

His parents are shouting again.

It comes from the kitchen, muffled but getting louder through the crappy floorboards. He knows, without having to hear either of them slurring or smell how they stink, that they'll both be drunk. Or at least Mama will be, because she never isn't.

He hunches his shoulders, gets up off the ground, wipes his tears. He's so hungry, but it doesn't matter. Nothing about him matters. Not compared to—

He pads across the hall to his brothers' room. The crib he'd had to stick them both in for so long is gone now, the sides broken down to nail over the window whose frame cracked, covered in plastic. The boys aren't curled on their ratty mattress, but it's got a frame, and he looks under it to see them huddled there.

"It's okay," he tells them. "It's okay, they'll stop, go back to sleep."

"Scared," Noga whimpers, clutching Leda, who's learning to walk faster than he can get him shoes. Both toddlers crawl towards him on their bellies until their heads poke out, and he helps pull them the rest of the way over, shoulders scraping against the metal.

The shouting is getting louder and louder.

Leda whimpers.

"It's okay, come on, get in bed."

"Stay?" they both mumble, and he says, "Duh," and piles onto the bed with them, covering them all in the blanket. His legs stick out the bottom, but they're warm.

"It's okay, it'll—"

There is a loud thump and a scream. He goes tense. Leda instantly starts crying.

He hugs his little brothers tightly, murmuring fiercely in Mirialan, "Don't worry. I won't let anyone touch you, never. I've got you. It's okay. Stay here. Don't come out no matter what until I say so."

"No—"

"Stay here and don't move," he snaps, and they listen, because they know by now.

He runs out of the room, skids to the landing, jumps down the stairs. Turns the corner and scampers into the kitchen, tripping over a knocked down chair. It does smell. Awful. It's like

someone is holding his head under a faucet of booze. He coughs and gags, rubbing his eyes, and sees his Mama and the man who fathered him.

Her skin is green, just like his, brighter than his father's paler yellow. There is red on it. She's hardly standing, fallen against the countertop, and he's waving his arms, bellowing.

His father hits his mother again, and she hits the floor, and he screams. He runs over and tackles his father, not caring that he's so much smaller, not caring that they're both screaming, that his mother is screaming, telling him to *stop, it's fine, stop. Stop*. But he doesn't care. He grabs at his father's thin arm and digs his nails in and tries to pull him away, away from his mother and away from his brothers and away from them all.

The knuckles that crack against his cheek backhanded hurt. He can't see for a second, can't feel anything besides the dizzy wave of pain that whites him out. He's on the ground too, then, looking up, and—

Looking down.

Not looking up, looking *down*. Looking down at his little brother, his little brother who's his goddamn son. He's looking down at Noga, and there's blood on the little boy's uninked face. It dribbles from his nose and busted lip and he's crying, crying and screaming at him, telling him, "*Get away from us! Get away! Leave us alone!*"

"Please, stop, stop," and it's not his mother pleading when he turns, it's Corazon. Corazon is on the floor too, and the Pantoran's beautiful face is marred by blooming bruises, one of his sunlight golden eyes ruptured and bloodshot. He's scrambling over to Noga and clutching the child to him protectively, and Leda has come out and run over and is screaming for his brother and his father and telling him to leave them alone too. Cora tries to shove Leda back, to shield both boys at once. He's crying. They're all crying.

*Ruka* looks down at them. Looks down at his hands.

He has blood on his knuckles.

He did this.

He hurt them. He hurt his husband. He hurt their children. He got angry and he—

Just like his father, just like Glava. He got angry, just for one second, *just for a second*, it was only a second and—

Ruka stumbled back. Stopped. Gaspd. Reached out for his family.

"I— I didn't mean—" and that was worse, that made it worse, "I'm so sorry, Cora, love, boys—"

"Stay away from them!" Corazon screamed, beaten but unbroken, sobbing but shining, and a shimmering, translucent barrier manifested between them. The Jedi's glare *burned*. "My mother was right about you, they were all right about you, you're sick! You're dangerous! Get out! Get away and get out and do not ever come near us again!"

He hugged both boys close to him and together they all huddled and cried and *bled*.

Because of him.

*Because of him.*

Ruka turned and ran—

*"Ru!"*

He opened his eyes with a soft gasp and sat bolt upright. His chest heaved. Electricity danced up and down his arms, bright flashes in the dark. A light clicked suddenly on, blinding him briefly, and then Cora was there, cupping his face.

"Ruka, angel, breathe. Hey, hey, you're alright, it was just a dream, you're alright now. I'm here, we're both right here, see? Shhh, angel, it's okay..."

"Cora?" he wheezed, and realized he was gasping, realized his chest hurt, realized *he couldn't breathe*. He ducked forward and pressed his face into his partner's shoulder and panted fast and ragged and shallow, trying for more air and completely unable to get it, trying to make the lightning stop, trying not to fall apart, Bogan, he was shaking so hard it *hurt*—

But Cora was there, and Cora helped. He felt the cool, serene brush of the Light washing over and through him, settling his nerves, unclenching his muscles, taking over on his lungs' behalf. All of a sudden his spine seemed to unstring and his gasps changed to feel inhalations that started in the pit of his stomach and held until his sternum felt it might burst, before he exhaled steady and slow. He slumped, and his husband cradled him, stroking down his back, smoothing fingerpads over his scars.

"You're okay, I've got you," murmured the Pantoran, soft and sweet in his ear, and Ruka knew he was crying. Cora's nightshirt was getting damp under his cheek.

They stayed like that for what seemed like a long time until Cora nudged him to lie back down. He went limply, curling tight next to his partner and sighing into his sweat-soaked sheets.

"That was a really bad one," whispered Cora, staring at him across their pillows, pink brows furrowed in worry, gorgeous golden eyes tired but not bloody, not bruised, not crying, heartbroken, or glaring in righteous fury. "The war?"

The usual answer, for both of them.

"No," Ruka whispered back, and shuddered. "Can... Can you check on the guys?"

"Were they in your dream? Oh, *honey*, I'm so sorry. Yes, we can go check on them, they're probably still asleep—"

"No," the Mirialan Sith cut him off, voice cracking. "N-not... Not me. Just you. Please, *mhi ahminaa*."

Corazon started at him concernedly for a long moment but nodded.

"Alright, angel, of course. I'll be right back." He leaned over, kissed his forehead right over the tattoo that mirrored his own, and climbed out of bed. Ruka watched him slip out the door and down the hall towards Noga and Leda's room. Even with the space now for them each to have their own, they hadn't wanted to stop sharing. They'd begged for stacked beds. He and Cora had both been more than happy to oblige them, both worried and heartwarmed that the siblings wanted to stay close. *When they're older*, they'd agreed, discussing it. *They'll grow out of it and want their own spaces, especially when they hit their teens. It's fine for now.*

They'd all put that bed together. Or at least, Ruka had done most of the actual assembling while Cora "supervised" and Noga and Leda jumped on the mattresses and threw screws at each other until Cora scolded them.

It seemed like forever before the Pantoran returned. Each second was agony, was bloody knuckles and scared, small faces, betrayed and broken. But eventually his partner did pad back into their room, gently pushing the door almost shut behind him. He left it open a crack, and the Mirialan was doubly glad.

"They're fine. Snoozing away. Though one of them left their shoes out *again*."

"Noga," Ruka answered immediately. "Leda's are under his pillow."

"...of course they are." Cora smiled at him, and Ruka wobbled one back that fell quickly.

His partner got back under the covers, yawning into one hand. He smoothed the rumpled blankets from where they'd been kicked up in Ruka's probable thrashing and then settled in against the headboard next to him. Ruka put an arm around his shoulders, needing him close, and Cora leaned into his side with a comfortable hum.

"If not the war, then what happened in your dream?"

"I..." He closed his eyes, opened them again, brushed his thumb over his husband's smooth, soft, perfectly untouched cheek. "I hurt you. You and— a-and the kids."

"Ruka, you know that's not remotely possible. It would *never* happen. It's just a nightmare."

"It could. I could."

"No," the Pantoran denied firmly. And, as if he could read his mind — which, well, he could, but the Mirialan knew that his partner just knew him that well — he continued, "You are not your father, Ruka, and more importantly, Glava isn't you. He was, pardon speaking ill of the absent, a troubled man with too many vices and too little care or will to overcome them. He abandoned you, and that is why it was always so easy for him to mistreat you and Utroba, nevermind that she let him. *You* stayed. *You* tried your best to help your mother. *You* kept your siblings safe and healthy and fed and you kept Glava and anyone else who could ever do them wrong far from them. *You* have given literally everything you had to give and *so much more* to the boys, every second of every day, and you've given so much to me, too. You love us, like we love you. You could never do such a thing to us."

"But I *could*. Maybe not normally, but what if I got angry, and I lost control, and—"

To that, Cora only shook a finger at him. "You have control, Ruka, you and I both know that. Of yourself and your powers."

"Complacency leads to ignorance, ignorance leads to vulnerability, and vulnerability the Dark Side. And the Dark Side can only corrupt."

Cora blinked at him. "Even I didn't remember that one, is that Master Ta'var?"

"She said it a lot."

"The masters aren't always right. And she was kind of a, *ahem*, bitch about it."

Ruka actually *snorted*. "Isn't that my line?"

"Love, we're not Padawans anymore, don't make excuses. I know you're afraid," he took his hand, squeezed, "but you know you've mastered this, and you know you're careful, and it's because you worry that we both know you'll always be vigilant. I believe in you, and you believe in me, so how about you trust me enough to believe in yourself? Don't let the nightmares take away all the progress you've made. You're in control here, not them."

The Mirialan grumbled, then sighed. Threaded their fingers.

"Thank you, *mhi ahminaa*."

"You don't have to thank me for anything. I'll always remind you how wonderful you are, angel. I love you."

"I love you too. So much. So kriffing much. I swear, I won't ever hurt—" he choked, couldn't finish. Cora rolled over and hugged him again, and he wrapped his arms around the smaller man in turn, clutching at him.

"I know, I know," his partner soothed. Ruka tried to listen, he did, but when he closed his eyes he saw the blood again.

"I don't think I can sleep tonight." He pulled back slightly, just enough to press kisses into his husband's hair. "You should go back to bed."

"Mmm, I don't think so, Mister Tenbriss Ya-ir. It's three in the morning, you've had a bad dream, we are neither of us alright, and I am not leaving you alone. So, there will be pancakes. By which I mean, make pancakes. Please."

Ruka laughed short and snotty. "Is that so, Mister Ya-ir?" he echoed back. "Fine. What kind?"

"Ooooh, oh, do we have everything for those Mirialan ones? The sweet ones that make my teeth hurt, not your spicy nonsense."

He chuckled again, getting up and taking his husband's hand as they quietly crept to the kitchen.

"*Ttreslece*? Yes, your highness."

They stopped when Ruka paused just outside their kitchen. Cora tugged at him, and the Mirialan glanced over to see understanding and a soft sunrise smile.

He shuddered, breathed deep, kept going.

Later, his hands were splattered, but it was with batter instead.