

The nightmares won't stop.

She tries, she does, to ignore them. To shake them off when she wakes up choking off a growling shriek by going for a swim in the ocean or for a ride on her swoop bike, struggling in vain to outrun them. She tries to meditate, then to plan, to logic away the problem like she'd fix a broken line of code or a malfunctioning engine. She tries to remind herself of reality, of how she was taken in and given her own space and care and shown all sorts of affection and advice — even the awkward and unwanted kind — with no expectations.

But none of it works and *they won't stop*.

Eilen dragged herself from her room listlessly, feeling a deep, unrelenting ache all over from too little sleep for too many days straight. Her fur was lusterless and tangled and she couldn't find the energy to brush it. It was hard enough to open her eyes and get out of bed; even though the last thing she wanted to do was close them, because all she saw behind her lids were the horrible images. The creeping terror kept lurking, making her itchy in her skin. She always feel like she needed to run, but Stars, she was so exhausted. Her head pounded and her neck and back felt like knives we're stuck in the knots.

Sighing and twitching, the hybrid stumbled, nearly falling, at the stairs. She caught herself hard two steps down, then kept going, leaning on the railing. The tumble caught attention, though, it seemed, as a voice rose from downstairs.

"Eilen? You up, kiddo? Ya alright?"

"Y-yeah!" croaked the girl back, weak and whimpering as her rough voice cracked. She cleared her throat and tried again, louder, "F-fine! I'm totally fine!"

"Don't fall!"

The unspoken 'again' hung on the end fondly. It wasn't the first time.

Cringing, Eilen took several breaths and carefully shuffled the rest of the way to the landing, forcing herself to keep moving. It would be okay. And besides, she needed to eat. She'd been sneaking cold food at odd hours but not enough, and her appetite was dismal anyways when she did.

When she entered the huge kitchen, it was to a familiar and, previously, kind of homey sight. Satsi, Uji, and Sammy all gathered, the baby next to her father where he sat stiffly with his bad leg outstretched, sipping his caf. He offered a politely kind nod as she entered, reading something intently, though he still looked awful even after his stay with the medics. Satsi was cooking, like she often did.

"Elly-belly, you want eggs with your toast?" the scarred woman asked from the stove, cracking something into the pan while Samantha smeared her breakfast over half her face in an attempt to swallow the bread and jelly whole.

The toddler was kind enough to offer a sticky hand full of greenish blue and orange speckled fruit goop to the half-Bothan, exclaiming, "*Erren!* Mornun! I 'as jerree. Want sum?"

The hybrid wasn't used to children, actually rather intimidated by them, but she'd been around the little Human for some time now and liked to play when her parents were there to supervise. Sammy was really sweet, when she wasn't trying to pull on Eilen's ears.

"No thanks, Sam. Thanks though."

"Werrcom. Erren seepy?"

"Yeah, sleepy."

"Seepy. Go bed bed. MOMMAH SAYS. Bed bed!"

"You do look pretty tired, Elly. You okay?"

"Just not sleeping well," the Selonian mutters quickly towards her toes. "Fine."

She couldn't look at Satsi, even as the woman put a plate in front of her. Seeing her at the stove made the food smell like burning skin and hair.

Made the nightmares come roaring back.

The stink of fuel, so strong it burned nose and throat and eyes on every breath; the spark of a lighter; her fur on fire, a stench like no other; and it hurts, it hurts, but that's not the worst. The worst is her captor letting her skin burn deep, not so deep to kill but enough so that the fur doesn't regrow or regrows in patches at best. All sorts of ways to remove her ears or her tail; knives and sabers, saws and scissors and shoving them into machines, irons and blow torches, even just ripping them off by hand. A heated rod shoved down her throat and singeing her vocal cords, so that her voice only gets uglier. She's turned into a monster, ugly ugly ugly, and people scream when she passes like she screamed when she burned and she's so alone—

"Ei? Eilen? Oi, Selen to furrybaby, you in there? Honey?" The Human moved around the table in her tunneling line of sight, coming about for a comforting touch.

Satsi reached for her and Eilen just— flinched.

They both froze.

Eilen's ears were pressed flat to her skull. Her shoulders and abdomen were coiled, back hunched, arms up. She'd flinched. She...she was holding herself like she expected to be hit.

When her eyes nervously, fearfully darted up, they caught sight of the look on Satsi's face.

Satsi, who looked like she *had* been hit.

"...Eilen?" the woman whispered, dark almond eyes round. Moisture welled in them, but the hurt splashed there wasn't something the half-Selonian could even register. It lasted a moment. Then Satsi blinked hard, glassy, and raised her hands, palms out, and backed away slowly until she was across the room from the cowering girl.

It was all the opportunity the hybrid needed. She unfurled from her seat and bolted, back up the stairs and into her room, the slamming of the door and its lock engaging chasing her. It still wasn't enough, and she dove for her bed, dragging all the sheets and blankets off and taking them with her as she crawled underneath the frame, wedging her large, long body in as tightly as she could.

There she curled in the dark and hyperventilated into her sheets, heedless of any of the family downstairs or their reactions, heedless of anything but the fear clawing in her chest and the stinging in her eyes.

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Eilen avoided Satsi for a week.

It wasn't good. Ruka came to visit and tried to talk to her, sat outside her door, but she couldn't face him. She found meals delivered to her room and no one tried to make her come out, at least, though she heard the Tameikes moving around the house, going about their lives. She heard Uji trying to tell Satsi that things would be fine, heard Satsi telling Sammy that Eilen was just having a very long nap and didn't Sammy want to go play outside and leave her friend be? She heard footsteps approach her door before they hesitated, stopped, then turned around. Retreated.

The hybrid felt *horrible*. She knew she was causing Satsi upset, knew Samantha was confused, knew Uji was probably mad or something — he was always so impossible to read! She didn't know how Satsi got anything from him — and that Ruka had been awfully concerned in his big brother way before he'd had to leave again. But she couldn't make herself get up and go out there. She thought about trying to talk to them and the words died in her rusty throat. Her breathing seized. She started shaking and then her thoughts just tumbled and she knew anything she said would be stupid and wrong and she'd make things worse than they already were. Why did dealing with other people have to be so hard?

I wish we'd never gone to Canto Bight, the half-Bothan thought miserably, not for the last time, ears and tail drooping while her leg bounced in anxious, pent up jitters.

It was just...She couldn't get the images out of her head. Eilen had seen plenty of questionable or shady things, but *that*...

It had been so fun — scary, but fun — to walk around as Leeadra's covert date, all dressed up, and see all the new sights the casino had to offer. Then the bombs had gone off and people were missing, including Uji, and everything went crazy. She and Mauro Wynter had gotten back from their encounter in the woods and some extra scraps with Collective goons only to find the incident minimized by the casino staff and their clanmates quietly, furiously working. In particular, the big, admittedly sort of scary, sort of cool cyborg-Kaleesh had been standing in front of the kitchen closest to the explosion site, very obviously blocking the way, while inside the various heads of the two clans had been interrogating the enemy agents they'd found or captured in the fray. Eilen had been directed inside when she'd tried to find someone to report to, and Satsi had been there, and...and—

There was a man, one of the Collective, and Satsi had been making pulp of her knuckles against his face. Just as the hybrid had come in, Satsi had hauled him over to the frying vats and stuck the man's hand in the oil and he'd *screamed*. The loudest, most agonized scream Eilen had ever heard, so loud in and of itself that for a moment it had just, just shocked her. People, no matter their species, just *didn't get that loud*. It was *animal*.

And then they could all *hear it*, the pop and sizzle of water boiling inside him and the puckering burst of skin, and the *smell* — she scratched at her snout, still unable to get it out even after days and several showers. It clung to the inside of her nostrils like it had that day, filling up the staff kitchen with a pungent, thick stink, oily and smoky and all manner of burnt. It was the sort of smell that came from waste dumps molding on hot, humid planets, from mynockes sneaking into the ship vents only to die behind the aft radiator and rot there until their stench led someone to them. It was terrible, and because it was oil smoke, she could *taste it*.

But the screaming...

And then she'd pulled it out, and it looked all bloated and red and bubbly, less like a hand and more like stew gone wrong. And Satsi'd just...just...

Eilen scrubbed her hands over her face and ears and through her hair, trying to push the images away, her eyes scrunching shut. She didn't want to remember Satsi's hands digging into the broiled flesh, twisting and scratching to rip the boils open and make the Collective man scream even more. She didn't want to remember how when he collapsed from shock, Satsi grabbed the next of the group, a woman, and pressed her mildly pretty, slightly too wide face into the stove top. She didn't want to remember how Satsi had snarled at the woman that she

would burn her until children ran shrieking in the streets at the sight of her and men vomited when she spoke, how she'd make the other side match if she didn't get what she wanted. She didn't want to remember the way that woman had sobbed as the stove got hotter and almost been too busy panicking to divulge everything she knew. She didn't want to remember Satsi briskly, carefully cutting open a third woman's hand to remove tiny short bones one by one or when one of her ears had dropped to the ground with a wet little sound.

She didn't want to remember the round, clean little bullet holes Satsi had put in her victims' foreheads either, only when she was done with them and long after they'd begged to die. The expression on Satsi's face the whole time.

"Nooooo," groaned Eilen, practically chewing a hole through her inner cheek. She shook her head and her body hard, slapped her face. "Think about something else. Flying. The swoop engine. How cute Lee is oh gosh."

Thinking about other things — especially other embarrassing things like passing her battleteam leader notes, oh Stars — helped a little bit. But only a little. The other nightmare thoughts were invasive, always cropping up and circling in the back of her head.

Eilen glanced at her comm sitting over on the desk. Maybe it was time to call Baro. At least to talk if nothing else, since she could talk to him about anything. And maybe then...he could come get her. Maybe she should...leave.

But, ugh. You can't just go running to him about all your problems! You're supposed to be training and getting awesome and better than...than this. What's a life running away from everything? As soon as things get hard I want to jump ship and go hide with Baro? Geez, I suck. Ugh.

The other part of her, the one that had had her staying in her room most hours, creeping around the manor only when the others left or went to bed, and refusing to speak to anyone...that part felt perfectly justified in getting the heck out.

You saw what she did! She's dangerous and crazy and you'll be next if you mess up!

Eilen groaned again and pulled on her hair. Her stomach rumbled, but she didn't think she could bear to eat, not with her insides so Twi in anxious knots.

She was about to at least call her father figure for his advice — shameful or not — when she heard and felt footsteps coming down the hall again. They stopped instead of reversing. The hybrid could sense that it was Satsi, familiar with her aura.

A gentle rap of knuckles sounded against the white-painted wood.

"Hey, Eil. I'm not trying to bother you, not to do anything, promise. I just need to tell you something. Please just... Listen, okay? If you're awake. Then I'll go away, promise."

Eilen nodded, then realized the woman wouldn't see it and berated herself. Jerkily, she got up, crept over, and reached out and tapped on the door. Call and response. Her sensitive ears caught Satsi's sharp intake at the sound, the shifting of her feet on the floor boards.

"Right, okay. Well...It occurred to me that I might have scared you, and Uji thinks I'm probably right. I don't hide anything, so I didn't think of it first — why now? But then he reminded me that Canto Bight was the first time since you came to join us that you've been around when there's a real, actual life or death fight to be had, when things get serious. Not only that but...when someone crosses me...when someone hurts *my family*."

Satsi's tone grew hard, threatening. The images flashed behind her eyes again and the half-Selonian tried to control her flinch. The Human seemed to realize herself all on her own though and cleared her throat.

"I'm not sorry you saw that," Satsi said softly but surely. "I'm not sorry I did it either, and I won't be sorry next time I do it. I'm glad I did. It's what I am. What I *am* sorry about is that you could think I'd ever hurt you like that. But I know—" her voice shook a little, almost a crack. "I know being that kind of afraid, and I know ain't nothing I can say to change it. Or make it better. And it's really better if you run. It really is. But I'm saying it anyway. Eilen, I swear to you, I won't ever hurt you and mean to. I will kill anyone who hurts you or the rest of this family but if I can help it I will never hurt you."

Eilen didn't respond. She processed the words, trying to find peace in them, trying so hard. She wanted to be comfortable again, to come of the bedroom, to have everything just go back to the way it had been when Satsi wasn't a *monst*—

Her ears burned in shame.

The silence stretched. There was more shifting, a rustling noise of paper or fabric, and then something hit the floor just outside.

"This was supposed to be for your Knighting, but I couldn't finish in time. Sorry it's late."

And then she left.

The hybrid waited a long time after the Human's steps retreat before she sat up, unlocked her door, and quickly slid it open. Her head thrust out as she peered up and down the hall before looking down at the wrapped package left for her. She snatched it and retreated, slamming the door closed again.

Scampering over to her bed, she dove in and settled, then took to examining her new prize. Whatever it was was pliable in her hands, bending in its flimsiplast packaging. She tore into the bright blue paper, shredding it with her claws — it rained around her in a fluffy, crunchy pile that she was going to love rolling around in later, at least until she had to clean it up and out of her fur — to get to what was beneath.

Soft fabric spilled into her lap.

Gently, slowly now, the hybrid lifted the items for inspection, feeling the incredibly soft and fluffy texture of the knitted plush. The first thing she had touched was a scarf, thick and *long* and striped, ending in tassels tied with lovely knotwork. The next loose bits were two gloves of the same material, two-toned and shaped not for standard Near-Human hands like everything else but for hers. There was even a sort of gripped leather capping sewed to the inner palm and fingers, like gloves for speeder riding. The biggest piece was a sweater, long in the torso and broad in the shoulders, perfect to her measurements. The last were a pair of socks — fit for her feet with little toes for each of hers and a tube-like heel, capped with holes for her nails to stick through — and a very odd hose sort of thing that was wide and thick at one end and tapered at the other where it closed much like a normal sock or those lekwarmers Tali made, but bigger. Eilen realized after a moment that it was for her tail.

The final bit, wrapped separately in more flimsiplast with a note attached, was a hat. It didn't have ear holes cut into it, no; instead it had more rigidly knit protrusions for her ears to fit under, like little cone-shaped caps. Like the hat had ears too. Each one was tipped with a tiny, fluffy pom-pom ball *in the shape of a starfighter*. Tiny little wings and everything, like ornaments.

The whole set was woollen and warm and her absolute favorite shades of maroon and pale lavender.

Just when she'd thought she couldn't feel any worse than she had the last week and a half.

Shaking as guilt choked her, she lifted the note, spying Satsi's flirtatious handwriting. The kind she used when she was being fancy, as opposed to her normal angry, looping scrawl.

Tufts,

I dunno if your fur coat keeps you any warmer than the rest of us, but I don't want you getting cold here on Selen when winter rolls around. Don't let the tropics fool ya — Citadel's on a mountain, and that kark is frakking freezing. Your little sockies with the toes cut open just ain't gonna cut it, and I ain't standing for it. I'll make you more if you like these. Just let me know.

Oh, and wash on cold then air dry, or they'll shrink.

Stay warm, sugar.

Kisses,

- S.

Tears dripped onto her pantleg and hand. Eilen hiccuped in a rough, growling breath that caught sharp in her chest. Her ears pressed back so tight they'd probably never come up again, and she hugged the sweater to her chest and buried her face in it.

It smelled like the Human.

The half-Selonian curled up on her side and, for the first time in a long time, cried long and hard.

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It was late at night by the time she slipped out to go to the kitchen and stretch her legs and maybe run and never come back and maybe beg Satsi to forgive her. The house was mostly quiet, or at least the rooms she passed were.

I really, really need to call Baro, she thought to herself, a little less anxious now that she'd cried some of it out. She had to get the man's advice. Maybe then she could fix things. Because, she thought, I maybe yeah wanna fix this. She's so...she cares. And let me stay here and just took me in no question and it's nice to be by the ocean and not always stuck on Voidbreaker... Maybe it could be okay. Kinda.

She still jumped and twitched at every single sound in the house, though. Her shoulders still crawled like she expected to be attacked. She still smelled the burning smell.

Ugh, just, food! Then call Baro. One thing at a time.

The kitchen always looked even bigger than it already was when it was empty. Eilen had zero cooking skills, unlike Satsi and, especially, Ruka. She could definitely get by with the time honored tactic of rummaging in the cupboards for snacks, though. The half-Selonian stuck her arm up on top of the cryo-unit, feeling around for the biscuits she knew were up there, well out of a certain Force-sensitive three year old's reach.

"Errun!"

The hybrid startled, then whipped around to crane her neck down at the tiny Human toddler who came rushing at her legs, crashing into her ankles.

Speak of the mynock...

"Sam, w-what are you doing up? Or out of bed? Does Sa—" the name stuck in her throat, "do your parents know?"

"*Mommah*," Samantha whined, tugging at Eilen's fur and trousers. Her chubby cheeks were red, her dark eyes big and scared. "Is Mommah. Errun, Errrruuuun! Mommah, Mommah!"

"What's mama?" asked the hybrid a little helplessly.

"Issun bad dweams bafoom bad sad. Mommah sad bad."

"I...Sam, I don't understand, I'm sorry."

"Errun!" cried the child. "Mommah bad sad! Help sad."

"Help? Satsi is sad?"

She knew Satsi got sad sometimes, but so did everybody. Normally Uji dealt with such things, the two of them bent close together and having silent conversations in their heads — a skill Eilen found both cool and unnerving. But he was still recovering from his capture and resting through most of the days. Maybe the sensitive girl was worried about her mother being sad recently? The guilt came and churned in her stomach again.

"Sam, it's okay, it's just... Hard right now. But uh, I'm sorry. Okay?"

Not okay. Samantha started to cry, obviously upset, and Eilen's fur fluffed up in panic. She crouched down and tried to make soothing noises.

"Hey, come on, don't cry. Don't cry, please? Uuuhm. SATSI. Yeah, we need Satsi, or Uji, I don't know what to do with you, um. Where's your mom? Sammy?"

The toddler sat on her butt and cried more. Eilen sputtered and gnawed at her lip before deciding it would probably be best to just take her to the family's bedroom and hope one of them woke up. She was about to reach for the little Human when Samantha stumbled back to her feet and went running — waddling but also *running, oh geez* — out of the kitchen.

"Sam— gah, wait, don't fall!"

The half-Selonian raced after her, catching up in just two strides and following with arms outstretched, ready to intercept if needed, as the baby toddled to the second bathroom on the first floor, the one at the very back of the manor. Eilen's ears pricked as she caught sounds of a voice.

Her spine prickled. The Force hummed with unease. Eilen slowed as they approached, and grabbed Samantha, picking up the burbling child.

The light wasn't on inside, but that was definitely Satsi's voice, chattering. Poking her head in the ajar door, the hybrid tried to peer into the darkness of the washroom, letting in a little of the moonlight behind her. Soft sobbing reached her ears.

Eilen froze all at once. Her hand scrabbled around, feeling for a light switch, and when they flared on, she blinked through the brightness to see.

The bathroom was in disarray, rugs bunched up or kicked aside, items knocked over on the counter, the refresher curtain torn down. Tan limbs and dark hair huddled inside the stall, the figure rocking back and forth.

"...can't 'ave meh..." she mumbled repeatedly. "Rather die than be with you...stop...stop...said stop, please...give 'er back..."

Oh no, Eilen thought in dismay.

Samantha struggling in her arms snapped her out of it, though. The toddler tried to get down, and all at once Eilen knew that that was a very bad idea, somehow.

"Heeey, let's go find your dad huh?!" said the half-Bothan, darting back into the hall and all but flying upstairs. She didn't know what to freaking *do*, but she knew Samantha shouldn't be with her mother like... Like that.

"Errrrun nooooooo," whined the baby, kicking and smacking, and Eilen tried to summon up some patience as her arms and face got abused. She carried Samantha to the child's bedroom and deposited her in her crib, quickly fleeing as soon as the small Human was out of her hands. The hybrid slammed the door shut behind her and locked it, knowing firsthand that Samantha could get out by herself.

"Go to sleep, everything is fine!" Eilen barked through the door, and then ran back downstairs. She'd get Uji to deal with it in a minute. Right now, there were more pressing concerns.

As the half-Bothan approached the bathroom again, the warnings in the Force grew more insistent. She almost turned tail, but knew that Satsi needed some kind of help, however ill-equipped the hybrid was to give it. Her nose twitched as she entered the refresher again.

She smelled blood.

"S-Satsi!" yelped Eilen, finally noticing the bright red on the shower floor. Without the thing running, it pooled there, wide puddles. Alarm siezed in the furry woman's throat.

She rushed over, nearly tripping, and grabbed the Human by the shoulders, eyes frantic and searching. Satsi wasn't even *there*, eyes glazed and staring off into nowhere — or somewhere else — while her body shook and...and...

And she was holding a knife or something and there were cuts and blood and oh gods oh Stars oh no, no, no—

"Satsi! *Satsi!* Stop it, no, *stop!*" shrieked the alien as the other woman made another slice. Furred hands desperately clamped down around the open, weeping wounds, trying to stifle the blood flow.

Her shouting in the Human's face and the contact seemed to jog her a little. She blinked, dazed, shook her head. Looked slowly around, down at arms, at their surroundings, at Eilen.

"E...Eilen. Oh." More blinking. Another hear shake, this one hard and vicious. "...take it away from me," Satsi said, fingers spasming around the slim blade.

Eilen was more than happy to do so. She might have even snatches the dagger and chucked it across the room. It clattered against a wall and then the floor. The hybrid adjusted her grip on Satsi's wrists, trying desperately to find some center, to concentrate, to remember her training. She'd studied healing with the Force. Sure, she'd only really healed herself before, but she could do this. Just stop the flow. Like patching a broken hose in an engine.

Agonizingly slowly, the cuts began to close. The bleeding slowed, then stopped, and then the dark, open gashes turned to angry red lines running up and down the Human's flesh, vertical and horizontal, criss-cross and random. Eilen sagged in exhausted relief when she smeared blood around to feel for any breaks in the skin with her fingerpads and found none. None open, anyway. The scars were everywhere. There was more scar tissue than normal dermis.

Eilen had noticed Satsi was usually patched up, but she'd always assumed it was from brawls the other woman got into, given her raucous violent streak. It wasn't as if Satsi hid the wounds; she didn't really bother, and besides, usually wore clothing that hardly hid skin, nevermind bandages. But now that Eilen knew what to look for, what *specifically*, she could see it, she could remember — just how many times she'd seen Satsi with her forearms wrapped up or with a gauze pad taped to her cheek or thigh. Places that didn't make much sense, especially when all her other bruises and cuts tended to go uncovered, shiny mottled purples and yellows or scabbing reds.

How often does she do this to herself? Does she mean to? the hybrid wondered in horror. Some of the scars were definitely on purpose; they were just too orderly not to be, neat little lines marching up the inside of wrists and thighs. But all the others...

Eilen realized then how little she knew, about her caretaker. She'd already been faced with that fact after Canto Bight, but it was only reinforced now. What had gone on in Satsi's life, that made all these different scars? That made her someone who said she was glad to burn somebody's face off so long as she got to have her family?

"Satsi...you there?" Eilen asked at last, once she'd had a second to catch her breath and come down from the adrenaline high of the Human being hurt. She didn't know what to say, what to do. "Um. Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"I'm trapped," Satsi stuttered out on a gasp. Eilen's brows furrowed in confusion.

"Um, no you're not. You're right here. At home? See? Not trapped, super free."

"*N-no*, I..." the woman growled. "I'm not, not, it's— I'd rip out of my own skin if I could. That's what it's like. Like wanting to run, get the frak out, away, as hard as you frakking can, run like you've never run in your life. But I can't. I'm trapped. Inside my own goddamn body." Her voice cracked. "I can't leave my own damn body, Eilen. I can't get away. I c-can't. No matter how hard I try or fight, I— I can't."

Impulsively, the hybrid wrapped both arms around the smaller woman in a tight hug. She felt her jolt, and then cling, sobbing harder and harder, high, reedy gasps for panicked, snot-stopped breath. Eilen just hung on, tail lashing, skin crawling, but... But she stayed.

Eventually it slowed, and Satsi pulled back a bit to pant and blot her face on her shirt. Eilen handed her some tissue paper, and she blew her nose into the was several times.

"S-Satsi...?" asked the younger woman tentatively after a few more moments.

"Y-y-yeah. I..." she trailed off and hung her head. "F-frak. I'm sorry, Elly. I'm not— I can't— I'm stronger than this b-but I can't b-beat it, I'm frakkin'—"

"You're the strongest person I know," Eilen said sincerely, blurting it out. Satsi stopped and looked up at her again, and some of the helplessness seemed to fade back. "Even now. You still do, you know, all this," she gestured around to life in general, "while you've got to deal with all that, so, so I think you're really strong and... Yeah."

The Human stared at her for awhile while Eilen fidgeted. Finally, she coughed and snorted and murmured, "Thanks, honey."

The half-Bothan took the opportunity to slide slightly away from the shower stall on the tile, needing the space, and knew at once that Satsi had noticed. That hurt, like from the first day, crossed her expression again, and the tears welled back up. Her lip wobbled. She gripped her

arms tight, pressing fingertips into the barely closed wounds and *digging*. Blood bubbled up anew.

"No no no no no!" squawked Eilen, reaching out, aborting the motion, reaching again. "N-no, please, not with the— hurting. Stop! P-please, stop."

"Nnng... can't," ground out the Human. "Can't stop thinking—"

And that was it.

We're the same, Eilen realized. At least in this one little moment, this one regard.

"I can't either," babbled the hybrid. Satsi focused on her again. That seemed to work well. Satsi always focused on her... On her family, before anything else, no matter what was happening to her. "Th-that. Um. That's why I've been hiding. F-from. From you. You did those, those things to the Collective guys and I, uh, I kept dreaming that you'd do it to me if I ever made you mad too," she finally admitted.

"Eilen, I would never," the Human swore, vehement. Her hands left her injuries to grip the hybrid's sweaty palms, and even with the blood, Eilen counted it a small victory. "I told you."

"I-I know. But. But what if you do?" Her voice wobbled.

"Even if, for some frakked sideways reason, I had to— hurt you. Even then, I'd be fast about it. I'm not going to *torture* you. Eilen Jath, you are family to me, and ain't family ever get left behind like that."

"Okay," replied Eilen in a small voice. The words didn't make her fear go away, didn't stop her hide from crawling or let her shoulders leave their hunch, but... Maybe it *would* help.

Satsi nodded then, and released Eilen. She paused to look at her scarred, red hands, and bowed her head, grim.

"It's, um. It's okay. You're...you'll be okay?"

The words were stunted, awkward, empty, curling at the end in a question where there wasn't supposed to be one but that she can't stop. She tried again, stressing.

"Hey, it's okay. Just, just don't think about it!"

"T-that's not how...how it works, El."

"Oh. Well. How does it work?"

"You know those dreams you've been having?"

"Yes?"

"Lot, lot worse than that."

The hybrid chewed her thumb and knuckles, considering in the quiet.

"H-have you, um, tried talking to somebody? Like uh, therapy?"

Satsi stared at Eilen like she'd grown a second head at the suggestion.

"Frak no, I'm not going to no frakking therapy, kiddo. There's ain't a head-poking doc in this Galaxy that is equipped to deal with my shit."

"But... It's supposed to help? Isn't it? I mean, whatever you've been through, it can't be *that* bad...I mean, you're still here! And alive and healthy. Uh, and you've got a family and all these skills so...so. Um."

"Been through?" Satsi echoed. Her voice went high, briefly hysterical, before it crashed back down in fierce, whip crack tones. "I've seen what my intestines look like, kid. I've seen my liver. I can count how long I've been strapped down because I know how long it takes for my throat to give out from screaming and how long it takes to heal. I've been dead and resuscitated nearly every way you can think of— asphyxiation, drowning, electroshock, heart stoppage, bleeding out. I know that I can still be made to orgasm when my hands and arms are literally *nailed down* above me or when *rats* are shoved inside me, tearing things up until they suffocate. I remember what it *smells* like when I'm on *fire*."

Eilen wanted to throw up. Again. Her mind sort of just...blanched at even a quarter of that information and all she knew was nausea.

"I-I, I'm sorry," she stammered. "I d-didn't mean..."

The older woman breathed ragged and deep, coming down from her rant, some of her fire back in her despite the glaze to her eyes. She grimaced, shook herself, turned away.

"Goddammit," she swore. "No, I shouldn't— say shit like that to you, not right now—"

"—I was rude, I assumed, I just don't, don't get it, I don't know what to *DO*—"

They spoke over each other. Eilen withered into silence, squeezing her eyes shut and flushing with anxious embarrassment and too many other feelings. Satsi sighed next to her.

"Aww hon, no. I'm really the sorry one. I should be helping you right now, it's my damn fault you're not sleeping, that you don't feel safe here. I never, ever wanted that for you. I wanted you to feel safe, protected. I would die for you, I will never let anybody hurt you, I'll burn them all first."

It was probably a bad choice of words, and they both knew it, but neither could take them back. Eilen groaned again, and Satsi sighed, and moved herself further away. Giving Eilen space.

The quiet stretched again. Eilen spent it debating, chewing on a finger. What had she meant to ask Baro? Could...could she ask Satsi? Carefully, the hybrid voiced her question.

"How *do* you feel safe? When you stop feeling that way, I mean."

Satsi made a laugh that wasn't a laugh.

"You don't. But you practice. There's tricks and shit. Things you can learn in therapy, or just make up for yourself. Pick one spot that feels closest to safe and stay there when you need to. Then you make that space bigger. Like a spot in the house, then that room. There's other things too. Memory and verbal tricks. You could have a saying, or a list of favorite things, or some memory, or a physical object of personal value." She gripped the wedding ring around her neck, sounding half like she was reciting from a text and half like she was just talking. "One of the many docs from my stints in a padded room once suggested street names: the street or speeder lanes I was born on, then the one the next block over, and the next. It was to help with traumatic episodes, he'd said. Wasn't any good for me but might be for you."

"I have a mantra. I'd say a it, a couple words, something I could remember even at my worst, over and over, with a little mental picture attached to each of them. Rainstorms on the roof. Blue butterflies. Stars faraway. Blood and bones." A heartbeat, then one more, "Sammy."

"Seems nice."

"It is. You got anything like that?"

"Um. Like, things that are good?"

"Yeah. You can make a list of good things, safe things, stuff that makes you feel less raw. Defined tasks are good."

"What's, uh. What's your list?"

Satsi's smile was quiet and gentle. "Uji. Sammy." Her lips turned down, and she sighed.

"That's...broad, and half the time I'm worried about hurting them, so let me be more specific.

Uji's eyes when he's happy, the way they crinkle and how long his lashes are. Uji's voice when he talks to me and wants me to listen, like it's important that I hear him, because *I'm* important. Sammy's arms, how they were really fat when she was born. Her giggle. The feel of her weight in my arms. And... You and Ruka too. Turel, Kordy. In your own ways. Anybody I let in like this, it's because they help me too. But, anyway, it's probably better you don't use people. Too changeable. Defined tasks are better to start. I clean my guns. Just the smell of gun oil calms me down these days. I take deep breaths. I take a shower and soak in the hot water. I work out — run, spar, weight training. Things like that."

"I like flying," Eilen offered after a thoughtful pause, and Satsi nodded.

"Okay. Maybe not a good idea to go flying when you're busy feeling like traumatized shit, but your safe space could be your cockpit. You could just sit in there. I started with my bedroom closet when we moved in here, then my side of the bed, and my side of the couch, and... It grows."

The idea was nice. Better than cooped in her room. Snug, because every cockpit was for her long-limbed frame, but full of familiar buttons and switches and the smell of her leather seat and with a transparent top above her so she's not trapped.

"Yeah, alright," murmured the hybrid. She twisted her fingers. "Can I land it here?"

"Of course, hon. Plenty of room for ya out on the beach and everything. That could even be another thing. Beach, swimming. You love the water."

"Yeah." Eilen grinned at the thought. Satsi grinned weakly back.

"There you go. A place to practice feeling safe, and something to practice doing when you don't feel it. And ya just...keep tryin'."

Eilen looked around them.

"So the shower is your safe place?"

Satsi's laugh wasn't much of a laugh at all, dry and clicking and short. "In a manner of speaking, I s'pose."

"What's that mean?"

"Yah won't like the answer, Tuftys."

Eilen's spine straightened a little more. "I can take it."

The Human woman just shook her head.

"A'ight. It's not that it's safe so much as it is it's... Home base, lessay. Default place to return to. And it keeps me awake."

"Okay... Because...? I'm assuming there's a because."

"Because one of Jashin's cheapest, cruelest, and most versatile treatments was to throw us in the shower. It accomplished a lot of things, sonic or water. Some level of isolation and sensory deprivation, could pummel us or burst our eardrums, scald and burn us or make us freeze, give us hypothermia, dehydrate us, and most of all, deprivation of sleep." She shook again without mirth. "It's probably frakked up to put myself back in that but it's just...it's where I end up running when I'm not in control. Literally. Lots of times when I'm panicking my body just comes here."

"...oh."

"Yeah."

"...so, um. Jashin?"

"Jashin Cythe, the Blood God, Demon King, Black Sun Vigo of Coruscant. My former master, ex-husband, the monster that made me," Satsi answered wryly. Eilen wondered if she was being glib to hide the terrible tide of paranoia and pain and fear that the hybrid could sense the Human feeling at that name. "No good stories. You don't need the imagination fuel, so just forget about him. He's dead now anyway."

"Right."

"Point being, it's not really my spot, no. Not for feeling safe." Satsi shook her head. "So, frak this. Come on."

She stood on wobbly legs and Eilen wondered if she should help, but the older woman was already up and stepping out of the tub to join then younger. She turned back to turn on the spray and they both watched the blood wash away. It didn't go easily. Satsi had to reach back in to swipe the water around and push it all down towards the drain in little, pinkish waves. She rinsed her arms off while she was at it, and Eilen belatedly stumbled over to the sink to scrub her own hands raw with soap and hot water.

The half-Bothan was about to ask what was next when Satsi took her hand and tugged her out the door. The Human lead them out into the hallway and left Eilen there while she climbed the stairs, probably to go check on her husband and daughter. Eilen slouched against the wall while she waiting, feeling all the tiredness of the day and the days before it crashing down onto her. She wanted to just pass out so badly, but she wasn't sure if she could.

Satsi came back down in a few minutes, her clothes changed and hair brushed and smelling like perfume instead of blood. She took one look at Eilen and then grabbed the half-Selonian's hand again and pulled her towards the front porch, detouring long enough to snatch some blankets off the couches in one living room.

Content to be led at the moment, Eilen let Satsi lead her out onto the wide porch, the stars a wide swath above and the ocean in plain view, waves loud and lulling this close. The Human spread out one blanket and sat down, tugging until Eilen did the same and then manhandling the hybrid into laying down there with her head pillowed in Satsi's lap as the woman reclined with her back to the porch railing. She unfurled the other blankets and tucked them over Eilen and herself to keep away the mild crispness of the ocean breeze rolling over the beach.

"What're we doing?" Eilen mumbled at last, sure her entire body would be combusting if she wasn't so tired, thanks to having her *face* on the Human's *thighs*. She wiggled around until she felt comfortable and listened to the waves, slow and repetitive.

"Making a little bit of safety. And getting you some rest. Go on. Close your eyes. You need it."

"But..."

She tried to think of some suitable protests but couldn't. She was so, so, so tired. Tired from not sleeping. Tired of being scared. Tired of being tired.

"Shhhh. Just close your eyes. You'll be alright. I've got you."

"Okay," Eilen murmured, and all but melted when fingers slipped into her hair and started scratching gently at her scalp, a palm smoothing over her forehead in soothing motions. The Human lifted her voice and started crooning a lullaby like she did to Samantha.

"Just close your eyes..."

Satsi petted her and sang, and for the first time in a week, Eilen fell asleep feeling safe enough to go into the dreamless dark while the sweet words carried her down:

*"Just close your eyes...
You'll be alright.
Come morning light,
You and I'll be safe...and...sound..."*