

The Common Enemy

"They've got us pinned! We need help! We need—"

"—coming in from all sides! We have to retreat!"

"There's too many of them! What do we do?!"

Zyft Yadar cut the comlink and resisted the urge to smash it to pieces out of sheer frustration. Not all of those cries had been from people loyal to her, but even so, they were Revenants all the same. Of course the Principate was outgunning them at every turn. This was not the way they were used to fighting, trapped on a planet without space to maneuver. And as long as that damned Interdictor remained in orbit, they would remain planetbound.

The small team of Expansionist Revenants were holed up inside a small garage in the outskirts of Tipool city, having barely evaded capture by a squad of Principate troopers freshly deployed from orbital landers. Judging by the comms chatter, not everyone had been as lucky.

Running a hand along her red furred face, fingertips tracing regal cheekbones, the Zygerrian felt the mounting pressure of the situation upon her. But where others might buckle or lash out, the pressure only steadied her hands and solidified her determination. One did not make as fine a surgeon as her if they couldn't handle the pressure—and she was a bonafide diamond.

"Miss Yadar!" a youthful voice called with respectful eagerness. Her eyes turned towards the garishly dressed punk of a Bothan they'd busted out from a precinct jail on Ubrikkia a few weeks earlier. She could not make heads or tails what drugs he was on, but the kid was a whiz of a slicer.

"What is it?" Zyft inquired.

"I've been sweeping the Principate comms chatter and I think I've got a lock on their command. There's a lot of signals coming out from *this* location, and they seem important," the Bothan stated, pointing at a crude holomap of the Garganta Galleria's upper crust.

"Karabast," Zyft hissed, earning her an odd look from the Bothan.

"Apologies, fine work you've done. Unfortunately if they've holed up inside the Hutts' home, we're going to have to fight not just the Principate bucket heads, but Hutt security too." Her gaze panned across the handful of people around her. Good souls all, but few in number and light in armament. They would not be enough.

"They're not expecting us, though. The Principate types are bullies, and they know they've got us on the run. They wouldn't think we'd hit them back. At least not where they're the safest," the youth countered.

Zyft couldn't quite piece whether he was just naive to the ways of war, or possibly edging his selection of narcotics towards combat stims, but the enthusiasm was admirable. It also contagious.

"Perhaps there is a way," she mused. "But we'll need some help. Can you patch me through to a holonet link off-world?"

"You mean past the military-grade scrambling and jammers the Principate's got deployed right after they called in their fleet?"

Zyft was not sure how to react. The Bothan's toothy grin spoke volumes.

"Piece of cake! Where to?" His fingers were already dancing on his datapad, unscrambling feeds and diverting the signal past unsecure routers to slip into the slipstream of priority Hutt datapackets. The Principate may have been testing their luck, but they weren't foolish enough to anger Py'zah personally if they could avoid it.

"Get me a link to Dajorra, I have some favors to cash in."

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Tali Sroka hated when people cashed in favors. It happened, invariably, at the worst of times and involved sticking her lekku out in the worst of ways. All for the sake of making connections for the good of House Qel-Droma.

"And the house always wins," she thought to herself as the small group of cloaked miscreants followed her through the service corridors and maintenance sections of the sprawling Hutt-owned casino complex. As far as favors went, this one did not seem quite as egregious as most, though infiltrating a Hutt palace did bring certain repressed memories uncomfortably close to the surface. Spying Twi'leks dancing on platforms, serving drinks with their trays attached by chains to their collars, or escorting the high rollers as complimentary arm candy was making spiders crawl up her neck.

The muffled base of a sweaty dance club drowned out the clatter of credits and warble of slot machines as they passed in silence along the pathways usually reserved for the

lowest menials that kept the Hutt's enterprise running. Most were not paid enough to care about their presence, and the ones Tali sensed taking an interest were *persuaded* to a renewed interest in their work.

"You want to get back to tending those drinks," Tali muttered under her breath, amber eyes meeting the pale blues of a staring Pantoran with a tray full of expensive looking cocktails.

"I... want to get back to tending these drinks," he muttered listlessly, before turning around and wandering off the way he came.

"You know, that's a really neat trick you've got there," a voice sounded behind her. "If you've got some free time after, I've got some ideas how we could—"

"Thank you," Tali snapped sharply, turning to glare at the excitable Bothan youth with a souped-up datapad in his hand. "But my schedule is quite tight."

"Hey, I'm sure I could make it worth your while. Just an hour of working the whales around the sabacc tables and..."

"The lady said she is not interested," Zyft hissed. "Take a hint and can it, laserbrain. We're getting close."

The Zygerrian did her best to not show her nerves, but Tali could sense them all the same. She was on edge, just as much as the rest of her team. Much was riding on the success of this mission. Why else would they have called for her help?

"The turbolift access is just around that corner," the Bothan stated, brushing off the chastisement without breaking pace. Furry digits dancing on the datapad, he verified they were indeed on the right track, and the service elevator would take them straight to the top floor, placing them behind their target.

"Just take a left and..." his voice trailed off as something in the map didn't quite add up. There should have been a checkpoint along the corridor they just passed. And there had been, but it was unoccupied. The security was heightened from the events at the auction, so why were there no guards? It did not add up. "Something's wrong."

He'd barely gotten the word out when the first blaster shot rang out and he felt a sharp tug at the scruff of his neck. With preternatural speed, Tali had backed off around the corner and yanked him along as he'd absentmindedly wandered into the ambush he'd almost figured out.

"Karabast!" Zyft spat, drawing a blaster from under her cloak. "How did they know we were coming?"

“Doesn’t matter,” Tali replied sharply. “They’re in our way, and we have places to be.” Throwing back her cloak, the Twi’lek revealed a suit of sleek plastoid warplate, its worn surface testament to countless skirmishes. From her side, she pulled free an ornate staff of brass, its surface embossed with swirling patterns in the style of ancient Selenians upon a sea of inlaid purple. She held the weapon out with both hands, testing its familiar weight, before igniting its plasma blade.

“Whoa,” the Bothan stepped back in awe as the brilliant yellow tip of her saber-glaive emerged from the emitter, a furious sun caged within an invisible field. “Is that a genuine lights—?”

The blade hummed as Tali spun the weapon around, leaving a white after-image on the Revenants’ retinas. Without hesitation, she stepped around the corner and shoved forth her hand, palm splayed, and *shunted* the closest security guard backwards into his mates. Side-stepping the few hurried blaster bolts and swatting around the last she could not dodge, the Twi’lek waded into the confused security detail with grim confidence.

The saber-glaive rose high, slicing through the barrel of a blaster hurriedly being pointed at the advancing Twi’lek. Staring in disbelief at the seared weapon in his hand, the guard failed to notice the back end of her weapon following suit and slamming into his faceplate, knocking him down. A pair of guards, hurriedly pushing off the stunned form of their comrade, tried to regain their footing, but Tali was already upon them.

Plasteel shattered under the blunt impact of decorated brass, chips of a helmet scattering across the corridor as another guard slumped into unconsciousness. Another blaster cried out, its crimson bolt slicing through the folds of the Twi’lek’s cloak before a shimmering golden blade snipped the weapon, and the hand holding it, in two. Panic gripping the last hired gun, he turned tail and ran, only to feel a sudden sensation across his backside as a wall of invisible momentum propelled him straight into a wall with a resounding crash.

The golden blade disappeared back inside the weapon as Tali stood amidst the disabled guards, her chest rising and falling with measured breaths. The security detail were alive, but no longer a threat. Yet she had expended much in a short time. This would have to be an insular occurrence, and Tali knew it most likely would not.

String past the incapacitated guards, Tali headed for the turbolift the Bothan had specified. Behind her, the rest of the Revenant strike team stared in shock at the devastation. Some skittishly raised a blaster pistol to finish off a security guard who groaned in pain, but Zyft’s hand stayed theirs.

“We’re not like Rasha,” she said simply.

The elevator was where it had been promised, and unoccupied by further security. As they ascended the bloated bulk of the Hutt's palace-cum-casino, the counter clicking steadily upward, the cramped elevator car started to feel even more cramped than it was as nervous hands fidgeted with blaster safeties and toyed with the grips of vibroknives. Everyone was on edge, and the mysterious appearance of the guard squad left them with more questions still.

"Can we trust her?" The question was barely voiced, less than a whisper, but Zyft's ears picked it up as clear as day. She did not need to know who had voiced it, she knew her crew and they were probably all thinking the same.

"She took them out, didn't she?" Zyft replied to no-one in particular. It wasn't an answer, just a reply, and she felt uneasy that it was the best she had. Of course, she had been the one to call for the enigmatic warrior's assistance, but much had happened between now and the prison break. Their fleeting acquaintance, and the hurried exchange of first names while under fire, had not left her with much to work on in regards to the Twi'lek and her true allegiances.

Standing ahead of the team of ex-cons, thieves, and criminals, Tali was painfully aware of the mistrust exuding from them. It was to be expected, she reasoned, with how precarious Zyft's position and her entire faction was within the whole. The Principate wanted them all dead, or in chains, and Rasha was out for blood. It was hard to be a pacifist in a galaxy of fists.

But that did not mean one shouldn't try. Perhaps the guards downstairs would take stock, and rethink their employment. Perhaps not, but had she simply ended their lives then and there, that slim sliver of a chance would be nonexistent. As long as there was a non-zero chance, trying was not pointless. Smarter statisticians might argue that was a tautology, but she found it a comforting thought nonetheless.

Perhaps she might be able to convince these Revenants to build a future for themselves, and make a potential ally for Arcona in the process. The odds were certainly stacked against them, but the chances were, as far as she could tell, non-zero. That would have to do.

"Ve're almost at the top," Tali spoke up, abruptly ending the nervous shuffling. "When those doors open, ve're likely to face opposition. I vill do vhat I can to buy you some time, but you *needt* to get out. Understood?" There were some half-hearted murmurs, their reckless plan suddenly seemed positively suicidal. But it was too late to turn back now.

"Umh, what about if we don't have blasters?" the Bothan youth inquired, his erstwhile awe replaced by growing palpable dread.

The elevator gave a polite *ding* as it reached the top. The doors hissed and began to open.

"Then you should have thought about that twenty floors ago," Tali replied. Holding out her hand at the opening doorway, she extended her senses into the future, seeking the telltale signals of danger and finding them aplenty.

The barrier coalesced into being just as the first volley of blaster fire raked the doorway, impacting harmlessly on the invisible bubble in all the hues of a rainbow. A squad of Principate soldiers crouched behind a barricade, hurriedly thrown together from the lavish furniture of the opulent stateroom. Though obscured by the iridescent flashes of blaster bolts dissipating on her barrier, Tali's eyes picked up confusing details among the defenders. The makeshift nature of their barricade was the most glaring, but not all wore helmets and others still appeared to be wielding only sidearms. Hardly the sort of prepared force they might have expected.

Something was not adding up. The Principate seemed utterly unprepared, at least compared to the Hutt security before them. As a silver lining, that did give the Revenants a fighting chance.

"Move!" Zyft hissed, shoving the closest Revenant armsman with her left hand while brandishing her own blaster pistol in her right. "Our brothers and sisters depend on us!" It was shallow motivation to charge into blaster fire, but sometimes it was all it took.

With a rebel yell, the Revenants charged out of the turbolift, fanning left and right under the protective umbrella of Tali's barrier, and returned fire. The gilded corridor, tastelessly bedecked in a facade of luxury that appealed to the Hutt's aesthetic sensibilities, erupted in a hail of sparks and plasma. Blaster bolts crisscrossed the narrow battlespace and sprays of molten metal erupted wherever they struck, burning off the veneer of opulence until only scorched duracrete remained.

The damage to the upholstery was, by and large, the only real casualty of the exchange. Even at this range, the nervous Revenants posed little danger to the Principate defenders, and what few bolts did threaten them were absorbed by their cover, though it soon began resembling a smoldering pyre about to ignite. In return, the defenders seemed confused and bewildered by the amount of enemies suddenly spewing into the corridor and their own fire was barely more effective than the Revenants'.

A young Human woman fell with a sharp cry, clutching her shin in pain and dragging herself along the imported carpet to safety. A moment later, a young Principate trooper took a blaster bolt to the shoulder and spun off his feet from the impact, slumping behind the barricade. The weight of fire grew less, and Tali saw her opening.

Dropping the barrier, she let the cool power of the Force flow into her limbs instead, propelling her forward at speed. She crossed the distance between the turbolift and the barricade in a heartbeat, leaping over a shot up divan embroidered with garish Nal

Huttan wildlife, she swatted aside an errant blaster bolt with her saber-glaive before delivering a sweeping kick to the side of a Principate trooper's head.

His head hit the divan with enough force to crack both its frame and his helmet, his form going limp an instant later. Pulling back her grip upon the saber-glaive's shaft until her fingers nearly touched the emitter, Tali deftly bisected a blaster rifle being leveled at her, while sweeping the legs of another trooper with the trailing end of her weapon. Spinning it around in a halo of golden light, she slammed its brass shaft across the recently disarmed trooper's torso, knocking the wind out of her and sending the Umbaran to the floor.

The final two defenders lasted only a moment longer, before they too were disarmed and sent down for the count. After the chaotic moments of mortal peril, an unnatural stillness descended into the room, with only the soft humming of Tali's saber-glaive piercing the silence.

"D-did we win?" the Bothan inquired, peering from within the turbolift, eyes wide with adrenaline.

"Yes," Zyst replied curtly, though in truth, the victory lay solely with their ally. A dangerous and possibly capricious ally, she realized with some trepidation. She would have to be on her guard whenever dealing with their ilk in the future. Compared to her own ragtag team of misfits, these warrior-mystics seemed otherworldly and utterly lethal. Perhaps the Collective had been onto something when they'd considered them a threat. It never hurt to have contingencies, after all.

"Find the databanks! Set weapons to stun, I want their commander alive!"

Zyst's orders were acted on with sudden enthusiasm. As the fear of death abated, the endorphin rush of survival pushed the Revenants to action and they eagerly clambered over the barricade to sweep the room beyond and bring in the prize. After all, plundering the spoils was something they were all very familiar with.

Tali let them go about their work, running her fingers over a section of armor where a near miss had melted the plastoid. It was a sobering reminder how close to the limit she had been pushing her abilities, if the wave of nausea that made her clutch the saber-glaive for support was not feedback enough. She knew better than to show weakness around her allies, however. They might be the better pirates, but they were still crooks in the plurality.

She caught Zyst eyeing her and knew the Zygerrian was thinking the same. It sent a shiver down her spine. Somewhere distant, as an echo of a future yet to pass, she glimpsed Zyst raising a poisoned blade at her throat. A blink later it was gone, but the taste of venom lingered on her tongue. She hoped that future would not come to be.

"We can't find him!" one of the Revenants yelled from within the stateroom. "He's gone!"

Zyst's measuring gaze snapped from the Twi'lek and towards the frustrated Nautolan who was spreading his arms defensively. "There's no-one else here. We found the terminals, the comms, everything they use to coordinate their troops, it's all here. But the commander's missing."

"Impossible!" Zyst hissed, striding closer to inspect the findings. "They were here just a moment ago, giving out orders." She glanced over her shoulder at the Bothan. "Isn't that so?"

The youth nodded enthusiastically as he clumsily vaulted the broken divan and slipped on the unconscious trooper on the other side. "Yeah, I had command signals coming out until the moment we began ascending. They can't have gotten far."

Zyst panned her gaze across the stateroom. There were no convenient exits, and the fire escape had not been used or it would have been heard across the casino. Her brow furrowed. The Zygerrian was not born yesterday, and she had seen her fair share of patients trying to shirk from their duties with a made up malady. Indeed, she'd grown quite accustomed to spotting a faker.

Turning around, she inspected the fallen Principate soldiers, taking in small clues here and there, details overlooked by a more careless pirate. Only a pair of them seemed like true soldiers, the rest were likely techies who worked the comms and tactical readouts. That explained the poor defence. But then there was the Umbaran. She was a curious sight. She'd been armed with a blaster pistol, and yet her thigh holster was not empty. There were also slight discolorations on her armor where one of the others had carried his rank marking.

"Step back!" Zyst made for her blaster, but the Umbaran was quicker. Rolling out of the way of the stun bolt, she drew her Enforcer pistol and pressed it against the Bothan's spine.

"One wrong move and the boy gets it!" she hissed, rising slowly to her feet with the terrified Bothan as a shield in front of her.

"Easy now," Tali urged making sure to look as non-threatening as possible. "Ve're not here to kill you."

"Spoken like every murdering Revenant scum out there," the woman spat, pressing the barrel of her weapon harder against the Bothan's spine and drawing a yelp of pain from him. "Drop your weapons!"

"There's no way out for you, Principate oppressor!" Zyst growled. Behind her, the rest of the Revenants were hurriedly taking aim, though appeared hesitant to fire.

"Oppressor?" the Umbaran scoffed. "You're the ones enslaving innocent civilians and selling them off to the Hutts and worse!"

That struck a chord, Zyft's restrained demeanor melting into outrage in a heartbeat. "We are **not** slavers!" she yelled. "I've been called that ever since your sanctimonious enforcers dragged me out of my clinic and accused me of being someone I'm not—just because I'm Zygerrian!" The hurt was clear in her voice, her eyes shimmering with emotion. It seemed to strike the Umbaran as well as her retort was not as snappy as before.

"I know for a fact your people are slavers," she repeated doggedly, though the accusation was no longer as personal. "And I won't have others relive that hell, even if it kills me."

"That can be arranged," Zyft hissed darkly, but Tali stepped in between them, palms splayed at them both.

"Stop, both of you. This is not getting us anywhere."

"I'm not taking orders from some self-appointed arbiter of morality," Zyft growled.

"And we won't stop until you're all locked behind bars, where you belong!" the Umbaran retorted.

Tali sighed, bowing her head. "Let's try to work this out. I've tried my best not to kill anyone today, and I would hate for you to force my hand."

Neither the Zygerrian, nor the Umbaran was quite sure to whom the words had been directed. They did seem to strike a chord, however, as their respective stances relaxed ever so slightly.

"Good, now. My name is Tali Sroka, and I can attest that Zyft here is *not* a slaver. If she were, your Principate would not have to trouble yourselves with locking her up."

The casual threat made Zyft's red furred face blanch.

"May I at least know with whom I am talking?" Tali asked, turning her palm to a beckoning gesture.

The Umbaran growled, still using the Bothan for cover, but realizing she had no real way to escape on her own. She was trapped, so perhaps playing for time might help. Surely

the other field commanders would be smart enough to send in reinforcements? That was assuming they had any to spare.

"I am commander Kalee Reechi of the Severian Principate. I can provide my ID-tag, but divulging anything else would break against the Galactic Concords of Military Prisoners," Kalee replied tersely.

Zyft scoffed derisively. "So now you're concerned about fair treatment of prisoners? But not when your people locked us up simply because we wouldn't bend the knee to your two-bit empire?"

"You're not soldiers," Kalee struck back. "What do they say, no honor among thieves? Why give any honor at all, then."

Tali could feel the Zygerrian's temper rise, exuding like hot waves lapping against her senses. This was not getting them anywhere.

"Kalee, please. You seem like a smart woman. You must realize you're not getting out of here, even if you shoot that man. Just put down your gun and surrender. I promise you fair treatment."

"I-I think she makes a lot of sense!" the Bothan whimpered, back still curved painfully from the slugthrower against his spine.

"Shut up," Kalee muttered, thinking feverishly of a way to escape. "I'm not trusting any of you with my life, let alone those of others. Everyone knows you're nothing more than a bunch of thieves and liars."

Zyft grit her teeth, the insults splashing like water against her face, and she was powerless to resist them. Her eyes turned from the Umbaran to the Twi'lek. She was perhaps powerless, but her ally surely was not.

"Enough of this," she said, "Do what you did to the servants earlier. *Make her* drop the gun."

Tali's eyes snapped to meet hers, amber against gold. The fire in hers reflecting off the metal in Zyft's.

"No," Tali said bluntly. "She thinks you're a slaver, and you would have me *make her* drop the gun against her own will? Is that not what slavers do? They *make you* do things against your will."

Zyft looked a bit sick. Not least because of the venom in the Twi'lek's words, but also at the wound they'd left in her heart. She averted her gaze, cowed.

Kalee witnessed the whole and though seeing her enemies squabbling presented her tactical mind with opportunities to be exploited, she could tell the significance of what had just happened, even if she couldn't put her finger on it. Perhaps this Zygerrian was speaking the truth about her convictions after all.

"Look," Tali said, snapping Kalee out of her thoughts as she took a step closer to her. "I know there are Revenants out there who have gone mad with revenge. They have been seduced into violence and will see themselves as victims of oppression, and using that for justifying the oppression of others. They must be stopped, and I will help you in that."

She held out her saber-glaive and rested it against a shot up armchair, raising her arms to show she was unarmed before continuing closer.

"I was a victim of the same crime," she admitted as calmly as she could. "And you can believe me, I will never work with people who would aid slavers, or practice slavery themselves."

Kalee Reechi inspected the Twi'lek apprehensively, her blue eyes trying to pierce her mask for the hidden truth beneath. But there was no mask. With sinking realization, she recognized the same hollow look in the woman's amber eyes as she saw in her own. Of someone who'd had her freedom taken from them in the worst possible ways.

She swallowed. "If I were to believe you," she began, forcing out the words that felt like treason to her. "What would happen next?"

Tali turned to Zyft, who seemed equally unprepared of success as Kalee seemed of surrender. "Well, we... would take you into custody... and after this situation was over, we'd—arrange for a prisoner exchange! Is that not something respectful parties do with their prisoners of war?"

Kalee wanted nothing more than to wipe that smug grin off the Zygerrian's face, but her options were limited. Help did not appear to be coming in time, and was it really worth dying here and now?

"Please, we are not all murderers," Tali implored, hand outstretched, while her eyes glanced at the Principate soldiers who all still drew breath. "We are not slavers either."

The Umbaran grit her teeth, sucking in a tense lungful of air before deflating with the longest sigh. "Very well," she muttered. "I hereby surrender myself to you." She pulled back the Enforcer pistol from the Bothan's back, spun it around and offered it to the Twi'lek, grip first.

Zyft nodded to a pair of Revenants who approached her and snapped a pair of mag cuffs on her wrists, even while the hapless Bothan staggered to safety, panting like he'd just run a hundred clicks. Tali turned to the Zygerrian with a stern look as she handed her the commander's side-arm.

"I hope you'll be vorth my trust, lady Yadar," she said. "I vas meant every vordt I saidt today."

Zyft looked at the pistol and then at the Twi'lek, feeling an urge to rise to the challenge, but suppressing it. "So did I. The new Revenants will build a home, and you cannot do that on the backs of slaves. Only empty palaces." She waved her hand at the tasteless stateroom.

"Goodt," Tali nodded, "I'm gladt to have chosen the right side," she said and rested her hand upon the other woman's shoulder. Somewhere distant, as an echo of a future yet to pass, she glimpsed Zyst raising a cup of wine in friendly greeting. In an instant, that vision had passed, but she hoped it might yet one day become reality.

"One thing I just don't get, though," the Bothan muttered as he went over the Principate datalogs. "How did the Hutts know we were coming, but not them?"

Zyft's expression darkened. She knew the answer, but did not reply. Smoking out that mole from her crew would have to be for another time.