

*"I'd get outta here, just as soon as I'm able  
But my hyperdrive's on the frizz  
Just today some mynocks, chewed my power cables  
And my life's one big sarlacc pit..."*

The melancholic melody of some nameless Twi'lek singer droned in the background while scores of surly and apathetic patrons nursed their drinks at the counter. A faint whiff of narcotics floated in the musty air, a mixture of death sticks and spice. Nobody seemed to care, not least the bulky owner who kept the drinks coming.

Outside the cantina, filtering through the drapes of threaded beads, the high-pitched sound of a siren barely stirred any of the dour patrons and the entrance of yet another life-beaten sod did much the same. The hooded figure peered around the bar with muted urgency before taking a seat towards the side, back facing the doorway and seemingly sinking into the shadows of their cloak.

As the burly bartender shuffled over, she ordered a pint of local brew with a lisp made worse by her exhaustion. Hurriedly gulping a third of the drink, observant eyes noticed she was using only her right hand and the left seemed permanently hidden within the folds of her cloak; perhaps injured or missing entirely.

Not much would have been made of the whole, yet another disfigured piece of gutter trash looking to blunt the pain of existence with a few pints of cheap alcohol, were it not for the sound of plastoid boots marching inside. The beaded curtains pattered against polished carapace as a trio of soldiers entered the cantina, their features hidden behind hardened helmets.

Two were brandishing exotic weaponry, while the leader carried a vibrosword on his belt. Some of the patrons turned to glance at them, shifting hands to concealed blasters, while others were either too drunk or apathetic to care what this all would lead to. With the bartender pausing his service and moving over to the register, the man in charge spoke up.

"Attention scoundrels and vagabonds, we are pursuing an enemy of the state and we have reason to suspect they may be hiding within these premises. The accused broke into a military compound and released twenty-seven prisoners, convicts and criminals, who had been sentenced to atone for their crimes via forced labor. Thanks to them, your community is unsafer than before," he declared. "If you've seen anyone suspicious enter recently, I want you to point them out. Assisting in capturing this menace will be rewarded handsomely. The First Order does not forget."

There was a stifling silence, but no-one seemed interested in getting involved. Not even the barkeep. After a long moment, the officer clacked his heels together and gave an annoyed grunt. "Verywell then," he scoffed. "You had your opportunity."

Scanning the room, he singled out a few individuals and began asking about their presence. "You there, how long have you been here? Can anyone verify where he's been for the last hour?"

There were murmurs and grunts, low and annoyed, as patrons muttered half-hearted excuses for their fellows, hoping to make the man and his cohorts leave. But the officer was insistent and finally made his way up to the cloaked one at the counter. "And you? Can anyone vouch for her?" he demanded, moving forward to inspect her. The woman made no outright effort to hide her features, though neither to expose them willingly.

The man's brow furrowed. Her pint was beaded with condensation, but only halfway. The drink in it was still cold, but she'd drunk most of it quickly. Maybe to make it look like she'd been there a while. Yet she only had that one pint, so she was no regular. All the others had several empties around them.

"You, show me your hands!" he barked suddenly, the two troopers raising their weapons that hummed with a threatening sound of charging electricity.

The woman tensed, almost imperceptibly so, as she prepared to fight or flight. But it was neither her, nor the troopers, who made the next move. It was another entirely.

"You do not need to see her hands," a soft, yet commanding voice addressed the officer. An orange hued hand momentarily darted from the folds of a beige cloak.

The man hesitated, before relenting. "We do not need to see her hands," he agreed.

"You will leave us alone and be on your way," the woman in beige told him.

"We will, leave you alone and be on our way," he nodded, before signalling the troopers to stand down and follow as he turned around and left.

As the danger of imminent death seemed to subside, Tali released the grip on her lightsaber hilt and let out a sigh of relief. She was still hurting all over and the wound in her left arm made it difficult to focus on anything else than dulling the pain. Yet, even so, she had not failed to sense the familiar sensation of someone drawing upon the Force. Especially not, when it had happened so close to her.

Turning slowly to her left, she took in the woman in beige, who'd been sitting in the cantina far longer than her. The orange Togruta was almost entirely obscured by a cloak of her own, only the protrusions of her montrals and the peeking of her lektips around the hood giving away her species.

She tried to extend her senses to gauge the woman's nature, but either from her own exhaustion or practiced cunning from the Togruta, she could sense nothing. Had she been imagining it all? Tali could not say, until suddenly a recently familiar voice whispered in her mind.

*“Follow me.”*

The words were as much a command as a beckons, the Togruta pushing herself away from the counter and heading for a more secluded table. Intrigued, especially with her suspicions verified, Tali left a credit chit by her pint and followed, hoping to at least thank her savior.

The pair sat down at a corner table, the cantina slowly returning to normality around them. No-one seemed to mind what had happened too much, as all they really did care about was their chemical escapism. Taking a seat opposite the Togruta, Tali waited in silence for a polite moment, but it seemed the woman wished her to speak first.

“T-thank you, for *that*. For speaking on my behalf,” Tali muttered, trying to sound as demure as she could, while itching to find out who this fellow Force user was.

The woman stayed silent for a moment longer, before raising her head enough that they could see eye to eye. Deep blue eyes, barely faded by age, met the Twi’lek’s amber gaze and in that moment, the Togruta let her ephemeral cloak fall, though just for a moment.

The aura that the old Togruta cast was blinding, its nature undeniably benevolent, but still fierce and bound by no code but her own. Though she was old and the years of hardship had left their marks, Tali could tell there was still much fight left in her, even if it seemed she had no desire to pursue it.

Curious, Tali lowered her voice even further and leaned in. “Jedi?” she whispered, only realizing after the fact how conspiratorial she’d just sounded.

The woman’s stern gaze was followed by a cold reply. “I am no Jedi.” A moment later, she smiled. “But I used to be.”

“Usedt to?” Tali inquired.

“Yes, a long time ago, but it wasn’t for me. Or I wasn’t for them,” she sighed and shrugged. “I guess in hindsight it was a blessing I didn’t stay.”

Tali nodded, understanding the implication. “The Empire didn’t last, though,” she began with a hint of optimism.

“And neither did the New Republic,” the Togruta replied with a gesture towards the door and the First Order patrols.

Tali fell silent for a while, but couldn’t fault the Togruta’s logic. Still, something about it irked her. “I don’t fight for the Republic,” she stated, as boldly as she dared considering their surroundings. Thankfully, the music had been dialed up once more.

“Then what do you fight for?” the Togruta inquired.

“Freedom.”

“Hmph, that’s an awfully big thing to fight for. And one I’ve seen countless oppressors claim to defend as well.”

“It’s not for me.” Tali shook her head. “For those who don’t have it, or who’ve lost it.”

The Togruta fell silent, and when she spoke, her tone had become darker. “You mean slaves.”

“Yes,” the Twi’lek replied, nodding to affirm her position.

The Togruta’s reaction was inscrutable, but on some level Tali felt it had struck a chord with her. “I see,” she finally stated thoughtfully. “And the ones who enslaved them?”

“I…” Tali hesitated her answer. Why did she do that? It wasn’t like it was a big secret, or that it bothered her. Or did it? “I kill them,” she finally stated, something about the verb chafing her when spoken out loud.

The Togruta was silent for a moment more. “That’s not the Jedi way.”

“I am no Jedi either,” Tali replied, allowing herself a smirk. It didn’t seem to go down well with her opposite number. “I-I’m sorry, I meant no offence…” she began, but was silenced as the Togruta held up a hand.

“No, it’s alright, no offence taken. It’s just…” She paused to collect her thoughts. “You were a slave as well, weren’t you?”

Tali nodded slowly, lips pressed into a line. It was not a subject she wished to explore.

“Be careful,” the Togruta warned, her voice a mix of stern compassion. “I’ve seen what the road you’re on can do to someone. It’s a noble cause, but there are too many pitfalls.”

“What do you…?” Tali began, but something in the old Togruta’s eyes made her reconsider prying. Despite the years, whatever memories she had were still too fresh in her mind. It wouldn’t be polite to inquire. “Thank you, I will remember that, and try to focus on the saving part.” She offered a faint smile.

The Togruta accepted it and returned it in kind, her blue eyes flickering as if she’d suddenly remembered what it felt like to smile after a long time. “How did you escape, if you don’t mind my asking?”

The question was sudden, but Tali felt it fair to share. “I, don’t know, to be honest. I must admit, it was more this saber’s than my own doing,” she admitted, pulling out an old lightsaber that had seemingly gone through hell and back again. The leather wrappings on the handle were old and dried and the emitter slightly crooked, not that the weapon had ever

been much of a looker, but more of an expedient construct of necessity. Or desperate vengeance.

The Togruta furrowed her brow, extending her hand towards the weapon. "It can't be, can it?" she muttered to herself. Once again, Tali could feel the other woman employ her connection and merely being in her presence felt calming and aweing at the same time.

The smile on the Togruta's face widened, though it held a note of mournful remembrance.

*"Glad to see you again, old friend."*

Tali wasn't sure if she'd been meant to hear the Togruta's words, though with her obvious power and skill, it couldn't have been an accident that she did. She sensed a faint pulse of power from within the saber's kyber heart, a flash of heat and anger, but also begrudging respect. Like two rival lionesses meeting each other.

"She will tell you things," the Togruta stated as the moment passed. "Angry and violent things. Some of it, is true. But do not let it control you."

The Twi'lek blinked, perplexed by this cryptic advice. "You *knew* who this belonged to?"

The Togruta allowed herself a knowing smirk. "We crossed sabers, once or twice. She ended up losing hers more often than me, though."

The saber almost sparked to life.

"I'm glad at least a part of her is still around. Maybe I will see her again, when I become one with the Force."

The Twi'lek could sense the conversation wouldn't lead anywhere pleasant and chose to merely nod, hooking the saber back to her belt. "I'll take care of her," she promised. "She saved me, so I owe as much to her."

The Togruta gave a dry scoff and reached out to grasp her hand, holding it firmly yet gently. "The weapon is only part of it," she stated, her blue eyes drilling into her amber ones. "You did everything that you've achieved so far, and *You* are the only one who's responsible for what you will do with the time you have. Whatever you do, make sure you can be proud of what you leave behind."

Tali felt like she should respond to that, to counter it or offer some assurance, but she could find none to give. Instead, she merely nodded. "I will try," she muttered.

"Do or do not, there is no try," the Togruta sighed.

"Excuse me?"

"It's just something my old master used to say. I think what he meant by it was that unless your heart is with you when you do something, you're setting yourself up for failure. So don't just 'try', when you set about doing something, give it your all. No matter what."

Tali thought about it for a moment and nodded. "Thank you, sounds like your master was a wise Jedi."

The Togruta nodded. "Yes, he was," she agreed with a longing sigh.

"I need to return to my ship and be off this planet before the First Order decide to put it on lockdown, or the officer remembers what you did to him," Tali said as she got up, though wincing minutely from the pain in her arm.

"You're still injured, here let me," the Togruta offered and placed her hand unerringly upon the wound on her upper arm. Even through the fabric of her cloak, Tali could sense the cool touch of the Force as it gave new life to burned tissue and mended that which a blaster bolt had sundered. It felt comforting and safe.

"Thank you, again," Tali muttered. "I feel like I'm repeating myself..."

"Don't worry, it's nice hearing a thank you for saving someone's behind for once," the Togruta shot back with a smirk.

"I, don't think I caught your name, though," the Twi'lek said.

"It's Tano," the Togruta smiled, "My name is Ahsoka Tano."