

The broken ceiling fan rotated lazily around its tilted axis, the faint rhythmic scraping of bearings yet another annoyance adding to his misery. Koliss Welcott reached for the bottle of scotch for another refill, but only an apathetic splash was forthcoming. He downed it all the same.

Ever since his return to the Clan during the recent conflict with the Collective, he'd felt like his life was in a downward spiral and little could pull him out of that nosedive. The days leading up to his departure had been troubled by family and friendships, the latter threatening to turn into something more.

Upon his return, that ember of affection had sparked, but the flame had not taken hold and now he was as confused as her about where they stood. The heat of that spark still lingered as a pleasant oasis amidst the broken badlands of his life, but the more he contemplated it, the more he dreaded to seek a path back.

What was he afraid of?

The work he did for the Clan did not satisfy him. The life he lead was not the one he'd envisioned. Each day he dragged himself out of bed to do what should have fulfilled him, but which left him as drained as a spent power pack at the end and leaning for the bottle to get his chemical fix.

It wasn't healthy and he knew it, but screw it, what had he left to lose?

A sharp rap upon the door startled him and upon swift reflection, he realized it must have been the third attempt. Dizzy, stomach growling with dissatisfaction from the lurching motion, he stood up and shuffled for the door, pulling his blaster from the coat hanger with practiced disinterest.

Slumping against the door frame, he palmed the buzzer and yawned, the act almost turning into a retch as the wall rebounded his breath. The door opened with a click and Koliss raised his blaster to his hip, lazily aiming it sideways in case someone was stupid enough to barge in. The few scorch marks outside his rented dwelling were proof of this rather unpleasant precaution being a real necessity.

"Please put the gun down," a soft, familiar voice sighed as a tired-looking Twi'lek walked inside without as much as a hello. She looked dreadful, well, at least compared to her usual self and the dark marks beneath her eyes told him she hadn't slept much in the last weeks. Though dressed casually and seemingly unarmed, Koliss couldn't help but consider how out-dressed he was by the purple lek-head and swiftly tossed his blaster aside.

"W-what are you doing here, Tali?" he managed, the shock and humiliation at his own state denying him a more eloquent opening.

"Ve needt to talk," Tali Sroka replied bluntly, uttering the dreadful words that men the galaxy over feared to hear from their romantic interests.

Sighing in resignation, he ran a hand through his greasy, matted hair and cleared his throat with an awkward cough. “C-could it wait, lavender? I really don’t feel like...”

“No, we need to talk. Now.” The demand was as adamant as the steely gaze in her amber eyes. He knew he could press the issue, but that he would ultimately be forced to concede and like about to undertake a particularly distasteful operation, he steeled himself for what was to come.

“Alright, lavender. What’s it all about?” He spread his arms wide as if inviting harm.

Suspiring, Tali ignored the half-drunken taunt and instead took a seat upon the couch, shifting slightly upon realizing the seat she’d chosen had a moist patch which she did not wish to contemplate. “It’s about you, andt us, andt the team andt the Clan. But mostly, it’s about you. What in the stars is wrong vith you?”

“Me?” Koliss exclaimed. “What about them?!” he gestured beyond the doorway where Ol’val continued to plot and wallow in its own schemes. “Have you ever stopped, even for just a moment, to consider the sort of people we’re working for?!” He shook his head in dismay, before muttering in a sulking tone. “This is not what I came here for...”

She could sense his conflicted emotions, though that kaleidoscope was being spun around wildly by his intoxicated mind and discerning which cardinal direction was his true North proved vexingly elusive. Leaving the matter for a later time, she focused on what she even came here for.

“I know what you mean andt it isn’t ideal, but ve both swore to fight for Arcona, not leave her in her time of needt!” she chided. “Ve all neededt you. / neededt you...”

Her softened tone seemed to break some of his resistance as for a moment, his expression mellowed. But it did not persist as he pushed his own frustrations up once again. “I swore to serve a Clan that I thought was something new, something different. Something that *worth* fighting for. And what did that accomplish? More murder, more death, more war. Arcona was no better than the Fi...” he paused, choking on the name of his former employ. The force that had recently obliterated the New Republic’s capitol and wiped out countless billions in the process. “...Than the groups I’ve served before,” he finally managed to croak. “They’re nothing but scum.”

“They are my friendts!” Tali spat back, heckled by the apparent slight aimed at both her and her closest friendships. “Sometimes, our goals can require unconventional sacrifice...” she muttered, not quite believing she was even saying those words out loud. They felt *wrong*, but she’d heard them used before and hoped they could persuade him as well.

She hoped wrong.

Furrowing his brow, Koliss tilted his head and stepped closer, inspecting her as if she was someone foreign. “Are you even listening to yourself anymore, Tali? Or have they gotten into

your brain too?" he snapped back, perhaps a bit too harsh for his own liking, but what was done was done. "I cannot believe the Tali I knew would even entertain such a thought. The Tali I knew had integrity, she had spine and she always wanted to do the right thing. You've changed, lavender. And not for the better..."

Her eyes shifted with shock and anger, the insult spat in her face forcing her lips into a thin, pursed line. "Vell, maybe this wouldn't be such a big shock for you, if you hadn't been gone for months on endt andt actually been here, *vith me!*" Her retort was as harsh as his outburst and the brimstone almost perceptible in the air between them.

"I had things to do! My family was in danger! I couldn't just let them be on their own. You wouldn't understand, I just had to do it. I had to get away from this place. No-one was listening and then all that happened to Ol'val..." he rambled on incoherently, desperately trying to fan the flames of indignation.

"Here ve go again. You only care about yourself! What about *us*?!"

"To hell with the others! To hell with the team and the Clan. To hell with the damned Shadows and their wars! We don't need that, Tali. We can just leave it all behind. We aren't beholden to anyone here and all they bring us is more pain and death. And I cannot, I will not, stand here and risk losing you forever." He stepped closer and grabbed her hands, holding them up in his own. "Please."

Tali met his desperate gaze. The love was burning, passionate, but there was more. There was a layer of sentiment he perhaps did not even admit to himself and it frightened her. And he had not even understood her words.

"No," Tali whispered, pulling back. "I vas talking about *us*," she laid her hands softly on her belly, cupping it gently as if protecting something within.

The dry 'what' died on his lips. His brow furrowed.

She offered a weak smile, tears spilling unbidden down her cheeks. "Happy Valentine's..."