

How's the Heart?

"Flying is for droids..."

The wailing alarms and smell of acrid smoke filling the cockpit of the E-wing were a testament to the Twi'lek's limited piloting ability—or the skill of the Severian TIEs she'd been fleeing from. Rear deflectors down, she tried to eke out a bit more power to bring herself out of gun range, but the pesky pursuers would not relent.

"R3, can you findt *any* more p—?" There was a dull detonation as a capacitor bank blew somewhere in the *Callous Songbird's* starboard wing. The engine guttered and died.
"Karabast."

"Hang on, R3, ve're going down!" Tali Sroka yelled as gravity made her stomach lurch, the E-wing plummeting from the sky with all the elegance of a brick. The beleaguered astromech tried its best to reroute what it could into the repulsors to soften the inevitable hard landing, but even so the dirt of Tipool City was uncomfortably firm.

How's the heart?

Alive.

Tali awoke from a momentary blackness to feel heat rising within the cockpit. Greedy tongues of fire lapped at the cracked transparisteel of the canopy and every system was down. At least her flight suit had managed to protect her from the worst of the impact, but the fighter itself would be a total writeoff. Grabbing what equipment she had to hand, she unbuckled the flight harness and fired the canopy's explosive bolts.

Leaping out of her burning craft, Tali beheld the empty square she'd crashed in, the buildings around her standing desolate and pockmarked by stray blaster fire. She'd have to find her way out and soon, but the fighter's comms were totalled and—

A sharp binary warble alerted her to what she'd forgotten. Still trapped inside the E-wing's sealed astromech socket, R3 was squealing in distress. Whether droids could feel pain or panic, René certainly mimicked it convincingly.

"Holdt on, I'm coming!"

She ignited her saber-glaive, scrambling up the side of the fighter and cutting into the hatch cover. Yellow plasma bit through military grade durasteel as she carefully removed the cover to let her companion out. Except he wouldn't detach. The ejection system had been damaged, trapping the droid inside the burning fighter. Its squeals grew in intensity, reaching heights Tali had not known it was capable of.

Thinking fast, she realized her options were limited. This was going to hurt, but maybe the droid could be saved. Reaching out through the Force, she harnessed every last iota of

finesse and strength she had to *wrap* her consciousness around the droid and *pull* it out. Resistance mounted as the restraining bolts bent, pearls of sweat dripping down the Twi'lek's forehead, before finally the wiser yielded and the droid came loose.

René landed in the dirt with about as much elegance as the fighter it had just been extracted from, bleeding sparks from one of its track units and an unsightly dent in its dome. But it was alive.

Danger flashed in her weary mind and she threw herself clear of the burning E-wing just before it was consumed by a flash fire that detonated a tibanna coil. The two survivors slowly picked themselves up while the wreckage burned, belching a column of black smoke. A dead giveaway for any enemy patrols.

"Ve have to go," Tali said grimly. "Can you move?"

R3 beeped an affirmative, though its locomotors were visibly damaged. They would have to stick to the shadows. Dashing across the open would not be an option. Pulling out her scanner, Tali dialed in a full-frequency scan of the nearby area. There had to be a transmitter strong enough nearby that she could call in an extraction. The device returned a handful of signatures.

"Let's hope they're not all heldt by Severians, or vorse."

R3 beeped solemn agreement.

How's the heart?

Afraid

The pair picked their way along a narrow side street, the smells of Tipool's sewers not far from the Twi'lek's nose. The Hutt-run city was not too dissimilar to any found on Nal Hutta, except the owners had yet to despoil the planet quite as badly. Though they had certainly tried.

The angular architecture of Imperial prefabricated buildings had been subsumed by bulbous and ramshackle outgrowths, enveloping the old under a hodgepodge of sandstone and cheap rockrete. What had once been a small Imperial outpost had been consumed by the Hutts and their minions that now infested the old bones like parasites.

Yet, it was not out of malice that most of Tipool's inhabitants subsisted like this. Most had no other choice, or simply had never heard of anything better. In a galaxy of opportunity, most were never afforded any. To the average Dandoran civilian, the Tenixir Revenants must have seemed like just another passer-by, not too dissimilar to themselves in more ways than merely the superficial. Contrasted to the polished warplate of the Severian Principate and their overwhelming military might, was it a wonder the locals had quietly leaned towards the former?

This was unfortunately not a war where picking the underdog was without consequence.

“Surrender, Revenants, and we will offer you leniency and a fair trial!” An amplified voice commanded.

Tali snuck up to the next corner and peered around it, taking in the sight of a squad of Principate soldiers hunkered down behind barricades and apparently besieging a residential building. From the bodies lying nearby, and scattered across the courtyard, the Revenants were putting up a stiff resistance.

“Go frak yourself, bootlicker! We don’t want anything to do with you! Just leave us alone already!” a bitter reply came, yelled from one of the empty windows. “We’re not going back to your slave labor camps for crimes we didn’t do!”

The lead trooper, holding a megaphone connected to a field radio, sighed and shook his head. **“You have two options, you hear? Surrender peacefully, or we’ll drag you out by force.”**

“Come and try it, buckethead! We’ll gun you all down if we have to!”

“Come on, sarge, why are we wasting our time negotiating with these laserbrains?” A trooper nearby asked, blaster rifle still aimed at the building. “Just get us an E-web from command or a launcher, and we’ll blow them all to pieces.”

The sergeant looked at the young soldier with a weary gaze. “I know what you’re thinking, but we’re not going to slaughter them, just because it’s easiest for us. If we did, we’d be no better than—”

He was interrupted by the grinding of stone under metal treads, a heavy transporter churning up the plaza and halting behind the Severian lines. It bore the emblem of the Principate’s 1st Fleet on its side, proudly resplendent in the evening glare. The transporter’s troop ramp swung down and a pair of figures emerged, one sharp in officer garb, the other in a flak vest and holding a datapad.

“Sergeant Nysum, I heard you’ve yet to clear the sector,” the officer stated more than asked.

“We’ve cleared the sector apart from that building and in a short while...” the sergeant began, but was ignored entirely as the officer turned to the robed man with the datapad.

“This will do for a demonstration,” he said, pressing a button on his wrist link.

The heavy transporter lurched, its suspension shifting under the weight of something *significant*. Heavy, ponderous footsteps heralded the arrival of a monstrous infantryman that would have made even Stres’tron’garmis look normal by comparison, yet his size was not the most glaring of his physical attributes. Jutting out from between custom moulded plates of armor were blood red crystals, harsh growths of inorganic material that pulsed with unnatural energy. The Restoration Trooper craned its head at the officer, its dull eyes fixated upon the command link.

“See that building over there?” the officer gestured. “Pacify.”

The Principate soldiers gave the abomination a wide berth as it stomped forward, worried looks shared between them as this unholy amalgam of science and sorcery charged ahead. A withering hail of blaster fire erupted from within the building, the Revenants making good on their threats, but the Restoration Trooper hardly noticed as it waded through the storm of crimson and smashed its way into the stairway.

“Frak! It’s inside! Go go, we’ve gotta stop it!” Panicked voices cried out from within, the Revenants scrambling to defend their freedom. Those voices were soon replaced by horrific screams and sounds of wet tearing as the first pirates met their end.

Outside, the young soldier looked pale, staring on in horror at the sounds of slaughter from within. His eyes wandered to the sergeant, pleading for him to make some sense of this. The veteran merely replaced his helmet and looked away, this was the way of things.

All resistance within the building was swiftly subdued, the last screams—begging pleas of mercy and cries of surrender—ending in brutal smashes. The heavy footsteps returned and the creature they’d unleashed returned docilely to its handler, body soaked in gore and blaster marks. Without a word spoken, it returned inside the transporter, its singular purpose fulfilled.

“I hope this was satisfactory?” the officer asked the attending person who was tapping his datapad with great enthusiasm.

“Oh yes,” he replied eagerly, “most enlightening indeed.”

As Tali pulled her head back behind the corner and urged R3 to press on while their sounds would be masked by the departing transporter, she cast one lingering glance at the distraught soldier. He was shocked, face pale as a sheet, a casual brush of his distraught mind revealing his surface thoughts without effort.

He was disgusted by the creature and the carnage, unsettled that their side would create such things. And of whom? Men like himself? Could he be turned into something hideous like that? Or would they all be replaced by these things instead? He did not understand, not nearly enough. All he knew was it was wrong and his heart was afraid.

Tali shook her head and turned away. There were other comms nearby.

How’s the heart?

Guilty

The narrow back streets got them a good way away from the Severians until they were abruptly blocked, a section of a nearby building having taken the worst of a proton bomb and collapsed into an obstacle course of rubble and debris Tali knew R3 would not be able to traverse. The main roads were still not tempting and she judged the stoppage only a

momentary issue. If they could cut through the opposite building, they could simply circumvent the road block and continue on the other side.

Hoisting R3 through a shattered window into a dusty dwelling that seemed to have been abandoned before the current crisis, the pair set forth through the maze-like habitation block. Passing rows of flimsy doors, rotting off their hinges in what Tali presumed must have been a condemned building, they listened to the distant sounds of gunfire and explosions as it filtered in through the broken windows. Debris cracked beneath their tread, a fine dust covering every surface, and yet here and there Tali thought she saw signs of life. Someone having started to clear out a room, tidy up a door frame, or even just hang up a small decoration.

The whine of a speeder caught her attention, a jubilant, drunken cheer rising from outside as a gaggle of intoxicated pirates almost crashed into the building with their vehicle. Leaping off and leaving the speeder where it lay, the motley crew waded inside the ground floor with what looked like a long-range communicator in tow.

“Stay here, R3, I’ll see if I can’t get to that transmitter,” Tali instructed her droid, the weary astromech giving a low warble of acknowledgment. Sneaking down a flight of stairs until she reached the ground floor, Tali moved in cautiously, aware that not all pirates were as benign as the ones she’d just witnessed meet their ends.

“Did you see the look on that trooper’s face when I blasted the big sithspit to pieces with a thermal grenade?” One of the pirates jeered.

“Betcha he didn’t sign up to face fighters like us!” Another declared, drawing a long sip from a bottle of beer. “Ain’t no prissy Severian soldier know how to fight like real killers do, that’s why Hawee always said, I was her favorite.”

“Groxdung! Hawee ain’t seen you as nothing more than a braggard and a fool!” A third retorted, earning him a chorus of chuckles. “Now, take a look at these bad boys. Just got a little care package from our benefactors.”

There was a sound of a crate being broken open and the giddy squabble of eager hands grabbing at fresh blasters and vials of drugs.

“Blast, we could have really used half this kit in the last fight. Those big crystal bastards are tough customers.”

“Maybe for you, pipsqueak. I just need a good vibroknife and some combat stims.”

“I don’t need no stims, gramps, I’m still quick on my feet without ‘em,” the youngster retorted. There was a hushed silence, he seemed to have crossed a line.

“Ya calling me old, boy?” the previous man spoke, his voice darkening. “I’m not a rotation older than thirty. I’ve just been killin’ since I was old enough to hold a blade and I’ll still be gutting lapdogs while you’re rotting in a Hutt gutter.”

“Easy there, the kid didn’t mean nothin’. Right kid?”

The youngster gave a noncommittal half-apology. Before the old killer could press for more, someone wiser decided to change the subject.

“Hey, Dirk, show ‘em the thing. What you took as a trophy.”

“It ain’t much, but I figured it looked real neat. Came off the big nerfhumper you blew up.”

A chorus of awed gasps rang out as a red crystal was produced, broken at the base but clearly having belonged to one of the Principate’s new abominations.

“Whoa, that’s sharp as a knife. Could cut someone with that.”

“And the guy was covered in those. Wonder what they feed ‘em to make ‘em grow like that?”

The old killer sipped his beer before speaking up. “I know *exactly* how they make those.”

“Really now? This should be good.”

“Here, hand it over,” he demanded, taking the crystal and holding it like a shank. “What they do is, right, they got these crystals, same as what we’ve been hunting for Hawee, and they plant them like trees, in some science goo.”

“Science goo, seriously?” the youngster scoffed.

“They grow big and they break ‘em off, see?” He mimed. “And then they line up a bunch of rosy-cheeked little punks like you and *stab ‘em* right in the gut. That turns ‘em into big stupid brutes that don’t know nothin’ and follow orders real easy. Maybe I could give a demonstration?”

“Can it,” the closest the party had to a leader snapped, “I think Hawee’s trying to contact us. Just too much damn interference...”

The old killer didn’t listen, instead leaning in closer to the youngster and attempting to grab him, poking the air with his crystal shank. The boy protested, kicking off his seat and smashing his beer bottle into the side of the old killer’s skull. “Get off me!”

The man growled and charged him, blood dripping from his brow. The pair tumbled, knocking the comms unit off a table with a crash to much uproar. The scuffle didn’t last long, ending in a savage cry and a sharp sound of tearing flesh as the crystal sank deep into living tissue.

The old killer coughed blood, the wildly panting kid rolling the larger man off him, staring at his bloodied hands in horror. “I-I didn’t mean to...” he stuttered, all prior bravado having left him.

“Who gives a frak about him? Look what you two did to the comms?” the leader spat, annoyed. “Oh kark it all, let’s just get back to the others and find a ship off this rock, with or without Hawee.”

“B-but I killed him...”

“So? He’d killed four score when he was your age, better start catching up, son. Here, have a stim, it’ll make ya forget all about it.”

Tali sighed in silence as the pirates filed out. She would probably have had to kill them to get to that transmitter, but more than that, she felt the kid’s guilt. He was only trying to fit in, but it seemed he’d found himself with a crowd that did not share in his morality. Had she had the option, she might have tried to convince him to live another life. All she could do was wish the guilt-ridden boy luck, before he became an old killer himself.

How’s the heart?

Alone

The back alleys had proven harder to traverse than she’d suspected. The bombing damage was far more substantial in this part of the city. Although she did not like traversing the streets, at least she wasn’t the only one around. That had to be a good sign.

Cloak wrapped tightly around her, Tali and R3 made their way in the direction a few huddled handfuls were traversing as well. Skittish and diving for cover even at the sound of distant blaster fire, the locals were shell-shocked and weary. She could see it in their eyes and pale faces, the raw reality of war having caught up with them so suddenly. Nobody wished for a war on their own soil, but at least there were those who were prepared to meet it with kindness.

Up ahead was a small checkpoint. Behind it, a few tents had been erected that flew banners of universal medicine. Beside them was a smaller emblem, more subdued but familiar; Clan Odan-Urr. The Jedi had set up a triage point to serve the wounded. At least one Clan out of seven had managed to consider the people of Dandoran. A few Odanite guards manned the checkpoint, keeping the civilians orderly and prioritizing the patients by their injuries. On the wind, she could smell a field kitchen bubbling.

She joined the line of civilians, not wishing to cause an altercation if she could avoid it, when a racing speeder rounded the corner and pulled to a halt outside the checkpoint. A bloodied Severian officer disembarked, an armless Zygerrian lying strapped upon the speeder’s back. He called for a medic, for anyone, to assist him.

“Sir, this is not a military hospital,” the Odanite guard told him bluntly. “We only treat civilians. Please take your wounded to your own hospital.”

“She’s not *mine!*” the man snapped, tugging at the stretcher. “She’s a Revenant, don’t you see?”

The guard appeared confused, calling for a supervisor. A medic hurried out of the operating tent, wiping her hands clean as she approached. "Sir, you can't bring her in here, you—"

"She's Zyft Yadar!" the officer yelled, "She's one of the pirate leaders, the sensible one. If she dies, our best, last hope of finding any sort of harmony between our factions dies with her!" His eyes pleaded with the medic, his desperation genuine. "Please, you have to help her."

The Odanite medic swallowed. Tali could tell she was a Jedi healer and likely aware of the wider political implications. This would implicate her Clan, but it also might bring peace. She chose to take that gamble.

"Bring her over, clear the operating room, now! We've got a case black!" she ordered, rushing to help the man carry the stretcher and the unconscious Zyft into the triage tent. There were some murmurs of discontent from the civilians, but they seemed too weary to stir up much. All but one.

"How come she gets treatment and I don't? I've been waiting so long. I've come from so far away! Please, you have to help me, he's... he's so cold." A haggard woman pleaded with the guard, almost throwing herself at him in desperation. In her arms, she held a bundle of dirty linens, cradling it and the small babe within like the most precious gemstone in the world.

"Please..."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but we are at capacity. I will let you in when we have space," the guard replied stoically.

"But he won't last that long!"

"Ma'am, I am sorry. It's time for you to go. Get back in the line and wait for your turn," the other guard ordered.

Tali felt her heart break as the rebuffed mother slunk back, pressing the bundle against her chest and weeping. Long minutes passed until the medic emerged once more. The woman was let through and she hurriedly presented the Jedi her child, but by then, the bundle had grown still.

Tali could not bear the horrific wail the woman gave when she realized she'd been too late. The scars of her own loss were too fresh in her mind. A gamble had been made, one life for another. But what made a Zygerrian pirate's life worth more than that of a newborn babe? Tali could not begin to tell, as all she felt was the crushing absence of her own child within her, like missing a piece of herself. A sensation of being irreversibly alone.

How's the heart?

R3's inquisitive beeping broke her out of her flight, snapping her back to the here and now. The plucky droid had managed to keep up, but now they were both lost. Trapped inside Tipool city and still without a means to call for help. Tali sighed and pulled out the scanner,

making another sweep of the area, though not expecting to find anything. The fighting had moved on from this part of the city, only blasted ruins remaining. Heavy scars bore down on buildings and streets alike, the anointments of warfare.

The scanner pinged, showing a surprising return not far away. A wide plaza where a fierce battle had been fought not long ago and the corpses were still fresh. The pair made their way over in silence, finding an encrusted Eta-class shuttle parked amidst the carnage. It was ancient, even beyond its design as moss and mildew clung to its copper hull like scabs on the back of an ancient turtle. It was a surprising sight, to say the least, but a welcome one.

Reaching out with her senses, Tali was even more surprised by an absence of guards. The shuttle was, as far as she could tell, abandoned. Had it been anywhere else, she might have thought it an ancient relic of the Clone Wars, but squatting in the middle of a blasted Dandoran plaza, she was confident it had only just arrived. And ships that flew tended to have working communications.

Fleeting across the broken ground, urged by rising anticipation, Tali entered the cramped shuttle with mounting curiosity. A sense of foulness permeated its confines. Reeking of stale air and mildew, much of the seating had begun to decompose, but the wiring appeared mostly intact. The taint went deeper than that. A lingering wrongness that she could feel crawling up her skin, yet not put in words.

She could not place her suspicion onto any singular detail, but something elusive told her this shuttle carried significance. Arcona's enemies were many and the lack of any Clan insignia gave her pause. She saw a data port and ordered R3 to download the flight data, as well as anything else it could glean from the ship's records.

While the droid worked, Tali dwelled further, finally finding a crusty transmitter and pressing the activation key. She had never felt so relieved to see a piece of technology turn on in her life, her hands almost shaking as she dialed in the emergency frequency and sent out her distress call.

Her back shivered with a sensation of freezing water, the warning coming so late she barely managed to throw herself aside of the emerging lightsaber blade that cut the comms unit in half. The assailant, clearly trained in the use of the Force, did not relent and pressed his advantage, thrusting his saber through the pilot's seat Tali had tried to put between herself and her foe.

The blade bit through the flimsy cushion like it wasn't there, the beam of crimson plasma lighting the weathered leather aflame while the Twi'lek threw herself back against the canopy glass and shoved her arms forward. The air thrummed with the release of kinetic energy, pushing the dark assailant back just before his thrust could skewer her. With the moment's respite, Tali drew her own lightsaber and activated its shimmering yellow blade.

"You should not be here," the acolyte hissed maliciously. "She will punish you for this transgression."

"Vho vill? Vho are you?!"

“Who I am does not matter. Only the Seer matters. The all-seeing mother, who guides us towards Ascension,” the acolyte spoke, his voice euphoric.

Before she could speak another word, he charged once more, moving like quicksilver. Tali could only catch glimpses of the man beneath the dark and tattered cloak, the wiry frame and parchment thin skin sickly with purple blotches and an off-yellow tint. He reeked of death and depravity, the same darkness that permeated the shuttle itself. As their blades met in a flash of light and collapsing containment fields, she realized the acolyte must have been using the ship’s corruption to further hide his own presence.

Cursing herself for the obvious oversight, Tali let her tired muscles swell with the strength of the Living Force, breaking the bind and kicking the acolyte back with a boot to his gut. The man sprawled across a sensor terminal, wheezing as he gasped back the air freshly kicked out of him. With a speed that belied his withered frame, he pulled out a small vial of a green liquid and consumed it, his lips moving in a monotone mantra as he did.

Tali could *feel* the swell of darkness within him, the connection he had had with the Force seemingly redoubled. Yet his body and mind seemed unprepared for it as convulsions began to take hold of him almost immediately. He did not care, or need to care, about such minor inconveniences as raw power leapt from his fingertips, striking Tali’s lightsaber and driving her back.

Arcs of lightning coursed between them, the acolyte cackling with maniacal glee as unfettered power seeped through his body. An almost religious euphoria had overtaken him, dark hymns on his lips as he launched himself at the wrongfooted Twi’lek and beat back her defence.

Each parry was like stopping a charging mudhorn, each evasion as precarious as tugging a krayt dragon’s tail. She could not stop retreating, giving ground under the relentless assault until she had no more to give and slammed against a console bank, pressed down by his body weight and Force enhanced strength.

Gripping her saber with both hands, she felt her strength failing, his superior leverage proving her better as he slowly, inexorably, pressed down her guard and the locked blades against her exposed neck. She screamed in desperation, the tips of their blades sinking through the durasteel and melting wide gouges in the ship’s interior. She did not want to die like this. Not like this.

“A little help, René!” Tali cried, the bloody red blade scant centimeters from her neck, the hiss of melting steel kicking embers on her exposed lekku.

The astromech, ignored by both combatants until now, unplugged from the data socket and turned to its mistress’ defence. It had no chance against a foe as deadly as this, but it tried its best anyway. A spot welder emerged from within its tubular chassis as it wheeled forth, the electrified pincer striking through the acolyte’s robes and into his thigh with painful electricity.

The jitters became worse, almost uncontrollable, and the acolyte spasmed violently under the shock. His blade slipped, Tali managing to roll out from underneath it as he willed his muscles back into obedience and struck back at his synthetic tormentor. A binary wail filled the shuttle as the acolyte lopped the droid's dome clean off, the bulk of its body spitting sparks and falling down a second later.

It was the last kill he'd ever make as Tali drove her saber through his exposed flank, skewering him like an insect. And yet, gutted by plasma and mortally wounded, his lips kept moving, muttering dark prayers as he collapsed into a heap that crumbled into nothingness.

"René!" Tali yelled, rushing over to her destroyed companion. She could find no life within his circuits, the only spark left hissing out of a misfiring conductor. She cradled the domed head in her arms, heart heavy with guilt for having asked too much. She was alone and afraid. Outside, the sounds of warfare seemed amplified. Warfare between four factions, and the seven clans sent to meddle. *To meddle.*

The observer, she realized with sudden clarity. His datapad had born the markings of Naga Sadow. The weapons cache the Revenants had shared in, and the combat stims they'd indulged in, they'd seemed suspiciously similar to recent experiments in Arconan research projects. Even Odan-Urr were here, killing with kindness. None were beyond blame, all their hands equally red; including her own.

Was this all they were good for? Endless misery and death? How was a heart to handle that?

She held the droid's head in her lap and gently removed its memory core. Hopefully some good would come of this data, though she felt it would only lead to further destruction. Another planet, another populace, caught in between their endless feuds. She couldn't do it alone, guilty and afraid.

She did not hear the J-type yacht land until the gust of its thrusters kicked up sand inside the shuttle. Warily, she raised her head as heavy footsteps ascended the entry ramp. A dark figure loomed in the doorway—and extended a hand.

How's the heart?

Strong.