Tense, coiled up like a viper ready to strike, a caged tigress prepared to pounce, a wound up spring about to break, none of the comparisons could come close to describing the physical anxiety Decima felt as she paced around the Voidbreaker’s training room with her vibro glaive in hand. A series of training dummies kept flicking up as she approached their hidden positions, the sparking remains of the torn targets a testament to her persistence alongside the worn track in the durasteel floor.

Why was the war not on? Why were they being kept on stand-by for weeks on end? Why was she being tormented like this? What did the Shadow Lady have up her scandalously short sleeve?!

“Rrragh!” the Iktotchi warrior brought her glaive around in a sweeping arc, the shimmering blade slicing through the stump of a target dummy and gouging a deep cut into the floor panel. Sparks flew where cabling was cut, electrical flashes hissing and spitting as the warrior pulled her weapon free with a dismissive grunt. The ravaged remains of the dummy slipped below deck as the warrior returned to her stalking, the momentary distraction barely sufficient to keep her from snapping entirely.

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The short-lived training fight played out over the pale blue holoscreen on the ship’s bridge where the Voidbreaker’s captain rubbed her temples. The short statured woman had enough on her plate already without the irritable Iktotchi tearing her ship apart from within. She already had Skarbles for that.

“Could *someone* please look into this?” Leeadra Halcyon sighed, gesturing at the vid-feed.

“I will gladly bring you her head,” Skar hissed from a darkened corner of the well-lit bridge, “Do you wish her end to be quick, or painful?”

Every pair of eyes on the bridge turned to look at the Kaleesh lurking in the dark.

“I personally prefer the latter…” he added with a faint tremor of what sounded like arousal and which sent shivers of revulsion down everyone’s spines.

“No, no killing. We still need her for the coming mission,” Leeadra protested sharply, the Kaleesh’s dour expression turning even more sour and sulking.

“Tali, please, could you have a chat with her? Make her calm down a bit? Those target dummies are not cheap and I’d rather not go over budget right off the gate with this Battle Team…” the Pantoran sighed.

“*Try hard*…” Juliana coughed from an opposite corner to Skar’s, leaning as she was against a bulkhead with an expression of supreme boredom and disinterest. It seemed she was still having some trouble adjusting to the fact she was working *for* The Man rather than *against* him. Even if The Man, in this case, was the Shadow Lady.

Leeadra shot her a pointed gaze, but did not deign the comment worth responding to. Returning her attention to the Twi’lek empath, she offered a pleading look which the purple skinned woman found hard to ignore.

“Fiiine, I vill see vhat I can do,” Tali sighed, lekku twitching with mild anxiety as she pushed herself out of her chair and headed for the doorway.

“I could always take care of the problem…” Skar suggested.

“No,” Leeadra sighed.

“It would be no problem at all…”

“No!”

“I might actually enjoy it…”

“NO!”

“I’m fairly sure I would, actually.”

“Not what I meant…” Leeadra sighed, rubbing her temples. Each day with this mismatched rogues’ gallery was making her new commission as Battle Team Leader seem like less of a promotion and more like being ceremonially thrown under a Swoop. She just hoped the Twi’lek could manage to somehow make the irritable Iktotchi stop tearing up her ship before they’d even left Ol’val. Kelviin would have his furry hands full with maintenance already.

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Sounds of barely restrained violence and expensive ship repairs in the making greeted the Twi’lek as she gingerly made her way towards the training room. Soft, balanced steps brought her ever closer to the grunts and groans of the annoyed Iktotchi until she rounded the corner and sneaked a peek into what remained of the ship’s hardened combat training quarters.

Electrical smoke wafted from the burning remains of moving targets, now deathly still and spitting sparks, deep gouges in the durasteel floor and ceiling looking more like the work of a caged Krayt Dragon than a mere woman. But Decima was not a mere woman, Tali knew as much just by looking at her and as she paused and extended her senses towards her, she suddenly became aware of just how unlike herself the Iktotchi was.

Although she’d sensed the mindscapes of many a foul creature, experiencing countless decrepit cesspools of emotion and thought, nothing could have prepared her for the smothering blanket of incoherent rage that now wrapped around her and threatened to strangle her in its softness. The sensation was all-consuming, oppressing in its totality as it breathed down upon her mind like an overbearing parent, its moist breath making her neck tingle. The desire for action almost made her draw her own weapon in anger and it took all her training to stay her hand as the waves of pure and unfettered anger washed over her, permeating her mind and drawing out the well-hidden resentment she felt for her old master.

But there was more, hidden beneath that thick slab of festering anger and resentment was something more. Something sharp, piercing, chafing. An ancient pain which refused to dull, that continued tormenting her like an aching battle wound. She could feel it and all she wanted to do was to reach out and…

*“Eavesdropping is not exactly polite,”* a gruff female voice sounded inside Tali’s head, “Especially among allies.” The sentence was finished in the vocal register, snapping the Twi’lek out of her focused reverie to find the Iktotchi staring at her from two feet away. So close she could smell her.

Tali gulped as she sensed the waves of resentment emanating from the stern-faced woman, mixing with the adrenaline of her sweat and the scent of unwashed fur and bleached bone with which she’d decorated her armor. Standing only a few inches taller than her, yet seemingly occupying the entirety of her view, the Iktotchi looked ready to slice her in two if it hadn’t been for the fact they were on the same side. Or so Leeadra had told her.

“Erm…” Tali muttered, finding herself caught rather off-guard by the warrior woman. “I, uh, you doing alright, in there?” The Twi’lek leaned around Decima’s ostensibly broad shoulder to emphasize her point as something came crashing from the training room’s ceiling.

The clang of the dislodged durasteel plate did not seem to elicit any reaction from Decima who continued to stare into the Twi’lek’s amber eyes with a cold, uncaring gaze. “What’s it to you, *spy?*”

The accusation staggered Tali, who visibly recoiled at the word. “Me? Spy?” she gasped in shock. Making to rebut the misnomer, the Twi’lek swiftly realized that technically, she had been spying on her and relented. “Fine, I guess I kinda vas spying on you. But I swear, it vas not malicious! I vas just… vorriedt.”

“About me?” Decima narrowed her gaze, “Or the ship?” She shifted her gaze to the side as another loose panel came off its hinges with a dull clang, the acrid smoke of burning electronics slowly seeping towards them along the cold floor.

“Both, actually,” Tali replied with a sigh. “Though, mostly the ship.”

The Iktotchi grunted, with amusement. “I suppose that is fair enough,” she mused, striking out her hand so fast Tali almost thought it was a gut punch, but as the pain never came, she realized the woman had merely moved to offer her a handshake.

Gingerly accepting it, the skittish Twi’lek gave it her best firm shake before almost having her arm ripped from its socket by the bulky hellion’s powerful retort. “The name’s Decima, although I suppose a spy like you had that figured out already, huh? What’s your name, convenient distraction.”

“D-distraction?” Tali managed between muffled yelps of pain as she held her almost-dislocated shoulder and wished for Koliss to be here. “A-andt my name is Tali Sroka.”

“Well if you don’t want me tearing up your ship, then you will have to distract me otherwise…” Decima smirked, her emerald eyes flashing with a fire that struck frigid cold into Tali’s heart.

“Umh, I’m not sure I follow…” Tali muttered, hoping against hope the woman was not suggesting what she feared she was. If a simple handshake had almost torn her arm off, she wouldn’t survive a -- full body hug.

“Drinking,” Decima laughed with a sound of breaking thunder, “If I can’t rip apart those measly training droids, I might as well get piss-faced and see where that takes me. Doesn’t seem like we’re taking off anytime soon, what with our glorious Shadow-bitch too busy prancing around in her lacy robes to take the initiative and…”

She suddenly fell silent and glanced at Tali, the Twi’lek staring at her with muted shock.

It was Decima’s time to give an awkward cough as the faintest of reds flashed upon her dark cheeks. “I, uh, did not mean that…”

“No, no, it’s understandable. Ve’re all on edge here. You shouldt see Skarbles, he’s literally climbing up the walls…” Tali brushed it off with a nervous chuckle, feeling any other reaction might lead to dismemberment and more structural damage.

“You mean figuratively,” Decima sighed, shaking her head, “I hate it when people misuse words.”

“Nooo, I think in this case literally is correct,” Tali mused, “He, uh, likes the vents. Just like a certain someone…” she added with a hint of venom as she recalled the time she found one of Kordath’s drones in her laundry hamper. Driving away the karking thing had also drastically reduced her need to replenish missing undergarments.

“Huh, I would like to see that,” Decima mused, rubbing her chin and hefting the vibro-glaive over her shoulder. “But, we have more important things to do. Since you’re technically my superior…” the Iktotchi barely managed to stifle a derisive chortle, “You’re paying.”

“Vhat? I’m not your superior!” Tali snapped as she felt the Iktotchi’s arm wrap around her shoulders like a python, squeezing her still unhurt arm and guiding her towards the galley with little room for protest. The simple show of physical force made her lekku skittishly shift to her front, the tender tips preferring to be as far away from her crushing grip as possible.

“I said *technically*,” Decima shot back, “You’re technically my superior, but only by virtue of rank. Don’t for an instant think you can order me around or you and me and -” She stomped the base of her vibro-glaive against the floor plates as they walked. “- are going to have a deep and constructive discussion about leadership by experience. And I’m using deep as a relative measure, since you’re such a skinny little runt I could probably snap you with one hand.”

Tali tried to ignore the uncomfortable admission that she was probably correct and steer the discussion towards a more comfortable middle ground. “Don’t vorry, I’m not goodt at giving orders. In fact, I loathe it. I don’t vant anyone’s life to dependt on vhat I tell them to do. But, you mentionedt something about drinking? Have you perhaps heardt of the Pink Lekku? I happen to have…”

Her words were cut short by Decima’s boisterous laughter, the air around her vibrating with the force of her amusement. “*Pink Lekku?* What are you, a girl?!” the Iktotchi roared in laughter. “Whiskey, rum or straight up filtered grain alcohol from the cheapest local crops. That’s a real woman’s drink.”

Tali felt like contesting that point, but one glance at the savage blue face paint of the uncomfortably grabby Iktotchi made her reconsider. “I, uh, vas just about to say I happen to have removedt all the ingredients from the ship andt ve shouldt be able to enjoy proper drinks vithout any of the, uh, frou-frouy interferences of that fruity beverage.”

“Hmph, swear I could have thought you were about to suggest we share one, like a pair of pansy sisters on sleepover or something,” the warrior smirked, flashing a smile that only a mother, or very drunk asteroid miner, could love.

Tali gave an uncomfortable chuckle. “P-perish the thought! Plain alcohol it is! Not an umbrella or cocktail cherry in sight…”

“That’s the spirit!” Decima chuckled, giving the Twi’lek an affectionate squeeze that made Tali hear her own bones groaning in protest as they entered the galley.

The Iktotchi sat down at the counter and Tali, instinctively, went behind to fetch them a bottle of the nastiest dregs she could find before sensing distinct amusement in the air. Her lekku twitching to pin-point the direction of the source, she stared into a darkened vent where a pair of glooming eyes peered down at her.

*“Skar?!”* Tali blurted telepathically. *“Please, you’ve got to help me!”*

*“Oh? So Now it’s fine if I chop her head off, huh? When you’re being held hostage…”* the Kaleesh’s mental tone was laced with sarcasm.

*“No! Please, don’t hurt her. I just needt someone to… someone for her to focus on vhile I re-locate my shoulder… Pleeeease?”*

The Kaleesh seemed to consider it for a moment before giving his reply. *“Nah, as much as it surprised me, I am finding her tormenting you to be even more amusing than lopping her head off. At least one of the two has a chance of entertaining me for more than a minute.”*

*“Come out of your vent, curd, and we’ll see whose head gets lopped off!”* Decima’s mental voice roared as loudly as her vocal ever did, the woman springing up in an instant and sending her glaive through the ventilation shaft. The vibroblade bit through the thin metal plate like a lightsaber through a B1 battle droid as a string of hissed Kaleeshi curses and the hurried sounds of scraping feet carried the lurking Sith deeper into the depths of the Voidbreaker’s bowels.

“And stay away, you spineless vent-dweller!” Decima spat after him, planting the base of her glaive firmly against the floor with a *thunk* of finality before reaching for a glass of something intoxicating.

Tali hurriedly filled her glass with something she was not even sure what, gawking at the warrior as she downed the drink in one go after having shooed off the sadistic murderer Leeadra somehow managed to keep on a very improbable leash.

“More,” Decima demanded, slamming the glass onto the counter and having it filled almost at once.

“That vas, amazing!” Tali admitted with a genuine chuckle. “Oh, you don’t know how long I’ve vantedt to do that to him!”

“So why haven’t you? Didn’t seem too hard to me…” Decima quipped dryly as she downed the second drink and placed her glass down once more. “More.”

“Vell, you see…” Tali began as she poured her more, but the other woman raised her hand to silence the bubbly Twi’lek.

“Listen, let’s make two things clear between you and me before either of us drinks more than we probably should, ok?”

Tali nodded, clutching the half-empty bottle with both hands.

“I’m not your gal-pal and I’m not here to protect you. You mess with him and get yourself in a mess, I’m not going to come wipe up after you. You got that?”

The Twi’lek nodded, still silent.

“Good, now, if you were from where I was from, you’d be dead by now, but you’ve somehow managed to climb up the pecking order without a spine and I’m just about bored out of my mind enough to care, so my suggestion is this…” She reached over the counter and snatched a bottle into her hand. “Ditch that krakin’ rotgut and grab yourself a *Pink Lekku* or whatever and sit down. Because if you intend to keep on chatting in silence, we might as well do it properly.” She patted on a stool next to hers as she glanced at her glass, then the bottle of whiskey and eschewed the former entirely.

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“So, uh, how long have they been like this?” Leeadra asked as she continued to watch the security feed from the galley where Tali and Decima continued to sit in silence, barely glancing at eachother.

“Ugh, what does it matter? The lek-head stopped the horn-head from tearing up your precious little ship. Maybe she got her in some sorta mind lock or whatever…” Juliana groaned, equally bored out of her mind as she sat in the now-vacant seat with her feet crossed on a weapons console, her heel two inches from launching their ordinance into a docked GR-75 Medium transport.

The Pantoran gave a long sigh and admitted the unruly ganger had a point. “But why is she smiling?” she muttered.

“Huh? Which one?” Julie perked up, her foot sliding off the console and pressing the button. Three decks below, Kelviin feelt a sudden shock as the wires in his hand suddenly sparked for seemingly no reason.

“Both of them…” Leeadra replied.