

“Well? Will you take him?”

The question was simple, ushered in a nervous tone as if merely mentioning the forbidden offer would make it soon expire. Grimy hands clutched the narrow shoulders of a young lad, broken nails almost digging through the roughspun tunic cloth as a mother held onto her child, peddling him to an unsavory trio.

Dull, sandwashed browns and reds bedecked the trio of slavers, loose and ill-fitting garments cobbled together for function over style covering the forms that sat around a small plastek table. Unmarked credit chits, bets in a seemingly endless game of sabacc, lay scattered across its surface amidst cups of bantha-milk tea and hard liquor.

The two men and one woman eyed the timid youngling who stood in his mother’s grasp, nervous and uncertain as he barely understood the gravity of the situation, but could sense the trepidation permeating his parent. Turning his head to look up at the most important woman in his young life, he found no solace as her eyes were firmly fixed upon the trio in front of her, and the alluring credit chits upon their table.

“Scrawny,” stated the female bluntly, taking the moment of distraction to swiftly glance at her compatriot’s hand of cards.

“Sickly,” said the other of the men, a burly Togruta with a chipped montral.

“Lacks spirit,” grunted the Zabrak, casting a venomous stare at the human who tried to peer at his cards in turn.

“But we’ll offer...” he continued, reaching for a set of credit chits lying in the pot, “Five hundred.” The chits were placed at the lip of the table.

The boy pressed firmer against his mother, small hands clinging to the coarse cloth of her tunic. He was not yet old enough to understand transactions, but could sense the peril. His mother, barely aware of his actions, looked at the money with a hungry stare, eyes burning with desperation. They had not eaten in days and it was a miracle the boy was even alive anymore. The slavers wouldn’t let harm come to him. Five hundred was a lot of money. No-one wastes something so valuable.

Or so she at least told herself to ease her conscience as those grimy hands reached out to snatch the pair of glittering chits off the table’s edge even as her grip on the boy’s arm loosened.

The choked atmosphere of the shady portside joint hung heavy with the smoke of unrefined narcotics. The distorted tunes of bootleg jizz crackled through broken loudspeakers over the hubbub of muted chatter and the clatter of crusted tableware, murky substances disappearing inside the inebriated host of less than reputable patrons served by a disinterested bartender.

The rundown cantina reminded her of countless others like it, products of an uncaring galaxy where countless millions disappeared in the cracks of interstellar society and millions more struggled to breach the black surface of poverty, even if it was off the backs of others like them. She did not despise the place, even if it offended her every sense. She did not despise the people either, though she had no love lost upon them. She understood, understood well from where they came from, but even so her understanding had a limit and it was being drawn at the table before her.

“C’mere ya runt!” the Zabrak grunted, his strong arms reaching out like vines to ensnare the timid boy and tear him off his mother’s tunic, the boy’s frail grip slipping on the coarse fabric as he let out a panicked yelp. Eyes pleading at her to protect him, the woman’s only concern was the pocketing of the precious credits and escaping before someone bigger and stronger took them from her. Without a further thought or gesture, she turned to leave, but found her passage blocked by a tall yet slender form.

“Stay,” the hooded woman stated, her voice soft but unyielding and the woman obliged, halting at once and staying in place as if transfixed.

Moving past the petrified woman, the cloaked Twi’lek approached the trio at the table where the Zabrak was busy tying up the boy’s wrists so he wouldn’t run while they finished their game. Her presence stirred a reaction.

“Huh, what you want?” the Zabrak spat dismissively, trying to peer into the darkness of the Twi’lek’s hood from where only the tips of her purple lekku stuck out.

“The boy,” she stated bluntly, her tone calm and balanced as if the answer had been as clear as day. “Andt a promise that you vill findt other vork.”

There was a stunned silence.

For a moment, the three slavers did not know if she was joking or being serious. The preposterous demand was spoken in such a carefully chosen tone as to balance between being facetious or merely utterly naive. In the end, they realized it hardly mattered.

“Funny...” the Togruta grunted as he put down his cards and shifted to look at the obscured woman. “Now, you gonna pay for him or what? The price is fifteen hundred, unmarked.”

Even as he spoke, the Human woman sensed something awry and slowly shifted her hand to the grip of the blaster nestled at her hip. A flick of her thumb undid the restraining strap and she gently eased the weapon out of its holster, aiming the barrel beneath the table at the cloaked Twi’lek.

“Fifteen hundredt? For such a scrawny andt sickly boy vho’s lacking in spirit?” Tali questioned, the Twi’lek’s senses keenly aware of her surroundings and the danger she was

already in. “Andt no, I vas not being humorous. Once this transaction is over, you will never trade slaves again.”

The Zabrak’s expression grew dark, the Twi’lek’s voice having lost much of its naivete and the way she refused to back down of her demand sent waves of unease down his spine. “Is that a threat?” he growled, pushing the lad behind him and away from the woman he feared might try and take him. The boy was worth a fair bit, after all.

“No,” Tali replied nonchalantly, “it is a promise.”

“Frakkin’ *schutta!*” the Human woman spat as her temper got the better of her, finger curling around the trigger as a bolt of ruby red spat out from her blaster’s shrouded barrel. Like quicksilver, moving before her trigger had reached the end of travel, Tali shifted her stance ever so minutely as the lightsaber she’d kept in her hand hissed to life with a brilliant yellow blade.

The crimson bolt, aimed at her upper thigh, struck the gleaming plasma edge of her saber and reflected, bouncing back at an angle and striking the Togruta’s lower abdomen. He let out a pained grunt as the stench of his own burning flesh and the hiss of melting fat reached his senses, dulled by the mortal pain of his cauterized guts, before slumping onto the pool of credit chits.

The Zabrak pushed back his chair, roaring as he rose up to grab for his vibroglaive resting beside him, but the arm he shot out to retrieve it stung with a sharp pain before feeling somehow lighter at the shoulder. A wet thump followed the biting hiss of plasma burning through flesh and bone, Tali’s saber stroke cleaving the man’s arm off at the elbow. He stared in mute shock at the lost limb, the cauterized stub oozing vitae as the full extent of his injury struck him.

“Uuuugh...” His eyes rolling back in their sockets, the man slumped unconscious to the floor, overcome by shock.

Horrified by the sudden change of fortunes, the Human woman scrambled to her feet, squeezing off a pair of shots which the Twi’lek’s dancing blade deflected into the ceiling as the slaver made her escape. Without a motion to pursue, Tali extended her hand with fingers splayed and squeezed, ever so slightly, before jerking her hand to the side.

A sizeable copper pot, used to distill the sour swill that was served on the cheap in the cantina, dislodged from its frail moorings to the wall and flung across the room to smack into the fleeing woman’s side. She cried out as the dull clang of the pot finding its mark reverberated across the cramped cantina, crashing into another table and spilling their drinks as the worn plastek broke under her impact.

Every pair of eyes in the joint were upon her as Tali released the trigger on her saber, the blade disappearing back into its hilt, the Twi’lek pulling back the hood on her cloak. “Go back to your drinks, this does not concern you.” She tossed a credit chit off the ones scattered on

the floor by the dead Togruta to the barkeep and the greasy man merely shrugged and returned to his business, along with most of the patrons. They knew better than get involved.

Closing the distance to the Human woman who slowly tried to scramble back to her feet, Tali grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and held on, the woman squirming in her grasp. "I meant what I said. You will find other work, do you understand? I see you trading other peoples' lives for profit, I will make sure you end up like your friends..." she hissed venomously, lekku coiled in a stance that conveyed barely restrained aggression.

The woman whimpered an incoherent apology, but Tali did not care for her words. Reaching into her mind with a sense of dread, she planted a singular thought into her psyche. "*Flee.*" The woman bolted off with a panicked scream, scrambling to her feet and disappearing into the street beyond, beside herself with horror. She would hopefully never forget that lesson.

"T-thank you..." The frail words sounded behind the Twi'lek, a trembling tone laced with hope, but fearful. She turned around to see the boy's mother before her, still clutching the pair of credit chits she'd earned from selling her own son as she looked like contemplating offering the other to her.

The sight disgusted her.

Lip curling into a sour snarl, the Twi'lek brushed past the woman and knelt down beside the trembling boy, undoing his restraints and giving him a comforting pat. "It's ok, little one. No-one is going to hurt you. You're safe now and your future is going to be much better from here on out. You can trust me, I'm your friend." The Twi'lek's hand disappeared into the folds of her cloak and she pulled out a local treat, handing it to the boy with a smile. "Listen, can you stay here while I talk with your mother? If you be a good boy, you'll get another one just like that, ok?"

The boy accepted the food, eyes wide with hunger and awe as he clutched the treat like it was the most precious item in the world. For him, it could be. With the boy preoccupied, Tali rose up and pulled his mother aside, pressing her back against the wall with lekku reared and tense as if facing an enemy.

"You!" she hissed, voice strained as she tried to mute her malicious tone so the boy wouldn't hear. "You have no right to this boy. No, right. He is the most precious thing in your life and he is not yours to trade away. If he chooses to leave you, then so be it, but you will never, ever, sell him away to some horrid man who will make him their slave."

The Twi'lek's eyes were ablaze with fire as every syllable dripped with the kind of malice only personal experience could brew. "You do not deserve him, but I'm leaving him with you. And if I find out that you sold him, that you did anything as... unthinkable as you did today... Your fate will be worse, so much worse, than those slavers."

The haggard woman shrank deeper and deeper into the folds of her tattered tunic, as it withdrawing into a shell of grime would save her from the Twi'lek's wrath. At the end of her

bitter tirade, she whimpered some sort of acknowledgement and with trembling hands, made to offer up the credit chits to her, but the Twi'lek struck them down with a snarl.

"I don't want your blood money! I want your understanding! You will not gamble with this boy's life, but keep him safe, until he is old enough to keep you safe. And maybe, just maybe, together you can make a living together..." Letting out a strained sigh, Tali turned on her haunches and returned to pick up the boy and the credit chits from the slavers' pot. Fishing out a second treat from her cloak, she handed it to the child along with a pouch full of credits.

Looking at his mother as she let the boy return to her, Tali's eyes flashed a burning amber that the other woman knew to fear even as she embraced her son. Without a further word, Tali turned away and left, pulling up her hood as she left the cantina and pulled up her communicator. Opening a tab on the holodisplay, she ticked off a trio of names on a long, long list that spanned several sectors.

If only there'd been someone like herself that day. Someone to drive off the vultures eager for a young Twi'lek girl. Someone to slam her mother against the wall and drive into her mind that her daughter was not hers to sell.

She felt her hands ball into fists.

No, it wouldn't have helped. She knew her own mother too well by now to believe she could ever change. She would only ever look after herself, but even if she could never have provided a future for her child, Tali now had another. One where she would make sure no more such tragedies would come to pass. She could only hope that the boy would get the chance she never did.

"Voidt damn you..." she muttered as she filtered into the crowd and vanished into the streets.