

Kiast
28 ABY

The first time it happened, he didn't even mean it.

He's just gotten off his second shift of the day at the tibanna mines down on the surface, it's balls-sticking hot and the sun and sky are so orange it hurts, and he's sweated out at least two of himself. He's standing at the tram stop, shirtless because he can be and it's kriffing hot and he feels disgusting, would strip right out of his soaked pants too if it wouldn't get him arrested. All he can think about is getting home and falling onto the couch and how *badly* he wants one of the cigarras the lady lounging on the curb is smoking.

While he waits, some guy, a species he doesn't know but not Sephi so okay enough, comes out of the Fuel n' Fry behind them and saunters Ruka's way. Guy stops, looks a minute, then steps right up to him and asks, "how much?" He's smoking too, and he's got a vest on — the store clerk out for a break.

"Huh?" Ruka asks, tired and sweaty and jonsing and very ready to deck the guy and run if he tries to hustle him for something he didn't buy. But the other man just drags his eyes up and down the Mirialan's frame and smirks around his smoke.

"How much? For a little fun," he repeats, and tilts his head to the bathrooms attached to the shop. "Maybe just a blow?"

For a second Ruka thinks he's trying to buy drugs, but then, with a sudden clarity, it clicks into place. He gets the... *Feeling* of the guy, like he does sometimes, not danger or anything, but want, hunger, lazy and scratching.

He's being asked what he charges for a kriff.

Ruka is about to punch the clerk in his karking smirking mouth when he notices over the man's shoulder a couple kids and their ma heading into the store. It reminds him, hard and sudden like he'd punched *himself*, of Noga and Leda. They're growing stupid fast at five and six and it's all he can do to make sure they eat even twice a day. They're too damn skinny, and they don't have enough clothes, and they need haircuts, and teaching them to read with no holos or anything is all but impossible. They need *so much* he can't give.

But hey. More money, right here. And he doesn't even have to crawl up into a starship's engines to scrub off the carbon scoring and hope he doesn't fall, get poisoned, or mangle himself.

So Ruka finds himself saying, "Two hundred credits." A random number, pulled up in a panicked moment of thought, as something reasonable. It's probably way cheap, but what does he know? It'll buy more milk and cereal and even a shirt so the boys don't have to share one that doesn't have holes.

The guy smiles really big then and wags his eyebrows, turns and saunters to the bathroom. Ruka follows him. They lock the door behind them and the Mirialan drops to his knees on the filthy kriffing floor, feeling something sticky through the holes in his pants, and the rest kind of

just *happens*. He doesn't actually have to do a lot at all; guy seems pretty much to have it handled. All Ruka has to do is open up, not choke, ignore the taste or smell and kind of just...hold still like that until it's over.

He wonders if next time he'll have to figure out how to do, well, *more* before he even realizes he's already planning for more of this.

Well. It's not like he couldn't say his mama didn't raise no whore. His mama didn't raise him at all. He felt sick and horrible to think of his grandmother, but she was far away, and Noga and Leda were *here*, and when he brought them candy bars the clerk gave him as a "treat" along with the creds, their smiles were the best thing in the kriffing world.

So maybe next time he meant it. And maybe the time after that he actually went *looking* for it, asked the girls in his neighborhood and Shannii for some tips. He's not stupid or clueless, having done enough and being *fifteen* and a *boy*, and looking old enough to pass for legal, but their advice helps: places to go where the people tended to be cleanest, tricks and techniques to get things over with faster, the best gutter-made, poor-ass street remedies to keep himself clean. They don't look at him with any of the disgust or shame he feels for himself, and they don't pity him either. Shannii offers him some of her fishnet stockings. He very forcefully declines.

She laughs at him and talks him into learning how to put on eyeliner. But he doesn't wear the kriffing stockings or anything else.

And the thing is, he only does it sometimes, to shore up loose ends when he can't get shifts at the mines or factory or ports, or to make extra for something extravagant, like new shoes for the boys — not thrift or used, *new* and *their size* — or to enroll them at the local public school he spent a few years at when Mom was sober and he was four, and just once, very guiltily, a pair of work boots for him. But the thing is, while he only does it sometimes, he still hates it.

He doesn't like the guys who pay him, and he doesn't like what they do. Some of them are fine, whatever, some are absolute assholes, and some get rough, and *those* he punches in the face or scratches back until they go down and gets himself gone. The only thing he does end up liking are the piercings Shannii convinced him to get, in his tongue and nipples, from the same folks who did his tattoos — she'd sold them as being something people would pay him more for, but he ended up digging them anyway, even if getting them was the biggest regret possibly ever. It's the only upside to all the crappy to careless "clients."

But what he really, really hates is hanging out in bars to pick them up. The stink of the alcohol gives him headaches and reminds him of dragging his mom to bed from where she's passed out on the floor.

It figured that a bar was the place debris hit the thrusters.

Ruka's had a long franging week, because Jev's factory, one of his oldest spots for shifts since he'd been *seven*, had gone under. Mostly on account of poor kriffing Jev getting his knees broken by the gangers he owed and then dying of the infection. God and Stars, had Ruka wanted to drink himself into a coma over that, but even trying reviled him so bad that he just

spat up one beer, and he wouldn't, *he wouldn't*, smoke, not with the boys around. So as if losing Jev wasn't bad enough, half of his work was gone to the Jumprut Barons east in Lower Cepttown when he was kicked to the curb — "lucky to have his teeth" — with everybody else. And then Noga had gotten a fever and Leda had to watch him even though he was *goddamn five* and being in the same tiny space as his sick older brother meant he was probably gonna get sick too.

Long franging week. One that left him in desperate need of credits. So here he was, sleep-deprived from tending Noga with his sinuses rank with *tihhaar* and cheap wine, and with a small alien man pressed to his front, aggressively grinding their hips together while chits bruised into his palm. Ruka already had a hand down the front of the guy's pants, in public or no, the only thing on his mind getting him done as fast as possible so he could move on to the next one. His plan, such as it was, was to just get through as many as he could before morning and run by the pharmacy when it opened.

And then he heard a voice shout, "*Rukami!* Is this you?" over the music and froze.

Ruka wrenched away, breaking the kiss while yanking his hand free and wiping his palm on his pants. He shoved the other man back, who protested loudly, as a woman came up to them.

"Ruka, what you is be doing here place?" she demanded, being followed shortly by some balding, pudgy dude with lots of rings on his hands and eyes all but fixed on her ass in her short dress.

"Mom," Ruka said, switching over to Mirialan. "What are you doing here?"

"I asked you first, young man," she replied, changing over too. She spoke Basic pretty poorly, at best enough to get suitors to find her stupid and reliant — not that they were entirely wrong there. "What are you doing in a bar? Why aren't you home? Who is this?" She pointed at Ruka's client, her brackets jangling. "You didn't tell me you had a boyfriend. You keeping things from me now? Like you're sneaking into bars?"

"You were in bars when you were younger than me! And I'm not dating nobody."

"Listen, lady," the guy under his arm butted in, impatient and looking flustered at the rapid fire conversation he didn't understand. "I got here first, so when I'm done, you can have a go."

Utroba narrowed her eyes at the man, her tongue changing again. "Me be is his mother and us be is to speak now. You will wait."

"I don't care what Mommy kink you have, lady, I paid for time and I'm getting it."

Kriff, Ruka thought, unable to smack a hand over the other's mouth fast enough. His mother saw him try to move though, even with her drunken gaze. Her misty eyes widened, the flush of her cheeks darkening.

"He pay you?" she demanded. She whirled on Ruka, tripping into his chest so she could stab a finger into it, and went back to Mirialan. "Did that little disrespectful cocksucker just say he paid

you to spend time with him? Is that why you were all over each other like whores? Because he *paid* you?"

"Mama—"

"HE PAID YOU?!" she shouted, and Ruka flinched. Then, he growled.

"I'm not gonna get paid if you keep franging making a scene! You'll get us kicked out!"

"Ruka!"

"Mama, leave it!"

"You don't say another WORD!" she shouted. She snatched his ear and dragged, and he yelled, bending down to lessen the pressure. "We are leaving!"

"No, I'm not— ow, ow, let go!"

But his mother wasn't listening. Utroba released him to talk at her date for the night, slamming back the nearest drink discarded at a table as she did so. She passed two more half finished glasses and downed those too, then continued her ranting. Ruka saw his client slip off with a furious glare, and knew his prospects for awhile were ruined. He grit his teeth and stormed out, sick to death of the smell.

The cold air outside helped clear his head of any stench, but it didn't cool his rage any. Or embarrassment. He paced and kicked at rocks while he waited, headache growing, until his mother stumbled out. At least she was alone.

They stomped home in tense silence, the bar not far away, just a few blocks. The whole time she kept drinking out of a bagged bottle of he didn't know what.

As soon as the door slammed behind them, though, the shouting started in earnest.

Utroba slammed her half empty bottle on the counter, screeching in Ruka's face.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

"I was making some money before you had to kriff it up! What happened to you watching the kids tonight, huh?"

"You said you were working!"

"And you said you would be here!"

"I— I only stepped out for a *little bit* and the boys were asleep, they are *fine*. And this isn't about me! What were you doing there, Ruka?"

"Working!"

"That isn't working. That is *sick*."

"Kriff off. You think I like it? I don't but they sure do! I'm making more than you did in a year in one freaking night!"

"No son of mine is a goddamn hooker!"

"Well you're sure right that no son of yours is, since you don't karking have any! As far as you're concerned."

"I have three ungrateful boys is what I have! You think I don't do anything but I work hard for you! I provide for you! I'm giving you freedom too, not like my mother, and you just piss it away! My son takes his freedom and whores with it! No, no more, you stop this!"

"Stop? Oh, sure, I'll stop! As soon as you stop spreading your legs for every gangbang in half a mile! If you closed 'em, I wouldn't need to frak around just to feed the kids you keep popping out!"

"Don't you *DARE* speak to me that way! I am your *mother* and I've given you *every* chance! How could you take what little bit of happiness I save for myself and twist it up?"

"*Happy?* Those frangers don't make you happy, that's why you frak right through them and let them beat on you and do whatever they want so long as they buy you drinks! You just drink away our money, and you wonder why I'm spreading for it? It's because of you!"

"I'm not the one whoring myself for coin, *Rukami!*"

"Don't call me that, I'm not yours."

"You are and you are lost, Ruka, you're doing wrong and the gods can't forgive you if you keep selling your sex!"

"Sure, yeah, because THE GODS care that I trade ass for credits but not that you trade it for booze or necklaces. You're an even bigger whore than I am—!"

The woman slapped him across the face.

"QUIET!"

He snapped back around, cheek and jaw flaring in pain.

"*NO!* No, Mama. No! Get *out!* Get your drunk whore ass the kark out of my home and don't come back again! You're not welcome here!"

"This is MY house, MY home, and you are MY SON!"

"Yeah? And who pays the kriffing rent, huh? Get out. Get out! You're just screwing up Noga and

Leda by being here. It confuses them, you in and out, thinking you'll be here and want them and making promises and then leaving again. It confuses 'em and worse it *hurts* them! They're better off with no mom than you. *I'm* their kriffing parent."

"You can't kick me out!"

"Watch me!"

"No! No, *Rukami*—"

"—*don't call me that!* You're plastered, get out!"

A truly panicked expression came over her face.

"You can't take my children from me!"

"I DAMN WELL CAN."

"NO! NOOOOoooo!"

He grabbed for her arms and she scratched and flailed at him, wrestling. "Ow, frang—"

"You're hurting me, Ruka, get your hands off me!"

"Get out!"

He dragged her bodily to the door and shoved her out, struggling to close it when she stuck her fingers back through.

"WAIT, STOP!"

"NO! Sober the kriff up. Or go drink until you die frakking some jerk."

"Ruka, wait, I need— I need money, I need— this is my house, you CAN'T."

"I *can!* And I am!"

He finally got the door closed, leaning against it to brace even as the staggering woman began pounding on the frame. Her voice was a muffled shout.

"THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS, EH? MY SON BECOMES A HOOKER AND HE GET UNGRATEFUL! YOU THINK YOU'RE SO GOOD? YOU'RE NOT! YOU'RE GOING TO FRAK THEM UP WORSE THAN ME!"

"*LEAVE!*" he screamed through the metal. "Before I call the cops!"

"Ruka!"

The banging and yelling went on for awhile, alternative between begging him and cursing him. Eventually, though, it went quiet. He watched out the window as she shuffled down the street, coming somebody or another. A half hour later, a jacked speeder blew by, picked her up, and left again.

Ruka slid down with his back against the kitchen counter, put his face to his knees, and sobbed so he wouldn't scream.

Upstairs, one of the boys — Noga, by the pitch — started wailing in their bed. Hungry, or a nightmare, or upset by the fighting downstairs. Leda's small voice joined in as he shouted, "Big brother!"

Ruka coughed to clear his throat.

"Downstairs!" he called back. "I'll be right there!"

I put hands on my mother, he thought, however, shaking all over and unwilling to move. He felt too hot but the thought was nothing but cold horror. *Gods. Kriff. Kriffing hell, I...*

"Broooooother!" Leda yelled again.

Ruka shoved himself to his feet and tramped up the stairs, refusing to think about it or his trembling. He exhaled and made himself gently push the boys' door open, approaching the mattress on the floor. He swooped them up into his arms.

"Ay, ay, what's wrong? Eh? What's wrong?"

Noga kept crying, but it was quieter, into his shirt. Leda said, "He said his throat hurts a lots."

"Aww, buddy. I know, I'm sorry. I'm gonna get you some medicine that'll make it not hurt, okay? But for now you can gargle some warm salt water or duck on ice."

"Nuuuuuh," Noga whined around his whimpers. "S'grooooooss."

"You're telling me, but it helps. C'mon, we'll do that and get you back to sleep." He turned to Leda. "How are you doing, huh?"

"M'hot. It's sticky." The child made a face. Ruka almost chuckled at his whine, but couldn't feel amused when it might be his littlest brother catching cold.

"Do you wanna take a bath?"

"No."

"Then I'll get you a washcloth for your forehead for now. Bath tomorrow, though."

"Fine," Leda grumped.

The elder ruffled his hair, then squeezed them both briefly before getting up to do as promised.

It was going to be a long franging night too.

-X-

They didn't speak for a week.

Ruka went about his days, working in whatever. Noga's fever went down. Leda went to school. And their absent mother did whatever she did. Ruka couldn't care, and all he felt about it was angry, franging angry.

At least, for the first couple days. By the third, he was guilty. The fourth her was sad. The fifth he nearly broke down.

She called and asked if she could come by, please, she needed someplace for the night by seven days out. Ruka agreed.

And he decided to get his crap together.

His mother came gratefully and simpering that night. She was sober, and she made them all her *liksh*, their favorite dish. The boys were really happy to talk to her over dinner, and she played with them and told them about how she was going to take them to see a show soon.

The day after she only drank after they went to bed. The next days after that, she was gone.

"Where's Mama?" asked Noga, Leda beside him.

"With her friends," Ruka answered, and hated her a little.

She came back sloshed another night after, and Noga and Leda saw it. Ruka did his best to get her up to get room past them but they saw her stumbling around and vomiting, her dress nearly exposing her. They asked worriedly if she was okay and the next morning she snapped at them for being too loud for her headache.

It took Ruka a couple weeks, but he'd decided. One day, he dropped the boys off at school and nudged Utroba out of bed with painkillers and breakfast.

As they finished eating, his mother started to notice his staring, and finally asked, "What is it, Rukami?"

Ruka braced himself, then got up to put up their plates. He washed and dried them and the dishes, then sat back down, watching his mother tap rapidly at her caf cup. He knew she wanted to dump whiskey into it. Or just have morning wine.

"About our fight. The other week. About me...working."

"You're not still—"

"We're not talking about that part," he interrupted. "I wanted to say I'm sorry, so sorry, for throwing you out. For hurting you when I did. I never should have done that. I'm a bad son. I'm sorry."

"No, Ruka, you're *not*—"

"Ay, ay, I am, let's be honest, here. I might be a good brother but I'm a lousy son. You're my mother. I should respect you no matter what, and I haven't given you that for years." He hung his head.

Utroba sighed. "Ahhh, I never liked such things. My mother expected respect, and my grandmother, but what did they know, ay? Not me."

"It's only right," argued the boy back, and she shook her head.

"Such a serious boy. Live your life, Rukami."

Ruka's face grew solemn again, losing its shame or kindness. "Mama, I live for my boys. That's all there is to it."

His mother stiffened. "You think I wouldn't die for my sons, ay? Ay?"

"No, Mama, but that's not the damn problem. It's that you can't be bothered to put them kriffing first—" he cut himself off. "Look. I don't want to fight anymore today. We have to...figure this out. What happened."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't... Keep doing this. The drinking, the spending, when you say you'll be here and you're not, I can't keep up anymore. I can't watch them and you."

"I'm not a child, Ruka, you don't need to watch me."

"Yes, I do. I've been having to pick you up off the floor since I was six. I get to say this, I *deserve* to say this," he asserted, and Utroba had the decency to look ashamed. Her gaze dropped, shoulders slumping. She looked much smaller that way, without her big flashy earrings and hair.

"...okay, Rukami. Tell me."

Ruka nodded, readjusting his seat across from her. He stared at the wood grain for a second, chewing on his nail, before squaring his shoulders.

"You'll always have a home here, Mama. You'll have your bed and if I can feed you, I will. I love you. You're my mother. That won't change, ever." He took a deep breath, then plowed on before he could lose it. "But you're not theirs, and I have to take care of them, so you need to sign it over to me." At her look, he clarified, "The house, sign it over to me. And...and custody of the boys."

Her sharp intake of breath nearly stopped him, but the words were there now. He'd decided. Shaking, he set the data chip he'd gotten down on the table between them.

"I turn sixteen in four months. When that happens, we just do the paperwork and give the copy to the records building uptown. That's it. I talked to— you don't know them, but I talked to friends at work who've done this stuff and it's, it's simple. Not like we're Sephi." He glanced at her, saw her tear-stained face, and grit his teeth. "That's how it's gotta be. I get the house and legal guardianship so nothing gets messed up and you can just, not worry about it. Worry about you. Come here when you need to, or want to, but you don't have to anymore. The boys don't gotta know about any of this. It'd be confusing anyway. We stay family, we just... Go our separate ways."

The worst part of the quiet that followed when he was done with everything he'd planned to say was listening to her cry.

Eventually, she just whispered, "I can fix this. I can do better."

"You can't."

"H-how can y-you s-say that?" Her crying got worse.

"Because I have to!" He threw up his hands. "I don't get to be the kid here! I don't get to, okay, and I can't— I can't wait for you to get better, so I just have to accept you can't. Noga and Leda have gotta come first. I have to make their lives good, Mama. I have to. So just. Help me. Help me for once! *You owe me that much.*"

And now he was crying too, great.

She got up and hugged him. He started to pull away but she just gripped him tighter, and snot smeared on his face and against her shirt. His arms were moving without his permission to hug her back, clinging, scared and in over his head. He was fifteen. *Fifteen*. And supposed to be a parent all on his own. Gods above.

His mom held him, though. She held him tight until he'd cried himself out.

Then she said, "Okay."

-X-

His birthday came and went. He became a legal and free adult. He and his mom signed what they had to. Under the highly superior eyes of the Vatali Empire, Ruka became a parent to Noga and Leda Tenbriss, ages five and four. He also got a house to start paying off. And Utroba lost three sons in one day.

She went directly from the filing office to her favorite bar. Ruka went to a bar across down to find some trick to turn where he wouldn't stumble over her.

And that was that.