

# In My Defence

*“Are you certain about this?”* Yumni Ha inquired over the comms channel.

“No,” Tali replied, the winds above Eos city whipping her lekku. “But we need more ships.”

*“Understood. I will coordinate their efforts to the best of my ability.”*

Tali took one last glance at the relative comfort of the XS Light freighter’s interior, before hurling herself out of its open crew hatch. Swooping down through the contested airspace, past expanding flak clouds and bursts of laser fire, the Twi’lek kept her eyes peeled on the squat boxy shape of a civilian hangar on the outskirts of Eos. One that had recently fallen to the Collective forward elements.

Only a few dozen meters above the hangar roof, she activated her repulsor belt and felt the familiar sense of vertigo as it fought to slow her descent. Touching down with a hint more speed than she was entirely comfortable with, Tali turned the belt off and headed for the maintenance hatch. A saber slash later, she was in and carefully pacing along maintenance catwalks in the ceiling of the cavernous hangar space.

From her vantage point, she could see a ragtag group of pilots kneeling on the floor with their hands, all of them in case of some species, firmly pressed against their heads while a squad of Collective soldiers held them at blaster point. At least they hadn’t been executed. Perhaps the Collective too had use of them? She had no desire to speculate, instead moving with purpose to a position just above the captured pilots and taking a moment to center herself.

*Here we go again.* She leapt off the catwalk, and down onto the hangar floor. The Collective’s reaction was predictable and blunt.

“Get to your ships!” Tali Sroka shouted over the din of battle, deflecting blaster bolts with her dual lightsabers as she interjected herself between the detained merchant pilots and their Collective capturers. It was stretching herself dangerously thin, but the civilians needed to be *elsewhere* and the only way out of Eos city was via shuttle--and those shuttles needed pilots.

The gaggle of confused smugglers, traders, and assorted reprobates hesitated, but once the greediest of their kind made a run for it, the rest soon followed. Tali paid them no heed, not even when a few stray blaster bolts slipped past her defence and caught a fleeing Bothan in the back. These weren’t her people, she reminded herself. She was doing this to benefit her Clan, not out of love for the citizens of Arx.

The squad of Collective troopers had thinned from their own fire, the Twi'lek managing to reflect a few bolts back to their origin amidst the intricate defence, but a resolute number still opposed her. Sensing the pilots managing to put something more solid than herself between themselves and the incoming blaster fire, she could finally shift into offense.

The Force guiding her steps, her mind floating on its cool currents, Tali danced forward with graceful footwork. Dropping low to duck a volley of lethal crimson, leaping past a barricade of stacked crates, and pirouetting in a decapitating spin, she worked her way through the Collective line with deadly grace. The elegant number coming to a dramatic close, the golden yellow blades of her sabers slid back into their hilts the moment the last body slumped to the hangar deck.

Turning back to address the pilots, she raised them on a utility frequency used for civilian flight coordination.

“Listen up! Eos city is under attack, if you hadn’t noticed, and I need you to pick up any civilians you can and get them to safety. The Iron Legion has designated safe zones for refugees, but getting people out of the city is going to be tough. I’m putting you in touch with Callsign Q-tip, she’ll coordinate the effort. Anyone who’d rather take their chances with the Collective is free to do so. We have your IFF codes. Good luck, and may the Force be with you.”

There was a moment’s silence on the comms, disturbed only by a faint crackling of static, before the first sheepish acknowledgements began rolling in. One by one, the gaggle of mismatched freighters, shuttles, and industrial transports left their docking cradles and headed to assist the evacuation.

Tali was about to head away, when an upstart voice with a distinctly Coruscanti accent chimed up over the open channel.

*“To hell with you and your war! I am not taking orders from some self-made despot! My father didn’t die on Alderaan just so I’d have to suffer the indignity of obeying some glowstick waving dictator!”*

A luxury yacht of Nubian design peeled off from the pack and made for high orbit at best possible speed, a deep blue ion wake glittering in the evening sun. Tali raised a finger to her helmet and contacted her Arconan Expeditionary Forces liaison.

“Yes, the yacht. He’s made his bed,” she stated coldly as somewhere away the officer tagged the fleeing yacht’s IFF and marked it as Neutral. A pair of AEF X-wings, intent on escorting the ship to orbit, peeled off and left the ship to its own devices — and the tender mercies of the Collective’s roving Headhunters.

The hangar was devoid of further Collective resistance, the advance strike team that had been dropped to capture it ahead of the main advance now littered across the landing pads. Tali strode out into the streets and inhaled the acrid air. Smoke, explosives, burnt homes, and the pungent stench of seared *organics* laced the wind that fluttered her cloak. It was a scent she'd grown depressingly familiar with.

*"Commander Sroka, we have a squad pinned down near your location. Are you able to assist?"*

Tali looked at the burning city, the wails of its torment filling her earcones as it bled in the glorious rays of the evening sun. The Collective sure had a panache for choosing dramatic backdrops, she thought bitterly and acknowledged the request. Sounds of sporadic fighting surrounded her. Bursts of small arms and grenades, distant thunder of artillery, the screaming of ion engines overhead, they all filled her with a weary dread that made her senses alert, but the raw edge of her fear had dulled.

She'd seen war before. This one was no different. And it wasn't even in their own defence, but in service of people she *despised*. People, she recalled all too vividly, who'd attempted to commit genocide upon those races they'd deemed *lesser*. The Lotus emblem on the clasp of her cloak glittered in the fires of Eos. It looked almost *pleased*.

Shaking her head, Tali sat off towards the AEF squad. Their lives, at least, she had a desire to protect.

Picking her way through the devastated streets, littered with abandoned speeders and piles of debris from shell struck buildings, Tali pressed on doggedly as the sounds of a small skirmish intensified. A squad of AEF troops had been caught rescuing civilians from a collapsed hab rise by a detachment of Collective cyborg infantry supported by a walker of some description.

Volleys of intense blaster fire was turning the lip of a duracrete slab the soldiers used for cover into glass as the cyborgs attempted to outflank their trapped quarries, though for now the AEF had managed to hold their ground with a trio of cyborgs bleeding electric embers on the shattered roadway. They were running out of ammunition, however, and Tali knew from experience those cyborgs were a real pain to kill without explosives — or a saber. The largest threat, though, was the towering walker that spewed blaster fire into the slab from its repeating blaster and swayed the balance of power *heavily* into the Collective's favor.

"The bigger they are," Tali muttered to herself as she picked her way over broken glass to crouch by an adjacent street corner, drawing from the cool flow of the living Force around her. She could barely see the walker over the lip of a shot-out window — an impossible shot for a concussion rocket — but for someone in commune with greater allies than mere technology that was avenue enough.

She reached out towards the walker as it fired, brow furrowing in focus as she *clasped* her hand around a heated barrel. She could *feel* the reverberations of the discharging weapon and the resistance of mechanical servos as she *willed* the weapon to slew to the side. Caught in the moment, Tali missed the moment the cyborgs realized something was wrong with their support vehicle, but by then it was already too late.

The repeater kept firing, scything down the cyborgs from behind. Caught unawares, and having no means of escape, the enhanced infantrymen turned their guns on the walker in desperate self-defence. Tali sensed the pilot rearing back in confusion, not having realized what had happened to his weapon, and only waking up to his allies opening fire on him.

The pilot reacted with predictable self-preservation and within a matter of brutal seconds, the Collective soldiers had gutted each other as half-machines fought an even bigger one in a sudden and desperate bid to save their own lives from apparent treachery. In the end, the walker succumbed to thermal detonators, though by then what remained of the cyborgs was but a pittance.

“You’re clear,” Tali spoke into her comlink, and the pinned AEF squad finished off the wounded foes with a few well placed shots. Walking into view to join the remnants of the squad, Tali offered a nod of acknowledgement to the acting sergeant, a dark skinned veteran of Nancora.

“You never get used to them,” he grunted, “Fraking machines.” He spat on the ground in disgust.

“Are you alright? How are the civilians? Didt you get them out?”

“What’s left of us is doing fine. But sarge got hit by the walker when she tried to take it out with an imploder. Won’t be enough left for a proper burial. The locals are still trapped in the cellar. We were going to blow the rubble, but figured it might be best to let a demolitions team handle that.”

“Vhy’s that?”

“We, uh, don’t do finesse.”

“Ah, I see vhat you mean,” Tali nodded and cleared her throat. “Show me, maybe I can be of assistance.”

The man gestured at a doorway that led down into the basement of an apartment block. Grey dust covered the steps and shards of broken mortar littered the floors. The lights were out in places, shattered by the concussive force of an explosion, and the narrow corridor ended abruptly in a wall of piled-up rubble.

“The emergency shelter’s just beyond that, but we can’t get through.”

Tali nodded and inspected the debris. It had fallen in from above, where a gaping hole led to one of the building’s several apartments. Someone ought to have words with the architect, but now was hardly the time to debate design safety. A twisted mass of rebar and artificial stone, the rubble was heavy, and difficult to lift by hand. Tali gauged the size of the rubble pile and the hole overhead, before turning back to the man.

“Step back, I’m going to try something,” she said before sitting down cross-legged on the floor and closing her eyes. She calmed her mind, dulling out the distant rumble of an artillery barrage and the buzzing of starfighters overhead. She pushed aside the sensation of anger, of fear, of pain, and slowly waded into the cool stream of consciousness that flowed through all living things; joining, binding.

Her arms extended, palms splayed. Fingers curled gently, like grasping a lover’s side, before coaxing, suggesting, the rubble to move. There was resistance, as much she’d expected, but she did not let it daunt her. *Size does not matter, only Will.* She exhaled sharply and steadied herself. She tried anew.

Pebbles skipped down the rubble pile, loosened by an unseen shudder. The floor groaned, flexing as its burdens were lightened. Little by little, gently and respectfully, the pile rose free off the ground until it hovered a few inches in the air. Tali did not see the trooper’s stunned look, but she could feel it vividly and a small smile crept upon her lips even as a droplet of sweat ran down her brow.

With both hands, she raised the broken duracrete up, offering it a firm command for it to be elsewhere. Inertia still held sway, but the twisted ball still floated up higher and higher, before tearing through the hole it had come from and depositing somewhere above them. The shudder of its landing almost made the trooper bolt, but once the flecks of dust had settled down once more, stillness remained.

“You are welcome,” Tali panted lightly, holding her forehead as she rose to unsteady feet. That had taken much out of her. Surprisingly so. Where she’d waded into a strong current and drank deep of its cool power, by the end she’d left but a stream. Or at least that was how it had felt. Putting words to the innate ability of using the Force had always been troublesome for her. Someone more eloquent might have fared better.

With a swift slash of her saber, the blast door yielded and a group of huddled Arxians stared at her with a mix of fear and hope. She offered a kind smile and deactivated her weapon, extending a hand towards the closest survivor.

“Come, we’re here to rescue you,” she stated and was grasped by a tentative hand.

The majority of the civilians were in good shape, although some had suffered minor injuries. Seeing her work done, Tali headed back outside with datapad in hand, seeking to contact callsign Q-tip for an extraction. Yet with every step she took the nagging feeling of unease grew stronger. By the time she was outside, it had grown into a sense of foreboding.

It flickered and waned, however, like a candle guttering in the wind. One moment it was almost screaming, the next it was muffled and distant. She knew something was wrong, she just couldn't place it, before—

“Get down!” Tali shouted, tackling a trooper to the ground as a flurry of rockets screamed past them and detonated against the building wall. The concussive force threw them about like ragdolls, showering their armor with sharp shards of stone and pieces of shrapnel as her datapad skipped across the ground. Before any of the AEF soldiers could regain their footing, a murderous volley opened up on them, cutting down the first two who'd managed to evade the brunt of the initial attack. Their perforated bodies slumped into the street amidst a soft whining of servo motors.

“Oh frak,” Tali muttered, peeling a lek off her face and crawling behind the slab of duracrete the AEF had previously used for cover. Wading through the haze came a full squad of *heavily* augmented soldiers in pitch black armor, their weapons held up with *inhuman* stability and shifting from target to target like clockwork automata. For all Tali knew, they might as well have been.

Drawing her sabers, she tried to center herself before the inevitable fight, but even as she spun into view to buy the surviving troopers a few moments to scramble for cover, she realized something was *terribly* wrong. A wall of blaster bolts hurtled her way, and there was *no* sense of danger beyond the primal one that wrenched her gut.

She raised her blades, twisting them as best she could with sheer skill alone, but it was nowhere near enough. A bolt snagged her thigh, burning a grazing wound through the armor plate, and another struck her pauldron with such force it tore clean off. Staggering back under the onslaught before she too joined the recently departed, Tali barely managed to seek refuge in the exact spot she'd rescued the troopers from but minutes prior.

“Cease fire,” a voice announced from beyond the line of dark armored exterminators who duly obliged. “Brotherhood soldiers! Lay down your arms and cease this senseless struggle. You need not die here, on this alien world far from home, in service of cruel masters who care nothing for you. Turn over your tyrant, and the Collective shall reward you greatly!”

A hunched figure limped forward, clutching a stave for support as the day's events had already taken a toll on him, and he had yet more parts to play. The gaunt, withered features of Avitus Oligard were difficult to forget, as was the crackling tone of his wretched voice.

“Refuse,” he continued, having clearly paused for breath. “And your fate shall be same as theirs.”

The maniple of Hive Mind Marines held their fire, though their blasters were still trained upon the rubble. Tali could appreciate the peril of the moment, and the fact she was of little use without her powers. Only three soldiers remained, and they all looked to her for hope. She had precious little to offer.

“Avitus!” she shouted. “I knew I sensed something unnatural.”

“You are the only unnatural thing here, *Jedi*,” Avitus sneered, spitting out the last word like a foul glob of phlegm. “You and your kind are a blemish upon the galaxy, and we will wipe it clean of your tyranny!”

“Oh please,” Tali groaned, wincing as the stinging pain of blaster burn stung her thigh. “You of all people should know it is not one’s fault to be born this way. We are not monsters, unlike what *your* masters have done to you, and countless others. Look at the abominations you command! When did losing your sentience become the price we all agreed to pay?”

“They were volunteers! Honored to serve the cause!”

“You mean brainwashed desperates you promised false rewards to? How can you stomach this, Avitus? When you can feel the true nature of the Force yourself?!”

“I know the true danger of your kind, and the lengths we are willing to go to protect the Galaxy from you will demand sacrifices. But unlike your self-serving selves, we are ready to make those sacrifices. I hope you enjoyed this exchange, because it cost your men their lives. Not that you’d care...” Avitus nodded to the Marines. “Open fire. Kill every one of them.”

The Marines obeyed without question and a withering barrage struck the already weakened slab of duracrete with such force it almost shattered. Tali thought feverishly of any possible angle she could use to escape the impending doom, but she could see no out. The Force was silenced from her mind, and as long as she remained near Avitus, that would not change. For all his wretched qualities, the man was gifted in the power he chose to wield.

“Ma’am?” A young soldier looked at her. She could see the fear in his eyes, the desire to return back to Dajorra alive, or at least not die huddled behind a rock like some scared animal. “What do we do?”

The question was impossible to answer. She had nothing. She had...

“Raaaaaagh!”

Emerging from the doorway, with blaster in hand and vibroknife in the other, the acting sergeant roared in anger as he charged at Avitus. The man was caught completely by surprise and staggered back, lost for words. He stumbled, fell on his back with a sharp yelp of pain, and managed to point at the soldier while shouting to kill.

The Marines acted without hesitation, turning away from the pinned soldiers and their Jedi commander, and all focusing on the lone sergeant who pumped a trio of bolts into the closest Marine to little apparent effect.

“Go!” he yelled, grunting as the first bolt struck his arm and another tore the blaster from his hand.

Tali needed no further encouragement. Grabbing the young trooper by the arm, she rose and ran. The other two followed hot on her heels, squeezing out shots over their shoulders to, again, little effect. From the edge of her vision, Tali caught the heroic sergeant’s sacrifice as he was brought down under a withering hail, his chestplate smoking in ruin as he collapsed lifelessly to the ground at Avitus’ feet. She gritted her teeth in anger, and vowed revenge.

“After them!” Avitus barked. “The Jedi dog is fleeing!”

The Marines acted like automata, advancing in a perfect formation as they sat off in pursuit, with only a handful remaining to guard Avitus himself. With a head start, however, Tali and the surviving troopers were able to dash inside a devastated building and find refuge inside. At least for the moment.

“Frak!” the young trooper spat. “They’re unstoppable! You saw them eat those shots like it was nothing. And I thought the cyborgs were bad enough...”

The disheartened looks of the other two spoke of little more confidence than he had left. Without grenades, their blasters appeared more of an inconvenience than a credible threat to the dark armored amalgams of man and machine.

“They are dangerous,” Tali admitted, feeling a little better as a faint echo of the Force now sounded in her mind. Avitus’ trickery was disgusting and getting her focus back would take some time. Time which they did not have. “But we cannot leave those civilians behindt.”

“Why not?” the trooper spat, perhaps harsher than he’d intended.

There was a moment’s silence, before he apologized.

“I meant no disrespect, but why are we dying here for people we neither know, nor particularly care about?”



Tali felt once again short on answers, especially when she'd asked herself that very same question.

"Because we're better than them," she spoke, the words rising from somewhere deep inside her. "Because unlike the Collective, we do not think sacrificing others for our own ends is justified. I fight beside you, because I believe in our cause, and I want you all to get back home to see your families, just as I want to return to mine. And those people in that cellar? They want that too. We didn't choose this war, and we didn't start it. But we *will* end it."

The trio exchanged looks, then turned back to her and nodded. "What do you need of us, commander?"

Tali took her sabers and offered them to the troopers. "I will need your help."

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Avitus Oligard kicked the blasted corpse out of anger and snapped a curse as his spindly leg hit an unyielding plate of plastoid. His every existence was misery and loathing, most of it directed towards himself, but moments like these were the few ones he experienced joy. Hunting down Jedi, seeing the fear and panic in their eyes when they realized they no longer had a mighty ally at their beck and call, and hearing their deathrattles all made for a moment of profound delight to him. After all, it was the task his brother had moulded him for. It was his way of making amends for being such a disgusting and deplorable mutant, an *undesirable*.

He leaned heavily on the staff in his hands and cursed the glaring sun overhead that stung his sunken eyes. But such were the pains he'd been destined to bear, and he would bear them until they broke him. He deserved no better.

*"Master Avitus, we made visual contact with a yellow-sabered individual. Requesting directives."* The monotone voice of the Hive Mind Marines was still unsettling to hear, but perhaps that was what Sparks had been going for. Avitus keyed his comlink and acknowledged the report.

"Pursue and exterminate. Make her suffer."

There was a momentary pause, then another crackle.

*"Conflicting orders. Visual was on a male. Unable to comply."*

Avitus groaned. This part of their programming had Dagoo Mouk's handiwork written all over it. He was just about to respond, when a familiar hum sounded nearby. Ice cold panic flared up his spine and he turned around, just in time to catch glimpse of an armored form dashing for cover, a golden yellow saber in their hand.

Turning to the small guard detail beside him, he pointed at the fleeing Jedi. "After her! She's getting away!"

"Conflicting orders..." the closest Marine began, but he had no desire to listen.

"Do as you're told! Pursue and kill! I want their head!"

The Marines moved out without objection, following his orders blindly. As they rounded the corner in hot pursuit of the Jedi, Avitus felt the tremor of adrenaline slowly fade from his blood, a cool whisper of a wind stroking his tangled mop of a hair. He was alone. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, he was *very* alone.

Avitus Oligard might have been many things, but he was not a complete idiot. Even though at that precise moment he truly felt like one. Raising his comlink back to his head to rescind the order, he froze when a shadow fleeted over him. He snapped around, watching in horror and disbelief as the Jedi sailed down from above, defying gravity and his suppression of her connection to the Force, before landing mere feet before him and leveling a blaster pistol to his face.

"Tell your pets to stop andt surrender, or you'll join that man," Tali nodded her head at the sergeant's cooling corpse.

"Y-you wouldn't dare!" Avitus tried, backing away. "I-I know your Jedi code, you will not..."

Tali kicked the staff from his hand, sending him to the ground, before pinning him in place with her armored boot and leveling the blaster straight at his face. "Tell, them, off. Now."

He gave a pitiful whimper as he raised the comlink to his face. With a sigh of resignation, he whispered into it. "Every chain is broken."