

Temnos Excavations Mines

Lyra-3K-a System

37 ABY

Thud thud thud

Rumble

The sound repeated rhythmically, like an industrial metronome, as the lithe Twi'lek traversed the mine shafts ever deeper into the bowels of the moon of Thillion. Flakes of loose stone and specks of sand drifted from the ceiling with each tremor, leaving the air mildly choked with the residue of heavy mining. That was sure to chip off a few years off her life expectancy, Tali Sroka thought to herself as she let the Force guide her towards the elusive prey she was hunting. At least that made gormless wandering sound like it carried *some* meaning.

Why Lucine Vasano, the House Quaestor, had decided she should undertake this kill mission was still a little unclear to her, but the Human had seemed insistent that it might be – what was the word she'd used – *cathartic*, with a weird emphasis on the *cath* rather than the *artic*. It was all the same to her, of course. Not like she hadn't been asked before to infiltrate industrial sites of foreign powers and murder people, just because someone with a fancy title said they needed to die. Where had her life taken such a turn for the worse?

The realization that it had never been *better*, per se, to begin with made her kick a loose stone into the darkness ahead of her. The stone bounced merrily on the uneven ground as it skipped and ricocheted as the laws of Newtonian motion decreed. Was she herself little better than that rock? Merely skipping where simple reactions of force and counterforce demanded? The answer to that particular question was too depressing to contemplate.

Her ear cones perked up when the gravelly *crack* of the stone's voyage abruptly turned into a hollow *thunk* and the reverberating sounds of a metallic nature filled the tunnel she was traversing. She'd found the place. Stepping more cautiously now, she could feel the gentle breeze of humid air rising from the turbolift shaft before she even saw the damned thing. Indeed, even with the forewarning of its existence, she still almost walked into the gaping black maw of nothingness that yawned towards the moon's pilfered core.

Whatever the Severian Principate were excavating here, their ambitions ran deep.

Tali unhooked a glow-stick from her belt, snapped it to life and gave it a solid shake for good measure, though the last bit hardly mattered for an electrical appliance, before taking a look at the lift shaft's worn durasteel sides. In the pale glow of her light, she could barely make out the

scratched markings painted on when the lift had been constructed, chipped away by years of use. Thirty-seven B, it was the right one. If the intel was correct, her target was close.

Since it almost never was, she'd probably already walked into a trap. That left her only one course of action; spring the trap. With one final glimpse into the currents of the living Force flowing around her, Tali took the plunge and leapt into the turbolift shaft.

Darkness swallowed her.

Time seemed to stretch into nothingness as she fell, the sense of vertigo coming and going so many times she lost count. Only the heavily worn level markings, illuminated by the faint radiance of her glow-stick, let her know she was indeed still descending and not caught in some temporal vortex or floating in place.

Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven...

She grabbed her lightsaber and ignited the golden yellow plasma blade. Within the all-consuming darkness of the turbolift shaft, it was painfully bright to behold. Swivelling the grip around, she pointed the blade at the wall and stabbed it into the durasteel like she'd been taught during one of her advanced combat lessons. The lessons never mentioned inertia. The sudden deceleration almost yanked the saber hilt from her grasp, a sudden and painful tug nearly dislocating her shoulder as the blade bit into the metal and began drawing a red-edged gash along its surface.

Struggling through the pain, Tali let the Force imbue her body with renewed strength as she clung on and let the saber do its work. Hissing and spitting, the plasma blade continued to melt through durasteel like an industrial machine, drawing an inelegant cut into the elevator shaft's side that glowed a ruby red all the way into the darkness above. Whether this trick would actually work, Tali had no clue, but if not, at least she wouldn't be the first Arconan to succumb to a turbolift.

A few harrowing moments later, she had her answer. The blade had by then bisected almost two levels worth of metal, but her descent was by now manageable. The numbers ticked on by until, finally, she reached level fifty.

With the cool flow of Force energy coursing through her limbs, she bounded off the vertical wall and crossed the gaping shaft that would still continue on for a few more levels. Landing neatly on the precipice between mining tunnel and lift shaft, she took a moment to let her eyes adjust to the almost overbearing luminance of the industrial lighting that had only a few levels ago felt so frustratingly inadequate. She was still alive.

The rumbling metronome of explosions had grown louder, she realized, and the tremors of mining activity felt viscerally close. As her senses began adjusting from the nigh suicidal fall, she began picking up more detailed sounds as well, and shadowy shapes moving in the

distance. This was clearly at least a semi-active tunnel but clearing it out would be a last resort. Principle casualties would have to be limited.

Setting off in a low crouch, Tali headed towards the shapes and the sounds, moving as swiftly as she dared whilst not attracting undue attention. The tunnel soon joined a larger, like a vein to an artery, and it in turn opened into a wide cavern filled with brightly coloured mining machines and burly workers in hard hats.

Huddling behind what appeared a discarded crate of explosives, Tali took in the scene. Several work crews were busy loosening up a cluster of rocks from the latest detonation, using hand tools to carefully pick their way towards the hard rock face while a large, tracked hauler scooped up the blast remains onto a hover sled.

Something about this struck her as odd, and it wasn't merely the fact there were other detonations going on rhythmically in other parts of the mine. The care the workers took with what she'd assumed was raw minerals was almost closer to archaeology than industry, though she had to admit her knowledge of either was limited to some old holovids she'd watched with Koliss Welcott back then they were still an item.

Deeper ruminations on the nature of the Themnos Excavations were abruptly derailed when one of the workers cried out in elation to his mates. A trio of burly Besalisks trundled over, iron bars in each of their lower hands, and proceeded to pry away at a large slab of stone the worker had indicated. It took their combined effort and some choice swears to finally yield the morsel from the moon's bosom, but with a resounding *crack* of breaking stone it broke free.

From her vantage point, Tali could not see what *it* was, but judging by the commotion it had created, this had to be what the Excavations were after. She watched as the Besalisks hauled the object onto a specialist hover sled and proceeded to attach it to an awaiting traction engine when all of a sudden the hauler behind them exploded.

A violent sunburst of yellow and white blossomed into existence beneath the hauler, snapping its tracks like rubbed bands and flipping the several-ton vehicle onto its side like a very unfortunate turtle. Flames lapped hungrily at a puddle of leaking fuel and raced towards a crate of mining charges. Tali chose to duck behind cover.

BOOOM!

The detonation jarred her to her bones, rattling her teeth and making her earcones ring. In the confined space of a subterranean cavern, the effect of the explosives was amplified further and by the time a bit of the smoke had cleared, she could see no trace of the hauler. Only a black mark where it had been and burning pieces of durasteel scattered all over.

Her mind had barely begun to process this when she felt a shiver of premonition, carried by the furthest waves of the Force. *A speeding traction engine collides with her crate, mangling her under its tracks.*

Tali leapt clear of her hiding place a split second before the speeding traction engine collided with the empty crate of explosives. The container groaned as hungry tracks ground it to scrap and the vehicle hardly even slowed down on its way up the curving ramp toward the previous level. Breaking her leap into a roll, Tali caught sight of the fleeting vehicle through the smoke and dust – and the hover sled it was towing behind it.

“A heist? Oh great, running...” Tali thought to herself, feet skidding on the rough ground as she sprinted after the machine and its cargo.

Though trundling on at a terrifying speed for such a machine, the traction engine was far from *quick* and the winding subterranean passageways that made up the mine would surely have ended the life of a faster vehicle. It still took all her Force enhanced speed to catch up with the fleeing machine and throw herself atop the hover sled, landing roughly upon a canvas tarp draped over whatever the mining crew had uncovered.

“This better be vorth it,” Tali muttered to herself as she crawled forward, inching closer to the driver cab at the rear of the traction engine as the vehicle cleared the tunnel and moved into another vast underground cavern. Turning her saber hilt around into a reversed grip, she pressed the emitter against the cabin wall and pressed the button.

Snap-hisssssss!

The golden yellow plasma beam burned through the flimsy metal in a heartbeat and continued to sear a horizontal gash as Tali slashed the weapon across it. The Twi'lek's non-existent brow furrowed with mild suspicion as no abrupt yelp of pain was heard, however, even though she surely must have just gutted the driver. Neither did the vehicle slow down or abruptly alter course either.

Curious and concerned, she deftly sliced off the entire back of the driver's cab and ducked out of the way as the metal flap tore off, spinning uselessly into their wake. What greeted her was – unexpected, to say the least.

A black orb, surely no larger than a volleyball, floated inside the cabin with a dataspine connected into the control panel and clicking away as it guided the vehicle along the narrow tunnels. A probe droid! That meant whoever was behind this hadn't wished to get their hands dirty, and they probably were also observing the whole ordeal from afar. That in turn meant...

“Oh no.”

A heavy slug punches into her shoulder, the second striking into her face.

Tali barely managed to duck inside the driver's cab as a pair of heavy slugs whizzed past her head. Hands instinctively grabbing the probe droid, her momentum bent the data spike into a useless bow. The droid squealed in synthetic pain, beeping and warbling some binary curse at her before attempting to shock her with a nasty looking taser attachment.

Tali had to struggle with both hands against the droid, managing only just to keep the crackling probe from her lekku, whilst the unseen gunman continued to take pot shots at the cab. Bullets sparked off the flimsy metal, perforating the cabin with ease until – *Plink-hiss* – the inevitable happened and the droid took one for the wrong team. Relieved as its struggles abruptly ended, Tali threw off the hissing probe droid – catching a glimpse of the gaping hole blown into its side – and scrambled out of the cab to put the sturdier engine block between her and her opponent.

“Lucine better start getting me some better intel or I swear...” Tali muttered to herself as she clung to the side of the speeding, pilotless, traction engine, the durasteel tracks of which churned and clattered like an industrial grater mere centimetres below her shapely posterior.

Turning her head towards more pressing matters, she saw the vehicle speeding towards a rocky wall. Without the droid pilot, the machine had chosen to continue on its last heading and was now but a scant few dozen meters from a sheer stone face. Closing her eyes and reaching out with the Force, Tali *grasped* the controls and *pulled* the lever she presumed would make the machine turn.

She was correct, but also not, as the vehicle spun violently to the *opposite* side she'd hoped to steer it in, colliding instead with a stack of crates and spinning side-first into the wall she'd tried to avoid. The Twi'lek was thrown clear by the force of the violent impact, tumbling sideways along the harsh ground even as the mangled remains of the traction engine screamed the heir tortured death rattles.

Wiping a lek off her face, Tali tried to will the world stop spinning.

Solid slug strikes her lower back...

She surrendered to the world and spun along, a staccato of solid slugs kicking up plumes of rock and sand in her passing before the gunfire abruptly stopped. Perhaps her assailant had grown tired of his fruitless efforts? Or maybe they were merely reloading.

Thunk!

The unmistakable sound of a grenade launcher firing filled the Twi'lek's mind with a mixture of dread and elation. “*Finally!*” she thought to herself as the Force whispered the warning she already knew was coming. Stretching out a hand, she felt her fingers *coil* around the grenade hurtling towards her and gently, but firmly, decelerate it to a complete halt.

“Eat this, you fr-” She never got to finish her slur when the timed explosive detonated, spewing shrapnel in mid-air. Hot fragments of mild steel bounced off her armor as she instinctively

covered her head, the shower of shrapnel reaching far and wide. Far enough to hit her assailant as well.

“Aaargh!” A sharp, distinctly male voice yelled somewhere above and to her right. Catching movement just as the man ducked back behind a second-level outcrop, Tali pulled out her blaster pistol and trained her sights on the man’s last known position.

A trio of shots, poorly aimed as she stood up to her feet, seemed to keep the man’s head down and in a few short strides Tali had broken into a full-on sprint. Letting the Force fill her muscles with unnatural strength, she leapt up and landed neatly on the second level of the vast cavern. That was when she finally got a good look at the man who’d so enthusiastically tried to end her life for the past few minutes.

A dark-grey Zygerrian with golden-yellow eyes was glaring daggers at her, clutching his forehead where a stray piece of his own explosive had nicked him. Nothing fatal, it seemed, but enough to be a nuisance. Tali made a mental note to rectify that post-haste.

“A Zygerrian, huh? I thought you all vere slavers. Seems you’re also terrorists...” Tali spat derisively, her disdain for the renowned slave-traders made rather evident.

“One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter, *Jedi schutta*,” the Zygerrian quipped back, adding the slur in Huttese, just to drive home the slight at the Twi’lek’s supposed position. “You should have stayed as some rich sithspit’s pleasure toy. Doubt they’ll want you back after I’m done with you.” He flashed a set of vicious fangs, even as his right hand fumbled for his pistol.

“I wouldn’t do that if I vere you,” Tali stated darkly, her own blaster levelled at the man’s torso, saber alight and at her side.

“Oh, what? This?” The man flashed a devilish grin as he turned the palm Tali had thought was cradling a head wound, showing a detonator that was already blinking.

Ground falls beneath her feet, boulders crushing her torso and head.

In a split-second decision, Tali tried to jump clear of the trap, throwing herself towards her foe even as the series of detonations kicked up columns of loose sand around the outcrop she’d stood on. The ground beneath her gave way and turned into a deadly landslide that would surely have buried her alive. The Twi’lek instead landed on her chest at the lip of the newly collapsed section of stone, scrambling for purchase on all fours against the loose stones.

Her blaster had to go, a sturdy handhold on solid ground far more important. Fingers finding purchase in the rough crags of the freshly blasted rock, she clung on with all the grace of a cat scared of water. *A cat...*

“*Lucine you bastardt...*” Tali thought to herself as she realized the pun. Of course hunting down a slaver and exacting some nonspecific revenge would be cathartic, but in this case also cat-hartic.

Swinging a leg on the rock edge and climbing back up, she managed to catch the Zygerrian saboteur making a run for it. Without a blaster, however, she would have to get creative. Her lightsaber was an obvious choice, but...

Tali reached out with the Force and coiled her perception around a support strut some twenty meters ahead of the fleeing man. Clenching her hand into a fist and *pulling* she felt her control on the durasteel beam solidify and start shifting it sideways. Beads of sweat blossomed on her brow from the strain as she locked herself in a battle of wills between literal rock and a hard place.

The wiser yielded, and the durasteel beam buckled. The Zygerrian had mere moments to realize his peril and ducked aside as the section of roof came crashing down, almost burying him alive. A stray boulder caught him in the side, drawing a sharp yelp of pain from what might have been a broken rib, and the man crumpled to the ground.

For her part, Tali was panting hard as she jogged after him, bending the strut with her sheer will having taken much out of her. As she closed the distance, the Zygerrian managed to twist onto his back and glared at her – expectantly?

A violent explosion tears through her right leg, she bleeds out with both femoral arteries cut.

The Twi'lek jumped over the invisible laser beam, made only barely identifiable by the faint rock dust hanging in the air. In what moment the Zygerrian had had time to place it there was beyond her, but his ploy had failed him and he seemed to have realized it as well.

The saboteur drew his pistol and fired, Tali dodging the shot aimed at her face with supernatural ease. A second round followed, then a third, and by then he'd learned not to shoot at extremities, but aimed for center mass. Tali ignited her saber and blocked the round, turning the slug into a molten puddle that splashed against her armored midriff. The impact was *unpleasant*, but far from lethal.

“If you surrender now, I might let you live,” Tali growled, her patience starting to wear thin.

“Surrender? To a Jedi *schutta* like you?” the Zygerrian spat. “I'd rather you gut me like a wompa!”

“That can be arrangedt, *slaver...*” She struck another slug into slag and picked up speed, charging for the man with saber at her side. Magazine empty, the saboteur discarded his weapon and drew the grenade launcher he'd used before.

“Is he really that stupid?” Tali thought to herself as he zeroed in and fired. Learning from her mistakes, she deflected the round away and towards the open cavern, but the moment she tried adjusting the grenade’s path the sensitive fuse blew. A thick smoke cloud erupted from the explosive and Tali drew in a hasty lungful of air before the smog choked her.

“More tricks...” she cursed to herself, reaching out with her senses and expecting to find the man on the run, trying to outflank her or some other final gambit. But no, he was still sitting where he’d fallen, patient and calm. Something was wrong. *Very wrong.*

A quick staccato of dull explosions sounded through the ground and the earth Tali stood on shook beneath her feet. There was a faint after shock, but then – nothing. Vision still clouded by the thick smoke, Tali pressed on towards the defenceless saboteur when suddenly every single sense she had screamed in warning.

Train!

Her moment’s hesitation almost cost her life as the tunnel roof shattered from the blunt impact of a derailed mining locomotive. The heavy rail engine plunged through the air between them, smashing through the tunnel walls like they were but glass and continued into the lower levels of cavern with seemingly no intent on slowing down.

By the skin of her teeth, Tali had managed to revert her direction and missed being pulped by the runaway train. Feeling her footing crumbling beneath her as the rocky walkway shattered in its wake, Tali instinctively activated her repulsor belt. The hip mounted repulsor disks chimed in protest and she could feel the heat emanating from their sudden activation almost painfully burning through her armor, but when gravity inevitably won the battle over balance, she did not tumble to her demise but only floated down at a manageable rate.

By the time her feet touched the ground, she could sense the wounded Zygerrian no longer. He must have beaten a hasty retreat after his last gambit failed. Glancing at the wrecked traction engine and the tarp covered cargo sled it had been pulling, Tali let out a sigh of annoyance at her prey escaping, but consoled herself that the man surely had also failed in his mission.

Limping over, she grabbed the tarp and pulled it aside, curious of what had been worth all this destruction to steal. The sight shocked her silent.

“Oh, command vill vant to hear about this...” she muttered to herself as she replaced the tarp and began planning her exit out of these damned mines. *“A Jedi’s vork is never done.”*