

The shudder of laser impacts drew a squeal of panic from the overworked Twi'lek as she struggled to maneuver away from the burning wreck of the *Invicta II*. The control panels were ablaze with warning symbols and the constant high-pitched whine of sirens and alarms only added to her confusion as the *Lekmaster* began to pivot on its central axis.

“Oh nonononoooo!” Tali shrieked as the ship’s malfunctioning engine sputtered and died, the jammed nozzle spitting out a final gout of ionized gas that sent the craft spinning out of control like a frisbee and hurtling towards the pallid yellow ball of Nancora below.

Catching glimpses of the slowly burning heavy cruiser as her viewport swung around, Tali had to steady herself to not vomit as the ship plunged ever downward, drawn by the hungry pull of the planet’s gravity well. Only minutes prior she’d been struggling to haul more wounded aboard the very ship she now witnessed burning up. Seemingly out of nowhere, a Collective suicide bomber had appeared and found its mark. The space tug had managed to crash straight into the *Invicta*’s hangar bay and blown up against the barrier field. Within seconds the entire deck had been consumed in a conflagration from which nothing could escape, forcing her to abandon the vessel before the fires crippled her own ship as well.

Before her damaged ship had managed to charge up its shields, a Headhunter had strafed her from a blind angle. Though the Collective fighter was no more, the *Invicta* was soon about to join it as internal explosions tore through its hull in vibrant jets of burning fuels and munitions, a series of escape pods scattering into the void as the crew abandoned ship. Tali counted far too few to be even a fraction of her full complement.

By the time her spinning craft finally breached Nancora’s atmosphere, the violently sick Twi’lek had given up on trying to salvage the situation and focused all her strength on maintaining what remained of her bowels inside her gut. The roar of atmospheric friction filled her ear-cones alongside the screaming of instrument warnings, all of which had become but grim background noise to her as she watched the desert race towards her.

In the final moments before the *Lekmaster* dived into the dunes, she let out a soft whimper.

This had definitely not been the way she’d imagined dying.

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“Mount up!” The sharp order roused the attention of a trio of Kiffar Huntresses, busy adjusting their energy bows in the sparsely populated vehicle bay at the outer edges of Axio city. Kendra Icasta’s brisk pace left no room for interpretation, the *Shikari* smelled blood in the water and they would not be denied. Sya, Corika and Aquina moved as one, rising deftly to their feet as they picked up their weapons and equipment before moving towards their speeder bikes, following the example set by their mistress.

Mere minutes earlier, Kendra had received word from Ghafa Ordram, instructing her to investigate a reported crash landing in the wake of the orbital engagement slowly petering out above Nancora. Though it was not her place to judge, she felt a certain degree of ire at

being sent on an errand that might as well be relegated to one of her subordinates, but another part of her entertained the idea of finding a Jedi Master or Sith Warrior to bring back as her prize.

It would not do to send her huntresses to claim such a trophy. Though capable in their own right, their chances of success would be greatly diminished without her presence and the thought of not being part of such a great hunt did not sit well with her.

As she tightened the straps on her bike's saddlebags, the sound of soft, feline steps on the brushed durasteel of the vehicle bay floor roused her attention. Turning around with a restrained haste that showed she had heard, but had not been startled by the woman, Icasta laid her eyes upon a familiar face.

Dark eyes, underlined in yellow ink, met her gaze. Sharp, feline features married with the robust, yet lithe frame of an apex predator were topped by a thick bundle of dreadlocks pulled back by a length of snare wire into a tail behind her neck; yet another tool in the *Shikari* arsenal. Though virtually identical in appearance thanks to the tender ministrations of Technocrat bio-engineers, there were subtle differences between her huntresses which became evident only after a time and which the keen senses of the master huntress had picked up upon in short order. The woman standing before her was Corika, the cadence of her step and the minute crouch in her posture betraying her identity even among equals.

"Speak," the Chiss stated bluntly, her cybernetic eye whirring as the optics readjusted their focus.

"Mistress, begging your pardon, but what prey are we hunting this time? It may impact the choice of weapons and tactics," Corika stated with a curt bow.

Kendra studied the face of her huntress for a moment, the Kiffar doing well to hide any emotion she might be feeling. Too well, in fact. The Chiss did not like it.

"You hunt down any prey the Collective deems worthy and you will use any means to succeed in that task. If you feel inadequate for the hunt, you must mean I trained you poorly..." Kendra's reply was as much a trap as the obstacle courses she made her *Shikari* run through to hone their skills, but Corika had blazed through them all and this one was no different.

"Nothing of the sort, mistress," she placated with a submissive tone. "I am only following your teachings and seeking to know all there is about the quarry I am about to pursue. A wise huntress does not rush headlong after a prey she does not comprehend, but stalks until the time is right to deliver a killing blow."

There was a slight twitch in the corner of the Chiss' mouth. The woman was as intelligent as she was athletic, a dangerous combination for anyone who got in her way. But it would not do to admit that to her, it would only lead to hubris and failure, or worse.

Ignoring the verbal acrobatics, Kendra pressed on. "This time, there won't be a kill. At least not if we are successful in our hunt."

Corika's brow furrowed, her expression turning dour. "I see," she stated coldly, "I will inform my sisters, though their bloodlust may not be so easily restrained."

"Theirs or yours, Corika?"

"We hunt as a pack, mistress. What my sisters feel, I share with them and what I feel, they mirror in kind."

"So you sense their feelings? Have you developed Jedi powers of your own?"

"No, mistress, but a deeper bond between fellow huntresses. Once you've shared so many kills with your sisters, it becomes second nature."

"Yet, only you show this bloodlust. Not them. Perhaps I have not shared as many trophies with them as you have?"

"Perhaps..." Corika agreed with narrowed eyes.

The two women locked eyes, bodies seemingly relaxed while every muscle and sinew was ready to explode with violent motion, proverbial claws all but drawn and fangs poised for the jugular. It was Corika who broke the stare first.

"My apologies, mistress. I meant no slight. I will inform my sisters and ensure your will be done," she fawned, every syllable as false as the bow she made before turning around and leaving.

The Chiss followed her departure with a hand on her whip, every instinct calling for her to lash out and whip the uppity huntress back in line, but she knew better than to let her emotions cloud her judgement. The *Shikari* were fierce predators and the days without prey to hunt had left them as wound up as a caged beast. And as such creatures tended to do, they would lash out at anything that came within reach. Had their orders not been to bring back the survivors alive, Kendra would have relished seeing what the bestial huntress might do when she was finally released from her cage.

Finishing her preparations, the master huntress climbed on her speeder bike and powered up the repulsorlift engine. Raising the collar of her bodice to better cover her face and donning a pair of goggles to protect her eyes from the harsh Nancoran badlands, she raised a fist into the air that was mimicked by the trio of *Shikari* by their bikes. Without a further word or gesture, she squeezed the throttle open and the speeder bike shot out from the hangar at breakneck speed, darting into the industrial wasteland with three more in its wake.

The hunt was on.

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The sensation of nausea had finally passed by the time Tali woke up. By some miracle of the Force, she was still alive and hanging from her crash harness in the pilot's seat. As she wearily opened her eyes to take in her surroundings, she realized the *Lekmaster* was partially buried in a dune of sand, the craft having plowed through several before slamming into the final one and left embedded into its side with sand covering half of the cracked windscreen.

"Ouch..." she muttered to herself, feeling a throbbing headache, but surprisingly no further pain despite the twisted and mangled shape of her ship's prow that was clearly visible before her. As she made to unhook herself from the harness, however, something felt odd.

She couldn't move her hand.

Turning her head to look at her arm, it lay flat against the armrest and seemed perfectly fine beyond a few scratches and bruises, yet she could not seem to lift it. Blinking twice in stunned silence, she reached to poke at it with her left hand but it would not budge either. A shiver of panic passed her mind, her pulse quickening.

Out of desperation, she tried to kick the pedals in front of her, but her legs did not respond. Trying to twist her body to shake herself loose of her bonds, she realized she could not even feel the pressure of the tight harness against her, not the weight of her armor or even the cold steel against her fingers.

Staring down at her paralyzed body with eyes wide with shock and terror, the Twi'lek let out a cry of pure horror, trapped in a prison of her own flesh.

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Darting past the remains of broken factories and desolated farmsteads, the four *Shikari* moved in silence. The devastated remains of Nancora's past reached as far as their eyes could see, though that was not much in the smog choked wastes around Axio city. Skeletal ruins of agricultural machinery jutted out from the irradiated earth, rusting like the shells of empty houses built before the Technocrats got their hands on the world and turned it into a hellscape of industry.

If any of the women were concerned by this or in any way moved by the ecological massacre that had taken place by their allies, none made it apparent as they lay low over their sleek speeder bikes and pressed on into the Badlands, a place somehow even more inhospitable than their current surroundings. Only those insane or driven enough would venture there and Kendra was not entirely sure which category she fell into.

Her loyalties lay with the Collective and they were unquestionable, but the orders she'd received from Ghafa Ordam had sounded half-hearted even coming from her directly. She had faced and killed enough Jedi to know what they were capable of, but to send herself and

her *Shikari* on such a mission bordered on the insane. Even if the occupants of the crashed ship had somehow survived and they were not just tracking debris, there was a good chance they'd perish even before they found them. The Badlands had a habit of leaving few corpses.

Squeezing the throttle ever tighter, the Chiss grimaced as a sudden gust of sidewind almost threw her speeder bike into an uncontrolled spin. Twisting the bike from a crash course with a dilapidated wall sticking out of the sand dunes, she gritted her teeth and relented. She knew better than to press heedlessly into danger and with the trio of Kiffars at her side, even if the prey got a head start, she could be certain they would track it down.

And she so enjoyed the thrill of a good hunt.

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She'd screamed until her voice failed and then screamed without a sound. How long she'd been trapped in a state of breathless panic she could not tell, but by the dried stains on her cheeks it had been a while. When she slowly began to regain her senses, mind recovering from the horror of being trapped in place without control over even the most basic actions, the Twi'lek closed her eyes and tried to think about the situation as objectively as she could. It was what Koliss would have done.

She was strapped to her seat rather firmly and before her she had the ship's control panel. However, it was of little use when she had no hands to operate it with and it seemed almost every system had gone offline in the crash. The windscreen had cracked and some sand was leaking inside, but it wasn't too much of a danger. When she stopped to think about it, being half-buried in sand might actually have been a good thing as the Nancoran sun continued to scorch the speckled sides of her junkyard bargain. At least the ship wouldn't turn into as much of an unbearable hotbox if a good part of it was beneath the sand. Or so she thought.

Turning her head to look around, the only action she could truly muster, she spied an open drawer beside her. A pull-out compartment had shot open and most of the objects within had scattered somewhere around the cockpit, but she could clearly see a half-eaten ration bar, a bottle of water and a banged-up communicator, along with an emergency flare gun that had come with the ship.

Though the concept of hunger suddenly seemed nebulous to her, she figured keeping hydrated might be a smart idea. If only she could somehow get to the bottle. Even as she stared at the clear plastek vessel, the liquid within taunting her with its crystal clear coolness, she felt a growing need to drink. She might not quite feel her stomach or hunger, but she definitely could feel parched.

As she continued staring at the stained drawer that lay two feet beneath her chin, the contents mocking her as they stood so close yet so impossibly far away, she felt an itch slowly grow on her upper lip. Fine kernels of sand from the breached window had floated

onto her face where they had stuck to her sweating skin, now forming a coarse film which was irritating her tender hide.

Moments passed and her focus shifted ever more rapidly from the conundrum of rehydration to the more pressing agony of a face itch. The annoyance continued to grow and grow no matter how much she tried to ignore it, her reflexive commands to reach out and wipe the smear from her face unheeded by her limp limbs. Eventually, she could take no more and let out a squeal of sheer frustration, shaking her head and doing everything in her power to blow away or somehow rid herself of the maddening torment of an itch she quite literally could not scratch.

Suddenly, the itch vanished amidst a soft brushing against her lip, purple skin against purple skin. Caught by surprise, she stared at her right lek with a stupefied look, its tip now covered in a thin film of offending sand, until her overworked synapses managed to convey the profoundness of her observation to the higher parts of her stunlockered brain.

She could still move her lekku.

Had she paid attention to all the medical jargon Koliss gushed at the slightest provocation, she might have figured out why it was obvious she could still control them. However, in the joyous moment she had no desire to contemplate the why's or how's, but rather focused on the possibilities this newfound mobility offered.

When she had first begun on the long journey of mastering, or even understanding, her Force powers she had used her fledgeling abilities in telekinesis to knit lekwarmers. The first attempts had been very lackluster, bundled heaps a five year-old would have been embarrassed to show their parents, but in time her dexterity had improved greatly. Nowadays, she had been able to knit two lekwarmers at the same time, holding one set of needles in her hands and levitating the second via guidance from her lekku. It was not so much a showcase of multi-tasking as she used the physical motions as a guide for the mental ones, the basic activity of knitting an almost mindless activity to her. However, she had managed to learn how to channel her control without using her hands directly, even if that was still not quite as precise.

Clinging to the newfound control of her body, she took a steadying breath and raised the tip of her right lek, focusing her mind around the water bottle. Extending her control to the object felt odd yet familiar at the same time and she drew strength from that familiarity in a world of confusion and shock. Willing her control around the bottle, enveloping it in an unseen bubble of power, she raised her lek and the bottle followed.

The weight of the object tugged at her mind, draining her strength the more she forced it to shift. Her lips pressing into a line as she struggled to maintain her focus, Tali levitated the bottle up to her lap and finally wedged it in between her legs. It felt odd to see the bottle press against her thighs yet feel nothing, but she brushed aside the troubling thoughts and shifted her focus to the cap. Gingerly moving her lek around, she twisted the cap with more and more telekinetic momentum until it popped open, exposing the mouthpiece. The strain

on her mind mounting, she finally raised the bottle up to her lips and eagerly opened her mouth to drink deep of the refreshing liquid.

As the first splashes of water touched her parched tongue, she could not help but let out a minute mewl of relief, the sensation so wonderfully familiar and encouraging she almost trembled. In that instant her focus vanished, all mastery melting away in a heartbeat as control of the bottle was wrestled from her by the gravity of Nancora with very predictable results.

The dull clank of the container striking the *Lekmaster's* durasteel deck echoed inside the cockpit compartment, a splash of water spreading across the cool metal and spreading ever further as the bottle rolled to the left along the listing ship's floor. Tali watched the bottle spin away in horror, spilling its precious contents as it went before striking the corner of a small compartment and spinning down an opened access panel.

In a moment's hesitation, the bottle had vanished, swallowed whole by her ship's depths.

Her resulting cry was cut short only as her raw vocal chords failed yet again.

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The heat of day had faded and as the scorching sun slipped beneath the horizon, a creeping cold worsened by windchill forced the Chiss to wrap her robes tighter around her body. Their speed had slowed considerably yet again, a function of fatigue and poor visibility despite the powerful headlights fitted to their speeder bikes. It chafed the *Shikari* to so clearly announce their presence, but after losing four of her sisters in the Badlands from nocturnal crashes, even Icasta had admitted it was an undue danger. In the near-total darkness beneath the smog-choked skies, there simply was not enough native light to make use of their cybernetic implants. A light amplifier did not work if there was nothing to amplify.

The sound of an approaching speeder bike caught her attention and without any other clue than the fact she dared approach her, Kendra knew who the rider was. When Corika pulled up alongside her, she did not even deign her with a glance.

"What is it?" she Chiss asked dryly, her supreme disinterest evident in every syllable. "Keep it quick."

Despite her mistress' lackluster response, the *Shikari* still bowed her head in greeting, claiming the high ground in the verbal duel that no doubt was to ensue. "We have been riding for hours without pause, mistress and your followers are tired. The Badlands are hostile even to us and too many fine sisters have fallen prey to its dangers. I would advise we halt and camp for the night."

Though Kendra had prided herself for guessing the rider's identity, the angle of her grievance caught her entirely by surprise. She had not taken Corika as one to care about the wellbeing of others, but the logic behind her request was hard to deny. Corika had to be well

aware that she herself had taken action to preserve the strength of her remaining *Shikari* and ensure they would be ready and available when the final showdown between the Collective and the Brotherhood began. This request made absolute sense and so she could make only one conclusion.

It was obviously a trap.

The wind whipping past them and the distortion from their communicators mangling the subtle nuances of speech made it hard to figure out the exact angle, but Kendra was sure Corika was baiting her. The Kiffar had ambition, she had drive and above all, she had cunning. These were excellent qualities to have in a huntress, honing them to a weapon as sharp as a razor blade. But they also gave that weapon a second edge which could cut the wielder as readily as it did the prey and she was now dancing on it.

“Wise council, Corika,” Kendra admitted, momentarily tearing her eyes from the landscape in front to cast a glance at her fellow rider. In the dark, under a flurry of sand and fluttering cowls it was hard to make out any expression on the fellow *Shikari*’s face. “But we will press on. This prey cannot wait. Ordam wants them captured. The longer we dally, the higher the risk they will be prepared for us, or be claimed by the Badlands.”

Corika made for a rebuttal, but Kendra’s sharp tone cut her off before she could voice more than a tone. “And that is final.” The mistress’ tone was as unyielding as beskar. Seeing her defeat, Corika bowed her head and muttered a barely polite “As you wish, mistress,” before slipping back to her position among her sisters.

Beneath her cowl, the Kiffar could not stop smiling.

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*“... though it pains me to say it, I have to leave you alone for a while, lavender. Something has come up at home and I need to check in on the folks. I trust it’s nothing, but in case we don’t see each other in a while, I want you to know that I lo-ZZZZZZRPTH.”*

It wasn’t helping her mood any, but the Twi’lek tapped the cracked screen of the worn datapad with her lektip once more, rewinding the message she’d found stored on its memory bank and listening to Koliss’ farewell for the seventh time in a row. The crackling speaker hardly did his voice any justice, but even distorted and warped it was like a frail ember of comfort against the pitch black of the Nancoran night.

As the recording began anew, Tali pressed the back of her head against the chair’s neck rest and tried to sleep. She had done so intermittently after pulling out the datapad and realizing she could not reach anyone with it. With the *Lekmaster*’s communications busted, she had figured there was little else to do than wait for the internal batteries to drain and then... What then?



Gusts of wind howled in the far corners of her damaged ship, carrying with them a scent of pollution and damp sand. A chill shiver ran down her neck and ended abruptly, though her body still shook out of habit. The sensation was otherworldly and as intriguing as it was unsettling, but she was in no mood to consider it. Maybe Koliss would have found the situation more interesting? No, she would never wish anyone to be trapped the way she was. It took a considerable amount of active ignoring to forget she was in fact paralyzed and to stop herself from screaming in a futile attempt to somehow *will* herself back into control of her own body. She knew it would be of no use, but what else could she do?

She could unbuckle herself, but without control of her body, she'd only slump against the control panel and possibly choke. The most mobility she had at hand was the chair adjustment panel which somehow still worked and was within lek-range, but only offered a simple swivel function for ease of access. If she chose to unbuckle at the end of travel, she'd face a longer fall and face-plant against the floor instead.

Not exactly much to work with, she had decreed. Still, she'd found enjoyment in spinning back and forth for about a minute before the novelty had worn off and she'd been left immobile in a cold and dying shipwreck.

The hopelessness of her situation was beginning to encroach upon her mind once more and as the recorded message ended in static she considered replaying it for the eight time. Reaching for the pad with her lek, she saw a flash of light in the distance that caught her attention.

In the dull gloom of the emergency lighting, her initial instinct told her it was a reflection off the ship's windscreen, but as she focused her gaze into the distance she could clearly see a cone of light moving. Distorted by distance and the Nancoran atmosphere, she could not make out more than the fact it was light and it was moving in a way which seemed to indicate sentience.

The moment of utter relief and joy turned into one of cold dread as she remembered where she was stranded and who the most likely 'rescuers' would be. Despite her condition, she did not fancy her chances in a Collective POW camp. If they would even take her alive in the first place.

Deciding she would be served better by proof than speculation, she closed her eyes to rid herself of any visual distraction and extended her senses to their limits, honing in on the approaching presence. No, *presences*. It immediately became clear more than one individual was converging on her location.

The range made it difficult to sense clearly and fatigue was setting in, but she could sense four persons and their unifying desire to hunt that seeped from them like a cloying stench of blood. Face twisting into a sneer of disgust, she pressed on ever further as long as she had the connection, picking up nuance differences in the four riders before her focus broke with a gasp. Sweat was dripping down her lekku once again, but she had a chance. She just needed to act fast.

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*“Target sighted, mistress.”*

Kendra’s blank expression grew minutely tenser as the words filtered in through her communicator. The four *Shikari* were moving closer in a line abreast, the humm of their speeder bikes bouncing off the tall rock formations surrounding the crash site. Even in the dark of the night, Kendra could make out broken outcrops sticking out through the sand around the wreck and a series of flattened dunes behind it where it had smashed through at least six on its way down.

The mangled ship rested with its nose buried in sand, somehow having missed smashing into the significantly less forgiving rock formations, and as they dimmed their lights to not announce their presence any further, her augmented eye could pick up a red glow through the cockpit glass.

The ship had survived the crash, at least in part. That meant there was a high chance a passenger might have survived as well. Ordam might yet have her prize.

“Sya, left flank. Corika, take the right. Aquina, move around and cut them off in case they r...”

Kendra never had time to finish her orders when an impossibly bright dual flash strobed in the night, Aquina’s speeder bike vanishing an instant later in a sudden explosion along with its rider. The force of the blast wave caught Kendra off-guard and her speeder bike careened into the sand, the front spar digging into a dune and flipping the vehicle in a violent loop. Sya was caught in the blast as well, a shrill cry barely audible over the explosion as she fell off her speeder bike and tumbled on the harsh sand. Only Corika escaped mostly unharmed, pulling to a stop behind a second dune and drawing her weapons.

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She had not believed it would work. At least not as well as it had. Lekku wrapped around the control column in a fashion she had only once had to pull off, she’d managed to nudge the gun turret around to align the sights on one of the approaching riders. There wasn’t much power left in the ship’s energy reserves, but at least the shots had driven them into cover and bought her some extra time, not to mention seemingly taken out two of the four assailants.

Releasing the controls while slapping the the trigger one final time to send a third shot flying wildly too high, Tali turned to the datapad in her lap and began to poke and prod.

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Spitting sand from her mouth, the Chiss growled to herself. That had been reckless of her, a misstep she would not repeat. But now they knew for certain they had prey and where that prey was. It might have cost the life of a *Shikari*, but they had all sworn to die for the Collective.

“Take out that turret!” she snapped, drawing her pistol while the shaken *Shikari* readied their energy bows. Rising as one from behind cover, Sya slightly slower than her sisters, the trio opened fire on the turret. A pair of plasma arrows streaked through the night towards their mark, illuminating the cold stone and sand around them with a purple glow, before striking the ship’s armor and the turret joint in a splash of sparks.

Pistol leveled in her cybernetic hand, the Chiss steadied her aim. Red eye peering through the night, she minutely adjusted her elevation and braced for the recoil. A double-tap followed the arrows, the heavy recoil making Kendra wince despite her cybernetics as the pistol spat out two rounds in almost immediate succession. The shot struck true, punching through the weakened turret joint and searing a power conduit. A moment later the coupling overheated and the turret cooked off in a shower of sparks and plasma fire.

“Corika, stay back and cover our rear. Sya, with me.” The Chiss’ orders lashed out like a whip, but the Kiffar protested.

“Mistress, I am injured. I should stay behind,” Sya stated as calmly and respectfully as she could while clearly in pain, a hand pressed against her bruised leg.

“Can you still fight?”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Corika, with me. Sya, stay with the bikes. Make sure we are not ambushed.”

The Kiffar’s nod was heavy with regret and shame at her own fragility, but Kendra would not risk her life for nothing. One death had been enough. Sharing a cold glance with Corika, she sat off towards the wreck, skirting around cover to keep as low a profile as possible.

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She was ready, or at least as close to ready as she could be. All she had to do now was capitalize on the internal discord she’d sensed and then... Then with a bit of luck she might be able to get out of here alive.

Sensing the two closing in on her location, Tali honed in on the one with ambition. Extending her lek to act as a focus, she braced herself for the very draining stunt she was about to pull. It had better work or she would be in deep trouble and too weak to do a thing to defend herself.

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Corika moved with all the skill and finesse she had been trained for, her swift feet making nary a sound as she darted behind her mistress and flanked right. The mangled wreck of the target ship, a JumpMaster 5000 by the looks of it, seemed unassuming as the gun turret continued to burn and cast flickering shadows along the rocky hills by their either side. It had seemed just as unassuming before its cowardly passenger had killed Aquina, another failure that she counted against the blind Chiss leading them.

Kendra was a good huntress, but not the best. She had keen eyes for detail, but blind to the realities of the hunt. The Chiss might have taught her how to hunt, but she knew Kendra no longer was her equal and claiming this prize would prove that once and for all. The Collective might see the *Shikari* as nothing more than a resource, but to her they were a sacred sisterhood. A sisterhood which would not be used and discarded as mere agents and wasted on trivial missions. No, she wanted equal standing with their so-called superiors. What was it that Rath Oligard had said? *“The Jedi and the Sith subjugate those they view as their lessers, showering them in trinkets and titles to lure them into a gilded cage. But when their lies melt away and the time for payment is due, they gleefully foot the bill with the blood of mindless minions.”*

The words had perhaps not been meant for her, but rather the masses Oligard addressed to rouse them up in rebellion. Nevertheless, they had stuck with her and she could not help but feel the same gilded cage being slowly built around her and her sisters by those cowards who refused to dirty their own hands or lead their troops from the front.

At least in that regard she could respect Icasta.

“Cover me, I will flank the ship and breach,” Kendra’s voice hissed through the comm link, breaking the Kiffar huntress from her thoughts, the abrupt shift causing a faint moment of vertigo.

She was about to reply the expected acknowledgement, but hesitated. Why was Kendra to breach the ship? To claim the prize herself. It was why she would have preferred to leave her behind and chose Sya over herself to follow her up close. She was here only as fodder and a witness to the Chiss’ own ambition. She and her sisters had bled for this prize and now their mistress would claim the reward and glory. And for what? More praise and another spar in her own cage by the Technocrats?

No, she would not have this prize. This quarry was hers and hers alone.

“Corika?!” The tone was urgent, aggravated. The Chiss was unbalanced.

Corika knew she could not defy her mistress, but she had to lure her away from the prize. The dancing shadows cast by the sputtering fire consuming the gun turret caught her eye. A thought emerged.

“Up left, behind you! She’s getting away!” Corika yelled, pointing at the cliff face where the shadows were especially hard to make out.

Kendra snapped her head around at where her fellow *Shikari* was pointing and caught the fleeting shape of a fleeing Twi’lek. The prey was escaping! Without time to weigh her options, she followed her instinct and in a split-second a decision was made.

“Stay with the ship, I will hunt her down myself!”

The Chiss did not bother listening to Corika’s reply as she sat off after the fleeing prey, leaping up at the cliff face and beginning to scale the broken surface with the grace and dexterity of a feline predator.

Corika watched the Chiss disappear into the shadows and smiled. She could not believe the ruse had worked. How could the Chiss have been so gullible and blind? Only further proof she was unfit to lead them. Pushing aside the glee of her petty victory, she flexed her knuckles and prepared to board the ship; and claim her prize.

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Tali slumped back in her seat, face pale with exhaustion. Dry mouth snapped for water, but she had none to spare. Perhaps later, once she had her thrall. Her survival rested on a ruse, but if Lucine could pull one off, so could she. Closing her eyes, she ignored the creeping presence closing in and tried to recover from the extensive Force drain.

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Outside, Corika scaled the *Lekmaster’s* hull with deft steps, having silenced Kendra’s voice in her comms to allow no distractions she slipped ever closer to an exposed hatch that hung ajar at the top of the ship’s crew module. Finding purchase on the ship’s uneven hide, she pulled herself onto the superstructure and crouched by the hatch. Weapons ready in both hands, she swiftly scanned the area within and dropped inside the ship as silently as she could, boots striking the metal plating with a muffled clang.

Crouched low, hugging the shadows with both weapons poised to strike, the Kiffar immediately noticed the lekku peeking over the pilot’s chair. The faint twitch in them let her know the pilot was alive. Eyes darting across the cramped compartment, she looked for traps or hidden opponents but found none. The pilot was alone, ripe for the picking.

“Please, I surrender.” The Twi’lek’s voice startled her momentarily. “I am injured, I needt medical attention,” the woman continued.

“Get up, slowly, hands above your head and get on the floor,” Corika stated coldly, her frozen tone chilling the room.

“I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t? Because I have ways of making you...” the Kiffar hissed.

“Can’t. I... I hurt my neck when I crashed. I... I can’t move.” The despair in the Twi’lek’s words was genuine.

“Hmph, serves you right, Brotherhood scum,” Corika spat back, her voice lacking all compassion for her crippled prey. If anything, it offended her to find this husk of a being having been able to kill one of her sisters.

Or had she? Surely not. Either the Twi’lek was lying, or there was someone else present. Her eyes shifted around a second time, spotting two halves of a nutribar, one by the pilot and another by the gunner’s seat. Both had been eaten.

The Twi’lek was lying! There was someone else present, but if the lek-head thought she could play her for a fool, she had another thing coming. A huntress did not fall into a trap, she dismembered it.

“Stay still. Move a muscle and I decorate your ship with your brain,” Corika hissed venomously, slowly pacing towards the Twi’lek while her senses were on edge to spot the second occupant. They would surely pop out at any moment. Any moment now.

*“LEAVE YOU ALONE!”*

The voice, impossibly, sounded directly behind her and Corika spun around on her heels. Expecting to face a blaster or knife, she fired first before even acquiring a target. The toxic dart struck the wall above a discarded communicator, a recorded message playing on the screen.

Corika barely had time to realize her folly as Tali tapped the seat swivel controls, spinning around and levitating the flare gun at her. At such close range, even with such inaccurate means of aiming, it was almost impossible for Tali to miss.

The flare spat out from the snub barrel and crashed into Corika’s back, the intense heat of the red pyrotechnic immolating her garb in a heartbeat. The hiss of the burning flare was joined by the screams of panic as the Kiffar struggled to douse the flames, dropping to the ground and rolling, but only succeeding in pressing the flare deeper into her robes.

The sight of the panicking Kiffar huntress burning up alive was too much for the Twi’lek to bear and she closed her eyes and pressed the controls again to turn her seat to its original facing. She tried to blot out the sounds and smells, but failed, Corika’s tortured screams reaching a crescendo before the flames reached her microthrusters and cooked off the fuel cells. Within the cramped cockpit, the effect was magnified and the concussive blast knocked the Twi’lek unconscious.

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The trail had gone cold. If there even had been a trail to begin with. Kendra Icasta snarled to herself as she came to the conclusion which all available evidence pointed toward. She had been duped. There had been no escaping Twi'lek, only an illusion. But what part had the overly ambitious Corika played in it? She had no proof, but her instincts cried murder.

A dull explosion sounded behind her, confirming her fledgeling suspicions.

Letting her anger flow out lest it made her burst, the Chiss spat out a savage cry before sprinting back towards the wreck. "Corika!"

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Corika was no more, her lithe form turned into a blackened skeleton that lay twisted upon the *Lekmaster's* deck. As the Twi'lek slowly regained consciousness, she was greeted by the choking smell of acrid smoke and the scent of burnt flesh, a particular combination she was depressingly familiar with.

Earcones ringing and feeling disoriented, she hoped the last assailant would not return just yet as she struggled to re-establish her failing connection with the Force. It was her only ally, but a powerful one at that. After expending the flare gun, however, she had no more offensive means. Her blaster pistol was too snugly squeezed between her thigh and the pilot chair to draw and she did not even want to consider the risks of telekinetic lightsaber wielding. In her exhausted state, neither option was workable.

She just needed a bit more time.

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Time seemed irrelevant to her as the hunt consumed her mind. Drowning out fatigue and anger, all she knew was the pure call of a predator's lust for the kill.

The stench of burnt flesh and rocket fuel drifted out the JumpMaster's topside entry port, the hatch itself lying wide open and scorched by flames. Kendra Icasta let her cybernetics take a reading as she slowly shifted around to observe all angles she could without entering the ship itself.

The sight of Corika's corpse stirred conflicting thoughts. She had ignored her orders and mislead her, but she had also been *Shikari*. Either way, it hardly mattered now. All she had to do was complete the mission. Just like Corika should have done.

Seeing the folly of trying to force an entry where one of her sisters had already perished, the Chiss saw a second option. Pacing softly over the beaten ship's roof, she drew her shock baton. With pistol in hand, she stood above the cockpit window and aimed down, finding a crack in the screen and engaging the baton. Electricity crackled. She pulled the trigger.

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Triggering a sharp warning that breached her focus, Tali suddenly sensed the hostile huntress' presence far closer than she had thought. Unable to run or even hide, all she could do was swivel her chair as a heavy slug shattered the windscreen before her. The Twi'lek let out an instinctive cry, eyes squeezed shut as shards of transparisteel rained on her head.

Before she had time to react, the huntress was inside the ship. Slipping in through the razor edged frame without breaking skin, Kendra slid over the dashboard and brought her shock baton around in a sweeping arc, striking the side of Tali's chair and sending out a jolt of power.

The Twi'lek cried out in shock more than pain, the violent arcs of electricity leaping to the chair and grounding swiftly without striking her body. Seeing her error, the Chiss huntress broke right, tugging her lithe frame into a tight combat roll to gain a better angle before rising up to lash out once more.

"Please no! I surre... AAAARGH!"

The Twi'lek's cries of protest ended with the business end of the shock baton jabbed into her arm, the paralyzing bolt of electricity now coursing through her body with ease. Tali convulsed in a spasming heap, unable to finish her plan before slipping back into unconsciousness.

Icasta withdrew her weapon with a dismissive grunt, swiftly securing the rest of the ship before returning to the Twi'lek's unconscious form and wrapping her shock whip around her neck. Keeping a firm hold of the weapon in her cybernetic hand, one she had been told might better respond even under influence of Jedi mind trickery, Kendra kicked the unconscious woman's leg to wake her up.

There was no response.

She tried again, adding more force behind the kick and almost breaking the bone where her boot struck home, but there was no response. Aggravated, the Chiss thumbed the shock whip and sent a jolt of painful electricity coursing into the Twi'lek's neck.

It had the desired effect.

Awakening with a startled scream, Tali panted hard as tears streaked down her cheeks. Though she could barely feel it, even the faint sensation of having something wrapped so tight around her neck was bringing back memories she did not wish to relive.

It took all her remaining willpower to maintain even a semblance of clarity as she turned her eyes towards her captor, a red and blue haired Chiss woman with a baleful cybernetic eye. The sadistic smile on her lips did not leave many questions about her identity.



“V-what do you vant? I already surrenderedt...”

The Chiss seemed puzzled by her words, but far less so than the Kiffar before her. Tilting her head to the side more out of curiosity than surprise, her remaining biological eye narrowing, Kendra inspected her captive. “I thought Jedi were supposed to put up more of a fight,” she stated bluntly. “I’m almost disappointed.”

“Killedt three of you, didn’t I?”

The Twi’lek’s cheeky reply earned her another jolt from the shock whip, though Kendra could not deny the woman had caused at least a modicum of problems. But why was she still here? Why had she not run? Why had she not tried to defend herself?

“And I will make sure you pay for your murders, *Jedi*,” Kendra spat venomously. “Now, get up. My superiors are waiting.”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t, or won’t?” Kendra inquired, running her finger over the shock whip’s trigger.

“Can’t,” Tali insisted, sighing as she felt like she’d been in this exact situation mere moments prior. “I... broke my neck or something during the landing. I cannot get up.”

The Chiss clearly fought hard to disguise the sadistic smirk spreading on her face. “Poor thing...” she mocked her, before suddenly racking her knuckle dusters across her kneecap. There was only a minute twitch.

“A truth?” she mused, surprised “A first for your kind.”

Licking her lips as she watched blood seep out from the broken knee, the Chiss undid the Twi’lek’s crash harness and wrapped her arm around her shoulder. Still keeping a firm grip on the shock whip, she began to haul her prize back to the speeder bikes, leaving a trail of Twi’leki blood in her wake.

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“Mistress! Are you alright?!” Sya called out as the exhausted Chiss finally managed to haul the limp Twi’lek to the bikes.

“Two,” Kendra spat at her prisoner.

“Vhat?” Tali muttered, perplexed by this sudden acknowledgement.

“You killed *two* of my sisters. And you did me a service by offing Corika. She was a liability,” Kendra stated coldly, robbing her foe of any pride she might have felt before turning towards the injured *Shikari* who by now had managed to treat her sprained leg.

"I am fine, but she is not. Paralyzed from the neck down, but we only need the head."

"Very good, mistress. Do you want me to carry her on my bike?" Sya asked, as cordial as ever.

"No, you are still injured. I will take her. Any word from command?"

"The Brotherhood forces have made landfall East of Axio city. Our troops are engaged in combat with them, but until they are neutralized we should stay clear."

"Very good, now let us be gone."

"Very well, mistress."