

More neckline? Maybe less? She didn't want to look like an easy, stereotypical Twi'lek after all. But not too much of a prude, there wouldn't be much time to make a first impression. She would have to pique their interest. But what if they were *only* interested in that? Why was she even bothering? She could always just call it quits and snuggle up to 'Koliss'.

The thought left her hand frozen, the dangling earring gently glittering in the mirror as she stood still in deep thought. Tali's mouth shifted into a depressed arch, brow furrowing in distress. Yes, what about Koliss? Had someone bothered asking the question, she might have stated it was *complicated*.

He'd left before the war with nary a word, simply vanishing from Dajorra and heading out on some weak excuse of having to help his family. At the time, she'd tried being supportive, even if she'd not fully understood or accepted his choices, but as days turned to weeks turned to months, all without any word from him, the worry had soured into dejection and a lingering sliver of resentment. Why hadn't he called?

Tali slipped the earring in its place and smoothed out the creases from her dress. A fitting dark-blue number that she decided showed just enough to be intriguing and not make her look like, well, look like an archetypical Twi'lek. Those questions would be for later, she decreed. Be the reality of them as it may, for all intents and purposes, they'd never gone fully official and she was no longer beholden to him. A chance to see what other prospects might be out there seemed, right. No, not right, but acceptable. If there would ever be a chance to see if the grass truly was greener, now would be the time.

Her lips curling back into a sultry smirk that reeked a bit too much of Lucine for her liking, Tali picked up the small handbag hanging from the mirror stand and headed out. Leaving her lightsaber at home felt odd, but she'd been assured she would not need it. Though the promise wasn't one she particularly believed in, she figured it would do her good to trust people without a weapon at her side. And if anything happened, she always had a few tricks up her lek.

"What in the name of tide are you doing man? Seriously, what are you doing?"

There was no response. Then again, Koliss shouldn't have expected any kind of revelation talking to a mirror. His eyes lingered on the shrapnel scar that ran along his neck. He sighed heavily and quickly went about washing his hands. He grimaced as he rubbed the soap into the freshly scarred burns on his hands; another present from the recent war. It brought up too many bad memories. He quickly wiped his hands and slipped on his new dress gloves, but the memories didn't go away.

Such thoughts were partly why he had even bothered trying out this new speed dating service he had heard about. He still had some off time to burn, and he couldn't just sit in his apartment any longer, he needed to get out of here. Although now that the day had arrived that his 'date' had been scheduled, he was having second thoughts. He had wondered if he simply needed some company, why hadn't he tried any number of the friends he had made

in his service with Arcona. Why hadn't he tried calling a certain lavender hued Twi'lek he had grown to care about more than he realized. It was, for lack of proper term, complicated.

Koliss rolled over his thought as he began dressing slowly. He felt guilty above all else. His departure from Dajorra had been less than routine. Koliss wasn't sure he had told anyone where he was really going, but he had told her why.

Well, partly why; it simply wasn't something he was comfortable bringing up. That snap decision left a large mark on his mind. Why was he not comfortable discussing his mission, especially with someone he had fond feelings for. Was his paranoia really that deep seeded, had there been one too many betrayals, was he really just that weak?

The swirl of negative emotions had not helped Koliss feel relaxed in anyway, which is why he now stared at himself dressed to the nines. A less militaristic sort of dress, but Koliss was adamant he put his best foot forward no matter how scattered his mind was at the moment. He had signed up for this, and come death or high tide he was going to follow through.

Koliss didn't feel too good about this, especially since he hadn't even talked to Tali since the Collective conflict had ended, or even before that. Now he was going out on a date, a blind date of all things, without even finding out where they stood? It reminded him of a lot of his previous trysts; brief passion and a passing separation.

This felt different though, at least he felt it did. Koliss didn't want that, not after finding out what he had about Tali. Still, that did not change the fact that he had no idea where they stood on an actual relationship.

He needed to follow through and actually talk to Tali again. Explain himself, tell her why he had left so suddenly, finally give up some of that precious security and trust in someone else. Koliss couldn't help but just imagine how it might go. He might pour his heart out, she might accept what he had to say, they might grow closer. The alternative was the ending of so many other similar relationships, with the door slammed in his face. That thought only further darkened his mind.

Koliss picked up his coat jacket and moved to exit. His knees felt weak, though he wasn't sure if it was nerves over this 'date' or a sign of just how his resolve had failed him again. He would talk to her again, soon.

Now though, now he had a new challenge in front of him. Now he had to be suave; he had to be human again.

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The venue was far from unpleasant, she had to give it that much. The Selenian resort, overlooking a verdant cove of azure water and sun kissed beaches, was in an ideal location and the slender sculpted sandstone pillars holding up the gilded roof left the hall with an airy elegance that made it easy to breathe. That was precisely what Tali needed.

The pounding in her chest did not relent and each step down the line to the sign-up booth felt unbearably heavy. Despite the lightness of her dress she felt suffocating and it was through sheer will she did not turn around and sprint away lekku flailing. She would go through with this and not allow Lucine and Zujenia to snicker behind her back.

“Miss?” the agitated voice sounded through the haze of her thoughts.

Turning to look at the clearly peeved Duros sitting by the small desk, beads of sweat dripping from his bald forehead and holding a hololodger in his hand, Tali could tell he was not enjoying tonight’s clientele. A pile of lightsabers, blaster pistols and other associated weaponry lay in a tray next to his desk, small tags attached to each.

The Duros was holding out his hand expectantly.

“Oh,” Tali blurted, suddenly realizing his intent. “I, uh, decided to leave mine at home.”

The blank stare did not shift as the hand was withdrawn and a sensory wand produced in its place. Scanning her from head to toe for any concealed weaponry, the Duros finally grunted and nodded. “Name?”

“Sroka. Tali Sroka.”

“Right, table 27. Stay there, chat with whomever is sent your way. You have until the bell rings. Good luck, have fun and -” he paused to pull out a paper ticket for her. “One free drink on the house.”

Tali accepted the slip and nodded, looking a bit dismayed at the very clinical entrance provided, but figured it was not representative of the night’s main attraction. The man was simply doing his job and peeved, right? Feeling not too reassured, she decided to head for the bar and cash in her slip before they ran out of booze. By the sheer waves of nervousness emanating from the attendants, it would be in high demand.

“What can I get you, my dear?” the sharply dressed bartender, a smiling Nautolan, greeted her as she leaned by the counter.

His winning smirk and friendly features gave her some respite and the Twi’lek’s shoulders visibly relaxed, dropping a generous inch. “I’ll have a Pink...” she paused, considering the order. The Pink Lekku was her go-to cocktail, a safe mix of fruity juices and plain alcohol. But this night wasn’t supposed to be about the usual, the safe, the tried and tested.

“Surprise me,” she finally decreed, managing a playful smirk of her own which the Nautolan took in stride. Nodding, he turned back to his bottles and began to assemble his surprise.

While the juggling bartender worked his magics, Tali turned around to take in the other participants mingling nervously around the bar. A smattering of different species, Togruta, Humans, Twi’leks, Wookiees, Pantorans and many more besides were making awkward

smalltalk while ingesting their drinks with gusto. Despite being a social butterfly in a certain sense, the prospect of wading into that social krayt dragon den felt daunting when it was for the reason of finding a suitable mate. Had it just been for work, it would have been easy. But now, now it felt too personal. Too close. Too intimate.

“Relax,” the bartender chuckled softly as he placed a pale blue drink upon the counter, served from a tall slender flute. “They’re more afraid of you than you are of them,” he added with a good-natured laugh.

“T-thanks,” the Twi’lek mumbled, her purple cheeks turning a faint shade of crimson mauve. “It just feels so, overwhelming.”

The bartender smiled and nodded. “I’m sure it does, if you’re going in assuming to pick a mate for life,” he winked. “The way I see it, you owe none of these your time or company. What you choose to do now, or after, is up to you. Test the waters, see what you find and remember, there’s always more squid in the sea.”

The comforting smile and gentle kick from the blue drink had the effect she had been hoping for, adding just enough courage to the hesitant Twi’lek to break the spell of trepidation. Her shallow breaths slowing until she let out a soft sigh, Tali brought her racing mind to rest. The Nautolan was right, she should just go out there and see what happened. At any rate, she could always just go back home and not feel beholden to anyone. It was a very liberating thought.

“Thank you, I needed that,” she admitted. “Though I have to ask, what am I drinking?” she added a moment later, sipping some more of the refreshingly minty berry-flavored cocktail.

“A Pale Pantoran. Though this one has a little... surprise.”

“Oh? What would that be?” Tali raised an eyebrow as she finished the glass and suddenly coughed, feeling an intense burning sensation down her throat like she’d ingested a mouthful of fire. The sensation lasted for but a second, the fire turning into a refreshing minty coolness that lingered on her palate.

“That,” the chuckling Nautolan winked, holding up a small bottle of Pantoran Ice Fire brandy. “Enjoy your evening, milady, and do come back for seconds. I’d be honored to surprise you again.”

Rolling her eyes, Tali gave a soft groan and nodded, playing her part as the peeved, but amused customer as the master of ceremonies rang the bell to call them to their tables. Finding her way to table number 27, the Twi’lek sat down and sighed. This was, as they said, it.

Koliss could swear this view was something out of an old dream of his. It was strangely close to a view from home. The setting star casting golden rays across picturesque buildings. He

realized just how much he needed something like this. A simple sight for some simple peace of mind. He was already beginning to feel better.

“Excuse me sir.” A voice interrupted his thoughts and Koliss had to push down his grimace.

“Yes, what is it?” Koliss turned to see that same Duros that had been so unwelcoming to the event.

“The bell sounded sir, please head for a table please” Koliss saw that indeed most of the surprisingly large group had already moved to be seated, and he immediately felt quite out of place staring into nothing as he had been.

“Um, yes, thank you.” Koliss moved quickly past the peeved worker and made towards the first open seat he saw. That feeling of self-doubt was beginning to creep back in. He had been one of the first to arrive to the rather large hall where this speed dating event was supposed to take place. He had felt immensely out of place, and not just because he had to submit his weapons at the door.

‘Maybe the four blasters was a bit of a bad idea all things considered.’ He thought as he finally found an open table only to discover that no one sat across from him.

Koliss briefly adjusted his neck collar as his mind continued to wander. He honestly didn’t know what to expect from this whole ‘speed dating’ thing; he had never seen it back home and had only heard about it in his travels. It seemed so silly to base something like an emotional connection on a relatively short conversation before trying to do the same thing to another. Then again, Koliss could recall an uncomfortable number of relationships he had before that had been based on less, in his darker years.

Now sitting alone at that tiny table, with other couples already speaking loudly next to him, it seemed to just start bringing up bad memories. Maybe this idea was a bad one after all.

“Achuta la dan ye wanya” <Hey there good looking>

Koliss was snapped out of his dark train of thought when he realized someone had appeared quite suddenly in the seat opposite him. He hadn’t even heard them approach.

Koliss’ vision was filled by a striking sight. A female purple-hued Togruta, dressed in a simple but stylish silver dress and light makeup. Within the span of seconds Koliss felt a sharp sensation go through his chest as he was reminded of someone else that could strike a similar visage. Yet he also felt a strange pull of familiarity with this woman.

All of his thought processing left an utterly blank look on Koliss’ face, and the small smirk the Togruta woman had slowly fell away.

“Kouzago-ake, Jee seian fa doth wa dondichola bom kiuke bai bakanu kae baua bai cohai huttese..” <Sorry, I guess it was a bit too much to expect someone else to speak huttese>

The disappointment seemed to almost roll off the Togruta. Though Koliss finally realized he had in fact understood her; it had simply been quite a long time since he to speak hutttese in any kind of fluency. He began to struggle to recall the needed word structure as the Togruta for a third time.

“I hope this isn’t a deal breaker, but I’m still working on my basic.” She spoke in a heavy hutttese accent, but she spoke with confidence as she tried to regain a semblance of smile.

Koliss finally managed to relax his mind as he began to remember his old hutttese tongue, as well as recall what kind of lambasting his brother and sister would give him for sitting and being unable to speak openly with a beautiful woman. With a mind that was still refocusing, Koliss finally spoke.

“Mah bamausa bengahena, Jee woy du wopka cohai bu jensm.” <My apologies madam, I do in fact speak the language>

The woman gained a small look of shock that had mirrored Koliss from before. Koliss himself allowed a more confident smile to slip onto his face as he addressed her.

“Kuna kee ritke gee bai cohvana mi peee Jee doth wa dondichola... whoma cay mee neyoha. <You will just have to forgive me as I was a bit...struck by your visage.>

That shocked look on her face was overtaken by a slight blush, before it was a apparently suppressed as she regained a smile of her own.

“Let me start again.” Koliss spoke in basic again as he extended his hand across the table. “Koliss Welcott, a pleasure to meet you.”

The Togruta woman seemed hesitant at first, but eventually extended her hand across the table to grasp Koliss’ hand.

“Feron Kasri, bu cuova doth bidwata.” <..., the pleasure is mine.>

Koliss made a snap judgement in pressing his lips to the back of her hand. Just like how his etiquette classes had beaten into his head. Another suppressed blush let Koliss feel a flush of relief and would make the following conversation much more awkward now that he had remembered his old ways.

However, for some reason he still felt that ghostly stabbing sensation over his heart.

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The hubbub of mingling people changed for a ruckus of shifting chairs and shuffling feet, before giving way to awkward greetings and idle pleasantries. Tali found herself tapping on the small table she was seated at in barely contained nervousness before a white-clad Nautolan stepped up and laid his hand upon the chair opposite.

“Excuse me, ma’am, but is this seat taken?”

Roused from her anxious reverie, Tali's eyes shot up in mild startlement, managing to stutter a hurried reply. "No, I'm just wait... Oh," she trailed off, realizing what the man was implying as a deep blush spread on her cheeks. "P-please, have a seat."

The man gave a polite smirk, placing down his half-drunk cocktail and seating himself opposite before offering her his hand. "Jaiome Sysko, always a pleasure to meet someone who appreciates humor."

"Tali Sroka, I really should get my headt in the game, shouldn't I?" she sighed, though accepting his hand as a gesture of civility.

"Oh nonsense, you're quite delightful just the way you are," Jaiome chuckled disarmingly. "A beauty such as yourself, I would forgive any gauche and I happen to find your sense of humor quite to my liking."

The blush on her cheeks deepened, though she couldn't shake the feeling of *something* being awry. As if there was a mild hint of something untoward in his voice. Still, she tried to keep an open mind and smiled.

"You're too kindt. Someone like you must have no trouble finding company, so vhat brings you here tonight?"

Jaiome chuckled, sipping his drink nonchalantly and leaning towards her ever so slightly. "Although it might be difficult to believe, I have not been so lucky in love. For reasons I cannot fully understand, it seems I always end up playing second fiddle to other, more successful men. Why, had it been any other venue than this, I doubt I would ever have gotten the time of day from someone as breathtaking as yourself."

The tips of her lekku squirming, both from the compliment and slight nervousness as that nagging feeling refused to relent, Tali forced the pleasant smile to stay on her lips while she thought of a way forward. Something that perhaps did not involve complementing one's looks.

"That is very unfortunate indeedt, but as long as there is life, there is a chance," she stated with an awkward chuckle. "But tell me, vhere do you vork? I frequent Selen from time to time vhen I go andt check out my store in the Sinchi Ring, but I have not seen you aroundt those parts..."

There was no perceivable shift in the man's features as he continued to beam his wide, toothy grin that had begun to take on an almost predatory aspect in her mind. "Oh, I do some holography. Freelance, mostly. I travel quite a bit and don't usually get credited for my work, so it is not a surprise you haven't heard of me, even if you probably have seen some of my work. I focus on finding new trends, new styles and designers and exposing them to the galaxy at large. I consider it a service to all."

He sipped from his drink yet again, though Tali was quite certain he'd barely ingested any of it.

"You wouldn't happen to be an artist yourself? The Sinchi Ring is full of entrepreneurial sorts and if you have a shop there, I can only assume one of such vision as yourself might be trying to make your mark on the cultural scene, as it were."

"Oh, I wouldn't call myself an artist, but I do design some lekwarmers..."

"Splendid! That is precisely the sort of venture I am looking into next! What a coincidence!" Jaiome exclaimed enthusiastically. "And your modelling? You model these... *lekwarmers* yourself, I assume?" His voice rose to an expectant pitch, Tali sensing hints of excitement from him that went beyond the trivial.

"No," she replied bluntly, "I have mannequins for that, they work..."

"Oh no-no-no-no! That is a crying shame!" the man interjected, raising his hand in objection. "A waste of potential! I am certain that your wares would simply fly off the shelves if you did a series of holos with yourself wearing them. A woman of such grace, such beauty, such elegance. But we would have to keep in simple, bare, raw. Otherwise your mere presence might overshadow that of your legwarmers-"

"*Lek* varmers..." Tali interjected with a palpable bitterness.

"- of your lekwarmers and we would not want that. Not at all!" Jaiome shook his head profusely, making his tendrils flail. "I would suggest," he stated, pulling out a crisp business card from his pocket and sliding it across the table, "that we meet again at a later date and see what I could do to boost your sales. Just you, me, your *lekwarmers* and my camera. I'm certain we'd find some excellent angles..."

The way he licked his lips while his gleaming eyes traced the curve of her dress made the Twi'lek feel physically sick. Crossing her hands over her chest and tugging the neckline up defensively, she called the card to her with a gesture of her lek, the card floating through the air upon her command.

Jaiome's smarmy smile finally shifted, into a gawing stare. "Y-you-you're..."

"Yes."

"A-and you... uh, excuse me. I, uh, ahem, think that perhaps your current means of promotion are quite adequate and, uh, I will probably not be of any service to you after all. My sincerest apologies..."

"How disappointing, but I guess I will survive without..."

“Y-yes, uh, best of luck to your business and... oh dear, is that the bell? How time flies, I must be off. It was a pleasure, miss Sroka.” The Nautolan made his hurried excuses and bolted, forgetting his drink on the table in his hurry to leave. Tali flipped the card over and chucked it away. At least her dates couldn't possibly get any worse than this.

Koliss offered a final parting word to Feron as he stood up, responding to the bell indicating a switch of partners. Their conversation had gone swimmingly, or at least he thought so. They had spoken about their professions, apparently she was currently working towards starting a nonprofit charity, and about what they expected out of a relationship. The two of them had exchanged contact information and a promise to speak again in the future. It was certainly an auspicious start for Koliss to this rather strange event; maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

His drifting thoughts were quickly shifted as he approached the next table. A human woman sat in almost rapt attention as she caught sight of Koliss. She wore a decidedly less formal wear than most of the others around them, Koliss included. Her brown hair, tanned skin, and a rather obvious beauty mark seemed almost fringly familiar to him but he couldn't exactly place it. Remembering his manners, Koliss decided to start the conversation this time as he sat down.

“A pleasure to meet you, I'm Koliss-”

“Welcott, Dr. Welcott to be exact.” Koliss felt his eyebrow rise at the interruption. The woman had a terse smirk as she observed Koliss' face with a piercing gaze.

Koliss spoke slowly, “Yes.... you know me? I must apologize that I can't recall where we could have met.”

His partner flipped her hair behind a shoulder as she answered. “Really? After all this time? Well I guess I shouldn't judge too harshly. I've changed quite a bit since then, and it looks like you have too.”

Koliss adopted a pensive look, to which the woman only seemed to smile wider at. He couldn't place her, despite that familiar feeling starting to grow. Both stared at one another in a quickly growing tense silence. This was broken by the woman chuckling as she leaned back in her chair nonchalantly.

“Alright alright 'Liss, I understand. I think I owe you a bit more than trying to mess with you.” She gained a rather knowing look, and Koliss froze.

‘Liss...’ That was an old nickname, one he hadn't heard in a long time. The mental images of a bombed out hospital floor and a deafening silence rushed to the forefront of his mind. The woman across him slowly traced a finger horizontally across her eyes, and the scarred visage of a mercenary soon joined in his jumbled thoughts.

“Ester...” The woman smiled and spread her arms out as if he should be happy for the realization.

“On the spot as ever doc, good to know you’ve kept yourself sharp.” She spoke with a more relaxed tone of voice. Koliss felt anything but relaxed.

“Ester.... How, why...? What are you doing here?” Koliss had to know; he needed to distract himself from those past thoughts. Ester had taken the time to enjoy a drink from what looked to be a hip flask before quickly stowing it away and putting on another self-satisfied smile.

“It wasn’t intended that’s for sure; but imagine my surprise. I come out to the middle of nowhere to look for some fresh business, hear something about a war, end up here, and decide to come to this little party to see what the company is like on this backwater. Who is it that I spy across the room? Silver tide Koliss himself, looking much more tall, dark, and handsome than I remember?”

Koliss shifted as Ester ran her eyes across the fresh scar on his face. He also rubbed his glove covered hands together, wondering what she would think of those scars.

“It’s almost like fate right? I couldn’t help but take over the table and get to see you again.”

Koliss could not make sense of their conversation, speaking like they were old flames reunited. He remembered separating from her on less than amicable terms, if one counted a hail of blaster fire for a last word as amicable. He thought he would never see her again, and yet here she sat apparently better than ever.

“Alas the company around here leaves a little much to be desired.” Koliss refocused on her speaking, “So I don’t know about you lover-boy, but I think it’s good to know that I can get my hands on someone that knows what they’d be doing.” She slid a small note to him which held her new contact information.

“So you up for a party tonight; or do you think it would go over better if we let it simmer a bit so it can be more explosive?”

Koliss visibly flinched at the word ‘explosive’, but Ester showed no outward sign of noticing that. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing emerged. The words seemed to be stuck in his throat. He finally shut his mouth, grabbed the small slip of paper and quickly moved away at a brisk pace. Ester didn’t follow, but he could feel that piercing gaze on his back.

That stabbing sensation in his chest felt like it was growing bigger.

The sensation of someone approaching was equally physical as it was ethereal, the floor itself gently bending beneath the weight of the hulking Besalisk that approached her table. Tali had sensed his presence, and interest, but hoped it had been misdirected. However, as the creaking chair opposite struggled to withstand his bulk, she was forced to admit he was indeed her new date.

Perhaps she shouldn't have brushed off the slimy Nautolan so easily...

"Enchanted to make your acquaintance, miss." The rumbling sound of his voice was like a landslide, though his sophisticated pronunciation wrapped the rolling boulders in soft velvet.

Taken aback, Tali did not even notice the offered hand at first and grasped it haphazardly when her senses caught up with the situation. The Besalisk seemed unalarmed as he wrapped his fingers around her hand in what passed as a delicate squeeze, before bending down and planting a kiss on the back of her hand.

The purple Twi'lek had no words for the situation, her every sense screaming that she had been drugged and would wake up in some dingy prison any moment now. She was not quite sure if that had been an overall improvement.

"My name is Daegello Rasharius, esquire. May I be so bold as to inquire your name?"

"T-Tali, Tali Sroka," the Twi'lek managed before shaking her head to clear her thoughts. "I'm sorry, I, uh, had a bit of a rough time with my previous *date* and I wasn't expecting..."

"Someone like me? Oh, do not worry my dear. I get that a fair amount. People seem surprised about meeting Besalisk poet."

"Poet?" Tali blinked, twice.

"Oh yes," Daegello let out a soft chuckle, velvet rocks grinding against each other in a quarry. "After all, where else would Ojomian poetry come from?"

"Ah, yes, of course... Ojomian poetry..." Tali coughed, feeling distinctly out of her depth.

Daegello seemed to pay her discomfort no mind, instead reaching out to grab the glass Jaiome had left between index finger and thumb of his lower right arm. "A drink? For me, perhaps?"

"N-no, that's..." Tali began, glancing to the left to see the slimy Nautolan chatting up a Mirialan, his gestures such a repeat of the act he'd pulled on her it sent another shiver of disgust down her spine. "Actually, go ahead. I doubt he'll be needing it..." she muttered bitterly.

Daegello smiled contently, bringing the glass up to his mouth and craning back his neck to ingest the entire cocktail in one go, garnish and all. Setting the glass down with meticulous care, he offered a soft chuckle at Tali's shocked expression.

"Your eyes are like the twin suns of Tatooine, though they seem to orbit a black hole," he reached over to gently close her gaping maw with his finger. The sensation was oddly gentle, his skin soft and smelling ... *nice*.

“There, much better,” he decreed, earning himself a blush from the purple hued lek-head.

“I’m sorry, it’s just... I haven’t been aroundt Besalisks that much andt...”

“No need to apologize, yet again. Perhaps we ought to begin anew. Please, pray tell what quirk of that cruel mistress Fate has brought you to such a sordid soirée?”

“I wouldn’t call it sordidt, per se, but I guess I’m here because my friendts thought I neededt to...” she sighed, dreading to use the words she was about to, “Move along.”

Daegello nodded, his expression conveying sincere empathy. “I see and deeply sympathize. The pains of the heart, these are very well known by sailors of troubled waters. Ojomian poetry has spared no expense in detailing the grief that arises when a love is ended and two lovers are no more.”

“That... sounds oddly fitting,” Tali admitted, though still hesitant about the prospect of suddenly prompting a recital of said poetry.

“Of all the emotions, we are blessed to feel. Love is the scariest, and hardest to heal,” Daegello sighed, his voice heavy with emotion as he glanced to the side as if to avert his gaze. “These words, not from my pen but another’s, I believe hold true no matter their heritage. Love is the great equalizer, I find. And the pain of lost loves transcends boundaries of time and race.”

Tali could do nothing more than nod, transfixed by the poem and its bittersweet message. Perhaps Zuji and Lucine had been right after all? At least there was someone who understood her.

Reaching out to grasp his hand once more, the tough skin surprisingly soft to her touch, Tali offered a tentative smile and shifted closer in her seat before speaking. “I think I vouldt like to hear some more verses, if you have them.”

Daegello’s features melted into a beaming smile, the Besalisk nodding approvingly. “Of course, miss Sroka, I have plenty more,” he assured her. “Four arms, lets one work twice as fast,” he added with a soft chuckle as he reached for a red notebook from his breast pocket.

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“... see if I don’t,” Daegello ended the poem with a low growl, managing to strike a perfect balance between the gruffness of a Besalisk and the bitterness of a lover scorned.

“That vas vonderful,” Tali sighed breathlessly, lost in the tremors of his voice and the words from Ojomian masters now long-since dead. Idly sipping the last drops of her cocktail, the Twi’lek smiled at her date as he closed his notebook and coughed, one hand rubbing his throat.

"I'm most pleased you found my recital enjoyable, miss Sroka. Might I suggest we discuss the subtleties over a beverage, perhaps? I see you are quite empty and I must admit the performance left me parched."

Giving a soft chuckle, she nodded and stood up, accepting one of the Besalisk's hands as he guided her towards the counter. The Nautolan bartender greeted the pair with a friendly smile, holding up a bottle of Pantoran Ice Fire brandy and giving it a cheeky shake. Nodding with an amused smirk, Tali sat down by the counter while the bartender fixed them their drinks.

"So, about your vork," she began, brushing her lek behind her shoulder, "I take it you publish these poems of yours somewhere?"

"Oh, huh? Published? Oh, no-no. Nothing so commercial, my dearest. Art must persist on its own merits, not live or die by the whims of a bureaucratic publisher," Daegello, distracted by the flashing bottle of liquor that the bartender juggled, replied.

"I see," Tali nodded, the reply piquing her interest ever further. "But, if you don't mindt my asking, vhat do you do for a living then?"

"Living? My dear, writing poetry is my entire being, my existence is my craft and through it, I exist."

"Yes, I fully understandt that part, but... to be blunt, vhere do you make credits from?"

The bartender interrupted their conversation as he placed the two drinks on the counter, smiling politely as he glanced at the two and inquired who might be paying for them. Only the first drink had been on the house.

"Since you were so keen on monetary matters, I presume you might be more inclined?" the Besalisk stated as he reached for the glass and took a sip.

Caught aback, but swiftly realizing it would have been rather rude not to pay her share, Tali pulled out her credit chit and handed it over to the bartender, before reaching for her own glass.

"Oh, and on the off chance you happened to have a few spare credits lying around, would you mind settling my scores with this fine establishment? I seem to have forgotten my chit at home..."

"Um, how much do you...?"

"A hundred and seventeen, ma'am," the Nautolan bartender stated, before the poet could spin fanciful exposition.

"A hundredt andt seventeen?! I'm not paying for... How much have you been drinking?!"

Daegello finished his drink and looked almost offended, placing it upon the counter as he struggled to fight back a rising burp. He failed.

“I will have you know that a certain amount of intoxicants in one’s bloodstream is highly conducive to writing good poetry! I did not find you dismissing my art so casually upon recital,” he scoffed.

“Vell no, but,” Tali muttered, feeling ashamed. She had enjoyed his verses, she could not deny it.

“Precisely. I shall accept this second cocktail in lieu of an apology,” the Besalisk mused, snatching the second Pale Pantoran off the counter and downing it in one go.

The red that had suddenly flared on Tali’s cheeks had nothing to do infatuation and the bartender knew it at once. Swiftly slinking away from the encounter, he backed to the register while Tali almost skewered the man’s face on her index finger.

“I have hadt it vith exploitative sithspits tonight!” she spat. “You may have talent, but you are an oaf andt a drunkardt! I couldt not care less for your verses if this is the price someone else hadt to pay for them to be createdt...” she scoffed, eyes flashing fire as for a moment the air around the man seemed to vibrate and shimmer before she regained her senses.

“Findt someone else to rip off, or better yet, earn your own damn credits...” Tali growled as she stormed off, heading back to her table.

Koliss was glad to feel the buzz of his alcoholic beverage starting to kick in. The conversational buzz in the room was growing more quiet, an outburst from some woman across the bar that sounded like gibberish to his alcohol-addled mind notwithstanding. He could feel the edge of tenseness starting to dull. It was a refreshing feeling; that fuzzy feeling was instantly cut off when a rather invasive voice spoke too close to his ear.

“Excuse me sir, the bell has sounded, you’ll need to continue on or you will be asked to leave.”

That same Rodian was talking, although he didn’t look like he was enjoying having to talk to Koliss too much himself. The good doctor wanted to tell the staff member to buzz off, or he wanted to just punch the Rodian and go back to his drink, he wasn’t quite sure yet. A knowing look from the Nautolan bartender stopped Koliss from following his more violent thoughts. Instead Koliss simply nodded, placed down a credit chit and moved away to where he thought he remembered his next table being.

He couldn’t see any sign of Ester, which he was infinitely glad for, but he didn’t think he had much more charisma left in him after such hated memories were brought up. Still he figured that there wasn’t much more left to go and he was committed as is.

Koliss quickly found his next table and quickly moved to take his seat with some measure of dignity. He sat across from a rather striking Devaronian woman that held a rather peeved look at the moment.

"I'm not sure how you could possibly be late here, so that's a strike against you right off," the woman spoke in a gravelly tone. Koliss felt his wish to snap a retort, but held back after a second of slightly sober thought.

"Of course, I just had to take care of some business, I apologize for that." Koliss extended an arm in a greeting, "I'm Koliss Welcott, a pleasure." She did not attempt to return his greeting, so Koliss resigned himself to pull back his hand and slump back into his seat.

The doctor could feel her eyes running over him, trying to figure or judge something out. Koliss didn't particularly like when that judging gaze lingered on his facial scars. That previous feeling of anxiety started to return and he began to feel like he was on the defensive.

"Crin's the name, in case you wanted to know. So was it work related that stopped you from showing up on time, or was it more of a personal problem." Crin seemed to have signed off on common courtesy for the moment, and Koliss felt his patience already wearing thin.

"Technically," Koliss drew out, fighting off the slur that tried to arise "It is a personal and work problem, but let's call it a bad memory. Just an old scar from my early days as a doctor, nothing more."

Koliss let his eyes drop slightly as he tried to collect his thoughts properly. He was quite surprised by the large toothy grin that greeted him when he looked back up. It reminded him of Ester; he didn't like that.

"Doctor... well why didn't you say so?" Crin leaned forward with a mischievous glint in her yellow eyes. "Here I thought I was not going to find any good sort in this place." Koliss could feel a small red flag go up in his at the tone, but really he was just glad for the conversation to distract him at this point.

"Well, I'm not sure about a 'good sort' but yes, I've been a doctor for most of my adult life. Private practice, freelance work, working with refugees and things like that."

"Oh wow, that must so....gratifying," Crin stretched her words, and that smile slowly started to fade. "Although I can't imagine how well freelance work might pay."

Koliss bristled at that. "What do you mean how it might pay? I don't do it for the pay, I do it because I-" It was Koliss' turn to stop. He knew what he was going to say, because he wanted to help people, but something in his mind clicked that the justification never made it out. He wasn't sure if he believed that now, with the Collective conflict still fresh in his mind.

Koliss could feel what might have amounted to a panic attack building up in him. The arrival of Ester, his crisis of conscience that he specifically was trying to escape with this whole stupid 'speed dating' thing. It was beginning to bubble over. He took a moment to refocus his gaze; Crin was frowning at him. He had to get fresh air soon or something bad would happen.

"Please excuse me." Koliss did not hear any retort as he stalked away from the table. He had to find somewhere that was more open to the fresh air.

If this place had any good company, she was having the worst luck finding it. When they weren't after her looks, they were after her money, or just a general waste of effort. Why, oh why could she not find someone cute, funny and who appreciated her for who she was? Someone like... No.

She froze, as if sensing a familiar scent. Aftershave. A lingering fragrance, but not of perfume, but in the Force itself. Someone *very* familiar...

She shook her head. No. That was precisely why she was here in the first place. To get away from it, to get away from *him*. But why was she running?

"Hey, you look like a troubled number? Let me guess, daddy issues?" the voice startled her, soft and elegant, but playful, intriguing.

She turned to look at the person who'd snuck up on her and was surprised to see a female Zeltron lounging in the seat opposite, sipping the last dregs from a cocktail glass through the straw rather audibly, her cheeks concave. That might have been a rehearsed number for the guys, she reminded herself.

"Umh, excuse me, but that seat is reserved for..." she began, barely recovering.

"Dates, yeah. I know," the woman smiled, waving a red slip. "You thought only guys liked being on the hunt?"

Tali blushed, averting her gaze. The woman had a point, it wasn't like they'd exactly been selected by gender to sit by their tables. "Oh, umh, sorry, I didn't mean to..." she began to apologize, but was cut off again.

"Don't worry, I get that a lot. So, you not interested?"

"Erm..." The blush on the Twi'lek's cheeks deepened.

"So you *are* interested..." the woman leered, suddenly intrigued and leaning forward. "That's ok, honey. If you get bored stroking sabers, why not try blasters for a change?"

"V-what? H-how did you...?"

“I didn’t.”

The woman’s cheeky grin drew a sliver of anger from the Twi’lek. She could accept when others had her beat, but the gloating was pushing it. “Look,” she sighed, “let’s start from the beginning. I’m Tali Sroka andt...”

“Ilya Jex,” the Zeltron woman smiled, offering a hand for a shake. “The pleasure’s all yours, if you play your cards right.”

Tali accepted the woman’s hand out of habit, though something about her chafed her a great deal. There was cocky confidence in her, yes, but also something beyond it. Something elusive.

“A pleasure to meet you, Ilya,” she offered, intentionally dragging out her pacing to slow things down. The Zeltron was clearly speeding things by far too quickly. “What is it that you do for a living?”

“What is this? A job interview?” Ilya scoffed, breaking into a chuckle. “Haven’t you been on a date before? C’mon, ask me something personal! Something deep. Something... dark. You wanna know what makes me tick, don’t you? You wanna know which buttons to press, what holovids I like, what position I like to cuddle in, so you can wrap those lekku around me as you kiss my neck.”

Tali was at a loss for words.

“Don’t deny it, sweet cheeks. Go on, ask, I promise I won’t bite, unless you want me to.”

Her head was spinning. Things were going too far, too fast. Something about the woman wasn’t right. She just couldn’t place her finger on it.

Every last thing the woman said was true. She was reading her like an open book. She couldn’t be a Jedi, or a Sith. Or, she could, but she was fairly confident she would have noticed. No, the woman wasn’t reading her mind and yet, all the things she insinuated were things she felt and that felt *wrong*.

“Excuse me,” Tali muttered, pushing herself away from the table. She suddenly felt light-headed. She needed some air.

“What’s the matter, sweet cheeks?” the woman cooed. “Don’t you wanna find out what makes me tick? What makes me purr?”

She did. Oh by the stars, she did want just that. But something about that want felt wrong, it felt forced. It was tearing her apart, but she had to deny that desire, that need. She wavered, but stayed the course.

"I think I need some fresh air," she muttered, stumbling away from the woman as if obscenely drunk, the lingering scent of her intoxicating perfume slowly fading as she burst outside and inhaled deep of the cool evening air. A few hungry lungfuls later, she could already feel her head clearing, her thoughts returning to herself and the unbidden desires leaving her mind. Though, some still stubbornly lingered.

She shook her head, lekku gently flailing. Why was she still sensing Koli...?

She looked up, staring at the familiar face not five paces from her. The man was staring at her with a stupefied expression. Hers was not much better.

"Erm," she managed to voice. "F-fancy meeting you, uh, here..."

"Um... hello there." Koliss hesitated. He saw that Tali seemed to not be faring any better.

Koliss didn't think it could have gotten much worse than what he was feeling right at this moment. A promising night had taken a quick turn for the worse. Seeing Tali here, dressed in something that was so flattering, and the implication that she was in this place, made this go from bad to an absolute nightmare.

Koliss opened and closed his mouth for a few moments, Tali tried the same thing, but neither of them said anything to one another at first. Finally Koliss managed to speak.

"So, you're here for the-..." he stopped, yet Tali still answered.

"Yes...."

Tali continued speaking. "I guess that means you also-..."

"Yes..."

The both of them turned away from one another. They both focused on areas away from each other. Even out on the balcony with waves of fresh ocean breeze flowing in, both seemed to find that same feeling of needing fresh air continue to rise again.

Koliss let go another whisper. "You look good Tali."

"I'm sorry, come again?" Tali did not turn to look at him.

Koliss cleared his throat, forcing himself to speak more like the gentleman he was supposed to be. "I said you look g-...beautiful, Tali." He didn't see her reaction as she kept her head turned away. Koliss had an irking feeling about where this was going, so he decided to jump out in front of it.

"So, I guess this is one of those... signs I guess."

Tali finally turned to face him, the questioning look was obvious on her features. Koliss continued.

“I mean, we both *did* sign up for this, whatever the frack it’s supposed to be. I know why I did it... But I would also like to know why you did.” Koliss could feel his calm features start cracking.

It was an innocent, honest question. One she felt she could not deny him, but at the same time she felt scared to her core to answer it. Why *had* she come here? Peer pressure would have been an easy out, but she knew it wasn’t true. She had chosen to come here and now she had to admit to herself, as well as him, why.

She sighed, steadying herself for what she was about to say. It wouldn’t be polished, or suave, but it would be the truth.

“I came here, because I don’t know you anymore.”

Her admission of guilt sounded an awful lot like an accusation and she realized it the moment was voiced out loud. She could already see his features shift and had to act fast.

“Over the months we’ve... been involvedt, I thought I was learning to know you. The real you. The man behindt the mannerisms andt titles. But then, then the var came andt you disappearedt. I triedt to understandt, I triedt to accept. I waitedt, I heldt hope, but then things got vorse...” she trailed off and averted her gaze, stifling a choking sob. “I neededt you, Koliss. I neededt you, but you weren’t there.”

“That is not the man I fell in love vith. That is not the man I can love. Andt perhaps, perhaps that is too much to ask for at times, but I know vhat I vant,” she looked up once more, eyes shimmering with emotion. “I came here, because I didnt not know vho you vere anymore andt that frightenedt me. I vantedt to findt someone vho wouldn’t run away. Someone vho vouldt understandt, like you didt.” She shook her head.

“But all I foundt vere people vorse than the next.”

Koliss felt his jaw clench at Tali’s words. They were truthful, and he didn’t like them. The problem was that he still hadn’t told her why he had disappeared when he had. Why he decided to go where he went. The fact that she thought he would run out on her hurt more than anything.

It was exactly what he did. He would never forgive himself for that, but he needed to *try* something.

Koliss resolved something within his very soul. He nodded to himself and turned to face Tali.

“It’s almost strange you know. I want to say you helped inspire me to my decision. Seeing you so resolute in freeing others, working towards a greater good, it was-.” Koliss stammered to a stop as he tried to refocus.

“I want so badly to say that what I didn’t wasn’t meant to alienate you, that I had the right reasons, that I did what I did because I had to.” He stopped and started rubbing his eyes. He felt the moisture already collecting. He looked back at Tali, his own eyes holding a telling shimmer.

“You did think you were getting to know me, but to tell the truth Tali, no I don’t think you did. You thought you were, damn it I thought you were too, but no I was playing myself.” Koliss cleared his throat and wrapped his gloved hands across his chest. He resolved himself to continue.

“I left then because I was scared of two things. One was in part for my family Tali. They were in danger because of me, and I had to set it right. Even then I still managed to screw it up and I lost more than I set out to protect in the first place.”

Koliss sighed heavily, taking a breath before continuing. “But I’ll be happy to retell that story for you another day. The second reason I left is where we lie.” Koliss felt a shiver go up his spine.

“I left in part because I was afraid; afraid of the look you’d give me if you ever found out what I’ve done in my time to survive, or because I followed orders. I try to avoid my past if I can. My military service, my early freelance work, all of it was one giant mess after the other. I’ve done some horrible things Tali. Things that would have seen me hung as a war criminal, things that’ll stay on my mind until the day I die. When I came back and I got shuffled into the thick of those medical tents. An endless line of-”

Koliss stopped himself, he needed to keep focused. This was about him and Tali. He quickly reaches and ripped off his gloves, throwing them over the balcony, and allowing his burn marks to show fully.

“I met someone tonight, someone from my past. Someone who I let into a hospital wing of innocent people only to have her blow that wing up in my face. I let it happen Tali, whether I wanted it or not. It reminded me so much of then...” Koliss took another breath. He was really unloading now, and he didn’t think he would be able to stop himself even though he really wanted to.

“The truth is Tali, I don’t know who I am anymore. I don’t think I even knew who I was when I left. I’ve spent so long trying to get away from that, trying to distance myself, but it only ever gets closer.”

“But let me tell you one thing I know for sure, no matter what happens afterward, I am utterly thankful that I’m here. Because I know if I wasn’t, I would have been dead by now at some far flung corner of the galaxy. This place, Arcona, you, all of it has shown me there is

something better than trying to run. It has shown me I can build something better. The Collective war showed me what was wrong, but it also helped show me what is right.”

Koliss took a step forward to Tali, raising his hands to his chest almost as an emphasise.

“I can’t ask for your forgiveness Tali, I don’t deserve it, but I want you to look at me as only you can and see if I don’t mean it when I say that I want nothing more than to build something new, with you.”

She stared at him in disbelief, arms wrapped around herself as a fidgeting finger kept toying with the tip of her left lek and the silver thimble that covered it. It was as much an act of distraction as it was of remembrance. Teetering on the edge between two choices, ones which might define her future, she felt torn and conflicted.

The man she thought she’d known, the Koliss she’d confided in, was he gone forever? Or had he ever even existed beyond her imagination? No, she knew the man was real. Or, at least he could be.

“I,” she struggled for words, but none were forthcoming. She averted her gaze.

How could she give him what he wanted? How could she trust him again? After all he’d done, after all he’d admitted to and what he still kept hidden. Could she really take the chance, with a man who could be as much a waste of her time as the ones she’d met today. Her time was finite, her choices infinite. It was an equation even she could see had only depressing outcomes.

“I want to believe in you, but…” she muttered half-heartedly.

“Please, lavender, grant me one wish. Do it for me, for *us*, see if I’m lying or not. I won’t hide a thing. I swear.”

She turned back to him, his eyes shimmering with sincerity. They held a desperation she found familiar and frightening. A desperation she’d shared.

She closed her eyes, a tear spilling from her cheek as she shook her head.

“I…”

She felt his hand grab hers, the familiar roughness of his meticulously maintained skin bringing back memories as he placed hers upon his cheek. “Please,” he croaked, choking on the plea.

She trembled, somehow already knowing what she would find and dreading it more than anything. She chose to ignore it. Ignore her better judgement, her fears, her instincts. She dived into the cold, her mind breaching the icy surface of a frozen lake and diving into the frigid waters of his subconscious.

The shock struck the breath from her lungs.

Tali opened her eyes in a startled jolt, a shallow gasp drawn in sympathy to her astral self. Her heart was pounding, hand still clasped against his cheek, nails almost breaching his skin. He didn't seem to mind.

She looked at him, his gaze averted and features solemn with resignation. He could sense him, clearer than ever. He had held nothing back.

Her hand fell from his face, her own bearing a blank expressionless stare of profound contemplation. What felt like raging hours of thought passed in but a heartbeat. She looked up once more and offered her hand. Not as a lover, but as a partner.

"You have my chance, Mr. Velcott. Use it wisely."