

“Gaaah! Can’t you...? Frakking... Nnngh!” Koliss Welcott grunted, gritting his teeth as the orderly removed the pieces of glass from his back. The bomb attack on the *Golden Mynock* had left him wounded and with the stream of other injured arriving in a steady stream, the doctor seemed more anxious than ever to get patched up quickly and back into business. Standing beside him, a hand placed upon his and wincing in sympathetic pain with each removed shard, Tali Sroka beheld the bloodied and scarred back of her totally-not-boyfriend.

“Please, be careful.” She looked at the orderly. “He needs to be back to full strength so he can help the others.”

The man nodded, though looking rather skittish as he had clearly not been trained to handle such injuries, nor the pressing number of fresh patients filing in with various lacerations and blaster wounds. “I’ll do my best.” The young Togruta stated, taking a breath before continuing his grim work. “Damn, what the hell is going on out there?”

“War.” Koliss spat before Tali had time to respond. “That’s what.”

“W-War?” The orderly stuttered. “Here? On Ol’val?”

“Vell ve’re not sure about it yet. It couldt be something else. Kordath is investigating andt when he returns...” Tali never got to finish her over-optimistic sentence when the door into the operating room slammed open, the half-Ryn Gate Wardeness standing in the doorway looking pissed-off and distraught beyond belief.

The room fell silent, the grief and worry on Zujenia’s face visibly shocking to behold, even for those not as naturally empathetic as Tali. Voice trembling, despite her best efforts to keep it under check, she spoke in a hoarse whisper. “T-they took him. They have Kordath.”

Tali dashed over to her at once, wrapping a comforting arm around the shorter woman, a sympathetic lek mimicking the motion as she sought to comfort her. “Are you sure? Kordt sometimes tendts to just disappear...” She tried, but she merely shook her head.

“I know so. Because they sent me his ransom!” Zujenia spat venomously, holding out a small holoprojector to show a pre-recorded message.

The pale blue hologram coalesced into the bulbous shape of a bloated Hutt, smiling victoriously as he held a chain in one stubby hand, giving it a firm yank and gaining a distinct surge of satisfaction from doing so. Stumbling into view was Zujenia’s betrothed, the Ryn Kordath Bleu. Chuckling to herself as she pulled her new ‘pet’ beside her, the Hutt spoke up. *“I am Whallata Besadeii, though you must have known that by now. Port Ol’val is now under my command. I hold in my possession, among others, your precious Aedile, Kordath Bleu. If you wish to see him, and the others alive, you will relinquish control of the Port at once and surrender to my troops. If you do not, we will kill every last one of you or vent you into space. That is a standing offer, though I am not known for my patience.”*

The Hutt licked her lips and gave another booming chuckle, yanking on the chain to topple the Ryn off his feet once more. *"The choice is yours, Gatewardeness, but the scales always tip in my favor in the end..."*

Tali stared shocked at the message, Koliss and the orderly both silent as well as Zujenia pocketed the device and tried to collect herself. "T-that bastard's got my Kord." She muttered. "And now she wants the Port?!"

"Ve vill fight her every step of the vay!" Tali declared adamantly. "This is our home, she vill not drive us away from here."

Zuji gave a soft smile, appreciating her optimism even if it may have been a tad naive. Especially considering her follow-up question.

"Just, one thing, Zuji. Who is she?" The Twi'lek's innocent question left the room in a stunned silence as she looked around and rubbed the back of her lekku in embarrassment.

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The situation on Ol'val had not improved in the days following the initial series of attacks. Despite their best efforts, the scattered Ol'val security forces were in disarray and many of their outposts had been struck, leaving them short on weapons and supplies. Though Shadowgate did their best to assist in the attempts to drive out the criminal invaders, it seemed they were being outmaneuvered at every turn and the counter-attacks met with costly failure, depleting the number of fighting men available to the Arconans until Zujenia had to halt the attempts and focus on maintaining what territory they had.

The jagged front between the Ol'val security forces and the criminals was hard to mark down, though a lull in the attacks on either side had allowed the consolidation of positions and strengthening of key points in preparation for whatever was to come next. Having been pushed back from all access points to the outside world in the initial attack, Zujenia was painfully aware that the pirates were amassing forces for another attack towards the remaining core while starving the populace and getting them ready to sell out their Arconan masters for food or medical aid.

There had been attempts to contact Selene and request urgent reinforcements, but even though they had managed to breach into a few long-range comms bays and tried to send out signals at great cost in lives, there had been no responses thus far. With the losses mounting, such attacks could no longer be sustained as Shadow Gate was being bled white of operatives.

Sitting at the *Lucky Lekku*, one of their remaining strong points in the momentarily stabilized front lines, Tali fought the mounting dread with a glass of a spirit the name of which she'd already forgotten staring back at her. The past days had been arduous on her and others on Ol'val, though the most she lamented the loss of her storefront.

The shop had been lost in almost the first wave of attacks and she had not heard anything about its fate since. The thought of her beloved little shop being broken up, burnt down or commandeered to serve as a staging area for the invaders sent shivers of disgust down her spine. However, one outcome was even worse to contemplate. That some of those who fought to take Ol'val from them might be using her lekwarmers as their own and enjoying their soft warmth as the station had grown colder and colder through interruptions in power and heat supply.

That her lekwarmers could become accomplice to such atrocities left the Twi'lek depressed, her lekku sagging in a sympathetic expression of her own emotional state as she snatched up the almost drained glass of alcohol and swallowed down the rest. The burning sensation in her throat did little to alleviate her distress, though the faint buzz calmed her nerves as she already consigned *Your Lekku and You* to a grim fate.

Around her, the bar continued to operate as normally as it could, although the clientele had become increasingly heavily armed as of late. Volunteers, members of the Ol'val security forces and Shadow Gate operatives, to name but a few, all seemed to take solace within the Lucky Lekku that still tried to cling to 'the good old days' with a pair of Twi'lek dancers taking center stage though few patrons seemed to pay them much mind.

If only they could let the rest of Arcona know what was going on. If only they could breach this damned blockade. The oppressive sensation of being trapped inside the space rock was gnawing at her mind and she found her fingers tapping the table nervously now that the drink was all gone.

She was just about to get up and fetch another when the door opened for a second and a metallic clink accompanied a fist-sized cylinder bouncing towards the pair of Twi'leks.

Though slightly inebriated, Tali sensed the danger a moment before the flash bang exploded, dropping down and managing to upend the table she had been sitting at to block the worst of the audiovisual torrent that flooded the room the next moment.

Earcones ringing and vision slightly blurry, she stood up the moment the thugs stormed inside, drawing her saber and preparing to fend off the attackers while the rest of the bar still recovered from the effects of the grenade. The first bolts slaughtered the patrons at the bar counter, gunning the hapless men and women down before they even knew what had happened. The bartender, having seen the grenade bounce in and ducked behind his counter for cover, stood up and delivered the first reprisal in the form of a scattergun shot which blew a running thug off his feet. Before he had time to fire another, however, his body was wracked by a burst of fire that saw him stagger back and hit the rows of bottles behind him, collapsing amidst the shards of his own merchandise.

The two Twi'lek dancers shrieked out in disorientation, having lost their footing and eyesight from the force of the flashbang's detonation. A cruel looking Weequay, bearing flashier gear and most likely the man in charge of the attackers, leveled a tastelessly gilded blaster pistol at the two and pumped two low-powered bolts into their bodies. Both shrieked in pain and remained still, but neither was truly dead from the attack, the bolts too weak to truly kill them. As they continued to moan in pain, sobbing in agony as their worlds became nothing than unending misery, Tali was struck by the force of their distress, the emotional backlash leaving her disoriented. The first attackers having noticed her and her drawn saber, she was

met by a flurry of bolts that threatened to overwhelm her defences in that fateful moment. Had she not been wearing her armor, the bolt which slipped past her shimmering golden blade might have rent her shoulder unusable, the ablative plates instead absorbing most of the energy with a sharp cry of pain the only lasting result.

Realizing she was being outgunned, Tali began to fall back, throwing loose debris at the attackers that continued pouring in through the doorway and open up a very one-sided firefight against the stunned patrons who barely had escaped the initial barrage. The cries from the two Twi'leks continued to haunt her, their wails piercing the din of battle and blaster bolts while all around her the Lucky Lekku was being torn asunder in a chaotic short-range firefight.

Crimson flashes lighting up the interior, bathing it a bloody red that masked the vitae pouring onto the floor from the wounded and dead, a stray shot soon found the pools of spilled spirits with grimly inevitable consequences. As the flames erupted in a ball of fire, licking hungrily up the walls and spreading across the ceiling, the hellish battlefield could hardly have been recognized as the club it had been but mere moments ago. The fire suppression system struggling to contain the flames, screams of the dying mixing with the discharge of energized bolts of plasma, Tali realized in a moment of clarity that the bar might be lost, even if they somehow managed to drive the attackers away.

The Arconans falling back under the withering fusillade, the thugs advancing relentlessly towards the bar counter, Tali witnessed the Weequay lieutenant make his way up to the dance podium and the two Twi'leks still writhing in pain upon it. Before her very eyes, she saw the man pull out a serrated vibroblade, thinking for one shocked moment he was about to cut their throats as he reached for their chins, but what she saw was something far more atrocious.

Pulling down their chins, the man reached into their mouths to pull out their tongues before slicing it off and throwing it onto the floor like a bad piece of meat. Their screams of pain muffled, turning into panicked sobs of utter horror as the dancers began drowning in their own blood, crimson rivers welling down their chins.

Staring in mild shock at the sight she'd just observed, Tali felt a spark of utter rage coursing through her. The nagging sensation of unjustness that always accompanied the presence of the ancient Jedi or Sith that dwelled within the ancient saber dangling from her belt resurfaced and the hatred of her unnamed mentor flowed into the Twi'lek's consciousness. She had to act. She had to avenge them. She had to murder that damn Weequay for what he'd done to her leksisters.

"Drive them back!" She shouted, her voice barely audible over the chaos of the close-range firefight. "Holdt your groundt, damn you! They vill not take this from us!" The Twi'lek's rallying cry fell on largely deafened ears, only attracting more fire which she barely could deflect, though a few attackers fell from their own bolts. A burst of fire from her right cut down a few more as the remaining defenders picked off the easiest targets.

Realizing she had to lead by example more than command, the Twi'lek gritted her teeth and gathered her senses around a nearby table and shunting it towards a trio of thugs before sprinting after it to finish them off. The table smashing into the thugs and driving them down

to the floor, she leapt upon them in a storm of vengeance, saber hacking them apart through the table itself in a flurry of blows.

Emboldened by her example, the Arconans struck back while the thugs were distracted, caught wrong-footed by the Twi'lek's sudden counterattack. A resounding roar of drunken anger sounded from the bar's farther reaches, a wall of blaster bolts cutting down a score of the attackers as the Arconan counter-attack surged forward. Fueled by anger, bitterness and no small amounts of alcohol, the reckless charge caught the thugs off guard as much as the Twi'lek's sudden assault, several of the predominantly Weequay criminals cut down in a matter of moments as the rest dived for cover.

With Tali fighting amidst the thugs, the Arconans dared not use any explosives in fear of catching their ally in the blast. However, Whallatta's men seemed to have few similar qualms as they pelted both their own and their foes with defensive grenades to keep the vengeful defenders from launching a proper counter attack.

Slicing through a panicked Bothan, her blade cutting him cleanly from collar bone to pelvis in a single vicious stroke, Tali let out a scream of anger and set her eyes upon the Weequay lieutenant leading the party. The man seemed to barely register her as a threat, however, as he nonchalantly gestured in her direction and a pair of his henchmen opened fire. The weight of fire from their rapid-fire blasters keeping her occupied, she had no time or focus to deal with the concussive grenade tossed at her, only barely managing to throw up a barrier a split second before it blew.

The detonation caught a thug in the blast with her, the woman screaming in pain as her arm was torn from its socket by the concussive force while Tali was sent flying across the room, coming to an abrupt halt as her back slammed into the dancer podium dominating the center of the Lucky Lekku's interior. As she groggily gathered her wits about her, the first sound her ringing earcones recognized was the muffled drowning screams of the two Twi'lek dancers now mere inches away from her.

Shaking the cobwebs from her head, the purple hued Jedi took in the carnage and assessed her situation. The fire suppressants had failed and the hungry flames licked the ceiling like hungry wolves, biting into the rafters and spreading ever wider as the heat began to smother the battlefield. The remaining Arconans were being herded into a corner, soon to be enveloped in the growing fire while the thugs kept the only unblocked exit under their control. It was about to become a slaughter and the bar turned into the cremation hall of the surviving Arconan warriors unless she did something, and quick.

Yet, there was one thing even more pressing on her mind and she took to the act with grim determination, her lekku pressing against her chest as she rose up behind the podium just enough to cast a glance at the two ravaged Twi'leks slowly dying in agony. The tips of her lekku shifted, her eyes mimicking the sorrowful tone her prehensile tentacles gestured and for a split second she thought the two maybe realized what she was about to do and gave their approval.

Igniting her yellow saber with grim determination, Tali let out a sigh and muttered a few soft words in Ryl before stabbing the blade of her weapon through the two slender bodies before her, impaling both in a single blow and ending their lives instantly. "Peace be vith you, sisters." She whispered, narrowly dodging a blaster bolt that skimmed the crest of her right lek.

With the situation lost, she bolted back towards the surviving Arconans, casting aside the few shots that a handful of thugs loosed her way while the rest seemed content to see her run into her doom. Catching a glance of the smug Weequay lieutenant smiling at her, the Twi'lek vowed to see that man dead before this all was over, though right now she had more pressing concerns.

Dashing past the distressed dozen of surviving and badly battered troopers, Tali focused her remaining powers to push aside the roaring flames and expose a route to the back wall. Pearls of sweat beading down her lekku, body trembling from the exhaustion as much as her mind was teetering on the edge of collapse, she carved a hole through the cheap rockcrete to let the others escape.

Filing out as fast as they could, the survivors left the burning remains of the Lucky Lekku while on the other side the attackers celebrated their victory. A few moments after Tali slipped out through the flames, her armor singed and suffering light burns, the entire building collapsed, becoming the final resting place for scores of the already dwindling Arconan loyalists. As the battered Twi'lek led the survivors deeper into Ol'val's labyrinthine interior, the jubilant cheers and mocking laughter of the thugs continued to echo in their minds. It had been yet another humiliating defeat for them; one which they could ill afford.

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"We've got to strike back and rescue Kordath." Zujenia growled, slamming her fist into the table so hard it shook the cups of hot tea placed upon it. Tali could see the frustration in the Gatewardness' eyes, sensing the tension on many levels both obvious and ethereal. After learning of her fiancé's capture, Zuji had had to contend with the seemingly implacable advance of criminals striking into her beloved Ol'val, killing her fellow Arconans and tearing her home from her. Her responsibility. So many deaths, so much destruction, now rested upon the Hutt's slimy hands and Zuji clearly blamed herself for much of it.

Fidgeting with her lekku in sympathetic anxiety, Tali glanced at Koliss who placed a comforting hand upon her shoulder and gently shook his head. Their eyes meeting for a scant moment, she gently brushed his hand off and paced over to her distressed friend. "Zuji, ve're vith you. If you vant us to do something, ve're behindt you. Vith Xenna andt her people vith us, ve now have a chance..." She paused for a moment as the half-Ryn's eyes met her own, the weight of her office showing clearly on her weary features. "...But you know the risks as vell as I do. If ve do it, ve needt to give it our all. If ve lose now, ve vill be at their mercy andt everyone ve've triedt to protect..." Tali's voice trailed off as the aftermath of such an outcome was plain enough for everyone present to bother voicing.

The silence that followed was long and cold, the frost forming from each breath they took gently rising in the cold of Ol'val's mining tunnels, their remaining refuge after being driven back from the 'civilized' parts of the station. As it seemed to drag on beyond what was warranted, Tali spoke up again. "Zuji, ve needt to make the decision. You needt to make the decision. Do ve fight, or do ve freeze to death in here andt hope for someone in Arcona to save us?"

Koliss moved closer as if to speak, but Tali cut him off with a gesture of her right lek. "I know, Koliss. I know, but that was then and this is now. We won't fail our people. Not this time."

Zujenia shared a look between the two before moving to look at each of the other Arconans gathered in the small, cold mining outpost that now served as their ersatz HQ and saw they shared the Twi'lek's conviction. They only needed for her to lead them. Though a direct assault might jeopardize Kordath's life and risk everything they had left, it was their best bet at dealing with the situation. They had to strike back and behead the snake which was poisoning their home, quite literally.

They had been driven from their homes, their properties had been put to the torch and the damned Hutt had taken away from them everything they held dear, making them refugees inside their own fort. This could not stand and though Zuji felt the nagging guilt of jeopardizing those thousands that huddled with them inside the tunnels and depended upon them for their survival, she knew the moment to strike back was now. It was to be their vindication or final huzzah, but at least they would not silently fade away. They would take back the Phantom Complex, free Kordath and she would gut that slimeball of a Hutt with her own two hands.

Her expression growing cold and serious as she made up her mind, the Gatewardness adjusted her posture as her tail stopped idly whisking from side to side and seemed to focus like its mistress. Glancing at Tali and giving a nod of thanks, she turned to the Arconans and cleared her throat. "Brothers, sisters, Arconans. We run no more. Tonight, we take back our home or so help me we die trying!"

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The plan had been settled upon and put into motion, a draft of sorts having been the first thing they did from among the remaining Ol'valian refugees to pick out those who could and would fight for their homes. Though they had barely any military training as such, they had spirit and at the moment that was the best they could hope for.

Leading a force of twenty odd such men and women through the secluded underground passages towards one of the outlying manors which they had identified as weapons caches, she knew stakes at play. Her mission, like that of so many others, was to strike where the thugs would know it and provoke a reprisal. From an outsider, their targets would look precisely like those preparing a frontal assault, capturing ammunition and weapons, securing strategic positions and nerve centers of communications. However, in reality their plan was more devious. Once the targets were captured, the Ol'val volunteers would remain and hold their gains against the inevitable counter-attacks. Meanwhile, the remaining Shadowgate operatives and their fresh Arconan reinforcements would strike from below into the bowels of the Shadow Complex, liberate Kordath and slay Whallatta. Without their leader, Zujenia had deduced, the thugs would swiftly lose their cohesion and without a clear paymaster to keep them motivated, they would be much easier to dismantle.

It was a sound plan on paper, but like so many others, it would most likely not survive contact with the enemy. Dreading already the inevitable casualties both from their initial

attack and the brutal counter-attack which the poorly trained volunteers would have to weather, Tali had to push such thoughts aside and remind herself of what doubt had done the last time she had given it power over her actions. The mental images of the mining slaves being gunned down mercilessly by their masters while she watched helplessly from the side stole her breath away, causing one of the volunteers to ask if she was alright, but she managed to not give the memories any more power than they already had. The past was in the past and she had grown from her failures. They had been costly, but she would not repeat them. She would not fail again.

Making their way to their target, a manor once belonging to one of the more influential mining tycoons that still remained on Ol'val, Tali took in the lay of the land while her forces spread out and prepared for the attack. The building itself was constructed both for defense as well as looks, the courtyard an obvious killzone from the two wings of the manor which swept around to cover it from both sides and a fence up front the only obstacle preventing a full frontal assault.

That very fence, which might have provided the thugs their best defence, had been brought down in many places when they had taken over the building from its previous owners whose bodies still hung as gibbets from the top-floor windows. Tali scowled at the sight of such a macabre display, vowing to make the invaders pay for their atrocities while she heard similar sentiments whispered from amongst her troops.

Though they had surprise on their side, their foe were not idle and patrols were moving around the perimeter, a relatively wide and open expanse between the Arconans and their foe leaving them exposed if the sentries spotted them moving through the open. They needed to ensure any defenders would be suppressed before storming the manor and that, in turn, meant putting the two rapid fire repeating blasters into good use.

The remains of a habitation block, by now little more than tall piles of rubble, stood opposite the manor and from there, though exposed from the flanks, they could get the fields of fire that they needed. Gathering her squad leaders by her side, Tali instructed them to take the two repeaters up to the two dominating fire positions and keep the enemy suppressed as long as the weapons could fire, the rest charging in and clearing the manor during that window of opportunity. The squad leaders nodding grimly, realizing the peril in the plan, but determined to do their part, the battle was begun.

Beginning to scale the rubble piles, the Arconans advanced cautiously towards the zenith, trying to stay as inconspicuous as possible. The sentries seemed oblivious to the peril until someone stepped upon some loose rubble and tumbled down the pile, alerting the defenders to the peril. An instant and withering salvo of fire from the advancing Arconans gutted the sentries before they could raise the alarm, but the report of weapons fire was enough of a warning and the defenders mobilized at once. Pressing on with their given objective, the assaulting militia surged towards the tops of the two rubble piles only to be pinned down by fire from the manor, the first support gunners falling headless from atop the pile in short order. Unphased, others tried to pick up the weapons, but met with similarly gruesome ends.

Seeing the attack falter as it ground to a sudden halt with the guns silenced, Tali knew it was her time to act. Pointing at a handful of troopers huddling behind a slab of concrete being



peppered by blaster bolts, she called for them to follow as she lit her saber and charged towards the manor with reckless abandon, the yellow plasma blade spinning in deft parries as she bought the fire team enough time to get off their asses and follow her into the fray, charging after their Twi'leki leader into the jaws of hell.

Over the din of blaster fire, screams and explosions, Tali managed to pick out a familiar croaking voice. The Weequay she'd seen leading the attack on the Lucky Lekku was there, commanding his troops to take up defensive positions and target the Arconan support gunners. The same Weequay she'd seen cut out the tongues of two injured Twi'leki dancers, silencing their moans and pleas for aid, yet leaving them choking on their own blood. For her, such cruelty alone was reason enough to harbor revenge on the sadistic bastard, but that it had been committed on her fellow Twi'leks, unarmed civilians who'd been injured in his attack? Unforgivable. She had never considered herself a true Jedi and in that instant she felt the Dark side call to her more than in a long time. She would end the man's life and avenge her fallen sisters in lekku.

Crimson streaks flashing past her, Tali led the charge against the entrenched thugs, deflecting blaster bolts in a tight pattern of blocks and parries. The brilliant gold of her saber blade reflecting off her amber eyes and her battle armor singed with near misses, the vengeful Twi'lek struck fear into the hearts of her foes, screaming out a challenge at the Weequay lieutenant to face her.

The man recoiled momentarily at the sight of the purple hued Jedi charging directly at him, calling her out as a primary target as he sought to put as many bolts of blaster fire between himself and her as possible. The weight of fire drove her into cover, Tali throwing herself behind a sturdy storage crate left unopened in front of the courtyard. She was pinned, unable to deflect the fire coming her way and the crate beginning to creak and groan from the sheer weight of shots striking its side, but the distraction she'd made had paid off. No longer taking fire from the thugs, the support gunners could set up their repeaters and opened up on the defending criminals. A withering hail of blaster fire scythed from right and left in sweeping arcs, the barrels of the repeating blasters glowing hot as their foe was suddenly put on the back foot. The flurry of shots drove the wiser thugs and mercenaries into cover, the braver or more foolish ones punched off their feet by the fusillade that kept them pinned.

Emerging from behind her almost devastated cover, Tali resumed her charge, saber held high to rally the two squads of Arconan militia behind her as they assaulted the courtyard. With the repeaters keeping the enemy pinned down, the squads of lightly armored militia managed to cross the field relatively intact, throwing thermal detonators through the shot-out windows to clear the rooms inside of any remaining mercenaries.

Leaving the foot soldiers to deal with the enemy rabble, now hopelessly pinned and under assault, Tali made for the main doorway and the Weequay lieutenant hiding behind the frame alongside a pair of his aides. Blade moving around her like a living entity, the Twi'lek seemingly danced her way up towards the trio, pirouetting past bolts and deflecting others in a display as beautiful as it was terrifying. Curling her off hand into a fist before shoving it forward, fingers splayed, she shunted the trio off balance with a tidal wave of Force energy before leaping in after the disoriented foes.

Landing next to one of the staggered aides, she dropped low to avoid a rifle butt to the face and spun around, leg lashing out to swipe his feet off of him. As the man tumbled to the floor with a grunt of pain, she stabbed her sword through the chest of the other, carving upwards until the tip emerged through the top of his skull. His body falling backwards, halves peeling open like the petals of a macabre flower, the Twi'lek shot her head around as the Weequay charged at her with a serrated vibroknife in hand.

Twisting her lithe form sideways in the nick of time to avoid the lethal stab into her guts, her armored lek tips slashed across the man's face, the sharpened sheaths cutting into his tough, leathery skin and managing to draw blood. Clutching his face with one hand, hot streaks of blood clouding his vision, the lieutenant never saw the reverse stab coming as Tali stepped past him, flipping her grip on the saber and driving it into his flank.

The man coughed in shock and pain, the knife in his hand clattering to the ground as the tip of Tali's saber stuck out through his right flank, the hilt almost touching his left. The sizzling sound of his cooking entrails wafted up to his nose as Tali pulled the blade back, letting the man slump onto the ground while outside the rest of his men were being rounded up and dealt with. Leaning down, Tali called the vibroknife into her hand, pressing her left knee against the man's throat, choking him.

"I know you." She stated coldly. "You vere the one to attack the Lucky Lekku. You vere the one vho leadt that attack. I saw you andt I saw vhat you didt to those two dancers. People die in var, I get that. Even civillians, especially vhen scum like you fire blindly into a bar just for the sake of '*sending a message*'. But vhat I cannot forgive is vhen you *Cut Out* a dying person's *Tongue*..." She pressed harder on his throat, almost crushing his windpipe as the man struggled for breath, wheezing hoarsely. "Andt leave them to die..."

She held the knife in front of his face, the serrated edge glinting with a cold, vicious sharpness, the man's eyes narrowing in horror as he realized what she was about to do. His tongue already out as he tried desperately not to choke to death, Tali gripped the tip and slid the blade into his mouth. He let out a muffled scream of panic, eyes wild with terror, mimicking the screams of mercy the two Twi'lek dancers he'd mutilated had voiced before he'd cut them.

*"Yes! Do it! Make him pay!"*

The wicked voice sounded from the back of her mind, a familiar presence emboldening her to exact revenge on those who'd hurt her fellow Arconans. She paused, though the man hardly noticed as he continued to squeal in objection, pleading for mercy. Tali could feel the anger flow through her, every cell in her body screaming out for revenge. Eye for an eye. Tongue for a tongue.

Looking down at the Weequay lieutenant, her amber eyes as cold as ice, she drove the vibroblade down. "Arcona sends her regards." She spat, the knife sinking through the vertebrae of his neck and killing him instantly, the weapon buried into his mouth to the hilt and leaving him impaled to the floor.

The presence in her mind faded away, a hint of scorn lingering behind though she knew that revenge itself had been enough to satisfy it. Ever since she'd picked up the ancient saber,

she'd felt the presence at times, often angry and calling for revenge like now, but sometimes sombre and comforting. She was not sure who it was that had left her imprint on the weapon that hung on her belt, but she knew she owed that woman her life.

The sounds of the battle died down alongside the rest of the mercenaries and thugs, cut down and mopped up by the Arconan militia. The squads moving into the manor to secure it and confiscate the weapons cache, Tali opened a secure link to Zujenia. *"Head-tail to Butt-tail, target securedt."*

There was a sigh at the other end of the line, what sounded like Zuji muttering this being the last time letting Tali choose code-names for any mission barely muffled before she gave her proper reply. *"Copy that, ugh, Head-tail. Meet up with Redglaive and press for the target. I'll handle Tail-tail."*

*"Vill do, Head-tail out!"* The Twi'lek stated with a nod, though the gesture was utterly pointless with voice-only communications. Regaining her breath and taking a moment to focus on the task at hand, she selected two warriors from the group to escort her and pressed on towards the prison cell where Kordath Bleu was being held.

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"You've become quite good with that saber of yours." Xenna quipped as Tali deflected yet another blaster bolt back at its origin, the impact punching the prison guard off his feet with a smoldering hole through his chest plate.

"T-thank you?" Tali muttered, surprised by the often tight-lipped human's oddly amicable tone. Apparently the promise of revenge and gratuitous violence brought out the best in the secretive warrior woman, her Zhaboka already bloodied with the essence of a dozen guards. The pair had been fighting their way through the prison, seeking Kordath's cell. The diversionary attacks had clearly worked as the defences had been easily overwhelmed by their concentrated assault, but time was of the essence. Neither she nor Xenna entertained any ideas about Whallatta being unawares of their attack and forces originally destined to counter-attack the militia forces were no doubt being rerouted back towards the Shadow Complex.

Master and apprentice, though their relationship was hardly worth the iconic title as such, had fought their way through the winding corridors of their former base of operations, clearing ambushes and traps one after the other while dealing with increasingly desperate guards. Though neither woman was unbloodied themselves, Tali's lekku covered in traces of dried blood while Xenna had a nasty blaster scar in her left bicep, the pair kept on fighting with seemingly endless energy.

"Ve can't be far. There are only so many cell blocks in here..." Tali muttered, panting as she struggled to regain her breath as Xenna pulled her weapon free from a squealing Weeqay, ending his suffering with a swift kick to the head.

“You’d be surprised, lek-head. We haven’t even cleared the... wait! You hear that?” She snapped, dropping into a fighting crouch, weapon held at the ready as Tali blinked in confusion and mimicked her stance with her saber.

The sound of claws scraping against stone echoed down the corridor, hurried footsteps of some foul beast that had no doubt been loosed to deal with them. What sort of wicked attack dog or monster the sick perverted Hutt might have brought upon Ol’val, Tali had no clue, but she was determined to face the threat with her oldest friend by her side.

“Stand fast, we’ll deal with it together. You dash to the left, distract it, and I’ll lunge for her heart. Got it?” Xenna spoke coldly, her voice giving no room for objection as her eyes never shifted from the corner ahead where the looming shadow of the foul furred beast became visible. Hunched and snub-nosed, scuttling towards them on its hind legs like a raptor, a razor tail whipping behind it, Tali felt a knot tighten in her gut as she nodded. “R-right. Distract. I can do that.”

Her hands sweating as she gripped her saber hilt two-handed, Tali felt her injured lekku twitch with sympathetic tension as the creature rounded the corner.

“AAAAAAAARGH!” It screamed in alarm.

“YEAAAARGH!” Tali wailed, almost poking herself in the face with her saber as she moved her hands to cover her eyes..

“SHUT UUUUP!” Xenna screamed, not averting her eyes as the nearly naked Kordath skidded into view, his hind paws scratching at the stone floor as he came to an abrupt halt at the sight of the two Arconans ready to skewer him alive, a sight which he relished a bit more than usually.

“K-Kordath? H-how did you...?” Tali stuttered, the Ryn moving towards her to snatch the jacket she’d been hauling with her as a means to locate him.

“Long story, luv. I’ll tell ya all about it, later. Now give ‘ere me jacket.” Kordath muttered, cheeks red with embarrassment as he sought to cover his near-nudity before any other Arconans showed up.

A pair of hurried footsteps announced the sudden arrival of one of Xenna’s troopers.

“Captain, the Wardeness has located the Hutt and... Oh my gods, WHY is he NAKED?!”

“TALI, JACKIT NAU!” Kordath screamed, snatching the garment from the stunned Twi’lek as the man covered his eyes and looked away rather than face the sight of the furry Aedile clad in a metal bikini and matching loincloth.

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It had taken them days and countless more lives to clear out the last holdouts, but finally, after so much destruction and death Ol’val was back in their control. Tali knew she would be

reliving the past weeks in her nightmares for years to come, but that could not be helped. At least they had prevailed. At least they had survived.

Most of the asteroid base was in ruins, the population drastically reduced from the bitter urban warfare, lack of supplies and fiendish biological weapons that had almost brought Shadow Gate to its knees. But it had not and though the losses had been hard and cut them deep, Tali knew it would come a time to rebuild and make their home even better than it had once been. Even her lek-shop.

Standing before what remained of Your Lekku and You, Tali had to choke back the tears. Her arms wrapped around her body, lekku mimicking the same, the purple skinned Twi'lek beheld the burned-out husk of what was her life's work. The storefront windows, though many times smashed in by hooligans, were now burnt out so badly the frames themselves had bent out of shape from the heat. The interior was little more than blackened ash and carbonized remains of store shelves and piles of incinerated lekwarmers.

That someone would want to destroy something as innocent as lekwarmers. To burn and utterly annihilate a business that offended no-one and meant no harm to anyone was incomprehensible to the Twi'lek who had sunk so much into the place. She had poured her heart and soul into the small shop, being as it was her best hope of obtaining a real income without having to do shadowy deeds for Arcona. But now, now it lay in ruins. Smashed asunder like her dreams of a peaceful life outside the whims of others. Independence, true independence from anyone. The ultimate goal for the former slave.

She felt a pair of arms move around her shoulders and hold her tight, pressing her back against a firm chest which she was familiar with by touch alone. Koliss needed not say any words as he consoled her, the unspoken promise of rebuilding it, rebuilding that shattered dream, self-evident as he moved his hand to gently caress her bandaged lek. They would mend the wounds. They would rebuild. They would make whole again and they would do it, together.