

Water was hard to come by on Iridonia. In the badlands, the golden dunes stretched endlessly, an expanse of shifting golden dunes and shattered rocky hills that pushed the boundary of the horizon. There, the sun was a predator, a constant presence. It beamed down on you like a furnace, ripping the breath from your lungs, boiling the moisture from your blood. For one to survive in the desert, they needed to know where to find water...and that was no easy feat. Eons had been spent charting wells and reservoirs, placed where tribes could hunker down to hunt their prey. Oases, fed by chill, underground streams, were tightly controlled, protected from pollution and overexploitation. The planet's greatest cities sprung up around the largest oases, and the cold streams that ran from the mountain ranges at the north and south poles.

Honor and tradition dictated that honor was to be shared. It was a sacred thing; the truest symbol of purity. Rites of marriage and chieftdom, alongside duels of honor, were sworn upon water, spilled into the sand. It was said to purify the land, wash the hearts free from guilt, from sin, from shame. In the reflection of clear, crystalline water, one could see their soul unbound from earthly fetters. Freed from worry, from pain. If only for a moment.

A lot of tribal, mystic mumbo-jumbo. Sera's elders had spoken it in the same breaths as their warnings about nightsister witches, prophetic dreams, and vengeful spirits. Having encountered all three of those things...and having seen that all three of them were wildly different from her elders' expectations...she knew just how limited that old advice was. Yet, somehow, her belief held true. She was a captain now, a battleteam leader. People depended on her wisdom to guide them, her strength to protect them. Still, she kept to the old ways of her people, the adages that had guided her as a huntress in the tribes.

It was a cold, brisk morning on Eldar. Winter had now fully settled in. Hoarfrost and rime coated the fallen leaves of Autumn, frosting around the thick, black tree trunks of the Eldarian forest. It had snowed, almost a week ago. Sera had only seen the stuff once before, when picking up her lightsaber crystal from Illium. It was far more pleasant, here. Soft, dancing slowly in the air. She still wasn't used to the chill, of course. A lifelong desert dweller, she found herself constantly tapping into the Force, bidding her body ignore the biting cold.

Before her, a stream ran through the forest, bubbling into a pool fed by an underground hot spring. Steam roiled from the surface, and frost retreated from the water's edge. The water was stark, crystal clear, the forest that surrounded it totally pristine. The Keadeans, the Eldarian natives that her team was assisting, certainly hadn't mapped it. For all she knew, this area had never seen another sentient, aside from her.

The glossy surface of the pool was a nearly perfect mirror. Sera could see herself. The maroon markings that crossed her flesh in symmetrical swirls. Her horns, filed down to needle points. Sometimes, she found her reflection nearly unrecognizable. It was the same face, sure...but something in it had changed. Where had that scar come from? The gash, crossing her from cheek to chin? How had that look in her eyes, the light behind their bright blue cast, changed?

She wondered about that, and worried about it, often. Worried that she was changing. Worried that she wasn't changing fast enough. She was expected to lead. To protect her people, protect her crew, protect the adopted family that she had found in Arcona. She was so sure that she could do it, so confident that things would turn out for the better. That was how things were supposed to turn out, right? Those who were honorable, righteous, earned the very best lives that they could. Those who heeded the lessons of their ancestors, who found their happiness, their purpose, in all the good that they did. That was how it was supposed to be. That was what she had believed in for so long.

...had that changed? When?

Horrors prowled the shadows on Selen. A temple cracked open when the planets aligned, releasing monstrosities without reason, or pity, or mercy. Sera could remember their cries, shrieking into the night, echoing in the jungle's twilight. She could remember their teeth gnashing, ripping, tearing. She could remember the bodies of people who had done *nothing* to deserve the atrocities wreaked upon them. And, she could remember how the temple had *twisted* people. Turned them against their loved ones...against their friends...against themselves.

Ruka, plunging into the dark, trailing blood and gore.

Alaisy, bloody saber burning, plunging her claws into Sera's side.

Diy.

Ancestors, Diy.

A shining, half-quirked smile. Forest-green tresses, bouncing with laughter. Warm, turquoise eyes, promising mischief. One of Sera's closest friends. The Zabrak trusted her with...everything. With her word. With her life.

At the temple's bidding, Diy had shot Sera in the gut.

It changed everyone who had encountered it. It scarred them, more deeply than any weapon, left a mark upon them that couldn't be washed away...or could it?

Sera stared into the water, into the depths of her reflection. She saw her doubts, her worries and her fears and her anger and her weariness. The pain built like a blight within her, a tumor of shadow upon her soul. Yes, the temple had changed her...but not through any suffering that it had put *her* through. Rather, it was seeing what it had done to her friends.

Diy avoided Sera. Glanced away. Acted as if she had forgotten what had happened, like it had never occurred in the first place. The Zabrak could *feel* the turmoil in her, an open wound that was torn wide at the slightest touch, the barest thought. She never met Sera's eyes.

And that hurt more than anything.

Sera gazed deeply into the water, and reflected upon her reflection. It only took a moment. In the end, despite everything, she was a simple creature, after all.

Water could wash away all things. When the storms came, even the greatest dunes and mountains melted away. It purified, sanctified...made life anew. In it, she found what she needed to do.

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Diy was busy when she saw Sera coming.

It was ironic, really. She'd spent most of her laying about on the streets, coursing along with gangers and bangers and pimps and drug jockies. That was just the way of it, really. It was fun work, easy to lose herself in. One didn't have a lot of time for existential dread when the half of their day that wasn't spent ruttin' it with the first pretty thing in her path was spent high as a damned kite or siphoning memories off of whatever she could get her mitts on.

Things had been different for a few years now, sure. But, nothing quite as different as...karkin' aid work? Give her just a few months with that damned goody two shoes Zabrak, and here she was, passing out winter supplies to villagers, helping to train up their hunters with modern equipment. It was quiet work, placid. Left her too much time to think, and put too many damned questions in her head...and there just wasn't enough for her Psychometry to keep her distracted.

Who was this girl? The one that was doing something...good? Not just because she was being paid to, either, or because she'd been ordered, but because it was a good thing to do?

The same She-Akk as before? Selfish, hedonistic...she could feel her, hiding somewhere within herself, couldn't she? Waiting for the beck and call to come again.

Or, maybe this was something else. The protector. The person who'd sworn her loyalty to Zujenia, and meant it. Who swore lots of things to lots of people, and normally meant to keep her words when they spilled out her lips.

Or maybe it was that other one. The guilty one. The scarred one. The one that had listened to a beautiful voice in the jungle. The one that hadn't been able to protect all those poor, innocent children. The one that had shot Sera in the gut for hurting those babies, only to realize that she'd failed to defend both her friends, and the monsters that had wormed their way into her heart.

Or.

Or.

Or.

She wasn't sure who she was. There seemed to be lots of her, wanting lots of different things. She didn't know anymore. At some point, she'd just...stopped asking, hadn't she? Searching for those answers reminded her of things that she would rather not remember. It was far better to just take whatever she was presented with, lose herself in the memories that she was given. Far easier, too.

The Kiffar was roused from her solipsistic musing when she saw Sera approaching, a low sigh escaping her. The sigh died as she broke into a wide grin, greeting her friend and lover with a wave.

"Heya, Tatts! What's on the up'n'up?" she questioned, deliberately avoiding the Zabrak's eyes. Since what had happened on Selen, at the temple, she couldn't quite bring herself to meet them. Those eyes were...so confident, so sure, so trusting. There was a warmth in them, a promise that Diy couldn't deny...and a question that she couldn't bring herself to answer.

"Not much," the Zabrak replied brightly, a toothy smile crossing her face. "Just wanted to show you something. Wanna...take a little walk with me?"

Diy thought that she was going to say no. She'd done so well, avoiding Sera, avoiding thinking about...well. The thing that hadn't been her. But, one look at that smile, as pure as sunlight, as enough to send a bolt of warmth through her chest. That was all it took.

"Course!" Diy replied, her grin quirking. "Y'know I'm always down for a lil bit of *bushcraft*."

That brought laughter out of both of them, alongside a none-too innocent look...but Diy still didn't meet Sera's eyes. After a moment, the laughter died, and silence stretched between them, a trench that couldn't be crossed.

"...right," Sera broke back in after a few moments, her smile returning. "Let's get going...before I have any *other* ideas for you."

That brought Diy's grin back real quick.

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"You see it?"

“...I don’t really get it,” Diy admitted, her brow furrowing deeply. A pool of water stretched before her, tongues of steam curling off of its surface, stretching into the biting cold air. The “short little walk” had turned into more of a trek...and this had been it’s end. Some kind of hot spring?

The water was shockingly clear, as pure as crystal. Diy could see her reflection in the glassy surface. Her dark green dreads were pulled back behind her shoulder, swept into a thick curl. Dark freckles were splashed across her golden skin, splaying over the golden tattoos that crossed the bridge of her nose.

Diy gave herself a good look. Then, she stuck out her tongue, and blew a raspberry.

“Nothing. Tatts, you alright? This just an excuse to sneak a peek while I’m bent over?”

There was a moment of silence before Sera spoke.

“Can you swim, Diybiy?”

“Er...yeah? Kinda.”

“Good thing,” Sera replied. Diy could *hear* the smile in her voice. Then, her concentration on the water was broken by the sound of a zipper.

She turned to see the Zabrak pulling her boots off, laying them carefully by the water’s edge. Heedless of the air’s chill, her trousers fell around her ankles moments later, soon joined by her tunic and cloak. Underneath lay toned, tight musculature, coiling underneath the swirling pattern of her tattoos, running from the top of Sera’s head to the tips of her toes. The scars there seemed to belong to the pattern, spots of pearly white incorporated into the symmetrical pattern. All save for one.

Diy’s gaze flinched from it, but it was there. A deep pockmark in Sera’s abdomen, an inch or two over her navel. She remembered the moment that she had put it there. She remembered the irrational anger, the hatred, flowing like ice in her veins.

She still didn’t want to believe it.

Slowly, Diy’s gaze travelled up, and Sera caught her eyes for just a moment. The Zabrak gave her a smile and a wink. Then, taking off into a run, she leapt into the forest pool. The glassy surface of the water broke into millions of shards with a splash, ripples echoing as she broke back to the surface.

“If you don’t get your butt in here, I’ll float you in and dunk you, clothes and all,” Sera threatened jokingly, standing on the tips of her toes to keep her face above the water. The stone that lined the pool’s bottom looked smooth, slick...and the water did seem so warm.

The two of them shared another look. Diy was unsure...if only for a moment. That smile was hard to deny.

The Kiffar gave a crooked grin, and started pulling her flight suit away. Moments later, another splash broke the silence of the forest, the water's warmth wrapping around her, embracing her. Then, Sera's arms joined it, coiling underneath Diy's shoulders, pressing the taller woman's body back up against her.

Diy expected a lot of things. A kiss, maybe. Something more. But...not the words.

"I brought you to the water...because I wanted you to see....*you*," the Zabrak murmured, resting her chin on Diy's shoulder. One of her horns tickled against the back of the Kiffar's neck. "Not how anyone else sees you. Or how I see you. The memories are good for all that. Just...how *you* see you."

There was silence for a moment as Diy took that in. The words hit her like a dagger of heat, piercing something within her. She wasn't sure what. She wasn't sure that she wanted to know.

"...how? How do I do that?" she questioned after a moment, almost desperately. "See myself...I don't even *know* myself. I don't know where to start...where to..."

She cut off raggedly, her head shaking. Slowly, she turned back around to face the Zabrak, still avoiding her eyes.

"You don't need to know," Sera answered, smiling. "Just start with the reflection. Start with the water. Start...start with yourself."

Diy said nothing. Instead, for the first time in months, she met the Zabrak's gaze, blue-green eyes questioning.

Sera's eyes answered silently.

And water healed all of their wounds.