

A warm evening sun cast its brilliant rays upon the resplendent spires of Cloud City as the *Esperanza's* bulky prow angled for a designated landing pad. In the freighter's cockpit, Yumni Ha worked through the touchdown procedures with the ease another would have drawn breath, flying the venerable cargo hauler second nature to the pallid Kaminoan trader. Beside her, the ship's only passenger shifted with annoyance.

"Ugh, I hate these trade talks," Tali Sroka muttered to the uncaring Kaminoan as she guided the freighter to its berth upon a pristine platform above the clouds of tibanna gas for which Bespin was famous. "I don't understandt why they keep sending me out here. I have no experience vith this stuff!"

As the engines began cycling down, Yumni finally deigned to turn her attention from the controls to the Twi'lek and offered a curt nod of understanding. "Do not sell yourself short, lady Sroka. You possess many qualities which could prove invaluable in the coming talks."

"Oh really?" Tali inquired with a raised eyebrow. "Vhat might that be beyondt *these*?" She cupped her breasts for emphasis. "I'm sick andt tiredt of even my own Clan treating me like glorified arm-candy!"

"I cannot comment on that," Yumni replied calmly, her genderless voice betraying no emotion. "However, that was not my implication."

"Then vhat vas?"

"You possess abilities, both natural and learned, which allow you to measure your opposition in ways others cannot. Knowing your opposition is key to victory."

"Isn't that a military proverb?" Tali scoffed. "Ve're negotiating, not declaring vars."

"It may be, but applies all the same. Our mission is to acquire this contact and the benefits they present to Arcona. Our opposition, should it present itself, will consist not only of the contact's own beliefs and demands, but the actions of other agents seeking them as well. Make no mistake, lady Sroka, to talk trade is to make war."

She felt like contesting that point, but something about the Kaminoan's surprising conviction in her words made her think better of it. After all, why else had she chosen to hire the woman to be her aide in these discussions if not for her expertise? Better she take the advice when presented.

"Very vell, let's go meet our contact andt hope these talks vill be swift," Tali said as she got up from her seat and headed for the exit ramp. Venturing into Cloud City unarmed, even as pleasant as it promised to be, was setting her on edge. However, the contact had been quite adamant on that regard. They were thus walking into a trap, or a very peculiar meeting. Only thing left was to see which lot they'd drawn.

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“He shouldt have been here by now,” Tali muttered as they stood in an empty meeting room in one of the cloud spires overlooking the central districts. The gold and silver of the heavenly city glittered beyond the tinted glass, though for all its splendor it was still a facade to a grueling industry that fed upon the galaxy’s appetite for war. Surrounded by the fruits of that trade, in a pleasant highrise meeting room of impeccable design, the two humble Arconan merchants sought a slice of that profit, and an opportunity to secure supplies for their own wars.

Tali felt her lip curl in revulsion.

“It is possible their delay was connected with the recent tanker fire in the orbital transfer terminals. It left much damage and certainly would take priority over these discussions,” Yumni mused, hand tapping on a datapad.

“Vell I hope ve weren’t ditchedt without notice—” she swallowed the rest of her sentence as the leathery *flap-flap-flap* of wings made her body tense in panic. Her hand had darted to her waist, clutching at the saber that wasn’t there in a vain effort to protect herself from her erstwhile ‘owner’. Yet, it was not Raoul KarDannaa who fluttered into the meeting room, but a female Toydarian next to a gaunt Human.

“Apologies for keeping you waiting,” the Toydarian stated with genuine regret. “Circumstances had me tied up. However, I am ready to hear out your proposals.” She extended her arm in greeting at Tali who still tried to shake herself away from the lingering ghosts of her past. An awkward silence ensued as the Toydarian hovered in place, hand extended, while Tali seemed to be staring blankly into the middle distance. Mercifully, Yumni stepped in and took her hand, shaking it in greeting.

“My name is Yumni Ha, representing the Arconan Logistics and Shipping Company. And this is—”

“*Tali Sroka*,” a brash voice sounded from the doorway where a familiar Zabrak had appeared, along with their aide, a short Togruta woman in a sharp cut suit. Unlike her, the Zabrak had chosen to dress rather revealingly, her dress hugging her figure like a second skin and dipping down between her modest breasts in what was surely a breach of some rules of decorum.

“Miinu,” Tali replied, the sight of the Principate agent finally shaking her free of her shock. They’d met before, during the Gala where Principate delegates and Arconan dignitaries had had a chance to rub elbows and take the measure of their opposite numbers. Much like then, she’d only spoken Huttese, though any hesitation or timidity on her part had vanished and been replaced by cold durasteel. Tali couldn’t help but feel much of their prior meeting had been an act.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet us on such short notice, madam Zylla,” Miinu stated to the Toydarian who hadn’t even given her name yet, extending her arm for a shake. “And my condolences for your loss. I admire your ability to pick up where your husband left off.”

The woman offered a grateful nod and shook the Zabrak’s hand, though it was obvious she was not quite as taken by her attire as her husband might have been.

“He was a good man,” Zylla stated. “And he will be missed, but he would not have wanted his legacy to be undermined by grief. So, here we are,” she sighed.

“Yes indeed, here we are,” Miinu agreed, taking a look at the Twi’lek and Kaminoan opposition. “I trust by the end of today, we’ll all be flying home richer for it. Some perhaps just from the experience...”

Tali, though reeling from the broadside of sudden revelations, still managed to catch the obvious barb and narrowed her eyes at the Zabrak. It seemed the Principate did indeed want this connection and had sent their own shadowy dealer to contend with it. Very well then, let the games begin.

“Madam Zylla, we are very aware of the extensive network of clients serviced by your company and we believe ALaS Co can deliver superior value to you and your customers,” Yumni Ha stated. “We pride ourselves on ensuring delivery of any good, to any client, anywhere in the known Galaxy, and our fleet of bespoke vessels and their pilots stand ready to cater to your needs.”

“Bespoke vessels? Like that old heap of junk you flew in with?” Miinu scoffed, while the Togruta beside her stifled a chuckle. “The Principate Haulage Corp flies under the protection of the Severian Principate’s fleets, using modern carriers and with academy trained pilots. We certify all our crews to the highest standards that match or exceed Republic qualifications.”

“Your pilots fly like drones,” Tali stated, rolling her eyes. “I believe they’re trained to military standards with how predictable they are. When faced with raiders and having no escort, they’re defaulting to surrender and abandoning the cargo.”

“Our pilots do no such thing!” the Zabrak insisted with a hiss. “They defend their ships to the last man.”

“Ours have the vits to escape,” Tali smirked smugly. “With the cargo, *and* their lives.”

“If they are anything like yourself, I find that doubtful,” Miinu smirked. “A Twi’lek is easily confused by swiftly developing situations and becomes distracted. You could barely form intelligent speech after seeing a Toydarian. How could madam Zylla entrust her precious cargo into your caring hands when you’d be flustered at the first sign of trouble?”

Tali felt her cheeks burn as a lump formed in her throat. She wanted to lash back, but had no words worth speaking. The opening exchange, it seemed, had set the tone for the talks to come.

The constant barrage of belittling remarks, jabs at her 'place in society', and past failures did not relent. Every kink in her armor was exploited, every tragedy or shortcoming poked and prodded as Miinu took almost perverse enjoyment out of showing just how much she, and the Principate, knew of their Arconan rivals. It all came to a head, when the Zabrak hinted not too subtly that Tali would not be able to *deliver* on the deal, and that entrusting the transport of such valuable commodities to her operation was a thought better *killed in the crib*.

Tali slammed her palm into the table, earning a shudder of shock from everyone except the smug Zabrak who knew she'd just won. With every pair of eyes on her, Tali felt her anger and outrage about to boil over, but in the choice between fight or flight, she chose what came natural.

"Excuse me," she muttered and fled the room.

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"I can't do it," Tali spat, head hanging between hunched shoulders as she peered down at the sea of clouds below. "I won't admit she's right about me, but this isn't my kind of task. They should've never have sent me here..."

Yumni remained silent for a moment longer, waiting politely if the Twi'lek perhaps something more to say before giving her reply.

"With due respect, ma'am Sroka, I believe you are mistaken."

She turned towards the Kaminoan, angry streaks of frustration blotting her cheeks.

"Did I not say that knowing your opposition was the key to victory? Miss Miinu clearly knows hers."

"That's not exactly a pep-talk, Yumni," Tali spat bitterly.

"But what I did not mention was in addition to knowing your foe, you must also know yourself. You say this is not your forte, and I believe you are correct in that only so far as you're approaching the situation from the wrong angle. You may not have the barbs to exchange with miss Miinu, but you have the ability to connect with madam Zylla. We are not here to outdo the opposition, but to convince the client. Miinu played very well, but I did not judge her arguments persuasive to the client. Otherwise she would have made her choice already."

Tali bit her lip as she mulled over the Kaminoan's words. Though she hated to admit it, the trader *might* have a point.

"So, we may still have a chance?"

"I would not have stayed if we did not," Yumni replied matter-of-factly.

"Then, how do we turn this around?"

The Kaminoan pulled out her datapad and showed her a holopict of the gas tanker explosion in orbit. The damage to the orbital was extensive, and the wounded and dead were counted in the dozens. Somewhere among those burnt bodies lay Zylla's husband too. Though she had no love lost for Toydarians, Tali could still feel the sympathetic pang of losing a loved one.

"Work this angle, and I will do the rest," Yumni stated.

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"Apologies, madam Zylla, for the previous. It must have been something in the air," Tali said as the pair returned to the negotiation chamber.

Miinu's aide was already exchanging details of minutiae with Zylla's escort while Miinu struggled not to grin like a cheshire tooka.

"That must be a poor omen," the Zabrak smirked. "Getting ill on the merchandise you're here to transport."

Ignoring the barb entirely, Tali sat down once more and sighed. "Shall we proceed?" she asked, her attention now entirely on Zylla. The widow studied the Twi'lek's amber eyes and nodded her ascent, much to the Zabrak's chagrin.

Unlike before, Tali kept the discussion focused on Zylla and her needs, ignoring Miinu's barbs and insinuations as best she could, blotting out her voice and instead extending her senses to study the Toydarian. Though immune to Force persuasion, she still gleaned some inklings about her emotions and responses to various subjects, guiding Yumni's expert replies to more detailed questions with the most suitable flavor or emphasis.

Their opposite numbers did not fail to take notice of this renewed vigor and Miinu doubled down on her previous tactics, trying as hard as she could to tug at any weakness or vulnerability she could think of from the Twi'lek's sordid past. This time, however, no matter how vicious the barb or salacious the insinuation, Tali did not rise to the taunt, but kept her focus on the Toydarian. Fighting every instinct and prejudice, she let herself open up to the woman, sharing in her grief and empathizing with what until hours ago she'd seen as a shadow of her worst nightmare.

"I assure you, madam Zylla, that our safety recordt speaks for itself, andt that ve vill offer you any support ve can to ensure the recent tragedy will not repeat itself."

"I would be inclined to believe her on that one," Miinu stated, her tone suddenly suspiciously amicable. "After all, she has much experience in running from one tragedy to the next. Though so far, never the same in a row..." She paused. "Then again, *first time for everything*."

Tali felt her hands curl into fists, the desire to reach out and throttle the Zabrak almost overwhelming, when she felt a cool hand on her shoulder and to her shock, found Zylla offering her an empathetic look.

It was a confusing sensation, a mixture of revulsion and gratitude, like tasting sweetness where her eyes had seen a sour fruit. But which to believe? She chose to smile.

"I would be very happy to arrange this service for you, at no extra cost," Yumni added with a nod, offering Zylla's Human aide a full record of recent ALaS Co injury reports and the corrective actions taken to ensure they would not be repeated.

"Thank you," Zylla stated, "I will take this generous offer into consideration when I make the final decision. If you would submit your final bids to my assistant and we shall retire to review them."

And with that, the discussion petered out, the delegates of both parties being shown to a lobby for some refreshments while Zylla and her aide discussed the proposals. An uneasy silence had fallen between the two opposing parties, like the chill of winter having found its way into the outwardly pleasant confines of the upscale dwelling. Zylla's return was thus not unlike shattering a thin layer of frost as all eyes, previously frozen, turned to her expectantly.

"I have reached a decision," she announced, wings flapping ponderously to keep herself aloft. The day had clearly taken much out of her. "And I wish to congratulate the Principate Haulage Corp for their excellent bid. The call was close, but I must do what serves the company best. The deal is yours."

Tali felt her shoulders slump as if the breath had just been stolen from her. Miinu's poodoo eating grin was almost too much to bear, though she still forced herself to shake hands with Zylla and thank her for taking the time to listen to their proposal.

As the Twi'lek and Kaminoan walked back to their ship, silhouetted on the walkway by the setting Bepinian sun, Tali finally let out a long sigh of defeat. "So much for knowing yourself andt your opposition..." she muttered dejectedly.

"It was always a possibility," Yumni replied, seemingly less perturbed by their failure, though few things seemed to evoke any sort of emotional response out of her. "I made the best offer ALaS Co could, but the PHC operates larger tankers. If they were willing to take a hit to their margins, they could out-bid us."

Tali did not know whether that made her feel any better, knowing that they had always been fighting at a disadvantage. No wonder Miinu had been so smug. “Ve didt our best,” she said, half-heartedly. “Seems like I didt get to go home one more experience richer,” she added with bitter venom.

“Wait!” a familiar voice called out after them, the tell-tale flapping of Toydarian wings heralding the laboured arrival of the visibly exhausted Zylla. She was panting lightly by the time she managed to their side, looking weary and frail.

“Can ve help you?” Tali asked, feeling concerned for the widow’s condition. Today must not have been easy on her either.

“I was hoping that perhaps you could,” Zylla said, her lips curling to a warm smile under her trunk nose. “You see, there was a second deal I wished to discuss with you, and ALaS Co.”

“A *second* deal?” Tali inquired.

“The majority of my late husband’s enterprise revolved around the brokerage of mass Tibanna gas, the kind of ubiquitous bulk that feeds blasters around the galaxy. But, he also had a second trade, in more lucrative and, rest his soul, more volatile grades primarily destined for high-grade turbolasers. I was very taken by your track record, and I believe entrusting this trade to your capable hands would ensure that my husband’s legacy would be the last blaze of its kind,” she said as she extended a contract form to them.

Yumni accepted the flimsi and swiftly read through it, visibly struggling against the tugging of her thin lips as she got to the compensation. “This will do,” she stated, as much to Zylla as to Tali. “This will do very nicely.”