Dry, burnt stone crunched beneath the worn boots of Tali Sroka as she gingerly picked her way through the blasted remains of what had once been her lek-shop. Though the fires had long since died out, the blackened remains of flame-licked rockcrete testament to the ferocity of the inferno that had engulfed it after the Hutts began their retreat, she could still smell the putrid smoke and the charred remains of her labor.

Walking in silence behind her, trying to find any sort of remains or items that might have miraculously survived the fire, Koliss Welcott halted to examine a slab of stone resting atop a mound of crushed debris. Though the slab itself was blackened by fire and heat, its underside looked undamaged and with a soft grunt, he reached down to hoist it up and aside.

Muscles tensing, he strained against the weight of the rock, the jagged edges of its broken sides digging into his gloved hands and threatening to slice through the bantha leather when suddenly the stone began to rise almost on its own. Turning to glance at the Twi’lek, he saw her standing arm-stretched towards him, eyes closed and brow furrowed as she clearly was aiding him in raising the slab with her abilities.

Acting quickly, Koliss slid the near weightless slab of stone aside as Tali tired of the exercise and let the object crash upon the masonry, pulverizing lesser stone beneath its bulk and kicking up a cloud of grey-white dust. As the obstruction cleared, Koliss covered his face to keep the dust from his lungs and leaned in closer to see a small pit of sorts hidden beneath the slab. Therein, charred at the edges but otherwise intact, he found a bundle of yarn and a pair of trampled lekwarmers that had lost much of their color and softness under the blistering heat and followed chemical dousing that had killed the flames.

Picking up the objects like they were frail blossoms into the palm of his hand, Koliss offered the remains to the Twi’lek who seemed to choke back tears as she recognized her own handiwork. She had poured her heart and soul into the shop, an effort to obtain independence even from Arcona by her own merits and to finally feel like she was the master of her own fate. But the cruel Hutts and their campaign of terror had put an end to her dreams that now lay broken and burnt at her feet.

Accepting the charred remains of her dream, Tali ran her fingers along the once-soft yarn and the pale thread of the lekwarmers, the coarseness of the fabric dismaying her. She had only hoped to bring something warm and soft into the world. To offer her fellow Twi’leks and Togruta an innocent, kind gift and to protect their sensitive lekku from a harsh world with which she was more than familiar with. But it seemed that harsh world did not take kindly to such gestures and would turn even the most innocent of cotton-laced dreams into a coarse, burned nightmare.

Closing her fingers around the objects and squeezing them tight, Tali closed her eyes and visualized just how the shop had looked like when it still stood there, but the image had already begun to fade and the vibrant colors of freshly knitted lekwarmers and smells of imported herbal teas and incense came to her in a mix of greys, browns and acrid bitter tones. As the extent of her loss began to hit home, she could hold back the tears no longer as the first hot pearls began rolling down her lightly freckled cheeks.

Yet, before the first droplets had slipped off her chin to hit the ground below, she felt the firm embrace of the human doctor wrapping around her, holding her tight in an unspoken gesture of compassion and comfort she had found herself needing more now than ever.

Long seconds ticked by as the wave of despair washed over her until she finally calmed down enough to give him one last squeeze and then let go. Standing before him with her eyes still focused upon the items in her hand, Koliss rested a comforting hand on her shoulder and gently tugged at her to leave. This place held nothing more for them, only despair.

Sighing as she sensed the sentiment even without her attuned abilities, Tali nodded and turned away from the ruins, clutching the remains of her legacy against her chest as she let herself be escorted back to her apartment by the tired doctor. As they cleared the rubble and headed up the street back towards what was left of the Pride of Ol’val, she leaned in to peck a kiss upon his cheek and whispered, “Thank you…” into his ear, her slender fingers sliding along the palm of his hand before intertwining with his digits, forming a firm bond as she squeezed tight. Nothing more was said as they made their way back through the war torn remains of Ol’val. Nothing could.

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“Are you sure about this?” Koliss asked from the couch, concern strong in his voice as he watched the distressed Twi’lek pacing back and forth with a mug of wine in her hands. They’d returned to her apartment, or what was left of it, and she had immediately gone for the drink. He had hardly objected, having neither the strength nor the desire to stop her, merely mentioning in passing that she had been hitting the bottle a bit heavier than she used to. However, considering the circumstances, that was hardly surprising.

“Yes.” Tali replied, her voice muffled and distorted by the mug she was drinking from, gulping hungrily at the cool liquid.

“But what about…?” Koliss began.

“Us?” Tali finished the sentence as she turned sharply towards him. “I velcome you to join me. I’m not running away.”

Her quick reply caught him off guard and he had to pause gather his wits. “Look, I know this all got to you and I don’t blame you, at all. It was horrific and we saw hundreds of people lose everything. But…” He trailed off, swallowing the words he was afraid might be construed as an insult.

“But you don’t think I shouldt go? You think I am overreacting? You think… I am suffering from some sort of shock?” Tali listed all the fears moving through his mind.

He stared at her for a moment before sighing in resignation and nodding. “Aye. That.”

Her expression melted into a soft smile as she crossed the distance between them, leaving the mug on the table and wrapping her arms around him and giving him a long and affectionate hug. “You don’t needt to vorry about me, Koliss.” She spoke softly. “I just… needt a breather. It’ll be a goodt thing, trust me. I just… I can’t be in Ol’val anymore. I have to clear my headt andt this seems like the perfect opportunity.”

They both knew that was a lie.

It had only been a few days ago that they’d learned of a new Battleteam being formed. Something more proactive, more mobile, more violent. The higher ups refused to call it a revenge-team, but they all knew what it was. A bunch of angry folk destined to be sent out there and get back as much of the Hutts’ ill-gotten gains as they could. And show the rest of the galaxy that Arcona would not be trifled with.

As far as causes went, they’d both seen better, but it was a way out and despite her normally calm and demure appearance, Tali had shown she was more than capable of violence if need be. Even so, Koliss remained apprehensive.

“I know, I know, but… I’m just gonna miss you, lavender.” He sighed, reaching behind her to grab the mug she’d left on the table. Taking a deep sip that emptied the dregs, she let the wine work its way into his bloodstream for a moment before looking back at the Twi’lek’s amber eyes.

“I’m gonna miss you a lot.” He finally managed.

She could sense the affection, not only in his voice and expression, but all around him. If he thought he was being somehow coy, he had no idea. Breaking into an affectionate smile, Tali leaned in closer towards him, lekku gently wrapping around his shoulders as she allowed her eyes to almost close. Pressing her lips against his, she held her in place like a fly in a spider’s web, paralyzed by her kiss as she sensed his racing heart.

When their lips finally parted, he was left tasting a lingering hint of her soft scent while the Twi’lek bit her lip with a playful expression. “Vhat say if I make you miss me even more?” She winked as her lek made a beckoning gesture.

He knew this was against his ethics as a doctor. He knew this was all sorts of wrong. But in that moment, after all he’d been through, he frankly did not care...