

She watched. What better way to pass the time? What better way to hunt? *Good hunters observe, then act.*

Everyone, even some of the best hunters, thought that hiding was something complex and cerebral. They would often devise elaborate schemes and detailed situations all intended to conceal them. Not Koya. Her method was different. So different, in fact, her superiors tended to judge her severely for not following their standard. Rather than spending her time hiding in the bushes like a snake or looming over her prey in the trees, Koya chose to sit right out in the open. She wasn't foolish, though. She wore a disguise. Like hiding, disguises were necessary but often overdone.

Koya's pale skin blending to a blue-violet as it met her raven hair marked her as Umbaran. Well, half Umbaran. The latter half was less significant, so she preferred the former. Today, she was still an Umbaran, at least to anyone who would give the quiet gardener much of a glance. *Good hunters know that truths blend with lies like milk blends with tea.* She tended to a small bush as approaching, quiet footsteps echoed on the paved walkway that ran behind her.

A small band of guards formed a mortal barrier around the newest Son of Sadow, Warlord Takagari "DarkHawk" Sadow. The barrier was a ring of well-equipped soldiers armed with heavy blasters in hand and more on their sides. The overhead sun glinted off of daggers and grenades that lined belts and bandoliers. Even the flowing robes of Dark Jedi could be seen throughout the inner ring. It seemed the Warlord had elected to upgrade his entourage with a few more lightsabers. Koya suppressed a smile. All the powerful and elite had the same great flaw – they thought too much. Warlord DarkHawk was a masterful warrior and a brilliant executor of preparedness. He was efficient and cunning and planned for every outcome. That would be his downfall. His bane. His overconfidence.

As the Warlord's protective bubble passed by Koya could feel their awareness pressing against her. Quick glances fell upon her as the soldiers took stalk of the woman tending the garden. As with any protectorate, they projected themselves, projected their awareness, all around them creating a pressing of will that wanted to push out anyone who may come too close. Koya, however, had chosen her disguise well. You cannot push that which does not need to be pushed. The gardeners had been vetted on this day. Koya knew that. She had paid a talented Vizsla slicer to make sure she passed the test. So, when the protectorate bubble would press and push on her Koya would push back. The grin almost overtook her as the Warlord passed by chatting quietly with one of his Dark Jedi.

"I appreciate you asking me to join you today, Warlord. I've been away for two years only to be welcomed back freely," the voice said calmly.

Koya didn't recognize the voice. Odd. She had done her research. She had gathered detailed descriptions of every active and even some inactive members of Clan Naga Sadow. She had anticipated the Warlord to arrange for a couple of Knights to accompany him and that those knights were likely to be those who were most into his inner circle. She had expected one or two Dark Jedi who were just outside of Warlord DarkHawk's circle just to throw off anyone who was doing exactly what Koya had planned. However, this voice had not come up in any of her research.

Koya carefully pulled out her datapad. It wouldn't be suspicious, and she wouldn't be out of place. She quickly went through the stored dossiers. Surely this man, this unknown variable. Surely, he would be on her list somewhere. *Damn*, Koya thought. She really hated unknowns.

"You are always welcome in Naga Sadow, Knight Griffin. That is not going to change," the Warlord spoke in his characteristically relaxed but firm voice. He paused his stride for a moment to look at the knight. "However, there are questions. The Consul and I both are intrigued, along with many others in our Clan, where one of our rising stars ran off all of a sudden. One day you were a Professor in the Shadow Academy. The next we hear you resigned from the Shadow Academy.

and disappeared."

*Knight Griffin?* Koya asked herself. She pounded the name into her datapad.

The knight opened his mouth to speak, "Warlord, plea...". He was cut off.

"And perhaps in your time away you were elevated to a station where you could speak out of turn," the Warlord said sarcastically. He gave the Knight a cross glare. "Don't interrupt me. You disappeared during the height of our conflict with the Collective. You disappeared when we needed you most. You may be welcome back in Clan Naga Sadow, but you start over. Your rank doesn't change but your period of service does. You start over proving yourself to the Clan Summit. I assure you that the questions will keep coming. If you suddenly fail to answer them, I may just arrange for you to learn what it feels like to have a lightsaber on the inside of your body." Warlord DarkHawk punctuated the last sentence before pausing for a brief moment. He then continued moving down the path with the whole protectorate lurching to motion with him as he did.

*Griffin. Griffin...* Koya thought to herself as she churned through the records. Then the image of the man who was now speaking to her target appeared on the screen.

Jinius Lu'Kar Griffin

Age: 33

Knight – Force Disciple

Briefly served within the Shadow Academy before resigning and hasn't be heard from in nearly two years.

Limited combat training.

Koya read the Knight's dossier and couldn't help but smile. This Jinius Griffin wasn't known as a soldier or as a warrior but as a scholar. DarkHawk's bodyguard today was a bookworm. Her plan was still intact.

"It is difficult to explain my absence, Warlord," Jinius started. He licked his lips nervously before continuing, "I ran into a conflict. A conflict of wills. My research was taking me places that were leading to more and more questions. More and more conflicts.

"I struggled with balancing my desire for answers against my duty to those around me. In my urgency to uncover answers, I abandoned what little family I have and went rogue."

"And you found something interesting, I gather?" the Warlord asked.

"Deduction says I did. But..." Jinius started.

"Deduction says?' You either found something or you didn't. Keep it simple", DarkHawk pressed.

"That is just it, Warlord. It isn't simple. I literally can't answer that question because I don't know. I remember my research forcing me to ask some enormous questions. I remember deciding to seek out the answers and resigned my post within the Shadow Academy. Everything after that point is a blur."

Jinius stopped talking for a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking again, "Sir, I don't remember what I found but I'm also intelligent enough to realize that I was on to something and that whatever I did find may have been taken away from."

The two continued down the path towards the Warlord's speeder. Two guards were checking it over before the Warlord boarded just in case.

"Have you been seen by the corpsman?" Warlord DarkHawk asked his tone shifting to more serious. "Sometimes memory loss can be recovered."

"I have and what I was told, very plainly, was I don't have memory loss. The memories simply aren't there. They were... removed."

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Koya smiled as she listened in. She'd been inching along the path listening to the conversation. She knew more about Jinius's little story than he did from the sound of things. Pity he'd never know the whole thing. He had uncovered something that THEY wanted to ensure no one knew. Something truly dangerous. Something that THEY had ensured would be stolen from him. It was a pity that the poor, young Knight would never have his answers. The tragedy of his loss pained a deep part of Koya. She quickly distanced herself from those feelings and started to move away from the Warlord. She needed to be in a secure location for this next part.

As Warlord DarkHawk and the Knight Griffin sat down in the speeder, Koya disappeared behind the side of a building. She tapped on her datapad screen and it soon filled with the camera feed from her droid. It hovered only a few kilometers away and had zoomed in on the speeder.

Koya watched the speeder take off from the platform led and flanked by two more speeders. She heard the roar of fighters overhead as the fighter patrols observed from the upper atmosphere. Fortunately, DarkHawk's profile had told her he was a man of action. Sure, he was intelligent, but he was less of a timed, precision explosion and more of a wrecking ball. For that reason, little things like computers could be things he would overlook. On top of that, Koya knew that guards often looked for active devices when doing sweeps. Bombs were rarely on timers these days. At least the good ones weren't. Bombs tended to use an active signal. Send a message and the bomb blows up. Koya had made sure that her bomb was not tied in with any system on the speeder, that it was stored among spare parts in the cargo section, and that it was entirely passive. Its only active module was a remarkably simple and quiet receiver that operated on a frequency far too low to trip any warning systems on scanners or searches.

Koya pressed a button on her datapad and waited as the transmitter ordered the bomb and its full complement to come online. The low-frequency burst was enough to tell the rest of the bomb's components to come online. Koya waited. She wanted them to be far enough away that when someone came looking for the cause and source, she'd be able to slip out and leave the planet ahead of the search.

Her droid watched almost anxious itself as the speeder tore through the air. Koya waited a little longer. *Good hunters have patience. They wait until the prey is fully onto the trap before springing it.*

Assassinations required finesse and the right timing to be good. That was the problem with amateurs, they got excited. They rushed things and caused more trouble. Not Koya. She wouldn't rush and she would be successful. She watched as her target passed over a tall building several kilometers away. She started inching towards the "EXECUTE" button on the screen. Her screen flashed a warning.

The droid relayed an image of Jinius frantically tossing things from the cargo compartment and over the side of the ship. He seemed worried. Extremely worried. He was shouting and looked back every half second or so at the Warlord.

Koya flipped on audio. She needed to hear this.

"Escort One and Escort Three, drop to position delta seven. Repeat, one and three drop to delta seven!" Jinius was shouting towards a communicator in his left hand. She hadn't seen it before with him searching through the cargo. He was now in the front of the escort trying to unbuckle the Warlord's lap belt.

"Delay that!" the Warlord shouted. "What the hell is going on, Knight? Why are you changing formation and throwing my stuff out of the cargo hold? Need I remind you that is *my* stuff?!"

"Sir, there is a bomb on this shuttle. I felt it for a moment, and I doubt I have time to argue. You have to jump."

Koya swore under her breath. She split the screen on her display allowing her to watch what the Knight was doing while she was able to activate the bomb on the other screen. Koya pressed the "EXECUTE" button. The shuttle suddenly turned into a blossoming fireball. She had succeeded. The speeder was destroyed. Even from a few kilometers away, Koya heard the boom and felt a small puff of air as the shockwave rippled out. A large section of a skyscraper they had been passing was ruined. The outer glass shattered and little fires burning outlining the maw carved into the building. In the brief moment after the explosion, Koya heard the distant scream of emergency services. They'd be at the crash site in a breath. They'd be at the garden in a moment. Koya shot off.

In her preparedness, Koya had stashed changes of clothes in different hidden locations around and within the garden area. Each bag would have a change of clothes, a day's rations, and a blaster. And a small incendiary. Each bag was on a timer. If Koya did not get to it within the prescribed time, the device would burn up her caches. Emergency services would be so consumed with the assassination and how a series of random fires they won't be actively looking for her for a few minutes at least.

Koya raced out of the garden quickly changing into a businesswoman's suit and tucking her blaster between her breasts. It wasn't exactly easy to draw a blaster from that particular spot, but it was concealed, which was far more important right now. She turned onto a busy street assuming a brisk walking cadence with some other businesspeople. It was nearly lunchtime so activity would be booming, even with a "terrorist" incident only a few hundred meters away. Koya loved businesspeople. Unless the debris was falling on them, they would always continue as if nothing were going on. You couldn't delay making money.

She hurried along. She was intentionally moving faster than those around her but not alarmingly fast. Too much speed drew attention. *Good hunters never draw attention unless the attention distracts from the truth.* She passed by several shops and considered grabbing a drink. All she had on her was a briefcase and the clothes she wore. Not too little to stand out but just on the line. She thought better of it and continued. The walkway was getting increasingly busy as more people left on their lunch breaks. The more people who left those offices the more she would disappear in plain sight.

Koya rounded a corner and continued towards a small spaceport tucked into the center of town. She'd stashed a speeder there and would use that to take her to one of two shuttles she'd arranged to have her picked up. *Good hunters always plan to get away. One is none and two is few.* As Koya stepped around the corner she watched as a speeder careened past her overhead flying far too close to the ground causing the people on the walkway to scatter. The speeder crashed into the street just next to Koya. A robed form leapt from the crash and landing a few feet away and coming towards her. It was the Knight.

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Jinius charged from the crumpled speeder. That wasn't his finest landing, and he would certainly feel the bruises of that crash later. However, he had to get to the assassin before they got away. He stepped out in front of the fleeing woman and ignited his blue lightsaber.

Koya froze in front of the Knight. His blue blade reflected off the surfaces around him creating odd scintillating patterns around the Knight. She couldn't hide her fear and her disbelief. Her plan had been perfect. One word escaped her lips in the clamorous street, "How?"

"Instinct," Jinius answered back simply.

"Instinct?" Koya asked trying to back away from the Knight who was moving towards her.

"I sensed your bomb. For the record, the Proconsul is safe and will not be joining us this afternoon. Nonetheless, I expect we won't be alone long. If I fail, they'll succeed," Jinius said. He raised his saber to hold it out in front of him. It was a defensive stance, but he somehow poured a challenge into the stance and he strode forward. "Who are you?"

*Good hunters convey both truths and lies. The former reinforces the latter. The latter is the foundation of your existence.*

Koya shook her head, "I'm no one. I'm just a jealous former Sadow who detests that the freak experiment was named Son of Sadow."

"That answers the question I didn't ask, not the question I asked. Who are you? What is your name?" Jinius demanded. He took a step forward.

*Good hunters know secrets conceal us. Keep the deepest truths hidden.*

"My name?" Koya asked. She was almost in shock at this point. How had he found her? How had everything fallen apart so spectacularly? How did he follow her? He was kilometers away, in an explosion, and she had been wearing a disguise? The questions raced through her mind. She looked up at the Knight. A demure response wasn't going to give her what she needed right now.

"I'll trade you," Koya pouring however much confidence she could muster into the statement. She took a step forward. "I'll give you my name. My real name. I'll give you that if you tell me how you tracked me down?"

The knight stopped and stood quietly for a moment lingering on the proposal. Koya could hear more sirens and sounds in the distance. His help was on its way. She should strike now and vanish.

*Good hunters never stay long enough to give a statement.*

She had to know.

*Good hunters never lose themselves in the hunt. Good hunters see the surface for the depths.*

Dammit. She had to know.

*Good hunters follow orders.*

"Deal," Jinius answered. "Your name."

"You tell me first," Koya shouted back. All her training was screaming at her to shoot at him and run.

"I'm not the one trying to kill people. I don't trust you. If you're as good as I think you are, you know I'm not going to deceive you. Tell me your name."

*Good hunters would die before...* Frack it. "Koya!" she shouted. "Koya Ivarra Kozlov."

Jinius lowered his blade slightly. "Hello, Ms. Kozlov. I am Knight..."

"I know who you are, Griffin. Your part. Don't delay. I know they are coming."

Jinius nodded. "Very well. Umbarans stand out. I saw you and remembered you. Seeing one Umbaran female isn't unusual. Seeing two this close together after your bomb stood out." He paused for a moment and added, "If it is any consolation, that ruse worked. I wouldn't have suspected you under normal conditions."

"How'd you know I went the direction I went?" Koya asked.

"I didn't. I had my droid scan the surveillance in the area for anything interesting. An Umbaran in place A and an Umbaran in place B was enough uncanniness to merit me to investigate. So here we are."

"How'd you survive? How'd you save him?" Koya asked. She was breathing heavily. She was desperate. Desperate for answers. The anxiety of defying her training was getting to her. She would be beaten if she survived. THEY would know she talked.

Jinius shook his head. "I've been more generous than our arrangement stipulated. Your turn. Why target him?"

"I told you that. He's Son of Sadow. The fool doesn't deserve it."

Jinius shrugged. "That's a weak lie."

THEY would kill her if she told him the true reason. Today wasn't her day to die. She pulled out the blaster and shot. Her shot dissipated in a blue half dome in front of the Knight. He'd thrown up a barrier.

"You assassins are all alike. You look at a profile and see 'Trained' under my lightsaber skills and forget to that there is more to a fight than proficiency with weapons." Jinius strode forward and focused on a small piece of the shuttle that had broken off in the impact. He flung his arm and the piece launched away and towards Koya.

Koya flung her arms out and pushed on the debris. It lurched in the air only for an instant but enough to lose momentum. It fell a few feet in front of her and skittered to a stop.

Jinius stood stunned for a moment. He hadn't expected her to know the Force.

"You make the same mistakes I do, Knight," Koya sneered. Koya shot Jinius.

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Jinius opened his eyes. His chest screamed in pain. He felt his torso and found thick wraps covering the spot that hurt the most. Or was it the least? Burns were funny like that. Jinius sunk down into the bed. He tried to be fancy. He tried to be like the fighters and champions he knew too well. Bravado wasn't one of his usual downfalls. He should have just taken her in instead of showing off.

The door to his room chimed. Jinius looked at the clock. It was mid-morning. He was probably late to a meeting or some training.

"Enter," he said with a cough. His throat was dryer than he'd realized. Jinius fished around for a glass of water nearby his bed.

The door opened to reveal the looming figure of Warlord DarkHawk. Jinius dropped the glass and quickly tried to stand. His ribs screamed in agony.

"You're going to hurt for a few days, maybe a week. Blaster shots are... unpleasant. Trust me, I've had my share of them. DarkHawk strode into the room. "You're lucky. Your barrier was still dissipating when the blaster shot got to you. It took the bite out of the shot. Your cloak took the burn. Now you have to deal with the sting.

"She tell you anything useful?"

"Did you get my report, sir?" Jinius asked.

"Yep," The Warlord answered. "If I wanted to read your report, *Knight*, why in creation would I be standing in your room asking you?"

"She did it because you are a Son of Sadow. At least that is what she said."

"Do you believe her?"

"No."

"Smart. That is a stupid reason. Go on."

"Sir, this woman, Koya, as she told me, doesn't fit the profile of an estranged Sadow who wanted to punish you for ascending where they couldn't. That kind of bitterness is more akin to a lover's quarrel."

"Lover's quarrel?" DarkHawk asked, his tone suspicious.

"Like a lover's quarrel, sir. Her attack was antiseptic. If she was mad at you personally for succeeding where she hadn't, her attack would have been more personal. Think a shot to the back, knife to the chest, et cetera.

"This attack was impersonal. She wanted to blow up your ship. She wanted to destroy the evidence. She didn't want you to know who did it. That is not the mark of true hatred. That is a mark of someone doing a job. She was either hired or told to take you out, sir."

"That is quite the bold statement, Knight Griffin. It seems less likely there is a group of bad guys trying to see me taken out and more likely someone I just pissed off along the way."

"With all due respect, Warlord. You're a proconsul and a Son of Sadow now. Taking you out would deal a blow to the clan as a whole, perhaps the whole Brotherhood. A pissed-off person would wage a smear campaign or embarrass you, most likely, before trying to kill you. A cadre working against the clan as a whole fit the narrative more."

DarkHawk stood quietly for a moment then nodded. "Well argued, Knight. I will present this information to the Consul. Take a break for a day or so. Learn to cope with a new hole to breathe through. After that, see you bright and early for training. You have a lot to catch up on." DarkHawk pointed at the blaster shot with a smile before slapping Jinius on his shoulder and leaving the room quietly.

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"Did you tell him anything?" a monotone voice asked. Quiet whirring sounds could be heard in the darkness.

"No," Koya answered. "I told them the cover I was given. Nothing more. I swear."

"Subject's length of interrogation, body temperature, perspiration, and staccato of voice are all indicative of truth," the monotone voice said.

"Thank you. You may now leave," a deep, shadowed voice said from the corner. The whirring sound continued for a moment before the wall slid open casting bright light into the room. Koya watched the dark of the silhouette spherical interrogation droid leave the room. Its various tools glimmered in the fluorescent light of the corridor beyond.

"You failed, Koya. You failed in your first mission. Failure is not something we tolerate."

*Good hunters don't fail. Failure is punished. Harshly.*

"I... I know... Sir."

"You won't fail us again. Will you, Koya?" the shadowed voice asked.

"No sir," Koya replied firmly. Her voice squeaked a little.

"Good. Next time, we won't be as forgiving. This time you will have to pay penance for failing. Next time, you'll be dead before your target knows you even tried. Do you understand?" the deep voice said firmly. There was a darkness to the tone. A finality. This was real evil. It was an awareness and a capacity for violence so great that common evils could barely comprehend.



"No, sir."

"Good. Tomorrow morning, report to the discipline hall. Repeat that for a week. Then I expect you first thing the following week to reeducate yourself on how to be an effective tool in our organization. We'll see how you progress from there."