

The Value of a Name

Amanda Francis couldn't understand her people sometimes. Solarian colony worlds were disturbingly bland, their “noble” inhabitants holing themselves indoors to minimize solar exposure. Seemed like a waste of a perfectly good planet if you were going to spend your entire time underneath shade.

Especially when one took into consideration the amount of effort needed to alter the planet for habitation. It was more than just making sure it was the right distance from its sun and had the base components for life. Often the very biochemistry of the planet had to be altered in order to be compatible with the colonists, a project that was never small-scale or inexpensive, even when you focused on worlds that were nearly suitable to begin with.

Such was the case for Xani, the “Jewel of the Solarian People.” It needed little alteration, relatively speaking, having been a Se-Lan border colony before the Ancient Interstellar War, but even the minor changes had taken several staryears and billions upon billions of credits to undertake.

All that effort to turn Xani into the most lush, beautiful tourist trap that the Solarion upper classes could hide from.

Xani got *billions* of visitors and credits from said wealthy families, especially from Solaria, but no one ever did anything that they couldn't have done at home. They avoided the mountains because they were too cold, avoided the forests because they were too rustic, and avoided the beaches like the one Amanda was currently enjoying because they were too sunny.

After all, it wouldn't be proper to get any color to their skin and look like they *lived* on a colony world. It was important to be as pale and white as if you had spent your entire life on Solaria, because that was what importance looked like. If you were to get even the slightest hint of color, you might be confused for a commoner, and one couldn't suffer that.

Stupid religion. Amanda was astounded by its power to make people accept the most inane nonsense in its name.

She refused to be bound by such ridiculous social norms... not that anyone believed she would anyway. The nobility *expected* her to do “scandalous” things such as sun herself on a Xani beach, daring to put a little tan on what should be ghostly skin, or to do so in the most hedonist outfit she could find. Amanda personally liked yellow – it honestly had nothing to do with it being a sexually suggestive color in Solarian culture. Of course, the skimpy two-piece swimsuit that would have been immodest on a girl half her size *was* very intentional.

She *did* have a reputation to keep after all.

It helped that Arcadian-designed clothes – and their revealing styles – were more comfortable than those from Erani tailors. She had more to her hips and chest than the typically slight build of her race, which meant that clothes generally designed for Erani felt like they were suffocating her.

Just another “scandal” to add to the list, really. After all, there was nothing new to the whispers that her family genetically altered their children to appear more exotic... they were prevalent back when they were the primary noble house on Xani. Nobles from Solaria would vacation there, become entranced by the sons and daughters of their family, and form political unions that allowed her family to eventually rise to a station on Solaria.

Not that the accusations were *wrong*; merely baseless. Truth being, that *was* the Francis family's plan over the last two hundred and some-odd staryears. Amanda knew she herself had been modified in such a fashion, and that there had been a tentative agreement for her marry the first son of then-Knight Commandant Timothy Honore, increasing their family's prestige even further.

Was it wrong that Amanda found herself thankful for the Second Battle of Mydor?

Not that Amanda was the only Solarian woman who felt that way. The gender roles long ingrained into Solarian society were first blurred, then erased completely, once it became clear that

there was no way it could remain intact with the small numbers of noblemen that remained. The ladies of Solarian nobility gladly embraced the challenge almost to the last woman, much like Amanda, who wasted no time accepting an offer to join a Knighthood Academy and shape the psionic potential that would have otherwise been wasted.

Her thoughts came to a jarring halt as she watched a couple, a man and a woman, walk across the beach in front of her. Obviously a commoner couple, judging from the light bronze skin tone. Not that Amanda particularly cared... she just thought they both looked pretty attractive. She entertained calling out and propositioning them, until the glint of a stone around the woman's neck told her the couple was married.

The gentle sensibilities of the noble houses called Amanda "promiscuous." In private, they no doubt used harsher language than that, one of the few opinions about her that was truly exaggerated. Amanda could count her sexual liaisons on one hand, and none of them with people already married, although she *was* just as likely to proposition women as well as men, and on occasion, both at the same time. It was a trait of hers she embraced rather than pretend didn't exist.

A shadow slid over Amanda, and she let her annoyance show on her expression as she looked up into the face of one of the resort staff.

"You're in my sun," she said with obvious irritation. When the attendant squeaked in shock, and dutifully sidestepped to allow the sun back onto her, she asked, "How may I help you, mister?"

"My lady..." the attendant nervously said, trying not to anger Amanda further, "You have a communication. It claims to be urgent."

Amanda sighed in frustration. She could, in theory, ignore the incoming communication. She *was* on her vacation period.

Amanda could even, in theory, answer the incoming communication, and outright refuse the request with no ramifications whatsoever. A period of rest was *demand*ed by the words of the Prophets, and not even the kings of old would have the authority to supersede such divine mandate.

But considering that only two people knew where she was and had access to comm her, along with the reality of her station, ignoring or refusing were not true options. With a resigned sigh, she sat up, raised her visor, then stood. "Where should I take this call?"

"It will be forwarded to your room, my lady."

"I trust you will secure and return my beach supplies?"

"Of course, my lady."

Amanda straightened into a dutiful posture, then said. "Very good. Have it done."

She wasted no further time, taking long strides across the sand and along the path of volcanic rock to the resort hotel. The doors slid open silently and she crossed the threshold, immediately receiving the evil eye from a cluster of six "proper" noblewomen, who immediately began talking amongst themselves. Amanda didn't need to read their minds to know that she was the topic of conversation.

Nor did she need to read minds to feel the eyes resting upon her from the noblemen congregated at the first table in the lobby. Men would be men, be they Solarian or Arcadian, noble or common, rich or poor. With a devious grin, Amanda loitered in the lobby until she drew the attention of the desk clerk.

"Change of plans, mister," Amanda said sweetly. "I'll take my call here, if I can."

The desk clerk didn't need to get her name... she had become rather famous in her stay, only occasionally for the "wrong" reasons. "Of course, my lady," he said with a smile, fetching one of the hotel comm devices and transferring the communication through before handing it to her. "There you are, my lady."

Amanda leaned toward the side of the polished light wood fiberwall desk, her right hip barely grazing the edge as she set her right arm onto the desktop, and winked to the noblemen, five of whom making no attempt to look away. The noblewomen, predictably, rolled their eyes at the display and

continued their low muttering.

“Knight Francis, at your service,” she chirped, finally addressing the caller, after putting the receiver end to her left ear.

“Good morning, Amanda,” Celine Honore's voice replied in greeting.

“And good morning to you, Madam High Tenant,” Amanda returned, making a teasing poke of her tongue at the boys, and a wink to the girls.

Celine's voice lowered in the smallest hint of disapproval. “You're taking this call from the hotel lobby, aren't you?” the High Tenant accused. “And wearing that glorified piece of yellow string you bought from Fredrin of Hallwood, I'm sure.”

“Are you having me watched? That isn't a very proper thing to do to a woman on vacation.”

Celine snorted. “I can hear background noise, and you proudly showed me that outfit yourself when you bought it a ten-cycle ago. It was merely an educated guess.”

Even Celine's snorts sounded graceful and ladylike, Amanda observed. She wasn't sure how that was possible. “Anyway, I doubt you called to chastise me about my wardrobe choices.”

“That I did not,” Celine said. “There has been a bit of an inter-species incident I'm afraid, and I could use your help to resolve it.”

Amanda shifted fully into business mode. She stepped away from the desk, and turned around with her back to the two groups she had been teasing. Any nice view they got from that point on would be purely accidental. “Go on.”

“A rogue group of Arcadian militants have abducted a group of young Initiates there on Xani as of 7.15 ET your time.”

Amanda quickly checked the time display in the lobby. That hadn't even been eleven ticks ago. “I trust there is more pertinent information than that.”

“The group abducted was a class for nine- to ten-staryear children from the Sather Knighthood Preliminary Academy, on the southern hemisphere, about five hundred and fifty TackMets from you. They were on a nature trek with three adult supervisors when the attack occurred. It is believed they are a mercenary strike force of twenty or more men of several races. We haven't been able to get a report on the exact number and composition, but the Wraiths are still working on that.”

“And how does this require my attention?” Amanda asked. “The Wraiths have handled child hostage situations, I'm sure.”

“One of those abducted is Knight Anton Harin,” Celine informed. “He possesses sensitive information that we would like to keep secret, if possible.”

The Harin family had, up until a hundred staryears ago, been one of the eight primary families of Solaria until Amanda's clan had garnered the bloodlines and political clout to unseat them. It had basically been a straight swap at the time, as the Harin family quickly settled in as the premier clan on Xani. That added up to something that didn't quite mesh in Amanda's mind.

“A member of the Harin family shouldn't have been overcome by a group of mercenaries,” Amanda noted. “Do we know any details as to how the ambush and abduction happened?”

“Not yet,” Celine replied, “but if he was with children, he might not have been able to fight at his fullest, nor do we know the full capabilities of the attackers. You suspect he may have been in association with these mercenaries?”

“I wouldn't dismiss anything with such little information.”

“A wise approach,” Celine approved. “At any rate, report to Division First Officer Daniel Saddock. An image of the scene for you to teleport with should be incoming now.”

“I didn't exactly bring my carbide with me, High Tenant. I wasn't expecting action.”

“It is being sent to the Wraith's temporary operations center as we speak. Estimated time of arrival is twenty-five ticks. That should give you enough time to freshen up and stretch your muscles before you head out.”

* * * * *

The temporary operations center was a series of seven tents pitched outside of a scenic camping ground, overlooking what were most likely ruins of a Se-Lan outpost from the Ancient Interstellar War. Amanda promptly kicked out the inhabitants of the easternmost tent while she suited up, then emerged with her helmet tucked under her arm.

“Glad to see you, ma'am,” First Officer Saddock acknowledged, with a salute and then a bow.

Amanda huffed in response. “I trust you have more information for me than the bare-bones briefing I received when you requested my presence.”

Saddock coughed politely, then admitted, “I actually didn't request you, ma'am.” The officer then jerked a thumb to his right, and added, “He did.”

The black suit and glossy black badge with white lettering pinned to his chest pocket told her the man's station before he even opened his mouth. “Agent Parker Forde, SIA.”

Even if the official department name had switched from Inquisition to Intelligence, that didn't mean *anyone* thought it was good news when one of them showed up in the field. It still meant that somehow, nobility was involved.

Forde was a younger man, likely new to the agency, with a face that couldn't have been any older than his early twenties. His deep brown hair was mostly covered by a broad-brimmed SIA labeled hat that protected his fair skin from the sun, and a visor covered his eyes.

“I see I'm not the only one who suspects Knight Harin didn't exactly give it his all in his students defense,” Amanda said.

“Not Anton, my lady,” Agent Forde corrected. “Boyle Harin, however, is very much involved.”

“And you know this... how?”

“Because when Boyle learned you were here on vacation, he informed me that he wanted to put you in your place, and told me to arrange it. Anton happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

The Wraiths apparently weren't in on this plan, because Officer Saddock immediately turned with all the ire he could respectfully unleash on a nobleman, and snarled, “This entire hostage situation was *your* idea, sir?”

“Well, obviously, it got a little out of hand. I had expected Boyle Harin to gather up some supporters of his. I wasn't anticipating he would hire out-of-system mercenaries. Noblemen I could count on to not truly jeopardize the children...”

“But you can't say the same for a bunch of ruffians hired off of a pirate clan, most likely,” Amanda finished, taking over for the Wraith officer. While Saddock couldn't really lay into Agent Forde for his actions, Amanda *could*. “I'll save my lecture for later, because frankly the children are a lot more important than you are at this moment. I want every last scrap of information you have.”

“Oh, I can do that, Knight Francis, just give me a moment to...” Forde was reaching into his pocket to grab his PCU, when he stopped and noticed Amanda almost staring into him. “You're probing my mind, aren't you?”

“Oh yes. But I want you to send me all the information on your device anyway. It'll do nicely to fill in the pieces that will surely be a consequence of your lack of brain matter,” Amanda snarled in retort. “That you even *thought* it would be a remotely good idea to involve *children* in your scheme...”

“I thought you said you weren't going to lecture me,” Agent Forde noted timidly.

“This isn't a lecture. This is common sense at this point. My lecture will likely involve lashings to prevent any confusion.” Once satisfied she had gleaned everything she could of the developing events from Forde's mind, she turned to her PCU, where a smattering of separate files had been transferred to the system's memory.

As she processed that information, she then addressed Officer Saddock. “What do we have on our enemy, Officer?”

The Wraith called up the relevant information of the ruins, and projected it from his PCU display. "Scanning has identified twenty-three life signs: twelve Arcadian, four Demodian, five Ruma and two Ubeks on the surface, along with nine more Arcadians, three Ubeks, two Ruma, and thirteen Erani on the lower levels, four adults and nine children."

"The Ruma will make infiltration difficult," Amanda observed. "They were likely chosen for this mercenary team for precisely that reason."

The Ruma were a race that the Erani approached with considerable wariness, mostly because the reptilian species were, in general, nigh immune to psionic influence or illusions. Misdirection that would have normally been useful in slinking around the ruins would be largely worthless now; the Ruma would immediately know something was up, alert their comrades, and shatter the deception. Arcadian businessmen hired Ruma as assistants for centuries due to that immunity... apparently mercenaries were now getting in on the act.

Officer Saddock confirmed her line of reasoning. "And why our infiltration operatives haven't been moving in. On top of that, we have no idea how many mercenaries are down in those lower levels."

Amanda grunted in annoyance. "I need to inform the High Tenant of the situation, preferably in private."

Officer Saddock regarded the tents, and then pointed to the one she had used to dress. "That's probably the most isolated."

"Good. Then come with me, Officer. I want you to provide your input."

The Wraith nodded, and Agent Forde nervously piped up as it looked they were about to leave, "Would you like me to add in my input as well, Knight Francis?"

Amanda whirled about angrily, and just about spat, "Agent Forde, consider yourself damned lucky that I haven't already sent you back to Solaria in a packing crate."

She then stomped off after the Wraith officer and into the tent, closing the flap behind them.

* * * * *

When Amanda emerged again, she was in a slightly better mood, but not by much. She summoned Agent Forde into the tent, and quickly scanned to make sure that there was nobody loitering about who could listen in.

"Looks like you get to be useful after all, Agent Forde," she grouched.

The SIA man nearly jumped at the sound of her voice, and regarded her with a nervous grin. "Anything to help, Knight Francis?"

"You said that Boyle Harin started this whole scheme because he knew I was here?" she asked.

Agent Forde nodded vigorously. "Yes. He contacted me when he learned you had made reservations. The Harin family has been on SIA's radar since they were demoted from Solaria. I happened to be the one who was able to convince them I was on their side."

"Good. Because you have a very important job. You are going to tell Harin that we're going to give him what he wants."

Forde blinked. "You're going to surrender to them?"

"For now. Meanwhile, I will need you to freeze and empty all the accounts tied to the Harin family. I don't want a single credit left."

The SIA agent processed this plan, and came to the obvious conclusion. "You're going to convince the mercenaries that Harin has no plans to pay them. Makes sense... he probably doesn't. There's no way he could ensure them an escape at this point. They might already be on the verge of mutiny as it is."

"That's the plan," Amanda acknowledged. "Now, I recommend you make those arrangements quickly before the mercenaries get even more anxious. The sooner we disarm this situation, the better

the chance some young Solarian children make it out of this alive.”

“Understood,” Agent Forde agreed. “I... well... I will need to be alone while I make this call, I think.”

“Of course,” Amanda said in deference. “Just let me know when you have everything set up.”

She stepped outside of the tent, and returned to where Officer Saddock was coordinating with his team lieutenants. “Everything in place, ma'am?” the officer asked.

“Indeed. I trust we're clear on what I need you to do?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Good.”

At that point, Agent Forde had emerged from the tent, and closed the distance. “Everything is a go. Obviously, Harin wants to you leave your carbide and weapons behind. I am to escort you to the meeting point, and hand you over.”

“Of course,” Amanda frowned. Even though she expected it, that didn't mean she liked stripping down to her bodysuit. The men around her seemed equally perturbed that she would do so without shame right in front of them. She rolled her eyes, and snarked, “I can assure you, nothing you'll be able to see will be anything new.”

The process of taking off a suit of carbide had simplified over the years, especially with the development of liquid metal for the joints. Connecting the pieces of carbide mesh to the plates had taken the most time by far, where liquid metal bonded quickly and seamlessly.

Nonetheless, it still wasn't a quick process, taking nearly five ticks before Amanda was down to her bodysuit, with Officer Saddock collecting the pieces for storage, save her PCU which he kept himself. “All right, Agent. I suppose I'm ready to go.”

Forde coughed, and held up a pair of full-hand, fingerprint-locked manacles. “He insisted you wear these as well.”

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So far, so good.

Boyle Harin wasn't present at the meeting point. This was actually a good thing, as while Amanda trusted her ability to keep her thoughts from a talented psionic's prying mind, she couldn't trust the same of the bumbling SIA agent escorting her, nor the Wraith escorts.

In Harin's place were four of the mercenary team he hired, along with five of the children hostages. Amanda felt for the little ones, four boys and a girl, one of them with a couple scrapes on his cheek, and all of them with dust on their uniform slacks. They have already been through hell, and they were the *lucky* ones.

The mercenaries were a good blend of heavy muscle and psionic check: two Arcadians, an Ubek, and a Ruma. They all were rather unremarkable, really, although their uniform dress – forest-camouflaged light carbide and matching bodysuits – told her they were part of a professional squad that had worked together for some time. This was both good and bad; bad in the sense that they won't be scrambling and fighting each other when Amanda dropped the hammer, but good in that they will be quick to cover their own asses and turn on their current employer when it looked like they were being scammed.

One of the Arcadians, apparently the designated party leader, stepped forward. He was a rather burly man, with a fresh cut on left cheek – which could very well be related to the scrapes on one of the boys being traded – and a scar over his left eye. He also had a slight limp as he moved his left knee, suggesting considerable scar tissue.

This told Amanda two things; first, that he had a bit of experience in fighting, and second, he wasn't particularly good at avoiding getting hit.

His right hand even bore some burn marks as he tauntingly ran his fingers across Amanda's

cheek. "This is the girl we're trading for?" he said with a smirk. "I think I understand why the boss wants her. If the guy can't get aroused for this lady, I guess nothing could."

"I doubt your boss wants me for a sex toy," Amanda snarled. "And I doubt you do either."

The mercenary smirked. "You're right, but if you've seen how he's been acting, you'd agree he probably needs a good fuck more than anything else." He gestured to the Ubek, and said, "Give the kids over while I transfer control of this beauty's cuffs."

Electronically locked restraints – much like the fingerprint locks binding Amanda's wrists – were coded to open automatically if the person authorized to use them moved more than twenty Tacks away. It was a safety feature required by galactic law, considering the hypothetical scenario of a prisoner's keeper being injured and leaving the prisoner largely helpless in a perilous situation. Anybody who moved psionics appreciated this feature as well, as mechanical locks could have their inner workings teased by mental talents, and someone *that* dangerous would likely need a constant guard anyway.

The process of transferring control of the lock was fairly simple. Agent Forde scanned his finger onto the ID pad, then allowed the mercenary to do the same. Once done, Agent Forde scanned in again to remove his fingerprint from the authorized list.

"I don't think I need to drag you along, do I?" the mercenary leader asked. "We're all professionals here, right?"

Amanda nodded. "Yes, I think I'm quite capable of walking on my own."

The mercenary gestured to his teammates, the other Arcadian taking the lead while he fell in to Amanda's side, and the Ruma and Ubek took to the rear. "I'm going to be quite honest, I don't like this much at all," he admitted to their prisoner.

"Oh?"

"He didn't tell us that his target was a Solarian Knight. When he said we were trying to lure a woman out, I figured it was a mistress or a mother of one of the kids," the man elaborated. "That's a bit of trouble that I frankly didn't want to get involved with."

"Most people don't have a terribly high opinion of the Knighthoods anymore," Amanda said, "I'm a bit surprised you do."

"I'm not so much worried about other Knights. There weren't all that many of you even before you all decided to sit on an exploding planet. I'm much more worried of the military response that comes to a Knight in distress. I have no doubt there will be a handful of cruisers and another regiment or two of your Wraiths ready to go by the time we get back to our 'base.' I don't like those odds."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because if shit gets heavy, I and my men don't want to be slaughtered by a legion of angry Solarians. The others might still be blinded by the money promised, but us four aren't entirely sold anymore."

"You're not all of the same company then?"

"Old religion, us four have been a team for about ten staryears now. There four more of us in the base, but the rest are thugs and goons that responded to an open call promising a million credits per head. Those freelancers have pretty much nothing to lose. They'll be willing to go down in a blaze of glory for the promise of money."

"Are you offering me a deal?" Amanda asked.

"More of a non-aggression treaty. If things go down fast, we won't get in your way."

"Well, I can't promise that," Amanda frowned, lifting her manacles. "I'm not the most powerful psionic in the galaxy. Trying my tricks without using my hands would be a bit of a danger to any innocents nearby."

"I guess we'll both see, won't we?"

Amanda had to admit that was more than she had expected. Anything that wasn't outright opposition might as well be allied resources in this sort of situation.

At that point, the procession had reached the ruins. The Se-Lan were an odd culture, Amanda had decided in her studies as an Initiate. They had access to technology at least equal to what could be found in the modern day, if not superior, yet a lot of their superficial structures were built from native stone. Considering how easy it is to make fiberwall, and the versatility of the material, it seemed odd that the Se-Lan would waste so much time and energy carving and shipping stone.

Of course, the interiors and lower levels of their ruins were a much different story. They used metals and building materials that the Erani still hadn't figured out how to replicate perfectly, melding together a far greater variety of elements into their alloys than the Erani could yet manage.

On top of that, they were built to last, evident by the operational trim lights that illuminated the underground of the outpost. Even if the lights had been replaced, the fact that the structure was compatible with the replacements at all was remarkable. It reminded Amanda of just how much her species had copied and reverse engineered from the ruins of their ancestral parent race.

A left bend in the corridor led to the central bunker. Ten more mercenaries and four Solarians clad in heavy brown carbide with full helmets stood vigil in front of a side bunker, where the remaining children were huddled together.

"I didn't think Boyle Harin would be here," Amanda said once she had been led to the center of the the bunker. She focused on the armored Solarians, and asked, "Which one of you is Anton?"

"Not lacking for confidence, are you, Knight *Francis*?" The Solarian in the center right of the formation stepped forward. "You don't sound terribly surprised to see my grandfather isn't present."

"Boyle Harin is near seventy staryears. He wouldn't be in the middle of a hostage situation. Not to mention this isn't his style of subversion. No, I rather figured from the start that this was the act of an impatient young man, trying to regain his family's lost honor in any way he could before his grandfather passed on."

She found herself on the receiving end of a gauntlet-reinforced open hand slap, the blow causing her to adjust her balance quickly to keep from falling over. She could feel the copper taste of blood in her mouth, and her cheek already smarting from the blow.

"I will bruise every inch of that genetically altered skin of yours, abortion, before I'm finished with you." Anton snarled. "This has nothing to do with family honor or pride. This has *everything* to do with revenge upon you and your family for your crimes against us. Crimes that Solaria continues to let pass unpunished."

"I take it this is where you list the crimes I've committed then?" Amanda snarked, earning her another slap, this one to the other side of her face, over her right ear, making her inner ear ring with a high-pitched buzz. It was followed up by a knee to her gut, forcing her down to her own knees as she doubled over. Faking the pain was unnecessary in this case, although her clenched scream was entirely deliberate.

Anton paced in front of her, the loathing pouring from his voice. "Your family used genetic tricks and seduction to depose mine from Solaria, spitting in the face of proper genetic lineage. Clearly, judging from the sight in front of me, it's a practice that has continued. Your family committed the greatest sin against the noble families by betraying the Solarian people to the demonic hordes on Mydor..."

"*One* of my family," Amanda snarked. "A sick, depraved extremist who was a member of a group that extended far beyond one family."

"*Silence!*" This time, the reward for her remark was a boot to her face, finally knocking her over before she was drug back to her feet by the mercenaries flanking her. "Your family's actions killed tens of thousands of honorable noblemen, and yet your family remains in their station! My father... my uncle... *gone!* And what is your punishment? *Nothing!*"

Anton continued his manic pacing. "Did you think changing your name would free you from association? Did you think other families would be convinced that was enough?"

Amanda glowered at her torturer. "Changing the family name wasn't my choice. If you wish to

call me Knight Amanda Fransisca, be my guest. As for losing your father... *so did I!* He likely died right next to your father in the Second Battle of Mydor.”

“Do not *dare* to compare our sacrifices!” Anton howled. “You are the worst of your Bannor-forsaken family! Mocking your noble appearance, flaunting your charms at every opportunity! You know nothing of nobility!”

“I’m flattered that the epitome of nobility itself would go to the trouble of taking children hostage so he could lecture me on the subject.”

This time, Anton’s answer to her jibe was the barrel of his sidearm, drawn a hair’s breadth from the center of her forehead. “I can’t... I can’t let this go unpunished any longer. Even if the rest of Solaria and the worlds under her banner turn a blind eye... I can’t.”

“Couldn’t even get enough of your own family to follow this damn fool scheme?” Amanda said with a knowing grin. “Is that why you had to hire mercenaries to keep the Wraiths at bay? I believe you promised a million credits a person, am I right? That’s an awful lot of money.”

“What?” Anton said, a hint of concern tinting his voice. “How did you know about that?”

But at that point, Amanda had nothing further to say to Anton. While not taking her eyes off of the enraged Knight, she addressed the mercenaries in the bunker. “That’s a lot of money for a family that’s broke. The Harin family has been a disaster since leaving Solaria... their business interests have stalled, their ventures have failed spectacularly; they hold their position on Xani merely through prestige at this point.”

“You! She speaks lies!” Anton barked, as a predictable muttering began to filter through the non-Solarian contingents.

“You’re hunkered down in this hole, surrounded by what is likely three Wraith regiments at this point. Do you think they’re going to let any of you out of here alive? Your ‘boss’ here knew damn well that this was a suicide plan. He knew he wouldn’t have to worry about paying you.”

The sidearm shook in warning. “Silence your mouth, or I will hole you where you stand!”

“Then prove it.” Amanda grinned. “Pay them.”

This was where the scheme got tricky. How she progressed here depended on if Parker Forde had done what he was supposed to do. Meanwhile, she felt the lock on her restraints click softly as they came unlocked. The mercenaries that had escorted her had been slowly backing away the moment firearms were drawn, and apparently, had left the range of the manacle’s sensor.

“I don’t need to prove anything!”

At that point, the concerns of the mercenaries reached a boiling point. A Halfblood Ubek, his hair tail lacking a tie that would have identified his clan, spoke up the loudest, punctuated by the unsettling sound of his cracking knuckles. “Actually, Solarian, I think you do.”

Anton didn’t turn his focus away from Amanda as she had hoped he would, but she wasn’t relying on that either. “Fine. Leonard, pay the mercenaries. Get them to stop crying.”

A second Solarian, on Anton’s left, popped open the panel on his left bracer, and accessed the PCU stored within. After a few commands, Amanda could almost hear what little color was in his face drain away. “Anton... we have a problem...”

The mercenaries didn’t even wait to hear what the problem was. Firearms drew, and pandemonium erupted in the bunker. Amanda was momentarily forgotten due to the now much larger threat, and that was when she made her move.

Shrugging out of the restraints, she delivered a shoulder tackle into Anton’s chest, successfully knocking him over and freeing his sidearm from his grip. With that opening, she sprinted to the side bunker where the children had retreated further into once the plasma fire began flying. In the process, she spun the Solarian known as Leonard into the bunker as well, grabbing his PCU before he fell onto his backside.

“I would strongly suggest you keep these children safe, if I were you. It might look good to the Adjudate, provided anyone survives this mess,” she ordered, then accessed her own PCU with a comm

request. “Saddock! You're clear! Move in now!”

Anton's scream of rage cut through the din, mostly because Amanda sensed it directed towards her. “You *whore!*” was then followed by a bright red-yellow ball of fire headed towards the side bunker.

Amanda deflected it with a shield of energy, assisted by Leonard, who at least appeared willing to follow her suggestions. “Brother?” she queried of the armored knight behind her.

“Cousin. Father's side,” Leonard amended.

Another flash of fiery rage crashed against her shield. Staying here put the children at ever increasing risk. “Stay here, and don't move!” she ordered, charging back out into the central bunker.

Amanda didn't know much about Anton's psionic potential, but she figured it would have to be pretty good since his genetic line had been a premier family of Solaria. On top of that, his raw output must have been enhanced by his rage, and the significant advantage of his full armor rendered many of her hand-to-hand options worthless. This was probably going to hurt.

Fortunately, the situation between the mercenaries and the other Knights had shifted into the corridors as the mercenaries retreated. One of said Knights was severely wounded, a plasma shell piercing his armor and left flank. The other was pushing deeper into the corridor, most likely to keep the pressure off his ally.

Which left Amanda and Anton to scrap with a largely clear stage.

He literally shrugged off the forearm hold she attempted, using a burst of mental energy to help throw her into the wall on the far side. She absorbed most of the impact with her own psionics, and ducked underneath Anton's follow-up blow that had enough force to visibly shake the wall.

In some ways, this was the opposite of the Nerean Trance; Anton was so overcome with anger that he was no longer concerned with his own well-being. This could be a good thing, as people who stopped thinking would start making mistakes.

Being reckless certainly doesn't mean harmless though, as Amanda was reminded when Anton's next swing crashed against her psionic shields, the force shaking through her left forearm painfully as she raised her limb to block. She had to put an inordinate amount of energy into her defensive powers to compensate for not having her carbide, and thus had little opportunity to use them on the attack. Another wide punch allowed her to respond with a leg take-down, and while Anton fought it off, it still forced him to take a step back and gave Amanda time to set her feet into a proper stance again.

As if things weren't already stacked enough against her, the style she learned – focused on disabling strikes more than outright power – did not match well against the tight guard he had learned, keeping his attacks short and swift, out of Amanda's grabs and counters. At the same time, Anton kept a close distance so that Amanda couldn't use her more complex offensive psionics without risking her own health. It was a matter of watching for the right opportunity, and surviving long enough to find it.

Or until the Wraiths burst in and started shooting. Whichever came first.

Amanda then inadvertently kicked something on the floor, the break in her attention nearly costing her dearly, as only her instinct saved her from a vicious jab to her head. As she spun about, she determined just what she had bumped into: the sidearm that she had knocked free from Anton in the initial exchange. Apparently, he had never bothered to retrieve it.

It gave her an option... provided she could take advantage of it.

The sounds of combat started getting closer again, which Amanda identified as the Wraiths moving into the underground section of the ruins. Now it was Anton's concentration that momentarily broke, giving her the opening she needed.

The blow to the sternum she delivered by itself didn't do any damage; that tended to be where carbide plate was at its thickest and most sturdy. Even the jolt of electricity she added to the punch would be absorbed and redirected by the carbide's underlayer toward less sensitive parts of the body. But it dazed Anton for a demitick, and *that* was what Amanda was looking for.

As her opponent sorted himself out, Amanda had made her break, sliding to pick up the

sidearm, then rolling to face Anton, who was now charging to close the distance again. Amanda then wasted no time firing five cartridges his way.

The first two were handled by his psionic defenses, the third and fourth absorbed by his armor, before the fifth one crashed against his helmet. While it didn't cause a total breach, the crack it formed in his visor rattled him and dispelled the rage that had made him so dogged in his attack.

And at that point, the Wraiths had charged into the bunker, firearms trained and ready, which finally convinced Knight Anton Harin that yielding the field of battle was the better part of valor.

"This is why I'm a Knight of Solaria, and you are a Knight of Xani, Harin," Amanda crowed as she rose to her feet. "It has nothing to do with my family name or my genes. I'm just better than you."

* * * * *

Amanda received some field dressing, and with her psionic abilities accelerating her healing, she barely looked any the worse for wear by the time they finished the march back to the Wraith camp.

They were met by Saddock's second, who said, "Ma'am, sir, Agent Forde is getting a bit... irate. Can we release him now?"

Amanda slapped her head in memory. "I knew I was forgetting something! Yeah... let him go."

The second went quickly to his comm to deliver the order, followed a tick later by a red-faced and fuming SIA Agent Parker Forde.

"Knight Francis!" he bellowed. "Could you perhaps explain to me why I spent the last tenth-cycle and a half under armed guard in a temporary holding cell under *your* orders?"

Amanda stared him down coldly, "Agent Forde, consider yourself *damn* lucky that I'm going to recommend the time you spend in custody as grounds for a lesser reprimand for your catastrophic bungling of this case. Do *not* test my patience further."

That silenced the agent long enough for Amanda to add with increasing disdain, "And for future reference, Agent Forde, I don't care *what* family you hail from, or what you think of mine. I am a Knight of Solaria, and you will address me and anyone of my station with the respect due to it. Until one of us leaves this camp, you will address me as 'ma'am' or 'my lady.' I trust I am clear on this."

Agent Forde gulped, then nodded, "Yes... my lady."

"Good. Now get out of my sight."

As the duly shamed agent retreated to the farthest part of the camp he could manage, Officer Saddock put a finger to his chin, and said, "I think I finally figured out why you wanted me to apprehend him after the hostage trade, ma'am. You suspected he might have been an accomplice to Knight Harin."

Amanda nodded. "Usually incompetence is simply incompetence. But sometimes, the mistakes are intentional. I had to put together a plan of action for both scenarios. Agent Forde, with his authority in SIA, would have been a near perfect accomplice to get the conspirators off-planet after everything had gone to hell."

"And why you told him the part of the plan you wanted him to know in detail. If the funding for the mercenaries was still in Harin's account, you would *know* he was their contact outside. Then you'd bring him up in some fashion, and that their way out was already in custody, and when Knight Harin went to check, he would discover that we had indeed put him under arrest. Which would have likely incited the same chaos you had managed to stir."

"I figured I'd openly muse about where Knight Harin had got the money, and segue into Agent Forde. Thinking back, I had played the money angle a bit too strong, and it would have been a tougher sell had the money actually been there; but since Forde proved to be merely incompetent, and not duplicitous, that sequence of events was unnecessary."

The officer nodded, duly impressed by Amanda's thought process. "At the risk of sounding bold... well done, ma'am."

She gave the Wraith a playful wink and a smile, then strode with purpose to her familiar tent at the end of the camp, and gestured with both thumbs as she ordered, "Everyone, out! I have a report to write. Officer Saddock, get me my carbide and have it sent in along with your report. I'm tired of you and your men ogling me."

Saddock cringed. He hadn't *meant* to take such a good, long look at the curvy Solarian Knight in her wonderfully flattering bodysuit. It just... happened.

"Don't worry, Officer. You are forgiven this time."

* * * * *

The High Tenant wasted no time contacting Amanda after the latter sent her report.

"Knight Francis, I am grateful that you were able to resolve the situation without any of the children being seriously harmed. Every psionic of meaningful potential is precious."

Amanda nodded glumly. "I know, Madam High Tenant."

"I'm sorry that you got dragged into old family drama. I know it's a sore point for you."

"It's beyond a sore point, Madam. I'm not my uncle."

"No you are not. And that's why you work for me, and why anyone who doesn't like your last name can cordially ream themselves with a coat hook," Celine confirmed. "You're probably the best Knight that I can count on to get the job done no matter the circumstance."

Amanda smiled slightly, even if she knew Celine was exaggerating. "You're too kind, Madam High Tenant."

"At any rate, I called because I wanted to get some more input from you on your report." There was the muffled ping of a file opening, then Celine spoke again, "There were three Knights that went along with Anton Harin; Leonard, Jacob, and Terrell Harin, if I am reading the report correct. They all cited that they were following the lead of a family superior, according to Wraith First Officer Saddock's report."

"That was their excuse, yes."

"And Leonard was the one that obeyed your wish to guard the children... but your recommendation doesn't reflect that. Was that intentional?"

Amanda shook her head, her brown eyes seeming to darken. "They were all accomplices to the kidnapping of innocent children to use as bartering chips in a deluded plot for revenge. I recommend they all be punished to the full extent laws allow. I'm tired of hearing people use family and faith as an excuse for their actions."

"I will take that under advisement."

Amanda scoffed, "Which means you'll ignore it." The Knight regretted her words the moment she said them.

Celine's cross rejoinder was biting. "It means I will take that under advisement. Do not lecture me on the cultural grasp religion and name still has in this sphere of influence. I can assure you I am well aware of them. I fully intend to recommend the harshest sentence I can sell to the adjudicates. Whether it meets your standards or not is not my concern."

"I suppose that's all I can ask for," Amanda yielded. She wasn't going to win this argument. "Is there any chance that I'll be able to return to my vacation in the near future?"

There was a nervous silence on Celine's end, which prompted Amanda to sigh in resignation. "What else do you need from me, Madam High Tenant?"

"There was an attempt made on the life of the Sixth Prophet—" Celine began.

"There are roughly three attempts a ten-cycle on the life of the Sixth Prophet," Amanda groused. More stupid religious backwash... just what she needed to deal with.

"This one involved a Solarian freighter attempting to drop a Final Judgment fusion bomb onto the grounds she was speaking on."

Amanda's eyes flashed open. "Oh." She had to admit, *that* was a new one. And if it had been a Solarian craft dropping Solarian ordinance... Celine would most definitely scour every rock in the galaxy to try and find the party responsible. "What information do we have?"

"Sending it to your PCU now. We've been able to track some activity we believe related to the attack to one of our industry worlds, Kerig. It's seen better days, and it's become tied to mercenary and pirate activity. For now, I want you to give our target some preliminary casing. Make no maneuvers until support arrives; simply scout and record."

"Support?" Amanda said with a raised eyebrow. "I get support this time?"

"Actually, Knight Francis, you'll be supporting them. The Sixth Prophet is under the protection of the Galactic Alliance's SAF team 3. They will be the primary body in command of all phases of investigation and apprehension. You will report to Commander Jonathan Feroz; I'll give you his comm and ID tags so that you'll know when he arrives. He is currently wrapping up his investigation on Kiros, so he and his team will probably be a cycle behind you."

"Feroz?" Amanda asked. "He's..."

"Justin Feroz's son. Yes. The wayward child of Kiros. I think you'll like him, actually. He has a lot of the same thoughts on family and religion you do. And he's cute."

Amanda rolled her eyes. "How about you let me be the judge of that? I would have thought you were above playing matchmaker for the good of the psionic bloodlines."

"I am sending my best Knight on a highly sensitive mission. Any 'matchmaking', as you call it, is entirely coincidental."

Amanda shook her head. "Of course. I assume I will be leaving immediately?"

"I already have your travel plans plotted. You leave from Sather Starport in four tenth-cycles. That should give you enough time to clean up nice. Can't have you making a poor impression to a prominent SAF Commander, now can we?"

"I am on my way, Madam High Tenant. I'll report in once I arrive on Kerig," Amanda said in parting, terminating her end of the communication. That woman was impossible at times.

That said, it wouldn't hurt to groom herself a little. No person was at their freshest after hand-to-hand combat after all. And looking presentable wouldn't be a bad idea if this Feroz boy was, in reality, pretty cute. He could be good for a tumble or two at the very least, in that case.

And it would drive the old men blustering about the good old days mad to learn she was fraternizing with a Kiros man.

She *did* have a reputation to keep, after all.