

*Piercing coronas from amber flashes filled her viewports, a celestial staccato of red and green playing out amidst pulsing sapphire blues of ion thrusters burning at attack speed. Dark wedges, looming shapes of warships, criss-crossed the debris choked orbit around a pale, desolate planet while the burning wrecks slowly tumbled into its acrid atmosphere to become a lasting testament of that horrific battle.*

*The moment had been seared into her mind. The bright emerald lances of turbolasers skewering the Will of our Lady. The heartbeat of dread when its spaceframe, punctured and venting oxygen, stood deathly still in perfect silence still choked her breath. She knew it would stumble, there was no other outcome.*

*The Lady was consumed before her eyes in a muted explosion, hull plates buckling under enormous energies that ravaged the vessel from stem to stern and left her a broken husk, slowly sinking towards the badlands of Nancora. The despair, the choking impotence at doing nothing, it served only to underscore the painful sting of her loss. Aboard that ship, in one of those blooming fireballs, she'd felt his life snuffed out. Robbed from her by a foe she hardly even knew.*

Tali Sroka awoke with a sharp gasp. Her skin was clammy with sweat and her heart was racing. The lump in her throat refused to go down and even as she reassured herself of her surroundings, a wave of nausea began to take hold.

The gentle hum of the *Voidbreaker's* drives sounded around her, the faint hissing of the ventilation a source of comfort. She was safe. It had only been a dream. Yet she did not feel safe, not one bit.

Tugging her lek in a reflexive act of self-comfort, Tali sat halfway off her bedding and stared at – *nothing*. Her vision swam, eyes unfocused. The nausea grew within her like a bubbling cauldron and she felt it about to boil over. Lurching onto unsteady feet, she reached the refresher just in time before the dregs of her previous meal washed over her palate once more.

Leaning against the toilet seat, shivering on the cool tile floor, Tali felt the waves of sickness roll over her in a dull echo of her pulse. It wasn't the nightmare's fault, not fully anyway. The sickness had taken hold after, after – her hand trailed to her belly, gingerly resting on the still-firm skin that would soon be swelling with growing life.

The thought sent conflicting shivers through her being, lips curling into a lovesick smile while her gut wrenched in fear. Tears pealed down her cheeks and she choked back a sob. What was wrong with her? The realization should have been joyous. Becoming a mother should have been cause for elation. It was the epitome of womanhood, a celebration of life, yet she felt like she was slowly dying inside.

She did not wish to become a mother. Not yet, not like this. The thought terrified her. Not the pain, not the changes that would alter her body forever. No. The thought of a small, fragile little thing looking to her for safety, for warmth, for love. It terrified her beyond all measure.

“What if I...?” The hoarse words were barely audible over the hum of the ship’s engines and the whistling ventilation. She did not wish to even give voice to the thought of following in her mother’s footsteps. She did not wish to admit, not out loud anyway, that she might have felt a pang of sympathy for the woman that had abandoned her, sold her, when she was but a child.

Even the mere thought of her doing the same existing within her felt like an overwhelming guilt upon her soul and she tugged at her lek harder still, nails pressing against the sensitive skin and almost drawing blood.

“No,” she whispered, to herself or perhaps the Force. “I von’t do it. I von’t follow in her footsteps.” Her words were bitter, resentful, propped up by stubborn power. But she knew they lacked conviction.

The sickness passed, mercifully, and she shuffled out of the refresher with a tired, worn-out slouch. Life had taken much out of her as of late, but she felt there would be more still left to be taken.

Her half-hearted steps carried her to the small cooking station and she brewed herself a mug of tea, leaving the thrice-used leaves to sit in the water as she sat down on the circular couch. For the longest while, she merely stared at the dark brown leaves slowly rotating and drifting in the unseen currents of her brew, mind lost in that tranquil ballet. It reminded her of something that she couldn’t recall.

The dancing leaves provided her with a meager drink, the pallid liquid barely registering as having flavor when she finally sipped it. She decided it was fine that way. Anything more and she might not have managed to hold it.

Turning her gaze to the viewing port that showed the vastness of the stars beyond, the Twi’lek nursed her mug and considered her life. She had come far from where she’d sat off, but still it felt too early for this change. She still wished to do so much, help so many, and in truth, she had no clue what impact motherhood would have on her.

But what of the father?

“What about... *him*?” The question lingered in her mind like the stale taste of her brew did on her palate. Neither was particularly enjoyable, though not offensive either.

She knew the child’s father, but did she truly *know* him? There were many things he hid and she did not wish to pry, but the temptation was there. She had always suspected there was more to him than he let on and the recent talks she’d shared with him had done little to dispel that notion. But that also left her with an uncomfortable enigma; *who* was Koliss Welcott really? And perhaps more importantly, what sort of partner and father would he be?

She'd grown up without a mother. Technically the statement was false, but for her own sanity's sake, she clung to it. There had been no mother, nor a father. She'd still somehow managed. But she was not going to let her child suffer the same fate. He would be there and he would be the best damn father there was, or so help her the Force.

She'd made that choice for him, but despite her grim determination on the matter, something told her he wouldn't object. Despite his secrecy, his distancing and the stupid, *stupid* choices he made Tali could not deny the man had a good heart. She'd wanted to, at times. It would have made things easier, so much easier, but even her self-delusion would not stretch that far.

"Damn it, Koliss..." she muttered, swirling around the slurry of leaves and amber liquid in her mug. Why couldn't he just have been simple? Why did he have to be complex? Be a – *person?*

She stared at the mug as the rotating leaves came to a halt, their dark shapes floating in place in a haphazard manner, one atop the other, settling into a pattern. But the pattern wasn't entirely chaotic. It seemed to remind her of him, if only in the abstract.

Tali clutched the mug with both hands, purple knuckles paling as she *squeezed* the porcelain vessel. Whether for solace or to break it, she did not know. Her hands tired before she found the answer.

She hung her head so her lekku drooped on either side of her face, masking a silver sliver that ran down her cheek. "Damn you, Koliss..." she muttered softly, the bitterness all but spent. No matter how hard she'd tried, that flame would not go out and that tender affection still stung her every time she saw him die aboard the *Lady*. The nightmare all the worse, because it hammered home the feeling she couldn't shake.

She wanted to be happy with him. She wanted to be with him. She wanted to raise their child together with him.

The burning, yearning desire to make a life together was so strong it hurt and all she could do was try and smother the flames, lest they consume her entirely.

She wanted him, but what she wanted rarely came to pass and the fears and doubts of her past cast long shadows. It was at those moments that she was lucky that small flame still fluttered within her and refused to die.