

“Why did you go and have to get yourself into this mess? To be a hero?”

Bril’s words hung in the sterile air of the hospital room. In the secluded medical wing of the Citadel, he sat alongside the broken form of his Mirialan master, Ruka Tenbriss Ya-Ir. He’d never seen him in such terrible shape, and although he could hear the idle chirp of the machines designed to monitor his vitals, Bril nonetheless found himself reaching out with the Force to feel his life force. It was faint, nearly as faint as the heat of the discolored hand he held.

He sighed. How could he sound so ungrateful? Siva had mentioned to him that despite his condition, it was possible that Ruka would be able to recall things said to him while in a coma, even if only as vague memories. That’s not how he wanted him to remember his first visit. But he couldn’t help how he felt, and he knew all too well the premium that both he and Cora placed on honesty.

“I appreciate what you did. Saving all those people ... We helped do a really good thing, master. But out of everyone who came to help that day, why are you the one paying such a heavy price? It isn’t fair.”

His eyes drifted to Ruka’s face. The man’s face, normally a vibrant shade of green, had taken on a sunken, cadaverous pallor accentuated by the signs of Dark Side degradation: swollen veins and capillaries that splayed across his skin like ink-filled cracks. It was hard to look at, but Bril kept his eyes glued on Ruka so he wouldn’t for a second forget the price he’d chosen to pay.

“I hope you wake up soon. Things have been even more difficult without you. For everyone. You hold everyone together, you know? You anchor us. Maybe that’s why it feels like everything is unraveling with you stuck in this bed. Siva is ... I don’t know where. Or what she’s doing. But she loves you, Ruka. She loves all of us. I haven’t been able to feel our bond for a while now, but I’ve always felt that from her. She’s just ... in a difficult place right now, I think. But I’ll look after her while you’re recovering.”

Bril gave Ruka’s hand a gentle squeeze, and inhaled sharply and held it. Then, a forceful exhale. “I just hope I can do right by her. Not fail to be there for her when she needs me, like how I’ve done with so many of my friends and people I care about. Ever since I’ve joined the Brotherhood, it feels like I’ve done more of that than anything. Maybe that’s why you worry about us so much, because you don’t want to feel that same pain again. Like no matter how hard you try to do otherwise, you’re still letting them down somehow. That sting of inadequacy.”

He pulled a necklace from his shirt and ran his thumb across the symbol engraved on the pendant’s surface. Jagged, cruciform petals overlaid rounded ones at a forty-five degree angle, all housed by an

unbroken circle. It was the symbol of the Father—the personification of balance between Light and Dark.

“You and Cora gave me this during my first lesson. You both accepted me amongst your ‘flock’ with open arms and helped give my life structure and grounding in a time when it felt I had none. If you can hear me, I want you to know that you’ve never failed me, Ruka. And just like me, I’m sure every member of your flock recognizes just how much you managed to give them all while carrying so much responsibility... you’re amazing, master. And if you remember this, I apologize for the bird metaphors.”

A stifled laugh and subsequent snuffle from the hallway brought a much-needed smile to the young man’s face. Master Cora was listening, as Bril hoped he was.

“I love you, Ruka. And I’m going to continue to help hold things together while you’re recovering. And you *will* recover. Your story doesn’t end here.”

Bril gave Ruka’s hand another firm squeeze before rising from his seat. He wiped away the tears that pooled in his eyes, gave the bedridden Mirialan a final, yearning look, and promptly exited the room. When he nearly ran over Cora, the Pantoran Jedi and husband to Ruka, he opened his mouth to apologize.

“Master Cora, I’m so—”

But the sudden embrace that followed changed his mind; he locked his arms around the man’s back and hugged him tighter than he ever had. And the two wept.