

THE MISTAKE

"This is the story of getting burned. Literally. Though if I'm honest, it's not nearly my last or first. I've been burned a lot. Literally — and metaphorically.

Fire's messy. Y'know that? The ain't pretty kind. Now, I wouldn't be the type that would mind messy. A slug through the back o' the head, cut to ribbons, spikes under the nails of cut off fingers...hell, I'd happily beat a guy beyond recognition before he goes under, *hypothetically* speaking. But fire...

City-working types and medical droids pile up the bodies they can even dig out, and people come and walk around the rows looking for something they're only gonna find if whoever they're looking for took a dive for the pavement before the flames could get 'em. You can tell a doll that's broken, but burned... Folks gotta stare awhile, look for some excuse. They pluck up the lil shoes out of the metal boxes and hope they can say 'this is his boot, stinks like his feet too, it's gotta be his body.' Lock o' hair, maybe, or some ring or trinket that special someone didn't ever take off. But most... They just stare. Thing about fire is that it leaves so *little*. You look for something human shaped or... Well, kinda human, alien, whatever — something *recognizable* to whoever's doing the looking. And it's just not there. It's all burnt up. You stare at pieces of charcoal laying on pillows, arranged in a way that's supposed to be something like the person it had to be once upon a frakking time... And you guess.

But fire is also bright and fire is also clean, and for me, fire is for family. Sometimes it's necessary. Sometimes it sends a message, or sometimes it needs to clear the way so things we need can get to being there instead. Sometimes things go so wrong that fire is the only way to ever make right possible again, to burn them all, burn it all, burn it all down in the flames. That's this story.

When all else fails, use fire.

It was a dark Coruscanti night, which meant it wasn't really dark at all. Never was, on that city-planet. People might not have water or air, especially in the underworld, but neon was cheap and it was everywhere, every corner, every goddamn door. You couldn't get away from it. But all that light didn't make anything any better. The dark only seems scary because it leaves more to the imagination, hides things and lets you make up what's there. But the light? That shows every ugly frakking thing. You don't get to pretend the spice junkie cutting up his arms just to get a vein cause his feet and hands are all dried up ain't there. You don't get to ignore the little girl getting gang-raped in the alley, seeing every tear and dry bloody slide of body parts into unwilling holes. You think the dark is scary? Try having your eyes closed as tight as you can and still being able to see all that shit through the skin of your eyelids.

Anyway, it was a Coruscanti night, and I was after this woman named Mani. Mani was Black Sun just like me, in our ranks. Pretty girl, actually, Zabrak, yellow skin and red tattoos because she liked standing out, and cause she was a huge frakking pyro. We called her Manic Mani cause she'd burn anything she could get her hands on. But she'd done bad, see. She stole from us, took a crate of high grade, high value medical supplies. And I was the one who made sure any of our own knew how bad an idea that was.

So Mani goes out this particular night, and I'm ready for her. I'd trained the woman, I'd inducted her, she was in my service on account of being a little too destructive for the other lieutenants. I knew her. I followed her for a couple days and found one of the neighborhoods she liked to burn stuff in, and then I followed her while she found a new score. Old building, old bones, droid textile factory converted into a hotel village for the homeless in the area. She liked to watch people run, so I knew it was a good bet, and I set myself up there and waited.

But she had a decent feel for me too, and she was hunting me right back.

See, Mani set two fires that day, and what you have to understand about city planets like Coruscant and moons like Nar Shadda is how *cramped* they are. Even a square block of space has more bodies packed in than you can probably picture. That's a lot of fuel and a lot of collateral and, most importantly, a lot of blockage. Mani had effectively trapped me. The first fire was at another plant, and it got the emergency services off their collective asses after about an hour and had people swarming the alleys and crannies Coruscantis call streets. By the time the second fire started where I was waiting, the whole floor was already in a choke hold for kliks and kliks. People crammed into every inch trying to get away, police condoning off the bridges trying to keep order in the evac, smoke filling up faster than the scrubbers or oxygen delivery systems could ever manage.

It was a frakking mess.

Now while all those other people in the slum were busy stampeding and dying, I was trying to climb out onto the old catwalks for the maintenance crews. Up on the roof, I could probably get to another building or break my legs trying, but that was better than no trying at all. Of course, Mani was waiting for me. First fire had been a bomb she'd rigged. She'd been there for the second, just to catch me. If I was dead then she could get away in the chaos with no one to report in, yeah? So I get up onto the catwalk, which is already so hot it burns to touch and my boots are melting at the soles and sticking every step, and then there's Mani. Manic Mani, with a bottle of who knew what, ready to light up.

I shot at her but the smoke messed up my sightlines, and then she was on me, 'cause the bitch knew that kicky Zabradi martial art style and didn't even need her hands. I pulled a knife and we fought and everything was a blur. But at some point she got the upper hand and she stomped my hand into the metal where it had got cherry red and there was an actual sizzle, like nerf steak in a pan. I didn't even feel it for a whole minute, and by then she'd poured that bottle over

me. Don't ever get drenched in rhydium, burns your everything when you breathe or blink like all hell and eats at your skin.

It's kind of a miracle that wasn't it for me, but I have a lot of those.

So Mani goes to get my knife, yeah, to make a spark, since I guess she wanted it poetic. And I take my chance. I tackled her and we hit the grating and I got a good hit to her head that gored a hole in my knuckles the size of a blumfruit on her horns. Can't honestly remember how I got out of their, nevermind how I got her out of there, but a week or so and some bacta later we were both alive and mostly whole. I still had that scar, though. She'd charred me all the way down to the bone.

Now I know you're probably wondering why I was trying to capture her at all. Well, back in our Black Sun chapter, executions were pretty shows unless they absolutely couldn't be. Mani got pampered for days out of the med center until she was well again; the best food, the finest drinks and clothes, around the clock services and comforts, like royalty. Drive someone frakking crazy every second of it too.

And then, after about ten days, when she broke and started wailing at the walls to just stop and do it already, we all got together in the complex's gardens.

See, when you burn somebody alive without any kind of accelerant in the mix, it smells like making dinner but someone forgot all the spices. Like, somebody just going by in their speeder with the windows down could just slow a bit and take a breath and think, "that smells good, mhmm. Now I want fried chicken" or something.

So we get together in the garden and build up the pyre and when we're done, Mani gets dragged out and stood up for everyone to see while we get the ropes. Our boss comes up too and everyone goes quiet, as quiet as Coruscant can get, to listen to him preach.

And he says, "this woman is my family. This woman is my family, and she ate ate my table, and she worked of my lands and shared of my labors. And yet she stole from this family. And for this crime, she will know the pain that I know, that it is to be betrayed by family." He asks all the rest of us if they approve of God's judgement and of course we roar for blood like a bunch of sycophants, which makes him happy, so he praises us all.

And then we tied her down and I lit it up and she laughed and laughed and cooked real slow at first while the fire bubbled up her backside and then ate through her awhile, till she stopped screaming like some animal. So damn raw and loud, that kind of screaming. It's actually nice when they either pass out from the pain or the smoke of their ownselves.

The gathering after is nice cause once the fire's burned out we go and we drink and eat and remind ourselves what we have, what's been given to us, just one more reason why we don't

steal or be anything other than absolutely loyal.

'Course, Mani wasn't actually stealing. Not the meds, anyway. That was a guy named Tuuka, but I let him know I knew and this was his only chance cause he was taking it to help his sick nephew. Mani was trying to trade secrets with the Crimson Hounds, she just hadn't caught the boss's eye yet. I made Tuuka come watch her burn, so he'd know not to frak up again.

And *that's* how Mommah got this scar."

Satsi held up her hand in evidence. The movement startled her rapt audience, and then they were screaming.

"Hey. Hey, hey, Bunnybeans, Rosytails, no no, don't cry, honies, hey—" the woman rushed to hush, sliding to the floor from her chair to reach for both toddlers. The girls, one Human and a mirror image of Satsi and her father, the other half-Zeltron and half-Ryn, were clutching each other and wailing, fat tears rolling down their pudgy, reddened cheeks. Or redder, in the latter's case.

Samantha and Shay'Ira recoiled at first when she wrapped strong arms around them, but then they clung to her, crying and shouting about how they didn't want any boo-boos from fire and they hadn't been bad and they were sorry for taking cookies earlier. Satsi's heart broke to tiny pieces in her chest and she started tearing up too, horrified that they were so scared.

The door creaked, making both girls jump and startle again, and the woman looked up to see Zujenia poke her head in. The toddlers took the opportunity to flee Satsi's grip as Sammy shrieked for her father and went stumbling and running in her little waddly way past Zuji, tugging Shay protectively behind her.

"What is going on here?!" Zuji gasped, eyes blowing wide and short, sandy tail lashing. Her hand half-went to a bo-rifle that wasn't on her back, since they all had agreed on a no weapons rule around the children.

Satsi quickly swiped at her eyes and stared after her daughter and "goddaughter" helplessly, only not running after them because of the telepathic surge of calm from her twin. He was already tending to them, and he tried to soothe her own whirlwind of upset too. She took a few deep breaths, shaking, and sent back gratitude.

"I was...they...I was telling them a story and they just got so freaked out."

The half-Ryn looked mutinous and worried to death all at once, probably regretting having to leave her hybrid child with the Tameikes at all, no matter how much marginally safer it was.

"Care to explain?" she asked stiffly, obviously struggling for diplomacy. It reminded Satsi of the other woman's Master. Atyiru had had the same demeanor whenever she got well and truly ticked off.

"Well Shay asked me why I have kitty stripes and then Sammy wanted to know too and so I told them they were scars, and they asked what scars were but didn't get the whole, you know, a wound not totally healing and normal body parts being replaced by scar tissue thing, and so I said scars were stories about things that happened, and so of course Sammy demanded a story—"

"—and so you told her THAT?!"

"Well I said she could pick one and i would tell her and I swore I would never lie to my kid and so I wasn't about to and yeah, I told them."

"It's not lying if you just don't tell them everything they don't specifically ask for! You could've just said oh, mommy was in a fight, not all about your psychotic she-akk adventures! They're going to have bad dreams now for sure!"

"Look, I'll admit, maybe mistakes were made."

"Maybe?!"

"But it IS lying to make kark up and I'm not lying to my kid. I'm not lying to yours for you either. That's just part of the deal."

Zujenia covered her face and groaned.

Much grumbling and adorable baby-cursing followed, and Satsi's sharp ears caught a few stray words like, "not even a good storyteller."

She bristled. "Hey! I'm doing my best here."

"Darned gods help us all then!"

"Oh, yeah? And what exactly did I do wrong?"

"Stories aren't supposed to just be recounting things. They're legends and fables, tales of tookes. You learn something from them."

"Pretty sure the kids just learned not to touch my lighters or the stove."

And she had to give Zujenia credit, the hybrid woman could *glare* if she really tried, Shadows.

"The Ryn are galactic storytellers. Our ancestors were warrior poets and bards and we traveled the Galaxy with stories and song," Zuji said, her chest puffing with pride. It sounded a little bit like she might be reciting something. "And the scary stories we tell our children aren't about burning folk alive! They're about spirits and the fear in yourself and defeating it. Besides, there are enough real and terrible things, don't you think?"

Both women were momentarily silent at that, eyes unseeing, focused on their respective nightmares. Satsi fidgeted after a moment, crossing her arms.

"Yeah, well, you think you're so great, maybe you should be telling the bedtime stories," snapped the Human, staring away. "For the kids, and all."

Then, a whisper, "...not that I wouldn't mind too. Something... different like that. Nice."

The amber-eyed half-Ryn looked surprised, her tail curling unsurely around her thigh in discomfort. She chewed her lower lip and eventually said, after too long, "... Yes, I um, I think I will. Do that."

The tense and awkward tension was past simmering though, and Satsi scoffed and muttered a quick, "whatever," as she went to the kitchen to warm up some blue milk for the girls. Zujenia frowned after her.

"Do you want a han—"

"I got it. Go back to the Citadel. You can visit in the morning."

The hybrid stiffened at the rude reply. "Fine."

"Fine!"

"She-akk."

"Mutt."

They glared at each other.

Two scared little wails drew both their immediate and total attention though, mother's instincts roaring, and Satsi quickly hustled off to comfort the little ones. Zuji made to race to the bedroom too, but stopped. She did have to get back.

Sighing deeply, the new Rollmaster turned and walked back out the foyer, into the dark with the moon above and away from the cozy little Manor that held all her true fears.