

As it turned out, being like a falling star wasn't magical, or pretty, or poetic. It didn't fulfill any wishes. No, it *frakking hurt*.

Satsi realized three things as she slowly dragged herself into consciousness through the fog of pain and heat that was her world.

One, she was hanging upside down from a seat harness so that the chain of her necklace kept smacking her in the face. When she tried to turn away, the angle just got her smacked in the teeth, sending sharp-yet-dull ringing numb-pain through her skull.

Two, there was an instantly familiar pair of barfy baby socks dangling out of her shirt pocket, precariously close to falling out. Her daughter had worn them — and made a mess of them — the night before they'd shipped out, and Satsi hadn't been able to make herself leave Selen without taking the tiny, itty-bitty socks with her, dried vomit or no.

Three, the emergency light wouldn't stop karking blinking and she could feel her blood pressure rising behind her eyeballs to blinding, stroke-inducing levels just at how badly she wanted the damned thing to *karking stop*.

There were other things too, like the fact that she was on an enemy-controlled planet of deadly design inside a crashed escape pod that was literally on fire at that moment with other passengers dead or screaming as they burned around her, but those others were the first three things she noticed that actually gave her pause.

"...Sithspit," she croaked. "Sammy! SAM!" the woman cried, struggling suddenly to be free of her seat. Belatedly, she stopped screaming for the child; her baby wasn't there. She patted the socks to be sure, holding them against her chest so they wouldn't fall and trying to unhook herself with just one hand. "ANYBODY? Report! Who's alive?"

A few groans answered her, but the quiet was deafening — or perhaps that was her eardrums being blown out? Everything was muzzy, and her thoughts kept looping around in slow trickles. She thumbed the socks again. Sammy's face swam in her mind. Chewing on her knuckle with her two — *two!* — whole teeth. Walking across the room to give her a block with a mynock on it. Crying. *Crying for her...*

"Don't cry, baby, mommah's comin'..." Satsi muttered, and then realized, *again*, that she wasn't listening to a one-year-old. The ensign two seats over from her was sobbing softly, wet little snuffles that kept catching with a smacking sound around the flappy bits of her torn throat. Blood pulsed from the wound, like paint spilled over her face, into her long blond hair, dripping down to the ground — the ceiling? — below them. Not her baby, not Sammy, but Satsi couldn't remember the woman's name. Some worker from the *Invicta II*.

Frak, thought the new Consul slowly, blinking and rubbing at her face. *I...am so concussed.*
Frak.

Everything was muddled, but she had enough experience with far worse head trauma to push through the mire. Some things were obvious, at least: get out of the harness, get out of the ship, avoid the fires, check for survivors.

The woman shifted about, trying to get her bearings. Her head felt sticky, probably matted with blood from whatever had given her her concussion, and her neck and shoulders pulsed with agony that became an aching but ignorable constant. When she moved, fresher, brighter pain sprang from where the straps and crash webbing dug into her flesh, the metal buckle on one of the plastic pieces embedded in her side. It didn't look deep, and there wasn't a lot of blood, but it hurt. Her hamstrings and all the muscles along her upper thighs burned, both from what she suspected were actual burns and from the exertion her upside-down, seated position had placed on her muscles.

She shifted again, felt the stings and twinges and spikes along her nerves, sharp and shining, and breathed through her teeth. Her fingers wrapped tightly around the release catch for her harness. She braced herself; then, she pulled.

There was a *click*, and the gravity had her for a short moment. Then the floor — *ceiling*, her scattered brain reminded again — was under her and her skull was swimming and her body was throbbing and the shallow hole in her abdomen decided to slowly grow wet, the wound agitated. She would have laid there for a long while if not for the way her vision was narrowing and the air tasted thin and too hot. She had to get up.

Satsi groaned, rolling to get her hands under her and push herself to her feet. Her fingers brushed the socks in her pocket. She wobbled, straightened, and looked around.

The ensign with the rent throat was still dying, and dimly, Satsi thought that the experience was probably crappy for the woman. She reached out, squinting, and grasped the ragged edge of the crewman's skin and muscle, pulling it wider. Blood *gushed* out, like a clog removed from a half-draining faucet, and the girl's pale, terrified eyes rolled back into her skull. The choking noises stopped.

"Yah welcome," the Consul murmured, patting the cleaner side of the woman's face in a last gesture comfort. She turned, then, and surveyed the other bodies. The pilot was...well, splat, probably, considering the whole cockpit area was just...gone. A few others were obviously dead, looking more like leftover bits from a bantha steak barbeque. One man was missing a foot but struggling in his harness and — swearing? His mouth was moving but she had trouble hearing him.

".elp me!"

Satsi frowned at him. He was more impatient than her daughter.

"Hold on," she said, approaching and grabbing onto his harness, which seemed to be twisted shut. The Consul took firm hold of it and *pulled*, muscles straining, feet digging into the metal under her. The straps tore with a whistling *snap*, and opening given, Satsi bodily lifted the man out of his confines, slinging him over her shoulders.

He dug an elbow into her back, and she nearly dropped him, glaring. The Twi'lek just shouted and flailed his arms, pointing over at the remaining exit hatch that had cracked along its seams, letting in slivers of light. Satsi stomped towards it, grabbing up a mostly-intact emergency kit along the way from under the other seats; she didn't see a stray foot, though.

She and her luggage stumbled out into stinging, dry air after she muscled the hatch open manually. It wasn't the cool relief she'd been hoping for, but it was *air*, and she gasped in gritty lungfuls greedily.

Then, she dropped the Twi'lek.

He yowled, and she ignored him, dropping the crate too. Then she scrambled back into the pod; she thought she'd seen some others moving.

By the time Satsi dragged another two ensigns or privates or whatever the hell they were out, she was ready to vomit; so she did. It burned and stank. She hunched over in the hot grit — too fine to be rock but too coarse to be sand — under her when it was done, feeling the dirt that stick to her lips and crunch in her teeth.

Frak.

Satsi dug one hand into the dirt; the other went to her pocket again. Barfy socks, barfy Satsi. They could match.

I'm a mess, kid, she thought, lying there and coughing slightly around grains that snorted in her throat and up her nose when she breathed. *I'm a mess and I don't know how I'm gonna get back to you but I'm gonna try.*

A hand touched her back, and she jerked, but it was only one of her comrades; he offered her a canteen of water, saying, "It's all we have, your Excellency, ma'am. You'll have to sip."

"Don' call meh tha'," Satsi rasped, spitting to clear her mouth — a useless endeavor — and then taking a small drink. She didn't hand it back to the man, instead tying it to her belt. "Name, names, all o' yah."

"Drehy, your Exc— ma'am," answered the man who'd brought her water. His face was covered in scrapes and burns. He was missing half his eyebrows.

"Liles," shortly groaned another, holding his — or her, should couldn't really tell — side. Liles was slouched against some rocks, watching the smoke starting to thin as it rose from the crashed pod.

Finally, her gimpy Twi'lek answered, "Bel'haevha. Can call me Belv."

"Great. Y'know who I am. So...so..." she squinted around them, hand over her pocket. "Right. Right. What've we got? Supplies. Someone."

"Ma'am," it was Drehy who spoke up, evidently the most competent or clear-headed of the lot, despite his injuries. She felt a sliver of respect curling in her gut for him. "There's the canteen and a pack of ration bars for sustenance, ma'am, and this flare gun has a single round." He offered it to her with a salute, and she took that too. "Also, my datapad is still functioning, though the comms are...well. Nonfunctional."

They all glanced at the wreckage, grim.

"Casualties? How many poor frakkers were...with us?" Her head throbbed. She shook herself.

"I can't be sure without counting, ma'am, but...more than typical capacity. There weren't enough seats, but it was a panic."

"So at least, what...twenty, thirty? Gimmi a range here, kid. Actually," she interrupted him and her own train of thought, "nevermind, s'not important righ' now. Comms, we got comms?"

Drehy bulked, looking a little concerned, though it only showed around his eyes. "Like I said, ma'am...nonfunctional. Our personal devices can't get frequencies out either. You tried yours."

She didn't remember that.

Frakking concussions...

"Right." Satsi rubbed at her head again, then glanced up, twisting around to survey the land as Liles helped Belv tie up his foot stump. There were jagged, slim lines in the distance — ruins or rock formations, maybe. No good cover for klicks that she could see, no break in the landscape that wasn't so distant it didn't seem to melt into the sky. Just grit, sand, and craggy flatland far as the horizon. "Right. Hunkah down. We ain't movin'. When that pod cools off, s'all we gots for cover. You lot, go...patrol. Uh, the ones tha' can walk, anyway. See if yah can't find somethin' useful, plants er critters or somethin' for fire. We're gonna need more fire. I think."

Desperately, she wished she knew anything about living outdoors anywhere except in the Coruscanti gutters. Exposure, starvation, dehydration...she had experience with some of that, but this...this wasn't the city, with people to pickpocket or scraps to scrounge. She was so, so very frakked.

Gimmi some spicehead wit a knife any day to this, she thought, kicking a stone. The motion pulled at her burns and cuts, and she hissed.

Drehy was acting like she knew what she was doing, though, and so he saluted like a good soldier boy and took Liles with him, the two trudging off in opposite directions. The Twi'lek had dragged himself to sitting upright and was moaning about his leg and some such, and she tottered slightly as she moved to sit down next to him.

"Shuddup," Satsi snapped, closing her eyes without meaning to. The wind felt muted on her face, like she was lurking a few inches below her skin, and vertigo washed up her spine and swirled in her skull.

"...ow am I supposed to go back to my family like this?" Belv was saying, and something about his husband finding him ugly, and scaring his kids, and wanting to get back to them. All the sorts of things people thought about when they were sure and rightly screwed beyond belief.

The Consul pulled the little socks out of her own pocket, running her thumb over them, then pressing her nose into the blue-and-orange pastel-striped fabric to sniff. The barf was dry, so it didn't much linger, but a bit of the baby smell, that perfect smell, was still there. It made her toes curl in her combat boots and her stomach knot, but there was nothing else for her to vomit, so she just convulsed a bit, swallowing tightly.

"Sammy," she whispered. "Wait for me, okay?"

"You've got children?"

Satsi didn't realize she was being spoken to until the man prodded her, and then she blinked, recalling that she'd sent the others off. She could still see them clearly, small figures in the near-distance. Right. That had happened.

"...yeah," she said eventually, glancing at the Twi'lek. "You?"

"Four. Kids, I mean. Well, one's a teenager now, giving us hell." He chuckled, and his skin was blotchy from dry sweat and blood loss. "She wants to dance, doesn't care about the stereotype. I was gonna teach her..." He looked down at his mangled leg. Despite the gruesomeness of the injury, it seemed to be his only one; he would last if they got rescued, she imagined.

"That's nice," Satsi told him. Then, she drew her dagger from her pelt, put a friendly hand on his shoulder, and briskly slipped the blade between his ribs at an angle.

Belv didn't make any noise — such was the beauty of piercing a lung and the arteries at the same time. He just sunk a little lower in his seat, gaze blown wide and then drooping, and then that was it. If Satsi looked, she could see the blood pooling underneath him. She gently adjusted his position a bit to cover it up.

Maybe it was sick, but not even the part of her that wanted to be better for her daughter felt anything about it, not even mildly perturbed. They didn't have much water. She'd rather get back home to be a crappy mom than a dead one.

When her other two men came back, she recounted how Belv had just stopped breathing — shock, probably. She made her tone mournful when she said it. Even when her head spun incoherently, her tongue could spin silver in her sleep.

They were upset, but only in passing. One more dead from the crash. Damn the Collective. Rah-rah-rah.

The sun was setting, and so Satsi told them something about getting some sleep and waiting to see who came to find them — enemy or ally. They passed around ration bars, and she found herself dozing with an empty wrapper in hand shortly later. Drehy reminded her that she had, in fact, eaten. He was a good boy. She thanked him, then drifted off again.

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An awful pounding, like ten hangovers wrapped in a boot to the head, greeted her when she woke. It took her a few seconds to collect herself through the pain.

"*Kyodai*...Uji...hon, can yah get me some painkillers?" she called. Then, "How's Sam?"

No one answered her, and when she squinched her eyes open, it was to debris and dust. For a moment, she bulked.

"UJI! SAMANTHA!"

"Ma'am?"

Satsi turned to see...Liles and Drehy. The crash. The attack. Right.

"Frak," the woman swore, tearing at her hair in frustration. "Wh...right, sorry, boys. Hit my head bad on our way down, I'm good, I'm here."

"Of course, ma'am," Drehy replied. She really would get him promoted if they lived through this, or switch him to her personal guard, since she couldn't get Bly to frakking stop giving her one. Guardsman Drehy, professional exhaust-pipe kisser.

Satsi was distracted from a reply by a flicker of motion in the merciless morning light that did nothing to assuage the deep chill in her bones from the freezing night. A plume of dust had appeared, shapes at its front; it wasn't big enough to be a storm.

"We've got company?"

"They've been approaching for some time now, ma'am. We think they'll arrive within the hour."

"Well then...let's get comfortable to meet our guests."

They all hunkered down as strategically as they could — which wasn't much — with what weapons they had left, arrayed in something of a V-formation with Satsi at point. She watched through narrowed eyes as the contingent approached, a pack of women all. The figure at their front was familiar from enemy dossiers, and the rest around her appeared to be clones or *something* — they all looked alike, severe and sneering and armed with bows.

"Kendra Icasta, right?" Satsi called from where she crouched behind a stack of bodies — they'd moved some of their dead from inside the pod to build themselves makeshift barricades a few corpses high. "You're Technocrat. And these must be your *Shikari*." She resisted the urge to say *back-up dancers*, noting how their armor all matched, in Liberation Front colors. Snark wouldn't help her now; she needed to be smarter than that.

"You seem to know me. Why don't you introduce yourself?" Icasta called back. Her voice was as sharp and cool as her features, and her smirk split cerulean skin. Though both her eyes glowed red, the mechanical one seemed to whirl in a different direction than the natural, and Satsi internally cursed the cyberjunkies.

"I'm somebody looking to get away from the Brotherhood," Satsi responded evenly, taking a gambit in standing up, slowly, her arms raised and pistol pointed towards the sky. "My escape didn't...go so well."

She jerked her head at the crashed pod. Icasta's predatory gaze followed the movement then jumped back. Satsi hoped her two fellows would stay quiet and play along. "We," she stressed, as the men slowly stood too, bewildered. "Would like asylum with you. We want to *join* you."

"And why should I believe that?" Icasta's purr was like cold oil, slick and seeping. "You twist minds and words...but you won't twist mine. You can't play me...but you are welcome to attempt it."

She smirked, and it was the grin of a hunter.

Satsi lifted her chin. "No tricks, Icasta...I just want to be free, to help you. I can prove it."

"Oh?" The Chiss seemed amused.

"Long live liberty," Satsi said, and then with two quick pivots, cracked off two shots that shook all the way up her arms. The bullets slammed into both Drehy and Liles, dropping the latter dead instantly; her mark was off slightly on the former though. He went down with a shout, and she got to see his furious, pained expression before a third shot splattered and spread it over the rocks.

She lowered her gun, then met gleaming red eyes. "Two Jedi-lovers, dead for you. I'd kill any more I met. Please."

For a moment, she thought the Chiss swallowed the act; but Kendra merely scoffed, commenting, "Perhaps, but all you've truly proved is that you're very driven to survive and don't care about who you hurt — typical Force-user."

"I'm not a Force-Sensitive."

"I don't particularly care. What you *are* is my *prey*. Relinquish your weapons...or don't. I'd be happy to take them from you."

Her tongue poked out to lave her bottom lip at the thought, and as if it were some cue, her Huntresses all drew their gleaming bowstrings.

Sighing, the former Fade complied, dropping her gun, then reaching for her belt and undoing it too. It, and her holsters and all the weaponry in them, dropped to the sand.

Icasta frowned. Satsi smirked.

"Someone looks disappointed. Hoping for more of a challenge?"

"Nothing is a challenge to me," Icasta hissed, evidently let down but pushing past it. "And you are my prisoner now. Take her."

Two of the *Shikari* broke ranks and advanced on Satsi with wary steps, though Icasta had uncoiled somewhat. Satsi laughed at her as she approached. "I've known women like you. I've been women like you. Hell, one of them was even myself, once upon a time, when I was younger. Whatever you're chasing...the chase is all you have. The point isn't getting there. It's just having something to keep getting to." Her voice grew cruel. "How's it feel to be empty?"

Icasta merely hissed at her, like some agitated animal too proud to really swing. Satsi lowered her hands as the Huntresses came close, exchanging their bows for stun batons.

"Fine, Icasta. I admit, I was lying."

"You aren't here to convert."

"No; I'm here to destroy you simpering fools."

She put as much disdain into the words as she could, throwing out one hand, fingers splayed and crooked like claws, as if hurling something at them. They reacted predictably, like anyone *expecting* to fight a Jedi would: the lot of them flinched away, dove aside, or otherwise leaped back in thruster-aided jumps, fully anticipating a lash of lightning or telekinetic push.

The opening was all she needed. Satsi tore forward before the two nearest her had even unfurled from their defensive crouches. The Arconan kicked her first target in the throat with all her strength behind it, pushing up from the ground. It dropped the Huntress like a bag of rocks, and she clawed at her neck, trying to breathe around the splinters of her larynx.

The second was raised her baton and swinging, but Satsi ducked around it, stepping close and pistoning an elbow into the Kiffar's side. The *Shikari* buckled and gagged, but still managed to bring her other arm about, lightning-fast, and Satsi felt the familiar sensation of spiked vibroknuckles punching through her skin.

It was a good hit, and she buckled, knocked back. The Huntress moved to step over her and bring that baton down, but the Consul moved quickly from her vulnerable position, hooking her right foot around the woman's ankle while stamping her knee with her left. It snapped loudly, and the Huntress collapsed into a wailing heap.

Satsi rolled over then, on top of her, and drew back her fists, raining down vicious blows cracking against the Huntress' skull. Nothing compared to the heady, erotic snap of bone under her hands, and for the first time in the haze of the time since the crash, she felt like she could *breathe*.

That sensation came to an abrupt end when something stabbed into her neck, no small pinprick; this was a deep jab. Satsi gasped and spat, bloodied hand coming up to find a dart lodged firmly in her muscle tissue. She yanked it out and swore, leaping upright and turning to Icasta and her *Shikari* with a snarl.

The Chiss merely smiled over the sights of her dart shooter.

Satsi growled and charged at her. One red eye widened in alarm, and the blue-skinned woman fired again. Another dart caught Satsi in the arm. She slipped in the dust, staggered, tried to keep moving.

Darkness, the intimately familiar drag of a sedative, *something* pumping into her, having its way inside out, took her before she finished her next stride. Her knees hit stone, and her cheek pressed into the sand.

The Huntresses shuffled around her. She was dimly aware of them, sinking quickly into blackness. As they prodded at her and moved to lift her, she dragged an arm — the one she could almost feel two fingers of — to her pocket.

She touched the itty-bitty baby socks there.

Then, she fumbled them out and nudged them into the grit with her knee, burying them quickly as they dragged her away.

She couldn't let them know she had a child. *And besides*, she thought dimly, *maybe if Kordzy finds 'em...they'll...find me...He...powers...*

She couldn't think any more. Brown eyes and chubby, bread-roll arms swam behind her closed eyelids, and then—

Nothing.

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The surprise, really, was waking up as soon as she did. She'd expected something much more...final, in that heavy fade to black.

Instead of awakening in a cell-block to be told it had been days and now the torture could begin, or some such, Satsi found herself in the back of a rumbling vehicle. It was dark except for where the light of small barred windows shone directly above, behind and in front of her. Kendra Icasta was seated across from her, working on some files, it seemed. The Consul tried to shift about and found not only did her body hurt and respond sluggishly, but she was shackled, stuncuffs around her wrists and ankles and hooked to chains attached to the floor.

Well, she thought, *I guess I can't call them stupid.*

"Finally, you're up," came Icasta's unpleasant, nails-on-sheet metal tone, laced with impatience and boredom.

"So sorry," Satsi managed, her throat twinging and tearing. She felt her lips peeling back at their edge, dry and cracked. "I'll try to be a better plaything. Really. I've been told I'm great at it."

Icasta gave her a sour glower with her one organic eye. Satsi tried not to whimper as images of long white fingers and red eyes danced in her mind's eye. Instead, she focused on the phantom pains and the very present real ones; her head still roared like a ship engine, and her stomach wounds were oozing. She wondered if they'd treat her or if she'd die ugly from the gut infection.

The sick part of her grateful for the pain relished in it. It gave her clarity and comfort. Something stable in the mess. Satsi wrenched hard in her chains just to rip the hole in her side a little wider, gasping with the fresh agony.

"Masochistic, aren't you? No matter. You'll break."

"Oh, honey...you can try."

The Chiss was unimpressed. She went back to her files. "You're something of a new player... Satsi Tameike," said Icasta, reading off her datapad. Satsi caught a glimpse of her open profile, a holoshot taken from some above angle. "We were expecting your predecessor, Atyiru Caesura Entar *Arconae*."

"She had a bigger office. I was looking to move up."

"How neat, then, that a little vacancy opened up for you. The funeral was lovely. A tad dramatic, but I can understand rallying the troops."

Her smile was pointed, not a smile at all. Satsi offered one right back, her lips peeling back from her teeth.

"Still, you... You're more difficult to place, I admit. We were unaware of you. Atyriu's previous Proconsul, however...him, we know well. Like old friends."

She turned the datapad about, and there it was, a picture of Uji. Satsi stopped herself from tensing too late, and knew from the flicker of Icasta's facial muscles that she'd seen.

"Uji Tameike. Former Scion, do you call it? Now a House leader. Any relation, hmm? What is it? Husband? Cousin?"

"Brother," Satsi sneered, because it was pointless to hide, and she didn't need Icasta making too many connections. She had, in fact, several to steer the Chiss away from.

"Family. Quaint." Icasta made a note, then tucked away her pad, watching her with hunter's eyes again.

They sat in silence, watching one another like two manka cats circling, until the vehicle rumbled to a stop. Icasta stood and got out, calling for her *Shikari* again. They left Satsi to swelter and stew where she sat, closing the doors again behind her and cutting off any vantage of their location.

Damn.

Still, she listened intently, trying to make out what she could. There was lots of wind, voices, the sounds of machinery and droids. They were talking close by, but she only got the impression, not the words. When she craned her head back, she saw one of the Huntresses out of the corner of her eye, standing outside her transport like a guard.

A smile crawled across her chapped lips. Carefully, she tilted her face and pressed her temple hard to the metal of the vehicle's wall, then began grinding her skull into it furiously. Her skin dragged, and the barely-scabbed over wound there tore back open, bleeding freely like head wounds always did.

"Hey...hey!" she croaked. The Huntress turned. "Please...can't see. Yer gonna have to carry me outta here...just...wipe my eye, please?"

The Huntress frowned at her over her wide chin, then turned to ask something of someone. Probably Icasta. They didn't seem to do *anything* without orders. She bet they didn't even crap on their own.

Whatever was said, the Huntress reached through the bars a moment later with a bunched scrap of cloth. Satsi held still for her as she wiped at the blood on her forehead, reaching farther down—

The Arconan jerked her head sideways and clamped her teeth into the woman's forearm, chomping down viciously. A scream went up, and the Huntress tried to pull away, but Satsi dug in, stronger, not willing to let go. She bit and gnawed, working her jaw and throat even as blows started raining down on her head, smashing against her skull. Commotion rose, and the doors were thrown open, and hands pulled at her but she *hung on*. The hot, pulsing flow of blood, like a hose, too quick to swallow or stop, let her know she'd succeeded as the arm she had latched onto and its owner went limp, and the other Huntress finally yanked them apart.

She'd severed the artery. Three down, two to go. Satsi gave a crimson-soaked smile even as a stun baton cracked into her repeatedly, shock pulsing through her. The pain was terrible. She laughed. Spat blood. Laughed harder, until they started kicking and snapped her ribs. Then, she just wheezed.

Icasta's growl before unconsciousness came again was a sweet, sweet promise.

"You'll pay for that, Tameike. For all my *Shikari*."

Satsi was glad.

She was counting on it.