

Ruka flew bolt upright with a gasp.

His heart galloped in its cage, thrashing and writhing, pushing *out out out* to break through his ribs. His gaze went in and out of focus, eyes blown wide in the pitch black dark, vision aching and dancing and melting with blurs of motion and twisted nothings. His skin was electric, peeled back from his every raw nerve and leaving his spine an exposed livewire. He gasped shallowly for air, knocked breathless, each panting breath a knife into his too tight chest—

"*Ru! Ru. Ruka.* Oh, hey. Hey, hey, *hey*, honey. *Honey*, look at me. Ru? Ruka? Love, hey. Look at me, you're okay. *Ru?*"

Gentle hands cupped his face and he nearly shrieked in mingled shock and horror as his eyes clenched shut and he crashed *down down down*.

When he opened them again, veins pumping more adrenaline than blood, he was in their bedroom. Technically his. At the Tameikes'. The light was on on the nightstand. Cora was holding onto him, looking disheveled and worried, kneeling half at the edge of the bed. He'd knocked him off. That was it. They'd fallen asleep with the Pantoran on his chest and he'd knocked him right off the bed when he woke up from...His dreams...

The fine tremors of leaping lightning coating and crackling and roaring up and down his arms slowly dimmed, then dropped into darkness. His hands shook. He shook. He stared at his knuckles and tried to understand why they weren't split-skinned and swollen.

"Shhhh, Ru, shhh," his lover soothed, stroking his cheek and petting his hair and smelling like Cora smelled. "Ruka? You're right here. I'm right here. In the dorm."

"I...I-I'm sorry, I...I thought..." he ground the butts of his hands into his eye sockets. "D-dreamed I was, we were, attacked on the street, I... Speeder just came up and following close, in front of the old place, and...I dunno if they were supposed to be Collective or Inqs or gangers just...You were... Someone stopped but I couldn't, I...I couldn't."

His voice cracked around a hiccup and he slumped forward, curling into a ball against his husband's chest. Cora's arms wrapped tightly around him, knees sliding on either side of his ankles as he squeezed, palm running up and down his back in strokes.

"Shhh, *shhh*, honey. It's okay. You're okay, it was only a dream. Not real. I'm right here, I've got you, it's okay."

He pressed kisses into Ruka's hair and didn't say a word about the rude awakening or the flashfire, barely-there burns stinging their arms and palms now or about the late hour or any of it. He just started humming to Ruka and badly singing a little song from some play or another the Mirialan could never remember for the life of him but it was some diddy about a man and his

vornskr hunting fowl and Ruka liked it because the damn geese got eaten and and and that was all real and not a dream and not gone or hurt or—

"I'm sorry," Ruka said anyway even as Cora shushed him for it immediately and held him tighter, turning them so the Pantoran could lean against the wall and Ruka could curl in his lap. The Mirialan's hands knotted against his partner's blue skin and he buried his face in the crook of his neck and cried and breathed and just held on.

"It's okay, Ru... *It's okay...*"

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When he woke up the second time, it was still dark in the room and Cora was sleeping with his nose buried in Ruka's dreadlocks, Ruka resting on his lithe, smooth, soft-skinned chest. He carefully shifted away and reached over to the nightstand, grabbing his glasses and then squinting as the holoclock read resolved into clear numbers. Four in the morning. Great.

The Mirialan shivered as he emerged from the sweaty cocoon of blankets they'd made and the cool air touched his bare skin. He grabbed a shirt and pants out of his drawer and pulled them on quicky, tying his hair back in a low knot and scratching behind his ears. He paid special attention to the one that just nubs at this point; it always felt itchier, a phantom that he couldn't touch.

Trudging downstairs with the light steps of someone who was used to walking past a toddler's bedroom, Ruka padded into the kitchen, following sounds of activity. He peered around the doorway long enough to watch Satsi and Uji speaking quietly. He kissed her cheek, and she pulled him back a long moment. The Sith boy looked away then, waiting until Uji walked by with his cane and gave him a silent nod.

Smiling tiredly back, Ruka slunk over to lean against the counters and slouch a little so Satsi could reach up and brush her fingers along the back of his neck in greeting like she liked to with her friends. She eyed him.

"Shouldn't you be in bed? You and Blue don't usually come out of your room when he visits." The woman smiled broadly at him before sombering. "And it's real early even then."

"Just couldn't sleep."

"Bad dreams, then?"

Ruka grimaced. Satsi bumped him with her hip.

"Kiddo, I know a frakking lot about nightmares and shit. And when I woke up terrified all to frakking hell and my honey weren't there to hold me cause he couldn't be, my family was. Lemme help you out like I had me and mine if you're not gonna talk to Cory."

"We talked. It just...it helps."

"But not for long."

"It's not that bad, okay? But sometimes it's just...hard. And I'm frakking tired." He sighed, rubbed his eyes, then looked at her, abashed. "Sorry, I mean—"

"Pain is relative, kiddo. Don't. You can have a shitty time too."

"Yours have gotta be worse, though."

Her laugh was mirthless, more like coughing or crying.

"I feel like I'm losing my mind every twenty minutes, Green. I...twenty minutes is about how long I can hold it together pretending everything is okay. But you know what? You almost died last year. You get to be frakked up over that."

"I guess."

She patted his arm, and they stood quietly for awhile until both their communicators chimed at once. They each took them out, watching as a holotransmission began playing. In the other room, they could hear a faint overlapping echo as Uji's did the same.

"The hell?" Satsi muttered as her brother came in and they all listened, watching Marick Tyriss speak.

*"...The Inquisitorius is more than just a task force. It is more than any one Inquisitor, more than any individual ideology or singular motive. Together, we form the first line of defense against enemies that threaten our very existence..."*

"Hey," his master interrupted.

Ruka glanced at her, blinking. He realized he'd been staring, that the message was over, that he was gripping the counter too hard. The twins were watching him carefully.

He found his voice. "What was that?"

"Bait, most likely," Uji murmured in his calm way. "A declaration of intent. It positions him ahead of any accusations from Oligard about deception or secrecy within our ranks, makes him and the Iron Forces out to be more trustworthy."

"As if we didn't know what the Inqies did."

"It is political less than practical."

The two started debating — which consisted more of Satsi swearing without any real point and Uji patiently enduring then commenting — but Ruka was having trouble focusing on the words. He was thinking about his dreams, about his scars, about the war. About being pointed at the Collective like a bunch of other too young soldiers new to the Arcona Armed Forces and Odanite Expeditionary Force. About Satsi and Turel and everyone else around him talking about this Pravus guy and his Inquisitors and a Dark Council like they were villains in holobooks — simple, clean evil.

"Just— shut up!" snapped the Mirialan, cutting the pair off. They exchanged a look and Satsi crossed her arms.

"Something to add, kiddo?"

"I just. Let's not talk about this."

She gave him a long stare.

"Take a walk, Green," she advised, nodding at the hallway. "Yer tired and stressed. Get me some milk for Sammy's rice cakes and get some air while you're at it."

"You want me to go all the way up to Estle for milk?"

"Long walk."

Ruka glared at her, but she didn't budge. The young man threw up his hands and scoffed, stomping off to get his boots. It wasn't like he really minded anyway.

He went back up to poke his head in his room and check on Cora, but the Pantoran was still asleep. The tattooed man kissed his partner's hair briefly and tiptoed back out.

The predawn air was muggy and heavy with Selen's constant high humidity, but still cool enough not to make him sweat. Ruka stuffed his hands in his pockets as he strolled away from the manner, up away from the beach and into the brush, steadily up through the speeder trail winding in the forest. His mind calmed some more as he walked, breathing deeply, enjoying the

pacing and atmosphere. Sometimes, he missed walking, even though having his speeder bike was great.

It left his thoughts room to settle too. What was he? Cranky, tired? Irritated? He didn't even know the Inquisitorious well or the people who'd been affected by him, not besides the Odanites who had come stumbling to Kiasst looking for refuge. It was a secondary kind of thing. He cared in theory, but it wasn't right in front of him, not like the war had been, not like putting food on the table, not like Cora.

He absently rubbed his thumb and finger together, then rubbed his fingers against each other, back and forth while he walked. It was an old habit from when he'd worn his grandmother's ring every day and night and even when he'd showered, pulling work gloves over it when necessary or thumbing it around so the flat, oblong stone was pressed into his palm and only the thin, lusterless gray band of tarnished silver was visible from the outside so it didn't look with stealing when he walked home. He'd used to fiddle with it a lot, spinning it around and around on his right-hand finger. That particular finger was bare now, because he lost the ring, but the habit stuck.

He didn't even have a special, charming or tragic story for it either. He'd just lost it. Didn't even know when it happened or how, exactly. He'd got careless over the years and just stopped treating it like a precious thing, used to it like a piece of his own hair, something forgotten. One day he just didn't have it, and after a couple more days, it became apparent that that was concerning. He'd looked all over their tiny-ass house when he realized, checking under things and the same places over and over and over as if this or that time it would be there because he looked more desperately. Retracing his steps was a non-starter. It had been almost a week and he walked everywhere, went a lot of busy public places, worked in all kinds of conditions with folks who'd be likely to just sell something they found as never really notice it in the first place. If it wasn't in the house or on his hand, it was already gone. His grandma's ring. He'd lost his grandma's ring, the one she trusted to him to actually care about, the one she told stories of. He couldn't bear to tell her he didn't have it anymore, even if it was a lie. Privately, he still thought about how now he'd have nothing left of her to keep a as a memento when she died.

Less absently, Ruka brushed his thumb over Corazon's family signet ring. The thing was ostentatious as kriff, bright shiny gold and big shiny sapphires and he'd been mugged — or attempted, anyway — more than once since his husband had given it to him, just six months after they'd started dating. He'd protested that. How could he take something so special to the Ya-ir house? Plus Cora's mom would lose her kriffing mind. But Cora had insisted. And Ruka had been extra careful with that one just like he tried to be with Cora when he wasn't busy screwing things up or being stupid. He'd managed to hang onto the damn thing — although no thanks to anything *he* did — when it had literally gotten blown off his hand along with the finger it was on.

And then there was the simpler band on his left ring finger, from their formal wedding. That one wasn't easy for him to twist or thumb, without any gem or setting or anything, but it was always there. It stuck and dragged when his hands got dry. Cora nagged him about taking it off while cooking. It was easier, maybe. He didn't love Cora less than his grandmother, but the idea of losing it seemed less significant. Maybe it was because they were both young and his grandma was so old he was pretty sure she'd give an ancient oak a run for its credits, but that inherent vulnerability only went so far. He and Cora could die any day. He'd already nearly died. Cora screamed in his sleep more often than not because of that. Even their masters, strong as they seemed, could be gone in a blink. Even the Voice who had delivered that broadcast.

Death had never been unfamiliar to Ruka. Not growing up next to the gangs. Maybe he was just used to the idea? But that didn't seem it either. He couldn't quite tell why the broadcast had bothered him, and why the idea of his husband being murdered wasn't a daily and constant fear like the state Satsi lived in. The not knowing was what killed him. The aimless anxiety with no direction and nothing but endless fuel in the form of his imagination and worries. He thinks of the worst things and then thinks up even more that are crazier, harsher. His brain can't even conceive of the possible pain it might soon be in, and it makes a tight knot in his chest, an uncomfortable hollowness, as if it was his heart that can't couldn't comprehend.

Belatedly, Ruka realized he had stopped fiddling with his rings and instead had one hand on his lightsaber, the other digging into the dirt he crouched on, packing itchy under his nails. He relaxed his jaw, not having known he'd clenched it.

Maybe that was the difference. They were at freaking war. That was basically what the Brotherhood did. It was just a really big neighborhood of gangs, just one big neighborhood sucking up kids on streets and making the years into battles over turf for dealing and shipping and gun running. It was expected. But the Inqs, they'd been... They'd been kinda like the brokers or the whores or the shopkeepers. The folks back at home who kept a light on for one dumb franger or another if he needed a place to crash for a night, the ones that didn't let any girl get turned away if she couldn't keep a baby. The patchwork, behind the scenes support. They weren't supposed to get gunned down when the fights hit the streets. And now this Tyris and all his thugs — including Satsi in her cover — were in the firing line where they had no business to be.

Maybe he was *mad*. Not for what any of the people on either side of this mess had done, but for the fact that now everyone was getting dragged in. That was how old ladies and little boys and whole houses full of three families each with twelve cousins got shot. That was how everybody and their mother and their grandmother and the cops got shot. That was how the kriffing neighborhood *dogs* got shot, their mangy packs coming out to investigate the bodies of vendors and hawkers and workers and then getting killed themselves. The streets got real red and real quiet after all the shouting and cursing and shooting.

Really was like one big gang war.

Something burned in his chest and lightning crackled in his hands. He bared his teeth, felt the heat rising under his cheeks and forehead that tended to accompany his eyes going all corrupt and gold. Kriff yeah, he was mad. Now more people would get hurt. Now—

No. Kriffing no. He wouldn't let it keep happening. What was he even doing, training for, if he couldn't finally step off his stoop and scream, "stop!"

Feeling more settled, as if he was steadying his bones with the Force, the Mirialan stood where he'd stopped, turned and began heading back to the manor house. He had some things to ask.

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"Will you tell me about the Inquisitor stuff?"

Satsi was still in the kitchen when he barged back in the front door, not taking his boots off before he went further into the home. She blinked and arched one brow at his abrupt entrance, setting down her drink.

"Hi to you too. And no, kiddo. You don't need to know about that shit." Her brown eyes roved over him, assessing, and she pursed her lips. "Is this about that broadcast? You don't gotta worry about it, Green. Doesn't affect you. In fact, better hope they all go down." She looked at his arm pointedly. The woman had protested strongly his getting the tattoo so visible and large, calling it memorable in so many words, that he wouldn't be able to give it. He'd countered that her scars were pretty damn distinct and then felt like shit for a good hour afterward at the haunted look in her face before she'd shut down and waved him off to do what he wanted.

"Don't say that, people could die. That does affect me," the Mirialan argued, and Satsi stared at him flatly.

"Ruka, listen," she said, and he did sit a little straighter just for the lack of a nickname, "there's a difference between believing in something because you do, and believing in something because somebody told you to or because it'd make somebody happy. Especially someone you care about."

"This isn't about Cora."

"People die all the time, Ruka. You're more pragmatic than that. Blue isn't. And I know you're ready to get all up for his crusade, I *know* you are, but just because you love him doesn't mean he defines you, bud. Just because he wants to help doesn't mean you throw yourself on that sword to make him proud. I know how it goes. I really, really do. You think, what could you want more than to live forever just being with your love and them with you. But Ruka, the answer there is *anything else*. Everything else. I had to learn that the long way around."

"Yeah, but you and Uji are all *about* that. You'd be a hypocrite."

"The point isn't whether or not I define myself by how much I love him, cause yeah, I do. I think, *I'm his sister*. That's me. Not Sammy's mother, not your coach, not a spy or Black Sun or clan or daughter, none of that, not Satsi. His sister. But that difference? That's about getting there. That's about knowing you first."

"I know who I am, Satsi."

"You're—"

"Don't you dare say I'm young," hissed the Mirialan. "You know better than that."

"Calm down, puffer pig. I was going to say, you're right, but not totally right. Love makes you stupid, kiddo. Really, really frakking stupid. And Cora's got big dreams. Easy to get caught up in that. That's all I'm saying."

"So, what, someone can't be inspiring? He can't inspire me?"

"I didn't say that," defended the Human. Her visage grew weary again. "But the people who inspire folks are also the ones getting themselves karking killed. And that's only after everybody they 'inspired' dies for them first. You wanna see how that goes, go take a hike up to the Citadel and check out the Blind Lady statue. Look around. It ends bloody and pointless."

"People die all the time," Ruka echoed from earlier. "What really makes it that different, if it's because they got swept up by their circumstance or if it's because they chose it?"

"How stupid they were," Satsi snorted. She drank her caf then rubbed her face.

"Are you gonna tell me about your Inq stuff or not?"

"Ruka."

"It's happening now, Satsi. I have to do something."

"And what's that supposed to be?"

"*Something*, okay? Just give me something to work with here."

She sighed. Then, the woman stood up, poured herself another cup of caf, and flopped back into her seat, wrapping her hands around the mug.



"I'm not telling you about my stuff. But I can tell you about the Inquisitorious. How they work, communicate, ranks and tactics and such."

"But what if you're in trouble," protested Ruka. "What if something happens or you get targeted as... her, or whatever, and I don't even know it's you? What if I had to fight you?"

"You don't know her, Green, and she doesn't know you, and it has to stay that way, clear? No, no nothing, that's it, period. I can't work otherwise. You'll probably never even run into me that way."

The man slumped back, crossing his thick arms. He didn't understand Satsi's other type of work, got deeply disturbed whenever he caught glimpses of it, almost like he was talking someone else inhabiting his friend's body for a moment, but he knew when to concede a corner to keep a street.

"Fine."

"Okay. Whaddaya wanna know?"

"Uh, everything?"

Satsi rolled her eyes. "Helpful. Well fine. Wake up your one true love up there. If I'm playing teacher to your budding knight complex, then we're only doing this once. Can't believe church mouse hasn't already given you freaking essays on this stuff, karkdamn..." she started to mutter to herself as if holding another conversation, something she did far more often than Ruka expected she realized. It was his cue to leave, pushing away from the table and making for the stairs in the main hall.

He only got up three steps before his master's voice snapped after him.

"Hey, wait a minute! Where's my milk?"

Woops.