

Part I: Sand

Sand kicked up behind her, plumes of silken, chalky dust rising into the air. It was deliciously soft, smooth, a pure bone-white. So different from the golden dunes on Iridonia, the desert hills that had shaped the boundaries of her life for so long. The sand there was coarse, rough. It got everywhere. Even still, Sera loved it all the same. Sand had been her playpen, her fort, her hunting grounds, and her comfort. In its shifting waves, she managed to find something concrete. Something solid. As every tribal before her had, Sera had found her home in the hearts of those around her, and the sand beneath her feet. That had been enough. Always enough.

The sand here was different, sure. But it was close enough. Besides, she had gotten her fill of home recently. A week spent there for Karran's rite, after she had convinced him to take the oath of kin, to go back to Iridonia with her. Another week and a half after, just to enjoy themselves, to speed his recovery. To help him find himself.

Then, as soon as they'd gotten back, another vacation had been thrown in their laps. Ancestors thank the summit.

Cerulean waves pounded the shore to her right, slow and smooth, frothing with snowy white caps. She'd always found the hum of the surf to be more alien than comforting, as some people called it, but it certainly served as a beautiful vista for their run. Suited up in shorts and a white tank top, Sera left her feet bare to the water and sand. She kept a comfortable pace, though slower than she might have ordinarily tried for. She wasn't running alone, afterall.

The Zabrak cast a glance over her shoulder. Karran was trundling along about fifty feet behind her. His steps were heavy, cheeks puffed out in exertion, even at a pace that he once would have been able to handle quite easily. He was still shedding the pounds that he had picked up in those dark few months, still adjusting to the lack of a left arm to provide him a counterbalance. He still hadn't found a suitable cybernetic, yet. Everyone that had been tried so far had been rejected in turn. But, he was *trying*. That was the change. No more wallowing. He had his ink back, and now he was trying. Improving every day.

"C'mon, Kar!" she called out, pivoting on her heel so that she was running backwards, facing towards him. "Just a few more minutes, yeah? Then we can head back, meet up with everyone at the wave pool, yeah?"

"Just... let me catch my breath, *Ka'Chinka*," Karran sighed, finally coming to a stop. "You're... you're really gonna make this hard, huh?" he panted. Sera gave a snort of laughter as she came to a stop of her own, rounding on him with a grin. After a few moments, he looked up and shared it.

"That," she replied, taking a few steps towards him. "Is what *he* said." She paused two feet in front of him, hands stemmed on her hips. Her bright blue eyes followed the rise and fall of his shoulders, studying, admiring her friend. For the last few months, she had felt... felt like she was going to lose him. That he would be gone, just like her brother, leaving her behind.

But he wasn't. Her mind was left to obsess over her other doubts. Her place as a leader, whether she was really cut out for the position that had been entrusted to her, the lives that she was meant to protect. She was beset with worries for her friends, her crew, her family in all but blood. But...

"Did I say that?" he questioned mockingly, voice shifting into feigned innocence. Slowly, the larger Zabrak straightened, levelling a fierce smile at her. She could hear the challenge in his voice. The dare. "Harder...no, I know that *I* never said anything like. So, it must have been..."

She hardly even needed to reach out with the Force. The intent for the spar, the duel, registered as clear as day. The challenge in his hearts, stirred by competition. She felt it rise up within herself in turn, and her grin grew even wider.

"I'll show you harder," she retorted, blue eyes flashing. Before he could reply, she was already making her first move, leaping to meet him. Even with one arm, he was still strong, fast, and much larger than her. She needed to put him down, hard. He recognized that. As she dodged inward, his one hand rose loosely to his chest, a hovering guard, almost daring her to strike high. She went low instead, dropping her hips and kicking out with her left leg, trying to catch his heels and sweep him over. He leapt the blow instead, landing solidly and reaching out to grapple her as he did. Even with one arm to hold her, he was still bound in thick chords of muscle. If she got caught in that grip, the spar usually came to a close soon after.

Not this time. She ducked into a roll, evading the grasping hand and coming up behind him in a billow of powdery sand. Turning on his heel, he tried to kick into her, but she caught the foot as it came and threw it aside. Neither of them were aiming for strikes. Rather, they were trying to push, to shove, to trip, leveraging for a pin. Grinning savagely, she pressed hard into his guard, pushing him back on his heels with a flurry of blows, each one resonating in the Force, pumping in her hearts. A soft elbow in his ribs, a knee to his inner, two short straight push-punched to his pectorals. He twisted into the blows, legs deftly sidestepping hers as she tried to trip him and he tried to do the same. Their K'thri turned into a dance, wailing to the rhythm of their hearts, a song that only they could hear.

Karran's good eye locked on Sera's. Then, bracing on his back feet, he shoved out with his open hand, palming her in the center of the chest. A wall of telekinetic Force slammed into her, casting the Zabrak a dozen feet backward. She landed on her butt in the wet sand, blinking. Then, the surf slammed into her. Tepid saltwater bowled her over, stinging her eyes and nose, soaking through her workout clothes in one fell swoop. Sera was shocked by the sense of vertigo, senses scrambling as she rolled end over end. As she came to rest, and the water receded, she reached out to the Force. It cleared her senses, gave her vision and breath back.

Karran was stalking towards her, laughing uproariously. Obviously, he thought he had the pin in the bag. He thought wrong. Blinking seawater from her eyes, Sera flicked her left hand up, willing the Force into motion. Following her gesture, a jet of white sand burst from the beach, spraying Karran in the face. She was fairly certain that he'd gotten it right into his laughing mouth; served him right.

She was on her feet moments later, charging her blinded opponent as he spat sand from his mouth and tried to brush it from his eyes. In this endeavor, having one hand certainly didn't help. She slammed into him with all the momentum of her sprint, arms wrapping tight around his waist. From there, the outcome was foregone. It only took a few moments for Sera to clamber fully on top of him, both arms pinning his one wrist, her left knee pressed into his chest.

She peered over him, water still dripping down her scalp. He blinked. One eye fluttered open, powdery sand caught in the lash. The next followed suit, faded and unseeing, but both locked on her face. For a few moments, there was silence. She had almost lost him. It had been so, so close. But he was here. Solid, real, unyielding. Like the sand under her feet, in something that was fleeting, ephemeral, she had found a solid foundation. Something she could trust.

"That was sloppy, *Ka'Chinka*," Karran chided playfully.

"And you were slow, *Ankari*," she retorted, eyebrows wiggling. "Still working off that flab."

"My honor impelled me to provide cushioning," he chuckled in return, though the joke rang a little hollow. Working as hard as he was, the fat would not last long. Still...

"You do make a good seat," Sera purred. Slowly, she lowered herself to her elbows, eyes on his. They kissed. Once. Twice...

"*AY*, you guys know this is a public beach, right?" called a familiar, exasperated voice from down the shore. Sera stiffened, a bright flush rising in her cheeks as she scrambled off of Karran. The larger Zabrak did much the same, rising to a sitting position with a strangled gasp. Neither of them met Ruka's gaze as he jogged up, lavender eyes practically rolling right out of his fringing head.

"Uh, we were-..."

"Just sparring! Just. Sparring."

"Yeah. It's, uh, it's a Zabradi thing."

The Mirialan paused, looking between the two of them. He seemed so deeply unimpressed that Sera thought he was gonna keep on strolling right on through the treeline. Instead, he drew in a deep breath and *sighed*, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Whaaaaat am I gonna do with the two of you?" he asked, thick dreadlocks shaking.

"Join in?" Sera joked, instantly eliciting a hard snort of laughter.

"Nah, hard pass *Ra'Tueria*," he deadpanned, eyes rolling. "You two still comin' to lunch? Or am I gonna have to put warning signs out for the other tourists? No one's kids gotta see two hornies rolling around in the sand. I know my kids don't."

Sera sighed, and looked to Karran, who was already climbing to his feet. "...yes. Lunch sounds good," he agreed, offering his fellow Zabrak a hand. She took it with a grin, rising to her feet...

Her eyes fell on the jungle over Karran's shoulder, and a shiver trailed down her spine. On basic instinct, she blinked, reaching out with the Force. The feedback was instant. Beyond Karran and Ruka, two familiar auras. Beyond the buzz of life, swelling from the verdant jungle. Beyond it all, something called. A note of song, insistent, pleading, urging. It carried darkness in its timbre, something terrifying. Something familiar.

I know you, the Dark Ballad called. *Bring your hearts to me*.

The call was strong. But Sera blinked, and her will snapped down like an iron trap, and it was gone.

"Sera? Lunch?" Ruka questioned from behind her, seemingly confused.

"Uh...yeah!" she responded after a few seconds, turning back to him and Karran with a grin. "Lunch. They got something other than seafood, right?"

"Course they do," Ruka responded, shooting her a warm grin as he took off at a run down the beach. Karran followed a moment later.

Sera hesitated. She cast a glance towards the treeline, reached for the Force... but the song was gone.

Weird, she thought, brow furrowing. Didn't matter much to her, though. Within seconds, she was sprinting off behind Ruka and Karran, hearts thrumming in her chest, a grin set upon her face. White, powdery sand kicked up behind her as she went.

And the Ballad called.