

Desert World Avon
Wild Space
37 ABY

The setting sun cast long shadows across the vast expanse of a planet-wide desert, marked only by the smooth worn pillars of an ancient riverbed that rose from the harsh sand and gravel like monuments of a bygone era. The arid air stung the Twi'lek's nose with its harsh, acrid scent and the seat of her swoop chafed her inner thigh from a day's riding. Perhaps she should have landed her ship a bit closer to the slaver camp and saved herself the trouble of a covert approach.

But what was done was done and so a long swoop ride it had been, the ramshackle speeder bike jittering and bouncing betwixt her lavender thighs all day leaving her sore and agitated. It was hardly the sort of sore she'd hoped to be after this mission, but just the right thing to get her in a sour mood to gut some sithspit slavers. Not that she *really* needed the excuse.

So focused on the minor irritation was she that when the swoop's control panel suddenly flickered and went blank, she was caught totally off guard. In the next moment, she could feel the harsh deceleration as the repulsors began bleeding power and the emergency systems kicked in, guiding the speeder bike to a semi-controlled stop.

"What in the...?" Tali Sroka cursed, hanging on for dear life as the bike made its final descent rather harshly into the gently curving side of a sand dune, the front fork embedding itself deep within the surprisingly firm formation. Jarred by the impact, knuckles white as she still held on to the control yoke, Tali opened her eyes and looked around. Still alive. That was something, at least.

Shaking slightly from the adrenaline, and wondering why she'd not sensed the danger, the Twi'lek peeled herself off her ride and stepped onto the sands. Her datapad had been tracking the route she was taking and another glance at it told her she was still a fair bit away from the slaver camp. And the sun was setting.

"Oh kark," she muttered to herself as she looked at the swoop and reckoned it was probably beyond her ability to repair. Heck, even refueling the damn thing was a minor challenge for her. "Where's Eilen when you needt her?" she thought to herself and opened the saddle bags to fish out some emergency supplies for the night. She'd best make camp now and head out come d-.

What was that?

A light shone in the distance. An eerie light that strobed with a lazy cadence, like a living thing drawing breath. It was *alluring* to behold. How had she not noticed it before? Had she been so engrossed in her own thoughts and emotions? Perhaps, but something about the light filled her with hope. It felt distinctly artificial and artificial light meant a chance for shelter.

She packed what she needed from the half-wreck of her swoop and sat off towards the light, night falling swiftly over the deserts until it was nigh on pitch black by the time she arrived. Standing at the foot of the pillar, Tali craned back her neck to take in the full size of the thing. It looked imposing, far larger up close than she'd thought from afar, and *bizarrely* this one was clearly man-made. The smooth sandstone bore marks of artifice and the light which shone from its peak had turned out to be, out of all things, a lighthouse beacon.

It was all most bizarre to say the least, but Tali was in no position to argue. Perhaps she could strike a bargain and be allowed to sleep inside? Perhaps the lighthouse keeper might even be able to assist her with the swoop? Perhaps.

Without sparing a further thought as to why a lighthouse needed to exist amongst the desert, Tali rapped on the corroded durasteel door and waited. And waited. *And waited.* Nothing happened. Nobody answered.

She tried again, but the results stayed.

Growing frustrated, she reached for her saber with her mind, hand moving to grasp the hilt when suddenly, the door shifted aside without a sound and a wizened Togruta draped in threadbare cloth stood before her. The old woman was withered by time, but even so she carried herself with dignity. Her face was obscured by the hood of her robes, but the shape of her montrals, as well as the lekku peeking out, betrayed her species at a glance.

"Apologies," Tali began after a moment of startled silence, her hand moving away from the weapon at her belt. "But I suffered an accident nearby and would need a place to stay the night. Could I trouble you for...?"

She never got to finish her plea when the woman already stepped aside to let her in, the still befuddled Twi'lek wordlessly accepting the offer and entering the surprisingly spacious bottom floor of the desert lighthouse. She shivered as the warmth of the indoors greeted her, reminding her of just how cold the desert had become the moment the sun had dipped beyond the horizon. Thankfully, a pot of what appeared to be stew was bubbling away in the small kitchen and the scent of dried herbs and linen lingered in the air.

"Thank you," she finally managed, the Togruta moving past her with nary a shrug in response and returned to tend to the stew pot.

She looked for a place to stay, but finally decided to wait, taking a seat by a simple wooden table and laying down her pack. She wasn't sure if the lighthouse keeper expected payment, but she might have something to offer in compensation. Perhaps her tarp, or some spares from her ship?

The thoughts were interrupted when the old woman returned with two bowls of stew, laying down the other before her and taking a seat opposite.

“Eat,” the woman said, her voice as soft as the desert wind. “We can talk after you’ve recovered.”

Tali had no desire to argue, her stomach rumbling at the scent of warm food. It had been days since she’d had a proper meal. Life at the edge of a nutribar was hardly one worth living. She nodded and dug in, the hearty flavors soon guiding her spoon until it scraped the bottom of her bowl.

The Togruta had dined in silence, but seemingly no slower because of it. By the time Tali finished, the old woman’s bowl was already emptied and she seemed to be inspecting her with her arms crossed over her chest. It was a peculiar sensation, *judgemental* without judgement.

“Thank you, for the foodt,” Tali said, hoping to break the uncomfortable silence that had fallen once more, now that the sound of scraping cutlery had died down. “It vas really goodt.”

“I know,” the Togruta replied bluntly. “And you already thanked me once, that is quite enough.”

Tali furrowed her brow. Was she being reprimanded for thanking too much?

“I don’t...?”

“You thank me, because you don’t think you deserve what I offer,” the stranger stated with such detached confidence that it made the Twi’lek recoil. “*But* you also don’t *not* thank, which means you don’t expect the world to belong to you. Seems our friend didn’t get there yet.”

If Tali had been confused before, she was utterly lost by now. Friend? What friend? She didn’t even know this woman.

“I meant *her*,” the Togruta stated and Tali felt a tug on her belt, where the ancient lightsaber she’d stolen from Raoul Kar-Dannaa’s collection gently yanked at its belt loop. A saber that must have been three times her age, if not more.

But her words weren’t what caught Tali’s attention. Nor the seeming familiarity with her weapon.

“You’re a Jedi?” she asked incredulously.

The Togruta’s dried lips curved into a smile, like the one a mother gives before explaining something very trivial to their child. “No,” she stated.

“A Sith?” Tali felt a faint shift in her stance, feet finding purchase on the floor, mind reaching out for her weapons as if expecting sabers to be drawn any moment.

“Stars no,” the Togruta replied, raising a calming hand to disarm her ready stance. “I am neither,” she reassured her. “But neither was she.” Another tug at her souvenir.

“How do you know...*her*?” Tali pressed, hand now resting on the ancient saber hilt. “Vho *are* you?”

“My name doesn’t matter, Tali Sroka, and if you must know, I *fought* the one whose saber you now bear on your belt,” the stranger said, before adding. “Both with, *and* against her.”

Tali felt like she’d just had too much to drink. This all felt so surreal. A million questions and yet none swam around in her head, but all the same it left her stunned speechless. The Togruta smiled again.

“You are safe here, Tali Sroka, at least until morning,” she reassured her. “I had hoped we’d have a chance to talk.”

“Why?” Tali managed, pushing aside the confusion and merely accepting the strange set of circumstance that had brought her here.

“Because,” she paused for a moment, hesitant. “I would rather you didn’t follow *her*.” She lowered her head and whispered in a voice barely audible. “*I’m sorry, old friend.*”

“Why?” Tali repeated herself, hating how dumb the word made her sound.

“The pain you feel, the grief, the loss. It’s the same that *she* felt. The same *detachment* I felt when I left the Order.”

“So you vere a Jedi?”

“Yes.” Finally a straight answer. Tali took it as a personal victory.

“I thank you for your concern but –”

“There is more to it than that,” the stranger pressed. “Something *much* more and it isn’t right that she’d have such a say in things.”

“Vhat do you...?”

“*Her*. This isn’t all you, Tali. The anger you feel, the depth of your hurt, it isn’t you. Not *all* of it anyway. She is using you and it has to stop.” Another pause. “*You have to let go, old friend.*”

Tali shook her head in a vain effort to clear it. None of this made any sense.

“The path you’re on, it’s not a new one. It’s one already walked by her, and many others besides. *Even my old master*. Your emotions are consuming you, slowly but surely, but that would be your right if it wasn’t for her influence.”

“Are you saying...?”

“Yes,” the Togruta stated adamantly. “And it must end. You need to let go of her, as she must of you.”

Tali recoiled at the force of those words, hand instinctively moving to the saber hilt. But whether it was to protect herself, or *it*, was impossible to discern.

The Togruta sighed in dismay and visibly deflated. She had no strength to contest her, at least not beyond words. So why had she been so afraid of her? And afraid of what? Losing her weapon? She had two sabers, and finding a replacement, though not easy, would be possible. So *why* was she afraid? Why did the thought of losing this particular weapon feel so... *impossible*.

She looked down at the saber hilt. It had been with her from the beginning. It had guided her, even before she knew she even had a connection with the Force. It predated herself as a Jedi, as a Force user, as anything. It had given her the courage to break her chains and spurred her to freedom. It had saved her life numerous times and in the worst moments, it had been a source of comfort and strength. She’d never felt *alone* as long as she held the weapon in her hands.

Was that what she was afraid of?

“It’s a choice you both have to make,” the Togruta stated, having moved back to the kitchen and now busying herself over a pot of tea. The scent was oddly familiar.

“What choice is there to make? It’s just a weapon...” She knew it was a lie, but she said it anyway.

The Togruta knew it as well, and didn’t bother with an answer. Instead, she placed a wrought iron pot between them and poured Tali a cup of hot tea that smelled of spring blossoms.

“If you want to pursue this crusade of yours, at least do it because *you* want it. Not because *she* still clings to revenge.”

Tali remained silent, gaze down in the straw gold surface of her cup.

“What happened to... *her?*”

“She died,” the Togruta stated bluntly. “Because of her hate.”

“*LIES!*” The sound was sudden, sharp and venomous. The voice hissed like a serpent and Tali shot up to her feet, saber drawn and blade ignited within a heartbeat. The blade was her own. The heirloom still rested at her belt.

The Togruta had not moved an iota and she merely sipped the tea as if nothing had happened. “At least I got your attention.”

“*Lies! It was not of hate! Not of hate!*” The voice was cold, distant and bitter. The soul that had once spoken those words was long gone and her memory was fading. What little remained of her, imbued within the lightsaber, it wouldn’t be long for this world. No matter what she chose.

“Then what was it?!” Tali demanded, for the first time. She’d ‘talked’ to the saber before. But never in this manner. She’d always been the listener, or the padawan wanting for answers. Now she demanded them.

There was silence. But it was not empty silence, it was embarrassed silence. The Togruta sipped her tea. The spirit remained flustered, Tali could feel it.

“Tell me,” she tried again, softer this time. “I need to know. Please?”

The sensation shifted. A begrudging acceptance.

“*Love,*” it admitted. “*I died, because of love.*”

For the first time since their brief and peculiar encounter, the Togruta seemed genuinely surprised. For all her mysterious sage advice, she had not known that.

She bowed her head and offered her apologies. “I am sorry, old friend. I didn’t know.”

Tali could sense the frustration, but also the gratitude. There was some begrudging respect between the two, however frail and distant. It felt good, even if she was an outsider to it. Despite their differences, they could *still* somehow find common ground. It was a kind of optimism she had not felt since... since.

A knife. A stab. A bleeding belly.

No!

Tali clutched her gut, fingers tracing the scar where Pib'leni had struck his knife. That betrayal had killed something within her, and it wasn't just little Ayoka.

The Togruta looked at her with concern. She could sense it on her tight-pressed lips.

"Thank you," Tali whispered once more. "To both of you. I know what I must do."

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Morning dawned on the cool sands of Avon, rousing the purple Twi'lek from her slumber. Tali yawned and almost swallowed a mouthful of sand. The last thing she remembered of the previous night was laying down in a bed the Togruta had offered and drifting away. She'd promised to make her breakfast.

As she opened her eyes, she found herself resting outside, curled up beneath her thermal cloak and shivering. Her back was pressed against the cold stone of one of the age-worn pillars that dotted the landscape. As she looked further up, she could see the sunlight glinting off a piece of scrap metal caught in a dried-up plant canopy. The wind jostled it around, making it blink at a pleasing cadence.

Was that all it had been? A hallucination? She slowly got up and brushed off the sand from her cloak. It had all felt so real. She scanned the area around her and – saw her swoop sitting idle beside her, repulsor unit seemingly operational and a flat, brightly colored pebble placed upon the seat.

As she picked it up, she could almost hear a voice on the wind.

"A friend says hello..."

She smiled and put the stone into her pocket as she mounted the swoop and turned it around the way she'd come. The saber she'd stolen from Raoul Kar-Dannaa was left resting against the pillar of stone – her lighthouse.