

Screams filled the air, unceasing and bloodcurdling. Limbs flailed, faces twisting in grotesque shapes. A terrible stench permeated the area, clogging throats and lungs. Jax Erinos clapped his hands over his ears, digging sharp nails into his skull. His fingers twisted up in his hair, so tightly that a few strands broke away bloody.

He just wanted it to stop.

“SHUT UP!” he yelled, voice almost drowned out by the shrieking around him. “Just, please, *quiet!* Frak me, what will it take to just...turn them off?!”

Across the room from him, in a small kitchenette, Atyiru gave a sigh. “They don’t *turn off*, Jax. They’re babies. As in, tiny people. Not electronic devices,” she said wryly as she splashed warmed milk on the inside of her wrist from a small bottle.

Frak. My. Frakking. Life. Why am I here? Just...why?

“Yeah, well, some people in this room, tiny or not, need to SHUT THEIR KARKIN’ MOUTHS!”

Atyiru materialized next to him in a heartbeat, slapping him upside the head.

“Ow! Woman, what the frick?”

“Language! Karking void, Jax, watch your mouth around them.”

“You *do* see the irony in that statement, right?”

“I curse much less and at a much softer volume than you. Besides, they won’t remember at this age anyway. The hippocampus isn’t processing episodic memory yet—”

“Blah, blah, something complicated. Look, the crying is giving me one frakking rancor of a migraine, so if you can, would you kindly *make it stop?!?*”

“Calm down, big boy. I’m getting there, eesh,” the Miraluka grumbled, deftly picking up the two wailing little girls and applying a bottle to each wailing mouth. “’s good thing your mommy and daddy are paying me for this, sweetlings. I love you, but Auntie Atty’s ears can only take so much—”

“Oi, yer gettin’ paid for this? Where’s my bloody check?”

“*I* pay you, stupid.”

“No you don’t!”

The woman paused, brow furrowing as she thought about it. “Huh...y’know, that’s right. I don’t. Who in the gods’ names pays you?”

Jax resisted the urge to break the legs off the living room table and shank himself in the face with them. Barely. “The Clan coffers, same as any other grunt.”

“Well, details, details,” Atyiru went on flippantly. She swayed side to side, shifting weight from one foot to the other to rock two feeding babies at once. At least they were finally quiet.

A few minutes of peace ensued, the infants making lots of burbling noises. Jax made a face from where he leaned against the counter.

“I thought you liked kids,” the Archpriestess commented.

“I do like kids,” the Zygerrian said. “But babies are frakkin’ weird, and gross, and you can’t do anything with them but wipe their butts and stuff their faces.”

Atyiru snorted. “Your maturity astounds me.”

“No, that’s my charis-frakkin’-matic personality and extreme attractiveness. Even the blind can’t resist. Mindblowing, I know.”

“Oh, totally. So much so that I think it’s making me nauseous,” she grinned.

Jax opened his mouth to retort but was cut off by Atyiru’s comm blaring. Her scrunching eyebrows alone managed to give him a panicked look.

“Take them,” she cried, pushing a couple of wiggling Human-spawn into his chest before he even knew what was happening. His hands came up reflexively and he clutched at them, his heart stalling.

“O-oi, I don’ know wha to do wit ‘em!”

“Hold them!” she hissed. “Not like bags of meat, support their heads and bodies, man! Here, just...” Her hands shot out, rearranging the squirming children and prodding his arms into position. “There, like that, okay? Don’t frakking drop them— hello! Hi! Yes, go for Lady Entar.”

Jax glared at her as she stepped out of the room on her comm, but only for a second. His eyes were almost immediately drawn back to the babies he held. Somewhere in their transition, Atyiru had discarded their bottles, and now they stared up at him with blank faces, drooling the milk that was still left in their mouths.

His face scrunched up. “Ick, kid.”

“Oh, no no no. I want the situation on *lockdown*, Lance Corporal, do you understand? I’ll be there in ten minutes. Just don’t--no! Don’t try to remove any of the tree branches. Don’t touch the Ryn’s flask, and for the love of the Light, don’t give K’tana anything sharp. I’ll be *right there*.”

The Miraluka returned in a whirlwind, sweeping up her cloak and datapad. “Look, I’ve got to go *now*. Dark Forge is having a little hiccup. I honestly don’t know if they need their Quaestor or their medic but either way—”

“Wait one frakkin’ minute, Quasty. You can’t just leave! What about these thing— two?”

“Take care of them! Just put them down for a nap! Andrel and Kooki will be back soon enough!”

“But, no, woman— karking sithspit, wait!” But she was already out the door. “Arrgh.”

One of the infants, he didn’t know which, belched spit and milk down his shirt. Jax groaned.

“Son of a bantha...okay, I ain’t holdin’ you twerps, so yer both goin’ night-frakkin’-night.”

The Mandalorian stalked around the house until he found two cribs squished into the master bedroom. He deposited one baby in each and stared at them, waiting agitatedly.

And waiting some more.

One gurgled. The other scrunched up her face like she was getting all the pieces of a pout together for future use against males of any species.

Jax growled. “Why ain’t you *ik’aads* sleeping yet? Go on. Get to it.”

Burble-gurgle.

“What, ya want a bedtime story or somethin’? I don’t have any good stories, runts, and I’m not in a mood to tell any either.”

They blinked at him, glassy-eyed and looking wide awake.

He sank into the nearby chair and groaned in defeat. “Okay, fine. Uh, how about the one — er, no, somebody dies then, Atts will kill me if I tell you that. What about Bosthirdi...no, wait. Hrm, there’s the one with the cantina on Dantooine...but that’s not exactly safe for kids either. Huh,” his head throbbed slightly. He snapped his fingers. “Got it! One of the first battles of the war. Really frakkin’ bloody, that one. Awful. Oh, but, on my team, nobody died, there’s no streetwalkers, nothin’.”

Jax kicked his feet up on a nearby stool and leaned back, wishing desperately for a cigarra. Too bad he’d be skinned alive three times over if he smoked around the kids.

“So...lessee...there we were, my team and I, getting ready for the assault on the Sith Academy, standard groundpounding, point n’ shoot, y’know, when I notice Atts across the hangar...”

“*Burc’ya*,” I greeted, waving to the Aedile. “What’re you doin’ here? I thought yer unit didn’t depart ‘til fifteen-hundred.”

“My friend,” Atts replied in Basic. “I wanted to see you off, is all. Is that such a crime?”

“Yeah.” I pulled out a cigarillo and my lighter. “Ya don’t usually do it. What’s up?”

Her welcoming smile faded around the edges. “Nothing.”

“Don’t give me that bantha fodder, Atts.”

“Jax—”

“Hey, Attagirl!” Kael came jogging up behind me, giving the woman a proper nod and bow. “Long time. Good to see you up and kicking again.”

“Somebody’s gotta nag this fluffball,” Atts said, stepping forward to hug Kael. “How’re you?”

“Grand. Ready to crack some bones an’ get ragingly intoxicated afterwards. Eh, Sarge?”

“You bet. How’re the boys?”

“Ready too.”

I grunted in affirmative, glancing at Kael meaningfully. He tilted his head, flashed a quick hand signal, and went back to herding everyone into packing our shuttle.

I turned back to Atts. “Fess up, woman.”

“Put that out first,” she muttered, screwing up her nose. I blew smoke in her face.

“No. Talk.”

The Miraluka sighed. “I just...have a bad feeling is all. And we’re sort of supposed to listen to our bad feelings. I’m worried about you.”

I nodded. “Okay, fine, but what’s really botherin’ ya?”

“Jax...”

“Spill, *di’kut*.”

She grumbled something in response.

“What was that?”

“Marick put me on another team,” she repeated, then sighed. “A whole other ship, actually. I can *feel* something is going to go wrong and he sends me away. Stupid karking bumblefluff-brained, pretty-headed, know-it-all jerkface is gonna get himself karking killed.”

“So many expletives. You *do* care,” I chuckled. Atyiru did her eyebrow-only glare at me. “Hey, I’m just tryin’ to help. You don’t look right when yer not smilin’.”

“I know, and I appreciate it,” she sighed. “Look, please just be *careful*. I don’t want to lose you too, Jax.”

“Hey, quit yer fatalistic whining,” I snapped. “You haven’t lost anybody this round yet. Screw yer head back on straight. You’ve got a war to fight in and you can’t be actin’ like this.” The Archpriestess just nodded, so I relented. “Look, if it makes ya feel any better, you can ride down to the initial drop-point with us. We’re first responders after the *Hammer* falls. You can see us off all mama-like and then get yer butt back here and do that leading thing you do so well. Fair?”

She thought about it briefly. “Yeah, alright. I suppose that’ll do. Just let me inform Brother...”

“Frak that,” I said. “No time, shortstack will understand. C’m on.” Spinning on my cybernetic heel, I loped over to the shuttle. “Oi, *shabuirs!* Get yerselves back in yer pants and look sharp. We got decent company.”

I watched my guys fall in, some quicker than others. Kid did his best to salute, but the look was off when he only had one sock on and two boots. *Karkhead. Gods, he’s green.*

“Boys, this is yer Lady Atyiru somethin’ Entar—”

“--Caesus.”

“--and she’s gonna be joining us on the way down to the dirt. Atts, these are my boys. You know Kael and...Shep, yeah?”

“Kael Erinos, Sherperd White, yes. Pleasure to see you again.” She made a little prayer-like gesture. “I knew Bubbles and Xebba too.”

“Yeah,” I strained a smile. “Right. Right. Well, the baby with his uniform frakked up is Marcus Wheeler, but we just call ‘im Kid. That’s Tonnuki Los, or Bayar, special tech. Jade Lyde and Namel Cadtho, and that fancy mynock with his nose in the air is Tannie.”

“Pardon me, sir, ma’am, but it’s Sheveeren Al’tana—”

“Tannie talks too much most of the time. I’m supposed to be the only one that loves the sound of my own voice, right, Privates?”

“Yes, Sarge!”

“Good! Now get movin’, ya lazy *di’kuts!* Oya!”

“OYA!” they echoed, scrambling aboard our transport.

I waved to Atts. “Ladies first.”

“How classy of you.”

“My mothers raised me right.”

“And sideways.”

I grinned.

-=*o*=-

“Now,” Jax went on, scratching his ears. He glanced at the little drooling Humans, then up at the ceiling, trying to remember. “I don’t recall everything after this for a bit. Ya see, Atts’ senses were good. Our little shuttle got shot the frak right out of the sky by hostile anti-air batteries. No use askin’ why us. It’s just about hitting whatever isn’t yours when you’re behind those turrets.”

He got quiet for a second, and the babies started hiccuping and groaning. Frakkin’ impatient jerks.

“Anyway, there was fire and pain and falling, noise, blah, blah, blah. Not...fun. Pilot did his best with the ship half blown out. We crashed into the desert, way off course. Woulda lost Bayar and Kid if Atts hadn’t been there...”

-=*o*=-

“Hang in there, *ori’vod*,” I growled through a mouthful of blood, shoving an adrenal booster in Kid’s leg. “Oi, c’mon! C’mon! Look at me!”

The boy’s terrified eyes wheeled into the back of his head as his body seized then stopped dead. I scrambled for a pulse and found none.

“Frak!” I screamed, starting chest compressions, pain lancing up my arm with each pump. One round, breathe. Two, breathe. Three, breathe. No response. *Frak, frak, frak.* .

“OUT OF THE WAY.” an almost-familiar voice commanded. A chill wracked my spine.

Two big Mando’a were brutally shoved to the side and then I was being hauled back by my collar. Atyiru dropped down in my place, putting both hands on either side of Kid’s cut-open head and murmuring something. She bowed over him, all dirty silver.

The seconds went like sludge. I blinked a few times. Imagined Kid’s mother slapping me into another life. *O’sik.*

Kid shook a little, then gasped. He sat bolt upright, trying to jump to his feet, and got pushed right back down by a pair of dark hands.

“Rest soft. You’re safe. Rest and breathe,” the Miraluka told him quietly, and by some magic, he did, lolling back into quiet, twitchy sleep. His chest rose and fell.

Atts got up again and walked away.

I glanced at the boys, then back. If one of us had whispered, “My god,” just then, I would’ve expected her to stop and answer, “Yes?”

--*o*--

“Now, after that, the boys were kinda...freaked out. Nam in particular. Jumpy son of a bantha. Real paranoid, gotta be, when you lived as long as he has with a Hutt Lord’s bounty on yer head. Doesn’t like the bucketheads, tincans, sparkfingers, none o’ ya. Probably wouldn’t like you twerps either. But anyway, point being, they had questions. We work for the sparkfingers, yeah, but it’s not often one of them even looks at us normal people, let alone talks with us, walks with us, or works magic on us. I knew better, ‘cause of serving with Atts, but they didn’t.”

Jax stood up and stretched, shaking out the foot that was falling asleep, and sat back down.

“So, we all got ourselves mystically patched up then Atts passed the frak out for a good couple hours. Got up and joined us while we dug through the wreckage. We hid from hostile scouts, slept more, and then when all was clear, Atts went to make a few calls to her people. Meanwhile, I’m sittin’ with my guys...”

--*o*--

“Hey, Sarge?”

“What, Nam?”

“Can they, y’know, fly?”

“...”

“Sarge?”

“Hang on, Private. Let me scrub the rancor *o’sik* outta my ears and make sure I heard you right. Can they fly? Can who frakkin’ fly, ya *di’kut*? The birds?”

“No, eesh, not the karked birds. Y’know, *them*.”

I rubbed at my face. “Nam, y’know I love yer stupid rear, but puttin’ emphasis on the word doesn’t tell me who the frak yer talkin’ about.”

“Them, Sarge!” he failed at whispering. I glared at him.

“He means the sparkfingers,” Lyde said, leaning closer. “The bossmen, the masters, the lords n’ ladies, the Jedi.”

The other boys nodded in agreement. Nam shushed Lyde, looking around frantically.

“Oh, fer t’love o’ meh lekku!” I cried, words running together in exasperation. Gods, I sounded like mom when I did that.

I took out a cig and jammed it between my teeth, lighting up and breathing. I exhaled a few times.

“Look, are you dumbnuts askin’ me if *Atyiru* can fly? Do you think she can hear us from kilks away and read our minds?”

“It *can*,” Nam insisted, fingering his jacket.

I smacked him upside the head. “Nam, I usually have a lot of patience for your superfluous capacity for bantha poodoo and your *gifted* imagination, but now ain’t one of those frakkin’ times, you get me? *She* could get a read on our heads if she wanted to, yeah, but she won’t. Atts is a *burc’ya*. She’s good people.”

Nam shrunk in on himself a bit, muttering.

“She saved my life,” Kid reminded us. “I like her!”

“Yer junk likes her, Kid,” I told him, snorting out smoke as the boy’s cheeks lit up like cherry-red plasma.

Kael boomed his deep laugh. Kid only got redder.

“Shut up! I do not!”

“Yer a guy, dumbfrak, of course you do.”

“I know *I* do,” Shep muttered.

I elbowed him, hard.

“Ow, hey, Sarge! You just said Kid was thinking it!”

“Yeah, but he had the gentlemanly decency to blush and deny it. You don’t talk about her like that though, none o’ ya. Keep it in yer heads and yer spare socks, boys.”

“Yes, Sarge,” they collectively grumbled and chimed.

“Good,” I settled back on my haunches and nodded over their shoulders. “Now, if ya really wanna know if she can fly or not, ”ya oughta ask her yourselves.”

Nam jumped out of his skin like he’d expected the Miraluka to materialize out of thin air and announce she’d been there all along before breathing fire and squishing his head under her boot.

“Oi, over here, girl!” I called as she instead came over the rise of a sand dune at the edge of our little camp. “What’s the word?”

“My brother had a lot of shouting to do,” the Aedile sighed, sinking down onto the dirt with a weary smile for everybody. “My punishment for getting in a wreck I shouldn’t have been in in the first place still stands: we get to walk back ourselves.”

“It’s already been nearly twenty-four hours though,” I growled. “Yer Force gods forsake him.”

“That’s the most illogical thing I’ve ever heard,” Kael added. “He can’t do that, can he?”

“That’s Cethgus for you,” Atts sighed. “He’s done worse before. It’s at his discretion until either Marry or Legz yells at him. Timmy might have his hide later, but he might not. Man threw me in a pen with a Krayt dragon as an exercise, a desert romp wouldn’t be outside his imagination.”

“Yer all frakked in the head,” I sneered. “What kind of morons are you? Yer team needs an extract, you get them one! That’s it! That’s how it frakking works!”

“No, that’s how an army works.” Atts grinned mirthlessly. “We’re a bunch of superpowered kids having tantrums, mostly. Some of us just have bigger toys to throw around when we don’t want playtime to end.”

“Yeah, I don’t give half a damn about yer big boy politics, so do me a favor and don’t brood over ‘em. Don’t even talk about ‘em.” I got up and stretched, rolling my shoulders. The last few millimeters of my cigarillo burned away in a tiny ring of orange, and I spat the stub out, stepping on it.

“Okay. We’re gonna have to focus if we’re gonna get back to the rendezvous point. But first...” I glanced Nam’s way. “The boys had some questions for ya. Oh, and Kid wants in yer pants.”

“SARGE!” Kid shouted, shaking his head furiously until he realized that was also a bad idea, and then he just sort of sat there looking like a miserable *di’kut*. Atyiru just laughed, leaning over to kiss the poor frakker’s cheek.

“My apologies, Marcus, but you deserve much better than me,” she chuckled, patting his arm. Sweet girl. Took way too much pity on the little nerf-brain. “And no, I can’t fly. Not

without use of a ship and someone to pilot it for me. I can jump in fairly high arcs with the aid of the Force, however, and given the correct conditions, that could resemble flying. Some of my brethren with much stronger abilities than I don't even seem to come back down to earth a'times."

"But you can certainly...heal," Shep noted, both awe and envy in his voice.

"I specialized my talents there, so I lack in others, but yes."

"What about the mind reading? Can you read minds?" Kid blurted.

Atts laughed again. She laughed a lot, really. It was when she stopped that things got messy. Or closer to the bottom of a liquor bottle, but I didn't fault her for that one.

"Well...that's a yes and no..."

I left them to their questioning and Kael followed. I passed him a cig and lit another and we smoked quietly for awhile, staring out at Korriban's orange sands.

"We frakked yet?" I asked him.

"Just getting a reach around, I think," he replied.

"Sure hope I didn't pay for this one," I muttered, smoothing back my hair. Kael just chuckled.

The sun sank lower and the cigarras didn't last.

-=*O*=-

"Annd just like that we were stuck traversing a good couple kliks of monster-infested desert, surrounded by enemies, walking back to the frakkin' battlefield where we'd been assigned. Sometimes we'd spot hostile flyers — y'know, air support — and then it was just get the frak out as fast as possible. But sometimes a sandstorm would whip up and then the pilots weren't the only ones grounded. We'd be hunkering down in a cave and hoping we didn't find something that bit. And the foot patrols besides..." the Mandalorian shook his head.

One of the girls gave a high-pitched, sudden cry, startling the one that had started drifting off. "Oi, oi, no, don't—"

The wailing resumed.

Jax groaned and yanked at his hair, then got up to go find something to stick in their mouths. He made a beeline for the purple baby bag Atyiru had been toting and dug around in it, but didn't find anything that looked useable. Diapers. A lot of frakking diapers.

In the other room, the kids quieted down. Jax's ears twitched, and he jogged cautiously back around the corner, peeking at them from the doorway. Both babies layed there sucking on their own toes.

"...well, frak me, I guess that works," the Fade muttered. He took his seat again, coughed, and restarted his story before they could get worked up again.

"So, skipping the boring parts with waiting and walking...there was this one time when we bunkered down for the night after a real hard day dodgin' fighters in the sky..."

-=*o*=-

It was so quiet that the air felt hollow in my ears. They twitched uncomfortably. I listened to the rhythmic *tsh-tshhh* of Kael cleaning his blaster with a rag and Kid's fitful snoring.

Atts crouched down next to me, at home in the dirt — at least, when the plasma wasn't falling. Girl had farmer's blood.

"How are you doing?" she murmured, which was Atts-speak for *'Are you hurt? Tired? In pain? Did you eat? Have you had eight cups of water today? Change your socks and boxers? When was your last bowel movement?'*

"M'fine," I replied around a cig, blinking grit out of my numb eyes, which was immediately replaced by more frakking grit. Karkin' sand got everywhere. Ugh, *everywhere*.

I adjusted my pants in vain and glanced sideways, squinting.

"Okay, what?" I sighed.

"What do you mean what?"

"Yer still here. Just say whatever it is."

"You haven't slept much."

"No, mother, I haven't. Gonna send me to bed early without dinner? Oh, wait."

The Miraluka snorted and elbowed me in the ribs.

I pulled my pack over and dug into it. "*Yai'yai* and hot sauce. Meal of champions and *Mando'a* everywhere."

Passing her a ration tray, I shook out some sauce onto mine and then shook a few more drops into my eyes for good measure, holding my lids open while my face stung and burned.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Atyiru demanded in her sharp doctory voice.

“Keeping my eyes open. Be happy you don’t have any, woman,” I grumbled around tears leaking down my cheeks.

“Why by the Force would you put that in your eyes? I could have just—”

“No puttin’ bandages over tired eyes. You can’t heal everything, Atts. Yer not a god.”

Her shoulders sagged and she murmured, “I know.”

I shrugged and started cramming food into my mouth while I had a chance. My tongue felt like it was on fire, but that distracted from the horrible frakkin’ taste, so it was a plus. Atts peeled open hers and dug in too.

Tsh-tsshh, went Kael’s cleaning rag. *Tsh-tshhh*.

“I’m so sick of war,” she said in a small, hard voice around a mouthful of vacuum-packed slop.

I snorted. “You don’t know what war’s like, Atts.”

The air felt a couple degrees cooler. “Excuse me? Have I not been fighting one for nearly two years now? How terribly mistaken of me,” the woman hissed.

“You’ve been fightin’ something, but not war.”

“Yeah? Then what do you call a conflict with more than one side where people *murder each other on order*? What did my people, my friends, die for? What about Xebba, Bubs?”

I gave her a *hard* look. “Actually, Xebba and Bubs died because of you. Don’t pin them on your imaginary battle.”

She recoiled, swallowing hard, and put her food aside. “I’m sorry.”

“You oughta be.” I retorted, then reached out to pat her arm with my mechanical hand. “But listen, that doesn’t mean you killed ‘em or they died because of you. So don’t get stupid ideas in yer frakkin’ head.”

Atyiru dipped her chin. “I mourn all the same.”

“We both do,” I sighed. “Look, none of that is what I meant, so let’s just not, okay? I meant that you don’t know war, you just know yer superpowered playground fights, like you said before.”

I tossed my tray and rummaged for a smoke before I went on. “Have you ever dug a foxhole, Atts? Sat up for twenty hours straight in the mud with yer socks soaked through yer boots and a second skin of dust while they dropped bombs on ya? Hiked forty klicks with a backpack bigger than you and yer rifle held above yer head? Trained to do a jump like a paratrooper? Had *any* actual military or naval training?” I snorted. “No. What about yer

Hapan? Where's his certificates? Where'd he learn command? He been trained to make plans and give orders like an officer? Not even once, I bet. You ain't soldiers or commanders, honey, not one o' ya, save a handful of old Imperials. Yer all just playing with your daddy's blasters. Soldier? No. Yer a Dark Jedi, and yer doin' a pretty o'sik job of bein' one."

"How do you figure that?"

"Yer talkin' to me instead of stabbin' me and flying off. And you don't wear enough black."

That got a little laugh. I smirked. *Good enough.*

"Really though, if I'm not a soldier, then how am I not a Dark Jedi either?"

"Frak if I know. That's yer business."

"You're insufferable."

"But you love me."

"Humph."

-=*o*=-

"We had a lot of conversations like that. Still do. One of our sore spots, I think. But you kids are gonna do it too, huh? Grow up, figure out one day yer godlings instead of people, and then leave all us regular folk behind."

Jax shifted. "But, that's at least a couple years away yet, litluns. Here's something to remember about your Auntie Atts: she isn't always so mopey, even if she gets real dramatic when she's not doin' her happy thing. Naggy, self-righteous in a weirdly honest, unintended way, too nice, naggy again...but not always mopey. Actually, the next day..."

-=*o*=-

"Oi, put that out."

"Woman, I have a frakkin' right to kill my lungs if I want to. Get off your tall rancor."

"Out, Jax. That's an order."

I sneered and took another deep drag, enjoying my burning throat and calm fingers. Exhaling, I dropped the half-finished bud and stomped it into the dirt.

"There. Ya happy now?"

"No."

“Ooh, yer startin’ to sound like yer Hapan! ‘Whine whine, glom and brood, frak my life or anything relating to joy, nothing can make me happy.’”

“Shut *up*.”

“Pft. Yes, *ma’am*.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Don’t give me stupid frakkin’ orders because I offend your damn senses, Atts.”

She glowered with all the force of her funny white eyebrows and pink-striped blindfold, which wasn’t much. The feeling crawling at the back of my neck that never quite went away though...

“Quit yer Forcey tantrum. I’m doin’ like I’m told. That’s good or bad, Atts. You don’t to pick and choose.”

“Well, what do you want, soldier boy?” she demanded.

“Me?” I snorted in disbelief. “I wanna smoke my damned cigarillos! Ashla’s tits, woman!”

Her angry expression fell away and she sputtered like a fish. “I--what--her...no! S-she doesn’t have--don’t take her name in vain!”

I threw up my hands, a grin threatening to spread out of sheer craziness. “Make up yer damn mind!”

“*Aarrgh!*” the Jedi shrieked, and went stomping off. Damn, it was fun getting under her skin.

I watched her go, took a quick look around to make sure I wasn’t gonna get shot in the face, and then reached inside my protective vest.

I smiled as I pulled out another pack and lit up with a sigh.

“Better kill me quick, little buddy,” I muttered to the stick between my teeth. “Before she gets my hide.”

Later that night, soft footsteps thudded up to my mat, and I knew without looking who it was and that the noise was only for my benefit. Damn Force-usin’ spooks could move silent as easy as regular people breathed.

I perked my ears up to get a load of the newest lecture. Instead, something small thumped down in the sand near my head. I rolled over and picked it up, my eyebrows climbing high.

“The frak is this?” I squinted up at Atts. “You got me cigarras?”

She shrugged, mostly silhouetted by the stupid frakkin' ball of fire in the sky finally sinking towards Korriban's western horizon. "Traded 'em from Tannie's stash. I just wanted to do better by you."

I blinked. "Don't...do that again, okay? Not that I dont appreciate it."

"Yeah."

"*Vor'entye, vod.*"

She replied in some pretty language I didn't understand, probably Miraluka, or whatever it was, and walked off. I glanced back down at the pack of smokes in my hand, shook my head, and rolled back over.

--*O*--

"Then again...other times she was really mopey. 'ere's another lesson for you twerps: people are stupid, especially when they like somebody. Believe me, I know it too..."

--*O*--

"You miss 'im?" I asked her, shifting around and clearing my dry throat uselessly. *Gotta hurry up and get back to the Academy base camp and refill the damn cantines.*

"Is it that obvious?" she said back, eyebrows squinching.

"You've been fidgitin' with that locket of yers a lot."

"It's a pendant, not a locket."

"Guess how much I care?"

"*Jax.*"

"Just guess."

"Alright, how much?"

I pointed at the absolutely empty field of orangish sand to our left, which was exactly the frakking same as the one on our right, front, back, sideways, upways, and frakking everyways. "That much."

"I can't see whatever it is you're pointing at, so your sass is lost on me."

"Oh, bantha poodoo it is," I sneered, and she tried to hide a snide grin. "You know exactly what I meant, ya little mynock."

"Anyway," Atyiru chimed, smirk still in place. She tugged at her little necklace-thing again, and the smile fell a bit. "Yeah, I miss him. I'm worried out of my karkin' mind. But I'd feel it if he was...well, y'know, so there's that."

I just nodded, a time-tested, transcendental gesture of wisdom and comfort.

"Do you miss her?"

"Dunno," I answered, pulling a cigarillo out and lighting it despite my parched mouth. "Nah. Yeah. Whatever," I sighed out smoke. "Yeah, I do. But that kinda stinks a rancor of a lot more when she doesn't give a single frick about me, y'know?"

Atyiru nodded back with an *mmmhm* sound of agreement, and just like that, we were okay, or at least pretending, which was pretty much the same frakkin' thing.

-=*O*=-

"Moral of the story: boys and girls are both stupid. Just, go die alone, unless you find somebody you want to be stupid for, and then you can be like yer mama and pop and make more tiny idiots. Ah, but I'm getting off track. I guess I might as well get to the good stuff. Took us a few days, but we eventually got back to the rendezvous point: the Sith Academy."

-=*O*=-

"Oi, that's the Academy," Lyde hissed, peering over the top of the craggy, sand-covered ridge we crouched behind. He adjusted his night-vision scope, muttering to himself. "Don't see any bodies yet."

"Let's get in there then!" Kird cried, his pale eyes wide in the moonlight. Seven different people hushed him, and he went on in a whisper. "We can get in, claim it, get out, get drinks!"

"Not a frakking chance," I cut him off immediately. "We don't know where our troops are, let alone everyone else's."

"Or where all the traps are. There's always traps," Atyiru grumbled bitterly.

"Or those. We've not going anywhere near the Academy. We're gonna sit our *shebs* down right here, radio in, and wait for instructions. Atts, see if you can't get a hold of yer short pincushion. He oughta be in charge of troop movements, right?"

"At least one of the divisions, yeah." She pulled out her comm then slunk off to have a discrete conversation.

"Do you think help is on the way?" Kael murmured softly to me, shoosng Kid aside.

"I don't know, *ori'vod*. I trust Atts. Don't trust her people."

“Guess we’ll just have to hope,” he replied, fingers flashing quick signs: *do we run?*

“And pray, brother. And pray.” *No*, I signaled back. *We stay. Or I do.* Atyiru came prowling back up the dune just then, so I nodded to Kael and turned to her. “Anything?”

“They’ll send a support squad to pick us up. We’re about on the edge of the perimeter one of Ashen’s loyalist agents set up, Skybender. Our forces are moving in, but there’s One Sith and New Order troops everywhere. It’s a madhouse down there.”

Everyone got quiet for a second, some glancing around. I stared out at the dim orange glow of an active battlefield outside the dark shape of the Academy.

“Got an ETA?”

“About seventy-five minutes—”

Atyiru leapt up suddenly, igniting her fancy lightsaber and hurling a small jolt of lightning out across the sand. Someone screeched, and then bright blue light burst into the darkness. I sprang up, blasters in hand, and shouted at the boys, “GET BACK!”

“Who are you?” the Aedile yelled. “And what do you want?” She twirled her blade, spinning around as another figure appeared behind us—

-=*O*=-

“Hey, if you’re going to tell them a story *they shouldn’t be hearing*,” aforementioned woman’s voice came from the other room. “At least get it right.”

Jax whipped his head around, glaring. “Frakkin gods, woman, don’t do that!” he snarled. “Make some damn noise when you come in!”

“Sorry,” Atyiru said sheepishly as she walked in.

“Hmph. What’re you doing back anyway? And whaddaya mean ‘get it right?’”

“There really wasn’t any emergency at all. Just Dark Forge being...Dark Forge.”

“Hey, you hired ‘em.”

“Don’t remind me. Kord did give me a spare flask though, so, not a total waste.”

The Fade rolled his eyes. “Great, great. Now, explain?”

“You said ‘bright blue.’ Those Twi’lek girls had *green* sabers.”

“No, they didn’t. What are you talking about?”

“Jax, they were green. It’s okay if you don’t remember that. You were hurt badly,” she said softly.

Jax narrowed his eyes, rubbing at the back of his freshly-scarred neck. “Yeah, I guess so...”

“So, go on. Green sabers.”

“Right, right. Well, suddenly green light burst into the darkn—” Standing next to him, the Miraluka stifled a snicker “Oi, oi! Wait one frakking minute! You can’t frakking see, you don’t know what frakking color they were!”

She burst into laughter. “Oh, but I had you going!”

Jax growled, getting up. “Oh, frak you, girly. I’m outta here.”

“Jax, w-wait,” the Jedi choked out around her giggles. “C’mon, don’t leave me here alone. They’ll never get to sleep if you don’t finish the story.”

“They’re frakking babies! They won’t remember a damn thing!”

“Oh, c’mon.”

“No.”

“Fine. I’ll finish it, then.”

The Zygerrian pulled up short outside the bedroom and turned around. “No. No, no. Just, stop. I’ll tell them the Force-forsaken story.”

“What? What’s wrong with me doing it?”

“You talk too much.”

“*What?* That’s what you do when you tell a story!”

“Yeah, but yer awful at it.”

“Oi!”

“Look, you tell ‘em real pretty, and that’s grand, but I don’t need to hear the five different ways you felt yer feelings or learn three new ways just to say ‘shiny.’”

Atyiru spluttered. Jax plopped back down in his chair.

“Now, where was I? On the ridge overlooking the Academy, blue blades, couple hot Twi’leks attacking like it was ‘self-defense’ after you caught ‘em spying...we tried to fight back...right...it gets blurry here...”

-=*o*=-

Atts and one of the other Force-users moved like lightning, jumping all around here and there, plasma and lightning flying through the air. The other Twi'lek advanced on Bayar, blade held aside, unignited.

"I don't want to hurt you," she said. "Put your blasters away."

I aimed and fired. The others followed suit, and the woman's saber sprang to life as she danced around the bolts. *Frakking Force-users!*

"Scramble, scramble!" I shouted, diving to the side as the Twi'lek drew way too close for comfort, so fast I could hardly keep track. I couldn't even blink before her weapon zipped towards me, and then it was just *pain pain pain* and heat.

Somewhere, I heard Atts scream, "JAX!"

Then, nothing.

-X-

Consciousness came back like the son of a bantha that it always was: hard, fast, and raw. I cringed back into something soft, all my everything feeling like weighted beskar.

"Easy there," a familiar voice murmured. I peeled my eyes back, recoiled at the white light, and shut them again.

Tears leaking from my eyes, I blinked and coughed a few times. My tongue felt thick and I felt woozy. "Wher'm I Wha...what happn'd?"

"Medical tent, Forward Base." Atyiru fuzzed in and out of my vision, extending a plastic cup in one hand, the other tilting my head up. I took a drink and fell back into the pillows, exhausted. "The loyalists claimed the Academy. We won, I suppose. Lost a lot of people."

"No, I meant, wha happen to us?" I tried again.

She smoothed my hair down. It felt nice. I floated a little, still numb. "We were being watched by a pair of House Odan-Urr's seers. Turns out they're really more non-combat, espionage operatives, but...I guess they got twitchy. Ashla and Bogan know I did. Anyway, they attacked, and one of them hurt you, and Kael tried to cover you but they got him too. I...stopped them. Healed you and the others. Waited for our evac. Ding, dong, now we're done!" the Miraluka finished abruptly.

"But...how?"

Atyiru shrugged. "You were right all along. I just decided right then to be a better Jedi. Er, Dark Jedi. Or really, a Dark*ish* Jedi. Those girls are still alive and well, I just sort of...lost my temper and then refused to acknowledge you were hurt. Simple."

I wanted to badger her further, but mostly I just wanted to sleep. She got farther away, and so did the pillows. I floated some more, light and heavy, numb and warm.

“...est, my friend...jus...rest.”

Rest.

-=*o*=-

“Holy whore on a rancor, they’re actually asleep,” Jax whispered in disbelief, staring down at the cribs like he was looking at a live grenade.

“They like stories, and lullabies,” Atyiru commented quietly, apparently less terrified. “C’mon, we can go play some sabacc in the kitchen while they nap. I’ll teach you how to be less awful.”

“Hey!” Jax snapped, and easy as that, two small pairs of eyes flew open again. “Oh, no, no no no—”

The babies screamed in protest.

“FRAK IT ALL!”

“I swear on Ashla and Bogan, if their first word is ‘frak’, I’m going to come back as a Force-ghost after Kooki murders me just to strangle you.”

“Funny, since you saved me in the first place.”

“Shut the kark up and go get some more bottles.”