

## Aedile's Quarters

### Port Ol'val

37 ABY

Another day, over. Another night ahead. Then another day, and a night, and a day until – what? She'd never gotten that far. Not really. Trying to discern her own future, even comprehend that a future was possible was exceedingly difficult. Ever since the attempt on her life, the one that had ended her pregnancy in the most violent of ways, she'd found her thoughts about the future to be *murky*.

Tali Sroka sipped the last of her evening tea and stared at the mug in her hands. Much like her life, it was empty and cooling quickly. She knew this wasn't right, that she had to get over it, but... How does one get over the death of their child?

She'd had plans. Not big ones, nor ambitious. Just humble and simple. A daughter, a home, a husband. Even the last one had been negotiable. She'd raise a free Twi'lek, and be the mother for her that she herself had never had. It would be tough, no doubt about it, but she'd loved her unborn daughter from the moment she sensed the new spark of life within her. *Her little Ayoka*.

That was all in the past now, or in a future she couldn't reach. And no amount of self-help books from Rhyllance, the Chiss medic-cum-scientist could mend that. It wasn't that she was just broken, a *part* of her was missing and she had no clue how to get it back. If it even was possible to do so.

She sighed and put the mug away into the washer. Much like herself, it needed refreshing to be ready for more use. "*And abuse*," she thought bitterly. If only Koliss Welcott hadn't left her. Maybe he could have talked some sense into her. He always knew what to say, but ever since the last War, she hadn't heard a word from him. He'd known she was pregnant, but was he even aware she should have been due? Was he even alive? Just another concern to heap onto the others.

The tuckered Twi'lek shuffled to her bed and slipped beneath the sheets. At least her recent "field promotion" to Aedile had updated her living arrangements. No more smell of poultry fat and linoleum carpeting in a windowless hole in the bowels of Ol'val. That was something, at least.

Closing her amber eyes, Tali drifted off to sleep, soothed by the sound of a humming air conditioner. One that *wasn't* damping her sheets with condense water.

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The sound of a baby's cry roused her from her slumber, deep bags under her eyes. It felt like the fifth time that night. Shuffling over to the crib, Tali wrapped her arms around the small

bundle and began to sway it back and forth, whispering sweet nothings in an effort to ease whatever pained the young Twi'lek. It took her a good few minutes to calm her daughter down, but soon enough the lavender baby was cooing happily in her arms, small fingers tugging at the tip of her lek.

Tali smiled as those mahogany brown eyes finally closed and the grip loosened. Just like her father's. She placed the bundle back in its crib and kissed her forehead. Tomorrow would be a hellish day to wake up to, but she didn't care. At least not in that moment.

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Warm, hearty scents of a home cooked meal wafted out of the gasser as she withdrew the roasting pan and probed the mynock for doneness. *Perfect*. Placing the pan to cool, she stirred the pot of stewed vegetables to go with it before calling out to the upstairs room of her small house.

"Ayoka! Dinner!"

There was no answer, but the sound of soft footsteps descending the stairs told her plenty. She picked out some cutlery to make the table, when she noticed an official-looking holowafer on the dinner table. Apparently it had come in the mail. Bearing the Arconan symbol, she knew it couldn't be anything good, and as soon as she opened it, her fears were confirmed. Another war. More service was required.

But it wasn't all. Her daughter had been accepted to the Academy.

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Blaster bolts sang through the air in a multicolored spectacle, the torrent of fire driving back the Arconan ground troops and forcing them behind cover. She braced herself against the bulk of a burnt-out tank and gripped her twin sabers with grim determination. They had to take the objective, and she knew there was only one way to get those people moving again.

Drawing deep from the living Force, she stepped into the hailstorm of fire, spinning her sabers in a whirlwind of parries and blocks that gutted the intensity of the enemy's firepower and gave the Arconans the moment of respite they sorely needed.

"Onwardt! Ve needt to press on! Our comrades count on us!" Tali shouted over her shoulder, averting her eyes from the enemy for but a second. That was all it took. A screaming missile detonated at her flank, throwing her clear in a shower of sand and shrapnel. A trio of repeating blasters kicked up puffs of glass off the ground as they traced their fire towards her prone form...

***KRRRSH!***

The sound of deflected blaster bolts was accented by the yelps of three Collective armsmen as their shots were expertly redirected back at them. Tali looked up and saw a slender figure, standing between her and certain death. A fierce Twi'lek warrior, lithe, proud and powerful. A young woman already, yet only beginning to fully comprehend the extent of her strength.

*Her daughter.*

The mahogany eyes met her amber and she smiled, offering a hand to her mother which Tali eagerly took. Together, they would take the objective and finish the mission – as mother and daughter.

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Tali opened her eyes wearily. It took so much out of her to do so anymore. Every breath she drew took effort and her heartbeat was slow and laborious. Still, she didn't mind. Turning her head, she saw the familiar face of Ayoka beside her, clutching her frail hand with concern on her face. Concern and so, so many scars. Her beauty had not been lessened by any of them, at least not in her eyes, but the deep grooves in her skin and the sagging bags beneath her eyes. Those she knew very well.

She had been busy with her life, and her own children. They weren't here, of course, they'd both decided it was for the best not to see grandma like this. On her last legs.

She coughed and Ayoka winced, hurriedly calling forth a handkerchief and easing it over her mouth. She'd always been such a kind heart.

Tali smiled weakly, offering the last of her strength to grip her daughter's hand one last time. It was all good. It had all been good.

Her face twisted into a frightened sorrow, but Tali could not hear her daughter's cry any longer. There was only cool oblivion.

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Oblivion. A vast ocean of nothingness stretched in every conceivable direction and she stood alone at its center. Alone, again.

A shiver ran down her spine, though she wasn't cold. Indeed, she didn't feel like she was *anything*. She merely *was*.

Steps, slow and soft, pattered over the ocean surface and she turned around to see a young Twi'lek approaching, or perhaps it was an infant, or a mother, it was difficult to tell. All the same, she knew it was her – Ayoka.

“Mother,” she finally spoke, her voice sounding like nothing and everything at once.

“Ayoka,” Tali managed listlessly, tears welling in her eyes. She closed the steps between them and threw her arms around her, holding her daughter firmly in her arms. She returned the embrace, if only just.

“I’ve missed you so much,” Tali sobbed, squeezing her firmly, afraid that the moment she let go her daughter would disappear for good.

“I know,” Ayoka replied, softly easing a reassuring thought into her mother’s mind to make her loosen her grip. “I’ve missed you too, or looked forward to meeting.” She offered a weak smile.

Tali wiped tears off her face and nodded, chuckling nervously. She must have looked so silly, and a mess.

“Thank you,” she managed. “For everything.”

“I should be the one thanking you,” Ayoka admitted. “You’re the one who made me.”

“But you made me whole,” Tali insisted.

Ayoka shook her head solemnly. “No,” she sighed. “I’m the one un-doing you, and I do not want that. You are my mother, and always will be. And I want you to be happy.”

Tali bit her lip and averted her eyes.

“I just, miss you so much,” she admitted. “All the things we never had a chance to do, to say, to experience. I – becoming a mother was scary, but I wanted it, I wanted *you*. And now I have nothing...”

Ayoka placed a hand on her mother’s cheek.

“You have plenty, you’ve just forgotten...”

Tali reached for her hand, but it was already fading away.

“No! Please! Don’t go, Ayoka! Please, just a little longer! Don’t go...” She sobbed in anguish, reaching after her fading shape.

"I'm never leaving you, mother, but I cannot be your everything," she whispered, the voice breaking into several.

"No, please Ayoka, please...?" She saw the last of her fading away and lunged after her fleeting fingertips.

Tali shot upright with a gasp, hand still reaching after her daughter as she stared at the bedroom wall and the symbol of her Clan that adorned it. The sound of her daughter's voice still echoed inside the room, or perhaps it was all in her head.

*"I'm never leaving you..."*

The words came to her over and over, but they weren't spoken by her. Now she heard many voices, and not just one. She heard them all, Lucine, Eilen, Zujenia, Atyiru, Kordath, Kelviin, and many more. The voices Ayoka had borrowed.

The voices of her friends.