

It happened in the night, just after the sun had set. Closer to twilight than anything else, really.

Ruka hadn't been able to sleep — nothing new there, not since the murmurs of another war started, not since the Tameikes got bombed, not since he'd had to come back again and be alone in the Citadel where the stone just bled black with the many decades of Dark use steeped in them — and so he'd gotten up to take a ride. Clear his head. He preferred walking, really, but it was easier to drive down to the coast and then pace down the shoreline for a couple miles until either the sun came up or he was drop dead tired enough to catch a nap. He was enjoying the sounds of the nighttime as he left Estle behind and cut through the jungle before his bike started to slow.

Puzzled, the Mirialan frowned and checked his gauges, but saw no warnings lit up, heard nothing to indicate a leak or loss of pressure or sparking boosters. He even yanked his helmet off, one-handed, just to be sure, straining his now unhindered ears. But no, nothing. The engine sounded normal.

But when he tried to rev the engine, depress the pedals to get back up to speed, nothing happened. Even trying to turn the headlamp on and off didn't work. And then suddenly he was *turning*. He yelped as the bike jerked, going sideways suddenly without his consent or motion, and nearly slamming into a tree. His helmet flew from his grasp and he nearly went flying off the damn thing too. With a few more harsh movements it seer out of the forest and onto the main thoroughfare, heading west. Towards the beach, yes, but not where he'd been going. Ruka growled and tried to yank the yolk back around, but it didn't judge. Not even when he used the Force to enhance his strength.

He couldn't control the damn bike anymore.

And not just that, he realized, as his currently probably murderous sentient ride made it to the coast and sweet again. It was going *towards* something. Some light in the far distance, easily visible across the beach's open expanse before the ocean.

*If that ain't a trap...* a voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Satsi whispered.

"Oh, hell no," Ruka muttered.

Inhaling the Force along with a sharp breath, he stood in one smooth motion and stepped up onto the seat, arms out for balance. Another step, and he was up on the handlebars of the speeder. The rush of the wind buffeted him, blasted back his hair, ripping it out of its tie without his helmet to keep it down.

He felt like he was flying.

But there wasn't time to enjoy it.

Teeth grit and pulse pounding in his throat with excitement and adrenaline, the Mirialan took one more step and slid down, almost losing his balance as he settled over the engine block. He swore in his native tongue and paused for only a heartbeat before he inhaled again and let himself *drop*.

His thighs met the hot metal, squeezing as he swung around, ankles locking, and then the world inverted and he was hanging upside down from his speeder bike. He squinted against the sting of the wind in his eyes, nearly blinding him. But he knew his own ride well, had built the damn thing, and was reasonably confident even without lights to shine into the engine compartment, or a stable surface to work on, or goggles, or *not being upside down while the damn thing was moving at the speed of sound*.

He told himself he was confident, anyway.

Reaching up while feeling his hair brushing and dragging just above the bloody ground, Ruka opened the engine casing, abdominals flexing as he leaned around the panel at an awkward angle. At the very least, it wasn't hard to feel his way half-blindly into his engine, fingers searching for the ignition cable. The heat generated by the running motor burned his hands, but he hissed and ignored it. He grasped desperately, but— no, he couldn't reach from here. Not the ignition can or the battery or the spark plugs. At best he'd be able to rip out the gods-be-damned coolant valve, and then the thing should just explode on him.

Well then. He couldn't stop this ride, not like this, so there was only one thing for it.

Ruka clenched his abdomen and lifted himself back upright, arms straining as he clawed back up and around, sliding awkwardly, boots and skin both squeaking against the painted and polished metal exterior. He wobbled on the edge of the bike, clinging, and closed his eyes. Thought of his family. Prayed.

And he jumped.

Satsi would've been proud. Cora would've screamed.

His Force-fueled leap took him in a high arc while his forward momentum from the speeder dragged him back, like a falling comet knocked off course. He hit the sand hard, once, twice, rolling and spitting. He was like a thrown stone skipping over the water, but instead he got to scrape over the rocks.

When he finally came to a stop, he laid still, groaning. Everything hurt, but at least he hadn't blacked out, and nothing felt broken as he experimentally lifted and twitched all his limbs. He could thank the Dark Side bolstering him for that.

Hours, or maybe just a minute passed before he lifted his head. He glanced up and watched his speeder, now unmanned, racing into the horizon, towards that glow. Well. It wouldn't take long for it to get there, surely, and then what? Would whoever had sabotaged his bike come looking for him? Was this another attack by the Collective, like when they'd bombed the manor? Kriff. He had to get moving, get to the city, find help.

The Mirialan Sith wobbled upright, nearly screeched at the pressure on his burned hands now that the adrenaline rush was dying, and cursed up a storm. It was a good thing he was alone. No one needed to hear him say half of what he did, whether or not they could understand his tongue.

He checked the glow again. He couldn't see the bike anymore. Was that his bad vision, or was it really that far gone already? He wished he had his glasses. And his helmet, because Bogan, his headache. And generally just that none of this was karking happening and that they weren't heading for war and dying once was bad enough he couldn't do it again, he really couldn't—

"Get a hold of yourself," Ruka hissed, and shook his head. He started up the dunes for the forest, pushing past pain. At least he didn't limp. He wasn't that hurt. He could figure out his way back to the city and get help—

His senses absolutely *sang*.

"Ruka!" shrieked a voice not a heartbeat later, a voice full of abject worry and horror, the voice he loved to hear most in the world.

"*Cora?!*" the Mirialan gasped, turning to glimpse his husband just a second before the Pantoran's smaller body was crashing into his. Corazon was panting like he'd run a marathon or danced ten recitals straight. "Wh— what are you doing here? Y'know, nevermind, tell me later, it's not safe—"

"It was me!" Cora gasped and wheezed, tears in his beautiful honey gold eyes as he pulled back, frantically looking Ruka up and down. His express crumpled further as he spied the cuts and bruises. "T-the speeder, it was me, I was trying to surprise you!"

...*what?*

"What?" Ruka said aloud.

"I asked Miss Eilen if she could slice into your speeder and bring you to a, um. A surprise birthday party? But then it got there and *you weren't on it* and I about died of fright on the spot and came to find you."

The Mirialan blinked rapidly. Tried to remember the date. Tried to settle his frayed nerves and swirling thoughts.

"Um?"

"It's your birthday in a few days," Corazon sighed patiently, contrite, his aura oozing upset. "And we thought we'd surprise you—"

"We?"

"I brought Noga and Leda with me. They've been dying to see Selen. And Miss Satsi and Mister Uji and Master Turel and Miss Eilen and Mister Karran...um. Even your— *our*, grandmother. They're all waiting, we set up a tent on the beach, since some of them have never seen the ocean and...well. Yes, it was a surprise. For you. I missed you and I just wanted to give you something nice for once, since you haven't had very pleasant birthdays before, and... Oh, Ru, I'm so, so sorry, I should've considered the climate of things here, that you'd be frightened, *Ashla*, you're hurt..."

Ruka was fairly sure his brain and heart had both gotten knocked out when he crashed because he was currently *liquid* inside. Melting. Molten. Turned to— to syrup or something.

And very much crying.

"Cor," he cut off his panicked, babbling husband before the other man could grow any more incensed. He cupped the Pantoran's beautiful cheeks in both singed palms and pressed their foreheads together, blinking past happy tears that flowed freely, cheeks aching from smiling. "You're incredible, and this is incredible, please stop saying sorry. You— I've missed you so bad. So damn much."

Cora started to say something, but he wasn't having any protests. Ruka tilted his partner's chin up and leaned in and then just that easy they were kissing, mouths slotting together old and familiar, new and delighted.

It seemed like an entire lifetime later, when they ran out of breath and needed to pause. Ruka didn't move away very far. Just enough to take in the healthy flush to Cora's face, the blush-slick look to his mouth. Ruka wanted to bite down on it.

He remembered there was nothing stopping him, and did just that. Cora's hands spasmed where they rested low on Ruka's back.

The motion happened to dig into a sore spot, and Ruka yipped, breaking their kiss. Corazon's gaze went from glassy to wide and alert in one freaking second.

"Ruka! Oh, Ashla. Bother! Why are you— no, *no* more kissing or anything until we take care of you."

"Taking care of me just fine there," grumbled the Mirialan in complaint, but let himself be nudged to sitting as his husband inspected his injuries in the moonlight cast off the water. "It's really not that ba—"

One blue finger flew to his lips, shushing him firmly.

"I'll be the judge of that. Sit. Quiet. Hands to self."

"Yessir," Ruka mumbled as best he was able.

"Better," sniffed Corazon, and went back to his tending. The cool touch of Force-blessed healing, like rippling stream, washed over him, gentle and balmy. The multitude of tiny cuts closed, and the bumps and bruises disappeared before their eyes. His muscles and bones stopped aching. His hands finally felt not on fire, thank *everything*.

"*Ahh*," Ruka groaned, and Cora eyed him again, far too well-mannered and genuinely good and kind to say 'I told you so' but plenty able to feel it. "Okay, yeah, that's better. Thank you, love."

"My angel," Cora murmured in reply, leaning forward to grab each of his hands and kiss his knuckles, then his palms, and then continue all the way up his arms. When he reached Ruka's throat, the Mirialan was torn between a tickled giggle and a deep moan.

"Jump off a speeder more often..."

"Don't you *dare*."

"Kidding, kidding, highness, I swear."

"Mm."

The Pantoran's lips latched to the tendon where neck met shoulder. The Mirialan saw more stars than just the ones above them, a different heat sinking lava-quick into his gut. Growling, he hoisted his husband into his lap and clutched him closer.

"Hnnn... You said...is *Aquayla* really here? And the boys?" His heart clenched like it might burst. It felt like it had been so long since he'd last been home, even just a couple weeks...And it had been almost a year since he'd seen their grandparents, not since the wedding.

But on the other hand, *his husband*. Like, damn.

"Mmm, *Aquaylo* too, but..." Cora chewed his lip, and really, that was Ruka's job. He looked sly but embarrassed at once. Way too polite. Ruka rolled his hips to dissuade his husband of that. "Ahh! But. But I think they can all wait a bit longer. Just this once."

Ruka gave a mock gasp. "Lord Ya-ir! How scandalous!"

"Shut up and kiss me," Cora shot back, blush deep, deep purple all the way to the tips of his ears and down his neck and oh, did Ruka intend to find out how far down it went before they moved *at all*.

He flipped them over with a quick heave, settling Cora back into the sand and grass. The Pantoran's legs wrapped around his waist as easy as breathing.

"Best surprise ever," Ruka told him, and went back to remapping that wonderful mouth of his.