

This is how it goes when he's maybe six or maybe seven:

His mom leaves him at the house by himself most days and comes back either very late at night or in the middle of the next day. It's something that happens more now than he thinks he remembers it used to, but that was back before his Auntie Zia stopped visiting, and he hasn't seen her in many years. Sometimes, instead of Zia yelling at his mom, it will be one of the more concerned neighbors tired of hearing him cry or annoyed by his running around asking them if they need any chores or work done. Other times, it will be that she's just sober long enough to feel bad that he had to sit around in the dark with no food in the fridge for a couple days because the electricity is off.

Whatever it is, sometimes, she takes him with her and leaves him on the curb outside the clubs or at a shop nearby the bar, somewhere she thinks he can stay. He doesn't usually stay, going off as soon as she's out of sight to just walk or ask around for little jobs. People don't always talk to him because he's little; call him a kid, or think he's lost. But he's not. He hasn't gotten lost in a long time. Knows his streets, and knows he shouldn't be out on them, because the gangs are around, but part of him also doesn't care. Part of him thinks, *then it wouldn't hurt*.

Just a part though. Mostly he's just hungry and bored, and so he hauls trash or recycles cans and bottles or runs messages or tiles roofs or climbs into machines in factories where the other workers are too big to fit inside to help fix them after he's told how. The kinds of factories that can't afford the droids to repair those things, or the repairs to the droids themselves. He gets good at that, at machines. Even likes them until he sees another kid get sprayed on the walls out of one and then it's a little...scarier.

So usually he doesn't stay where his mom leaves him, just makes his own way back home by night, and she usually ends up back there having forgotten she brought him at all. She smiles and hugs him a lot when she sees him and he helps her to bed. Rinse, if they have water that month. Repeat.

One such time, she drops him at a speeder station before waving goodbye, her bracelets jangling. It's cold, though, in the winter, in his threadbare clothes, so he's not feeling much like walking, and he can't muster up the drive to do it anyway just yet. Instead he goes into the little station shop, the bell ringing overhead, the heating turned up full blast hitting him like a wave when he goes through the door. It makes his nose itch.

He looks around, sees aisles with snacks and coolers full of drinks, and his stomach clenches. He thinks about just grabbing one, just *one*, and running, but—

No. He's hungry, not starving, so— so no.

He turns down past the windows — they've got bars on them, but that's normal — and walks right, looking over speeder supplies and dumb little knickknacks just to look. He walks by the

coolers with all the bottles and cans his mother loves more than him and makes a circuit well past the section with deep-fried fast food that's probably been there since yesterday, because it still smells too good. He walks around just looking until he gets almost to the front and sees a rack with holos on it and stops.

Crouching down, he peers a little wide-eyed at the bright, bright colors and big text. They're all in Basic; he knows some of the letters. Mama and Zia had used to read to him sometimes and they'd talked about it in school before he couldn't go anymore last year; he remembered tracing their shapes over dotted lines.

He picks one up at random — not that random, it's got a lot of green on it and he likes green — and flips through it. They aren't books, he knows, or letter pages. They're short and full of pictures, but not cutesy ones. These pictures are all cool and amazing. There's stars and space and ships. Blaster fights and really buff men in coats and women in weird skimpy clothes like his Mama wears to the clubs and troopers. There's flying whales and big animals and freaky awesome aliens.

He sits down there on the tile and keeps staring.

And that's how he meets Tan.

Above him, a scratchy voice demanded, "Hey kid, what are you doing? Where's your mom?"

"M'lookin'," Ruka answered, then shrugged. "Dunno. Bar maybe. Dropped me off here. She says she's comin' home but she never do."

The guy on the other side of the counter paused at that. Ruka was still trying to spell out something on one page when he finally said, "...you can't just read the comics, kid, you have to pay for them.

Ruka frowned, hunched in, looked away with a little flinch when the storekeeper's voice got sharper.

"I don' have none," he mumbled.

There were footsteps. The Mirialan curled a little tighter, got his feet under him. He could run if he had to. Throw the comic, apparently, at the clerk's face. Go home. He was ready to do just that when two boots filled his field of vision and he craned his neck back to look up.

The guy was an alien, he wasn't sure what. He had really dark blue skin, almost inky, and a longish neck and he was very thin and didn't have all his fingers. His face was really thin, like someone had squished it together in the front, but his bald head was round. His red eyes took up most of his face where his forehead left any room for it.

Whatever he was, the man was frowning a little, but he didn't try to grab Ruka, so they just stared at each other. Ruka clutched at the comic. The guy huffed.

"Can you clean?" he asked, taking the Mirialan by surprise.

"Uh huh. I does it for my Mama. Cook too."

The clerk seemed surprised. "You cook for your mom? You're too little to be using a stove. Or knives!"

"I'm not little," protested Ruka. "And I been cooking for like, ever. I can do whatever anything! I work all the time. I go to the *factories*."

"Well I don't need a cook here, you little brat chef," grumbled the guy. "But if you can sweep up and wipe the shelves and counters and stack some things, then you can read those trash holocomics. Sound fair?"

Excitement zipped through him. The Mirialan nodded hard. "Yeah, yeah, ay!"

"Good." He extended a hand and Ruka only stared a minute at it before shaking. "My name is Entan. Durlis, like my shop. Who're you, kid?"

"Ruka Tenbriss."

"Broom and mop are through that door behind the beer, Ruka. Sweep then mop, you hear? Always sweep first, I don't want you pushing mud around my floors. And go to the fresher and wipe your face off first, you look like you haven't bathed in days, brat."

He hadn't, but Entan didn't need to know that.

"I know, I can *mop*," Ruka scoffed instead, but got up and did as he was told.

By mid afternoon, the shopkeeper had probably had maybe three customers, but the store was cleaner. Ruka was good, he was pretty sure. He did the floors and wiped the shelves and under the counters and in the cryos and under, which were gross. Entan stopped him then to give him a soda and a nusaage roll and one of those comics.

"Here, bud. Take a break. You earned it."

Ruka took a break.

He liked the pictures. Mouthed the letters he recognized to himself and tried to spell the words. The Duros dealt with some more customers then came outside and stood next to where the Mirialan lounged against the wall, his back and butt aching on the duracrete and the smell of fuel strong, but engrossed in his zine.

The flicker of a lighter made him look up. Entan was smoking, something fat and wrapped in brown paper. It stank. Ruka wrinkled his nose but asked, "Can I try?"

The shopkeeper snorted at him, offered the thing. "Sure, kid. *Sure.*"

The Mirialan mimicked him, putting the end that wasn't on fire in his mouth and sucking. Smoke rushed into his mouth and nose and throat and he coughed and gagged. The alien laughed at him, snatching it back before it hit the floor when Ruka dropped it so he could gag.

"Th-tha's d-d-dis... 'ust...ing!" he hacked out.

"No it's not, you're just too young to have any taste. You don't need a cigarra, kid," chuckled Entan, and once Ruka could wheeze again through his tears and red eyes and stinging chest, he spat Mirialan curses at him. "*Haha.* Try something less strong next time."

Entan smoked half his stick of evil and gross and Ruka finished his food and went back to cleaning up in back. He stacked and rearranged some shelves the Duros claimed he didn't feel like bending over to get to. A few more hours passed. They talked a little bit between customers when the shop was empty, mostly sort of ragging on each other. The shopkeeper didn't once treat him like a kid, and that was great.

When he left that evening to walk himself home, Entan gave him two holocomics and his first pack of cigarrillos. Ruka decided he liked him.

So, he went back two days later by himself.

"You again," Entan groused, and Ruka lifted three fingers at him. The Duros snorted, did the gesture back, which looked way dumber and less offensive on him since he only *had* three. More like waving.

"Got more work?" Ruka asked, and the man pointed at the mop sitting against one cooler door.

The Mirialan grinned.

It became something of a pattern. He went to *Durlis' Fuel n' Fry* Once every couple of days between other days working somewhere else or staying home with his mom when she was sick with her hangovers. Entan gave him work to do, and he got to read his comics basically whenever he wanted. At one point, the Duros stepped out for his smoke break — Ruka was

already on his, the little stick smoldering between his teeth while he squinted and scowled and tried to focus on words that gave him a headache — and nudged him.

"Why are you reading that one again? What am I giving you others for if you're just going to stick with that one? It's got to be the tenth time I've seen you."

"I'm not readin' it *again*, 'm still *readin'* it," Ruka muttered, scowling. His ears got hot, and he shrugged, trying to seem casual about it. "I'm... I'm. Teaching. Myself," he said, haltingly. "Cause it's Basic. And. I. Yeah."

"You're—" Entan cut off in surprise, and Ruka scowled a little harder when the quiet stretched. *Don't start now*, he thought. *Don't*.

But Tan didn't say anything mean or pitying or whatever that a lot of people did when they found him by himself. Instead, he just scoffed, "You need something better than that trash if you're learning. Come back tomorrow. I've got a book my daughter never liked much. You can have that." He paused, added, "If you deep clean the refreshers."

Ruka side-eyed him, then nodded while wrinkling his nose, because those bathrooms were fringing gross again three seconds after he cleaned them every time.

"Fine, deal."

The holo Tan gave him the next day was a kid's book on Basic. Ruka nearly threw it at his head, but Tan flicked his ear first and pointed out that it was *for* learning and that if he wanted to be that stupid he could go find some babies or some gangers to hang out with. The Mirialan grumbled at him, but had to admit he was right, so he took it home and started reading it instead of the comics, which were a little too hard.

It was...good. About letters, but not just their shapes; how they sounded too, and words with them, and stuff. It made sense, like Mirialan did. He started to see how things he said matched to certain characters and how those letters made phrases in front of his eyes instead of to his ears.

Once, one of the nights his mom is actually home, she saw him reading and smiled.

"Rukami! Look at you. Growing up so much. Do you like your story?"

"Yeah, it's nice." He grinned at her, and she cooed and hugged him. She smelled like her booze and perfume, but she was warm and have soft hugs. He missed them a lot.

"Let's read together, then, ay? Just let me change."

"Okay!"

She kicked off her shoes and went picking through her closet and all the clothes on it and her bedroom floor for a big shirt and something softer than her dress. Ruka waited patiently on the bed, still smiling. They snuggled up when she got in, yawning and dropping heavily into him and the blankets.

"So *what...hmmm...wha's it cal...called?*" she yawned into his hair, and he held the holo up for her.

"A Is For Aurek," he answered, proudly, then flicked to the first page. "*Here, you go first.*"

Quiet. Just heavy breathing. Ruka turned to see his mother with her eyes closed and very much not reading.

"*Mama, you're falling asleep again.*"

He nudged her, and she snorted, blinked blearily, sat up a little before flopping back.

"*Mmm, s'rry, baby, Mama's jus...tired...let me...*" she made a gesture towards the holo but then her eyes slipped shut again.

The disappointment was familiar, so it didn't feel sharp. Just sat kind of heavy in him, like she did against him. He sniffed, clenched his jaw, set the holo down. Wiggling over, he pulled on her arm and nudged her around until she'd be laying flatter, actually on the pillows, and pulled the blanket up higher over her shoulders.

He picked the book up off the nightstand and leaned back into her. Carefully, he opened the cover and started reading quietly.

"Big aurek, little aurek, what... *Beg...begins* with aur...ek? *Achoo*, apple, akk dog. Aurek, aurek, aurek. Big besh, little besh...big boo-ster bot. Both-bother brother...Beeboo be... because he *bog...bog-huh...baht...bought...a big Besp..in...boot but didn't buy... two...*"

He got all the way to Senth, which was further than he'd gotten yet, before his eyes started to droop too. He set it down and kissed his mom and curled up next to her, whispering, "*Goodnight, Mama.*"

-X-

This is how it goes when he's maybe nine or maybe ten:

His mom doesn't leave him at home because that would require either of them being at home. She never really isn't out, with friends or boyfriends or sometimes his dad who's a franger. She's usually at some bar or something, he stops paying attention, because he's got things to do. He hangs out with his friends sometimes but mostly he's working full time at the factories still or wherever else, and it's not just odd jobs because he's bored or hungry anymore, it's because if he didn't his Mama wouldn't have a house to not come back to. He's dealt with more than one angry boss comming to fire her for not showing up, dealt with people looking for money and with getting their electricity turned back on and with Glava needing parole because his dad is still a franger. He gets credits and he puts them into his mom's purse and he thinks she forgets where the money even comes from, but he stops doing that because she doesn't buy groceries reliably, only *tihaar*.

He buys the food instead. They're like two ghosts. There's food in the cryo, and no one is home, and then the next morning even though she's not there when he wakes up, stuff is gone, dishes are dirty. They float around each other, only meeting when he has to drag her to bed, or she catches him leaving for a shift the same time she's leaving for a party; he's pulling on secondhand, falling apart work boots, she's doing up cheap gold-plated earrings.

He doesn't work for Tan as much anymore or sit around reading those comics as often, because he's working more other places or running around the neighborhood getting into trouble with his friends, but he still stops by. Mostly to buy cigarrillos once a week or sometimes to help the Duros clean when the weather gets cold and irritates him. They still talk. Tan is thinking about hiring actual help, asks Ruka if he wants to— first pick. Ruka feels a little mutinous about it, tells him no. It's not like he needs a bunch of holozines, and Tan isn't offering that much. He'd make more with his time at other places and not be stuck at the speeder station day in and out. The Duros shrugs him off, calls him a brat. Ruka calls him old. They smoke together and nothing changes.

Until it does.

Until Mama starts getting sick a lot more, is home a lot more. He thinks she's reached some new level of bingeing, to be throwing up that much, but she's not even drunk or hungover every time. She gets up a lot at all hours and sleeps a lot too. She complains about feeling hot when it's cold and cold when it's hot but she doesn't have a fever. She keeps saying she's not sick, though, going out dressed up only to come back just a few hours in and barf some more. He fakes being sick himself just so she'll go to the damn street clinic, and then mentions her crap to the nurse, who's no-sithspit enough to drag his mom off behind a curtain.

Then *everything* changes.

And that's how he goes back to Tan.

The Mirialan walked into the shop, took one look around to check for other people, and then went up to the register, ignoring the owner's usual snippy greeting.

"My mama is pregnant," Ruka said, without saying anything else, because he needs to tell somebody, and then sat right there on the kriffing floor in front of the candy and tabaac. Entan didn't say anything either for a minute. He just sighed.

"Ah, kark, kid," he huffed, and reached down to rummage behind him. He walked around the counter, walked up to the front, turned the shop sign to *Closed*, and sat down on the tiles with Ruka. He handed him a pack of the brand he liked.

They went outside and Ruka sat there staring at the gutters and smoked the whole thing with Tan that morning. The man offered him more, but he shook his head.

"Mama drank around me, m'not smoking around them when I meet 'em," he muttered, and the Duros used one long, spindly arm to hug him just briefly.

"You'll be okay, bud," he grunted. "I know that much. Have some *faith*."

Ruka didn't disagree even though he'd started screaming instead his head at the clinic hours ago and hadn't stopped since. Mostly because he wanted it to be true.

"I don't know what I'm gonna do, Tan," he admitted.

And Tan, because Tan knew him by now, said, "You're gonna do what you've always done, you brat. Take care of your family and yourself." And Tan, because Tan was still also Tan, added a little more angrily, "Even though you shouldn't karking have to."

That made him want to smoke really badly, but he went home without any more packs anyway. His palms itched. His skin crawled, and he wanted to tear out of it.

He focused by scrubbing the house from top to bottom and dumping all of his mom's bottles down the drain, because the nurses had been telling her about not drinking, and she wasn't going to listen, so he had. He cleaned everything even though it was pointless because it was *something*. He combed around to the factories and to the neighbors and to her friends and to the code numbers listed on the bills she let sit around with bubbles and dirt caked up to his bony elbows, because he needed to. He asked for extra shifts and he asked for any spare old kids' stuff and he asked about all his mom's favorite spots and he asked about paying in parts instead of all at once. He went upstairs when he was done downstairs and looked into his room and then into his mom's room and then into her old "office," which was more like a place for storage and a closet and for guests that they never had, because Zia had been gone for years and his Mama let all her hook-ups stay in her room.

He started cleaning more and pushing around furniture and throwing things in trash bags and clearing out that extra room. It would be his, he'd decided, because his old one was on the inner edge of the hall and didn't have a window or an outside wall and so it was a lot warmer when it got cold, and it was bigger and roomier, and a baby was going to need all that, right? He was halfway done moving the trash downstairs and his things into the other room — sans the mattress, because he couldn't drag it alone even though he tried — when Mama finally came home.

He ran down to meet her, and she— she was already drunk.

He started screaming at her first, but by the end of it, she was screaming back at him too. They fought for what felt like hours but might have been minutes, spitting rapid-fire hurts in their own tongue.

"You can't drink again, ever! You'll hurt the baby!"

"I don't want another baby!" she screeched. "And you're my kid, you don't tell me what to do!"

Ruka discovered a new kind of fear, a really cold kind. His mind went, absurdly, to one of those comics he'd read, where the hero got frozen in carbonite by a bounty hunter.

"Mama," he said, "please."

"I'm— I'm still thinking about it, Rukami, okay, just. Go to your room. Quiet. You're grounded, or...something. I need to sleep..."

He went to his room, his new one, and stayed there for an hour or two until he went to check on her. She'd fallen asleep on top of her covers again and he pulled her heels off her and tucked her in and left water on the nightstand for if she ended up with the early sickness again. He went back to bed then and laid there on his back staring at his ceiling, absolutely kriffing terrified, all night long. He couldn't sleep; his head was too noisy.

Getting up, Ruka dug around at the back of his closet and under his bed with increasing desperation until finally he found what he was looking for, sandwiched between trash bags he'd been dragging around earlier. The faded cover still had the recognizable *aurek* on it. He clutched the little Basic holobook for the first time in a year or two since he'd put it away, meaning to return it or throw it out. The Mirialan felt very small, maybe his actual age, whatever that was, for once, when he tucked it under his pillow as the sky started to lighten out the chilly window he had now, tucked his hand under it and his head over it, and closed his eyes at last holding that bit of hope.

In the morning, they fought again, mostly her yelling this time, when she found all her booze gone, half the upstairs moved around, painfully sober enough to finally notice. Instead of yelling

back, he started reading to her the files the clinic doctor gave, because thanks to Tan he could read Basic, but she can't. He didn't know what half the things he was reading meant or how to pronounce most of the really complicated words, but both of them could understand enough when he translated as best he could to Mirialan, understood warnings and *bad things*.

"Please, Mama," he begged again, crying then, and she hugged him. Promised to cut back. To try.

And like with Tan the day before, he didn't disagree, because he wanted it to be true.

-X-

This is how it goes when he's maybe twelve or maybe thirteen:

He is there with their mother at the sad excuse of a thing they have to call a local medcenter when Noga is born, and a year later he *is the one* pulling Leda out of their mother and catching him from hitting their kitchen floor when he is born. He is the one who names Leda, because their mother is too drunk to even be conscious for the whole birth thing, and introducing him to Noga is one of the happiest memories he has next to all the others crammed under his scalp like splinters under his nails.

He doesn't hang out with his friends anymore, not just because he is too busy raising two babies but because his friends are dead. The gangs in the ghettos have always been here, have always been bad, but they have gotten worse and worse as he's gotten older. The scattergun shots that were once background noise become easier to keep days and time to than holoclocks — and he should know, since his clock has been busted forever, but the runners and the dealers and the enforcers and the drivers and the bosses, all of them, are always there, like the hours of a dial. Who they are and what they call themselves keeps changing, but their presence is never gone. They try to recruit his friends, his neighbors, even him, and sometimes they succeed. They kill each other, and his friends, and his neighbors, and not him, and he feels so goddamn grateful. He sits beside the busted old crib his brothers have to share that he got from a lady down the street for hours sometimes, just staring at them until his eyes close, and that's how he sleeps when he has time to stop moving at all, until either it's time for work again or until a blaster shot too close to the house startles him awake.

Their Mama is becoming more and more like a third child, for how much he has to be the one picking up after her ass and her messes — her debts, her bills, her binges, her flings. His father is still a franger and either gone again or on another jail stint; he doesn't care, so long as he's not there, asking for credits or bothering the kids. His brothers are the two best things that ever happened to him, but they are also tiny mouths attached to very big stomachs, and it feels like it's killing him trying to fill them.

He still tries.

He works, so much. So, so much. He works in the factories and the mines and at the speeder port, sometimes even takes the trams up with other groups from his ghetto and does contracting and landscaping work for the rich asshole Sephis living in the ships in the clouds. He never learned to drive so he walks everywhere and gets thin and hard and ropey, puberty starting to hit and not sure what to do with him, all starved. But him being starved doesn't matter if they eat, so he does literally anything that will pay him, sometimes until he collapses — happens in the street once, and he's lucky enough that one of his neighbors, an older girl named Shannii, gets her cousins to drag him home. He works and works and cooks for the kids and makes sure their Mama doesn't end up in a coma and gets in fights sometimes because this place is franged, and once, just once, has the absolutely kriffing terrifying experience of a "home break-in" and "attempted kidnapping," as the police will later phrase it, from the walking, worthless sack of sentient Human garbage that is Leda's sperm-donor.

He gets scars from that to go with his calluses and his tattoos. But two of those tattoos are for his brothers, and when he does catch his reflection, he's proud of them in a different way that he ever knew pride; and also really, very, deeply sad, in a way he cannot fix. He knows he's not enough, but he does his best to try and raise the boys.

And that is how he loses Tan.

One of the speeder cabbies passed around word that morning about a rumor of a gang meeting up on Fifth and Greer, so Ruka changed his route home for the day from the tibannana mine. He walked fast, hands jammed in his pockets, collar turned up and his nose tucked into it, taking a familiar few turns and a familiar street he hadn't been down in what seemed like forever. Even without really intending to, he looked for the station as he moved, and smiled a little when he saw it.

Some of the letters above the door had fallen off or burned out, so it wasn't the *Fuel n' Fry* anymore. Two of the pumps were closed, little signs hanging over them that said something about being repaired, but they were so worn they'd probably been like that for months. The lot looked more littered and battered than it used to, and where once there had only been bars on the windows, there were bars on the door now too.

When he went inside, the cashier wasn't Tan. It was some scrawny other alien guy, more of the humanoid variety, pale pink. Ruka squinted at him, but didn't see pointed ears, so he didn't glare when he meandered over.

"Tan here?" he asked, and the guy stared at him blankly. "Entan? The owner? Your boss, man, kriff."

"Oh," grunted the other. His nameplate said *Roro*. He scratched under his cap. "I think he's smoking? Or in the bathroom. Or, uh." His fingers twitched, and his eyes were almost the same color as his skin. He was probably high on whatever the gangs were offloading this week.

"I'll just wait, huh?" grunted Ruka, stepping away so he wouldn't give in to the sudden, aimless urge to punch the guy for his life choices. He looked around the shop and noted more changes — fewer shelves with a more narrow selection of essentials, emptier coolers, nothing fried after all. But...*ahah*.

He went over to the stand and stared, then picked one up. The holozine's cover was bright and bold as ever, glossy to his eyes, big blocky words scrawled across the top. A figure with a skull for a head sat on a *throne* made of more skulls and held a staff— maybe a *necromancer*?

"Abyss-King and the Rising Dead," he muttered to himself, mouthing through the title before moving to all the tiny little speech bubbles.

"What did I tell you about reading that trash?"

Ruka straightened up from his slouch a little bit to glare back at the old man's good-natured frown, spying Entan hobble around from out of the back room, carrying the smell of his cigarras. "I like them. And so do the boys. They think the pictures are cool."

"*You* think the pictures are cool."

"*Duh*." He picked one up with a particular hero he knew from other issues, waved it at Duros. "It's *great*. You see this? Captain Lancer Starburn is *franging awesome*. He can outfly anybody AND always gets his bounty and the line where he fights Doom Star is like, the best worst thing to happen to zines ever. This series and Doctor Dimension are great. You just don't get it. No taste."

"Trash," repeated the shopkeeper, snorting and shaking his head.

"*Ey baas urek na iitala*."

"Oi, none of that greenskin talk in my store, kid. Basic or bust, remember."

"Fine." The Mirialan stuck his tongue out. "You're the trash, you geezer."

"Don't make me call your father, boy."

"Would have to have one," Ruka drawled back, rudely gesturing, and Entan scoffed to hide his snort, but failed not to laugh. Smirked at him. He smiled back at the old man. It felt *good*. Familiar. He was glad he'd stopped.

"Karking brat. You actually gonna buy something today or you just here to scare off my business?"

"I'm just reading," he said, and no sooner did a navy, three-fingered, wrinkled hand reach over and take the holoprint from him. "Ay!"

"Sorry, bud, **customers** only. You know that. Can't be doin' this anymore when you're not even helping around here these days."

"Don't be an asshole, Tan. The mine pays more than *comics*, and you know I ain't got none to spare, *kabron*," Ruka replied bitterly, crossing his arms and scowling. Entan reached over yet again to cuff him, and the Mirialan swore, rubbing the back of his head.

"AY AY!"

"Don't think I don't know disrespect you mean when I hear it just because I don't know what you're saying," the man snapped, and Ruka had to smother the urge to make another rude gesture, one with much more intent.

"Come on, Tan, lay off. Just let me borrow it. You know I'll bring it back good as. It's hard to teach the boys with just the one book, okay?"

"Just buy it, brat, instead of acting like one of those punk gang fraks. You've never wanted favors before, what's got you starting?"

Ruka bristled, sputtered in rage, "Kriff you! I don't need— I'm not— ay! Franging! Forget it! I dunno why I came to see your ass, I'm out of here!" He snatched the holo back and shoved it back into its slot, but his motion was too wild, too hard. The whole stand rocked back, wobbled, suspended, for a sickening second, and then toppled with a *CRASH* into the front racks. The other holozines and charms and candies and cans and smoke packs all came down in a **waterfall** over their feet. The strung-out cashier jumped nearly to the roof and fell on his ass too, knocking even more down behind the counter.

"DAMMIT, RUKA!" Entan **roared**, turning kind of purplish as a vein in his wrinkly neck throbbed, standing out from his skin all the way up to his forehead. "Look at this *mess*— ENOUGH ALREADY! THAT'S IT! GET OUT!"

"KRIF YOU!" the Mirialan shouted back, angry, angrier because his face was hot and he felt tears welling up and that was so franging stupid, to be crying, at his age, in front of somebody, and and and— "YOU GREEDY *PUUJA*, I hope the gangers get you!"

"Frak off, kid! Out! OUT! GET YOUR ASS OUT OF HERE AND DON'T COME BACK, I'M DONE WITH YOU!"

Ruka made an inarticulate noise and spat a string of Mirialan and stomped away, crumpling chocolates and cigarras under his work boots while he went. He slammed open the door and took off at a run, and he just— ran. Until it burned too much in his tired muscles and in his aching lungs to keep going. He stopped and hunched over and gasped for breath, spitting up, sobbing, and— *why?* Kriffing why? Over what? That? Everything else he dealt with and he was goddamn crying over *that?*

He felt so franging stupid.

"Get ahold of yourself," he hissed between gasps, pushing off his knees and wiping his face on his sleeve — just smearing snot and ash and grime, really. He started walking again, after he looked around to figure out where he was, and dread settled like a rock in his upset, empty stomach. He made sure to walk, but he walked *fast*. This was gang territory. His skin crawled, and something deep inside his mind screeched when he abruptly decided an alley ahead was *bad bad bad* and walked the opposite direction for another block before he looped back around and finally got onto busier roads.

He nearly fell over in relief against the door when he got home and closed it behind him. Nearly fell over from exhaustion too, and from something else he *wasn't thinking about* right now. There wasn't time, though. Tiny, uneven footsteps greeted him immediately, and then a tiny little green body was tackling his legs.

"*Ruka! Y'home!*" Noga cried, smiling and hugging his knee. Ruka bent down and scooped the toddler up, nuzzling their faces. He felt a stupid and guilty for it when Noga's came away with a black smear on his nose, and quickly carried him over to the sink and set him up on the counter to wipe it off.

"*Hey, buddy. How you doing? How's your brother?*"

"*'kay an' kay,*" Noga replied, wriggling away from the washcloth. He'd just recently figure out 'okay' and it was his new favorite word for some reason. He said it whether someone was talking to him or not, or whether or not it was actually answering the question.

"*You hungry?*" Ruka tried instead, hiking Noga back up on his hip and going upstairs to check on Leda for himself. He found the other child in the bathroom, making his own mess, and bit back a sigh.

"*Yes!*" Noga said, kicking to be let down. Ruka let him, but blocked his exit from the bathroom with one leg.

"Nope, mister, bath before dinner. Both of you."

"Nooooooo."

"Come on, bud. Help me out here? Start the bath for me while I help your brother? You make the best bubbles."

"Kay, kay!"

The older of the two children ran to turn the tap up full blast on hot and dump half the soap in too. Ruka didn't manage to repress his sigh then. He mentally added more bath soap to his never-finished shopping list. But one thing at a time.

"Hey sweetheart, did you go potty? Good job coming to the bathroom. I'm so proud of you. Let's clean you up, okay?"

"Ye," squeaked back the littlest of them all, quiet and holding up oddly chubby arms and blinking slowly. He made no fuss at all as his big brother stripped off his wet pants and socks and underwear and put them in a pile for later, then pulled his shirt overhead and set him in the bath that Noga had already gotten into. Noga started piling bubbles on top of Leda's head immediately.

"Wipe down, boys. Face and hands and between your toes, all over the water goes," Ruka said, then switched to Basic, *"Come on, you know this one. W is for Wesk, we all wash, wash, wash. Wipe down with wash, face and hands and between your toes, all over the water goes. Wash, wash, wesk is for wash."*

"Wes' was'," they sang back at him, loud and soft in turn. He shut off the tap and then rolled up his sleeves and started rubbing them down too, carefully massaging shampoo into hair and avoiding eyes; Leda was ridiculously sensitive, and he'd already started crying a little from his bubble crown. Once they were done, he got them dried off and dressed and sat them in their room with a toy or two while he cleaned up the bathroom floor from Leda's accident and put the clothes in the washing unit and then went back up to wipe down himself with the cold bath water before he drained the tub.

The kids played while he cooked, making enough for four even though only the three of them, he knew, would eat that evening. He nearly nodded off standing at the stove a few times, but every time he jerked back upright, thinking he'd heard a gunshot, or one of the boys crying, or a rack of comics falling over with a crash. He shook his head and tried to think about what needed to be done tonight and what could wait until tomorrow, glancing around the kitchen.

Dishes were dirty, but enough were clean for now on the drying mat. Counters needed wiped off. Floor had to be cleaned, someone had spilled something and hit boots stuck to the sticky

dried puddle— he hoped it was juice, anyway. The cupboards were a little on the lean side because he needed to go shopping again after he got paid later in the week. A rainbow of little magnetized plastic bits held sheets of flimsiplast to the cryo door: scribbles in looping colors and fantastical shapes pointless to anyone but the toddlers who'd drawn them. Mostly, though, it was stark sheets of white with tiny block black text crammed in paragraphs and stamped with red: bills, bills, and more bills. Notices. Those words mocked him. *Overdue. Past due. Due now. Overcharge fee. Late fee. Services will be shut off if fines not met.*

At least none of them read, *Eviction Notice*. He'd made sure of that. He'd started coughing up something that looked kind of red and black and weirdly orange and slimy lately, with all the extra mining shifts, but none of the pages said *that*.

One thing at a time.

"*Come eat!*" he yelled upstairs, and went to wait at the bottom to supervise two toddlers coming down, worried about Leda stumbling or Noga trying to jump down a step. Everyone made it safely, though. The boys talked about their day while they ate — no, they hadn't seen Mama, great — and he kept switching them between Mirialan and Basic, per usual. When they were done, he cleaned up and herded them upstairs again for bedtime. Teeth were brushed, to more silly little rhymes, and then they all piled into the boys' bed, his old double mattress on its frame. The sheets, which he'd been lucky to find at a thrift shop, had Captain Starburn on them, because they all liked those holozines.

Still not thinking about it.

"*I dweem'd uh'buh a owl,*" Leda told him, smiling and sleepy, and he smiled back and pet at the barely-three-year-old's hair.

"*Sounds awesome, bud,*" he replied. "*Owls can be pretty cool, I guess, huh? Maybe you'll dream about them again tonight.*"

"Ye."

"*Wanna know a secret?*"

He'd dropped his voice to a whisper, and Leda looked kriffing *ecstatic*. He bounced on Ruka's knee and waved little fists.

"*Yesssss! Was?*"

"*I'm scared of owls,*" his big brother told him. "*Birds all scare me, but geese are the worst. So you know what? That makes you way braver than me. You're so cool.*"

Leda giggled and covered his mouth.

"Kay," Noga contributed, helpfully, which Ruka was happy to hear over any surly comments—Noga was competitive. He often had to go talking about how he was braver or that something Leda liked wasn't cool or something, and then would cry if he made his brother cry, and then it was a whole *thing*.

"*C'mon guys, tuck in. Let's read a story,*" the eldest said, and reached for *A Is For Aurek*, like always, and *did not think about it*.

"*Buh wuh wed dis un 'kay,*" the middle boy whined, and Ruka shushed him, ruffling his hair in apology and planting a kiss there to hide his grimace.

"*I know, kiddo, but it's all we got. Come on. This is my FAVORITE. Pleeeeease? Please can we read it?"*

"kay," Noga relented, while Leda already snored and drooled on their legs. Ruka smiled for him as wide as he could and kissed him again, making it wet and loud. The barely-four-year-old gagged.

"*Stuuuuhp.*"

"*Thank you, kiddo,*" he told him, and watched the child puff up a little bit. "*C'mere, scooch.*"

They settled back against the wall, Noga clambering all over his lap and elbowing him in the face at least three times, not that the older Mirialan said a damn thing. Once the toddler was settled, he set the old book in front of them both and held up the cover, switching to Basic again.

"And what's this one?"

Noga couldn't really roll his eyes yet, but he was probably trying, the way they squinted and went sideways while he pouted. Ruka struggled not to laugh.

"Sai 'weddy."

"Tell me again. We're starting the story, you *have* to read the title too. It's like, *a rule*. C'mon."

Noga huffed, but complied, saying clearly enough, "Ahy i' fo' awh-ek."

"This means brother," Ruka said, pointing at the word. "It's Basic. Try to say it with me okay? *Brother.*"

"Uh-er," Noga echoed, chewing on his fingers. "Buherrrr."

"No, you don't gotta roll the *resh* like in Mirialan. It's short. Like this. Like biting it off, okay." He snapped his teeth, and the toddler laughed and mimicked him, chomping loudly on air. "That's right! Om nom nomarararar! Yummy! Right?"

"Wahrararar," Noga grumbled gleefully, "yumz!"

"Bite *brother*, Noga. Come on, say it with me. *Broth-er*." He snapped his teeth again as if taking a big bite out of something.

"Buh-er!" Noga mimed, biting. He chomped a few more times then pretended to gobble and rub his tummy as if full. Ruka felt his throat clench.

For a minute, he was just so happy that Noga knew what a full tummy felt like, he couldn't speak. But then his baby brother was kicking him and biting at his arm for attention, yelling, "Rawr!"

And of course Ruka could only set the holozine down and blow raspberries into his stomach in revenge. Noga laughed and shrieked so loudly that it woke Leda back up.

Finally getting them both back to sleep took another half hour, and by then, it was past nine, way past their bedtime. Ruka sagged against the wall when he pulled their bedroom door to the frame — but didn't close it, just in case — behind him. Sagging turned to sliding, which turned to sitting, and then he was on his ass with his head in his hands on the floor and—

Kriff.

His shoulders shook, and he balled a fist and shoved a few knuckles past his teeth to choke off any noise. His face got hot again, and it hurt, for so many reasons, to breathe. He couldn't *breathe*.

He just felt so kriffing...*powerless*.

And then he was thinking about it.

About the book. About the holocomics. About his Mama, and his brothers, and his dead friends, and about Tan. About smoking on the stoop. About mouthing words aloud to himself while the Duros sometimes helped him, correcting him, encouraging him. About Tan's stories of his own kids, estranged a lot like Ruka's broken family for reasons he didn't like to talk about. About telling Tan about his mom. About how the Duros had broken a finger punching the wall when Ruka had shown up with a huge bruise on his face, the day after the one and only time Glava, his franger dad, had ever hit him; how they'd both needed ice packs. About mopping floors and

nausage rolls and letters in two languages and the smell of gas and cigarra smoke mixing with cigarillos.

About how different those memories were to now. About how Tan's shop was so much more run down, just like the area around it, nearly swallowed up by gang territory. About bars on the doors and windows. About that junkie cashier, about Tan's thin frame even bonier than Ruka's starved one, hunched and frail, sunken around his big red eyes and thin lips nonexistent. About him smiling when they talked but then all but begging for a little bit of business— just for him to buy a comic.

Gods, he was the worst asshole in the galaxy. As bad as his dad if not worse. Getting angry and lashing out and—

Ruka stood up, blew his nose in his shirt and, checking one more time on the kids, took the stairs two at a time and locked the door behind him.

It was stupid to be out and going *into* ganger streets at night. Suicidally stupid. But right then he didn't care. He didn't even notice how long it took him to get to the station. A lot faster than when he was younger, that was for sure.

The shop was dark when he got there, the signs unlit. He frowned, looked around, considered his options. Maybe Tan still kept the spare store key up on the awning? The Duros was taller and longer-limbed than most other species that lived in the neighborhood. He'd always said only he or the birds could get in. Ruka had climbed to get up there when he was littler. Now he just jumped. He could always jump ridiculously high, for some reason.

He came away with a key in hand and a grin that was still more like a grimace.

The Mirialan let himself in, closed the door behind him, flicked on the lights. The bulbs sputtered and flickered weakly for a moment, then turned on, dull and growing brighter. The light was patchy where they were out; he hadn't noticed in the daytime.

The mess was still there. Maybe Tan hadn't cleaned it up, and maybe that idiot tweaker hadn't stuck around to. It didn't really matter.

He knew how to mop.

Ruka got to work.

It felt years back in time. Picking up all the cans, all the candies, everything. Restacking what he could, matching items to labels and pricetags, sweeping up broken pieces and making a pile of the unsalvageable stuff that wouldn't sell, too squished or dented— he'd take it home for the boys and come back with the credit for it, pay back in full. When the floor was clear again he

went and got the stuff to sweep and wipe up, forming a pile of cracked plastic and glass and wrappers. When that was done, he swept up the rest of the store too. And then mopped. And scrubbed, and kept wiping, because apparently nobody had done it well for a long-ass time.

He had his torso stuck in a fridge and was crawled halfway in trying to get dried beer off of a cold metal surface with a wet rag when he heard hesitant steps and knocking around and then a yell. He jerked out of the cooler, hitting his head as he went. He swore and stood up, walking over to run off whoever thought the place was open — or worse was trying to rob it — before he spotted the barrel of a blaster and froze. His body dropped low instinctively before his brain even processed the face behind the weapon.

"I've got a scattergun here and I'll use it, I swear! Leave me alo— Ruka?" Entan's angry tone — covering up *really goddamn scared*, really, and the Mirialan knew that feeling way too well, knew what it sounded like, knew exactly — dropped to one of confusion. The Duros lowered the barrel of his old gun, his hands still shaking, face pale, and frowned at him. "Wha— what are you *doing* in here?"

"I'm sorry," Ruka said, without preamble, standing up from his crouch. His head spun a little, the lack of sleep dragging him down, but he shook it doggedly and pushed his hair back out of his eyes, caught himself on the counter and hoped Entan didn't notice. By the way his brow furrowed more, he did. "Look, I—" The Mirialan gestured around. "I ain't stealin' nothing, *I swear to you*, on my Mama and my brothers, okay, I just. I just wanted to clean up. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry about earlier, okay?"

Entan's face was hard to read sometimes, less expressive than other more humanoid aliens, but this time even Ruka could tell it went all soft like it did when the Duros talked about the grandchildren he didn't get to see.

"Ahh, kid," he choked out, setting his blaster on the counter pointed away from them and lurching forward for a hug. Ruka caught him — and himself, if he was honest — and leaned into the counter and clutched at the old man, careful but desperate.

"I'm so sorry, Tan, I didn't mean it, I was stupid and angry and I never want anything to happen to you, I can't lose anybody else like that to them, no, I'm sorry, sorry, s-so so-sorr-sorry—"

He didn't know what language he was speaking anymore and it didn't seem to matter. Bony, frail, shaking hands dug into his shoulders hard enough to hurt and the Duros shuddered.

"I know, kid, shh, me too, I'm sorry too."

It took them a little while to pull apart. Entan, woken in the middle of the night by his shop's silent alarm and a little too old for such excitement at this point, went to sit in the back where he had a chair and table. Ruka brought him some water and muttered about finishing up, and did

just that, kept cleaning. It was getting closer to dawn than not when he finished, gently woke the Duros from his sitting-upright nap to tell him he was leaving. The stubborn geezer got up again and insisted on walking him out, sharing a smoke, even though he knew Ruka didn't do that anymore. The Mirialan still agreed.

"Hold on," Tan said, as they passed by the rightened comic rack. He picked one out — *Captain Starburn* — and.

And he handed the holo to Ruka.

Ruka handed it back.

"Kid."

"Tan, no, okay. You were right. Look. I. You been real good to me and I. I'm grateful for that. I can only probably read even at all 'cause of you helpin' me. But it ain't fair to you, and I'm not a kid anymore. I shouldn't be asking you for favors, and I was, 'cause I just. Had a weak minute. But that ain't me, can't be. Gotta do this all on my own. The right way."

"Ruka, I might call you kid, but you're raising some now, and there isn't some right way to be a *parent*. Plenty of wrong ones, sure, but you can...ask for help."

The Mirialan stared at him hard. "So can you."

Entan scowled at him. "Fine. Brat. Point taken. Just..."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

They both shifted. Entan didn't light his cigarra.

"Kark, kid, why's this feel like goodbye?"

"I don't know," Ruka said, and shamefully, his voice cracked. "But something tells me it is."

The Duros swore, and the Mirialan laughed without any humor and nodded. Put an arm around those thin, tall shoulders that had stooped, because Entan was shivering now that they were outside again.

"Tan, thanks, f-for— Man, frang. You gave me all my letters and I dunno what to use 'em for. J-just. Just thanks," he managed, ragged, and left it at that. A three-fingered hand clutched his.

"You're a good kid," the shopkeeper whispered, and sniffed hard through his weird slit nostrils.

They watched the sun come up, and then Ruka really had to go, because he needed to be there for the boys to wake up to. Entan waved him off.

Walking away had never been harder. He paused at the edge of the pumps, breathed deep, turned around and yelled.

"AY, YOU OLD GEEZER! FIRE THAT *PUUJA* CLERK, HE'S TOO HIGH TO MOP RIGHT!"

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO, BRAT KID!" Tan yelled back, and they shared one more grin.

And then he really did make himself go, because he had his boys to get home to, and his Mama to track down, and his bills to pay and *maybe*, if he got a chance, an old comic to read.

-X-