**OBJECTIVE CHOSEN: PURSUIT**

**I**

Jon once again looked over the *Carnival*’s scanners. They reported nothing, same as last time. In a way, he wasn’t sure how to feel about that. On the one hand, “nothing” meant “no Collective ships coming to kill you”; on the other hand, it also meant “no closer to finding Vance.”

 Jon sighed. Figures. The young Scoundrel should’ve known, *had* known on some level,  that it wouldn’t be as simple as following a signal into middle-of-nowhere-space and giving the old drunk a lift back home. He knew complications were part of the job, but he hadn’t expected Grot’s tracker signal to simply cut off like that. It didn’t bode well for his fellow Mercenary’s fate, and that alone was nearly enough for Jon to tell Artemis to turn their ship around and head home. Yes, his employers would be furious, but he could sweet talk them out of canceling his contract...or worse.

 No, no, no… like it or not, Vance Kordall *was* a comrade. Perhaps not a close friend, but there was a certain unspoken comradery among the Mercenaries of the Dark Brotherhood. After all, when you’re the “normal” people among a fractured organization of space wizards and their fanatical soldiers, well, it helped to have a few drinking buddies who couldn’t read your thoughts, if only just to help you stay sane.

 Was it much of a connection between the two men? Not really. Was it good enough to risk his neck out here, so far from Brotherhood space, and any sign of help…? Jon thought so.

 Still, all the pure motives in the galaxy weren’t liable to help him if he weren’t able to find *something* quickly, and Jon spoke a silent prayer to whatever beings may have been listening that that would happen. A moment later he sent a curse to whichever jerk had answered him.

 A series of staccato beeps erupted from Jon’s terminal, breaking him out of his musings, and sending the *worst* possible alert a small, barely armed craft like the *Carnival* could’ve hoped for: four-no, *five*- frigates, matching the schematics of the Technocratic Union’s ships, had dropped out hyperspace.

 Jon swore, loudly and repeatedly, before rushing to the pilot’s seat, ready to redirect the *Carnival*’s droid brain to somewhere a little less lethal.

 But it was too late. The flight of ships were already moving into a formation surrounding his ship, leaving no means for the tiny freighter to slip away without a fatal bombardment of lasers ripping his hull to shreds. It was at this point Jon started panicking.

 The ship’s control panel came to life with a burst of static, and an unfamiliar but unmistakably female voice came over the line.

 “*Unidentified Freighter, you are trespassing in Technocrat controlled space. Power down, and prepare to be boarded.”*

 *Blast it, blast it, blast it!* Jon took a deep breath, and calmed himself, before activating the communications panel, and preparing to turn on the charm that had saved his hide so very many times in the past.

 “No need for that, ma’am, we were just preparing to leave on our own. Must’ve taken a wrong turn somewhere, you know? But not to worry we are-”

 *“I* said *prepare to be boarded*,” the voice replied. The *Carnival* shook, as a blast rocked the freighter’s hull.

 “*That was a warning shot*,” the voice said icily.

 “...Prepare to be boarded, understood miss. We eagerly await your arrival on our humble-” The signal cut out.

 *….So this is how I die, huh? Shot by angry women on my own ship...you know, maybe it’s not that surprising after all?*

 Ten minutes later, Jon was greeting a contingent of what were unmistakably the Shikari Huntresses, who immediately swept into his ship and began moving from room to room searching for any other passengers that may have been hiding on board. Jon had Artemis at his side though, both to keep and eye on her, and just to strengthen his nerves, by however little.

Jon was deeply unnerved by their identical features. It was disorienting to see the exact same face everywhere you looked, like some weird kind of hallucination. Jon half expected them to *move* in the exact same ways as each other, and while there was a great deal of synchronicity in their actions as they moved about inside the *Carnival*, though Jon recognized it as the kind of unity that came from experience, and no doubt years of shared training, as  opposed to anything truly *unnatural*; the skill of and grace of a professional soldier. Even still, those *faces*…

It was the arrival, however, of a blue skinned, red eyed woman that caught Jon’s attention, and not in a good way. Jon recognized the chiss immediately, and his stomach dropped.

“Hunt Master!” one of the Shikari said when she saw her. “We’ve found no one else, the ship is empty.”

“Yes, I know,” Jon drawled sarcastically. “Sadly you ladies are the first guests I’ve had in a long-*grk*!” Jon choked out as Kendra Icasta struck him in the throat.

“I’ll bet we are,” she said offhandedly. “The place doesn’t exactly scream ‘hospitality.’”

“Now that’s just hurtful,” Jon said hoarsely, rubbing his throat gingerly. “I’d have cleaned a bit more if I’d been *expecting* company.” Kendra hummed noncommittal in response, to which Jon briefly considered feigning offense but thought better of the tactic.

The fact of the matter was that he was not nearly as in control of the conversation as he would have prefered. Not that that was anything *new* to the Scoundrel, but Jon was keenly aware of the numerous weapons in the room, and that set him more than a little on edge.

“And you are aware that you’re in Collective controlled space, I take it?” Kendra asked, both her organic and cybernetic eye fixed on him. Somehow, it managed to be even more unnerving than the Shikari’s identical faces had been. Jon got the feeling that that was gonna be a recurring feature for him for the foreseeable future.

Jon resisted the urge to roll his eyes when she mentioned “Collective Controlled Space.” Most likely their “controlled” space was theirs in the same way a pirate fleets preferred hunting grounds were theirs, but with an area as remote as all the way out here it was unlikely any of the galactic powers-that-be were aware enough of them to do much about it.

Still, Jon had to come up with some kind of an answer for the woman. His mind raced considering his options.

*Lie, Jon, lie! Lying fixes everything!*

Lost? He could pin it on a malfunction in the *Carnival*’s autopilot, Force knew the damn thing broke down often enough it’d only be half a lie. But he wouldn’t be able to get them to simply fly away if he claimed his ship was malfunctioning, too implausible for a group that was already looking for an excuse to stick him with a knife.

Running from pirates…? No, no, the *Carnival* wasn’t nearly banged up enough to look like it had just escaped from a fight.

Jon rapidly ran through his mental list of the usual lies, but couldn’t think of a single damn one to get him out of his current predicament. So, with little other choice, Jon was forced to *improvise.*

“I have information on the Dark Jedi Brotherhood,” he blurted out. “Information I’d be willing to share… for a price, of course.”

**II**

 “Information on the…?” Kendra trailed off. Whatever Kendra had been expecting him to say, it most certainly hadn’t been that, though the only outward sign was the seconds brief slipping of her composed mask. She recovered fast, however, and attacked back like… well, like a Huntress ambushing her prey.

 “Ok, fine, let’s say I’m willing to humor you here. How, exactly, did a random spacer come by this “information” hmm?”

 Jon pushed down his offense at being called a “random spacer” and just focused on appeasing the very deadly lady in front of him.

 “Because… I work for them,” Jon said, trying not to wince. The best lies always had a grain of truth, and if this was to be in any way convincing…

 “You… work for those… those *tyrants*?” For the first time Kendra showed an emotion more intense than mild aggravation, and unfortunately for Jon, it was barely restrained hate; he didn’t miss the way hand twitched toward her slugthrower, or the similar reaction he was getting from the other Shikari, though they at least seemed to be deferring to their leader for the time being. All of which suddenly gave Jon just the idea to solve his problems…

 “*Worked* you mean!” Jon said quickly, already plotting out his speech. “But those bastards… I just couldn’t stand it anymore!” Jon made sure to make his voice carry the tone of barely controlled anger.

 “Oh?” Kendra said, hints of sarcasm in her voice. “And why is that?”

 “Have you ever met a Force-Wielder, dear? They’re terribly arrogant, and more than a little self-centered.” It wasn’t even a lie, at least not in Jon’s experience. Jon noticed a few of the Shikari women nodding in response. Good, but it didn’t matter if he couldn’t convince Kendra too. Even if the others believed him, he doubted it would stop them from ending his life on Kendra’s orders.

 “Yes… they are that, aren’t they?” Kendra said, eyeing him warily. It was clear she still wasn’t anywhere close to convinced, but he also had her interest, which was a good starting point.

 “Ok, so tell me, what is this incredibly valuable information you’ve brought to us?”

 “I… don’t actually *know* what the information is, per say.” Jon resisted the urge to wince when he saw Kendra, and several other Shikari, prepare to draw their weapons.

 “Explain. Now.” Kendra said through gritted teeth. She was clearly getting tired of the run-around Jon had been giving her, so if he didn’t come up with something fast…

 *Dammit, Vance you owe me for all this trouble I’ve gotten into on your behalf!*

“The information I have is… well, it’s encrypted. *Heavily* encrypted, I wouldn’t know how to even begin cracking it open, but I *do* know it’s considered important by the higher ups in the Brotherhood.”

 Kendra hmphed. “Well that’s certainly convenient, isn’t it?”

 “Given my current… surroundings,” Jon said, gesturing to the Shikari, “I find it decidedly *in*convenient. All I know is it has *something* to do with some artifact they tried to recover recently…” Jon watched her eyes widen ever so slightly at the mention of the artifact. “I just assumed that, unlike your… fellows in the Collective, the Technocratic Union might stand a better chance at getting through these locks, you know?” When it doubt, appeal to someone’s vanity.

 Kendra stared at him for several long moments, moments that felt like an eternity to Jon. By the end, he was sure he would likely die here.

 “Alright,” she finally said. “Here’s how this is going to work: I’ll be bringing you aboard my ship, *unarmed*, where you will be under heavy guard, and will then transfer this alleged encrypted intel to us. If, and when, I find out you’re lying, we’ll shove you at an airlock and salvage your ship for parts. Understood?”

 “...Yeah, no.”

 The way Kendra’s eye started twitching would have been humorous if it didn’t coincide with her hand once again twitching for her weapons.

 “Look, I’m not an idiot.”

 “Could’ve fooled me,” Kendra hissed under her breath. Jon ignored her.

“I’m not just going to hand this information over without *guarantee* of pay, and for a sum that I doubt you’re qualified to authorize by your organization.” Jon was playing it dangerously at this point, and everyone in the room, from the huntresses to the droid, knew it. One wrong step and he was a dead man.

“So what,” Kendra snarked, “You just don’t trust us? Is that it.”

“That is *exactly* the case, yes. Got it one.” Well, fortune favored the bold, right?

Kendra smirked. “And what, precisely, is preventing me from killing you and *taking* your information, hm?”

“The fact that my astromech had been ordered to delete it from her hard drives if any harm comes to me whatsoever?” Jon said with mock innocence.

He had her. Jon could tell from the way she tensed, and the clenching of her jaw. Hook, line, and sinker.

**III**

 The *Seeking Arrow*, Kendra’s ship, had a noticeably spartan interior, though Jon supposed that made sense. The Technocratic Union was known to favor efficiency and uniformity before everything else, hence the reason their soldiers were modified to possess the bare minimum of facial features, and near identical ones at that. It only made sense that the philosophy would work its way into their ship designs as well.

 Still, the stools that passed for seats were more than enough reason for Jon to elect to remain standing for the duration of their little trip. And by little, he actually meant the better part of a day. Not that he was complaining, however, as it gave him time to work out the finer details of his plan.

 Namely, he’d been able to order Artemis to start concocting a fake encryption, one convoluted and confusing enough that it would hopefully pass for sophisticated, something to keep the Technocrats busy once it came time to fork over the goods. It had, however, required him to devote a great deal of effort into talking the Shikari and Kendra out of letting them so much as look at the “coded intel” Artemis was carrying.

 Actually, Jon was somewhat surprised to find the ship crewed *exclusively* by Shikari Huntresses. Not that he was complaining, of course. While they were unnerving, the pictures he’d seen of Technocratic foot soldiers simply gave him nightmares, and he wasn’t eager to meet any of them.

 Jon was disappointed, however, to find them going to great pains to ensure he couldn’t figure out where they were going, giving him pointed glares or flashing their weapons whenever he got too close to their control panels. Not that that stopped him, he just had to be *very* sneaky about it.

 Actually, it turned out that they were heading for the same location the Inquisitorius had determined the force that captured Vance to be heading, which reinforced Jon’s theory that this was the same ship that Vance had been transported on. But if the old Mercenary was still on board, Jon had yet to see any evidence suggesting it.

 “Hey, Mercenary!” Kendra half-shouted from across the bridge. That was another thing, Kendra Icasta refused to address Jon by name, just calling him “Mercenary.” Still, it was more than the other Shikari, who mostly just ignored him aside from the death glares and implied threats of bodily harm.

 “We’re going to be landing soon, so off the bridge!” She gestured to one of the many identical Shikari, who immediately took position at his side. Jon didn’t miss the way her weapons were poised and ready.

 Jon stepped off the ramp, and into the hangar bay, somehting he noticed to be just as spartan as the *Seeking Arrow*, though the variety of ships offset that to some degree.

 Just over there was his *Carnival*, the old freigther having been “towed” along from where the Shikari had picked him up. They better not have scratched it…

 The Shikari escorting him gave Jon a good jab in the back. Right, right, more important matters. Still, if his ship was scratched…

 The exit to the hangar was a fairly long hallway, opening out into… a network of underground caverns? Well, so much for his hope of figuring out where the Union was based out of… unless his plan worked, but that was a big “if.” Even he wasn’t used to pulling off *this* long of a shot.

 “So… when do I meet the boss man, hm?”

 Kendra gave Jon a sideways look. “Meet?” she said smugly. “You think we’d let you walk in and meet our leader in person, no questions asked?”

 Jon scowled. Road block. “I believe I made it clear on the ship, but I don’t deal with lackeys. I’ll negotiate with your boss, or not at all.”

 “And you *will*,” she said smirking. “Just not in person.”

 Before Jon had the opportunity to process what *that* meant, the group entered into a large, bowl shaped room, with a large holo-projector in the middle. Oh, now he was starting to understand…

 As the holo-projector flickered to life, Jon was met with the form of… something. He recognized the species as Ithorian, but… what had he *done* to himself?

 Daggo Mouk’s entire body was covered in scars, and not like burn scars or blaster scars, these looked more like the surgical kind. Daggo had done this to *himself*. And that wasn’t even counting the various mechanical parts. Two of his several prosthetic arms were fiddling with some kind of technology that Jon didn’t recognize.

 His one biological eye fixed itself on Jon, while the mechanical one remained fixed on the object in his “hands.” It was incredibly unnerving.

 “You are the Mercenary in service to the Brotherhood then?” he asked in a rasping, almost metallic sounding voice. It wasn’t until Kendra cleared her throat in agitation that Jon realised he should probably say something.

 “*Was* in service. Until recently. Mr. Mouk. Sir. Uh, Guild...meister?”

 Kendra’s facepalm told him far more about his apparent response then Mouk’s impassive and unreadable face ever could.

 “I see… and what about this information you have?”

 “I uh… just that it was considered *extremely* valuable by my former… employers. They mentioned… an artifact?” Well, that had been enough to win Kendra over, but this Guild Master of theirs seemed… impassive. Almost distracted, like his mind was somewhere a million light years away… Jon wasn’t sure if that was good or bad for him.

 Mouk was silent for a long moment, though his hands never stopped fiddling with that… whatever it was. It almost looked familiar, something small and pyramid shaped… where had he seen something like that before?

 “Very well, how much do you want for this information then?” he said offhandedly.

 “Um, well, I…” Jon was caught off guard. He hadn’t expected the guild leader to agree so readily… “Fif-fifteen thousand credits, then?”

 “Hmm… I’ll give you ten thousand. If your ‘information’ turns out valuable, you’ll have another six, but only *if*? Agreed?”

 Jon knew better than to argue at this point, and took the deal.

 The guild master turned to Kendra. “If this man’s information has what we want, execute the Brotherhood Mercenary you and your sisters picked up, understood?”

 “Yes, Guild Master,” she replied unhesitantly.

 One you picked up… Vance! But that meant that he was *here*, likely close by…

 “Guild Master,” he said confidently, and suddenly every pair of eyes in the room turned to look at him as though they’d briefly forgotten he was there. “If I may… offer my additional services? You have another Brotherhood Mercenary then?”

 “...Yes,” Mouk said slowly. “What of it to you?”

 “Well, it sounds as though he’s been, shall we say, less than cooperative? Perhaps I can… convince him to see reason? We Mercenaries, well, we shared something of a camaraderie, you know? Only normal people in an organization of freaks…”

 “You think you can convince him to talk?” Mouk said, glaring at Jon with both eyes this time. It seemed he’d managed to get the Guild Master’s attention. Good for him.

 “For a price, of course.”

 Mouk scoffed. “I’ll not pay you in advance for something that might not even work.” He waved one organic hand. “Try it if you want, but you won’t get paid unless you get results.”

 “Fair enough.”

 “If you’re lying, you’ll be killed.”

 “Obviously.” And with that, Jon turned to walk out the door, the Shikari who’d been following him thus far already making to go after him.

 “Mercenary,” Mouk called. “In your time in the Brotherhood, did you ever hear of someone called… Plagueis?”

 “Plagueis… I-it’s the name of one the Clans. I never had much dealings with them though.”

 “Ah. I see,” for the first time during that conversation, Jon thought he could detect a bit of emotion from the Guild Master’s voice. Disappointment?

 Jon took another look at the pyramid shaped object in his mechanical limbs. Wait, was that…? A Holocron? How? *Why*?

 The signal cut out, and like that, Jon was escorted out of the room by the Shikari.

The prison block was largely the same as everything else in the base: dark, dank, and carved from the natural rock of… wherever they were.

Vance’s cell was the only one currently inhabited, however. Luckily for Jon, he was currently being given the *least* amount of security since he arrived at the base: only *one* heavily armed huntress was shadowing him at the moment, and he thanked the stars it was *not* Kendra. Artemis had been taken to download the “information” into their computers. He just hoped the little droid could pull of her part of the plan.

And wouldn’t you know it, there was Vance. The man he’d undergone this entire crazy adventure to find. He looked like Hoth warmed over, and it bothered Jon deeply to think about what the Shikari likely did to leave him in such a state…

“S-Silvon? That you?” he said blearily as Jon looked in through the force field that acted as a door.

“That’d be me, Vance,” Jon said, smiling softly. He looked to the Shikari. “Open it for me, would you?”

She bristled. “You can’t honestly expect me to-”

“He can barely stand from the looks of him, much less fight. And me? I’m unarmed. What harm could opening the door *possibly* do?” She hesitated for a moment, but eventually complied.

Jon gingerly stepped inside, and leaned over the Mercanary’s prone form.

“Vance? Hey Vance, listen, I need you to do something for me, ok?”

“Oh?” Vance said, fully awake now. “And what would that be?”

“Duck.”

And like that, Jon activated his Magna Gloves at their maximum setting, pulling every inch of metal on (and, Jon grimaced at the thought, *in*) the Shikari’s body forward with a lurch.

She was so taken off guard she didn’t have a chance to react when Jon struck her hard in the midsection, knocking the wind out of her lungs. Jon grabbed Vance, shoved him out of the cell, and slammed the button the reactivate the force field  before she had time to recover.

Ignoring her shouts of protest and Vance’s confused queries, Jon activated his datapad and shot a message to Artemis.

*J-Got him. Did you do it?*

*A-Obviously. I’m not half the screw up you are, Jon.*

*J-Whatever. Just get back to the* Carnival*.*

Jon didn’t bother responding, instead grabbing Vance and heading for the hangar as fast as he could.

**IV**

Jon and Vance raced through the halls of the Technocratic Union’s base, at least as fast as Vance’s injuries would allow them.

 “Come one you old drunk,” Jon urged, “We just need to get the *Carnival* off the ground and into hyperspace, and we’re home free!”

 “Oh is *that* all we need to do?” Vance grunted. “Why, how simple it will be!”

 “Exactly!” Jon chirped, deliberately ignoring the older man’s obvious sarcasm. “Just focus on that!”

 “I can’t believe you came in here without any kind of plan!” Vance growled.

 “I do too have a plan!” Jon protested. It was only after it left his moth that he realized how childish it sounded.

 “Oh really, what are we to do then? Escape down the trash compactor, like some cheap holodrama? Do you know what kind of things *live* dow-”

 Jon was interrupted by the blaster bolt taking a chunk out of the wall, mere inches from his head.

 “Spoke too soon,” Jon said flatly.

 It seemed Kendra and her Shikari had caught up with them sooner than expected.

 “Mercenary!” Kendra shouted. “Surrender now, and I’ll let you and your friend live!”

 “Do you really expect us to believe that?” Jon called back without slowing down.

 “Nope,” she said before firing her slugthrower at them. The two were pelted by the bits of the wall she hit, but otherwise remained unharmed.

 “Um, Jon!” Vance said, glancing over his shoulder.

 “Not now Vance, keep moving!” They were just down the hall from the hangar now, in the same hall the Shikari had led Jon through upon his arrival. They were *so close-*

 “Jon, *Concussion Grenade!*” *WHAT!* Jon spun around just in time to see that, yes, the crazed Hunt Master really *did* have a Concussion Grenade in her hand, and was poised to throw.

 Jon didn’t have time to think about what he did next. This was something he’d thought up once, one of those crazy ideas no one would ever really *try*, much less in a live fire situation like this one. But, there wasn’t a lot of time. Jon shoved Vance to the side, some small part of his mind praying he hadn’t worsened his friend’s injuries.

 Jon took off one of his Magna-Gloves, turned it to its highest setting…

 Kendra took several steps ahead of her group and chucked her Concussion Grenade into the air…

 And the forces of magnetism drew the one to the other, right as it landed amidst the group of armed Shikari.

 The group scattered, the vast majority running back down the hall, save for Kendra who was already on closer to Jon’s side of the hall. There was a flash, a noise like thunder, and the roof came tumbling down on top of them.

 Jon tried to ignore the ringing in his ears as he pried himself to his feet. Where was…. Oh, Vance was lying unmoving on the floor. Was he…?

 Jon moved to check if his fellow Mercenary was still breathing or not… when the room filled with smoke.

 “You miserable little punk…” said a distinctly enraged voice. Oh, right, in all the excitement, Jon had forgotten that Kendra had been on his side of the corridor… huh.

Jon had just enough time to react when he saw the stun baton coming, and ducked out of the way. Kendra responded to that with a knee into his gut, followed by a knuckle plated strike to his skull as he doubled over, leaving him seeing stars.

 “What, no witty retort this time?” she hissed. She caught the strike Jon had aimed for her solar plexus, and twisted his arm back *hard*, followed by kicking his feet out from under him and sending the Mercenary to the floor.

 “No more *jokes*?” she attempted to bring the stun baton down directly onto his head, but Jon rolled out of the way and clambered to his feet. Another strike to the back of his head stopped that cold, and Kendra wrapped him in a choke hold, dropping her stun baton to the ground in the process.

 “I’m going to *enjoy* killing you, Mercenary,” she said through gritted teeth, tightening her hold into a strangle choke as she did so.

 Jon, choking on his attempts to breathe and only inhaling smoke as he did so, tired to ignore the burning in his lungs and focused. He raised his arm up, and brought his elbow down against Kendra’s midsection, a kidney shot… or where the kidney would be on a human, he wasn’t too familiar with chiss biology.

 The Hunt Master grunted in pain, but didn’t relent. Jon’s vision was starting to go dark, and the acrid smell of smoke was getting harder and harder to ignore. He brought his arm up again. And again.

 Her grip loosened, barely, but it was enough for him to start wrangling loose. Another shot. This time, Jon got free, and tumbled forward onto the ground, crawling free of the smoke cloud to take in a breath of clean air. Beautiful, pure, life-giving air, he’d never take it for granted again!

 That was when Kendra emerged from the smoke, bloody murder written large on every conceivable inch of her face. If he’d been in a less life or death scenario, Jon might’ve made some kind of poetic comparison to a demon emerging from Hell. As it was, he resisted the urge to let out a startled shriek, and scrambled away.

 “You know, Kendra,” he said, finally able to breathe again, although his voice was rough and hoarse from all the smoke inhaled. “If you weren’t so intent on killing me, you might-” she smacked him across the face once more, and Jon is just able to remain on his feet this time, before backstepping out of the murderous Huntress’s reach.

 “You might have noticed-” she kicked his feet out from under him, but he was ready this time. Instead of collapsing to the floor, he landed in a roll, and was able to return the favor with a strike to her legs, sending the enhanced chiss to the ground.

 “Noticed *what?*” she practically shrieked as she lashed out at him once again.

 “Noticed,” Jon said, barely resisting the urge to smirk, “You never retrieved your *baton*.”

 Kendra’s brow creased in confusion for half a second before she turn around. Jon imagined she had just enough time to see Vance emerge from the smoke, much of which had already dissipated by this point, before her own baton slammed into the side of her head, and leaving her spiraling into darkness.

 When Kendra came to, the first thing she noticed was that her hands were bound by her own whip. The second was her remaining weapons were missing. The third was that the lens of her eye replacement was cracked-no, make that *shattered*.

 It was the last one that sent shockwaves through her nerves, as the events of the day came rushing back into the forefront of her mind. But where was-how did-? And then she heard a voice. No, more specifically, she heard *her own* voice.

 “Yes that’s right, the mercenaries are headed for the armory-”

 The armory? That… that was on the other side of the compound. Wait… a cold sense of realization started to creep up Kendra’s spine.

 “Of course I’m positive, send the Shikari their right away! These too are good, *very* good.”

 The sound of her own voice saying *that* nearly made her vomit. She tried to yell that it was a trick, but that was when she realized her mouth had been gagged. Great.

 After that, the mercenaries rounded the corner, an infuriatingly large grin plastered across Silvon’s face, only mildly offset by the numerous cuts and bruises she had inflicted. It was small comfort, but it *was* comfort.

 “Yes, don’t worry, I’ll be there soon! Just make sure to cover *every* exit to the armory, and don’t let those two through!” Jon said in Kendra’s voice, a small metal disc held to his throat as he spoke. A Vocal Emulator. Because *of course*. That was when they noticed Kendra had regained conciousness.

 “Ah, well, hello there sleeping beauty!” Jon said grinning, holding Kendra’s communicator on one hand and his Voice Emulator in the other. “Thanks again for redirecting your soldiers for us!”

 “If you’re done gloating,” Vance said, rolling his eyes, “I don’t imagine we have very long before the Shikari realise they’ve been tricked and swarm the hangar bay, so  if you don’t *mind*…” He gestured to the Silvon’s ship. Kendra noticed the astromech was already on the ramp awaiting the two.

 “Ah, that’s your problem Vance!” Jon said, though he began heading toward the ship, Vance trailing after. “No sense of whimsy!”

 “Really? And here I thought my problem was the army of genetically enhanced cyborgs coming to kill me.”

 Neither of them paid Kendra any further attention as they marched onto the ship, leaving her behind.

**V**

Jon, Vance, and Artemis clambered into the cockpit, and Jon started shouting orders to Artemis to get them taken off.

 “We’re not out of the woods yet you two, but the clearing *is* in sight.” The *Carnival* lifted off the ground, and started heading for the doors.

 “Tell that to *them*,” Vance said, pointing out the front window at the group of armed Shikari charging into the hangar. He even saw one of them stopping to untie a *very* angry looking Kendra.

 “Faster, Artemis, faster would be bett-*whoa*!” the sudden burst of speed as they shot out doors and into orbit sent Jon slamming back into his seat.

 As they took off, Jon was able to get his first real glimpse at the outside of the “base.” It turned out to be built into a massive, hollowed out asteroid. That explained why it was so cold in there, and it was an excellent hiding place.

 “They’re following us Jon,” Vance said nervously, “Maybe we should go to hyperspeed now!”

 “Oh, that wouldn’t do any good! They almost definitely stuck a tracking beacon on board while I was in there!”

 Jon watched as the color drained from Vance’s face. “Then… why do you seem so happy?”

 “Because of what I had *Artemis* do while she was hooked up to their computers! Just watch, any second now!”

 The Technocratic ships started closing in fast, with the *Carnival*’s computer lighting up to let him know they were entering blaster range.

 “Any… second now!” Jon said nervously. Not good.

 Kendra watched from the bridge of the *Seeking Arrow* as her ships closed in on the miserable little frieghter, ready to blast it’s occupants into oblivion.

 That bastard mercenary… he’d humiliated in every conceivable way. Out-smarted her, out-*fought* her even! But he would not, under any circumstances, out-*run* her. She’d capture his ship, and make him *feel* every agonizing second of his death!

 “Hunt Master!” one of her Shikari called. “You need to see this!”

 “What is it, Eleven?”

 “Ships! *Multiple* ships, Brotherhood fleet by the look of them! Dropping out of hyperspace!”

 Kendra’s blood ran cold. No… this station was hidden, and there was no way the Mercenary would’ve had the time to-

 “There sending us a signal, Hunt Master!” It took a moment for Kendra to respond properly

 “L-lets, hear it then… Eleven.”

 “Collective vessel,” a voice came over the ship’s communication. “You are outnumbered, and outgunned. Power down, and prepare to be boarded. Do not, and we *will* open fire.”

 “You… you had Artemis send a signal to the Brotherhood while she was hooked into their computers?” Vance said “That’s…”

 “Brilliant? You don’t have to tell me,” Jon replied.

 “I was going to say incredibly risky.”

 And with that, the too sat in silence.

“So… guess I owe you one, huh Jon?”

 Jon scoffed. “The day I’ve had? You owe me like… twenty. At least!”