

Fort Blindshot
Selen
40 ABY

“Central command, our lines have been breached! Hostile strike team moving towards the research facility.”

“Copy that, Esk-Two, deploying reserves to intercept. Team Five, engage the enemy at junction Kresh-Seven.”

“Negative! They have one of those monsters with them! The team won’t stand a chance!”

“Team Five, stand down! Repeat, Team Five...”

The line erupted into screams of pain and panic, the hum of a lightsaber cleaving the connection to static silence. The combat coordinator stared blankly at the screen in front of her, the symbol for Team Five graying out as the last life signs flatlined. Twenty-one souls lost in as many seconds.

A soft hand rested upon the coordinator’s shoulder, giving it a tender, reassuring squeeze.

“You couldnt not have known,” Tali Sroka spoke with gentle determination. “You made the right call, but sometimes it still costs lives.”

The young lieutenant looked up at the Twi’lek, struggling to keep the tears from her eyes. “I-I know, ma’am, just...”

“Ve vill deal vith them,” Tali replied sternly, nodding at the central screen. “Bring up the pict. Vhat are ve up against?”

The lieutenant swiftly did as she’d been told, pulling up the security log from moments before Team Five had been run over. The grainy footage showed a handful of troopers charging down the corridor towards the research facility, and at their center stalked a dark figure of imposing stature. Even through the holoivid, the sight of him made Tali’s spine tingle.

“That is a high priority target. They von’t have many to call upon, *thank Ashla*, but unless ve can stop it soon, the facility defenses von’t holdt him for long.”

“Ma’am, we’ve got the enemy on sensors. They’re moving down this path.” The young lieutenant pulled up the facility map, indicating a section of corridor that had just gone dark. “There is a crystal sample held in this lab—” a room not far from the corridor flashed red “—and it looks like they’re heading straight for it.”

“*Karabast*, they must be drawn to those things like moths to a flame,” Tali grunted. “Close the blast doors. Buy us as much time as you can. I’ll take a team down andt stop that monster.”

Or die trying.

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The hiss and sputter of a lightsaber cutting through heavy durasteel was as unnerving to behold as any silence before the storm. The final barrier between the enemy and the lab was a thin line of Arconan troopers behind hastily prepared defenses, but at least they were prepared. Tali knew this would be a close one, and even then success was not guaranteed. But the alternative was too horrific to contemplate—a curse of having foresight of events yet to pass.

Cloaked in the mists of the Force, she stood silently in the recessed shadows of the corridor, watching intently as the blood red blade of the Ascendant Trooper melted through the blast door to make way for its minions. Durasteel ran in rivulets along the metal plating, hissing and spitting as it cooled, the relentless saberpoint coming full circle before withdrawing from the ragged cut.

A moment's silence passed, nervous troopers aiming blasters at the opening-to-be. The next instant, the plug of steel flung out with the kinetics of a speederbike, lopping the head off a trooper's shoulders before crashing into the opposing lab wall. The horrific death bred hesitation, and that was all the enemy needed.

Bursting forth through the still-cooling rent in the blast door, the Children of Mortis surged towards their foes. Bright blue blaster fire rushed to meet them, and two were punched off their feet with craniums boiled by plasma, but none lost a step in their charge.

Last came the hulking black monster, larger in stature than in mere height and marred by jutting crystal growths that gave them a macabre, unsettling silhouette. For a moment, Tali could *taste* the darkness seething around him, like a vortex of venomous serpents snapping and hissing at anything that got too close—a weapon wound up to strike.

The instinct to attack was overwhelming. Every nerve in her body screamed to defend herself, to attack now before he struck the first blow. But she'd seen how that would end, every gruesome manner by which that Force-corrupted monster would dismember her before she'd even drawn her saber. And so she waited, heart pounding in her chest, trusting the same Force that had empowered the unholy abomination before her to keep her safe.

A stray blaster bolt sailed down the corridor, screaming towards the Trooper's shoulder. Faster than any creature of such bulk had right to move, he'd drawn a cruel lightsaber that bled a deep crimson and struck the sapphire bolt into the tunnel wall. A low growl escaped the Trooper's masked face, a puff of vacuum sealed air releasing from the vents.

One moment, he'd stood still and the next he was halfway to the barricade. Thundering past a wounded comrade, smashing him aside with the elegance of a freight train, the Ascendant Trooper charged into the fray, lightsaber humming as it swung through the air.

As abruptly as he'd charged, the dark warrior halted, sensing peril even as the Arconans sprung their trap. Denton charges along the tunnel mouth detonated, the blastwave catching the closest Children and mauling flesh to a gorey soup as the Trooper hastily tried to erect a barrier.

The shimmering shield manifested the instant the first splinters rained upon his armor, catching the worst of the blast before shattering like an unboiled egg. Pain and violence washed over the twisted Sith, but that damage only fueled him. Unleashing his pain in a torrent of raw lightning, the Ascendant Trooper roared in rage as he glutted upon the sensation of the Dark Side flowing through him.

Screams of dying men were drowned out by the static crackle of Force lightning, the strobe of lashing tongues brighter than white illuminating the junction in scenes of violence. Men died, screaming, but sometimes the right call cost lives.

Advancing behind the awestruck Children, Tali waited until the last moment to engage her saber-glaive, pressing the emitter against the back of a stunned enemy before depressing the trigger stud. A brilliant golden yellow pierced his armored carapace, the spear of plasma erupting through his chest with a sputter of boiling plastoid. Withdrawing the weapon with a flourish, she spun her glaive around to behead a pair of the sluggishly reacting Children, two more lives taken before the first body had hit the ground.

A murderous blaster raised towards her, its heart beating with a crystallized soul, yet before the enemy could pull the trigger, a wave of telekinetic might struck him off his feet, sending him sailing right into the raging storm of crackling lightning. His charred remains slumped against the barricade like a sack of meilooruns, finally alerting the rage-fueled monster to impending danger.

The flow of energy ended as abruptly as it had begun, the Ascendant Trooper swerving around to face the Twi'lek behind him. Tali gave him no reprieve, greeting the monster with a straight lunge of her glaive at center mass.

A shallow gash across his chest plate was all it was good for, the preternatural speed of her foe seeing the blood red saber blade batting aside her brilliant yellow in a flash of crimson. She barely had time to back away as he pressed into a headless counter, slashing diagonally across the Twi'lek's guard.

Feet moving with the gait of a trained dancer, Tali deftly stepped over the corpse of a fallen foe as she retreated, the reach of her weapon saving her from death as the Trooper's saber flashed across her vision—but missing by centimeters. He did not relent. He did not hesitate. There was not a moment's weakness or respite as the crystal-infused berserker continued his onslaught, gripping his saber with both hands to deliver a withering staccato of crushing blows the Twi'lek was sorely pressed to deflect or dodge.

Trading ground for safety, Tali found herself being backed towards the blast door, swiftly running out of space to fall back further. Her defense was fluid and her footwork impeccable, but neither would account for much the moment her back hit a wall. The rearing head of mortal panic was pushed down beneath the surface of her thoughts by sheer willpower, the Twi'lek trusting the Force to guide her blade just as she trusted her plan to carry the day.

The Trooper swung his saber around in a cleaving arc, its bleeding tip burning a wicked rent through the Twi'lek's robes but missing anything vital. Faster than quicksilver, he was

attacking once more, denying a riposte with sheer brutality as he stepped forward to pressure her against the door. That was the opening she'd been waiting for.

Muscles tensing from retreat to advance, Tali thrust her saber-glaive forth, locking the front blade with the crimson saber in the Trooper's hand. As he made for his upward cut, she pressed on the haft of her weapon, guiding his blow away from her with superior leverage and twisted herself inside his guard—the small spike of a lightsaber blade poised at his shin.

The blade found its mark, his armor resisting for the briefest of moments before the plasma punched through, sizzling skin, meat and fat all at once in an unsavory melange of carnage. It was a crippling blow, and against any mortal foe it would have been the end. But the Ascendant Trooper was only dubiously mortal.

The warning flashed down Tali's spine, but there was nothing to be done. She'd overplayed her hand and her monstrous foe was glad to take some pain for victory. So close to each other as to make sabers useless, the Sith jabbed an armored elbow into the woman's midriff, knocking the air out of her lungs.

Tali staggered back, her head hitting the corridor wall as she struggled for breath. The Sith was upon her like lightning, battering through her feeble defense and cutting the saber-glaive in half. Sheer pain and rage fuelled his injured body and he drank deep of the terror in his foe's eyes, a dark gloved hand curling around her purple neck and *squeezing*.

Tali sputtered and croaked, flailing and kicking as she tried to break his vice-like grip but to no avail. Her earcones thrummed with pressure as the world began to gray out, her mouth gasping for air that her burning lungs screamed for. The Sith's glowing red eyes were the only thing visible through the mounting haze, piercing like embers through his visor. He raised his saber for the killing blow.

A streak of blue plasma struck the hand, and a second bolt sizzled against the tattered remains of his armorweave cloak. A final Arconan defender, badly mauled by lightning and leaning heavily against the broken remains of the barricade, glared defiantly from behind his blaster—and fired a third time.

The grip on Tali's neck loosened, the rush of blood banishing the fog from her sight. With a deep, hungry gasp, she felt strength flow to her limbs once more and without hesitation reached out to the remains of her weapon. The broken haft found her waiting palm, the stub blade igniting even as she jammed the weapon through the Sith's face plate and into his glowing red eye.

The Ascendant Trooper screamed like a wounded beast, tossing the agonizing Twi'lek away with bone shattering force before clutching his bleeding face. Tali landed hard on the metal floor, feeling something snap in her flank, and tumbled inelegantly with lekku flailing before coming to a halt next to the barricade.

The Arconan soldier rushed to help her up, still firing at the Sith but to little effect. She took his arm, easing up to her feet as the familiar taste of copper lingered on her tongue. "Go, you didt your part."

The soldier hesitated, but did as ordered, turning around to retreat further into the complex. Tali managed to stumble on, slamming her bloodied palm against the door controls and limping inside with one hand steadying her broken rib. Behind them, the Sith roared in anger and reached out after his tormentors. A telekinetic shunt scattered the last of the barricade, pummeling the retreating Twi'lek with debris that brought her to her knees once more, but worse was to come to the fleeing soldier.

His body enveloped in an invisible cocoon of power, the man screamed in horror as he was plucked off the ground and floated back towards the lethal monster, his outstretched hand waiting to grab him. Had he been hoping for a quick death, he was sorely disappointed.

Grunting with sadistic mirth, the Ascendant Trooper dug his fingers into the man's neck, feeding on his life force like a parasite. The Arconan screamed in blind terror, feeling his very essence sucked out of him as the vampiric triage took root. Flesh knitted, bone mended, and fresh crystal growths slick with viscera pushed out of the Sith's ravaged form until finally, a baleful red orb formed in the burnt-out socket of his punctured eye.

The hollow husk of the lifeless soldier slumped onto the ground as little more than a suit of armor, the Sith reveling in his rejuvenated form. Uncoiling a cruel whip from his belt and a serrated blade from his back, he stalked in after the injured Twi'lek—a bloodhound tracing the slick trail of crimson upon the floor.

Batting aside the lab doors with a single crackling swipe of the lightwhip and a telekinetic shunt, the Trooper stalked inside, chest heaving with murderous intent. Glowering as he panned his vision across the sterile laboratory now only sparsely illuminated by emergency lighting, the Sith reached out to locate his foe. As he pressed his senses wide, the sudden clack of a toppled beaker snapped him to the here and now, charging ruthlessly at the sound.

He found the Twi'lek huddled in a recess on the lab floor, cradling the crystal sample in her lap, freshly plucked off a sample holder. She held out her lightsaber, lips moving in some vain attempt at dissuasion, but he was beyond caring. Charging in, he swiped the lightwhip around to bat aside her feeble saber and stabbed with his sword to skewer the troublesome pest to the floor to watch her die—the sword sank through nothing and lodged into the floor.

The Trooper let out a confused snarl, bewildered and enraged. The clouds of trickery vanished, just as clouds of another nature blasted all around him. Tali shivered from lek to toe as she slumped against the containment controls, hand still clutching the manual override for cryo stasis.

As the smoke cleared, all that was left of the crystal monster was a frozen statue encased in carbonite.