

"...cuation! Repeat, this is Will of our Lady requesting urgent medical evacuation! Any available craft, please respond!"

Despite the chaos of an unfolding space battle just beyond the viewports of the *Lekmaster 5000*'s cockpit, Tali Sroka and Koliss Welcott shared a moment of dread silence as the crackling message filtered in on an emergency band. A glance was traded between them, one of question, and determination, before the Twi'lek pushed the control column to the left and sent the asymmetrical ship banking hard to port.

Koliss returned his gaze to the turret controls, feeling the gentle touch of Tali's right lek rest upon his shoulder and as a flow of tranquility seeped into his mind. He knew it was a trick, an illusion, as much a falsehood as vigor drawn from a narcotic, but he embraced it all the same. The shaking of his hands faded and he let out a fortifying sigh, bracing himself for the coming horrors that would be greeting them.

They had both heard the screams in the transmission's background.

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"Keep them off! Rear deflectors are down to twenty percent!" Tali cried out as another streak of fire bracketed the freighter from behind, a combat pair of Headhunters having slotted in on their tail as they raced towards the *Lady*. "Make it twelve!"

"I'm trying! Just keep us level!" Koliss replied as he jerked the gun controls to and fro, desperate to align the wildly swaying crosshairs with the swerving and jinking starfighters. Crimson salvos lanced out from the ship's turret, dual barrels spitting out bursts of plasma that failed to find their mark.

"If I do that, ve'll be spacedust in secondts!" Tali whimpered as she sent the ship careening hard to starboard to dodge another burst of return fire from the Headhunters, the emerald blasts slipping beneath their shield envelope by inches.

She heard a faint grumble from the Human medic, but he said no more, instead gripping the controls with grim determination and trying to lead his target. It seemed useless. Every time he thought he had the fighter's course, it would suddenly spin around and twist out of the way at the last second, going precisely the other way he'd predicted. It was uncanny.

"Frakin'... Stay still so I can shoot you!" he growled as he led his target once more before getting frustrated and jerking the controls hard to the right, slewing the turret around while depressing the triggers.

A flurry of bolts rained through the void, the Headhunter's pilot having seen the turret tracking him and preparing to jink away, but suddenly finding his craft right in the middle of a ruby red lightshow. He did not have time for regret before a bolt punched through the ship's thin belly plate and ruptured the fuel cells.

The violent plume of the starfighter's explosive demise rattled the *Lekmaster* and scattered the second Headhunter, the pilot finding discretion to be the better part of valor. With their shields almost overloaded Tali could finally breathe a sigh of relief, though she knew it would be short-lived. The burning wedge that was the Acclamator assault ship filling their view ports made sure of that.

"*Will of our Lady*, this is Tali Sroka of the *Lekmaster*, responding to distress call. Ready for medical evacuation. Where do you want us?"

"*We read you, Miss Sroka. Thank the stars you're here! Ventral hangar bay, you're clear to land!*" the voice of a weary bridge officer crackled in, the sounds of screaming in the background having died down considerably. Whether that was a good or bad thing, neither pilot dared to consider.

Dipping the *Lekmaster* beneath the badly battered *Lady's* port wing, Tali brought the ship up into the ventral hangar bay used for unloading LAAT gunships. As she settled the freighter upon the cargo lift and let the tractor beams begin hauling the ship up into the hangar proper, a thought crossed her mind. Why were they not using the gunships to escape?

The answer came a moment later when their ship arrived at the top of the hangar chute. Hanging above them were a pair of rails from which hung a badly damaged LAAT, behind it a second such craft visible, though with only superficial damage. Both ships were traveling along the equipment rails which, probably from a direct turbolaser hit, had now been mangled into a twisted wreck akin to a ball of shoelace. There was no way of getting any more gunships down without the gentle application of a dockyard hydrocrane.

"Alright, lavender, let's make this quick," Koliss muttered as he stood up from his station and headed into the ship's cargo hold to prepare it for embarkation.

Nodding, Tali took the moment to steady herself for what was to come, smears of red on the hangar deck a not-so-subtle hint. Slipping from her flight harness, the Twi'lek set the craft on idle and opened the boarding ramp. With the *Lekmaster's* engines gently rattling and sputtering behind her, Tali made her way onto the *Lady's* deck.

The moment the hatch opened, a rush of pungent smells assaulted her senses. A mix of acrid smoke from burning plastics and the stale iron scent of spilled vitals mixed with a waft of ammonia and adrenaline laced palpable fear. The sounds of distant fires, blaring klaxons and muffled moans from the wounded lying side-by-side on stained stretchers stunned the Twi'lek despite her preparations and it was only the sharp clack of an Arconan officer snapping to attention that roused her from her stupor.

A stern-faced lieutenant, his white warplate smeared with the dried blood of a comrade, stood to meet her, though calling it a greeting was being generous. "Miss Sroka, I presume? We need to get these wounded out of here at once! How many can your ship hold?"

Taken aback by the forward question, one which she in hindsight should have predicted, Tali fell silent for a moment as she tried to give some sort of estimate. "Erm...."

"We can cram in forty two stretchers, forty three if one is lightly wounded and can manage a sitting position for the duration of transport," Koliss replied sharply as he emerged down the ship's boarding ramp. "I suggest we get the lightly wounded ones in first, leaves the more grievous cases on top for the other end."

The lieutenant nodded, agreeing with his plan. "Very good, I'll begin evacuation at once." As if to highlight his words, a shudder went through the *Acclamator's* hull as a secondary magazine cooked off somewhere in the distance.

"You, get these men in that freighter! Case three's and down in the back. Anyone above that, up front. Now move it, people! *Our Lady's* not gonna hold on forever!" the lieutenant barked his orders to a cluster of orderlies and medics, who immediately began hauling selected patients up into the belly of the *Lekmaster's* cramped cargo space and stacking them up like livestock to get as many to fit as possible. It was going to be a hellish flight back to the *Invicta II*, but Tali had already resigned to that fact.

Grabbing the back end of a stretcher, the Twi'lek lifted the injured soldier up while a squad medic pulled the other end. Together, they traversed the blood slick hangar bay of the listing ship to the *Lekmaster's* entry ramp and inside the cramped shuttle. As they extended the stretcher legs to stack the man on top of a fellow soldier's unconscious body, Tali felt something grasping her wrist.

The man, barely of age to serve, stared at her with wild eyes, his knuckles white as he clenched her forearm in desperation. "P-please..." His hoarse whisper barely carried over the din of the rattling engines and groans of the dying.

She stared into his eyes, but could not meet his gaze for long, instead spying the name tag on his uniform jacket and putting it to memory. "You'll be fine, Villela. Ve're getting you out of here. You didt goodt andt Arcona vill not forget you. Ve vill not forget you." She pushed a minute sliver of Force energy down her arm, her fingers touching his skin and conveying a soothing balm to his troubled mind. It would not last long, but perhaps enough to take him through the flight.

Trooper Villela said nothing, but his grip loosened, fingers slipping from the Twi'lek's wrist as his strength failed him. Tali carefully shifted his arm back onto the stretcher as another patient was being hauled on top of him, leaving the man trapped in a claustrophobic prison of necessity if they were to save as many as they possibly could.

Perhaps it was best if he was not conscious.

Returning to the deck, Tali found the line of injured drastically diminished. Only the most severe cases were left on deck, ones that could be unhooked from their life support only for

the briefest of moments. Even without a medical degree, she did not fancy their odds of survival.

“We’re almost ready to set off. Just get these last ones in and…” Koliss’ words were cut off abruptly as a violent blast tore through the ceiling, fire and shrapnel blanketing the landing pads amidst screams of pain and terror. Glass shattering, durasteel bending like cardboard, the force of the explosion mangled the overhead equipment rails even further and with a groan of yielding metal, the clamps suspending an Assault tank buckled and broke.

Drawn by artificial gravity, the tank plummeted to the deck, crashing down corner first and then toppling over like a giant insect onto its armored back with broken treads uncoiling like lumbering whips. Men stood still for a frozen second, paralyzed by fear that even drawing breath might blow the tank’s munitions or rupture its fuel cells, but somehow the containment held, for now.

As the screams of the recently wounded began to filter through the ringing in her ear-cones, Tali coughed to clear her throat of the stinging smoke and white clouds of fire suppressants being blasted by first response troopers at the puddles of burning lubricant. The lieutenant picked himself up from the deck and shook off a minor bruise to his forehead, turning to look at the tank wreck now blocking one of the entrances into the hangar.

“Frak!” His response was primal, devoid of any decorum or military restraint.

“V-what is it?” Tali dared, sensing the waves of raw anger and frustration emanating from the man like smothering scarves ready to choke her.

“The tank’s blocked the direct route to the medbay! We’ll have to take the other way around, but we can’t move the higher cases. The gurneys won’t fit.”

The implications were obvious and even without Koliss saying it, Tali knew what he wanted her to do. “I’ll carve a path, this may take a moment, but we can get through it,” she stated with determination as she unhooked her lightsaber and sat off towards the tank, only to be stopped by a sudden yell.

“No! You can’t just hack into it! The tank’s full of fuel and ammunition! Your saber strikes either of those and we’re all blown into the void,” the lieutenant warned with a sharp tone. “We can’t move the thing without the cranes and the ship’s down on emergency power. We’ll have to take the ones we can.”

The Twi’lek considered his words, putting away her weapon and glancing up at the immobile cargo cranes. Maybe if they could re-route emergency power from somewhere else. Maybe the *Lekmaster*? No, they didn’t have time and she had no clue how to do that, but she had one final gambit.

“Standt back!” Tali called out as loud as she could manage in the choking atmosphere, closing her eyes as she sank down into a meditative pose and let out a calming breath of air.

Raising her right hand, she drew upon all that she'd learned and did her best to blot out the chaos around her. Letting the Force speak to her while whispering her will upon its winds, she drank deep of the cold pool of power and drew strength to her fingertips. Brows furrowing, faint pearls of perspiration forming upon her lekku, Tali held out her hand and called to the wreck of the Assault tank, sensing its cold durasteel hull and folding its bulk into an unseen envelope.

With the minutest flick of her wrist, her will strained against the tons of warmachine held in her mental grasp, she raised the tank off the deck until it cleared the dents it had made. Slowly, unaware of the stares of shock from the troopers around her, she began to drag the bulk of the machine to the side as it ponderously pivoted around along its vertical axis.

Exhaustion setting in, she bit her lip in grim determination. The tank kept moving aside, though painfully slowly, and in her tensed state her teeth slipped and bit into her own flesh. She tasted blood, the sensation bringing back immediate memories of her mission and like a breaking dam the world came crashing into her mind as she lost her focus. The tank fell down onto the deck, though only from an inch's height, and remained still once more.

Opening her eyes with a pounding lek-ache, Tali's ear cones were ringing and for a moment all the world around her was a blur of smoke and motion. Slowly, she recovered her senses enough to catch the lieutenant's last grateful words before he rushed off towards the now cleared entrance. "...nk you, Miss Sroka! We won't forget this!"

Too exhausted to voice a reply, she swallowed to wet her dry mouth only to coat her tongue in her own blood. The taste was revolting and she felt like retching, but the comforting hand of Koliss grabbed her shoulder and held her from doubling over and doing precisely that.

"You ok, lavender?" his voice was heavy with genuine concern, a quality she'd found in short supply in the days leading up to this travesty of a war. "Come, you need to get the wounded out and onto the *Invicta*. They can't wait." He helped her up to unsteady feet and guided her towards the *Lekmaster*.

It took her weary mind long seconds to process his words and it was not until they'd reached the ramp that she finally realized what he was saying. "Y-you're not coming?"

Koliss offered a smile, the kind he always gave when he was about to do something recklessly stupid. "No, lavender. I need to stay behind and help the *el-tee* prep those wounded for departure. Besides, I'm just taking up space."

Tali blinked in confusion, instantly aware of the risks he was taking even without the *Lady's* groaning spaceframe to further point it out. His expression wanted to convey confidence, but his eyes spoke of the same fears she held. He was no fool, he knew the risks and was taking them anyway.

Who was she to deny him?

“Please be safe,” was all she could muster as she wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace. “I promise to be quick.”

“Heh, you too, lavender,” he replied as he returned the gesture. “And when we’re back on Selen, I promise I won’t.”

She chuckled through a sob, wiping an unwanted tear from her cheek as she broke the contact. “That would be a first...” she muttered, appreciating his ill-timed humor for the distraction it was. They did not have time for sentiment, lives were at stake.

Turning towards her ship, Tali climbed up the ramp and disappeared inside, passing through the crowded cargo hold that reeked of blood and piss, before slipping into her seat. By her side, a lightly injured man sat limp in the gunner’s seat, a bandage wrapped around his head and over the other eye.

“You ok?” she greeted him as she flicked the switches to cycle up the engines from idle.

The man seemed unresponsive until she nudged him with her lek, the sergeant swiftly affirming he was fit to fight, though she had her reservations. As the *Lekmaster* rose from her moorings and slipped back into space, Tali felt a pang of guilt in her heart. Or was it the Force?

She had no time to contemplate as the chaos of naval combat rushed to greet her, the bewildering display of crisscrossing laser beams, ion blasts and missile trails a cacophonous background for violent explosions and disintegrating warships. The Arconan fleet was not faring well, but neither was the enemy.

Tearing her eyes away from the scene of destruction before her, she identified the *Invicta II* on her scanners and headed towards it at full speed, the rattling engines of her beaten-up ship protesting the sudden influx of power but complying all the same. Within a few short moments they were hurtling through the Arconan fleet lines, dodging capital ship fire and trying to keep themselves from being shot down by friendly gunners or clipped by blasts from hostile weapons.

As the stench of the wounded and the dying grew thicker, the air scrubbers struggling to keep pace in a ship designed for only one or two occupants, the sergeant at the turret controls picked up a threat behind them.

“Headhunter! Six o’clock high and closing!”

Tali glanced at the scanners and spat a curse at the signature. It was the same ship they’d fought on the way to the *Lady*. The Collective pilot had come back to avenge his friend.

“Open fire! We have to keep it away from the wounded!” Tali snapped, pushing more power to the engines while diverting almost all shield energy to the rear deflectors. The lights visibly dimming and instrumentation flickering as the hungry powerplants propelled the *Lekmaster*

forward, Tali knew it would not be enough if the enemy pilot was persistent. And being so deep inside the Arconan fleet and still slotting in on their tail spoke much about his dedication to vengeance.

The wounded sergeant brought the turret around and opened fire, spraying crimson bolts at the Headhunter in wild bursts. The shots flew wide and missed their mark, but forced the enemy pilot to evade all the same, the final shots from his return salvo slipping outside the shield envelope.

Not wasting a moment, the fighter struck again and the ship shook with deflected impacts from its lasers. Tali watched in horror as the integrity percentage plummeted, reverting all power to the rear even as microdebris began battering her windscreen without a barrier to prevent it.

“Stay calm, leadt the target andt trust your instincts...” Tali tried to call out to her gunner, but the man was panicking and firing off bursts in desperation before the guns had time to cycle. A long burst later, coupled with a scream of futile anger, the sergeant’s triggers clicked empty. The gun panel flashed a warning as the weapons overheated.

“Sithspit! We’re sitting ducks!” the man screamed, clawing at his harness. “Let me out! Let me Out! Where’s the escape pod?! We need to bail! We need to...!”

“*Sleep.*”

Tali reached out into his mind and forced the thought into his subconscious with a supreme effort of will. Surviving eye rolling back in its socket, the man slumped at the controls, head lolling limply against his chest as a long snore left his clogged airways.

Gasping a lungful of stale, fear-choked air, Tali braced her palm against her lek as everything around her seemed to have doubled. The control column felt heavy in her hands, the ship’s responses sluggish and even the shudders of its hull muted and distant as another salvo racked its aft. Only the sharp blare of a warning siren brought her back into the present, the flashing icon of shield failure occupying every screen.

Though she could not see it with her own eyes, she thought she could sense the predatory hunger of the Collective pilot as he lined up his sights on her, preparing to send forty four souls into the void. Closing her eyes, she whispered a final prayer, hoping that Koliss would make it out alive and wouldn’t be angry at her.

A flurry of crimson bolts skewered its mark and the perforated spaceframe buckled and blew in a haze of light and stardust.

“Lekmaster, *this is Flight-Captain DeVees. Sorry for taking so long, but your tail is clear.*”

Tali opened her eyes with a look of utter perplexion, staring at the open comm channel transmitting on Arconan starfighter frequencies for long seconds before managing a reply.

"T-thank you, Flight-Captain. I owe you one, or forty four to be precise," the stunned Twi'lek stuttered into her headset.

"Don't mention it. Arcona Invicta!"

"A-Arcona Invicta!" Tali replied as she spied a trio of X-wings zoom overhead, the lead fighter tipping its wings at her before breaking off and resuming the hunt. Gripping her controls with renewed purpose, Tali tried to steady her racing heart. "Not today," she whispered to herself. Koliss would have to make good on his promise.

Dipping over the dorsal antennae of a Nebulon-B escort frigate, she finally laid eyes upon the starburst bulk of the *Invicta II*. Its colorful hull had been scorched by turbolasers and a string of impact craters along its starboard wing spoke of a successful bomber run, but the ship itself was still in the fight and mostly unharmed. Though as much could not be said for its escorts that continued to burn up as they plummeted towards Nancora's atmosphere.

"Invicta flight control, this is Tali Sroka of the Lekmaster, carrying wounded from the Lady. Requesting permission to landt."

"Copy that, Miss Sroka. You're clear for port beam approach."

Bringing her battered ship around beneath the *Invicta II*'s hull, Tali carefully slipped in through the inviting force field into its hangar bay. Though in far better shape than the *Lady*'s, it was still strewn with broken fighters being urgently patched up and the wounded being taken in from other ships and waiting to be ferried to its medical ward.

Touching down on her allotted pad, she wasted no time in opening the cargo bay door and rousing the snoring sergeant from his slumber. "Wake up, we need to help these men off the ship! They won't last long!" she urged the man who looked as confused as she had been upon escaping certain death, before heading down into the cargo bay to help haul out the wounded.

Body aching from lek to toe, running on fumes as exhaustion gnawed at her every thought, Tali slumped against the sweat-damp seat in the *Lekmaster*'s cockpit. She was drenched in a spatter of blood and other fluids too unsavory to contemplate and the mental strain to go through the launch procedures seemed a herculean effort. Every nerve and aching joint cried for rest, but she could not afford to dally. More lives hung in the balance and she would have to make this trip again, perhaps more than once, before it was over. One way or another.

The ship groaning in sympathetic protest as the engines coughed a series of misfires upon warm-up, Tali nonetheless pressed the *Lekmaster* through the force field and into the void. Pivoting the barely recovered ship back towards the *Lady*, she pushed the engines as far as

she dared and engaged the droid autopilot. It would be a rare moment of calm and so she took to it like a dying man took to an oasis.

Weary hands found a half-eaten nutribar and some water in the ration compartment, the Twi'lek managing half of both before her stomach grumbled in protest. Despite the need for energy, the stress would not allow her to eat. The stale stench of death hung heavy inside her ship as a morbid silence fell upon her. Alone, in relative tranquility, she observed the space battle reach its final, bitter climax beyond her view screens, watching in enraptured awe as turbolaser banks fired the final salvos into the flank of a Collective Dreadnaught before a B-wing strike finished it off with a spread of proton torpedoes.

The mighty ship shuddered from the explosions, its back visibly snapping in two as prow and stern both tilted upward and a cloud of crystallizing oxygen from venting compartments billowed into space like the lifeblood of a giant sea monster. She held no love for the ship's demise, nor felt any vindication, but a sombre awe as the mighty vessel began to break apart before her very eyes.

Just about to tear her eyes away from it, she saw the Collective ship give one final deathrattle, one last defiant strike, as all of its remaining turbolasers began to pivot towards a target its logical command staff had deemed of no threat many long moments ago and let loose one final salvo.

Tali's face twisted into a broken scream of mute horror as the beams of emerald light lanced through the Acclamator's defenceless form, transfixing it in place like needles through an insect on display. A soul-tearing moment ensued while her entire life hung in the balance before the *Will of our Lady* exploded in a shower of burning debris.

"NOOOOOOOOOO....!"