

# *Snowflakes in the Void*

*An arctic wind whipped around her, swirling snowflakes in tempests that cut her naked skin. Featureless wastes stretched to the horizon under a clouded sun that offered no warmth. She shivered—from fear. Bestial snarls sounded around her, surrounding, corralling. She stared blindly through the haze at looming shapes of monsters, misshapen and unnatural.*

*She had to escape.*

*The ice cracked beneath her feet, a sharp splintering sound that sent tremors in all directions. Gravity shifted, and they all plunged into the icy depths.*

Tali opened her eyes with a gasp, the sense of vertigo still making her stomach churn. Sitting cross-legged inside a small shuttle skimming the *Nesolat's* exterior towards a secluded shuttlebay, she let out a soft sigh and brushed the Force vision aside. They'd been growing clearer, but her ability to interpret had not kept pace. All in due time, she kept telling herself.

The shuttle reached its destination, narrowly avoiding destruction as a pair of Collective snub fighters zipped past to join the battle raging around the station proper, and slipped within the snug confines of a cramped shuttlebay.

"Stay here andt wait," the Twi'lek told the shuttle pilot. "I von't be long."

It was an ambitious claim, but so was the mission she'd been sent on. While the front lines were always difficult to pinpoint in a boarding action, it was safe to assume this part of the station had been overrun and was now in Collective hands. By infiltrating behind their lines, it was hoped, a lone operative might be able to take out key back-line personnel and thus blunt the Collective's fighting ability. After all, the majority of their forces relied heavily on leadership from above to make any sort of tactical decision beyond reckless suicide charges.

Slipping out through a narrow doorway that looked suspiciously like a maintenance hatch, Tali stepped into a desolate corridor that bore the telltale signs of combat. Blaster impacts pockmarked the walls, while flickering ceiling lights told their own tale of concussive blasts. Shards of transparisteel littered the floor near a blackened scorch mark and the air reeked of spent tibanna. A few slumped forms remained on the ground, pushed aside to clear the way for others to advance. At least in death the Brotherhood and Collective were equal.

Distant sounds of fighting, muffled by distance and the labyrinthine corridors of the *Nesolat*, filtered in through the unnatural stillness, occasionally broken up by a sudden tremor of a turbolaser strike somewhere close by. Tali pressed on, senses alert and reflexes on a hair trigger, as she passed through devastated galleries and shot up laboratories that had housed—*Bogan only knew what*.

Arcane instrumentation, engraved ritual patterns, foreboding obelisks and stockrooms of shattered alchemical reagents all spoke of some sinister research that made the Twi'lek's skin crawl. Whatever it was, it was laced thick with the corruption of the Dark Side and though she was aware that some people in her House, let alone Clan, also tampered with such things the sheer scale of research going on aboard the *Nesolat* was highly disturbing. It felt almost *industrial*.

Faint humming of a repulsorlift snapped her out of the moment's introspection, the Twi'lek swiftly pressing herself into the plentiful shadows. A shipment of supplies, it seemed, was passing through. A lone menial pushing a repulsorlift trolley stacked with crates of violence walked past, unawares of the Jedi lurking within arm's reach. He hummed to himself, nervously perhaps, while touching the grip of his blaster pistol from time to time. It was obvious the youth was not experienced with war. It was something she could use.

Stepping out of the shrouded crevice she'd obscured herself within, Tali approached the man from behind and reached out with the Force.

"Tell me where can I findt Commander Dreen," she ordered with a dismissive flick of the wrist.

The man stopped in his tracks and was almost pulled off his feet by the inertia of his trolley. He turned around, expression troubled but slack, and stammered a colorless reply. "He is at forward command post Esk. Down this corridor, and to the left in fifty meters."

She could tell the man was confused, but probably truthful. Perhaps it was best to give him something else to think about.

"Thank you," she said as she passed him by, "But you really should be more careful next time."

His slack expression hinted at yet more confusion.

"Pick up your crates, or command vill be very upset," Tali smirked with a wave of her lek, the repulsorlift trolley tipping over and scattering crates across the corridor, along with an easily missed communicator.

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"What was that?"

“I heard it too. Sounded like footsteps.”

“Check it out, Corporal. We’ll cover you.”

The four Collective troopers raised their weapons at an unassuming corner at the edges of their perimeter, half their number breaking off to inspect the fleeting sound of intrusion. The moment they passed out of view, Tali took her opening.

Their attention drawn away from her approach, she shot her arm forward, flinging the two remaining men against the slagged blast door they’d been guarding with enough blunt force to knock them out instantly. Their listless forms slumped against the broken doorway, leaving the way open for the Twi’lek to make her way over without opposition.

Just a little further, and she would surely find — a quadruplet of blaster carbines leveled at her, and a smug Konnus Dreen leering at her from the center of an observation gallery.

“Blast her!”

The Falleen’s audacious order bought her *just* enough of a warning to form a barrier, answering the screaming chill running down her spine with a bubble of ephemeral energy that rippled with the impacts of blaster bolts fired at almost point blank range.

Four monstrous troopers, clad in heavy warplate and pumping bolt after bolt into her faltering defences, stood like a living barricade between herself and her target. The smug look on the green skinned man’s face told her she’d made a misstep, but to her annoyance she couldn’t tell where.

Her barrier fluttering before the crimson storm, Tali grit her teeth and shunted it outward, projecting a wave of telekinetic force into the obsidian troopers with what power she had left. It staggered them, breaking their fire and buying her a precious second to draw her weapons, but little more.

She was winded and needed to recover. Her foe, unhelpfully, seemed intent to not let her. Recovering remarkably swiftly, remarkably *simultaneously*, they levelled their weapons anew, but did not fire. The sight of twin golden lightsaber blades seemed to give them pause—though just for a moment.

The fight almost ended before it began, a simultaneous volley of blaster bolts overwhelming her defences. Even with two sabers, blocking so many shots aimed at the most awkward of angles pushed her skills to their very limits, and the inevitable was only a matter of time.

“Aaagh!” Tali hissed sharply as a bolt graced her shoulder, burning ablative plating and scorching the purple skin beneath with residual energy. This was a fight she could not win.

Cool power coursing through her limbs, she threw herself aside of yet another murderous volley and burst into motion to evade their fire. The remains of the blast door soaked a few errant bolts as she dove through the molten gap left by Collective breaching charges, the Twi'lek tucking into a roll when she hit the ground.

Her pursuers did not relent, emerging through the doorway to the sounds of the Falleen's boisterous taunts to fight him man-to-man. One of the dark troopers did not watch its step and crushed the arm of the unconscious guard still lying prone beside it. The pain snapped him awake, but the dark trooper made no attempt to reconcile, its attention solely focused on the fleeing Twi'lek.

Had their movements been any more mechanical, Tali might have taken them for battle droids. But even as muted as they were, she could still sense the faintest remnants of sentience within their obsidian carapaces. Whatever abominable automatons they were, the Technocrats' fingerprints were all over them.

The sound of pursuing footsteps was unerring, their rhythmic pounding a sickening staccato of unnatural efficiency that followed her without pause or hesitation. The corridor came to a junction, breaking up in three ways. She skidded left to what looked like a small lounge, while spending the last of her meager reserves to project a false self fleeing to the right.

The footsteps finally, *mercifully*, grew more distant.

Heart pounding in her chest, Tali let out a long sigh with eyes closed in relief, reaching out to the stream of the living Force to center herself anew. Her moment's respite was short lived.

"Hands up!"

She opened her amber eyes to a familiar pair of guards standing before her, the ones she'd duped to leave their post. *Sithspit!* She had to think fast.

"I surrender!" Tali blurted, her voice cracking just the right amount. "Please, don't shoot."

The pair glanced at each other, and the one in charge, probably the Corporal, nodded.

"Private, keep her detained. I'm informing Commander Dreen that—"

"Vait!" Tali cried out in desperation as loud as she dared. There was no telling what enhanced senses the dark killers might possess. "If you call him, ve'll all die."

The Corporal paused, hand hovering over his comm.

“What are you talking about, *Jedi scum*?” he inquired, hand slightly lowering. “Speak swiftly.”

“T-those black troopers,” she stuttered, “h-he’ll sendt them after us. Andt they’ll kill us all.”

“They’re Marines, you stupid *schutta* and they’re loyal to us. Your tricks won’t—”

“Please! You have to believe me,” Tali pleaded, calling forth tears of desperation. “They mutilatedt your Sergeant, crushedt his arm without a thought when he got in their vay. Like he vas just *disposable*.”

The sincerity of her disgust seemed to strike a chord. Despite being uplifted from whatever decrepit life they’d led before joining the Liberation Front, the paid held no illusions about being worth much to their masters and so-called leaders. Gnawing doubt began to take root, and the Corporal’s hand wavered.

“You know, the boys in Cor’neria said they’d seen...” the trooper holding her at blasterpoint began, but was shushed silent by the Corporal.

“Enough,” he hissed. “Fine, we’ll take you in ourselves. Maybe they’ll finally see our worth..”

Tali sighed in gratitude, docilely offering her arms to be bound. With the trooper still holding his weapon trained at her, the Corporal reached for a pair of manacles from his belt, leaving a crucial window of opportunity.

Grabbing the Corporal’s arm by the wrist, her foot bracing against his ankle, she coiled her body aside of the trooper’s reflexive shot. It struck the deck by her thigh, but by then it was already too late for a follow-up as the Twi’lek rode the toppling Corporal’s momentum to rise like an opposing pendulum. She flowed effortlessly into a low crouch, sweeping her leg out wide and tripping the trooper onto his back. A second blast hit the ceiling, leaving a sizzling hole that spat electric embers, but the trooper was already unconscious the moment his skull hit the deck. The Corporal reached for his sidearm, but a brutal elbow to his chin knocked him out cold. That last one, she’d picked up from Stron’garmis.

Wiping faux tears from her cheeks, Tali spat on the manacles that lay scattered on floor. “Never again,” she vowed as she headed back to confront the smug Falleen. At least she now knew how his little pets operated.

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“What do you mean, *she escaped*?” Konnus Dreen spat at the obsidian visor of the Collective Marine. “Bah! And after all the hype Sparks subjected us to. Should have known better than to trust her little abominations...” he muttered, turning around with ponytail swinging to return to his command post. Observing the fighting from the viewing gallery offered him an exceptional vista

through the vast transparisteel windows. Suitable accommodations for one such as him. What better place to take in the fall of the cursed Brotherhood's wretched home than their own orbital?

"Not impressed with your toys?" a mocking, female voice echoed around the gallery. "I hadt honestly expectedt better, but I suppose even the best troops fail when ledt so incompetently."

Konnus snapped around, lip curled into a snarl. His grey eyes peering around his ostensibly transparent surroundings that yet somehow managed to conceal a Twi'lek Jedi.

"When I find you, I won't kill you. Not at first," he growled in response. "You'll watch your planet burn, before we throw you to the rancors."

"Big vordts from someone who can't even kill a single Jedi."

The taunt was followed by a churlish giggle, and he finally caught sight of the elusive lekhead.

"There!" he spat, pointing at the flutter of a cloak. "After her! And don't you dare lose her again!"

The dark clad troopers obeyed, heading in the direction of the taunting Twi'lek and leaving Konnus alone within his command post. *Alone.*

A dread surmise suddenly crept down the Falleen's spine, a *very* bad feeling making his gut coil. The *snap-hiss* of twin lightsabers behind him almost voided his bladder, only morbid fascination turning him around to meet his doom head on.

Tali smirked with satisfaction as she closed the distance between herself and her foe, his clumsy attempt to draw a rapier hopelessly late. His hubris would be his und—

The Force wailed like nails on a chalkboard, her right saber rising up on instinct to deflect an incoming bolt. More followed, uncomfortably far to her left, testing the limits of her ability to parry.

Konnus stood stunned, watching with a stupefied look as his would-be assailant was driven back by unerring blaster fire from—the Marines he'd just ordered to pursue her. His lips soon twisted into a sadistic grin as he watched the Jedi's assault falter and the Marines beginning to pen her in. Perhaps, he admitted, if only to himself, Sparks had been onto something after all.

Tali strained under the focused assault, her sabers crossing and weaving in ever more desperate patterns to stave off the wall of fire directed at her, each new parry so hasty it offered her no chance to deflect with any accuracy. Each motion was a frantic attempt to deny her own death, and each motion degraded her stance like chips off a pillar's base.

The weight of fire was murderous, and she had to fall back. Bewildered how her ruse had failed, when it previously had worked so splendidly, Tali broke in a mad dash towards cover, only to have it blow up in her face as a flurry of rockets obliterated it before her very eyes.

The blast wave threw her about like a ragdoll, landing hard on her shoulder and feeling something give. The jarring pain left her limb unresponsive and fresh blood welled from a cut across her brow.

“Watch it, you idiots!” the Falleen Commander shouted at the troops who’d just saved his life, and then almost ended it with concussive force within a viewing gallery. “Use your blasters! Make her suffer!”

The Marines hesitated, but obeyed, weapons clicking to stun. Bright blue coronas were hurled at her, but even injured, the Twi’lek would not back down. A single saber in hand, she swatted aside the fire until the Marines had fanned out practically all around her and she simply could not reach in time. Hot agony coursed through her back, numbing her limbs and dropping her to her knees.

“Not so smug now, are we?” the Falleen chuckled sadistically.

Surrounded, bleeding, and on her last legs, Tali felt hot anger flash through her. Hot anger that yearned for burning vengeance. Smouldering embers floated around her vision; no, not embers, but snowflakes. *An arctic wind whipped around her, swirling snowflakes in tempests.*

“So long, *Jedi scum*,” Konnus gloated from his podium. “We’ll send the rest of your kin to whatever hell awaits you!”

Tali closed her eyes, embraced the Will of the Force, and drove her saber into the transparisteel floor beneath her feet. Horrific cracks crept like a spider web across the transparent sheet, drawing a choked gasp from the egoistic Falleen. The Marines tried to backpedal away, but it was too late. It was all too late.

The entire floor shattered beneath them and in an instant of violent motion, the viewing gallery was vented into the void amidst a cloud of crystallizing oxygen and snowflakes of shattered glass.