

"Momma?" a small, scared voice called.

Satsi's eyes snapped open and she sat upright, hand sliding with old reflex to her hip even though her pistol was locked safely in the second nightstand drawer. There was no warm body securely beside her, off-world instead with their dear Turel for another day yet. No other sounds echoed in the house, no banging crashes or creaking footsteps or careful, rough breathing. The moonlight peeked through the blinds just enough to reveal all the room's soft lines, distorted in fantastical shadows, including the little figure standing in the doorway.

"Sammy? What's wrong?" the woman asked, all her muscles tense and her nerves burning icy under her skin.

No sooner had the words left her mouth than the toddler was running over and sailing on up to throw herself into her arms. Satsi gave a wheeze at the impact, hugging the girl with the oldest and truest fierceness in all the galaxy — motherhood.

The back of a silky black, tousled head of hair was all the greeting she got, Sammy's face buried firmly in the sheets and her lap. Her voice came again from its cottony confines. "Bad dweams."

"Aww, my little bunny..." her mother cooed, relaxing and rubbing up and down the child's back through her nightgown. "It's okay, they were just dreams. They hurt for a bit, but then they go away, remember?"

"Mommycanlsweepwifya?" Every syllable ran together as if one word, and the blankets were little help, but Satsi had slowly become adept at translating her daughter's often dirty-mouthed mumble-speak. Uji liked to say that she and Sammy weren't so different in that regard, even as they both tried to teach her better than the impediment.

"Course you can, Sammy bunny. Wanna tell me what you dreamed about?"

Her little head lifted at last to reveal wet cheeks and a snuffly nose quickly sniffed and rubbed away on her mother's shirt. "There's was uh lady in some twees an she was broked an an the buzzies an den, lady and an...teh monstuhs!"

*Riiiiight. Monsters, that last bit was monsters, right?*

"Shhh, babygirl, it's okay. They can't hurt ya no more if ya don't let em."

"Cause dey ain's real?"

Satsi paused.

“Aw, honey,” she murmured, kissing her forehead and squeezing the girl under her arm tightly. “Your bad dreams aren’t real, they aren’t really happening to you. But monsters? Thing is, honey, they are real. There *are* monsters out there. Lots of them, everywhere you go, everybody you meet. Some ain’t so bad. Monsters aren’t scary because they’re big and ugly and full of teeth and claws, right?”

“No,” asserted the tot with some fierceness as she clutched her mangled tiger plush closer. “They’s *cool*.”

“That’s right. What makes monsters ain’t how they look or none, Sammy, it’s what they do. Everybody’s got monsters inside them. Me and your daddy were real bad ones once.” *And you’re the only fragile lil’ bars keeping them caged.*

“Nuh uh! ...nuh uh...” she trailed off, seeing her mother’s serious expression.

“Yuh-huh, and lemme tell you something, them beasties ain’t always easy to tame.”

“Taymuh?”

“Like yer pup from Coruscant, or Mistah Kittybird from Loth. How ya tried to teach ‘em to sit an’ to play with them treaties. Tame means... well, it’s learning, really. Knowing how to not let things control ya. Gentlin’ ‘em.”

“Wif tweats likes Wuf an’ Kittehburrhd. Ye,” she repeated.

“Exactly.” Satsi pressed a fingertip to the child’s small, perfect nose. “There *are* monsters, Sammy. In everybody and everyplace. Like I said, some ain’t so bad, but some *are*, and some *will* try to get you. Hurt you. Understand?”

The little four year old girl looked a bit frightened but was trying not to show it. Though her eyes, starry black in the dark, were teary and her lip wobbly, she raised her little face high, brave and bold.

“Ye.”

“But you know what, butterfly?”

“Wha’?”

Untangling them from the blankets, Satsi knelt on the floor briefly enough to close her fingers around one of the many toy block constructs that inevitably littered their home’s floors. This one happened to be a sword, or a spear. She really wasn’t sure what it was supposed to be, but it was pointy, and damn if pointy didn’t do good enough.

The woman handed it to her daughter, who claimed her weapon happily and with no small bit of pride. Looked just like her daddy with that cool, fierce little look all in her pretty eyes. “You can *fight* them, Sammy. It ain’t from nothing your job to, ain’t got to, but if you want to, if there’s something you gotta fight for, something you gotta protect, yourself or yer family or yer redhaired girlies—” the child went upright at that, back straight like she’d started learning as she gripped her armaments. “—whatevah it is... You *CAN* fight ‘em, and you can beat ‘em too. Like the knights in yer favorite pictchaholo.”

“I can?”

“Yer a Tameike, ‘course you can. We’re damn good at that, y’know. We’re survivors, not victims.” Sammy giggled, and Satsi ruffled her hair. “So those bad ones come, whatcha gon do?”

“I-I-I me gunna fites em!”

“That’s my babygirl.” She hugged her squirming little warrior, receiving protests along the lines of animal-like growling and gnashing and a few too many “fricks.” Had to teach the kid a little moderation in her frakkin’ swearing.

*Yes, because that is the important part. Really, shimai,* her twin surely would’ve said, were he there. She smiled quickly at the thought, then blew raspberry kisses into her daughter’s stomach, making her howl with squealing laughter.

“All bettah, bunnybean?” Satsi asked at last, breathless as her toddler from her own chuckles.

“Ye, momma.”

“All ready to go fighting?”

“Ye!”

“Okay, then, so you won’t be needin’ to stay in here, huh? Can’t have no fighting in here. This here’s for sleepin’.”

“Buh ya an’ daddy westles lots a’times—”

The woman snorted and coughed. “Yeah, we do, but it ain’t wrestling, babygirl.”

“Wuhzzit?”

“Ask me again in the mornin’ an’ I’ll tell ya.” There was about a fifty-fifty chance the toddler would forget. The same curiosity that made her stubborn also shortened her attention span. “But that isn’t the point. Nuh-huh-noooooo fighting or wrestling for little girls after their bedtime. It’s a rule.”

Crossing small arms, Sammy fidgeted, looking between the door and her mother. Her lip wobbled again, and she hugged both her toys, her voice still a little nervous.

“I ‘anna stays ‘ere.”

“Then put your spear there up an’ come ta bed, sweetheart.”

The girl’s lip jutted out. “Is a huh-huh-h’albuhd,” she said huffily before scrambling off the bed and sticking the block toy on the floor in her parents’ closet. Close enough.

*Halberd? Karkfrakking swear, one day, I’m gonna figure out who’s teaching her this shit. The possibilities were many, between her father, and her aunts and uncles, and even her goddaddy’s tailed gal. Swear, if Petals or purple Miss walking definition of needs-to-get-laid were lying...*

Sammy clawed her way back into the blankets then, moving fast as all hell. She burrowed promptly into Satsi’s side, half-faced Sir Snugglestripes securely under her arm. In just a few heartbeats, she was out like a light.

Nuzzling Samantha close, her mother kissed her hair, sinking down into the pillows with the toddler and fully welcoming the itty bitty foot in the face she was sure to wake up to in the morning.

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“Momma,” her little bunny-butterfly asked her, staring up with her wide brown eyes. “Where’s mah gramma and grappa?”

Satsi froze. Her vision flickered black and tight at the edges for the space between the breaths she wasn’t breathing, heat washing down her spine and pooling in her trembling knees. Sammy was still talking.

“Avy and Nay and Kira hases grammas an’ Kira talks ‘bout her inisble grappa a lots and Unca Kord has both of ‘ems.”

She stared at her toddler and found she couldn't speak, but that round face and big eyes and sweet little voice demanded it of her, just like they demanded all the love she'd ever had, and she'd be damned if she didn't give it.

"C...c'mere, h-honeysugah," Satsi said, numbly opening her arms. Sammy happily *leapt* up into them like she was wont to do, in a little arc straight off the floor, more like her daddy's sparkfinger self than even he'd ever been. Satsi thought of the first time she'd held Sammy in her arms, sweat-soaked and woozy and alone in a medcenter ward back on Kias, surrounded by cool-faced Sephi with Luna hovering not far outside. The baby had been so tiny, so squishy and wrinkly and pink, so *perfect*. She'd thought, *might be stuck with my face, kid, but you'll have your daddy's eyes and a smile like mine that he can't ever deny*. Satsi remembered feeling herself fall in love that very instant, even more in love than when she'd sworn to that small, four-month-old bump to protect it, more utterly and absolutely in love than she had, before that solitary moment, been capable of. She remembered holding her little icky, lovely baby girl and kissing her soft-smelling forehead and watching her eyes squinch open for the first time. She remembered making sure that the first words to reach her thimble-sized ears were, "I love you," and murmuring a promise to give her nothing but truth. Murmuring promises over and over: *I promise, every breath I have left, it's for you. I promise I'll do better*.

She'd never lied to her daughter before. Not the other night, not any other night, and Shadows, if it killed her, not now either.

Satsi sniffed, glancing down at Sammy. "Yah grandmama and granddaddy aren't...they...they're not here. They're gone, sweetiebaby."

"Gone where?"

"Gone away, like yah fishie from Corellia."

"How come?"

"Because they died, Sammy. That's how the world goes. Yah know that." Her throat was closing up. Her guts were gnawing themselves inside out, guilt rising like dark water to drown her lungs.

"How come?"

"Whaddaya mean how come, butterfly? Things die, that's how come."

"Buh daddy saids Glub left 'cause he wasn' eatin' 'nough."

"That's right — which is why you eat all yah veggies whether ya like 'em or not, right?"

Sammy nodded, but was already pressing on. "Did gramma an' grappa not eat them veggies?"

The rising tide broke. Satsi's legs gave out and she dropped them both to the floor, Sammy giving a little whoop like it was a game. She bounced in Satsi's arms and demanded they go again, but her mother couldn't move. Blasterfire and screams and split lips and bruises and pink walls and red, lying whispers all clamored in her mind, the bottoms of her feet throbbing along every slim, puckered white line of scar tissue there.

Uneven footsteps and the mingled smell of tabaac and vanilla rescued her, like they so often — *always* — did. "Daddy! Daddydayydayyday!" Sammy yelled, launching herself easily out of her mother's hold and tackling the man's ankles with what was sometimes unnerving ferocity. Her father laughed, dropping his cane and twirling the tot into his arms and over his shoulder, making her giggle with joy.

Satsi dragged her eyes from the spot they'd fixed on the cabinets and met his gaze. Those steady, gentle eyes she adored asked without words what was wrong, assured without answer that all would be well. His brows conveyed concern even as he smiled for their daughter, who went about tugging on his hair and miming a slash at his throat. He tickled her sides, making her shriek again.

"Why don't you tell me what you and your mama were talking about, hmm, my butterfly? Do I get to know?" he asked the toddler, and Sammy immediately launched into an explanation of vegetables and fishes and how everyone seemed to have grandparents but her and why were they dead like Glub again?

Casting him a grateful glance as he spared her a comforting one back, Satsi climbed to her feet and slipped out of the kitchen, going to their bedroom. She plopped onto the edge of the bed and hunched over, toes digging into the carpet, face buried in her hands.

She didn't know how long she sat like that, paying hardly any heed to the way the light sank low or her joints and muscles throbbed. But, eventually, the bed sagged and warm, strong arms pulled her tight in an embrace.

"She is asleep," he murmured into her hair, lips brushing her forehead. There was tiredness in his tone; no doubt he'd slept little too.

"Good," Satsi said raggedly, voice hitching in her swollen throat, raw and a bit strangled and reedy. She paused, then asked, "Did she—"

"I explained, vaguely. They died, you were involved, they do not have graves on Coruscant to visit. She took your nail polish and painted on that green rock out in the side yard. Apparently they and little Glub get to keep each other company now."

And just when she'd thought she couldn't cry harder. Her chest cracked in half. There weren't words. A thousand possibilities flashed in her mind, first hard and sharp, then hazier, blurred, unsure: she wouldn't have let them meet Sammy anyway. They would've hurt her. They were terrible, cruel, cowardly excuses for people who'd done nothing but break and barter away their own children and they spoiled every karking thing they touched. Parents and grandparents or no, they would've been bad for Sammy.

But then, maybe, just maybe not.

Maybe they would've still been their terrible frakking selves, but less, or at least reigned in by a desire to meet their grandchild. Maybe they could've met Sammy out in public places with her parents there and just had occasional, pleasant little visits. Sammy could have had dolls from her grandma to tear up right alongside her stuffed toys, could've known the reward of her grandpa's precious rare praise. They'd have sent her lots of trinkets and taken their allotted, constantly supervised holiday appointments with forced smiles. They would've tried to talk to Satsi on occasion and she would have blocked their comm line and warned them off five hundred kilks from the house with a sawed-off scattergun. Sammy would have loved them to pieces and missed their strange, distinctly powdery grandparent smell everytime it was gone, because she was the most wonderful, vicious, caring girl in world and Satsi had no idea how *she'd* come out of *her* but she had. It might not have been good, but it would have been something. Just maybe.

But what if not? What if she'd let them come around and they'd looked at Sammy like a shell of a person, if *that* much? What if they looked at her like a *thing*, told her she was some mistake, some abomination, that she was just as disgusting as her parents? What if they'd belittled her, cursed her, filled her head with lies? What if they'd touched her, what if they'd *hurt*—

And she'd never know, would she? Ten thousand frakking goddamn possibilities blooming up out of nowhere and not a damn one of them was real because she'd put smoking plasma holes in every single one twenty-nine years ago.

"I—"

"I know," he whispered, kissing her puffy eyelids, her cheeks, his arms tightening.

"I...I..."

"It is alright, dear." There wasn't any judgement in his words, no shade of regret, despite the fact that in the end, she'd stolen all those possibilities from him too. He believed in her, for whatever reason, like he always had. More than she deserved more days than not.

Instead, he just held onto her while she crumpled at the edges, thinking of their daughter and her mother and father and all the things their worth-less-than-dirt bones would never get to say.