

Cool air rustled the thick canopies of the Wroshyr trees, carrying with them the scent of wild, untamed life. Glimpses of starlight filtered in past gaps between the venerable flora, a greeting from the galaxy beyond. Somewhere out there, a pale dot among the rest, was Dajorra and further still the twin dots of Kiasts Aurek and Besh. The stars they'd come from were distant, but wherever the Arconans and Odanites traveled together, they made feel like home.

The wooden platforms creaked to the cadence of a pulsing beat, colorful lights drowning out the faint glimmer of stars. Laughter, cheering, boisterous one-upmanship between friendly rivals all mingled and mixed among the crowded venue, carving out a cacophony of merriment for the jubilant Clans. There was no mistaking the participants, their twin banners suspended off mighty Wroshyr trunks, and the wine flowed freely like sap through their veins, ensuring the participants remained suitably jovial.

It was the end of another year, and a celebration of a new one to come. Together, they had witnessed much hardship, but came out all the stronger for it. A partnership tentatively begun, but holding promise of more—much more. The air hummed with potential. One only needed the courage to grasp it.

"You are looking spectacular."

"You saidt that already—twice."

"Well, it bears repeating a third time at least," Stres'tron'garmis smiled as he lay his eyes on his date, the Qel-Droman Quaestor walking down the shuttle ramp and onto the landing pad amidst puffs of venting air. Dressed in a deep red gown, cut elegantly to allow freedom of movement on the dance floor while remaining cognisant of potential platforms below, Tali Sroka returned the smile with confidence.

It had taken her a while to get to this point, but she finally felt confident in herself and what she was doing. The years had demanded much, and taken more, but she was still alive and determined to press on. Head raised high, there was little left of the meek slave girl that had been dragged to Ol'val all those years ago, and letting her gaze linger on the handsome Chiss in his smart midnight blue suit, she allowed herself a moment of satisfaction. She had done well for herself.

"Since when do you accessorize?" Tali asked, her eyes picking up the glint of a pair of purple cufflinks, the amethyst shade of their gleaming color oddly familiar.

"It is my favorite shade," he replied, red eyes glowing with a tender warmth.

"I can tell," she giggled, offering a purple hand as he escorted her towards the festivities.

Arm in arm, Tali Sroka and Stres'trong'armis both tensed up a bit as they reached the party site. She could already sense it before it came, while he just expected such chaos at these events after years of them. They glanced at one another, golden and red eyes meeting before her's flickered down, a furrow in her brow and a slight smile on her lips.

"Ah, Strong," she began, reaching up towards his face, before a blur of color distorted everything.

"Tali! Strong! I am so happy you were both able to come tonight!" came the shout at the same time as the white-haired, somewhat glowing Miraluka practically appeared from thin air, enveloping the Twi'lek Quaestor in a sudden hug. Her Chiss companion fought back his usual instincts to defend her, knowing that while Atyiru was overzealous, she wasn't a threat. Probably.

"Hmmm," hummed the Miraluka, her head cocked a bit as she hugged the Twi'lek, "nope. Not yet? Oh well, I'm sure you two will get there eventually!"

"Yes. Very. Nice to see you as vell," choked out Tali as the cyborg-woman tightened her hold. She had a sneaking suspicion what the latter comment had meant and was not eager to address it.

"And you!" she said, releasing the flustered woman and turning on the large man, "so good to see you well!"

He leaned back as she moved to hug him as well, prompting a slight pout from the blind woman. Strong gave a bow, sending an apologetic sideways glance at his date.

"A pleasure as always, My Lady," he rumbled.

She stepped back, giving a slight curtsy in her...incredibly colorful party dress that Strong couldn't begin to describe.

"The party has already begun! Please, enjoy! There is food that way," the Miraluka gestured towards where the dance floor was, "and of course dancing," this time gesturing towards a table full of drinks, "and of course refreshments!"

That her last pointed finger was at a buffet table with what appeared to be Kashyyyk delicacies was not lost on the couple. The Chiss admitted to himself that the grubs looked rather plump but thought it was wiser not to correct their excited hostess.

"I'll leave you two to it, then and wish you both a perfect evening in the spirit of mutually beneficial arrangements," Atyiru beamed before spotting a second pairing that caught her attention, sparing Tali and Strong of her continued presence. As the woman bounded off to greet more new arrivals, the couple looked at one another, taking a deep, bracing breath.

"Perhaps this party shall be more enjoyable," mused the big man, looking hopeful.

"Unlike every other party we have attended?"

He grimaced, "I see no Hutts here, though I would not put it past the Children or Collective to have learned of this event. Also, I see people here that do not look Arconan or Odanite. Such a party will have attracted interesting plus-ones and business associates of both Clans."

Tali let out a sigh, "Of course. I suppose we must remain on guardt, as usual."

Strong pulled slightly on their linked arms, drawing the woman nearer to his side and smiling, "Of course. However, I will find it difficult to focus on threats when you look as radiant as you do this evening. Also, what in the world did Lady Atyiru mean about us getting somewhere?"

"Vho knows vhat she's talking about half the time? I just smile andt nodd..." Tali pressed, eager to squash that particular line of inquiry.

"That is a sound strategy, although I feel like—"

"Oh look! Ve shouldt go introduce us to Qyreia andt Revak," Tali blurted, yanking the Chiss along towards the two Consuls. Anything to avoid the Miraluka's insinuations.

The blind cyberluka, however, had other plans. Even as she exchanged pleasantries with another young couple, she cast her senses back at the two obstinate lovers. Tonight was to be a night of romance, and Bogan be damned, she'd make sure this night turned out *perfect*.

No sooner had she made her mind up, did an unhelpful voice sound urgently from the landing pads, seeking to gain the Twi'lek's attention.

"Tali! Hey, Tali!" the piercing hollering of her former Aedile cut through the music like a cacophonic knife. "I just need a moment of your time—and maybe a few credits if you have them?" Aru Law called out, trailing what looked like a considerable tab in the form of a flimsi slip in his wake.

Rushing past faster than a greased gizka, he was halfway to his intended target when *something* caught his leg and he tripped, tumbling right into a table of Wookiees enjoying themselves with some local drinking games. A series of growls and yawps followed as the Human scoundrel toppled a platter full of drinks, landing as he did in an inelegant heap at their feet.

Leaving nature to take its course, she was quite positive Aru would be able to finagle himself out of that sticky situation given a few minutes and a few rounds of modestly priced beverages. Of course, Wookiees also drank by the bucket so perhaps he might be occupied slightly longer, Atyiru mused to herself with the faintest of smiles.

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"Didt you hear that?" Tali asked as they got their first cocktails of the evening.

"Some commotion by the locals, my dear. Nothing worth our attention," Strong reassured her, tapping his glass against hers.

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"I swear, I insist even, that I recognize you, my dear," said the Sephi 'gentleman', not even trying to hide the leering nature of his state at Tali.

"I am afraidt you must be mistaken," she said politely.

The man was well dressed, to an extent. His hair was greased back, and his lips set in a permanent, lip-curved grin as if he knew something no one else did.

"No, no! I do business all over the Outer Rim, including with these Odanite fellows," he leaned in self-importantly, not seeming to notice the Twi'lek leaning away. "That is how I secured an invite to this curious, quaint soiree. I know I met you somewhere. Don't worry. It'll come to me!"

Tali glanced across the room where Strong was getting a pair of drinks for them, silently willing the Chiss to return quickly. Meanwhile, the so-called businessman continued his ramblings.

"...some deal with one of those buzzing fellows. A Toydarian?" Tali stiffened noticeably. "Ah yes...well, you know this party is somewhat tame, don't you think?"

He moved a hand as if to place it on her shoulder, a sneering smile on his face that he probably believed was quite charming.

"Why don't we go to my yacht and try to...hash out the details of our shared past," he suggested more than asked.

Tali steeled herself, prepared to show this man why he shouldn't lay hands on her. The details he had already remembered were off-putting enough; memories of her former owner dragged up. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the hulking figure of Strong fast approaching, his shoulders set.

*"Would the owner of the bright red, Sorosub pleasure yacht in bay 5A please return to your vessel. You are parked in a handicapped zone. If the vessel is not moved within five minutes, local Wookiee authorities will begin the scrapping process and donate the remains to charity. I repeat..."*

"Oh, kark! My baby!" the Sephi shouted, turning to run face-first into the broad chest of a towering blue man. "Get out of my way, you dumb...I mean, beg my pardon, so sorry, excuse me," he ended in a mutter as he took in the Chiss he'd begun to insult.

"Vile man," grumbled Tali, taking the offered drink from Strong. She paused as the announcement about the yacht finished its repeat. "Vas that...no," she murmured, thinking the announcer's melodic voice sounded familiar.

"Is everything alright? I am sorry I did not notice the trouble sooner," apologized the big man.

"No, it's alright. Let's just get to the dance floor."

Half a dozen meters away, a smug-looking Miraluka put her comlink back in her pocket.

The music was enthralling and her companion should have been the sole focus of her attention, yet something nagged on Tali's mind as the pair polished the floor with their shoes. The night had been, the recent run-in notwithstanding, perfect and on some cosmic level she felt they were pushing their luck. Had any date they'd gone on ever lasted this long?

She chided herself for such treasonous thoughts. Here was a perfect opportunity to enjoy some quality time with a charming gentleman and all she could do was worry and suspect the worst? Had her time as head of House Qel-Droma really made her that paranoid and cynical?

No. She willed away the thoughts and focused her attention back where it belonged, in showing the Odanites how a real couple danced.

"Dip me!" she called, exuberant as she spun herself into his waiting arms.

The man stilled his breathing, settling in the harness that kept him secure to the side of the massive tree trunk. He was trusting in a lot of things that could go wrong, based off Intel the Collective had been gathering for years. Camo netting blended him against the trunk in the evening darkness, so visually he felt secure. Other tech built into his suit made him invisible to most sensors as well. Over a hundred meters separated him from the party site, so it was believed that the cursed Jedi and their ilk wouldn't notice him with their heretical senses.

His line of sight was narrow, but that didn't matter much. His mission was one of opportunity as he looked down the scope of his rifle. Numerous targets of extreme value to two separate clans were gathered; as long as he took even one out this mission would be a success. He hoped he could get more than one when the confusion began, even if it meant not being able to get away. He had briefly caught sight of the white haired Miraluka while familiarizing himself with the location, and cursed himself for using macrobinoculars instead of his rifle, losing her by the time he'd gotten his weapon in place.

"Worth it," he murmured to himself as he spotted a couple moving across the dance floor in hues of blue and purple. He grinned, teeth glinting in the darkness as he lined up a shot on the Arcona Quaestor and her escort. A General if his memory served correctly. "Two-fer it is," he whispered with a smile, finger moving to the firing stud.

The world shifted suddenly, his targets lost as his rifle moved. He glared up, only to see one of the anchors holding him in place fall past his face and plummet into the darkness. That...was not meant to happen.

*'I can still make the shot, just a bit tougher.'*

He shouldered his rifle anew, eye squinting down the scope once more as he sought his previous targets. A two for one was too good to pass up. Just as he caught sight of the couple traipsing across the floor, his vision was filled with a grinning, yet eyeless, face.

"Hello there! I'm afraid we're having a strict no shooting the guests policy this evening. Especially not those two."

"Gah!" he shouted, fumbling his rifle and reaching for his pistol, or knife, or anything else he could blast the witch with. A growling from above drew his eyes upwards, to see a very displeased looking Wookiee watching him. Said Wookiee had a paw grasping one of the anchors holding his harness in place. "Uhh..."

Atyiru smiled at the man brightly, hanging upside down as the gunman was jerked upwards, followed by a short cry and a loud thump.

On the dance floor, Strong was in his element, but nearly missed a step as he watched his date's face furrow in concern.

"Is something wrong?"

"...no, nothing," she smiled up at him brightly, sensing that whatever danger she'd felt had passed.

The evening was, a few minor hiccups notwithstanding, going perfectly. The Odanites made for excellent company, the Arconans never shy of a party, and even the gaggles of hangers-on seemed amicable enough once the rougher edges had been pruned off.

Feet sore from dancing, the pair retreated to the modest privacy of a secluded platform overlooking a pristine forest lake. Two of Kashyyyk's moons hung in the blackness of the open sky, their light reflecting off the lake in twin bridges that led from shore to shore, entwining just below the platform.

The cool air was a welcome relief from the press of the dance floor, the dull thrum of the base only barely muted by distance and suspended veils. In semi-stillness, the Twi'lek and Chiss leaned over the railing and basked in the moment.

A respectable distance behind them, a curious potted plant observed the two. Unseen, hanging overhead, the levitating twig of a festive plant slowly inched closer, preying for the right moment.

"Strong?" Tali began, managing to tear her eyes away from the spectacular vista.

"Yes, lady Sroka?" Strong murmured, his heart barely recovered from the dancing yet finding itself aflutter once more.

"There's something I've been wanting to tell you all night..." She gazed up into his eyes, the moonlight shimmering off her amber orbs.

"You have my undivided attention," he assured her with a gentle smile that creased his features into familiar lines.

Just within prying distance, the plant vibrated with excitement.

“Just... stay there,” she instructed and leaned in closer, gently wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders.

Her lavender scent filled his nose, so close her lekku practically brushed his lips, it was taking all his considerable restraint to maintain as relaxed a posture as he did. Heart pounding in his chest, the Chiss was certain the platform would soon break beneath its tremors—if it did not fail him sooner.

The Twi’lek’s soft hands slid across his broad shoulders, reaching behind his neck. Already on high heels, Tali leaned in further, resting her weight gently against him as she craned her neck up and spoke in his ear.

At first he barely recognized it as words, the warm caress of her breath and rushing of blood drowning out all else in a heedy cacophony. A moment after, his mind managed to process what she’d said, even as she pulled away with a playful smile on her lips.

“Your bowtie was upside down all night.” She dangled the deftly removed accessory from her hand.

He was too flustered to respond.

But the plant was not.

*“OH COME ON!”*

The outburst was *felt* more than heard, and although Strong could spy no obvious source for it beyond the general direction of the party proper, the pitch and tone sounded eerily familiar. Accepting the bow with a hint of humility, he affixed it once more—making sure it was the *right* side up this time.

“I hope my inverted accessorizing did not befoul the evening, lady Sroka. For I must admit I have enjoyed myself thoroughly.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she smiled, eyes darting towards the presence she now felt far more clearly. “I just neededt an excuse to release the tension.”

“What tension?” Strong asked, befuddled.

“This,” she replied, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her lips against his.