

“Apologies Miss Zroka, but your credit rating is not up to the rigorous standards of this institution. I regret to inform you that at this time, we cannot offer you the funds you seek,” the Muun financier’s tone was as genuine as his rubbery smile of condolence.

“Ah, I see...” Tali nodded, bowing her head in resignation. “Vell, I von’t bother you any further, then,” she declared as she stood up, a careless hand swiping something off the man’s desk and onto the floor.

“Oh! Clumsy me,” she exclaimed, reaching down to fish up the communicator and handing it over. As the man made to accept the item, the Twi’lek gently waved her right lek. “It’s goodt I foundt *your* communicator.”

The banker’s eyes shifted, his already monotone voice losing all semblance of emotion as he droned his reply. “It is good you found my communicator.”

“Looks like your boss is calling,” Tali continued, “you shouldt respondt andt do vhat he says.”

“I should respond and do what he says...” the Muun man repeated as he flipped open the communicator.

Smiling to herself, Tali nodded and left, leaving the man alone for the moment while she stepped outside his office. Emerging back onto the well-lit walkway on the twelfth floor of the highrise pillar of polished stone and transparisteel, Tali leaned over the railing to admire the bureaucratic beauty of the Capital Enterprises office building.

Up above, bright rays of the Nancoran sun filtered in through the skylight and helped offset the clinical cool that the financiers seemed to prefer while muted jizz played in the background. Peering down the open center of the hollow spire, Tali saw each level lined with angular walkways along which countless more offices like the one she’d emerged from lay. Even deeper, she spied the pond of clear green water that hailed back to Harnaidan, the capital of many Muunians, and an aesthetic choice she had not been expecting in an organization otherwise so focused on nothing but efficiency and gains.

Not all hives of scum and villainy were seedy bars or cantinas, she reminded herself. The worst of crimes and shadiest of dealings could take place in pleasant offices and brightly-lit antechambers. It was this dawning realization that left her troubled. Had she been looking at the slaver problem from the wrong angle?

She’d been focused on hunting down slavers, the people who actively subjugated others and traded them for creds, and the ringleaders who bought and sold people like livestock. It had been the extent of the trade she had been familiar with, but as she leaned over the pristine transparisteel railing, surrounded by pleasant surroundings where smart people in sharp dress conducted crimes with a click of a few holokeys, she could not help but think she had been chasing mynocks while oblivious to the exogorth.

The thoughts were deeply unsettling, but she drew new purpose from them. The good thing about hunting up the food chain was that your prey would be fewer in number and the effects of their demise amplified.

Back inside his office, the banker was transfixed by the voice instructing him via the communicator. Had his presence of mind not been otherwise indisposed, he might have questioned Varryn Antillus' orders to invest a significant portion of Capital Enterprises' liquid assets in Tatooinian moisture futures; a high-risk portfolio shift which would see the funds tied down for the next three quarters or suffer a 90% write-down.

By the time he'd completed the transaction, Tali knocked on the door.

"Umh, yes? Come in!" the banker called, pressing the key to unlock the door.

"Hello, it's me again, but I think I accidentally left my communicator here," she greeted the very confused looking man.

"Your communicator, Miss Zroka? I don't think I..."

"Oh! You found it! Right there, on your desk. How silly of me!" the Twi'lek beamed as she crossed the distance between them in a few graceful steps and snatched the communicator off his desk. "Thank you kindly! Now, I think you were in the middle of something?" she continued without pause, her lek gently waving at him in a clockwise swipec.

The man fell blank once more. "Yes, please take your communicator and leave. I have other things to do."

"Vith pleasure," Tali winked as she turned around and departed.

Smiling to herself, she left behind yet another perfect crime-scene. None would be the wiser until it was too late, the recording in her communicator instructing the transaction to be signed off, but delayed until an hour from now when an estimated twelve point seven billion credits would suddenly vanish from Capital Enterprises' accounts and put the financial institution into panic mode.

Such a deal would be noticed on the galactic markets at once and be too big an investment to hide, calling into question Capital Enterprises' ability to fund its current operations, let alone the Collective warmachine that it paid for in secret. Without the influx of credits and burdened by panic loans the company would be forced to take to pay for its running costs, the Collective would grind to a halt while the company was forced to prioritize their daily operations over the war bills.

In a series of simple faux holocalls, coupled by a generous sprinkling of Force-aided suggestion, what Rath Oligard had spent six years to build would come crashing down in less than six hours. And all it took for that to happen was a simple bad investment. Had the financial dimensions not so utterly gone over her head, Tali might have called it poetic.

Momentarily distracted by her own cheeky thoughts, the warning of imminent danger came too late and she bumped into a junior analyst hurrying out of his office. A sharp yelp of surprise more than pain cut through the smooth jizz as datapads and paperwork scattered across the floor.

“Ugh, t-terribly sorry, ma’am, but you really should...” the young man fell silent as he picked up an elegant, high-end communicator that was receiving a call from Varryn Antillus. No, not receiving, but playing a recording. It took him a moment to process the words he was hearing, the seconds of distraction buying Tali enough time to pick a course of action she loathed to take.

“Do you deal in slaves?”

The sudden question caught the man as much off guard as the recording, his baffled mind stuttering an instinctive response. “N-no ma’am, I don’t make such decisions,” he managed before shaking his head and taking on a sharper tone. “N-now listen here! I’m calling security and we’re going to... Aaargh!”

The pale blue bolt of paralyzing power zapped the man at close range, making Tali’s lekku tingle from the proximity. Had she not been so drained from her previous manipulation of the banker she might have taken a more subtle approach, but a stun bolt would have to suffice. Stowing the blaster back into its holster, she looked around for a place to drag the unconscious man when the banker she’d just been dealing with walked out of his office.

The sight of the Twi’lek hunched over a junior aide might not have been suspicious on its own, but the glimpse of her belt, previously hidden beneath her cloak, and the lightsaber hilt dangling off it broke through any lingering effects of her mind trickery. Cupping his forehead as a lancing pain of conflicting memories struck him, the senior banker managed to act without further thought. Reaching for a distress beacon at the lapel of his plain attire, he pressed the emblem of the Capital Enterprises.

“Security! We have a Jedi on the twelfth floor!”

In that instant, Tali knew it was time to leave. Without hesitation, she snatched her communicator and vaulted over the railing, plunging down the central courtyard towards the rapidly approaching pool of knee-deep water.

Doors opened all around her, vicious security guards and bank workers alike rushing forth to assail her. It seemed Rath’s propaganda had instilled a level of recklessness even into the typically levelheaded bankers. Shots rang out after the escaping Twi’lek, poisoned darts lashing out from concealed wrist-blasters while the security guards switched their weapons from stun to kill.

The pressing cry of imminent danger flared up her spine as death closed in from all directions, Tali focusing through the warnings to manifest a shimmering shield around her. A

pearl-like bubble enveloped her entirely, the milky-white barrier rippling from the impacts of poisoned darts as she dived towards the pool below.

Wild blaster bolts crisscrossed around her, security teams on different levels trying to take her out but ending up causing more collateral as their kill bolts gouged deep wounds into the stone walls and shattered transparisteel walkways. At the last possible moment, she engaged her repulsorlift belt and the generators hummed to a hurried start, decelerating her descent just before her feet breached the pond's surface.

A rain of transparisteel shards clattered on her barrier, bouncing off the shield like drops of water before a hail of far more lethal bolts found their mark and hammered her in a torrent of violence. Under the weight of fire, Tali felt the barrier shatter a moment before it failed, leaping clear from the kill-zone and drawing her saber as a pair of guards rushed out to meet her.

Drenched in water but still quick on her feet, the Twi'lek weaved past a series of decorative pillars that promptly shattered from trailing blaster bolts, wading through the pond with surprising speed. Twisting around mid-step, lekku flailing wide as she fought to retain her balance on the slippery pond tiles, she ignited her saber as a bolt hurtled towards her. Crimson met amber with a flash of light and the bolt reflected back at its source, striking the guard in the chest and knocking her off her feet. The guard's cry of pain stalled her mate who dropped to a knee beside her to check for vitals while the Jedi made good her escape.

Vaulting over the pool lip, Tali's boots struck dry stone once more as she sprinted towards the main entrance. Sounds of blaster fire at her heels, the Twi'lek rushed towards the exit only to find a squad of four security guards heavily entrenched around it, blasters pointed at her and unleashing a hail of fire that drove her back behind a corner.

Tali groaned as she felt the strain of combat begin to wear her down. With the sound of rushing boots closing in from behind, the Twi'lek needed a new angle. Taking a moment to calm herself and extend her senses, she felt a frightened presence in the corner office behind her. It was a gamble, but she had to get out.

Carving the door off its hinges with a deft slash, she found a banker cowering beneath his desk. Drawing her blaster, she pointed at the Muunian and ordered him to get up. "If you intend to live, you'll do as I say..."

The pair emerged with the Twi'lek's weapon squarely pointed at the banker's neck, her slender form mostly hidden beneath the taller man's narrow build. Pushing him onward as fast as he could stumble, Tali called out to the security guards. "Drop your weapons! Drop them, now!"

There was a moment of hesitation, the security detail zeroing in and trying to aim at her hand to shoot the blaster from her grip. Beads of sweat dripped down her lekku, she was running out of time. It was her hostage's nerves that snapped first.

“For the love of profit, do as she says!” he barked in terror, hands flailing in protest.

One by one, four blaster rifles clattered to the floor as the duo passed the checkpoint and headed for the hardened transparisteel doors, Tali turning around to keep the banker between herself and any pursuers after they cleared the security.

“Do you deal in slaves?” she asked suddenly.

The man was too beside himself to answer before before she pressed the barrel of her gun against his neck and repeated the question. “Y-yes! I can get you as many as you want! Or contacts, whatever you want! Whatever!”

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The banker gasped and stared down at the hole in his chest, Tali letting go of his body and turning towards the door. Her saber out once more, she slashed the doors open even as the security detail scrambled for their weapons. They would be too late.

“*Schutta...*” the banker’s final gasp barely sounded over the thump of his limp form hitting the ground as he reached at the Twi’lek in a weak gesture.

Breaking into a sprint, the warning of danger came too late as something cut into her lek.

“Yyyeaaagh!” the Twi’lek cried out as she momentarily lost balance, stumbling down the steps leading up to the office building and slamming into a decorative post by the speeder stand. Dizzily, she pulled at her lek and found a small scratch at the tip where the dying banker’s dart had pierced her skin. Already, she could feel the poison begin seeping into her veins as she struggled to get up.

Realizing her peril, the Twi’lek focused all her might into fighting the toxin’s effects as she stumbled forward, collapsing onto her swoop and dislodging the pin holding the cargo modules in place. Clambering over the bike while only dimly aware of the angry shouts of pursuing security guards at the top of the stairs, Tali stuck the injured lek in her mouth and began to suck the poison out while gunning the throttle. The swoop responded without delay, leaving the heavy cargo modules behind as it shot off and raced away from the frustrated security detail, soon vanishing into the Nancoran badlands with its lek-sucking rider.

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The sweltering heat of the Nancoran outback made the air reverberate in the distance, the ferocious photon assault on her retinas and lekku barely stymied by the helmet she’d managed to don. The remnants of the toxin were still circulating in her bloodstream and working up a fever that was in no ways helped by the unrelenting solar rays that bathed the barren deserts and broken outcrops in their smothering blanket. The tip of her lek still raw

from the cut, Tali took solace from the fact the helmet's segmented plates at least offered a degree of protection to it as well as the gusts of sand and loose pebbles thrown up by the desert winds.

Racing through the outback, hoping there would be no fighters scrambled to pursue her, the Twi'lek hung onto the swoop's handle bars while lying flush against its sleek hull, wind whipping through her lekku. The exertions of combat were hard to recover from while a portion of her focus was constantly kept at dulling the poison's effects. She had no clue what those might have been, but even in their muted form she found staying conscious and driving in a straight course arduous.

Fatigue and dehydration began to set in as she contemplated slowing down and risking a break for some water, but the dangers in being caught idle on a hostile planet were too great. The navigation panel showed her proximity to the *Lekmaster*, the ship parked in a rocky valley some fifty clicks East of her location, and with her current speed it would only take her another twenty minutes to reach it.

She decided to press on.

Sweating profusely, the all-temperature cloak offering little protection as it fluttered behind her, the Twi'lek found her mind drawn to a nice, refreshing evening on Selen where she could enjoy the baths and unlimited refreshments. The optical illusions of the shimmering air made ponds of silver glitter just beyond the next rise or dune and each seemed ever more alluring than the last. Though she knew they were but mirages, she could not help daydreaming of the soothing waves lapping against her skin as she tanned on the sunkissed beaches of - *DANGER!*

Jerking the handle bars to the side more out of panic than design, her swoop twisted sideways in a sudden and violent maneuver only mirrored by the detonating mine a split second later. The blast threw the bike's rear skyward, narrowly missing the epicenter of the mine's fury, while the maneuvering fins struck the side of a dune. Acting as a fulcrum, the bike flipped over amidst a rain of blackened sand and smoke, its rider thrown clear of her damaged mount before it crashed down into a twisted heap of durasteel.

If she'd cried out during her sudden and brief stint through the Nancoran skies, Tali had no recollection. The only thing she knew was a dull, throbbing pain that permeated her entire body and a faceful of coarse sand. Spitting out the latter as she cried out from the former, Tali could barely feel her extremities from the shock of the concussive blast. Groaning weakly, she struggled to crawl up to her feet only to relive the chilling sensation of imminent danger like drops of ice water running down her spine.

Tired limbs protesting her every motion as she forced herself to move, Tali managed to clamber aside and throw herself over the lip of the shallow dune she'd landed on, rolling down the other side as a second explosive landed by her previous location. The detonation scattered sand in a blast of heat and pressure, droplets of molten glass splashing against her armor and burning through the weave of her cloak.

Ear-cones ringing, Tali reared her head and tried to peer over the now considerably shorter dune and through the black column of smoke rising idly from the blast crater. She had to find out what or who was shooting at her. Through the din of her injured ears she thought she heard a high-pitched giggle, maniacal and sadistic, but she couldn't tell for sure if it had been real.

THUNK!

The hollow, tubular sound of a launched explosive was unmistakable, but her senses cried out no warning. An agonizing split second slipped by as her own instincts told her to move, muscles twitching from the anticipation. Yet she chose to trust the Force to guide her actions and stayed put, taking the moment to recover as the explosive flew over her head and detonated behind a second dune to her rear.

As her senses cleared, she heard the giggle again, this time clearer and closer. Her eyes darted from left to right, scanning the slowly parting smoke clouds until she spotted a shape. Diminutive and slender but still distinctly Twi'leki, the form of her aggressor began to coalesce as she slowly paced through the smoke with a grenade launcher of some sorts cradled in her lap and the giddy chuckles of perverted excitement echoing through the clouds.

At first, Tali did not wish to believe her own eyes, that one of her kind would be such a cruel being as to draw excitement from the pain of others, but as she slowly regained her ethereal senses she could feel the genuine pride and thrill the woman felt from the carnage. It was proof she could not deny or ignore.

"Come out, come out wherever you are!" the pink-hued Twi'lek called, a sickly red eye glowing through the parting smoke and finally drawing a bead on her. "Hello, Jedi scum," she greeted with a tone that barely masked her giddy nature. "Goodbye, Jedi scum," the girl chirped before leveling the launcher and pulling the trigger.

Tali threw her arms up in a moment of panic, the fear of an explosive death and the pain of her injuries coursing through her. Raw emotion burned her in synapses as she tapped into a source she knew she should avoid. The giddy excitement of the other Twi'lek was mirrored in kind by the sense of primal power that she suddenly exerted upon the projectile, swatting it aside like an annoying insect as she deflected the grenade's trajectory with a swipe of her hand.

The round detonated to her right, showering them both in sand.

Gwendolyn stared at the Jedi in shock, sudden dread filling her mind as she realized she might have made a grave error of judgement. The beaten Twi'lek wasn't quite as worn out as she'd assumed.

The raging sea she'd sampled from crashed against the breakwater of her training and the pain of withdrawal seared her mind. Tali shuddered in the aftermath of her panicked sampling of the Dark, but knew she had to dare another pass. For all its excellent qualities, the Light's demands were ones she could not meet, not in the state she was in, and so she threw herself into the waves and hoped to breach the surface a second time.

The pink Twi'lek kept her gun up, though she hesitated pulling the trigger. Would she just end up being struck by her own weapon if she did? Her blaster pistol would not help her either. She would have to be smarter than that, smarter than a silly Twi'lek that the galaxy saw fit to be seen, but not heard.

"P-please..." the croaking, hoarse voice struck her out of her reverie. The Jedi was begging. "Please stop... I don't want to hurt you. Can't we just talk about this?"

Gwendolyn looked at the purple Twi'lek as she held up a weak hand in protest, her form scorched and marred by explosion and kinetic force. A weak Twi'lek, a frail, silly girl without the stomach to do what the galaxy demanded of her. She would never be seen begging for her life in such a pitiful state. She'd prove she was far more than her lekku led others to believe.

As the anger and determination welled up inside her to replace the hesitation and dread, Tali could sense the waves of frustration and hurt that festered in Gwendolyn's spirit. Though her mind was far from clear and the raw emotion wracking the petite woman's psyche hard to wrangle, she could sense clear glimpses of her torment and the burning desire to be seen as something more than a pretty face and a pair of head-tails. She found these desires to be shockingly relatable.

"Look, we don't need to end this in violence. We can be wise like a Cerean and talk about this," she stated with a hint more firmness in her voice. Reaching out with what little focus she could muster, she tugged at the first of Gwendolyn's memories she could find where she had been ridiculed of being brash, silly and stupid.

The pink Twi'lek hesitated, her grip on the grenade launcher flexing as she tried to will herself to fire a third time, but she could not make herself do so. It would only be yet another in a series of reckless choices she'd no-doubt be mocked for when she returned to base. Besides, the bankers would probably need her alive and mostly in one piece so they could make her un-do whatever chicanery she had been up to.

"Fine, let's talk," Gwendolyn finally agreed, though emphasizing her hesitation with a poignant jab of her weapon towards the other Twi'lek. "You first."

Had she not been so on edge and weary, Tali might have breathed a betraying sigh of relief, but as wound up as she was, all she could think of was where to take her next step. It would have to be careful and measured.

"I assume you were sent after me?" Tali began, finding the response in the faint shift of the pink-hued woman's grin. "Quite impressive minefield you managed to put in place on such short notice..."

"Hmph, wasn't much of a chore and you were driving in a straight line. The least you could have done is make it a challenge," Gwendolyn replied with a mocking tone, though the praise had clearly stroked her ego.

"I guess you're right. But hindsight is what hindsight is..." Tali muttered, appreciating the respite to try and calm her breath and racing mind. She just needed to keep the woman talking for a bit longer.

"I am ready to discuss the terms of my surrender. I'm sure your employers would prefer me alive rather than dead. Considering the amount of bantha poodoo they're in right about now."

"That's their problem," Gwendolyn spat, trying her best to mask her desire to do precisely that. "I'm only here to make sure you don't run away like the coward your kind are. Now what are your terms and remember, there's a lot more grenades where these came from," she added and patted the side of her launcher.

"What do you mean, my kind?" Tali spat back, the reverberations of her dip into the ocean of darkness still lapping at her mind.

"A *Jedi*," Gwendolyn spat the word like it was the foulest curse she knew, the mere syllables somehow staining her tongue.

Tali's lip twitched. "I choose to run, because it's better than needlessly killing more of your people. I do them a service."

"Is that so?" Sparks sneered. "Like a sniveling Twi'lek could ever pose a real threat. Face it, buttercup, you're nothing but a pretty face and that's all your friends will ever see."

"So are you, but at least I *have* friends!"

In the moment of silence that followed, Tali realized she might have made a mistake. Her response had distinctly not been careful or measured. Before she could even begin to salvage the situation, the pink Twi'lek's face twisted into a snarling visage of rage, her finger curling on the trigger of her gun without much of a conscious thought.

The distance between them was short. The cry for danger running down her spine late. The grenade was already halfway towards her face when she finally reacted and in that shortened space of time, Tali could do only one thing. Instinctively, she called out towards the munition and willed it to a halt.

The grenade decelerated like striking an invisible wall of gel, momentarily almost hanging in mid-air before the inertial fuse triggered. The explosion threw both combatants clear of its blast, sparks and fine shrapnel flying amidst the cacophony of concussive force. Tumbling through the sand, both Twi'leks came to a painful halt with lekku bruised and limbs aching.

Sparks was quicker on her feet, leveling her arm at the purple Jedi and triggering the wrist-mounted rocket. Roaring towards its target on a trail of fire, Tali saw the missile hurtling towards her and threw up her barrier. A meter before striking its prey, the rocket suddenly struck that invisible shield and detonated, the blast washing over the shattering bubble.

Before the increasingly desperate bombardier could play an explosive follow-up, Tali chose to offer her rebuttal. Drawing her blaster pistol in a smooth and practiced motion, she squeezed the trigger in quick succession, forcing her opponent to dash for cover as bolts narrowly missed her.

Spitting a curse at the cheating Jedi, weren't they supposed to only use lightsabers, Sparks pulled out a thermal imploder. Squeezing the arming strip, she tried to listen through the din in her earcones for the tell-tale pitter patter of deft feet on sand. The Jedi was running towards her.

Lobbing the explosive over the dune she'd sought cover behind, the crafty demolitionist prepared a back-up in case it failed to make an impression. Ditching the grenade launcher, she unholstered her blaster pistol and swiftly armed the wrist-mounted laser. She would keep that ace up her nonexistent sleeve, for when the Jedi least expected it.

The esoteric explosion shook the ground, tremors shifting sands as the two-phase detonation reached its final climax in a flash of incandescent heat. Waiting for a second longer for the worst of the aftermath to clear, Sparks rose up over the lip of the dune and leveled her blaster.

Beyond the smoke and sand rain she could see the smoldering outcome of her weapon. Glowing red hot, but infused with a greenish hue from local minerals, a giant hemisphere of glass lay at the epicenter of the explosion. Formed by the heat and pressure of the near-nuclear detonation, Sparks could not help but admire it as yet another achievement of her souped-up grenades.

That moment of enthrallment cost her dearly as a shimmering ring of pulsating energy emerged from beyond the haze of smoke and sand, striking her in the chest between her modest bust. The stun bolt crackled around her body, arcs of debilitating power coursing along her frame as she cried out in pain, finally coalescing upon her cybernetic eye that proceeded to go haywire. Overloaded by the stun bolt, the optic fizzled and hissed, failsafes and fuses shorting until finally the cybernetic popped in a puff of molten circuitry.

Tali witnessed her opponent tumble down the reverse of the dune, allowing herself a weary smile at having been able to lure her foe into a non-lethal outcome. Laboriously, she headed towards her incapacitated foe to make sure she didn't pose a continued threat, blaster pistol charged and at the ready. Passing by the glassed crater, she momentarily considered

returning to pick it up and offering it for Lucine as a punch bowl before dismissing the idea. She was more of a cocktail and champagne person, after all.

Groaning as the last flickers of the stun bolt fizzled off, Gwendolyn lay on her back with a piercing headache. Her cybernetic eye was no more and its explosive demise had almost killed her, but it had also absorbed most of the stun bolt's energy, leaving her relatively unharmed. Hearing footsteps closing in, she considered using her weapons, but her pistol was nowhere to be found. If the stun bolt had done a number on her eye, she did not fancy gambling her life on the wrist laser either. So she chose to lay still and bide her time. She would not be a silly Twi'lek, but crafty like a Trandoshan.

Rounding the dune, Tali saw the pink Twi'lek lying on her back where she'd fallen. Weapons scattered around her and black smoke rising from the empty cybernetic pit of her eye, for a moment she thought the other woman had perished. However, she could sense she was still alive, despite her injured appearance and rushed over to make sure she wouldn't die on her account.

The warning of imminent danger ran down her spine, but with the momentum and urgency to help, it was too little too late. Just as she reached her side, Gwendolyn twisted around and sent her slender hand into her throat with a swift jab. A cloud of spit shot from her mouth as she gasped in shock, sputtering and wheezing as she clutched her throat and tried to breathe. Sparks wasted no time and spun around sideways, sweeping the taller Twi'lek's legs from underneath her before pouncing on the prone Jedi with a mad glare in her remaining ink-black eye. Struggling to even draw breath, Tali found herself pinned and unable to move.

"Who's the silly Twi'lek now, *schutta*?!" Gwendolyn spat with utter malice. "I'll enjoy seeing you stuffed one last time..." she growled, one hand continuing to choke her foe while she pulled out a thermal detonator. Slender body shivering with perverted excitement, she squeezed the Jedi's windpipe with sadistic glee, nails digging into her skin as she forced the Jedi to gasp for air like a fish on dry land. Eyes wide in horror, Tali saw the deranged Twi'lek push the grenade towards her gaping mouth with a chuckle of giddy anticipation.

"Goodbye, Jedi scum," she hissed, beginning to force the explosive into the Jedi's protesting mouth. "Or should I say, *bomb voyage*..."

Pinned in place, the cold durasteel shell of the detonator pressed against her lips, Tali knew she was seconds away from a gruesome death. The death-grip Sparks held on her throat made it almost impossible to draw breath or speak and she had no time to focus. The only action she could take was one of desperation and even in the heat of the moment, she felt terrible about having to resort to it. With a shift of mental fortitude, she swung her lek at Gwendolyn's.

The armored lek tip met her unprotected skin, a harsh contact made worse by the segmented plates dragging along the sensitive appendage and drawing blood. Gwendolyn

cried out in pain, body suddenly spasming and twisting to the side from the neural shock enough to relent her grasp on the Jedi's throat.

Spitting out the detonator as she wiggled her left hand loose from beneath the mad bomber's knee, Tali muttered a hoarse "I'm sorry" as she reached out and grabbed Gwendolyn's right lek. She squeezed it. Hard.

Sparks cried out in agony, clawing at the other Twi'lek's arm while a string of incoherent curses spilled from her mouth, but her attempts were clumsy and unfocused and the Jedi's grip held. Finally managing to push the small statured woman off her, Tali released her grip and shoved the girl back with her boot pressed against her abdomen.

Rising on to unsteady feet, she searched for her blaster when her eyes caught the thermal detonator lying next to her, its arming light now blinking with an ever shortening cadence. Instinct overrode thought as she leaped clear, her weary limbs imbued by unseen energy as she dived over the shallow dune for cover.

The explosive detonated. Sparks flew. A wet, limp thump followed a few moments later. Tali did not need to consult her senses to know the end of it.

Throat almost caved in, bruised and beaten with patches of sand-matted blood covering her shape, the weary Twi'lek observed the battlefield for a long moment before managing to stand up. The devastation of combat had marred the land, marking it well for any passing aircraft. She could not stay.

Spying Gwendolyn's speeder bike nearby, she limped over and turned the bike towards the *Lekmaster*, leaving behind her housewarming gift and the remains of the mad artisan that had shaped it.