

Rrogon

He was in his old home. He recognized the walls. Recognized the smell of his wife's cooking. Rumbling laughter echoed from down the hall, and Rrogon followed it before he could even register his feet moving. He chased the sound, skidding to a stop outside the family room and grasping the doorway in a metallic, clawed hand that trembled.

And he saw himself. Or a version of himself. He sat with his pipe at the end of a comfortable couch, tucked under the legs of his master and mother figure. Nath lounged on him freely, her sharp nails occasionally scratching his hide while she also petted Zakath's long tail in sensuous motions. His grandfather read with spectacles perched on his long snout, a holo in hand. They all chattered together, leaned together, practically one immense, twelve-limbed, three-headed, one-tailed chimera. Vera, his wife, brought them snacks, her stomach round with child.

He was so achingly happy at the scene that it took him several moments of being immersed in it to remember that it had never happened. Vera had never met Zakath, before Marick murdered him. Nath had barely spoken to him before asking Kordath and the others to see over her suicide. Vera had been slaughtered before even a bump grew. At his hands.

Those same cybernetic hands clenched.

"Rrogon."

The Kaleesh spun about at the voice, a growl flanging from his throat as rage rose up, clean and burning, to clear away the shade of memories-that-were-not from his vision. His reptilian eyes landed on a figure of light, blue and wispy, like a ribbon of wind. She shifted as she moved, and when he swiped a claw at her, the light only scattered before reforming.

It came back together in a sorrowful smile, stern brows. Sprite ears and half a missing face.

"Rrogon, please, hear me out. I've been trying so hard to reach you."

"Begone, spirit," snarled the Kaleesh. "I've no interest in what my Ancestors think of me any longer."

"Rrogon, *please*—" and here the figure resolved, darkening almost to a solid sapphire, like ocean water, translucent but with depth. The voice became familiar, not a haunting sigh.

"Listen."

"Atyiru," Skar growled. "Can't you leave *anyone* in peace? Will not even death keep you from meddling like a gossipmonger?"

But she merely persisted, floating close, reaching out. Her speech was resonant and clear. "You are not happy, Rrogon. All you feel is hate and misery, and that is all in turn you give back into the world. You have to change it. Remember what you were once. Remember what you could be again. It's okay, my friend. You can change yourself if you want to. Your *past* doesn't have to define you!"

The cybrog laughed, no real laugh at all; he couldn't form the sounds anymore, not even in his dreamscape, or whatever illusion of mystics this was.

"Everything I once was is gone, Atyiru, as are you. What is your advice to one such as myself? I am the living. You are a specter. And I have no desire for change. I am what I am and will be that instrument of destruction until I have no further use or have wiped out the Galaxy before me. Take your sentiments elsewhere, spirit."

His smirk was cruel, and he waved his hand in dismissal. The ghost frowned at him, raising a hand in a gesture that was either cautionary or accusatory.

"I'll be back," she warned, and then disappeared in a shower of light.

He thought that was the end of it, but the glow only grew. It grew and grew, so bright it blinded and burned. The Kaleesh recoiled, hissing, as what was left of him boiled and fried then and there, skin and organs peeling back from the metal that superheated around them, cooking him inside and out—

Skar gasped awake from meditation, breath hissing through the mask and tubes of his respirator. The pain of being seared alive still echoed across his nerves, a phantom memory, just like so much other sensation he couldn't truly know anymore. He lowered his arms from his knees and braced himself on his mat, digging claws into the floor as he breathed raggedly, mechanically.

So it had been a dream, if perhaps some sort of prophetic one. He'd long left his people's superstitions behind. The Sith wasn't about to rule out meddling from a clanmate either, some machinations placed on his vulnerable, meditating mind.

Meditation was the closest he got to sleeping these days, in his new body

Skar grunted, angry. At himself, and the dream, and his interrupted rest; it was the first he'd been able to settle from his constant insomnia that week. He stretched and popped all his bones and metal joints, checking the late hour on the clock.

Well. If he had to drag some of the DDF out of their bunks to beat them into shape for a little relief at three in the morning, then so be it.

That goal was disrupted however, as he dressed, when his communicator blared. He activated it briskly.

"Emergency meetin', Throne place, now," grunted Kordath's sleep-thick voice over the comms.

"Damned birdrat," muttered the Sith, but sighed and finished dressing. He'd go collect his Quaestor first and then head for the sudden meeting. She was probably tangled up in her lovenest with Ventus' abomination.

As it turned out, Qyriea was already wide awake, looking unsettled. She jerked away when he stepped too near, and kept fingering her beltloops. They didn't say much as they headed for the Throne Room, the Summit Guard ushering them in. The rest of the Summit down to the Battleteam leaders, even those from Qel-Droma, were gathered. Kordath sat on the steps to the dias with his head in his hands, Terran pacing to his right. Lucine and Rhy lance pointedly faced away from each other, though the hunch of their bodies seemed to want to gravitate nearer. Leeadra yawned sleepily, and Grot looked about ready to dive into the nearest bush and not come out until he'd done however many thousand rituals to his so-called spirits.

The Kaleesh called, "Can we get this over with quickly? I'm not having the best of nights."

"You aren't the only one," muttered the Zeltron.

"None of us are," commented Lucine perceptively. If her eyes looked a bit puffier than they normally did, she hid it expertly with her cosmetics. "Not judging by everyone's state or this meeting."

Lee's voice was high as she asked, "You... Saw things too?" Nods and shrugs went up around the room.

"We all seein' things? Great. GREAT. Bloody karkin' sick o' this, right," Kord muttered darkly. "Wot's it now? Mass hallucinations? Another virus attack? Some big cult casting illusions on us? Huh? HUH?"

Terran looked exceedingly grim. "It's possible we're being targeted again, yes. Through the food or potables, if whoever it is got access to our shipments before they got distributed."

"I don't think so, schuttas," Qyriea spoke up. "I've had the distribution centers locked down tight since the riots. All day, all night, DDF-certified surveillance and protection. We're good."

"Besides," added Rhy lance adjusting his glasses, "most toxins or pathogens wouldn't survive the cooking process. It would have to be in ready to eat foods or beverages, and we'd likely notice tampering with those or at the desalination plant."

"Then what?"

"I think," came an unsteady voice, and the summit looked to regard Zujenia, normally so determined, "we're being haunted."

Exclamations and coughs of skepticism were cut dead silent as she clarified, "By Atty."

Everyone paused in unease.

"Ah hah! You all saw her too, didn't you! *Didn't you?*" the Rollmaster seized, amber eyes alight and burning.

"I...eeshh, yes, okay, I did see tha' lass," Kord admitted. Again, many shifted, eyes skittering. The silence was confirmation enough.

"Well, what do we do about it? Are hauntings common here? Has this happened before?" Lucine asked, running a hand through her curls. "I would like to get back to my silk sheets."

"I'm not convinced this is anything so silly as a ghost," Rhylance protested, though the Force-users present gave him *looks*. "Come now. You're all more intelligent than that, I hope. Not without proof."

"This is proof! We're proof! It's her!" snapped Zujenia. The Chiss shrugged.

"She said," Skar interrupted, already tired of the squabbling, "that she would be back. Anyone else?"

"Yup," Kordath grunted. Terran nodded, and Lucine did too. Qyriea shifted uncomfortably on her feet and hugged herself.

"It seemed like a threat. Not a promise," the Zeltron said, feeling the emotions of the room deeply. Skar had learned to trust her gut well. "She was...it wasn't good."

Silence, strained and awkward, filled in again.

"Right," Terran decided. "Everybody, back to sleep, but stay in the Citadel. No going off alone. Make sure someone else or a guard is with you. Report in the second anything happens, if it happens. Clear?"

Skar snorted as his Quaestor mumbled an affirmation and shuffled away. No spirit would overtake him. It wasn't like he had much of a life to steal anyways.

"Do your worst, Atyiru," he scoffed, and went to the training halls like he'd originally intended.

Lucine

"While I always appreciate the company, darling, you needn't walk me to my room," the redhead told her sapphire-skinned compatriot sweetly. Rhyllance merely tilted his head, scarlet eyes meeting hers as he smirked.

"But ah, my pet, how else will I gather evidence of whatever is really going on here? Or, if your collective madness is true, evidence of that? I have to admit, a ghost would be quite the discovery. Imagine the applications if one could capture another's spirit. Death would no longer be a barrier to experimentation..."

"I'm sure that will give you much to dream pleasantly about," Lucine retorted with a delicate laugh. She laid a hand on the Chiss' arm as they stopped in front of her door. "Thank you for the escort, darling."

Rhyllance hesitated. It was a subtle thing, but Lucine lived by subtle things, and she saw it as he leaned nearer for but a moment, boots shifting just so. "My pleasure, my pet. I'm happy to be of service. All night, if you needed."

His brows rose, and she caught her lip between her teeth. The tension always between them simmered. And there was just the door behind her between them. But...

"I'll do just fine, my darling. Don't you know it's rude to watch a lady sleep? Go on, we'll chat in the morning."

Something flickered across the Chiss' face, but it was a quick thing, and Lucine cursed internally for all her turmoils. She had never intended for playing with Strong or Rhyllance to grow so complicated, nevermind Creon—

"Sleep well then, pet," replied the scientist without missing a beat, quick and cool as he ever was. He pivoted and strode away, to his own room down the hall on the opposite side. Lucine sighed and quickly slipped into her chamber, shutting the door behind her.

The redhead slumped against the door. Her breaths were fast for a moment before she forced them into control, calling on the Force to do so with irritation. Straightening, she frowned at the space before her. While lavish by some standards, and roomier than her quarters on Ol'Val by far, she had not had the time to set up her office or bedchamber on Selen as she liked. The furnishings were all standard, dull and pragmatic and made of some sort of *cotton*. As if she had hair like a razorback boar. Or Satsi.

Grumbling, Lucine went to the small adjoining bathroom and washed her face with the stock soap — pitiful, skin-drying — and combed her fingers through her hair — she hadn't had the

time to collect her cosmetics bag in the rush to their shuttle and so only had the absolutely essential compact she kept in her brassier. It was atrocious, but atrocious would have to do. She scowled particularly hard at her own emerald eyes, trying to glare away the redness and swelling that wrinkled them.

Those dreams...

Lucine shook her head. The woman turned off the light, hesitated, then turned the bathroom one back on as she went out into the bedroom. She took off her traveling cloak that had covered her fluffy, silken sleeping outer robe and slippers and revealed the gown and chemise underneath. With a sigh, she tucked herself delicately under the covers and laid down gently, not wanting to further disrupt her curls with a bedhead when she had so little on-hand to fix it. She was feeling too drained to keep up an illusion of a false-face about now.

Her eyes slipped shut, and she reached for the Force again to will herself into sleep, deepening her breathing and slowing her heart until her consciousness had no choice but to follow—

"Lucine-love, you haven't finished your painting!"

Green eyes snapped open.

The Human groaned aloud. She was *so tired*. And *so hot* and *sticky*. And why couldn't Atyiru understand how terrible this humidity was for her hair?

"Luuuuucine! Come now! Let free your feelings. Your canvas awaits you!"

Sepia hands nudged her own, and Lucine switched her scowl from the plain, smooth rock in her hand to the Miraluka next to her, legs folded and braid trailing deep in the river water without a care in the world for mud or grime or insects.

"Master, is this really necessary? Can't we meditate *indoors*?"

"Hush, my sunshine. You've spent all your life indoors, poopy old Coruscant like it is. Enjoy the fresh air! Selen is a *paradise*! Shouldn't you be glad, hmm? Wouldn't all those noble friends of yours be jealous?"

"Of a resort, maybe," muttered the redhead, before conceding defeat and picking up the paintbrush and palette Atyiru had forced on her. When she lifted them back to the rock, though, she stopped. There was a splash of red over the stone, one she hadn't put there. Her paints were green and blue and yellow...

"Master?" she started to question, only to gasp when she looked and saw the red red *red* running down Atyiru's face, down her neck and soaking her side. The Miraluka turned her head, and a scream caught in Lucine's throat. Her whole skull was caved in on one side.

Atyiru frowned at her. "Now Lucine, what did you do?"

"I...I-I- I didn't!" exclaimed the woman, looking from the rock to her master's injury in alarm and confusion.

"Really? It rather feels like you did, well, something." Atyiru cocked her broken-open head, more blood and grayish matter spilling out like the wine in a drunken housewife's raving grasp. "Or perhaps not enough..."

Lucine dropped the things she held and covered her eyes, breathing deeply. This wasn't real, none of it, it couldn't be. Not the riverside, not Atyiru, none of this. It was another dream. A dream. *A dream.*

"Well, yes." Startling, the Aedile looked to Atyiru again, and saw the scene had changed. They were in a black starfield, floating disembodied outside Ol'Val. For a moment, she gagged, airless, but then Atyiru's now-ghostly specter touched her throat and sweet air came. "How else am I supposed to teach you now?"

"You're not real," wheezed Lucine. "And you don't have anything more to teach me besides. I learned all I needed to." Her fear and confusion turned sour, rankled, and she stiffened her shoulders, shouting back at the Miraluka. "I know what I am doing and I am the one in control, no one else. Just because I don't fit the mold you tried to force me into does not mean I have not been successful. Far more than you'll ever be, now. You are *dead*, Atyiru. Let go, so that the rest of us can live. Isn't that what you always told me? To let go and move on?"

"Nothing left to teach? Hah! Is that so, my dear sunlight?" The ghost's smile was too knowing, seeing too *deep*, like she always had in life. "Tell me then. Have you not *someone to protect*?"

Lucine's breath caught in her throat. She had the distinct feeling that, had Atyiru ever possessed eyes, they would be fixed on her stomach.

"How do you?— no— you—" she hissed, and Atyiru laughed in her face. The sound chilled the woman's bones. It was *mean*, vicious, things Atyiru had never been in life. The spirit laughed in her face and then *spat* in it.

"Lucine, Lucine...my sunshine girl...oh, you're digging yourself even deeper, don't you know? But no, you can't see that, you refuse to. Too proud. Too scared. What's love with vulnerability, no? You and that man of yours...you really think you can keep him, like this? That you can keep the child like this? *Present* as you are? Not in your darkness, Lucine. Not if you don't let go.

Because you know, if you do? You'll smother them. You're like this," she gestured to the void around them, black and unforgiving. "I'm warning you. You can change yourself if you want to, my dear, dear apprentice, and you *should* want to, because if you don't, well..."

Another touch, and once again Lucine couldn't breathe. She choked, eyeballs bulging, skin freezing, lungs exploding. She curled in on herself as her muscles contorted and the vacuum stole all her air, and around her Atyiru howled and laughed—

Banging on her door woke her. She bolted upright and ran to the refresher, upheaving more morning sickness into the toilet. Muffled noises behind her heralded the slicing of a lock before footsteps came into the room and then deceptively warm hands were pulling back her tresses.

"Pet? What's wrong?" Rhyllance asked, his tone soothing and clinical. He began muttering quietly about symptoms, noting her pallor and temperature, but she was too exhausted to really listen, just letting herself indulge in slipping against him. She didn't want to think on telling him anything, or anything she'd been told, or on whose arms she stayed in at that precise moment. She just wiped her mouth of the tissue paper he offered her and breathed in great gulps.

Breathe. Breathe.

Zujenia

This was all her fault.

Zujenia walked the corridors tensely, on high alert, her bo-rifle on her back and in staff mode for easy dispatch. Her head and eyes constantly swiveled, her tail lashing, and she clutched the Force tight and commanding, leaving her connection to it open so as to constantly fuel her steps. She couldn't tire, couldn't blink. She had to watch over her clanmates.

The night wore on, and she made another pass by the Journeymen halls. The few lights she saw on under doors got a quick check, mostly apprentices studying or entertaining themselves — and in one instance, each other. The noises she investigated were mostly snores and the groanings of an old castle built on a mountaintop, exposed to the storm. She remembered being held through those storms, remembered her Master's warm arms as Zujenia flinched and whimpered and curled close to the cradle of Atyiru's embrace.

"There, there, Zujubean," Atyiru had crooned into her hair. "It's nothing to be afraid of. The sky is just singing for us. You'll have to forgive it if it gets a little too loud for our little ears, for it is a very big sky, and it has a very big voice."

The half-Ryn's unblinking, bloodshot eyes watered, and she furiously blinked them away. *No! Don't get sentimental, that's what started this trouble in the first place.*

It really was her fault. She hadn't discouraged Atyiru's initial...visits. Not in her dreams and not in the waking world when her spirit manifested more strongly. She'd even encouraged them, accepted the Miraluka helping train her barrier technique and comforting her through the breakup with Kord, through the miscarriage, through everything...

Every moment, waking or sleeping, stolen with her wonderful Master, and she had been selfish and let it happen. She hadn't told anyone about it, not even Kordath, as Consul or otherwise. And she knew the others didn't know; no one had mentioned it. Until now.

Now, something terrible was happening. To Atyiru, to all of them. And it was her fault.

Zujenia shook herself and resumed her patrol. There had been an incident earlier with Lucine, but Rhy lance said he was taking care of her, and no one else had reported in. Maybe they weren't sleeping either. The hybrid sighed at that thought.

A noise up ahead, a tiny, scared squeak, caught her attention. The Defender gripped the strap of her weapon and broke into a Force-fueled sprint, springing around the corner and up the spiral stairs to the next floor up in two bounds. She landed over the railing in a crouch, amber eyes flashing across the landing, the balcony, the knook of chairs and a table for studying right under the light of an immense, wrought-iron window—

And there she was.

The half-Ryn uncurled from her position, shoulders slumping, and released her weapon. Her tail curled in misery around her thigh, and she had to suddenly bite back a crack in her voice as she piped up.

"Atyiru."

The spirit turned from where she'd been 'staring' out and up as if at the moon, were anything visible through the cloud of ice that raged just on the other side of the glass.

"Zuju..." the other whispered, turning towards her, folding ghostly hands to a ghostly breast. Like praying. Or clutching her own heart. "You yelled at me, earlier..."

"I'm sorry, Master," the hybrid said, sighing. She approached carefully, not wanting to startle the spirit. If Atyiru was with her, then she wasn't haunting — *hurting* — anyone else. "I just...those dreams were unpleasant."

"I just showed you your past. It can't hurt you unless you let it."

"I know that." The Rollmaster gave a frustrated noise. "But that doesn't mean it isn't scary. You know that, don't you? Being scared? You're scaring everyone tonight."

"Ah...yes. The others. You weren't talking to me, and I've been trying so hard to reach everyone else, and I finally just...did it! I pushed as hard as I could and I ripped through and I could finally talk to them." Her eerie voice took on an edge, an echo of her indignant tone in life, though no nose-crinkling pout accompanied this. "And they all refused to listen, every one! I'm trying to help. I'm trying to be here! *Why* won't anyone let me? *Why* won't anyone talk to me? I've been so lonely..."

"Master, it's not that. It's...complicated."

But the ghost already seemed to be off, fixated on the topic. She kept speaking, voice rising in pitch but not volume, making the glass panes and Zujenia's ears and teeth rattle.

"It wasn't so terribly awful at first. At times I couldn't even feel the pain, which would be a reprieve. And then all I felt was numbness, which would be a horror. So *numb*, constantly. I lost my sense not just of my hands and feet and toes and nose but...of *everything*...and then..."

Her specter darkened and flickered, as if growing weak.

"...and then I couldn't feel *you* either. You would be there, the lot of you, all of you, blazing so bright, keeping me warm! And then *gone*. And I waited, I always waited, for you to come back, and at times you did, and I was so, so glad, Zuju. I thanked the gods every time. Please think me not ungrateful. It was just...then something happened, I think, and then everything was so much fainter. So far. I couldn't feel the heart of the Citadel anymore. It's dark, you know, of course it is, but it is so very proud and fierce. I couldn't feel the city and all its teeming life, not its panic or pain or small joys. I couldn't feel any of my brothers or sisters. I didn't know where I was or where you were until you visited again. And I reached out to you from the dark — *true dark* — and I got a sense...a small speck of life in a cloud of nothing...a house with good bones where silence lay steadily...and then you were gone again...so far away."

"I didn't like it there... It was so cold and dark. So *alone*. You don't understand what it's like, for my people, to be in the dark. It's not like with sight, and it's not like the Force. Dark and Light, Bogan and Ashla, they are everything, everyone, each breath and birth, each dusk and death. They are alive. To be in the dark, for me...for Miraluka...is to be alone. I was so alone. *I am so alone*. Just waiting. Waiting for, f-for anyone to come and wake me up. He— *h-he promised he'd come and wake me up*," her voice cracked, and it was like the crack of a glacier, high and deep at once, resounding in the bones more than in the ears. "I prayed for him, I did, I yelled and I prayed and I cried but I realized he was too far away, he couldn't hear me, nobody could hear me! ***You were all gone!***"

The last note became a shriek, a scream, a hollow wail, and the transparisteel glass rattled in its frame. Zujenia flinched, and in that second when her amber eyes screwed closed, Atyiru's projection had disappeared. Dread clawed down her spine and curled her tail, and the hybrid whirled, looking around frantically.

"Master!" she shouted. "Master, where are you?!"

Distantly, a howl echoed in the night.

Zujenia spun, leapt, and raced back down the hall, following the noise, the mournful keen. She'd heard it before, when they'd brought back the body— when Ivoshar had seen and felt and—

The half-Ryn raced down the frigid hallways of black stone that seemed to go on forever, their shadows looming to close over her. Her heart skipped in her chest, sweat cold pooling on her brow and dripping down her back. The Force wailed around her like the wind wailed outside.

A set of glass doors just ahead burst open with a gust of ice and snow, and only her reflexes saved her from crashing through one. She stumbled and skittered aside, a shiver wracking her body. Her head snapped up as the howl came again, right in front of her.

There wasn't anything there though, just the blizzard roaring around the mountaintop castle. Still, when she squinted through the icy burn stinging her face and eyes, she saw a shape, a flicker of light.

"*Master!*" Zujenia yelled again. Her feet moved almost of their own accord as she dashed out into the whirlwind, razor gusts slicing into her exposed flesh and frost flashfire burning in her lungs, shocking her with the raw cold. But she ran. She ran and ran towards the shape, tripping and stumbling and soaring in turns, the Force thrumming in her veins. Branches, steps, droppings of rock, none were a deterrent. She just ran, through the ice and snow. "*MASTER!*"

And then suddenly there was no ground under her feet.

Zujenia screamed as she tipped forward and fell, for one wild moment thinking she'd run right off the plateau. But just as soon she hit rock; once, twice, again, tumbling over and over as she finally rolled to a stop. Her head spun. She groaned and coughed, and blood spattered the snow. From the cold, or injury? She didn't know. She moved to wipe it off her chin and found herself watching snow dislodged from her limbs and hair, as if she'd been covered in it. Had she blacked out? She couldn't feel her fingers, and her hands looked blackened when she peered at them. Fright stole tight in her chest, but she felt no responding spike of adrenaline or energy. Just tiredness. Cold, deep tiredness.

A light flickered, and Zujenia glanced up. Atyiru's blue-white spirit stood atop the lip of the craggy ravine, seeming to stare down at her. For once she didn't smile, and she didn't seem sad either.

"You left me and all I did was try to come find you, and now I'm *lost*. I'm so lost I'll be lost forever. I can't find my way *back!* I can't be with you all either. First Marick and then Kord and Uji and Lucine and then you— you all *left me* and I'm *lost!* Well *fine*. Now you're lost too. Now we'll be lost together!"

"M-m-master— At-a-a— no..." the hybrid tried to make the words come out, but couldn't. The ghost turned up her hood and spun away, and Zujenia was left in the dark, the blizzard the only hint of contrast to her drooping eyes.

No, she thought. She had to...to get back. To get warm. Live. Shay, Kord, the Journeymen, everyone...

Reaching for the Force, the half-Ryn struggled to her knees, shaking hard, muscles frozen stiff. She crawled, dragging her legs behind her, to the edge of the pit, and began stiffly climbing up, leaving fingernails behind with scarlet streaks at the end of frostbitten fingers. Every time she faltered she slid back a few inches, and it was like a death toll.

It was too much. She was too tired, too frozen. She slumped over, feeling herself backslide. A wolf howled again.

Something clasped around her wrist and pulled.

Zujenia was barely aware as she was lifted in the air and then suddenly pressed tight to a fire, burning and blazing. She yelped but made no sound, and the terrible heat only crowded closer. She couldn't struggle, but it burned...

She opened her eyes and caught a flash of blue so bright it glowed. A familiar face. Boots, and a thick cloak, and a lupine face peering up at her from a cloud of silvery blond fur, shy but determined.

"Ma...r...?" she whispered, but by then the burning had become a lovely, beautiful, amazing, wonderful warmth seeping into her that she never wanted to leave again ever, and she was so sleepy and happy now all of a sudden.

Above her, a lilting voice said. "Rest."

So she did.

=x=

The next time she opened her eyes, she knew, again, she was dreaming.

There were walls, shadowy and hazy, but warm. There were flowers in vases and in gardens, she knew, quiet and happy. And there were people, beloved and alive.

And there was her. And there was Atyiru. Not like she'd been in the storm, but like in her heavenly garden, warm and radiant. She stood there and smiled.

She opened her arms wide.

The hybrid was falling into them before she even registered taking the step to do so.

"My Zujubean..."

Her arms were soft and warm, skin dark with freckled spots. She smelled like an unidentifiable mix of floral tones and something that was pure comfort; the scent of just her, and it settled something in the half-Ryn's bones that had grown restless and rattled and scared. Stilled them. Picked up the pieces gently and held them together and rocked her altogether self in too-big arms that murmured sweetly. She tried to breathe in the safety and love and found herself hiccuping.

"...shh, shh, *mika iiymekeyh*. All is well. I promised you, I told you everything would be alright. Did you not hear me, little one? Listen three times. Everything will be alright, my Zujenia. Shh, shh. Breathe for me. Shh, shhh...I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry, I got lost, Zuju, and I made mistakes, and I am so very sorry, but all will be well..."

She was crying.

She couldn't stop crying.

Gentle, quicksilver hands caressed her hair, fingers carding through the tresses, petting lightly. The touches cascaded down her back and shoulders, small flutters, warm and quick and shushing her. A hum rumbled from her chest into hers, a lullaby, and the quiet tune filled her ears with a voice made of bubbling laughter and whispered prayer.

"...shh, shh, *mika iiymekeyh*. Listen three times. Everything will be alright. Shh, shh. Breathe for me. Shh, shhh..."

"...it's s-so h-hard."

The words don't stop, and neither do the tears.

"I know, I know. Breathe for me."

"It's so h-hard with-out you, everything's wrong, it's all— people a-are d-d-dying and, and K-kord, *Satsi*, Kord, he— and you! You did—"

"Shhhh, I know, I know. Everything will be just fine. Have you listened three times?"

"I'm breathing, I am, Master, it's just, j-just so, so hard, I can't..."

"You can, you can. Dear Zuju, I know you can."

"What do you know?" Her voice broke and she might have broken with it. "You left. You're gone. A-and now Kord too, it's all so broken and I can't fix it, I don't want to, it just hurts too much. It hurts so much I can't even f-feel it any...anymore."

"I know, I know."

Arms squeezed her tighter, pressed her face into the crook of a perfumed neck. Those comforting fingers started braiding her hair. She realized it so abruptly that it startled her into a wild, unhappy smile, a fluttering laugh.

Seemingly pleased at that, the Miraluka pulled back and cradled her face in gentle, firm hands and pressed one, two, three kisses to her forehead, a smile against her skin. The hybrid stared at her Master as she drew away and showed that very smile, a slant of starlight, and released their joined hands just long enough to point over to the hall in the nebulous place in which they stood. Zujenia followed with her gaze, wiping her eyes to see what could have been a bedroom door, cracked open, covered in crayon scribbles and scratch marks and other details she couldn't make out. It was less solid than the rest of the dreamy apartment, watery, like it was in motion, or just an impression of a thing.

What captured her attention, though, was the glow she could see coming from the room, shining soft and sweet through the walls, through the floors, through her and Atty's skin and bones. That light filled her with a warmth and love she didn't even have words for. It swelled up and choked her, and before she even knew it tears poured down her face and she trembled, body unable to hold all of itself and all that love at once. In that all-encompassing heartbeat, she couldn't do anything but love those lights, was redefined by how much she loved them, more than she'd even know she could possibly love anything. Her smile fell to bits as her chin shook and she shook tail to toe but it was a wonderful trembling, a thrill and a coming home.

Gently, the light winked, and then faded back, and the room seemed to fade from the space too. The feeling, though, didn't entirely leave her, and she felt suffused with it, a slow, seeping warmth that kindled her bones and eased her spirit.

A squeeze of her fingers returned her watery amber gaze to her former Master, and Atyiru's smile was no longer the most beautiful thing in the Galaxy, but it still made her happy to see. Zujenia breathed in raggedly, at a loss for words. As ever, the Miraluka seemed to just know what to do and say. She leaned forward again and nuzzled the half-Ryn's forehead in the same spot she'd thrice pecked, murmuring like she was telling a secret.

"You can change yourself if you want to. Three little lights for the *future*, Zujubeanie. I told you, it's all going to be alright."

Three kisses, three lights, three sentences. The hybrid swore to herself she'd remember that when she woke up, and meant it in that moment like breathing. If she remembered anything of this mad, priceless dream, she had to remember that.

"Y-you know, you have the ghosts from the tale all mixed up, with the scary one not being last."

"Details, details. Why END on scary? Happy endings are nicest."

A laugh slipped through Zujenia's throat, rocking her shoulders as she wiped more tears from her cheeks. "Yeah, they are."

=x=

Zujenia woke up.

She sat up slowly, just in case, but found she felt fine despite the beeping noises and sharp smell telling her she was in the medcenter. She wrinkled her nose and coughed, then groaned as the motion shook her head. It ached, and she rubbed a bump there that was covered by a bandage.

Kordath snored fitfully in a chair next to the bed. The half-Ryn debated waking him up, but the option was taken away when he snorted, startled, and cracked open his eyes as if sensing her attention. He probably had.

"Yer up," he rasped, then cleared his throat. "Good. Had me worried."

"...what happened?" Zujenia asked, glancing around. No other beds in the wing were occupied, a good sign. The nearest clock readout showed it was sometime in the afternoon, though one what day she didn't know.

Kordath handed her a little disposable cup of water, sipping at one himself. "Ya fell an' hit yer head while you was runnin' around the halls makin' sure everybody got ta sleep. Nasty bonk, but no concussion, they says."

"Right and...everyone's okay? Are you here because you're hurt, er...?"

The Ryn stiffened, then shuffled his hands, tail and head drooping slightly as he cleared his throat again. He set his cup down.

"Nae, m'fine, everyone's fine, just ah— just checking on me Rollmaster, right? Sorry, I'll go," he muttered, standing.

She reached out to catch his hand without thinking about it. They both paused at that, eyes latching onto where her fingers wrapped around his.

"...uh, Zuj?"

"I don't know," the hybrid replied quietly, keeping her gaze down stubbornly. She took a deep breath. "I don't know. It's not... Okay. But. But I think I'd like to talk to you again. I miss that."

"I miss ya too," blurted the Ryn, full of emotion. He quickly backtracked though, "I mean uh, talkin' to ya, too, yeah, we could...we could do that maybe? Call? Ya can tell me how Shay is wit' the twins?"

"Yeah. Yeah, okay, that...I would like that. Maybe we get caf sometimes too."

Zujenia finally made herself look up, difficult though it was, and hold Kordath's gaze. The discomfort and bitterness and all of it was still there, but so was longing, and the hope that Atyiru had slowly been nudging her towards over the months. Perhaps it was time to put the effort into forgiveness. Into the future.

When had she decided to forgive at all? Or that that future, that dreamy future, was hers?

The hybrid didn't know anymore. Only that she had decided, and that meant there was work to do. She could work. That was familiar.

"So..." Kordath said slowly, sitting back down. He looked exhausted and drained. "Maybe some caf now, yeah? I don't really feel much like snoozin' after last night"

Zujenia gave a tiny smile.

"Yeah. Yeah, that'd be good."

Fin.