

The portal yawned before her, cold and sharp. Outlined in perfect white against absolute darkness, its lense was a dull shimmer to a time already consigned to history. Tali Sroka stood at the lip of the iris, drawing short, shallow breaths as every fiber in her being tensed against her will. A stabbing pain in her side burned anew. The cries and the blood flitted at the edges of perception.

The vista in the portal shifted, the dull grey of brackish water clearing to the sound of crunching stone under booted feet. The chatter of close friends, a Bothan, a Pantoran, and a Twi'lek, filled the narrow Ol'val street, still raw from violence but cradling a new beginning. The Twi'lek's hands rested upon a swollen belly, Tali mimicking the gesture beyond the veil. Back then, there had still been hope.

The street made a bend, workers clearing out ruins and restoring old stores to new life mingling in among them. The bustling life of a shadowport milled all around the trio, masking the impending peril.

Even knowing what to look for, Pib'leni was hard to spot. His yellow hue was a greasy shade that melted into the grime and stone of Ol'val's walls, his small stature only adding to his subterfuge. Tali spotted him only a few meters behind the Twi'lek, his cold eyes already zeroed on his prey. The sharp outline in his pocket made her body sweat, a shriek echoing in her mind.

Pib'leni's pace quickened, the small Twi'lek boy pushing his way through the crowd. Tali felt her heart racing in her chest as ice-cold blood coursed through her veins. She willed the portal closer, hovering mere centimeters behind him. All she need to do was reach out.

How could so much hatred fill such a young boy? Pib'leni was barely a boy, far from a man, and yet his eyes were colder than a veteran of a dozen campaigns. When she'd tried to save him from that mining colony, he'd been filled with hope. How had it all died and why?

She shook her head. Those things mattered not. There was no changing him, his path had been chosen the day she'd failed him and everyone else on that blasted piece of space rock. He was only the last ring of a pebble cast in a serene pool.

Time moved like tar now. Seconds stretched onto eternity. She heard the cry of familiarity, the boy sounding her name. It felt so cold, so wrong. How had she not sensed it then? How had she been so trusting? She saw herself turn around, hopeful eyes lighting with sudden joy. She never saw the knife coming.

Tali rested her hand against the portal's surface, its shimmering veil tingling at her fingertips. All she need to do was reach out. So why didn't she?

Another portal stood behind her, a salty puddle at its base. Beyond its shimmering veil another scene played out. A daughter, beautiful and strong, stood before her mother. The daughter she'd twisted fates for, upended worlds for, stood on the balcony of their home with her hands dripping blood. The grin on her face would haunt her forever, her bloodshot eyes alight with the corruption of the Dark Side. Their lightsabers sang to life and only one would see the coming dawn.

Tali squeezed her eyes shut, the last tears dripping down her freckled cheeks as she pulled her hand back. The scream, the pain, the blaster bolt. The chaos, the gurney, the hospital bed. Rhy lance congratulating her on her survival, and the single word that died on her lips that day.

*Aayoka*