

Corazon woke up alone.

The man sat up with a short huff, blearily smoothing his mussed hair back out of his face. He didn't know what had woken him; the house was quiet, the bedroom still and dark. He didn't recall any nightmare. A familiar sensation tugged lightly at his senses, a shimmering hum, just a whisper of the Light, but it wasn't defined. Not a warning from the Force, just a stirring in it. Distant, very distant, an echo of a dream.

Regardless, the Pantoran immediately noticed the empty side of the bed, and brushed his fingers over the sheets. They were cold. Wherever Ruka was, he had been gone a fair amount of time. The young Jedi frowned, fought against the urge to curl back up under the covers, and climbed out of bed.

Padding on slippers down the hall, he poked his head into Noga and Leda's bedroom and, with the barest inhalation of the Force to enhance his sight, spied them both curled up asleep in their beds. Satisfied, he pulled the door softly to the frame behind him — but didn't shut it, they never shut their doors, any of them, as a rule — and proceeded to check both bathrooms and the spare room, just to be sure. When those turned up empty, he went downstairs; if he still didn't find Ruka, then he'd check the garage and the roof. His partner liked it up there, especially on bad nights.

Cora didn't have to go so far, however. As soon as he descended the stairs and looked into the living room, he spotted his query sitting in the dark, head bowed and hands folded. He scuffed a foot along the carpet as he approached, just to be sure Ruka would hear him coming and wouldn't be startled. His Sith partner looked up immediately, his twisted expression falling gentle as soon as he saw him.

"What are you doing up, angel? Did you have a nightmare?" The Pantoran yawned, smothered it, rubbed at his eyes and thought longingly of caf just appearing without him actually having to use the machine.

"No, just been thinking," answered his husband, getting up from the couch and coming over to wrap strong arms around him. Cora hummed and buried his face in the Mirialan's chest, sagging there, not entirely awake even if he was on his feet.

"What about?" he mumbled into green skin, closing his eyes again. Ruka rubbed his back, carded fingers through his hair, wonderful enough to take his weight because his legs didn't want to and he should have still been horizontal and why didn't they move this discussion to the couch and under a blanket, that'd be great.

Ruka didn't answer him immediately though, which was enough to make the Jedi peel back his eyelids with effort and prop his chin up so he could look at his partner properly. The Mirialan was staring off into space, face a little drawn, eyes a little damp. He'd been quieter than usual

for a few days now, but the Pantoran had intended to wait until his husband wanted to bring up whatever was bothering him. It wasn't the boys, surely, since they'd been happy in their new school year lately, the most settled since the move, and as far as he knew, there wasn't any more news on either his partner's father nor mother. No emergency with the Lotus or Odan-Urr or Arcona or any of their friends.

Not sleeping, though, was where Corazon drew the line, and so he took a deep breath to shake off his muzziness and leaned up to kiss Ruka's cheek, drawing back his attention.

"Hmm? Ay, sorry, love, I was just—"

"Thinking?"

"Yeah."

"What's going on, angel?"

The Mirialan sighed deeply. "It's...you remember I've mentioned my friend, from when I was a kid? Like, once. Or something."

Cora nodded. "Back when we were Padawans, yes. Your first boyfriend. Or crush, I think you said."

"Did I ever tell you what happened with him?"

"No, but... I've inferred." He reached up to cup one tattooed, scarred cheek, brushed circles there with his thumb. Ruka nuzzled into the touch. "I distinctly remember you talking about how you two planned to do things if you grew up. *If*. And you never talk about him, and I've never met him, and there's no holos...I just assumed he passed."

"Yeah," Ru murmured. "He died."

"And you were thinking about him?"

"Mmhm. It's. This is...today is actually his nameday. I kinda think of him every time when it gets close." The Mirialan gave a sigh. "Even over ten years later. That's stupid, huh?"

"I don't think so at all. That isn't how grief works, Ru. My mother still gets sad about my grandfather, and he passed when I was a baby. Look at us, and the war. Is it stupid that we're still dealing with all that?"

"No..."

"Don't be hard on yourself just because it's you."

Ruka grunted at him, looking away again. The Mirialan shifted on his feet, and Cora moved to tug him along to the kitchen by the hand. He suspected they wouldn't be going back to bed, and tea, at the least, was in order.

"I've got it," the green-skinned Sith muttered, as if sensing intent, kissing him briefly and nudging him to the table while he moved for the kettle. Corazon wasn't about to argue, folding himself primly into his usual chair. He watched his partner pull out cups and fiddle at the stove and pour leaves and spices with a carelessness only habitual muscle memory could create. Ruka stayed standing, even when there was nothing to do but wait for the water to boil, bracing both black-nailed hands against the countertop and bowing his head.

The Pantoran waited too.

Eventually steam started to hiss, and his husband snatched the kettle before it could actually shriek and risk waking the children upstairs. He measured out their drinks and set them steeping, still standing there. Still, Cora waited.

And finally after a few more minutes, Ruka murmured, "I don't...want to talk about how it happened. I mean, I will. I'll tell you, one day, love, I promise. Just. It was bad."

"You know that's perfectly alright, angel. Like we said— it's not secrets, it's just hard, and that's okay."

Ruka turned around to offer him the tiniest smile. "I love you," he said, and Cora gave a gentle, reassuring smile back.

"And I love you. Is there anything you *do* want to talk about?"

The Mirialan shrugged.

"I have been... Not dreaming of him lately, but it feels like... Like something's calling, you know? In the Force. I figured it was just memories but it's starting to feel more like visions, and I don't really know what to make of it. They're kriffing confusing."

Cora sat forward, clasping both hands on the table and leaning his chin on them.

"Have you meditated on them? Master A'lora is a powerful seer, and both she and Master Vorsa discussed meditation on such topics."

Ruka rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I tried. Doesn't really help me, you know I'm bad at that frang."

"Do you think it's a warning?"

"Nah. Doesn't feel like that. Just... Like calling." His tone dropped, got a little quieter. A little scared. "I keep wondering if...if it is though, and I'm just not good enough at all the spiritual stuff to understand. What if it IS a warning and I just can't tell? If—" His voice cracked. "If what happened to him happens to the boys or you or mama or..."

"Ru, shh, we're all okay," the Pantoran soothed, getting up and reaching out both physically and in the Force, melding their minds even as he twined their fingers to ease his partner's anxiety and offer calm instead.

"I know that. Right now. But it's starting to freak me the kriff out, Cor," the Mirialan admitted, massaging his temple with his free hand.

"You haven't been sleeping much, have you? I noticed it wasn't good, but..."

"Not really. Mostly been watching you or the guys sleep. Commer my mom yesterday, just to check. She says hi, by the way."

"Hi," replied the Pantoran, trying for a little levity. Ruka snorted. "Angel... If this is bothering you that much, then maybe we should talk about it, or ask Master Sorenn..."

But the Mirialan was already shaking his head. "No, I think this is just... My problem. Not something crazy. And I don't wanna talk to Turel about this stuff. Besides, it's not the first time I've felt crappy over it."

"What *do* you want to do? What did you do the other times?"

"I...I used to go visit him, today. Right after it happened, then once a year if I could, and then it kinda stopped. I got busy, or I just didn't feel like I needed to, you know? And then sometimes I just went 'cause I **did.**"

The Jedi's pink brows furrowed, and he suddenly felt terribly guilty and inattentive. "I've never seen you go..."

"Ay, don't make that face." Ruka clicked his fingers at him, nudging them back over to sit and holding his hand on the tabletop. "You ain't seen me go cause I haven't **gone.** Not in...Bogan, two years? Three now? Gods. Frang just got so crazy when the Jedi showed up, and then there was you and the kids and..." He shrugged. "I went once to talk about you, actually. Right after we met, before we really started training. Back when I was freaking the kriff out about everything and liking you so much. But not since then."

Cora squeezed his partner's hand.

"Why don't you go today? You can see him again, tell him about whatever you like. It might make things feel a little better."

"S'what I was thinking about. But I kinda got all, ay, stuck in my head about it. How long it'd been, and I wanted to talk to you about it anyway, 'cause it felt wrong, you not knowing, and...yeah."

"Well, there you go. You should do it. Go see him. I'll watch the boys today, so you can take your time. Maybe take them to visit my mother, she's been asking about dinner."

"Actually...I was gonna ask you to come with me." Violet eyes flicked away and back again, tired and vulnerable. "If that's okay? I dunno if it'd be weird."

"Of course not, dearest, I'd be happy to accompany you if you like. We'll accomplish a few things at once, Noga and Leda can go have a visit with my family and then we can join them all this evening when we're done."

Ruka nodded along. "Let's wait for the boys to get up, then we can go. It's down in the old neighborhood, so it'll take us a bit."

"Alright." Corazon squeezed his husband's hand one more time before grabbing his tea. The heat bled through the metal, warming his hands. "Why don't we go lay down? It'll be awhile yet."

The pair retreated back to their bedroom, settling in lounging against the headboard, Cora curled up between Ruka's spread legs, back pressed to his chest. The holoclock seemed to mock him, and the Pantoran scowled briefly at it, which got his husband to laugh at him.

"Sorry if I woke you, not being in bed."

"I forgive you, so long as I am delivered cuddles now," the Jedi replied, sighing back onto his seat. Ruka wrapped both arms around him, set his chin atop the Pantoran's head, kissed his hair.

"So...four more hours...Do you want to tell me about him? Your friend?"

"Mm...yeah. Okay."

"Start with a name, perhaps?"

"...I didn't say? Huh. Yi'o. His name was Yi'o, and his little brother was Jekk, and their mama was Beris. He was Mirialan too. We lived on the same street. Only ones."

"How'd you meet?"

"School, before Mama stopped takin' me and I had to stop goin'. I was like, ten maybe, and he was younger than me, and his brother was even littler. Me and him and Jekk all played together a lot, mostly before the boys were born. I was a lot busier with Noga and then Leda after that, but Yi'o didn't care that I was like, boring and always washing diapers or anything. He still came over and we'd all eat popsicles on the stoop and throw cans at speeders and chase strays up on the roof and stuff before they had to go home. Wasn't ever safe, with the gangs, but still."

"That sounds nice."

"Was, for awhile. Then..." He shrugged, sighed. "Then Jekk died. And then Yi'o died. And then their mama died. And I just...well, I didn't. Right? So. Life went on. Worked. Took care of the boys. Took care of my mom. You know."

Cora reached up and hugged the Mirialan's arms tighter to him, and Ruka hugged back, tight and fierce.

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

They didn't talk much more after that, just holding one another and waiting for the sun to come up. When noises of two almost-teenagers getting out of bed did finally reach them from down the hall, Ruka kissed him once and got up to make breakfast. Cora got showered and dressed to join them, and despite some protesting, they bundled the two children off to visit their step-grandparents for the day. Once his mother's personal transport was safely out of sight, the men got into their own speeder and set out.

Corazon turned the car towards the familiar alien ghettos, beginning the long descent from where they lived on now. Idly he watched the scenery change, magnificent, gleaming skyhooks and crystalline bridges and elegant ships in the Sephi style changing, all at once, to crammed, dilapidated tenements and kliks of warehouses and factories spewing smog, the air yellowing the further down in the atmosphere and the closer to Kias't's surface they got. Burned-out little buildings crouched next to engine manufacturers and broken-windowed shops with long-dead neon signs. All sorts of people of all kinds were everywhere down below the speeder lanes, even more crammed together than their cities. Cora knew from experience that not one of them would be a Sephi, when other aliens besides them were rare back in the upper sectors, his noble family included.

When they reached Ruka's neighborhood, the Mirialan quietly directed him down a few streets the Pantoran had never explored; Ru had always discouraged it, generally keeping them to a few paths between the shops and the house and the boys' old school. He'd always plead with

the Pantoran not to go out at night, not to visit him at any of the places he worked, not to go outside, often.

"Up there," murmured his partner, and Cora glanced across a barren strip of road to see what was clearly a cemetery, though the fencing delineating it was all but collapsed or smashed in or cut away. He parked the speeder nearby, since there didn't seem to be anywhere meant to actually park and Ruka made no comment on it, and together they walked over. The Mirialan picked some gap in the fence seemingly at random and slipped through, his partner following, foliage nearly choking out anything resembling order or walking paths. Cora shivered violently when his shoes met stone instead of grass, knowing he was treading on graves. It felt so wrong, disrespectful, but there wasn't much to be done, so he just kept up after Ruka, stepping as lightly as he could— all but pirouetting over old bones and lichen.

They walked a little while, deeper into the plot. His husband kept squinting around, occasionally frowning, before he seemed to spot something, and hurried more purposefully in that direction.

"There used to be a tree here," muttered the Sith in explanation. "Old thing, guess it finally fell over in some storm. Maybe that one last week? Stump still seems fresh."

They climbed over said felled log, bark bleached to a patchy white-and-brown to match the bones below the earth it sat on, and Ruka paused to look around again. His scowl deepened.

"Kriff. It's under there. Help me?"

"Of course," Cora replied, though he doubted his partner actually needed it; he'd seen him lift, throw, hit, and toss much heavier things with the Dark Side than the pathetic-looking, withered trunk.

Both of them bent and fitted palms under the wood, avoiding the branches that shook when they heaved in unison, lifting the thing without much difficulty thanks to their amplified strength. Both of them also paused, however, when they had it up.

"I...didn't think this through. Don't wanna drop it on anyone else."

"We can move it to the edge of the property?" suggested the Pantoran, and the Mirialan nodded. Again they acted as one, so practiced at doing so by now, invisible hands levitating tree right out of their hold and over the grounds, raining dried, dead leaves in its wake; Cora had to lift one hand in a gesture to guide his focus, but Ruka barely moved his eyes. Once it reached the road, they let it down again. The Pantoran stared at it a moment, bit his lip.

"We can drag it off later," his partner promised, spotting his look. "Doubt it'd bug anyone though."

"Alright," the Jedi replied, placated. He dusted off his hands and took a deep breath, then turned back to where the tree had lain. "Well then...shall we?"

"Mmm."

Cora reached out and took his hand. Ruka's clenched back.

The Mirialan lead them over to one marker, kneeling to rip away some of the weeds. The Basic text on it was faded, but not so much so as others nearby, still clearly legible. Nothing grandiose, just a name and date.

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"It's their family name," Ruka explained quietly, brushing scarred fingers over the engraving. "They're all here, since they died so close together, y'know? Wouldn't have a marker, 'cept all of us on our street chipped in a bit for 'em." He went silent, staring, and Cora squeezed his shoulder.

The Mirialan shuddered, then spoke again.

"Hey, Miss BB. Hey, Jekky. Hey, Yi. Sorry I haven't been around in awhile. Gets busy, yeah, with the Jedi stuff, like I told you. Brought someone this time. Finally get to meet Cora instead of just listening to me, huh? Corazon, this is Yi'o. Yi, this is the love of my life."

"*Ru*," Cora said, tears that he'd been repressing all morning welling up. Ruka smiled at him sadly.

"Wanted to come say sorry I didn't come sooner, and wish you another happy nameday. What's it like, being nine for the, what, fifteenth time? Your grandmama always did tell ya to stay eight. Good job. Did better than I did." He chuckled, snotty. "Sorry. Crappy joke. I'm just not sure what to tell you now that I'm here. Lot happened. Me and Cor are married now. Live up near the frangin' Empress' skyhook, how's that for crazy? Noga and Leda are older than you, now. Actually, that's kind of crazier. Heh. I stuck with the Jedi thing, kinda. More complicated than that, but who cares? I can throw kriffing *lightning* and almost fly, it's pretty damn awesome. We've been to war. Twice. I almost joined you. Couldn't though. Had to come back for someone." The Mirialan reached up the put his hand over Cora's on his shoulder, their rings touching. Cora sniffed. Knelt down next to his husband. Touched the stone too.

"If I may," he spoke. "I just wanted to say it's lovely to meet you, Yi'o Bissa. And Jekk and Beris too. Thank you for being Ruka's friend. I promise I'll do my best every day to take care of him and make him happy like you would have wanted."

"Cora," Ruka murmured, choked, staring at him. The Pantoran offered a trembling smile back.

"I promise," Corazon repeated.

"Okay," said another voice.

Both of them startled and whipped their heads around towards the sound. A short figure stood there, just a foot or two away, a faint shimmer in the pale morning sunlight. It was a boy, small and short, with a round face and curling hair. Cora's eyes widened, while next to him, Ruka gasped out like he'd been punched in the gut.

"Yi'o?" he whispered.

The spirit smiled, winked. Sort of *shifted* closer and peered at them.

"I'll take your promise, 'cause ya seem ta mean it," said the ghostly boy, looking right at Cora. "Thanks. For him. And thanks for movin' tha' tree. Was buggin' my mom." Then he turned to Ruka. Smiled even bigger. Waved. "Thanks, 'Ka. Come back soon, yeah? Be good. I love you."

And just like that, he seemed to wink away, gone in a blink with the shift of the breeze.

"...did that just happen?" Ruka asked eventually, an immeasurable amount of time later. Corazon realized his legs were cramping and shifted, turning to his partner. The Mirialan was crying freely, eyes still wide in shock. The Pantoran glanced back at the grave, at his husband, and then pulled him tight into another hug.

"Yes," he murmured. "I think it did."