



Under the Tusken Sun

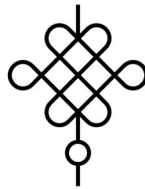


Sienna Starfall

Raider's Passion: Book One

Under the Tusken Sun

by Sienna Starfall



Chapter One

The endless rolling dunes of the desert baked under Tatooine's twin suns. Heat rising from the sand made a blurry haze above shifting hills and jagged rock. Draped in layers of cooling fabric--the latest technology provided by the Korionis Mining Corporation--a small figure emerged from beneath a smoking landspeeder and cursed.

Alia Noruna pulled back her pale hood and squinted across the sand. Her face flushed and strands of dark hair sticking to her skin, she aimed a kick at the silent speeder with a thick-soled boot. "When I get back to Anchorhead, somebody's going to pay for this." She should have known better than to buy this hunk of junk, but it was promised to last through this five-day journey up past the Great Mesra Plateau and across the Northern Dune Sea. The derelict speeder sagged under the weight of her drilling equipment and the core samples she'd been sent to collect. Alia kicked it again, her initial anger almost spent.

When the rage ran out, the fear would soon follow.

This was hostile territory. The bribes she'd paid to the Hutts had brought her safely this far, and the tattered flag that hung limp from the back of the speeder had done its job; the Tusken Raiders had left her alone in her solitary travel. Safe passage was never assured, but with enough Corporation credits flowing into this forsaken Outer Rim dustpile, even the most territorial of Tatooine's indigenous people could apparently be persuaded to ignore one small speeder in the desert. The history of this planet was littered with the bodies of those who stood in the way of colonization. Their hatred of humans was well earned.

And I'm no better.

But now was not the time to question the decisions that had brought her here, employed by a ruthless company who cared little for its own people and not at all for the innocents it harmed in its quest for profit. She was only a scientist. What they did with the information she gathered was not her concern.

Keep telling yourself that if it helps you sleep at night.

If anyone else would have hired her...but no, no sense in dwelling on that. None of what happened on Zerin Four was her fault, but someone had to go down for it, and Chief Hydrogeologist Alia Noruna took the fall. At least her science team had escaped. Most of them.

And none of that was of any use here and now. The dead speeder could be piled high with credits and it wouldn't help a bit. What she needed was transportation, and fast. Barring that, shelter and water. And possibly a decent weapon.

Another hour's work in the shade under the craft convinced her that the machine was well and truly cranked. It had chugged its last, and the final gasp of its navigation system had not been reassuring. In the speeder she could have made it to Mos Eisley by nightfall. On foot, it would take at least three days, assuming she didn't get lost out here. Assuming her water supply held out. And assuming the denizens of the desert allowed her to pass.

She had no doubt that the Raiders knew she was here. This was their land, their home. The banner of safe passage had brought her this far. *Please let it get me back to what passes for civilization on this burned-out hole.*

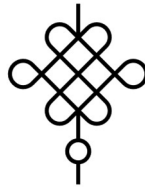
Alia pulled her hood back over her head, already conscious of the twin suns' rays burning her exposed skin. *Be smart. Get out alive.* She pulled everything out of

her travel pack except the rock samples. If she got out of here, there was no way she was ever coming back. Korionis Mining could go pound sand if they thought she'd come back here for more deep-drilled rocks. So...what else to carry. Water, of course. She had a full canteen and two extras. If she traveled by night and found caves to hide in by day, she could make that last. Four ration bars, bland but energizing. One very small hip blaster, which might scare away the small night predators but wouldn't slow anything bigger than she was. Alia turned her mind away from that thought. For a hostile environment, these dunes supported a shocking array of wildlife, most of it carnivorous and all of it endlessly hungry.

She had a small tent, a firelighter if she could find anything to burn, and nothing else of use. The drilling equipment would stay here, just one more wreck in a desert that swallowed so many of those who challenged its expanse.

The banner unhooked easily from the back of the speeder, and she stuffed it into the top of the pack, wondering if she should drag it along behind her, or maybe wear it over her hood. So far the Raiders had honored it. She hoped her luck would hold.

Some luck, indeed. With one more baleful look at the cranked speeder, she set off across the dunes, searching for a safe place to wait out the heat of the day.



Night in the desert was, if anything, worse.

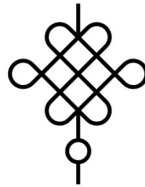
Alia trudged across the silver moonlit sand, head down against the biting cold. Two of the planet's moons shone bright in the sky, the third a dim crescent barely risen above the horizon. She wore the banner around her shoulders, but still the chill seeped into her bones, slowing her steps as she stumbled up and down endless hills of shifting sand. Her eyes burned from grit that she lacked the tears to wash away.

South. Head south and west. Using the stars as her guide, she plodded on.

A dark shadow loomed ahead, and she almost laughed with relief. The mesa rose high into the night, jagged stones like the teeth of a Krayt Dragon. When the sun rose she would find shelter among its caves and outcroppings. More importantly, it meant she was heading in the right direction. At the south end of this huge mass of stone sat the filthy cesspool of Mos Eisley. When she got there, she'd kiss its grimy streets and hug the bartender at the first cantina she could find.

Buoyed with new energy, she strode forward.

She didn't see the movement in the darkness, the shadow-in-shadow as it detached itself from the stones and crept along behind her. And when the rough, fabric-swathed arms snaked around her neck and choked out her breath, the brief sound of her struggle was lost in the icy wind whistling over the dunes.



Alia awoke with a mouthful of hair. Everything hurt. Her dizzy mind took long moments to realize she was upside down, head dangling over the side of something that bounced her prone body in rhythmic steps. Her arms didn't move, bound tightly behind her. She blinked, trying to focus, spitting out the dirty hair that kept creeping into her mouth.

Bounce bounce bounce. Her head pounded from the movement. And from the smell.

With a start of horror, she recognized the warm, animal scent.

Bantha.

She was tied up, facedown, lying over the back of a bantha. That could only mean one thing.

Tusken Raiders.

The intelligent, indigenous people of Tatooine had taken her.

She tried to speak, but her words came out in a dry rasp. “Please, I have safe passage...” She turned her head and saw the banner she had trusted draped over the back end of the huge, hairy creature that carried her. They knew. They didn’t care. “My company will pay you for my safe return.”

She managed to turn her head far enough to see the leg of the humanoid creature in front of her, the captor astride his mount with her as his cargo. At least, she assumed it was a male. They all covered themselves from head to toe, and few who saw one unmasked lived to tell the tale. The Sand People were not human, though masked and draped, it was an easy mistake. This one ignored her pleas, but reached in front of him and pulled out her canteen. The bantha beneath them kept trudging on as the Raider turned back and held her head, giving her a tiny sip of precious water. She would have given him everything she owned (admittedly, not much) for another sip, but he capped the canteen with gloved hands and stowed it away.

The sun beat down as they traveled, and the glimpses she got of the surrounding terrain told her they were not heading for Mos Eisley, but out into the wild desert, far from humans. Far from rescue. As if the corporation would spend a dime to save her. *No, but they’d pay for the samples in my pack.* Wherever that was. That would assume they knew she had the samples, which they didn’t, as she hadn’t made it back to report her success.

The reality of her situation set in. When the Tusken Raiders destroyed a settlement or raided a camp, they rarely left survivors. They took captives, usually women and small children, who never returned. She knew that sometimes the children were adopted by the clans and raised as members, but the women? She shuddered in the stifling heat. The rest of her life would be torture at the hands of these primitive monsters until she begged for the sweet release of death.

All day she struggled against her bonds. All day her captor ignored her, letting her use up her waning strength in the battle against rough rope. Her eyes burned from wind-whipped sand and her throat was a cracked desert inside her. She lapsed into an exhausted fugue, mind drifting in delirium. Finally after hours of travel, the bantha’s movement stopped. Alia jolted to alertness.

Strong hands pulled her from the bantha’s back, and her legs buckled beneath her. Her eyelids were glued shut with grit and she stumbled blindly forward, guided by the push of her captor. Sounds surrounded her, whispers of a harsh,

guttural language, the clanging of metal on metal, the low grunts of bantha at rest. *A camp. A Raider camp.*

She strained to open her eyes and got a glimpse of brown tanned-hide tents that would blend into the desert around them. Forms flickered by in sand-colored robes. Her captor spoke to some of those forms in the grunting words of his people.

Run. Get away.

But running would do her no good even if she had the strength. She had no idea where she was, except surrounded by Sand People in the middle of the Northern Dune Sea. If she ran, they would follow and wait for her to drop before dragging her right back here. Better to wait. If any of them spoke her language, maybe she could strike a bargain for her freedom. Her life was worth nothing to the corporation, but the samples in her pack would buy her freedom if these savages would make a trade.

Gloved hands pulled open the flap of a tent and Alia stepped inside. The relative cool of the shade brought welcome tears to her eyes and her vision cleared. When the tent flap closed, the space grew dim, a relief from the blinding sun outside.

Her hands were still bound behind her, and when the Raider took her by the arms, she sank down on the woven floor covering. He offered her another small drink of water, for which she was absurdly grateful.

Don't. Don't be grateful to these monsters for anything.

The space was clean, with a place for a cookfire in the middle and several worn packs strewn around the edge. She watched in silence as the Raider deposited her travel pack onto the floor with the others. The stones were in there. Her only chance at salvation.

She cleared her throat with a grunt that matched his. "Can you understand me? Do you speak Basic?"

The Raider turned to her and nodded.

"I am Alia Noruna of the Korionis Mining Corporation. I carry the banner of safe passage from the Hutts, which you have violated. This will be overlooked and you will be rewarded for my safe return to Mos Eisley or Anchorhead."

A low chuckle escaped the mask of the raider. She had never seen one this close. Draped head to toe in rough fabric, he stood tall with broad shoulders. The mask covered his head and face, with goggles to protect his eyes and a filter over his mouth. She knew from her pre-mission research that underneath the mask he would have gray skin, black eyes, and a round muzzle. It had to be a male. Surely the females weren't this big.

Maybe I talked too fast and he didn't understand. She started again, slower this time. "My name is..." She stopped at his laugh that chilled her aching spine.

He reached up and tugged on the mask. It split apart, revealing the creature's head and Alia gasped.

Black hair and ice-blue eyes. A close-cropped beard that hid a dangerous smile. A twisting scar across one cheek.

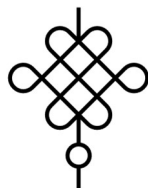
The Tusken Raider was beautiful. The Tusken Raider was human.

He chuckled again.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Alia. I am E'rom, leader of Clan Kirargh." His lips curled in a feral grin. "You have trespassed on Kirargh land, and as such, surrendered yourself and your property to my command."

Alia's heart pounded in her chest as the human Raider chief knelt next to her, pulling off his gloves and running a hand through her tangled hair. She couldn't help the primal heat that filled her at the nearness of this man, invading her space, her thoughts, and raiding through her dreams.

"Your corporation may look for you for a thousand sunsets." He pulled her face close to his. "But they will never, ever find you."



Dear Halcyon Family,

Thanks so much for reading this chapter! While the story of Alia and E'rom is just a bit of Starcruiser backstory fun, I really am an author. As D.W. Vogel I write sci-fi and fantasy, including the Publisher's Weekly Starred Selection *The Risen* (undead gladiators on a planet of hostile insects!) and the *Horizon Alpha* Series (space dinosaurs!), and as Allison Rook I write swoony fantasy romance. If you enjoyed this chapter of *Under the Tusken Sun*, please check them out, and may the stars light your way!

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