The Twi’lek checked her gear. Double, triple, quadruple-checked. For all that her superiors, a particular green-skinned space wizard came to mind, seemed to think that she was chaotic, reckless, and impetuous, she was meticulous about her gear. He armor was always polished. It was a symbol of her found family, the Erinos clan, gifted to her by her adoptive father, Jax. She disassembled, cleaned, and reassembled her pistol, a Westar-35 with the crest of the clan Arcona, every morning when she woke up and every evening before bed. She checked her entire pack of ordinance before every mission.

L’ara sat with her feet hanging out of the LAAT. Her helmet rested on the durasteel deck by her side as the wind whipped around her lekku. She breathed in the fresh tropical air, heavy with sea salt.

*“Five clicks out from the landing zone. All security detail, check your gear and prepare for landing. Remember, there’s no telling how hot this touchdown is gonna be.”*

The Mandalorian sighed. At least the weather was nice. Much better than that mission back on Eadu. The storms there had nearly-

A cold hand wrapped around her slender neck and squeezed. Not enough to restrict her breathing, but just enough to remind her that it could. Just like…

“Well, well, well, it looks like I’ve finally found my favorite pet.” A cold voice cut into her mind, but she felt the hot breath on her ear cone.

L’ara froze. That voice. It was cold, calculating. Just like…

“What? You don’t remember your loving master? I’m hurt, L’ara.” The voice dripped with feigned indignity.

“K-Kyrellius…you’re supposed to be rotting in a cell.” Her voice shook. Her breath caught in her throat.

“That’s *Master* Kyrellius, pet. Or just Master, if we’re in a hurry, if you remember.”

She did remember. She remembered every humiliation. Every vile thing. Every *business* partner Kyrellius had wanted to impress. In an instant, all of L’ara’s training from the military and with the Erinos disappeared. She felt like the same helpless child she had been, chained up in his office aboard the manufacturing station.

“Y-yes, m-master.” She cursed herself. She was better than this. All of the work she had put in, for what? Just to let it all slip away at the first chance it got?

“That’s right, pet. Remember what you are. A slave. Property. A *thing*. Bought and paid for, by me. You don’t belong here, playing dress up as a warrior. Remember how you used to dance for hours on end? The fine parties you attended?”

*Dancing for hours because we’d be whipped if we stopped before the party was over. The ‘fine parties’ where she and her siblings in chains had been the entertainment. Their only break from the stage was to be taken into a back room for… ‘private dances’.*

L’ara’s left hand reached gently wandered to her holster. Her slender fingers brushed the pistol that resided within. Her thumb brushed the snap button that secured the weapon, letting it spring open with a gentle *pop*.

“I took such good care of you. You never wanted for anything. But you repaid my generosity, divinely bestowed upon a lesser lifeform like yourself, by helping those Arconan dogs lock me away.”

She rested her hand on the grip of the weapon. She felt the pronounced crest of her clan press into her palm through her glove.

“But no matter. I have found you once again, and now we will go home and you can begin to make up for you and your sisters’ betrayal. You certainly have a heavy debt on your shoulders, but we will have plenty of time for you to pay it. Now stand up.”

The hand around her throat pulled and encouraged her to her feet.

“Good girl.”

His words struck fear deep into the very core of her being. She had sworn that she would never go back to that life. She grit her teeth.

*Never again.*

Her grip on the blaster pistol tightened.

*Never. Again.*

She twisted her body and drove her right elbow right into where the bastard’s temple should have been, but met nothing but air. She looked around wildly until she saw him. He was standing at the back of the cargo area, right in front of the port engine’s access panel.

**“NEVER AGAIN!”** L’ara screamed at the top of her lungs as she drew her weapon and fired. She swore that she saw the bolts land directly in his center of mass, just like she’d been trained to do, but in a blink, Kyrellius was on the other side of the compartment, in front of the starboard engine’s access panel. She shook her head and adjusted her aim. This monster was going to die. Today. She fired wildly. Light filled her vision.

***“MAJOR ERINOS!? WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!”***

L’ara’s vision cleared as the screaming voice cut through the fog. The passenger compartment of the LAAT was quickly filling with fire and smoke that poured out the open doors on either side. Two troopers laid dead on the deck with multiple blaster scores in their breastplates. She looked at the pistol in her hand, then back to the private who had screamed her name. His eyes were wide with fear.

A different fear gripped her heart now. The transport was losing speed and altitude. The NCO onboard had pulled his own sidearm and had it trained on the Twi’lek.

“Major Erinos, drop your weapon.” He moved his finger to the trigger.

“Sergeant! We have to abandon ship!”

“Yes, Major, we do. Since you saw fit to sabotage our engines-” The sergeant’s sentence cut off abruptly. “Father, I’m sorry. I know I wasn’t supposed to be outside, but…” he pointed his sidearm away from the Twi’lek and now rested the barrel directly under his chin and pulled the trigger.

The private at L’ara’s side screamed. He fell back away from both her and the sergeant and scrambled away on his hands and knees.

“Private! Get ahold of yourself! I understand you’re scared but we need to keep our heads clear!”

The private’s screaming stopped as his eyes focused on a point just behind the Mandalorian.

“S-spider. Spider!” He leveled his rifle at L’ara and pulled the trigger. She just managed to dodge out of the way as the bolt struck the control panel by the door, causing it to begin closing.

L’ara spun and leveled her blaster at the soldier and pulled the trigger releasing a stun bolt landed directly in his chest. She looked around. There had been twenty troopers on this transport, not including herself.

*Where did everyone go? Did they all off themselves?*

She couldn’t worry about that right now. She went to the intercom to make contact with the piloting crew, but as soon as she pressed the button to open communications, all she heard was screaming. The pilots were in the same condition as the rest of them. L’ara took another look around the compartment, only to find that she could barely see. It seemed closing just one door had given the smoke and flames the opportunity to build up in the enclosed space before venting out of the other door. She squatted down and reached half-blindly for her helmet. Once she had a hand on it, she quickly shoved it onto her head and awkwardly fitted her lekku into their specialized sleeves.

Now, with a respite from the smoke, she could think. The entire security detail onboard the transport were either dead or missing. The piloting crew were incapacitated. She gave a quick check of her jetpack. She quickly calculated its range and maneuvered to the door that remained open. She took a few quick breaths and jumped.

Once the Twi’lek was out in the open air, she took the time to survey the scene around her. Other LAAT’s seemed to be in similar predicaments to her own. Some weaved and rolled through the air. Others just slowly dropped altitude until they crashed into the water at full speed, the impact ripping the vessel apart. She activated her comlink and sent out a mass signal. Whoever was behind this, they couldn’t stop the signal.

*“Mayday! Mayday! This is Major L’ara Erinos! The mission to Tekpantli is compromised! Repeat, the mission is compromised. Something has invaded the minds of members of the mission! We need help!”*

She hoped someone was listening. She hoped that someone could pick up her signal way out here. She looked ahead. The island was still a speck in the distance. She hoped her jetpack had enough fuel to reach land.

Not quite.

She wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but as the rockets began to sputter, she triggered the wings of the pack to expand to buy her a little time to glide in. She almost made it too. At about a hundred meters from the shore, she could have reached down and skimmed the water with her fingers. At seventy-five meters, she could see the misting spray from the waves gathering on her visor. At fifty meters, she crashed. She had the foresight to retract the wings and control her entry into the water, but it was still a crash.

For too long, she didn’t know what was up or down, she just saw the cloudy, infinite blue-green expanse of the sea. She looked down, or what she thought was down, and saw light. She reoriented herself and swam towards it. When she broke the surface, she began to swim.

Despite it’s reasonable weight distribution, the Mandalorian armor did not prove helpful. By the time she dragged herself onto the shore, she could barely move. Her arms shook. Her breath was ragged. The last thing she heard before she lost consciousness was the voice she dreaded the most.

“Yes, little pet. Sleep.”