

Zxyl hated the cold. Despite the best efforts of the sputtering heaters loitered across the tavern, he could still feel the icy wind blowing across the frozen plains of Pagodon. He had wanted to conduct his business far from the prying eyes of the Brotherhood. However, as he sneezed for the dozenth time, he regretted agreeing to meet here.

The bartender seemed to anticipate a firefight would break out at any moment. Despite the length of the bar he hovered in one, centralized, location as he continued to dry the glassware. The only benefit, so far as Zxyl could tell, was that there were so few locals that new faces (or helmets as it were) didn't spark any curiosity. He glanced at his vambrace for the current time and began doing the calculations for how much longer he'd have to wait. Just as he was drawing to a conclusion that no matter how short of a wait; it wasn't worth it. He pushed his wobbly wooden chair back from the makeshift table as the door opened with a woosh.

The wind bit through his armor, chilling him to the bone. The person in the doorway did not appear fazed. Zxyl couldn't tell who it was, or even what species it was, under all the assorted layers of animal hides. From head to toe, this nondescript, woolen blob tottered into the bar. Zxyl hugged himself, trying to trap what feeble heat still surrounded him. *Just get into the room already*, he thought angrily at the person. As the thoughts swirled in his mind the person finally stepped in, the door hissing as its seal was restored. *Moronic creature*, he thought, before his eyes went wide behind his vision. Why was this person walking directly towards him? He cursed to himself, had he said that outloud or only in his mind.

As the person tottered over, Zxyl slowly lowered his hand towards his weapon. "I hear you have a job," the creature's voice was hard to identify. Being a master of industry he could tell some sort of vocal modulator was in play but this had to be a particularly expensive version. The voice fluctuated between male and female voice tones and the dialects of a dozen or more species with each syllable. While you could understand what was being said it felt like a chorus of mistonal people were singing each word.

Zxyl, still cautious, leaned forward. His hand now rested fully upon his hilt. "Yes. Are you certain you can handle it?"

"I'm quite certain," the modulated voice replied. The person kicked out the seat and, to the amazement of Zxyl, sat down and looked like a giant woolen puff. "Do you have the puck?"

Zxyl tossed the puck across the table. It skidded to a stop before his strange companion and the illuminated holo of one Thran Occasus-Palpatine sprang to life. The credit amount was impressive to behold. The stranger barely took the time to read the details before palming it with a wampa paw glove and pocketing it.

"Don't you want to know the details?" Zxyl asked?

"Doesn't matter. I'd have done this job for free," the person replied before standing up and walking out of the room. Zxyl shivered as the door opened again. *For free*, he thought. *Why would they do this job for free?* Shaking his head, he wrote it off as a waste of time. There was no way this person was going to survive against his Praetor and he had other potential bounty hunters to meet with.

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"Sir, your invitation?" the gentlemen asked of the new arrivals.

"I don't handle these sorts of things," the tall, handsome, gentlemen said with an air of aloofness only found amongst the social elite. A woman, as beautiful as she was fieresome, quickly stepped forward and produced the invitation.

The gentleman manning the door gingerly took the proffered invitation, scanned it, and gestured to them to enter. "Enjoy the evening Mr. Occasus."

"Indeed, I shall," Thran replied. There was a part of him that despised the act that he had to play but such were the trappings of his life. These sorts of galas had been required of him ever since his early holoivid days. The marvelous ballrooms with their chandeliers of glittering gems, the rich velvet tapestries, and the catered food that dazzled and outmatched what some planets got to eat in a full rotation. Thran wrinkled his nose at the stench of all the various people that packed the room.

Most people only see the glitz and glamor from the holoivids broadcasting these events into their houses. Few get to experience the odor of all these different species squeezed into these tight quarters, drinking liquor and sweating under the lights. Worse still, there had been a recent craze that said it was healthier for you not to bathe. So now anytime you walked up to someone you never knew if you were going to smell a bottle of perfume or their natural musk.

Making their way through the edges of the crowd, Thran motioned for Saris Aran, his frequent servant who accompanied him, to find where their seats were for the dinner portion of this farcical show of self-righteous pampering for...he honestly couldn't remember why he was here this evening. As Saris, with the grace of a predator and the body to match, parted the crowd he set himself on a course towards the bar. As he brushed by people in the crowd, he quickly gave the usual 'so nice to see you' and 'absolutely, let's do lunch' type replies that didn't require him to actually engage his brain. These people didn't deserve his actual focus.

The glorious part of this event was that the bar was massively large, stretching easily eight meters in length. As such, despite the crowds, there was enough room for him to walk up, kick his foot up on the bar rail and flag down the bartender. Thran grimaced when it was a serving droid that approached and not a humanoid. He preferred it when someone actually living mixed him a drink. There was something about the imperfect nature of their handling of the liquor ratios and shaking that made it more alive than when a machine produced a by-the-books cocktail.

"I'll take a Corellian Whiskey, neat," he ordered, opting out of the inevitable disappointment.

"That's a strong drink, for a strong man," a delicate, flowery voice said nearby. Thran turned to see the most striking figure nursing a cocktail that was somewhere between a Tatooine sunset and an exploding supernova. The beauty of both events paled next to the woman in front of him. It was almost as if someone had reached into the depth of his mind and constructed the perfect woman for him. She was tall, just slightly shorter than himself. Her legs glowed with a hint of sun in the open slit dress she wore. Her auburn hair fell gently past her shoulders in loose curls. Her emerald eyes sparkled in the dim light like miniature starbursts. She puckered her full ruby lips as she seductively sucked on the straw in her drink.

Thran coughed, choking on his words as he straightened up. "Naturally," he said. *Naturally? Naturally? That's the best you can come back with?* "I'm Thran. To whom do I have the pleasure?" *To whom? Who am I, Kamjin? That fool of a soapbox politician talks like that, not me.*

She giggled. "I'm Mariya and the pleasure is mine. I don't mind admitting to you that I'm a fan."

"I don't mind admitting, so am I," *Dank farrik, why the hell do I sound so cheesy.* Thran's whole body shook as he repulsed himself with his behavior. This wasn't him. He was a smooth operator. He was in control. Plans within plans, within plans and here he was stammering out lines like he was back in primary school. Who was this woman and how did she get to him like this. Thran could have kissed the serving droid when it returned with his drink. He snatched it in the least graceful movement of his life, splashing some of the golden liquor onto the bartop, before taking a sip.

If a serving droid could roll its eyes it would have as it wiped up the spill and moved on to the next customer. Mariya smiled coyly, taking another sip of her drink. "Look, I don't usually do this, but...want to find someplace more private?" She twirled the straw absentmindedly.

Do I want to? What sort of stupid question is that? Of course, I want to. Thran looked around for Saris. She wasn't anywhere to be seen. She'd be a while navigating this crowd anyways. Thran decided to not open his mouth and risk sounding more like that fool of a Consul. Giving a knowing smile he gestured for her to lead the way.

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Mariya had the most seductive giggle. It was like a feline playing with her prey. She knew she had him but wanted to have fun before she ate him. Thran was in awe as the crowd seemed to have parted for her as she had led him out of the ballroom and into one of the adjoining corridors. A few turns and they were devoid of any other people. His mind swirled. Who was this woman? Did it even matter?

Mariya stopped in front of a door and, curling her finger, motioned for him to follow her. She reached behind her and opened the door to a darkened room. She reached out, grabbing his tie, and pulled him into the shadows. Thran blinked his eyes, trying to adjust to the darkness. "You don't have to hide," he said, as his arms groped to find her.

"Zyxl and Kamjin send their regards," the seductress mewed as a coiled cloth gripped him under his chin, cutting off the oxygen and she tightened her grip. Thran's eyes rolled in his head as his body began to react to the deprivation.

"Harder," he moaned.

"What?" she said, her grasp slacked.

"What?" he replied, caught off guard.

"Ugh, even when you're being killed you have to make things awkward," a new voice said as the lights came on. Thran shielded his eyes from the blinding light.

"Who?" he said, as his vision returned. Before him stood Kamjin Lap'lamiz, the erstwhile Consul of Scholae Palatinae holding what looked to be a child's blanket. Mariya was gone or...

"You son of a, were you messing with my mind?" Thran raged.

"Of course I was messing with your mind. Geez, you're not that handsome of a man to just randomly pick up a girl at every bar," Kamjin snapped back.

"What the crik are you doing? This is messed up even for you."

"Zyxl put a bounty on your head. Given you know about," he motioned with his blanket. "I figured I'd kill two birds with one stone."

“You mind tricked me into believing you were a woman! That’s seriously messed up, even for you.”

“Look, you try and not get caught as the freaking Emperor, sneaking around like an assassin. You may be some flashy holovid star but I’m running the Empire.”

“You’re running a remnant of the Empire. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Whatever, that’s not important. Why in the world would Zxyl want you dead?”

Thran thought about this for a moment. Why would his boss put a death mark on his head? Had he stumbled across something he shouldn’t have? Had Zxyl correctly figured out that he had aspirations for his job? His mind replayed the last few weeks in his mind and nothing came to him. “I don’t know. I haven’t come across anything I shouldn’t have. It’s not even like we’ve talked that much since…” he trailed off. It couldn’t be. “I don’t believe it…”

“What?”

“That karffing Zabrak. He’s mad because I turned down the temperature in the office.”

Kamjin shook his head in disbelief. “He put a death mark on you because you turned on the A/C?”

“He hates the cold but he keeps the office so bleeding hot all the time. I was sweating so I turned it down a notch.”

“He sent me to kill you over the thermostat?”

“Apparently but this is on you that you decided to do the deed while in drag. This is worth so much more than knowing you keep your baby’s blanket in a vault,” Thran said, as he began to guffaw.

“You know what, it’s not worth it,” Kamjin said. “You’re not worth it.” He grabbed the handle, opened the door and stormed out leaving Thran rolling on the floor, howling with laughter