

**Coruscant**  
**Galactic Core**  
**37 ABY**

The glittering spires of planet wide urban sprawl gave way to gloomy twilight as the banged-up local shuttle descended towards the murk of the Coruscanti mid-levels. The polished chrome and glass swiftly changed to muted durasteel and neon lighting, before finally settling just above the decaying muck of the lower levels that hadn't seen the sun in centuries.

Harsh neon light stung her eyes as she stepped out of the shuttle and the cloying stench of organic and synthetic wastes wafted into her nose from somewhere deep below. Endless walkways of varying built stretched as far as the eye could see, which admittedly wasn't far, and the cavalcade of signs and holoboards bathed the durasteel streets in a multi-colored cacophony of retina searing illumination.

Pulling the cloak tighter around her, the purple Twi'lek headed past a pair of idle Coruscant Security Forces officers who stood guarding the public transportation hub, and headed down a street promising to hold all manner of entertainment. Some of said entertainment disgustingly like that which she'd been forced to be during her formative years.

The foot traffic was sparse, at least at first, but as the streets narrowed, Tali Sroka felt herself pressed on by others and the throng of people seemed to grow ever greater. The myriad species that made up the galactic center's populace was bewildering to behold, and during the short trip from the shuttle pad to where she was now, she'd counted at least a dozen alien races she was fairly sure she'd never seen before.

It appeared, she thought with a hint of dismay, that the former Grand Master's campaign of genocide had been rather successful in rooting out the *Undesirables*. At least the Brotherhood's domains within the Outer Rim held a far lesser variety of aliens. The Lotus badge in her pocket weighed heavy.

"Hey, you! Yeah you, tailhead! Employees go in *at the back*."

Tali was snapped out of her dark thoughts by a burly Zabrak bouncer, who clearly thought she was entering the holocantina as *entertainment*. She made to press on without even acknowledging the man, when a faint chill ran down her spine like a falling droplet of icy water.

*Hand grabbing right shoulder, turning around to restrain both arms at the wrists...*

Tali sidestepped the Zabrak's clumsy attempt to grab her, leaving her foot in his way for just long enough to see him sprawled on the durasteel street when his attempted assault missed its mark.

“Seems you have a very aggressive hiring policy,” Tali muttered. “Or maybe you’re just desperate. Either way, *I’m not interested.*”

The Zabrak reached for something in his jacket pocket, but Tali had no time for further complications. The heel of her boot impacted his horned forehead, splitting one of the horn nubs with a crack, and sending him into blissful unconsciousness.

No-one on the streets seemed to have paid much mind to the altercation, the next pedestrians merely stepping over the Zabrak sprawled haplessly across the narrow pathway. Such were the ways of things on the perpetually sunless streets. Well, no-one, except a pair of cloaked figures with eyes that glowed red with cybernetics.

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It had taken her another handful of minutes to reach the cantina that Yumni had set the meeting up in. How the Kaminoan kept eluding tracking of the various intelligence agencies arrayed against them was beyond her, but somehow the shrewd trader seemed able to arrange deals without tipping the opposition about her true allegiance.

Either that, or she truly had no allegiance, Tali thought to herself as she entered the cantina and searched for another of her kin.

Finding Manu Maurfai was not challenging. His size, and that of his swollen, but stubby lekku, was rather unmistakable. Convincing him to follow into a trap, that would take some doing. With a few swift strides, Tali made her way across the cantina over to the table Manu was managing to crowd all on his own and sat down without even as much as a greeting.

“You’re late,” Manu scoffed. “I was just about to leeve.” His tongue slurred a little on the final vowel.

“Something came up, hadt to deal vith it, before it became a thorn in my side,” Tali replied tensely.

Manu cracked a wide grin, his flabby cheeks jiggling from his approving chuckle.

“A woman of direct action? I leek that,” he chuckled. “But what has such a woman use of one like mee?”

“Sometimes action isn’t desirable,” she replied coolly. “Andt vhen dealing vith *elusive* prey, it vill only scare them into hiding.”

Tali shifted to a more comfortable position, letting the folds of her cloak fall aside and expose the more Twi'leki attire she wore beneath. The kind that *really* demanded a cloak in temperatures below tropical.

Manu's beady eyes took in the sight and a purple tongue hurriedly wet his lips.

"I see," he murmured. "Those are tricky seetuations. But you still haven't told what you require of mee?"

"I vas toldt you're a smart fellow," Tali spoke softly whilst leaning forward to pour herself a drink of the carafe next to him. The view he was enjoying only grew more inviting in the process. "Andt you might have some ideas how to capture someone like that."

Manu seemed *distracted*, but managed a reply. "I am more familiar with acquiring daata..."

"Indulge me," Tali insisted, her right lek tip swaying in a suggestive motion.

The male gulped, audibly so.

"Well, if you inseest," he muttered before rubbing his chin. "What do you know about heem?"

"He's cunning, risk averse, likes to play from a position of power and *hates* losing," Tali listed casually while sipping her drink.

The male nodded and thought about the conundrum set before him. It was intriguing. *Very* intriguing.

"I would consider luring him into a position where he thinks he's won, but when he goes to take his preeze, he trips the traap."

"Intriguing," Tali mused. "I honestly *hadt* hopedt for something better from someone like you, though. You came so highly regardedt."

Manu looked like he'd been slapped across the face with a wet lekwarmer.

"Excuse...?"

"No excuses," Tali stated dismissively, pulling the cloak back over her alluring form. "I see it vas *me* who vas vasting their their time here."

She rose up to leave and walked past him when another sensation of cold ran down her spine.

*Hand grabbing wrist, pulling to stop.*

She let it happen. Manu's sizeable hand wrapped around her slender wrist and halted her departure.

"No," he grunted. "I won't be insulted like thees."

"Then *do better*," Tali scoffed, her right lek doing another minute crescent moon.

His eyes seemed a little glassier than before, even as his mind clearly bit down on the problem that insulted that very intelligence. He was better than this. He *knew* he was better than this, and he would prove this arrogant *schutta* just how wrong she'd been to dismiss him.

"You want to capture heem? Then you need to isolate heem. Lure him out to a meeting and when he's alone, apprehend heem."

"How do we *lure* such a smart man? He won't fall for any trivial invite," Tali continued with her cold facade.

"He's intelligent, vain? Then appeal to his vanity. Offer him a chance to gain more power, or witness his own greatness."

Tali appeared thoughtful. "That *might* work..." she admitted pensively.

"Of course it weell. But you cannot trust that aloone. You must make the bait *irreseestable*."

"Andt how do you propose ve do that?"

"Pull him with vanity, and puush him with fear. He desires poower? Convince him he stands to loose eet." It was becoming clear Manu's growing excitement did not do well for his slurring tongue that struggled to keep up with his racing mind.

"Easier saidt than done..."

"Yes yes, *hmm*, but if he were bewildered, overloaded with decisions... Yes, then he woould struggle. Yes, hound him. Hound him, and offer a safe haaven."

Tali nodded, slowly. Perhaps she'd nudged him too far, this was maybe getting out of hand. But at least he was thoroughly hooked on the problem.

"Like, vith enemies? Threats on his life?" Tali glanced at the back of the cantina and sure enough, the pair with the cybernetic eyes had duly followed her inside.

"That could work, yees. But it would have to be credible..."

“Get down!” Tali snapped, pressing Manu’s head down as if to protect him, while snatching her lightsaber from across the small of her back with a flourish that was guaranteed to attract the pair’s attention.

“What is the meaning of...?” Manu blurted in shock, but got no further before the pair of Collective hitmen opened fire.

Blaster shots rang out and bathed the cantina in a bloody red glow, the patrons scattering for cover the very moment the first weapon barked. The Collective hitmen had good aim, Tali had to admit as much, but with Manu covering behind her, she could afford to dissipate the two kill shots on a barrier before the general chaos forced them to find cleaner lines of fire.

“Come, they’re gunning for you!” Tali snapped at Manu.

“What? Why me?!” the distraught man managed, hugging the leg of the table he’d just sat by.

“Seriously? You *needt* to ask that?” Her lek made yet another crescent moon, though by now Tali was starting to tire.

Manu’s eyes glossed over once again, and he shook his head. No, of course he didn’t. They were gunning for him, because he was valuable. He was important. These goons must have been sent after him because a rival wanted him out of business. And he’d not noticed their dangerous presence before, because... *It didn’t matter*. He was in danger, he needed to flee, and the woman of action might be his best bet.

“Come,” Tali stated as much as a command as an offer. She did not wait for a reply, but made a beeline for a side exit in a hunched shuffle.

Manu followed, terrified of losing not only his life, but his place as informant.

The pair of Twi’leks evaded the gunmen by seemingly blind luck, though in actuality Tali was pulling overtime to keep the flabby man believing every kill shot that missed her did so because of poor aim or happenstance. Fighting without a lightsaber was challenging. Fighting without *fighting* was exhausting.

“Hurry!” Tali pressed on, snapping off a few shots with her DL-44 that intentionally missed the Collective agents, but kept them pinned. There was no telling how long she’d might still have use of them.

Manu shuffled after her as fast as he could manage, his rotund bulk clearly made for a cushy job of slicing rather than the athletic rigors of combat. Even so, fear of death made for a fairly impressive motivator and fairly impressive was the speed with which he managed to haul his

overweight behind through the service doors into the small kitchen area and out the back into a narrow alleyway.

Tali followed suite a moment later, squeezing off a few more pot shots at their pursuers before putting a bolt through the door controls and seizing the thing shut.

“That shouldt holdt them for a few moments, but ve cannot stay.”

The door shook with the repeated impacts of blaster fire, and began to melt.

“A *very* few moments,” Tali muttered and grabbed Manu by the neck of his jacket to haul him with her. She’d barely made it halfway down the alley when the door gave out and the hitmen burst out, their clothes tattered by the fire and exposing more of their cybernetic implants.

They raised their weapons.

“Run!” Tali snapped and turned to face them. Perhaps she should have taken at least one of them out while she still had a chance.

Their weapons barked and crimson bolts flew at her, but splashed again harmlessly against an invisible bubble just in front of her. The barrier was holding, but not for long.

Manu kept running, his feet pounding on the decrepit durasteel and his heart caught up in his throat. This was far too much excitement for him. Far too physical a challenge. He’d barely reached the end of the alley where it joined a wider street when the hum of a repulsorlift caught his attention and a narrow speeder hovered to a halt before him.

The pilot, tall and slender, gestured for him to climb aboard.

“It appears you are in need of swift departure,” the toneless voice behind a helmeted head stated.

Manu nodded and hesitated no further, climbing into the vehicle with haste.

“Go! Go!” he pressed.

“Perhaps your compatriot might need some assistance?” the anonymous pilot gestured at Tali still stuck in the alleyway.

Manu thought about it, and then scoffed.

“Screw the *schutta*, take me out of here.”

“As you wish,” the pilot replied and drove the speeder up towards the higher levels.

In the alley, Tali sensed the two departing and knew she could *finally* make use of her lightsaber. Beads of sweat were dripping off her brow and the searing pain in her forehead was getting unbearable. The weight of fire on the barrier, even if only from two blasters, was draining her and the Collective cyborgs seemed happy to keep firing even though their weapons were starting to overheat.

Tali closed her eyes, focusing on the staccato of bolts impacting her barrier and let herself live through the Force.

*Kill shot. Kill shot. Crippling bolt to the knee. Kill shot. Opening.*

She dropped the barrier and jumped, leaping clear of the next blaster bolts while reaching behind her back to grab her saber. The bright yellow blade sprang to life just as she landed before the first hitman and slashed down across his torso. The plasma blade hissed as it sliced him from collarbone to pelvis, and if a cyborg could feel shock or surprise, it surely did so before expiring.

The second tried to level its weapon at her, but only gained a reflected bolt to its face for its troubles. As the hitman crumpled lifeless onto the ground, Tali too collapsed against the cantina wall and felt her world spinning. She'd taken too much, too quickly. The Force was exhausting to wrangle, and she'd asked a lot.

But, the mission was a success. Surely. She tapped her communicator and contacted Yumni.

“Didt you get him?”

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“Yes,” the speeder pilot replied as she guided the speeder towards the landing pad where her ship was waiting for them. The rented speeder hummed smoothly while Manu drew ragged breaths in the back seat, still winded from his experiences with physical exercise.

“What?” he muttered between gasps.

“Nothing,” the pilot replied. “We are almost at the landing pad.”

“Oh, good,” Manu stated with a nod, though something had started to feel *off* about this whole endeavor. He shook his head, it was probably nothing.

The pilot guided the speeder to a halt beside a sizeable, if ancient, star freighter that dominated the landing pad that had been assigned to it. Bulky and utilitarian, the *Esperanza* was hardly

going to win any beauty pageants, but it got the job done and right now, it was already humming with life as it was ready for another task.

“We have arrived,” the pilot declared matter-of-factly, turning off the repulsorlifts and stepping out of the speeder.

“Thank you,” Manu stated with genuine gratitude. “I owe you my life.”

“It was my pleasure,” the helmeted pilot replied. “Now, please, step aboard.”

Manu furrowed his brow, he wasn't following.

“Step *aboard*? I did not request transport off-world.”

“My apologies,” the pilot stated with a polite nod. “I forgot to mention, this is a kidnapping.” A spindly hand snatched a blaster from her hip and aimed it squarely at him.

“You...? Oh... Oh!” Manu felt like his head was about to explode. The sudden revelation of what had just gone down crashed over him like a tidal wave. From the moment the alluring Twi'lek had entered... *No*, from the moment he'd been contacted with this mysterious offer by one of his associates. He'd been set up.

“Now please, this way,” she gestured at the *Esperanza's* cargo hold.

“You are making a big mistake.”

“I am making a requested acquisition,” the pilot replied.

“You have no idea what you're messing with. When *they* find out what you've done to me...” Manu growled.

“It is of no consequence. You either board the ship willingly, or I shoot you where you stand. If I let you leave, you will sic your *associates* after me all the same.”

Manu was taken aback by the cold logic that was calling his bluff. He gritted his teeth.

“If you let me go, I'll...”

“You swear you won't make it worse for me? I find that difficult to believe, from a man with your reputation. Now, the ship.”

Manu shot the pilot a venomous glare as he climbed off the speeder and headed up the ramp into the freighter's hold where intermittent puffs of escaping gasses vented along its edges. The



pilot slotted in behind him, following just outside of reach while he walked up the ramp.

A ramp, he noticed, which was awfully low for one as tall as her...

He took the gamble and turned around, seeing the pilot hunched down in order to fit in after him, and leaving her blind for that crucial moment. He did not hesitate as he turned barreled into her, sending the spindly woman sideways and right into the path of a jet of coolant gas.

She shrieked and the blaster in her hand was lost in the vapours, but she would soon recover it. He had to escape, *right now*. Manu ran up inside the ship and hammered the ramp controls. He didn't have time for any elegant slice, and merely jammed a spike into the control port. It would keep the ramp retracted for at least a bit.

Climbing up into the cockpit, he couldn't help but smile victoriously as the engines were already primed for take-off. He was far from an ace pilot, but even he could easily take off with a ship like this and take himself somewhere safe. Without hesitation, he sat down in the pilot's chair and grabbed the control yoke—and spasmed violently as a shock charge coursed through him. After a second or two of electrified twitching, he slumped over the controls, securely knocked out.

“Target acquired,” Yumni Ha reported to Tali as the small indicator light turned red on her datapad. The trap had been sprung perfectly.

*“Excellent news. Take him back to Dajorra, ve’ll see vhat sort of price the Grandt Master is villing to pay for him.”*

“Acknowledged,” Yumni agreed, before looking at the ship's ramp once more. How to get it open with the *least* cost associated...