

Starport
Ghanta Two
40 ABY

"[Excuse me, but could you repeat that? My memory banks store three point six five nine seven million transaction routines, but I am finding no valid matches.]"

The howl of spooling ion engines and guttural growl of repulsorlift coils swallowed the polite reply, the Kaminoan trader making no effort to speak up. The frazzled protocol droid twitched, its servos jerking in a sudden motion as two conflicting contingency protocols vied for logical supremacy within its command code.

"Let me speak to a manager," the Kaminoan said, her voice momentarily audible as a YT-1300 on the next pad over suffered a sudden capacitor failure and the engine array lost power in a cascading fault chain.

The protocol droid looked at her, photoreceptors equally blank as the trader's expressionless face. A zero shifted to a one.

"[Right this way, please]," it said and proceeded to shuffle off the landing pad towards an ill-kept dockyard office. "[Leave the merchandize on the deck until we have cleared this out.]"

Yumni Ha gave no indication of acknowledgement, but followed the protocol droid, leaving behind a sedated trio of slaves; a Chiss, a Mirialan, and a Twi'lek.

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The office smelled of cheap tabac and even cheaper cologne, Yumni finding precious few of her senses that were not being offended by the surroundings she now found herself in. Overworked clerk droids working on threadbare cabling and the cheapest paint this side of the Richi Maze shuffled around the cramped peripheries while a handful of Gamorrean overseers attended to their progress from a central podium, their leather jumpsuits straining against the girth of accumulated flab.

The protocol droid shuffled nervously past the outer layer of menials, making its way towards one of the ill-tempered Gamorreans who busied himself with a bucket of deep fried Gizka. The porcine overseer turned his attention to the droid as it bowed low, switching its vocalizers from Basic to Huttese.

"[Benevolent overseer, I request mediation on a matter beyond my abilities,]" the droid groveled, extending the shipping manifest on silver digits.

The Gamorran picked the data tablet into his meaty hand, smearing Gizka grease across its transparisteel surface as his beady eyes strained to read the tightly packed lines of text. Yumni watched his arduous struggle ever forward, her hand slowly moving towards the pair of cylinders strapped to her utility belt as the realization slowly dawned.

"What trade protocol was the merchant requesting?" he inquired pressingly.

"[The protocol designation was marked R-41D.]"

"You useless machine, that clearly spells out—"

"*Raid*," Yumni stated in her emotionless monotone as she pulled the pins off two grenades and tossed them amidst the shocked overseers. A moment later, the office was choked by a cloud of smoke and an instant later, a frazzling blue halo of ion energy knocked out every data console and droid in the center. The coughing overseers were left floundering while the Kaminoan strode away at best possible pace, clutching a rebreather to her face.

Step one complete.

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"Finally," Tali Sroka huffed as smoke began billowing out of the dockyard offices. Though the restraints hadn't even been locked, the mere fact she'd been mock cuffed had left her on edge and it was with no small amount of relief that she tore the bonds off her wrists and neck.

"A distasteful ruse, but a necessary one," Stres'tron'garmis commiserated as he shrugged off the cuffs and picked up his hammer and riot shield from a shipping crate nearby.

"The Hutts are cowards, they'd never let us within a parsec of their wares unless they thought we were merchandize," Vicxa Varis added, struggling a bit with a snagged cuff.

"A seasoned observation, but we would do well not to underestimate our honorable foe," Strong rumbled as he walked over to effortlessly snap open the cuff and free the Mirialan's trapped arm.

"Those cuffs really were on you just for show, huh?" she mused, watching the burly Chiss make light work of the restraints.

"A son of Garmis will not be held by such paltry chains," he declared boisterously, earning a bemused look from the Twi'lek.

"That's not what you said last night when we broke out the silk sashes," she purred with a cheshire grin.

"The strength of the binding is secondary to the will of the binder, Lady Sroka," the flustered Chiss managed past burning cheeks.

She blew him a kiss and called her lightsaber to her hand out of the cargo crate, its brilliant yellow blade emerging with a characteristic hiss. Turning her amber eyes to the Mirialan who was busy retrieving her own equipment, she called out the treasure huntress.

"We're securing the slave pens first. How long can you keep them busy?"

“As long as you need me to,” Vicxa replied with an ear-to-ear grin, hefting up a fat belt of detonite charges.

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It did not take long for the authorities to realize that something was up. The ion charge had fried the fire alarms in the office compound, but a rising column of smoke had a way of attracting attention even without blaring sirens. Yumni Ha hurried back to her ship while emergency response speeders whizzed past, the deckhands, longshoremen and other assorted hauliers clearly focused on the scene more than their tasks. That suited her well enough.

By the time she made it back to the *Esperanza*, her venerable XS Stock light freighter, the trio of ‘slaves’ she’d brought along had already vanished on their respective missions. That left only a simple task for her to accomplish—sit pretty and hold tight.

Long spindly legs carrying her up the *Esperanza*’s boarding ramp and into the cockpit of the ancient freighter, Yumni locked up all doors and began low power pre-flight checks. Despite the chaos she’d wrought among the overseers, she had little doubt the auto-turrets would still be quite operational if she tried to leave without clearance.

And she was still waiting on her bonus as well.

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The mounting uncertainty finally broke as someone brave enough to disturb the *status quo* pulled the alarm and sirens began to blare across the freight yard. Loading crews looked on in bewilderment, all bereft of any clear orders from the overseers to stop working, but distraught by the sound of the alarms. The seasoned traders chose to sit it out, though blasters were being checked and holsters unbuttoned as trouble had a way of turning to violence in Hutt space.

A skittish merchant, losing her nerve, barked foul-mouthed orders to the slack jawed ground crew before boarding her vessel while holding the docking steward at blaster point. She did not make it far off the pad when the auto-turrets enacted the ironclad lockdown protocols, the fiery wreck of her ship falling out of the sky moments after lift-off and dashing on the cliffs beyond.

Her next of kin would be held liable for the lost cargo.

A pneumatic **thwip** propelled a grappling claw up high on one of the two massive warehouses where goods to be shipped were stored, the ascension module of Vicxa’s S-5 blaster pistol hauling the Mirialan towards a vantage point amidst the mounting chaos. The pulsing eye of the detonite charge she’d left behind on a cargo sled winked one final time before the entire thing vanished in a violent fireball, silhouetting her shape as she rose ever higher.

Pandemonium reigned below, nervous traders unholstering weapons as security details were rushed in to becalm the situation. Their gruff attitudes and vibroaxes did little to that effect, but the Hutts were rarely creatures of subtlety. Smiling mischievously as she vaulted to the warehouse roof, Vicxa fleeted across the acid washed duracrete to a decrepit skylight and wiping a thick layer of vintage grime off its face with her sleeve.

Inside, a handful of guards remained, along with prodigious stacks of contraband from all corners of the galaxy. Sounds of panicked blaster fire caught her ears, Tali and Strong no doubt making a powerful impression on the security details, and the remaining guards shifted nervously. They were on edge—she could use that to her advantage.

Taking a handful of detonite charges out of her pack, she dialed the timers at set intervals and tossed them off the roof into a vacant loading zone. Cracking the window open, she snuck inside, dropping onto a rickety roof beam and making her way across the warehouse unseen while the detonite charges ticked down to zero.

The first charge blew and the reaction was predictable. Every single pair of eyes snapped in the direction of the explosion, leaving a prodigious blind spot for her to drop down into. The guards had barely begun to shift back when a second explosion rocked the warehouse and rattled the windows, then a third, and a fourth.

Moving at speed and making best use of the cover, Vicxa skirted the warehouse interior with seasoned ease, slapping det-tape onto storage containers while ducking behind others to stay out of sight as the explosions outside ratcheted the pressure on the low-paid cargo guards' nerves. When the fifth detonation blew up just outside the warehouse wall, shattering a window, one of the guards flinched and sprayed the area in crimson blaster bolts. It took only the stern discipline of the group leader to keep everyone from joining in and ventilating the wall.

It was into that moment of panic that Vicxa struck her dagger. Depressing the detonator, a series of lesser explosions tore up the warehouse, toppling stacks of crates over the entrances until all but one were hopelessly lost under piles of heavy crates. The dread sense of an unseen noose tightening around their necks was palpable by now. They just needed the last push.

Cupping her hands over her mouth, Vicxa called out in her best approximation of a military tone. "Prepare to breach. Three, Two—"

She never got to one as the guards dropped their blasters and fled, escaping the surrounded warehouse before they were trapped for good. Smiling victoriously, the Mirialan locked the final doorway and drove a forklift to block it for good measure.

"Phase two complete," she called in over the comms before turning her attention to the bounty of contraband now locked in with her. Oh yes, this was an opportunity she would not miss out on.

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“Look out, grenade!” Stres’tron’garmis called out, throwing his considerable bulk to shield the Twi’lek from the thrown explosive as the two battled their way across the second warehouse.

Tali swerved around, sensing the danger heartbeats before he’d begun moving, and reached out with the Force towards the grenade. With an exertion of will, she wrenched the bomb off its parabolic arc and tossed it aside with a flick of telekinetics, its violence blossoming to life amidst a score of Ghantan guards and driving others deeper behind cover.

The second warehouse was almost emptied of all guards, the last handfuls of reinforcements throwing themselves into the fight with more desperation than skill, no doubt driven by the equal desperation of their paymasters to stop their merchandise from falling into enemy hands. But for all their sacrifice, the Arconans would not be denied.

“I will never get used to that,” Strong rumbled, mildly ashamed of what had in hindsight turned out to be theatrics on his part.

“It was very charming,” Tali replied with a kind smile. “But the Force is a stronger ally than even you.” As if to underscore the point, she reached out to grab a mind-hold on a crate in the middle of a tall stack and *pulled* it towards her, sending the entire stack tumbling down—along with the guards who’d been hiding behind them.

“A fickle ally, in my experience,” Strong huffed, deflecting the vibroaxe swing of a charging Gamorrean and caving his chest in with a shallow jab of his hammer.

“Fickle? How so?” Tali inquired, stepping to brace her back against his, her lightsaber humming through the air as it struck a crimson bolt of plasma and threw it back at the guard who’d fired it. The woman disappeared from view a moment later, a blackened hole through the eye.

“I have fought against some of the foulest scum in the galaxy, Lady Sroka. And every single one who called the Force an ally was let down by it,” the towering Chiss replied, armor plates shifting as he raised his shield to block another volley of blaster fire.

“And how do you know they were let down?” Tali raised a quizzical eyebrow, sheltering behind him and the shield as the storm of plasma washed over them.

“Because, Lady Sroka, I survived and they did not,” the Chiss said with a tone of confidence only hard-fought experience could buy, before launching into a savage counter-charge on tongues of his jetpack.

Left in the smoke, the Twi’lek scoffed. Had he been only brawn, life would have become dull already.

Strong’s final charge broke the guards’ morale just as the Chiss broke a Gamorrean’s spine upon his shield, the scattering guards fleeing back to their speeders and jetting off to be anywhere but here. Judging by the reports she’d been receiving from other Arconans around the compound, though, they’d have precious little luck evading another fight.

"Varehouse secure, cutting the power now," Tali called into her comms while Strong flexed his arms, assessing the level of laser burn the last blaster bolt to slip past his shield had caused on his shoulder.

Climbing onto a gantry like gravity was a mere suggestion, the graceful Twi'lek spied the power couplings that fed the entire spaceport—and the perimeter watch towers that conveniently overlooked them. Taking a moment to center herself, she clipped her saber to her belt and reached out with both hands, closing her eyes and calling upon her ally once more.

Strength flowed through her fingers, through her mind. Invisible tendrils of raw *power* coiling around the watch tower's leg, compressing, crushing. The rusted durasteel buckled, bending, twisting under her unrelenting will. Beads of sweat ran down her brow, hands trembling, but she would not relent. The leg tore loose, unhinged from its moorings, and a moment later the tower followed, toppling right into the power couplings and shorting them out in a brilliant electrical flash that made her teeth itch.

A wave of nausea flowed into her like a receding tide, and a profound emptiness filled her very core. Panting, Tali called in their success and completion of phase three, though below Strong looked on with worry.

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The auto-turrets jerked as consecutive power surges overcharged their capacitors before suddenly falling slack as all illumination was lost in a general blackout. The emergency lighting that should have kicked in was barely enough to keep the landing pad edges visible as even the sirens, a constant droning headache for the past moments, died down. After the cacophony and chaos, there was sudden stillness as an uneasy peace descended upon the space port.

After so much movement, suddenly nobody was willing to move a muscle. Nobody except Yumni as she pressed a slender digit to depress the transceiver on her ship comms.

"Auto-turrets down. We are clear to leave this place," Yumni spoke into shipwide comms in her finest Huttese. *"Last one off-planet buys the next round in Mos Eisley!"* That spurred some motion into the traders who hurriedly ignited their engines and took off, blasting away and scattering to the stars, bearing a message of what had happened here today.

From her vantage point in the cockpit of the *Esperanza*, the Kaminoan poured herself a tall glass of filtered water and sat back to await the final all-clear. There would be plenty of choice merchandise to pick from and she, like her ship's cargo holds, were thirsty for profit.

Tali and Strong emerged from the second warehouse worse for wear, but mostly uninjured. His laser burn would heal with some bacta and though she leaned upon him more than he upon her, Tali insisted she was fine and just needed a moment to recover. Racing past the limping duo, the Mirialan hurried along with a heaping armload of the finest drinks she had found within the Hutt stores. Almost too preoccupied with taking full advantage of the

situation, she realized the danger at the last possible moment as the trident form of an X-wing swooped in from above and strafed the platform.

Bottles scattered across the blasted duracrete, Vicxa diving for cover while Strong instinctively shielded the Twi'lek clinging to his arm with his body, her attempt at manifesting a barrier failing utterly. The X-wing pulled to a halt between the trio and the *Esperanza*, the pilot expertly hovering the ship in place and opening the cockpit canopy to address his foes.

A man dressed in flowing white robes trimmed in gold, the Human bore a familiar symbol upon his chest, marking him a ranking member of the Children of Mortis. His pristine white teeth glinted behind a savage smile as he beheld his battered prey.

"Your little raid has gone along far enough, Brotherhood scum," he declared. "Once I bring Chutil'ah your heads, she will supply the Children with every new recruit we need, so consider this my heart-felt thank you for your service in furthering the Great Plan. All shall be as the Force wills it."

Down below, Tali glared daggers at the man, but the pained grunt of her companion tore her attention to more pressing matters. "Are you hurt?" she pressed, knowing the answer before she'd even said the words.

"I will live, but if it is not too much to ask, Lady Sroka, I would prefer if you took this upstart down a peg. I fear my jetpack may be out of commission," the Chiss gasped, sparks bleeding out of the ravaged jetpack's power modulators.

Aching from lek to toe, Tali reached up towards the X-wing amber eyes nailed to the smug Mortis *sleemo* and *willed* the ship to pitch down. Its nose dipped, but only a few centimeters before the repulsorlifts compensated and the craft righted itself. The Mortis agent, momentarily paled as he felt the Force tug at his fighter, turned to smug elation as he felt the Twi'lek's grip fading.

"A pitiful attempt, Brotherhood witch. Now let me grant you Ascension," he laughed, turning the X-wing to aim squarely at the Twi'lek and the Chiss behind her.

Tali felt time stretch to eternity, staring into the quadruple barrels of the X-wing's laser cannons. That hollow feeling inside her had only grown and though she could feel the Force around her, strong and vibrant, it was like clawing at water with splayed hands and expecting to slake your thirst. There was no purchase, she had no hold. The flows passed her by and left her an arid island amidst a raging river.

Had Strong been right all along? She'd always been taught that the Force was her strongest ally, but now when she needed it the most—it abandoned her. Had she taken it for granted? Or was this the true nature of the Force, fickle and capricious?

She would not need to dwell on it long. The Mortis agent gripped his control yoke and pulled the trigger, the destruction of the Brotherhood witch consuming his mind completely. Emerald green bolts flashed across the distance, unable to miss at point blank range, skewering the X-wing like a bug on a needle.

Bursting apart amidst proton torpedo cook-offs, the X-wing simply ceased to exist, atomized by its own armaments in less than a heartbeat. The *Esperanza*'s dorsal turret thrummed with dissipating heat.

"I am not one to hand out free services, but let us call that a rounding error to your advantage," Yumni Ha's voice crackled over the comms.

Tali caught a glimpse of the Kaminoan's celestial eyes through the cockpit glass and offered a sincere nod of gratitude. Beside her, Stres'tron'garmis was regaining his footing like a proud son of Garmis only could, and further beyond still Vicxa Varis was making a mental note to do all of her looting only *after* the all-clear had been given.

Perhaps it was true that the Force was her strongest ally, but the most dependable were her friends.