

Heart's Desire

"Copy that, Blue leader. Descending by one hundred and maintaining vector."

The comms chatter melted into the muted cacophony of the LAAT's crew compartment, mixing with the rattling of fairings and the thrumming throb of repulsorlifts. Plates of hard plastoid armor clacked periodically as DDF troopers shifted position or bumped into each other as the craft adjusted course.

A slight feeling of vertigo tickled the pit of her stomach, her boots sliding minutely on the durasteel deck to widen her stance and brace against the maneuver. If only the designers of these things had bothered to put the hand-rails a bit lower, Vicxa Varis thought to herself as she glanced longingly at the handles overhead. Resigned to her fate, she leaned instead against the side doors, ignoring the warnings distinctly prohibiting exactly that.

Beside her, easily within handle distance yet ignoring their aid, the purple Twi'lek stood like a statue. No matter which way the craft twisted and banked, she was like an immobile fulcrum with only the tips of her lekku swaying under the force of gravity and inertia. Had it not been for the woman's serene expression, Vicxa might have thought her a bit smug. Force users and their antics.

"—, Blue leader. Descending by one hundred and maintaining vector."

As she leaned against the gently vibrating door frame, she let out a long sigh and let her mind wander. It was going to be one of *those* missions again, but at least there was a promise of a unique experience waiting. Another singular event in time which no other could replicate. And she lived for such moments.

Closing her dark jade eyes, she found herself imagining the future some indeterminable number of years later. She was older, of course, but like a fine wine she had aged to a stronger vintage. Standing atop the latest of her conquests, the ruins of a fabled civilization only whispered in half-forgotten legends, she gazed into the sunset and reflected on her life.

Such adventures she had had. Such magnificent highs and lows in her life. From the most harrowing of dangers to the peaks of mountains and lost temples, she'd roamed the Galaxy in width and breadth, sampling and savoring all it had to offer. She could point her finger at any starmap and wherever her digit touched, she'd have a story to tell, a memory to cherish.

And it all had led her to this moment. The culmination of her ambition. The final uncharted mote in a galaxy most were too meek or boorish to ever explore beyond their dwelling. The pinnacle of exclusive experiences that could never be supplanted.

She basked in that moment of fulfillment, chest rising and falling in long, satisfied breaths. She drank deep of her accomplishments, etching to memory that sensation nothing else could match. She was complete. She had done it. Her ambition of seeing the unseen and

exploring the unknown, all she had ever hoped for, it was hers to revel in forever—and *it made her sick*.

The temple she stood on shifted under her feet, a tremor unsettling its foundations, but she hardly noticed. A deep, cloying sense of unease began to swell within her, distressed waves lapping against the serene breakwater of accomplishment. The pristine heavens smeared beyond, the picturesque sunset of vivid oranges marred by violent brushstrokes of violet and green. She hated this. She *hated* this, more than she could comprehend. It should have been the pinnacle of her dreams, and yet each breath she took was suffocating. The sense of accomplishment haunted her, a life completed the worst sort of living torture she could imagine.

Beneath her feet, the temple was crumbling into a gaping pit, tumbling brick by brick into a vast nothingness that defied reality. Beyond, the serene sunset had warped into a howling storm that ravaged and tore at everything it touched, betraying the facade of her dream as wafer thin.

In the skies above, she could feel-hear a voice that was not her own, frustrated and furious as it sought to wrestle control of the stage once more, but its puppet strings were cut and tangled, undone by its own mastery. It had given her all she could hope for, it had given her her heart's desire—and she hated it for it with all her passion.

With a cry of defiance, she raised her metal arm against the raging sky and leapt off the crumbling temple, diving into the maw of oblivion. The years would come and go, her body would wither, and she would scratch but a minute portion of the Galaxy's secrets. She would die unfulfilled, with so many places unseen and so many experiences un-lived, but she greeted that fate with open arms.

Anything but a life without adventure.

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Vicxa opened her eyes to a world gone mad. How she'd not heard the trooper beside her crying with joy, or the one next to him moaning in carnal delight, she could not fathom but hardly did she care. There were more pressing sounds to attend to. The sound of rushing wind had increased significantly, and the vibrations across the LAAT's hull were growing ever more violent as the craft picked up speed. And even through the cacophony of gibbering troopers she heard that same dreadful monotone across the comms net.

"Copy that, Blue leader. Descending by one hundred and maintaining vector."

They had to evacuate. Right now. Reaching for the door release, she managed to force the lever down but nothing happened. The doors hissed, but did not move. They weren't being held back anymore, but in this steep a dive their weight alone was enough to stop them from moving. Gravity, her eternal nemesis.

Alarmed, she turned to the Twi'lek still standing like a statue, visibly unperturbed by the gallery of madness around her, staring blankly into some unknowable distance with a stupid grin on her face and twin trails snaking down her cheeks.

Vicxa clutched her arm and tried to shake her to her senses, but the Twi'lek remained immobile. In desperation, she cried out in her face.

“Wake up, Tali, or we’re going to die! It’s not real! Whatever you’re seeing, it’s not real!”

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Tali stood alone in a doorway, leaning against the frame like a comforting shoulder. A knee-high enclosure of pastel woodwork barred the entrance to a colorful nursery where a small Twi'lek girl sat, playing on a toy set that mimicked the noises of animals. Her lekku were still short, easily visible as she sat on a soft cushion with her back towards her mother, but Tali would have recognized that particular shade of blue in a heartbeat.

The world was serene, finally at peace. Time stretched into eternity, or perhaps it had stopped entirely, she cared little either way. There was only the here and now. A simple afternoon that could go on forever. She was tired, but content, the day’s efforts but a memory as she watched her daughter play. Happy and safe.

A strong arm embraced her from behind, familiar and comforting. Her digits searched for his and soon entwined, a firm chest replacing the door frame as she relished in its warmth and surety. Her precious little girl. They would protect her, and she would have the childhood that was stolen from her. Mundane, but beloved. Her precious Ayoka.

Her brow furrowed. Something turned in the pit of her stomach. An old wound stinging in her side.

She tried to move inside the nursery, a sudden wave of unease flooding over her. Ayoka was in danger. She could feel it. Something terrible was wrong with her, or would be, if she did not protect her. She made to step into the room but her knee would not clear the pastel bars, the comforting arm holding her back.

“Let go!” she demanded. “I must hold her!” she repeated, brushing him off with a shudder.

As she turned to face the man she could see no face, and as soon as she rejected him he’d vanished and only the cold doorframe remained. Tali was left breathless, staring into a void like a piece of her heart had just been wrenched out of her chest. There was nothing for her to see. Everything beyond the nursery was a gaping nothingness that swallowed light and ambition.

Recoiling, she clung to the door frame with knuckles white, heart pounding in her chest as she felt her feet perched atop a precipice of unknowable distance. The only thing that remained was the nursery and the child happily giggling within it, unperturbed by the world or its perils.

Wake up, Tali.

The voice was distant, like the voice at the bottom of a well. Yet it sounded with a cutting clarity that made her wince.

It's not real!

She clung to the door frame as chips of plaster began flaking off the nursery's walls, gaps opening in the floor leading to the same gaping abyss of oblivion. Tears streaked down her cheeks as she reached out to catch the falling debris, to pull it back in place and safeguard the precious child that mashed its palms against the sound toy with great enthusiasm.

Whatever you're seeing, it's not real!

The room shuddered, its walls peeling and cracking. Masonry tumbled soundlessly into the dark until all that remained was the impossible doorway and a pastel patch of playground upon which her daughter sat, content and happy. Tali squeezed her eyes shut, freckled cheeks a confluence of brackish waters. Choking back a sob, her shoulders slumped.

"I know," she whispered.

She had known since the beginning. One did not dwell in farsight as much as she had and not learn to maintain a firm grasp on what was real and what a vision. Anything less would invite madness. Nothing here was real, not the door, not the nursery, not the child. Only she was real—but it didn't matter. It might have been a fabrication, but it was the only way she'd ever see her dead daughter again.

As she opened her eyes, the tremors had stopped and the void was no more. The room was made whole again and the toddler continued her happy play. It wasn't real, but she could watch it forever.

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She wasn't responding. They were all going to die. Vicxa could smell the waves by now and the craft wasn't slowing down. She'd tried shaking, screaming, and even slapping the Twi'lek but nothing was getting through to her. The troopers around her were in far more armor and equally mesmerized. Locked inside the troop compartment, there was no way to avoid the crash now.

"Wake up, damn it!" the Mirialan snapped, desperation in her voice, as she drew her curved knife and jabbed it into the Twi'lek's side.

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Tali's world shattered like a pane of glass.

The stabbing pain lanced through her flank and in that searing moment of agony her entire world came crashing down—for the second time. Hot blood filled her nose with its cloying

iron stench, mixing with the smell of antiseptics. Her earcones rang with deafening silence, and the labored beeps of a cardiac sensor. They had saved her life that day, but Ayoka...

Tali opened her eyes and stared into the nursery. Its pastel walls dripped with blood, running in thick rivulets along the wallpaper and pooling on the floor in great puddles. The giggling had stopped, replaced by a horrific, keening scream that pierced her brain like a needle.

Her daughter clutched her face with both hands, screaming in agony. Instinctively, Tali took a step towards her, crossing the threshold into the nursery, and froze. Like quicksilver, Ayoka's head had snapped around to face her. Her visage was half twisted into a hateful sneer, while the other half was naked bone, a vibroknife sticking out of her eye socket.

Recoiling, Tali stumbled back over the precipice and tripped, tumbling into oblivion. The neverborn locked her eye with hers for a heartbeat, half a mouth spitting a poisoned word.

"Mother."

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The Twi'lek awoke with a gasp, cold sweat running down her lekku and brow, eyes wild in shock. The Mirialan did not waste a moment as she withdrew the knife that had just pierced her skin.

"Out! We need to get out, now!" she demanded, the proximity alert blaring in the background underscoring her urgency. "Doors won't budge, I tried the emergency release, but they're not mo—"

Acting on instinct, Tali splayed her hands against the obstinate door and *willed* it to depart. There was no grace or elegance in her action, only pure, unadulterated Force. The durasteel fairing tore off its rails like a piece of cardboard, flipping end over end as it tumbled into the ocean.

Vicxa needed no order to bail, snatching a flotation aid from its station and leaping into the unknown. Tali followed a moment later, having *yanked* the troopers out of the shuttle and scattering them into the wind. The shuttle hit the waves mere moments later, crumpling like foil and sinking swiftly.

Up on the waves, Vicxa was already busy hauling the survivors onto the self-inflated dinghy. Too few, by her reckoning. Reaching her mechanical arm to help the Twi'lek onboard, the two met eyes once more.

"Are you alright?" Vicxa asked.

"Yes," Tali lied, clutching her side.

Beyond, the shores of Tekpantli awaited.