

**Kiast**  
**36 ABY**

"I feel like a **puppet**. Or a monkey lizard in a suit. Or a piece of meat. This is so kriffed up, you know that, right?"

"Hush, you look handsome," Cora commented, and then gently but *firmly* moved his hand away from where he was trying to yank at his neck ribbon thing — what did he call it, a krevet? The Jedi fixed it to his satisfaction, then attacked Ruka's **cufflinks**. "And it's for *charity*."

He'd admit the suit was nice, even if it wasn't his style, even if he wanted to tear out of it: all dark silky fabric inside and light outer colors Cora claimed highlighted him or something. The room was nice. They'd been given their own to get ready in, like everyone else, the great big complex housing stages and ballrooms and dining rooms and suites and supposedly miles of underground storage. They were surrounded by gleaming, polished dark wood, not standard steel, all of it inlaid with gold or the Sephi's prize silvery-blue ores. Everything was accented in precious metals and the Empire's royal colors, plush carpets and totally redundant fireplaces given the central heating and cooling and curtains that touched the floor and tinted glass in wall-length windows that gave a view of looked like miles and miles of glittering fire and glass palaces and spires.

Goddamn Sephis, goddamn nobles. The suit was nice. The room was nice. The place was nice. The whole building and the city block around it was nice. The kind of nice that made his skin prickle and shoulders jerk up closer to his ears. He continued his rant with that feeling of *don't belong don't belong* burrowing into his back like insects.

"That's the kriffed up part! Seriously! How do any of you frangers not see that, it's, like, super messed up to SELL people."

"It's not selling people, Ru, this isn't some slave auction. They're just bidding for an evening with *volunteers*."

"Cause that's so different. Still paying for another person. Uh, hi, I kriffing *did* that already."

Cora stilled a moment, concern flashing over his features. "Oh, honey, are you sure about this? If it reminds you too much of the...past, then...we can go home."

"No, I'm fine, it's fine, we're here already, just— Just like. Open some more kitchens or shelters or frang. Bogan knows we coulda used some of that— OW! Ay, ay!"

"Sorry, *sorry*. Hold still," said the Pantoran, patient in the face of his twitching as he adjusted pins and lace and the dumb flower stuck to Ruka's suit breast. "There. That's better. And yes, all

those would be excellent options as well for us to donate to, but right here, today, is where our donors are meeting us, so we will do the good we can with it, no?"

"Yeah, yeah." Ruka let him brush non-existent lint off his coat. "Sorry, just... uncomfortable. Especially in these crowds of crazies. More than usual."

Usually, it wasn't so bad. The time they'd spent with the Jedi and Sith of various factions, the wars, the politics, it had all desensitized him to such parades of grandeur a little; what did tripping over fancy clothes matter next to the freedom of flying over rooftops, lightsaber in hand, lives on the line? Certainly, he didn't belong here, but he did belong somewhere, in a destiny of light and dark with the man beside him, and he knew that now where once he hadn't.

But... This wasn't just some event. Corazon's mother had asked for them specifically, both of them, and it had had his back up ever since. His husband was thrilled, but Ruka just felt ill with nervousness. Was she actually trying to include them both, and why now? He couldn't think of anything that had changed.

The Mirialan thought of the box in his dresser at home and thought, *not yet anyway*.

"I know, love," Cora saying pulled him out of his head. The slighter man made a show of looking around even though it was only them in the chamber, then lowered his voice, murmured, "And watch it, mister, you're one of 'those people' now, and *have* been, if you hadn't noticed."

"I'm not forgetting our anniversary, don't worry," the Mirialan teased, then snorted. "Married or not, babe, I'm never gonna be no noble *sleemo*."

"Ruka," Cora admonished, and lifted one of his manicured hands to cup the tattooed man's scarred cheek, turning him to face him. The Jedi gave a beautiful sunrise smile, golden eyes adoring. "You have always been the truest definition of *noble* there is, gallant and true and selfless. Far more than anyone else here or any landed title."

The Mirialan's face flooded with heat, and he wriggled uncomfortably in the suit and at the praise. "Cooor, c'mon, don't say stuff like that. Not when I can't even kiss you all night long for it."

The Pantoran chuckled, patted his cheek. "I would apologize, but I'm not sorry at all. Don't be so grumpy, dear, it won't be so bad."

"I have to entertain some rich ass AND watch someone else paw all over you, I call that pretty bad," he muttered, mutinous, but let his partner finish fussing with their outfits. And didn't dive out the window. Or think about finding the maintenance room and electrifying the breakers so they could call this whole thing cancelled and go home.

Corazon kissed him very lightly — couldn't mess up the makeup, *of course*, he'd say — and smiled.

"You know you're the only one for me, angel. Thank you for doing this with me, you know I appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah. Your mom asked, how can I say no?" He leaned down, stole a longer, filthier kiss happily given. "Even if I'd rather stay right here and press you up against that window so anybody could look up and see how gorgeous you are when you're riding me, when you fall apart."

"*Ruuuka*," and it was the other whining this time, lovely face flushing a pretty purple, eyes glazing a bit before he shook himself. He swatted the Sith's chest. "That isn't fair."

"We could though..."

Corazon huffed, pouted. "*Stop it*, we're going. But you owe me that offer later, mister, to make up for this. This is not the time and these are not the trousers for such *things*."

Ruka only leered, then laughed as the Pantoran glared at him and used his Force-blessed control to make said problem disappear, smoothing a hand down his fancy pants again huffily.

"Sorry, babe. Don't be mad? Please?"

"I'll consider it," sniffed the Pantoran with no real bite, only holding the imperious expression for a second before he smiled softly again. Golden eyes darted to his pocketwatch. "And maybe even indulge that window idea. Something to think about while we're wining and dining, since it's time."

"Cooooor."

"Escort me down, my dear?" sing-songed the Pantoran, batting his pretty pink lashes. Ruka groaned out in Mirialan, making his partner giggle, and offered his arm. Cora took it, and gave them a last once over in the mirror, before they moved for the door. The guards stationed outside hardly blinked as they went by, following velvet ropes down flowery hallways. There were a few other people further ahead of them making their way to the designated room, but not close enough to hear them murmuring to each other.

"We still meeting up with your family after?"

"If the time allows, yes. Mother said tea will be ready at the manor even if it's late, and Angie will likely just be getting off from her shift, so she's likely to join us. Father has a meeting in the morning so I'm certain he's *already* in bed."

"Lucy and Zack doing okay?"

"Yes, the trip is going well, though Zacarias seems more enthused. Lucretia never did care for being offworld."

"They're on a star yacht and haven't even left the system, that's not *offworld*. Hardly slumming it."

"You know how she is, takes after Mother. I don't think she's ever been below 340th Street."

Ruka chuckled. "Remember when she said my hair was alive?"

Cora's cough was delicate, trying not to laugh at his older sister. "Vividly. To be fair to her, she'd never seen dreadlocks before."

"*"Snaaaaaakes!"*" he mimicked, throwing his voice, and this time the Pantoran couldn't smother more laughter.

"Hush, don't be mean to my family, they're yours too."

"I know, I know." Not that *they* did. Only Turel, Satsi, the boys, Angelica, and maybe his Mama, if she was ever sober enough to catch on, knew about their wartime wedding. Hell, Turel had *done* it, standing over them in that hospital bed, Ruka barely able to rasp out a vow after the ventilators had been pulled from his throat when they'd pulled him out of the bacta tank; but neither of them had wanted to wait a second longer, not having come so close to losing each other entirely. Corazon especially.

They'd meant to announce an 'engagement' once they'd come back to Kiast, but there was Ruka's recovery, and their duties, and the Lotus, and the alliances, and more battles, more enemies, apprentices and more...something, always, nevermind their home issues, taking care of the boys and his mama and the disapproval from Corazon's family only marginally softened by the first war and...it just became less and less important. After all, they knew. Official to the Vatali or no, rings or no, they knew. They had each other and their family and that was what mattered.

He thought again of his dresser, shoved the thought away. His partner had been right earlier, it wasn't the time. He had to focus on the charity date tonight. Because being bargained off with some chick he didn't know for hours so they could stare at his scars or mock his manners was going to be so fun.

"Still say this whole thing is messed up."

Cora hummed at him. "I will admit, it's a tad bit archaic, especially in the sexist aspects, given these events tend to expect only young or suitably widowed or matronly ladies to bid, and only tend to employ younger gentlemen as the contestants... But it's still for a good cause. And besides, it isn't the only auction tonight. There's the arts auction too, and the antiques. I'm told there's some pieces from the early reign of Empress Jaeiika the Second, and that's not just pre-Republic and Imperial age, now."

"Did you put up that painting you did for the art one?"

"One of my watercolors, yes. The one of Ussun's skyline. I thought a bit of cultural sharing would be appropriate. Do you think they'll like it?"

*"Mhi ahminaa, your work is so kriffing beautiful, it's almost as easy to get lost staring at it as it is to drown in your gorgeous eyes. Course they will."*

The Pantoran Jedi beamed at him.

All too soon they reached a winding staircase and proceeded down it into the lower hallways, being ushered by event coordinators not into the ballroom entrance but to the stage entrance down another hall. The backstage area was still plenty fancy but a little barer, mostly wood and wires and odds and ends, some mirrors and lights and more corridors with more doors, carts with wheels probably meant for the item auctions later. They could hear soft, classical music and a very soft hum of voices and tinkling glassware from the other side of the heavy curtain on the stage itself— all the gentry and guests. The pair of Force-users followed along with the other supposed bachelors, all of whom looked like the kind of people Cora might have gone to school with or who attended the same upper class parties he did, who lived in mansions and skyhooks and wouldn't have so much as wiped their shoes on Ruka.

One of the staff stared at them hard where their arms joined but they ignored him and any other looks right up until it was time to go on and get in line at their respective places. Someone took their names, checked against a datapad, looped little numbered tags to their lapels like they were cattle. Cora's was higher than Ruka's; he didn't know if that meant he was going sooner or later, but either way, he didn't like even the little bit of separation. Corazon, of course, sensed his discontent and kissed him one more time right there in front of everyone, squeezing his hands, before they parted to be shuffled around.

Ruka loved him so damn much for it.

A few minutes later, a whole gaggle of stage people and photographers and who knew what else started floating around with the arrival of a Sephi woman in a sharp outfit that he couldn't identify between a suit or a dress. She breezed by them, the music stopping outside, lights swinging this way and that, and then pushed past the curtain that rose for her. Brief applause, and then she began speaking into a microphone. Introductions and thank you's and aren't we all

so wonderful for being here and frang like that. The Mirialan swallowed bile and stared at his shoes while the speeches went on, and on, and on, and then finally the people in front of him started moving, called up one at a time to be shown off. Seemed the numbers they'd been given were counting up in order, so he'd be on before Cora.

"Nine, you're up, go, go, come on," someone was saying to him, lightly shoving his arm, and Ruka made himself move, gut roiling even worse than the first time he'd been on a dropship onto a Collective star-destroyer with a bunch of fanatics shooting at him.

The lights were so bright, the floor so dark, even though he could hear the people out there, knew they were sitting at tables. Instinctively, he inhaled the Dark, and it answered, sharpening his vision. Everything resolved, and then he didn't know if it was worse or not, actually being able to see all those eyes on him. A quick scan of the crowd only revealed one familiar face, Araceli Ya-ir herself, in the first row of clustered tables that wasn't made entirely of Sephi; important, like the family was among the lesser nobility. He stopped where he was supposed to, next to the Sephi hostess, managed not to stumble, lifted his chin and curled his fingers like he could be holding his saber at his side.

"Our next candidate for the evening... A lifetime mechanic and machinist, master of starship engines and bladework alike! That means he's good with his hands, ladies!" A roll of politely contained tittering that made his skin crawl. "... Please welcome one Ruka Tenbriss... His title is that of a Master of the Force, a two tour veteran and decorated war hero, and Knight of 'the Lotus,' best described here as a 'galactic humanitarian organization.' What an honor it is to have you, Master Jedi! I think I speak for all of us when I thank you for your service to our beatific Empire. When he's not off saving worlds, his interests include...aww...cooking, guitar, and spending time with his two sons! Young man, I rather think this is getting to be a bit unfair to our other bids!"

Again the crowd laughed a little, but there was a lot more cooing and sparse applause going on, some faces skeptic, others intrigued like hungry animals. Ruka wished he could melt into the floor. He'd left all those invasive, stupidass "tell us about yourself" forms these people had sent him to Cora, and clearly, that had been a mistake. Did the Pantoran have to exaggerate so much or get so personal?

*It's just because he's proud of you,* part of him reminded, but the rest was still busy wanting to run and hide.

"Would you like to tell us all anything about yourself tonight? Perhaps a hint on your plans for the evening?" the announcer baited him. He barely repressed a grimace, instead forcing a grin he hoped didn't look too sick and shook his head. She just rolled with it, joking with her audience, "Ooooh, and the silent mysterious type too! How very romantic. Well, then, ladies and gentlemen, let us begin our bidding! The opening bid shall be a standard ten thousand..."

The Mirialan choked a little on his own tongue; he hadn't been paying attention to the numbers attached to any of this, or the earlier bids, but was violetly reminded then of just how much credit these people had to throw around. He watched as women whispered at their tables, gloved hands covering mouths, some fiddling with the little signs they lifted instead of actually *talking*, when suddenly, one of them went up. But it wasn't some noble rich bitch or some Sephi as he'd feared.

It was Cora's mother.

Ruka froze in horror.

The whole skyship could've crashed and he probably wouldn't have noticed. His stare was stuck on Araceli, and Araceli was staring right back, dead on, hand delicate in the air.

He looked frantically aside, to his husband, who met his gaze from the side stage. Cora's expression was perfectly placid and smiling, his court face, but when their minds brushed in the Force, he could hear the Pantoran's confusion and bewildered concern echoing his own growing sense of dread. What was his mother *doing*?

Their mental link trembled when Ruka's attention was torn back to the speaker, but didn't break, not after all they'd endured together.

"Lovely, splendid! We have our opening at ten thousand, do I have eleven—"

"One *hundred fifty* thousand," the Ya-ir matriarch called crisply, her smooth, clipped tones cutting across the stage and cutting off the half-started raising of a few other paddles. A murmur rippled through the room, and in their mindscape, he felt the equivalent of Cora all but fainting; not just at the number, but at the action. An abrupt escalation like that, it wasn't how things were done. It was against decorum. Rude. A, what did Cora call it, a social faux paux.

A statement.

"... Well then... Your raise is acknowledged, Madame. Any other bids? One hundred and sixty thousand?"

Silence.

The spotlight felt like it burned.

The auctioneer tapped her tiny little silly hammer.

"To the Lady Ya-ir, then, for one hundred fifty thousand. Very good, very lovely. An excellent contribution to the cause! Let us all appreciate such generosity and keep just as much in mind

as we proceed, no? Very good, come now, Master Tenbriss, well done... Master Devvn, if you'll come onto the stage?"

The Mirialan locked eyes with her again as he was tugged backstage by some well dressed assistants. Her yellow eyes narrowed.

"Oh frang," he whispered.

-X-

Cora and Ruka didn't really get to see each other again before the end of the date auction after that. They'd already expected as much — they were each of them, and the twenty-some other candidates, supposed to leave almost immediately to shmooze their owners, winners, whatever, for the rest of the evening while the other events went on — but whatever loop Cora's mom was throwing them for made it all a lot more annoying.

Ruka had to join the other finished bidees at a designated table while the rest went on. His secret husband got bartered to an older Sephi lady who the Sith was pretty sure he recognized from some of Cora's dance recitals — maybe a lover of the ballet, oh boy. He got a good price, but none of the other bids went as high as fast as Ruka's had, did what Cora's mom had done. People kept shooting him looks because of it, and he hated it, and hated watching Cora get seated at another table, and hated the whole night.

Not caring that it was rude or whatever, he stood up, darted over, and bent next to his partner's chair and began whispering furiously in Mirialan.

*"What the hell is she doing?!"*

*"I don't know!"* Cora hissed back, turning wide eyes on him while they got shushed and stared at in horror by everyone nearby, as if they were murdering someone and not just talking. *"She didn't say anything about this, I have no idea why she would bid on you."*

*"What am I supposed to DO?"*

"Shhhh!" someone hissed, and Ruka glared at them, got stared down right back, holy kriff.

*"I don't know, angel, but we can't do much about it right now so maybe just see what she wants? I can't even fathom. Why not tell me about this?"*

*"Cor, I—"*



"Pardon me, sir, but please return to your seat," interrupted a slight woman in a staff uniform, flawlessly pleasant, but the guards a little behind her made it obvious it wasn't much of a request. "The event is ongoing. Surely two friends may speak afterwards?"

He started to protest, but Cora's hand on his over the back of the Pantoran's chair stopped him. The Jedi's lips were drawn into a thin line, worry evident, but he was watching the scene around them and Ruka knew he'd be about drowning under all the pressure of those manners he was raised on by now. So, instead, he sighed, nodded, and backed away with a last pleading look at his husband. Cora mouthed something at him he couldn't decipher, but he assumed it was comforting, like an *'I love you.'*

A few more speeches later and an intermission was announced before the next auction set began. The donors and their respectively purchased dates were all escorted into the Hall and paired off, and Ruka gritted his teeth and offered Araceli his arm just like he had to her son. She didn't loop hers through his like Cora liked to, instead just laying one gloved palm over the back of his wrist, a formal, barely-there touch to escort.

"Well then, my Lady," he began, because he sure as hell wasn't just going to *wait* for more of whatever she was on about. "Where to? The Kadd Theater is playing *Her Eyes* tonight, or there's the newest exhibit visiting the Empresses' Museum of Science and History, or the dance at the Vianna," he rattled off. All activities suggested, approved, and sponsored by the auction itself, of course. It had been one of the lists they sent along, and Cora had made sure he'd memorized that part. There were plenty more, restaurants and art and who knew what, all with a bigger price tag than he could have ever dreamed of; probably far, far more than he'd have been worth as an *actual* slave. But, those same places were happy to open their credit-filled arms for the sake of *charity*.

At least for a night, to however many of the grand twenty-five pairs decided to go to them, if any did at all. Real charitable, with all the coverage they got for it.

"None of those options, no, thank you," replied the matron coolly as they stepped out into the plaza outside the event house and the night air, always so crystal clear up this high. Ruka breathed deep of it, felt it fill his lungs, luxuriating for a second like he always did.

"Ooookay," he sighed out after a moment just breathing, watching from the corner of his eye as Corazon helped his lady gracefully into a carriage and headed off. He felt a pang of hollowness deep in his chest, beneath his ribcage and curled next to his heart, as the Jedi was whisked away and out of Ruka's small sphere of supernatural awareness. Feeling his partner's presence fade away always hurt at least a little, no matter how often they were apart or for how long. He focused back on Araceli. "Not up for entertainment yet? You wanna get dinner? There's—"

"I know what is in the area, and I do not care to partake of any of it at this time. I did not attend tonight nor acquire you for the pleasantries."

"Right to it then, huh," muttered the Mirialan, and eyed her. "Okay, what? What's this about?"

"I want to talk to you about my son."

Ruka's stomach dropped, and his breath hitched. Then, it evened out again. His shoulders finally unlaced a little, and he lifted his chin, narrowing his eyes right back at her.

*Guess tonight is the night after all, then.*

"Well, fine. I've been meaning to talk to you about him too."

That got her to blink, the tiniest break in her ice cold composure.

"What ever would *you* have to discuss with me?"

"Why don't you find out, ay? Let's go. We'll get a fancy kriffing dinner on their cred and fight *really* quietly. Cause, yeah, this is feeling like it's gonna be a fight."

She shook her head, and her cascade of earrings, dripping in diamonds, shook too.

"No. Not here. I want to see your...home."

The Sith stiffened.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"You take my son there, don't you? Then you will take me there. Surely any vista that is enough to provide for him and his safety is equally capable for me and mine."

Ruka grimaced, but she just looked back at him, expecting to be listened to when she issued a demand. He weighed the thought.

It wasn't ideal. He didn't like the idea of her judging him even more than she already did, and seeing where he lived and his neighborhood would definitely be ugly. Cora had been okay, because Cora loved him, and Cora was curious and exploratory by nature, and generally completely nonjudgmental, too kind, really. The whole thing had been an adventure to him the first time, and over the years the house, and a little bit of the neighborhood — not all of it, because it wasn't safe or home for anyone who lived there except whatever gang controlled it that day — had become another home to him, maybe even more than his family's estate. But that was Cora. Curious, nonjudgmental, kind Cora.

His mother was none of those things.

They'd avoided this all this time, partly because Ruka had never invited anyone but Cora down and partly because no one else had ever asked. Angie had made mention, but was clear that she wouldn't mind either way; to her, he was family. She respected his hesitation.

But now here Araceli was, demanding.

The Mirialan crossed his arms, scowled back at her. He was reasonably confident in his ability to keep them both safe if something crazy happened with the gangs, but he didn't let bad people around Noga and Leda, and while Araceli wasn't... his usual definition, he didn't like the idea of her judging *them* one bit.

But then, on the other hand, Corazon was their other father, and this was his mother. She was, for better or worse, one of their grandparents. One of the only decent set, too, besides their *great* grandparents. They should meet eventually, and all the years already had really been long enough.

They would probably be asleep by now, but if they weren't...well. He'd introduce them and keep it short.

"Fine," Ruka said at last, and dropped her arm to wave down one of the cabs. No way was he walking like with Cora. "You really want to, fine."

"Very good," was all she said, and Bogan, was it painful for them to be alone together; they both actively avoided as much whenever Cora brought him along to the manor, always keeping the Jedi in between them or following him out of a room or conveniently needing to use the bathroom or take a call if necessary.

He opened her door for her, not at all graceful like Cora or the others, but she stepped in anyway, more graceful than anyone had any right to be. Ruka gave his address, got an incredulous look from the driver, open-mouthed and all. He had to repeat it twice, and then still the guy looked horrified and like he'd say no until Araceli quietly but firmly reminded him that she was waiting, and one did not make ladies who looked like Araceli *wait*.

They pulled away. He watched his companion watch the lights and the buildings go by, polite disinterest hiding her sharp glances. What she was expecting at this point, he didn't know, but he saw her growing tenser and her lips thinner as they got further and further from the districts that housed she and her kind.

But they were going far, far below 340th Street where Lucretia had never been. Far below. Off the cityship with all its skyhooks entirely. When they dove down to the lower ships, cutting through the noxious clouds that made the air yellow-orange in the daytime, this close to the

habitable edge of the atmosphere, Araceli actually made a sound like surprise or concern. The cabbie was white-knuckling it. Ruka rolled his eyes.

"It won't kill you," he said, making them both startle, their driver moreso. "Not for another forty years, anyway. The lung bleeding doesn't start till then." They both stared at him in horror, which was really bad considering one of them was supposed to be *steering* — and a quick telekinetic hand kept the yoke steady, thank Bogan — so he added, "That's a joke, eyes up, Gods."

Yeah, a joke. Because it was more like fifty to thirty years or less depending on how close to the surface you were stuck living. How much time you spent in the gas mines. Some only got months. Ruka himself had been lucky to make his twenty-something, especially given how much he'd worked and where. He'd whispered to Cora in bed, once, that he wondered if it wasn't the Force that had helped protect him, if he'd had been dead already if not for this mystic power in his veins.

They arrived in his neighborhood without further incident, the cabbie almost taking off before he could even swipe his credit chit. Araceli strode elegantly despite the cracks in the pavement with her head held high and expression smooth, gem-encrusted shawl thing held tighter around herself, obviously ill at ease but far from showing it. Ruka gestured her to the house, helped her up the steps, paused them at the threshold.

"We gotta be quiet so we don't wake up the kids," he told her, finger to his lips for good measure, then unlocked the door.

Araceli blinked at him. "Children?" she echoed, quietly. He let them inside, shut, locked, and bolted the door behind them, extended a hand for her shawl. They kept the heating high when they could, and Cora always ended up kicking off half his fancy layers immediately— Pantorans being cold resistant, or something. Araceli passed it to him without pause and he hung it up as she looked about.

"My little brothers. Did ya not hear that nuts announcer lady? Or Cora, ever? I know he's gotta talk about em." *He's as much their parent now*, he didn't add aloud. He walked across the kitchen and started putting on the kettle, grabbing Cora's preferred tea. "And you can sit, it won't bite you, geez."

The matriarch did so, nose twitching, watching him pour mugs. "They said— Corazon says you raised a family. That you have sons, and you raised them yourself."

"That's cause he's ... sappy about it. Noga and Leda are my siblings. You thought I had kids?"

"I assumed you...had impregnated some young girl in mutual carelessness, and that she had left, or perhaps died in the birth."

Ruka gaped at her, then dragged a hand down his face.

"Cceeqa, I am freaking gay. Not into both, not into women, just guys. I've never touched a pair of tits in my life, okay, I didn't *knock somebody up*. Bogan." He set down their tea so he could wave both hands. "And *our Mama* ain't dead, thanks."

"Then where is she? You said it was just you and the children, and Corazon always suggested as much. Where is your father?"

"Nooo way, lady, you don't get to just buy me off, barge into my home, and demand my franging story over and done like— like it's that easy? Like you're checking off your damn grocery list? Oh, who the kriff am I kidding, like you've ever bought food for yourself. I'm not some project, you don't get to just ask me about my crap. Maybe if you'd ever cared enough to ask Cor he coulda told you. Or if you'd ever wanted to ask me before like he did instead of trying to get me arrested. Kriff off. Where's my Ma? Not here. Noga and Leda are my brothers and they're mine. That's all you get."

They stared at one another for another long, painfully tense minute.

"I have offended you," the Pantoran said at last, sipping her drink. Her lashes fluttered over it, and he wondered idly if she liked it.

"You've been doing that for awhile, lady," the Sith spat, then took a deep breath and got up again. He didn't want to get mad. Not at her, not tonight, not in general. Instead, he started moving around the kitchen. The motions were calming, comforting, simple and useful.

"What are you doing?"

"Cooking. I owe you a **candlelit** dinner or some frang for charity, right? Well, dinner," he gestured to the stove and counters. "Annnd..."

They kept a stack of candles in every room, for when the power went out or the electricity wasn't paid. The latter didn't happen so much anymore, not since he'd joined up with the Praxeum and started getting a stipend, but it was a habit as ingrained as checking the locks or rewearing his clothes or looking over his shoulder. Grabbing two, he set the thick wax pillars on the table in front of Araceli and lit them with a snap of his fingers and a spark of lightning, just because he was feeling like being vindictive about it.

"There. Candlelight, *my Lady*," he said sarcastically, and turned back to the counter. He dragged over the cutting board and grabbed a good knife and eyed the apron Cora had gotten him one Life Day, then looked back down at his Force-forsaken suit.

*Yeah, I don't think so.* Not only would his husband be upset if he ruined the outfit, but he didn't want to try cleaning the damn thing without...insulting the silk, or something. Whatever Cora would say.

Yanking probably more happily than he needed to at the pin and broach and lacy thing and tie or whatever, he managed to get all that off and piled next to the sink before going at the cufflinks with his teeth. If his partner's mother had any words for *that*, she didn't say, but the little noise she made was kind of funny. When he got *those* done, he went to work on the jacket, setting that over the back of his chair and then tackled the problem of the vest keeping him pinned in his dress shirt...blouse...whatever the damn thing was.

Unfortunately, he couldn't get the damned fasteners — and why did it have to be like this, what was wrong with a freaking zipper or button, for the gods' sake? — so he just gave up and yanked the whole thing overhead, gripping at the bottom, shirt and all. Thankfully for his life, he didn't hear anything snap, even though he got caught in the fabric around his shoulders and biceps and it was so tight it took his undershirt with it. The Lady gave an affronted gasp at his half-nudity as he finally franging got the shirt off one arm at a time and with a little casual abuse of the Force. And swearing. But in his own tongue. Because she didn't need to know all that.

"Oh, avert your eyes, it'll be over soon," Ruka scathed, moving to pull the tank top back on. A scrap of chair legs across tile and a hand on his bicep stopped him though. "Uh."

Corazon's mother was staring at his back and torso, her topaz eyes a little wide at the edges. Mostly, they seemed to be fixing on his scars, jumping from each slash and slice to the immense starburst in his side where his insides had spilled out. He quickly yanked his top back on. Jerked away. It was only a few seconds, but—

He resisted the urge to flinch and moved all the fancy clothes to a safer spot on the coat rack with her shawl before he looped the apron over his head and smoothed it down over the dress trousers. Debated a second. Kicked off the pinchy shoes and socks and put those to the side too. Washed his hands.

Araceli was still hovering, halfway back to her seat. "Those seemed...extensive."

"You freaking nobles, always doin' gymnastics just to stay sounding polite. Yeah, they're bad, I know, *thanks*. Show's over now though so you can sit."

She sat, like water falling over rocks, then asked, "What are they from?"

Ruka ignored her, *sifting* through his mental recipe box, comparing what he had in the cryo — actually fresh produce and actual meat, yes, because like having electricity and shoes and datapads, that was something they could spare for now, and Cora liked roasts and fish just like,

if he recalled right, his mother did — before picking one he could manage and beginning to gather ingredients. He spoke over his shoulder while he did.

"Factory accident. Fell in a machine when I was a kid. No big deal though, right?"

"Is that so?" Araceli asked, watching him like a hawkbat over the rim of her mug as she picked it back up. It made his spine crawl. "How unfortunate. What sort of factory was it?"

"Ship...parts. Ship engines."

"Hmm. And how old were you?"

"Ni— twelve," he stumbled, and bit back a curse.

"A nine or twelve year old in a *ship part* factory accident, ahh. Very tragic." Her eyes were yellow slits, and she managed to look bored as all hell and yet completely menacing. Cool, but composed. Sort of like Cora looked when he was well and truly mad.

Oh, kriff again.

"Why do you wanna know?" the Sith demanded, set on edge and setting down his chopping knife.

"I want to know," the woman intoned, "because as Corazon's account goes, your major scarring is almost entirely from the wartime efforts you two endured on your first deployment. He claims you obtained them through injury with an explosive, protecting him."

...*idiot*, the Sith thought at himself. Cora talked about Ruka's "heroism" to anyone with or without ears. *Of course*.

With the revelation of his screw up, he sagged, leaning back against the counter. The Mirialan was quiet for a moment, considering Araceli as she seemed to calm down, breathing delicately but quickly through her nose, the same technique her son used when putting on a public front.

After awhile, he sighed, turned back to chopping red squash and mushrooms and filleting scalefish and murmured, "I didn't think he'd told you that."

"Why would you lie to me?"

Ruka shrugged. "You already think I'm trying to swindle your kid for his cred or some kark, which I guess after three years is a step up from wanting to kidnap him. Would you really have believed me if I told you I got kriffed up saving him? You'd probably think I was trying to butter

you up or trick you or make you think you owed a debt — whatever crazy goes through rich peoples' heads."

"Such suspicions are hardly *crazy*, as you put it."

"Whatever. What's it matter? Yeah, fine, got hurt at war, that happens, don't it? Not really what either of us is here to talk about, is it?"

"No, it is not...however, I do not see how we can controvert with any success when you started off by lying to me; how are we to take each other for our word now?"

"You did the frangin' same, so don't ask me. What's all this sithspit about kriffing *buying me like a dog* just so you can start makin' demands? And pretending you wanted us there? Kriff you for that, by the way. Cor was *so excited* you asked about us both. He's excited every time you're nice about us. Thinks you're finally accepting it. And you just...manipulated him with that! You and me both know you're always just— just *tolerating* me, fine, but you didn't have to go out of your way instead of just bein' not a huge bitch when he brings me over."

She pressed white-painted lips into a delicate line. Inclined her head slightly.

"You...you raise a valid complaint. I do apologize for going about this so surreptitiously—"

"—for *lying*, don't pretend."

"...for misrepresenting," she conceded, and they stared at one another another long few seconds before he threw up his hands and resumed cooking.

The quiet stretched. He chopped, poured, mixed, glazed. Moved this, seasoned that, refilled her tea. Listened for the kids upstairs, itched to check his comm, managed not to. She watched him the whole time, though he caught her looking around the kitchen now and again too. The holoclock — bright, new, fully functioning, and styled with holozine characters — ticked off twenty minutes.

The Pantoran matron waited until he had the pan in the oven and a sauce bubbling and had cleaned up a little until she spoke again.

"I have a suggestion. You are correct, our situation is...unideal for trust. You feel coerced against your will and maligned, and I feel wary and weary of this entire circus both. Perhaps we need to begin on more equitable footing. Therefore, I will offer you a piece of information about me that could leave me vulnerable to its exposition, and you will do the same."

"...you...wanna trade freaking secrets? What are we, five?"



"Hardly. Information is a valuable thing, that with the potential to hurt more so. I am sharing with you a weakness, and expecting something equally intimate in return, so that we may both have a measure of security in the conversation going forward. Otherwise, we are stymied, and I do not intend to waste any more time nor this opportunity."

Ruka's lips pressed into a hard line much like hers had. He crossed his arms, straining the apron strings. The older Pantoran woman sighed delicately.

"Shall I venture first then, to show my sincerity? Very well. When I was about your age, I suppose it was, my companions — ladies of my peerage, of course — and I smoked tabaacc. I hid it from Porfinio and only ceased when I became pregnant with Lucretia, my eldest."

"I know who Lucy is."

She blinked rapidly at him and he shrugged again. "As I was saying...I abstained for years, through Angelica's birthing and Corazon's, but once he was a child? I started again. I skulk about my own home and offices, sequester away between meetings and in the morning in my favorite rooftop gardens and hide it from the children and my husband. The staff knows, because they are *everywhere*, but none of my family and certainly not my peers."

"You—" and he couldn't help a bark of disbelief. "Ay, ay, seriously?"

"Is that very difficult to believe? It is certainly unbecoming, indeed, but I did say I would confide something of value."

"No, just— I did too."

She lifted rose eyebrows at him.

"You smoked?"

"Yeah. When I was a kid, for a couple years. Stopped for the same reason too. Mama got pregnant with Noga, and I refused to bring a dirty habit around them. Haven't touched 'em since though."

"Well then, due credit to your willpower."

"That a compliment? Watch it, the universe'll implode."

"Sarcasm is ill becoming," she replied, he swore, sarcastically. "Now, that done with—"

"Ay, ay, hold up, fair's fair. I gotta tell you something."

"You just did."

"Me smoking ain't a secret, and not something I'm really worried about. I get that like, for you, it's *awful*, or whatever, your poor fancy ass image, but not for the rest of the galaxy."

She looked like she was trying not to scowl at him, because that would've been too unladylike too, or something, but she nodded eventually.

"I... appreciate that admission. You could have easily not said anything and I would have been none the wiser."

"Wouldn'ta been right, and that's not really me."

"So I am beginning to see."

They got quiet again, her obviously waiting. The food had started to smell, and it was warm next to the stove, but his sudden sweat wasn't from it, he knew. Ruka frowned down at his bared feet, squinting a little. His gut churned, shoulders prickling, and he sighed.

Because while him and Cora might've had *their* secrets, she wanted one of *his*, and he knew which one was bothering him most now. All the others, his partner shared, had shown him not to be afraid of.

"Okay..." he muttered. Rubbed at his scars, where they itched. "I...what do you know, about the Force stuff?"

"A fair amount, from Corazon and from liasioning with your Praxeum and between the Clan and the Empire. It became my son's business, and so it became my business to know of it. My knowledge, however, is solely academic and somewhat of politick."

"Ay, right. Well... We can do stuff with our minds, you know that?"

"It has been mentioned. Manipulation of objects, spatial awareness, the like...Corazon once showed me a...figment? An illusion. He conjured an image of dancers. We watched an imaginary ballet over tea."

Ruka smiled automatically. "'Course he did. Well, that's...not all. I mean there's lots of stuff like that, physical stuff and mental stuff and like...the spiritual side. Like, Cor is really good at making barriers or controlling creatures, controlling his body or even healing wounds...I'm good at...uh...well I can throw lightning and jump really high, let's say. And we can talk. In our heads. Or know what each other are feeling or thinking."

She leaned forward, gaze intense with a thirst for knowledge he had seen mirrored in her son.  
"You can speak to each other right now? Mentally?"

"Well, no. Not this far away. And even close it's hard, just images and impressions and stuff. I'm not good at telepathy. Cor and I are more... They call it a battlemeld, or meditation of minds... We're good at syncing up with each other, basically, cause of how close we are. It's like being two people at once. I'm him and he's me, but I'm also still me while he's still him. We are one. Uh, frang, I'm getting off track. Just. So, mind stuff, right?"

"Very well. Although I am curious about these topics, do go on."

"Well...so talking in our heads and stuff yeah and sensing things, and that's like... Not just each other or other Users but also... everything? All around us. All the time. And sometimes, I mean that like, ALL TIMES. We can pick up on stuff that happened in the past or...that might happen in the future."

"You have clairvoyance?"

"Yeah, sure. Kinda. Not all of us, and it's not clear, and I'm not good at it, but I...I do. I have this...farsight. My great grandma did, and I do a little, and..." He squeezed his eyes shut, felt a little sick because of it, opened them again. "I have dreams lately where I...where I go blind. And I think they're prophecy." He shrugged uncomfortably, swallowed his fear. "It's. It's my price, I think, for using the Dark. I dunno. It could just be nightmares but. But I also *know* it's not. And I...I haven't told Cora *yet*."

Ruka didn't look at her.

"I am sorry," Araceli said, because what else did someone politely say to that if they weren't calling it insane?

"Just what it is. I probably deserve it." The Mirialan Sith looked at his palm, shook his head, turned attention back to making sure his sauce didn't burn.

"What is it that makes you say that?"

"*Nope*," was all he answered, as he stopped the timer before it could go off and wake anybody and pulled the tray out. He plated two portions of fish and veggies, sauced them, and set one down in front of his unwitting mother-in-law. "Eat up, my Lady."

The Pantoran sniffed, looking down at her plate, then did a full on double-take. He almost snorted when she looked back at him.

"This is— you know I enjoy...?"

"It's not skysnapper but it should be close. And yeah, I know your favorites. Porfinio's and Angie's and Lucy's too, and only Angie even talks to me. But Cor talks a lot about all of you. You matter to him, so." He pointed again, tone falling into the one he used on the boys out of habit. "Eat, ay, ay, before it gets cold."

Pulling the apron off to hang up, he sat and did so himself, slouching into his chair while she more perched. He didn't much feel like eating, anxiety and upset cramping his stomach, but he'd never waste food. Araceli picked up her fork and took a dainty little bite, humming.

"It is quite good. My compliments."

"Thanks," he grunted. "So. You wanna talk. We shared. Talk."

"Negotiations are not supper conversation."

"We're 'negotiating?' Yeah, right. You said you wanted to talk about Corazon, how is that negotiating?"

"It is," the woman insisted plainly. "But as I have said, it is not a topic for our meal. Let us converse more familiarly."

"We ain't familiar though, lady."

She finished her bite, sipped her tea, nodded at him. "I admit...I have been more than willfully ignorant in regards to you. I have resisted learning anything about you, or your personage, or that which you care for or your interests, though my son speaks of them — of you — endlessly on the rare occasion I can capture a moment of his time these days. Perhaps I can gain no ground here tonight simply by proceeding without an explanation. If you will allow me, I will attempt to elucidate my actions."

"You saying you wanna explain yourself? That's rich. I don't need an explanation, I already *know* what you think about me. You've made that kriffing obvious for years. I get it. I'm trash. And you're...you."

"While not an... incorrect summation, I feel it overly harsh, or at least mischaracterized. Please understand, I want the same things you do; or that you claim to. I want what is best for Corazon, and everything I do is for the love and well-being of my family and my children."

And didn't that franging suck, because he *got that*. Because *everything* he did had always been for *his family*. For him, that meant...well. But on her end, it looked like opposing their relationship at every turn.

"Fine," he ground out between clenched teeth. "You got something to say, say it, so I can say what I got to."

Araceli took a few more dainty bites, then set her cutlery down and folded her hands in her lap. Ruka kept eating, more out of habit than anything else.

"At first I considered this a phase...my husband advised as much, reminded me that he and many of his fellow councilmen and diplomats had their trysts between *filibusters* on the floor when they were young, raucous gentlemen, full of their passions and love for their brothers and still learning. But they did learn. Trysts, and nothing more. Exploring, discreetly, is well and fine when one is coming of age. But we all know a proper *marriage* and hiers are expected, are right, and he and his friends grew up. I thought Corazon would too." She tilted her chin with an eerie sort of elegance, exactly one curl of her deep, pastel pink hair wobbling above one earring as if she'd willed it to. "But Corazon did not grow out of it. I accepted that, eventually. If his fancies laid with men, then so be it, so long as he made a *proper*, respectable match fit for our family name and developed a happiness in that marriage. Perhaps a well bred Sephi lord or one of his peers. That would be acceptable."

"And then I came along?" the Mirialan scathed, hackles up even further at hearing his partner talked about so much like...like a pawn or something, more than a person, handed off to some faceless guy.

"Oh, you were already involved by then, but as I explained, I thought it — you — a phase. Do not misunderstand me, it is not your gender to which I objected, even if it was less ideal. After all, he is our only son, and blood hiers to carry on the name are preferable. Much more difficult to accomplish that between two men, though not entirely impossible. My objection was and is your status. Harsh though it may seem, the fact remains you have no blood status, no titles, no wealth, no lands, no history. You are a low caste peasant. And, to my view at the time, surely a ruffian and criminal. When I was not consumed by terror for my boy, I thought perhaps after so many model years he had finally caught fancy of a rebellious streak, and was clinging to you so obstinately because he wanted to strike out at me and his duties. More likely still that you were manipulating him. Corazon is a sweet boy. He would undoubtedly wish to see good in you and be persuaded by his hopes for as much and romantic soul."

"*DON'T*," snarled Ruka, and reigned in his volume and venom with a deep breath and an effort of so many years of practice, hiding half of his and his mama's shouting matches from the kids. "*Don't* you dare. Insult me all day, lady, but he's *your son*. Don't you franging underestimate or talk bad about him, you hear me? Not to my face, not to anybody. Yeah, Cora is kind. He's unbelievably kriffing kind. And he's sweet. Sweeter than me or anyone deserves. Honest too. But being kind doesn't mean for a damn second that he's *stupid*, and being sweet don't mean he's weak, and being honest means he's strong, not gullible. So don't you godsdamn dare."

Said man's mother looked stricken. Then, her look turned more appraising. He almost thought she seemed approving.

"A...*quick* and valiant defense of my son. That is an appreciable quality. But you interrupt me."

"I'm gonna, if you keep spouting crap."

"Hush, now. I am attempting to explain my position, and it will be more smoothly done if you reign in your protestations, however justified you feel them to be."

The Mirialan glared, but stuck his fork in his mouth and bit down on it to keep quiet. She went on.

"As I was saying...I thought it a phase. But you both persisted, and persisted, and there was the fiasco with his nineteenth birthday — oh, how he defended you two to me. And I was so angry at him at the time, beside myself with worry. And still, you and he persisted. That first war came, and went, and he told me how you saved him, and I was grateful for that, I still am, but..." She sighed. "I tried to be patient. I rather think I have been. It was not a phase, I realized, but it was still less than my boy deserved, and in that view I in turn persisted in my resistance to you. I have avoided you and ignored you and judged you, perhaps misjudged you. This evening alone has shown me more of you than I have been willing to *hear* when my son tells me in years."

Ruka just stared at her. She gave the tiniest huff.

"You may speak now."

"Gee, thanks," he scathed around his silverware. He dropped the fork onto his plate and crossed his arms again. "So, what? You think even less of me now that you're here, seeing anything? What's it supposed to matter to me that you've had to get over yourself about us?"

"I am hoping you would at least find the perspective understandable, and thus be more willing to listen."

"Yeah, no, I get it." She lifted a skeptic brow at him, and he raised a hand, palm out. "No, really— *I get it*. The part where you just...worry for your kid. I know that part. But just 'cause I can sympathize doesn't mean I'm not *pissed* you basically hate me and look down on me without even knowing a damn thing about me."

"Tell me something, then."

"Like what? I already said, you don't just get to barge in and get my life story, m'not spilling my guts to you, lady."

"Something about you personally, then. Not your history or your family, if you do not wish to speak of them."

He scoffed. "You're joking."

"I am not."

"I dunno what to tell you and I don't really care. Ask, I guess."

She frowned slightly but persisted despite his trying to brush her off. "All those...tattoos."

"What about 'em?"

"Why do you have them?"

He blinked at her and uncrossed his arms. "What, seriously?"

"Indeed, 'seriously,' as you put it. I would like to know what is so particular to you that you found it necessary to permanently ruin your skin."

*"It isn't ruined,"* Ruka growled, and Araceli at least had the grace to offer a contrite glance.

"...I apologize. That was uncouth of me."

"Whatever. They're...frang. Cultural. Mirialans get them. The face ones, anyway."

"They mean something?"

"Each one, yeah. All different things."

"What?"

"What, what?"

"What do they mean?"

Ruka pressed his mouth in a line.

"Surely this query is not so difficult. Your people must know their meaning and elect to telegraph it to all, so it is not secretive. Surely Corazon has asked and you had told him." He had, and Ruka did, but the was beside the point. "What do they mean?" she repeated.

"These," he pointed to the arrows on either side of his face, just below his outer eye. "Mean I have family. One for each of my little brothers. It's like... It's not that specific but it's also really specific too. These each mean a younger individual I am responsible for and love, more or less. It's saying 'I'm a big brother' in glyph form."

Next were the triangles under his eyes, reminiscent of the teardrop shapes under his godmother's. Their placement had been to remember her by. "These mean...architect? Nah, builder? Laborer? Worker? Specifically that I use my hands to build or fix or like, put food on the table. I guess more literally it's saying I get dirt under my nails creating more in the world than was there before I touched it."

He pointed at the squares on his jaw. "These mean holding up. I support. I dream." His finger moved from the row of blocks to the triangles below his lip. "These are for remembering, mourning, never forgetting to say you have loved and, moreover, have lost and still carry it."

"And these are... Like saying warrior. I got them when I started training with the Jedi because... Well it seemed like maybe I could live up to them. Be strong and... And capable and finally *doing* something. Fighter. Protector." Finally he tapped the bracketed edges of his jaw and cheekbones.

"What about on your arms?"

"The ones on my hands and wrists are essentially a repeat, but with more emphasis, because they're not just on my face. I have them on my wrists and feet too." He wiggled his toes when she quickly glanced beneath the table. "'I support, I build, I raise up, I rear.' The bands and rectangles on my forearms stand for power, protection, strength, shadow, danger, and binding. They mean defense. Mean *I'll be their shield*. I got those around about when we got Knighted. The Dark is...freedom, to me, and the Sith ideals of that mean a lot to me, all that talk about breaking chains, but I also never intend to forget everything I'm sworn to and that I have to stay in control. That's why I got them on my arms. Like...bracers, yeah, because I can fight now, but also like shackles, because I always have to be careful. Annnnd then there's the wings on my back and that's it, which aren't really Mirialan but they were done the same way."

He tapped his fingers on the table, uncomfortable. Explaining the tattoos out loud to her was incredibly revealing, not something non-Mirialans understood, and he'd been expecting something shallower and maybe meaner. But Araceli merely studied him, hands still folded, thinking he couldn't tell what until she asked, "Wings?"

"Cora calls me. Uh. He calls me his angel. And I...I like it. A lot. A lot better than...than." He sighed. "Than street rat or guttertrash or ghetto whore or anything else. So when I went away to study on Selen, I got them to remind me of him, to remind me to be strong and be good, even in the dark. Especially in the Dark."



"You did not explain that flower on your arm."

"Oh. The flower isn't Mirialan either. It's called the lotus, and it's the symbol of the group of the same name. That's who me and Cora work for...with, as, whatever."

"He has mentioned this Lotus on occasion, yes. Your work seems important, if more dangerous than I would ever care to like."

"Don't worry, Cor is strong, and amazing. He'll protect himself AND everyone else."

That made her give another tiny, there-then-gone smile like his earlier tirade had. It kept reminding him that no matter how much she disliked him, she liked how much he thought of Cora.

"Are your earrings also cultural?"

"Are we just gonna talk all about how I look? Okay, yeah, that's more about what I expected," he scathed, then shook his head. "No, I just like 'em."

"And those?"

She was pointing at his nipple piercings where they were visible as bumps under his top now that he didn't have on the apron, Bogan. He really had to remember to take them out for times like these.

"Oh, for the love of—" and fine, kriffing *fine*, she really wanted to know, "I *got* them when I turned tricks cause they made me more cred. I kept 'em just cause I liked em though, same as the earrings."

The older woman's brow wrinkled in confusion. "You...did tricks? Such as an entertainer on stage? Corazon quite enjoyed magicians and pantomimers."

"Entertainer, pfft, yeah." His sarcasm only confused her more, and he sighed, rubbed at his forehead. "Bogan, you're serious. What would you call it that you'd know? Prostitute. I was a prostitute."

Well. That was certainly an expression.

"And yeah, Cora knows," Ruka added, before she could explode with whatever building rant was turning her *bright* purple. Concerningly purple. He picked his fork back up, took a big bite out of his dinner, chewed slow, gave her time for her brain to reboot, almost wished he could *film* it. Went on, "He didn't at first, because I wasn't exactly proud of it, but I did it to feed my kids, and he's always respected that; respected anything I'd do for them. He forgave me way

before I ever thought of forgiving myself. Not just for that, either, cause if you asked him, the only thing I did wrong was not telling him sooner, trusting him. But for...for anything. Everything."

Araceli still seemed in a state, so he got up to wash his plate, drying it and putting it on the rack and then debating collecting hers, since she seemed done. The Mirialan walked back over, snapped his fingers in her face.

"Yo, you still in there or did I break you?"

That seemed to get to her. She huffed through her nose again.

"No one has ever *broken* me, boy, and you will not be starting now," she asserted, voice managing to even out by the end like the noble she was. She gestured at her plate. "You may collect this."

"My lady," he replied, still mocking, and finished cleaning up both that dish and the pans, putting the leftovers up for the boys in the cryo. He was just finishing when her cool tones danced between them again.

"And what of your scars?"

"What about 'em? You already know—"

"I want to see them."

"*What?* Why? You can already see enough, don'tcha think?"

"No. You covered yourself, earlier. I want to see them in full."

"I ain't dropping my pants for you, lady, sweet Ashla and Bogan. Back off."

"Your shirtclothes, then. Show me your side."

"*No*. What the hell, why do you even wanna look?"

"It is relevant and important."

"You know how they happened, that's enough."

"Show me."

"Look, Lady Ya-ir—"

"You may call me Araceli."

That was new. Ruka balked.

"Uh, Araceli, can we just not already? I've answered all your damn questions—"

"*Show me*, Ruka. I need to *see*." And that was it, not any diminutive, not *you* or *my son's boy* but his own damn name. The Mirialan froze, and then slowly, struggling to hold her gaze, lifted his shirt off again. It hung limp in the fingers of one hand as he lowered his arms.

The Pantoran woman stood and approached, reaching out. Ruka dropped his gaze away and turned his head, not wanting to look at her while she did... this whatever it was. Cora might have taken the time to get used to his scars, might claim they made him more handsome, but Ruka knew how kriffed up he looked. He didn't even have an ear on one side anymore, the same side she was focusing on, which was basically pulverized meat.

Her cool fingers skimmed his arm, his side. Her palm pressed to his abdomen, and he nearly yelped. Kind of squeaked.

"Uh," he said, with emphasis, because not only was some lady touching him, his husband's *mother* was touching him.

Araceli's hand trembled, and so did her voice when she spoke.

"This looks..." she didn't finish, and Ruka shrugged uncomfortably.

"*Extensive*.' Yeah, I know."

"You could have died."

"I kind of did," admitted the man. "Cora doesn't...he won't talk about how bad it was, but I read the after action report, eventually. I was kind of...in pieces. I was dead. But Cora used the Force to...well, basically he revived me and kept me alive and then he got the medics to help and...yeah."

She looked up at him. Tears were tracking down her cheeks. Ruka might have squawked in alarm.

"This could have been my son," she whispered, crying, and Ruka's hands were lifting of their own accord.

"Hey, no, no, he's fine, and I'm never going to let anything happen to him, don't cry."

She did, in fact, cry. He moved with the instinct of a lifetime of practice and hushed her, guiding her back to her chair and, after a moment's hesitation, gently rubbing her back. He was softly crooning in Mirialan without entirely thinking about it, alternating between soothing sentiments and snatches of lullabies.

To her credit, the matriarch calmed down fairly quickly. Part of him wondered if he was looking at a snapshot of an older Cora, less quick to tears and quicker still to stop them, but wasn't sure— his partner was expressive, and he loved that about him.

The Sith summoned the little hankerchief from his dumb suit breastpocket that Cora had insisted on with barely a blink and a tug of the Force, handing it to her. She took the thing and dabbed her face with it.

Very, very softly this time, the Pantoran spoke. "My son screams in his sleep."

"Yeah, he does."

It was normal, to him. To them. Painful, but normal. They both had the nightmares. They both cried. Both clung to each other in the middle of the godsdamn night, closer to morning.

"Those scars are why."

"Partly."

"The maids told me. The last several times he stayed at our estate, they heard him."

"...yeah?" *Where was she going with this?*

"You knew."

"No sithspit, lady. I'm right there. Like he's there for me."

"I am his mother and I had to discover this from *the help*. My son did not tell me. There are several things he does not tell me, I *know* it. I know he is keeping things from me, and yet...yet he confides in you. Not his family. You."

Ruka grit his teeth. Took his hand off her back. Went to the counter. Put his shirt back on. Turned around.

"I *am* his family," he asserted. "Just because you don't think so doesn't mean that's not true."

"Yes *it does*," Araceli finally snapped, gesturing wildly with one small, soft, manicured hand, rings flashing. "This has gone on long enough—"

"Oh, like HELL, you don't get to decide that—"

"—I am his mother, I can and I will—"

"—he's a grown man! And he's told you this! It's his choice!"

"And he is not going to choose what is best for him and so I must bend my pride and plead with *you!*"

A beat. He stilled.

"...what?"

The Pantoran woman's golden gaze was wide, cheeks flushed violet under her dusted makeup broken by tear streaks, curls slipping out of their bun. She ran a hand through them, messed them up further in the front.

"It has to be you. Corazon will not break off this affair—"

"It's not an *affair*, we're partners! We're in love, we're a *family*."

"*Do not interrupt me!*" she hissed, and went on. "Corazon will not do so, I have accepted that. He loves you, and he has committed to that in all but matrimony—" *That's what you think.*

"—and he has defended and choosen this relationship at every attempt I have made to encourage him otherwise, to show him better. He has decided, and I see now I cannot change that, and so I must place my hopes on *you*."

"Ashla and Bogan and the Force help me," the Mirialan whispered. "I'd be kriffing laughing in your face if any part of this was franging funny. Me? After four *freaking years* you're coming to *me* to ask me to— what? *Break up with him?*"

"Yes."

"You're out of your mind!"

"You claim to love him so much, you claim you'll protect him even with your life— this is that. This is the only way, the best way forward. Corazon needs a *future*. A safe, prosperous future as he was meant to have. Away from the Jedi and their wars that scar you and away from you and your lack of prospects."

He did laugh in her face then, and there wasn't any humor to it. "You think Cor would stop bein' a Jedi just cause we split? You really don't know your kid at all anymore, do you? He's *made* for

this, he's— he's a *hero*, okay, don't you get that? He's going to change the galaxy. He saves people. He's...he's like the Light itself. Nothing is gonna stop that or take it away, not even if I broke his heart. I dunno whether to be MORE insulted or take it as some kinda sick fringing compliment that you thought for a second I'd have that kind of impact. We're partners but he's still Cora, and Cora is...he's a Jedi. He's the future."

Araceli looked...frustrated. Her eyes were still wet, and she quickly swiped one finger under them, and he felt himself uncoil, just a little, at the reminder of her upset, her vulnerability. That was something they shared, and he couldn't ignore it.

"...look. I get being afraid. I really do. I think about Noga and Leda getting hurt all the time, and I'd do anything to try and keep them safe, but...But the world's not safe, lady— *Araceli*. Yeah, what we do, with the Jedi and the Lotus, it's dangerous sometimes...but that part? That part you don't got any control over, you gotta let that go. This is who Cora is, who we are, and that's that."

He gave her a minute at that, letting her grapple with it, because it was terrifying, sometimes. Then, he went on, still soft. "But the other bit? You know, it's funny, I used to think all the same things. Everything you're saying, I would think about myself. That he'd be happier without me, better off with someone you'd actually like, someone that wasn't...me. Worthless and trash. I thought, *I can't make him happy... Like, long term, even if he loves me, I can't do that*. But I eventually learned that that's just not true. Not just that, but that I was really wrong. When I got hurt— that was horrible for him and...He's not better off without me, he's not happier without me, and I'm not either. We're better together." His tone hardened again. "Me an' him? End that? Absolutely not. I'm not breaking up with him to, what, save him from me? Yeah, okay, maybe a couple years ago when I was a lot stupider, that would've worked, but not anymore. I have a little more respect for what we've got now. Cora and me...we're good. We're *good* and we don't need...whatever it is you think we do or don't have. Yeah, okay, I can't give him a castle and hovercars and titles and all those things, I can't give him everything he deserves, but... But we still have a lot, and what we do have, it's good. I've seen that. And yeah, it took me awhile, but I did. Maybe eventually you will too."

Across from him, the Ya-ir matriarch sighed, a supple slump of her whole body. She sniffed, wiped her eyes again, quickly smoothed her hair and cosmetics back into place like she was the one that had magic at her fingertips. She stared into space, and then at him, sighed one more time.

"You refuse then?"

"*Duh.*"

"Do not be crass," she reprimanded, and he could tell that it was more about getting herself back under control than anything else. She smoothed her skirts, which were already smooth

and shiny and perfect, folded her hands in front of her tea mug. Lifted her chin and cleared her throat and like a flash all that frenzy and distress was hidden again and there was just a stately woman way too out of place at his crummy kitchen table. "Very well then. I have made my request, and with it answered, have no more to say on its topic. Let us proceed with our docket. You wished to speak to me as well?"

Ruka snorted, thought for the first time in *years* about a smoke. Bogan, what a night this was.

"Oh, you're not gonna like this," he found himself saying, dragging a hand down his face and sitting back down too, flopping into his chair because he was suddenly so damn tired. "I mean, you were already gonna not like it, I was ready for that, but after *that*? Kriff me."

"You really must stop swearing."

"*Johed ette na illaka*," he replied, as sarcastic as he possibly could. "You can kriffing guess what that's Mirialan for."

"Hush. What is it that you would request."

"Pretty simple, honestly." He waved a hand, needing that gesture when he didn't have sightlines, willing tendrils of the Force to open his drawer upstairs, lift the box there, and bring it down the stairs and to his hand. Araceli's topaz gaze zeroed in on it and she went so straight in her seat he wondered how her back didn't break. Though it was obvious she knew exactly where this was going now, he opened the lid and set it down between them anyway. His great grandfather's ring shone in the dim kitchen light, lovingly polished over the years by his grandma and then him. The sight made him smile dopeily, imagining Cora wearing it, thinking of how it fit, given Cora had decided his own family's ring — much, much older and quite literally beyond a price tag — was worth giving to Ruka for their *six month anniversary* as a couple boyfriend Padawans. The Sith took a deep, steady breath, smile still in place.

"I want to marry your son. And I'd prefer to do it with your permission."

The Ya-ir matriarch looked like she'd either murder him or throw up. She masked it fast though, in one quick breath.

"And if I say no? Will you even respect my wishes? You've shown no regard in the past."

"No, I won't," the Mirialan challenged. "I love your son. He's my *compass*, the light of my life, my heart, my soul's other half, my destiny— I know it. And I'm *somehow* his too. We're better together. He loves me, and I love him. I love him more than anything and I want the whole franged galaxy to know that for the rest of our lives. I'm marrying him. Whether or not you're there is up to you."

"Why are you even asking me? If you are not going to bother heeding what I say and simply act out however you like regardless, then why this charade?"

"It's not a charade. I'm serious, I want you with me on this— or at least I wanted you to know about it so you could have a shot at *pretending* to be. To get your kark together ahead of time. Think about it, yeah? What if I did just pop the question to Cor? Imagine him reacting. He'd say yes, *obviously*, and go *running* to tell you about it, because you're his mom and he franging loves you and he'd be so excited, and then you'd— probably look at him like you're looking at me now. You'd shut him down, or protest, or be obviously horrified instead of happy for him and try to talk him out of it, and he'd see *that*, and then what? Can't you picture how crushed he'd be? You'd lose him, don't you see that?"

Her face crumpled, pinched up. Her ramrod posture shook, brittle. Evidently, she could.

Ruka inhaled deeply, brushed a hand over his hair even though it was all pinned back in the fancy tail Cora had put it in. "Look. I'm giving you a chance to stay a part of your kid's life. That's not a chance shitty parents usually get, so you should kriffing take it. Like it or not, *he* picked *me* too. He's picked me over you and your crap over and over. And I don't want him to have to choose between me or you this time, 'cause it'll be me, and Cora doesn't deserve that. He deserves way kriffin' better. You really think you'll still get an invitation if you try and stop us now? You think you'll be wanted if you show up, think your calls'll be answered, that you'll hear sithspit about us or see us again? Fat chance. It dies slow, and it *sucks*. Believe me, I know. If you walk now, you walk for good. You don't get that back. Y'know why? Because your kid doesn't owe *you* shit. *You* owe him *everything*."

The kitchen was so godsdamn quiet.

And then Araceli let out a single, short, high-pitched shriek and immediately put her face in her hands. Ruka nearly jumped out of his seat. Upstairs, he heard noise. *Frang*.

"What the hell, lady?" he hissed, standing up as footsteps came quickly downstairs.

"Big brother?! Cora?! Mama?! What's wrong, what's— oh." It was Noga, and he was all sleep-rumpled and just in his pajama pants and looking wide-eyed but he stopped as soon as Ruka met him at the kitchen doorway to head him off. "What's going on?"

"Everything's fine, bud, don't worry. Sorry we woke you up," Ruka said quickly, then switched to Mirialan. "*Nobody's hurt, I'm sorry, so sorry, bud, don't be scared. We were just talking and Araceli got a bit...upset.*"

"*Araceli?*" Noga questioned, immediately adapting too, eyes narrowed in suspicion at the change as he peered around Ruka and into the kitchen. The matriarch had lifted her head at the



intrusion and was turned their way, observing. *"That sounds familiar. Who's she? She looks like Cora-brother."*

*"That's cause she's Corazon's mom, bud. Her name is Araceli."*

"Oh." The boy nodded, staring at her a moment while she blinked back before turning to Ruka again. *"Do we like her?"*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"Is she good? She around for him? She's not like Mama?"*

Ruka's chest tightened.

*"Mama isn't bad, bud. You know that."*

A shrug. *"Not the way you two fight."*

*"Noga..."*

*"Mama makes you sad,"* the boy clarified, smothering a yawn. *"Does she make Cora sad?"*

*"N... no, bud, she doesn't make Cora sad. She loves him much as I love you and Leda. She loves all her kids and she's really protective of them."*

*"So she's not like the bastard either."*

*"Language, Noga. And no, no, she's NOTHING like Glava. Not like none of the guys. His dad isn't either. Araceli is a good mom and she's never hurt her kids."*

Noga nodded. *"Okay then,"* he said, and his older brother wished more than anything that he didn't have to KNOW these sorts of things, didn't have to be asking, didn't feel the need.

But he did, because Ruka hadn't been able to stop any of that, to protect them or hide them from the fact that their Mama loved her bottles more, to do more than scrape by.

Noga pulled him from his quickly brooding thoughts; they were already in a spiral from the earlier conversation.

*"If she's so great,"* he was asking, *"how come she hasn't come before?"*

Well.

Kriff.

*"She's a really busy lady, bud. You know Cora's a noble, but she is too and she actually... Does that stuff. We just came from that charity party I told you we were doing."* Not that he needed to, because his partner had been discussing it nonstop.

*"Busy for years?"* Noga glared at him, then at the floor. Sighed like no kid should have to.  
*"Sounds more like she didn't want to meet us. Right? Cause we're not good or rich enough or something."*

The tightness in his chest snapped down the middle and cracked into little pieces.

*"Noga,"* Ruka hissed, fierce and damp, cupping the child's face in his hands. *"You are **always enough** you hear me, ay ay? Always. You and Leda are the best things in either of Corazon or me's life and you're incredible and so smart and kind and I wouldn't want it any different for one goddamn second. You're everything to me— and you're more to the world, you got it? You're enough. More than enough."*

He pressed their foreheads together, kissed the boy's hair. Noga sniffed a bit but nodded, hugging him quick and tight around the neck before he pulled back — he'd grown out of clinging for hugs, unless everyone was really upset.

*"Araceli just... Loves Cora a lot, like we do, so much it scares her. That's all. She hasn't been... Ready to meet you. But she's here now, and I know she's going to love you, cause you're the best, so why don't you say hi?"*

"Okay."

*"And be polite, no swearing."*

"Ayyyyy."

"Noga."

*"Fine, fine."* The almost-teenager straightened up from his slouch — something Cora had been drilling into them, about proper posture — and Ruka moved aside and back into the kitchen, hoping desperately that the woman was in some state to not freak him out. Thankfully, she seemed the image of put-together, giving a small, polite smile when Noga walked over to face the Pantoran matriarch. He gave a little wave. "Hi, Missus Araceli. I'm Noga, nice to meet you."

"Hello there, Noga. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance as well," Araceli responded with a warmth Ruka had never seen from her before, all soft and friendly. She nodded back at

him. "I deeply apologize if our discussions pulled you from your sleep. That was not my intention."

"No worries," Noga said, shrugging. He rubbed at his eyes. "I'm gonna go back t'bed though. Uh, you're really pretty. And Cora's really nice, and he talks about you a lot, so— it's just nice to meet you. Again. Goodnight."

She sniffed a little, smiled more. "Goodnight, Noga. Thank you. Sleep well and sweetest dreams, dear heart."

"Huh. Cora says that. Thanks." He turned to Ruka, asked, "*Nice enough?*"

*"Very. Proud of you. Now get some sleep."*

*"You too."*

*"After I take her home and pick Cora up. We'll be back before too late, promise."* He kissed his hair again, got an elbow in the side and a kiss back in reply, and then the boy was tromping back up to his room. Ruka watched him go, listened a few minutes after his footsteps stopped, then sighed so hard he nearly fell over. "Kriff me."

"I truly am sorry. I did not wish to wake the children."

"I know." The Mirialan shook his head.

"You're certain everything is well? You were...speaking rather emotionally."

He looked at her, considering.

"I was telling him that...that you were a good mom, so he didn't need to be worried about Cora. And that you don't hate him, because he thought maybe you did, since you've never come to see them or had them over in all this time, when Cora's their family." He sighed. "It's just me you hate. But he doesn't need to know that."

Araceli actually looked ashamed.

"I...please know I would never wish to give a child such an impression. Surely neither he nor his sibling deserve any such feelings from myself; they have done nothing wrong."

"Except be born *without prospects*, by your definition. But no, they really, really haven't. They're *good* kids. And kriff you, for making them doubt that for even a second."

She dropped her gaze down to her lap.

"I apologize," the matron repeated, and Ruka tried hard to reign in the cold, hateful feelings gnawing in his chest.

"Make it up to them, not to me," he finally said, and sat back down. He reached out and closed the ring box, pocketing it again. "You'll have the time. We're not going anywhere, like it or not. It's up to you whether you see them or us much."

They lapsed back into silence with each other for another very long few minutes. Ruka wished his husband were there, wished he could bury his face in his neck and cling, hide away from this long, long fringing night full of venom and awkwardness and silences and repeating it over again.

At least this was it. One way or another, he was moving forward now. He'd just need to find the right time to *ask*.

The holoclock ticked off another half hour, both of them lost to their own thoughts and the house quiet and relatively still again. Araceli eventually cleared her throat, pulling his attention from his fantasizing.

"If I grant you something, would you accept it?"

"Depends what it is," Ruka answered tiredly, so damn tiredly.

"My gratitude. You kept my son safe. I cannot repay that, and so far have only further indebted myself with misjudgment and rancor and callousness to both you, my son, and your children. For that, you have both my apologies and my sincerest and deepest thanks."

He shrugged. "Sure."

"Please, Ruka. I am sincere in this."

"And I believe you, but it's not like I don't hear what you're *not* saying. You're not saying yes. Just sorry."

"Observant."

"Spent my life getting told to kriff off without anyone saying a word, I get it."

"I am not saying yes, you are correct. Not exactly. But I *am* sorry. And I feel as though knowing some more of you from our tribulations this evening that I can say that with the utmost sincerity."

"You know that don't fix everything, right? Like. You've been a bitch to me and to *us* for years. That doesn't just go away. We're not buddies now."

"I would not expect so, no. I will show you the same candor you have gifted me tonight, Ruka, I still do not necessarily approve of you. I still worry for my son. I can see, however, that I have erred, and I can see that you and I both care for Corazon more than anything." She paused, softened, added, "And...and whether or not I would wish it so, I have seen that my son is happiest when he is with you, and above all else, that is what I most want for him. You do *not* have my blessings, but if he accepts your proposal, I will not protest it. Corazon will have my support."

Ruka narrowed his eyes at her for a long minute, but finally extended his hand. She stared for another second before shaking. Maybe it was too rude for her, or something. But still.

"I can live with that," the Mirialan replied. "You don't make him cry, I won't have to hate you as much."

Araceli...snorted. Actually snorted. Cora had claimed she did, but he'd never believed it until then.

"And if you make him smile as I have seen him smile these last years, then I will have more reason to warm to you."

Ruka felt his cheeks flush a little at that.

"I will spend my life making him smile," he promised quietly. Then he glanced at the clock. "But we should be getting back. Cora's expecting us for that...tea thing, at your place."

"Indeed, so." She paused. "Will you tell him about this conversation?"

"Absolutely. We don't keep secrets from each other. But," he gestured. "I'll give you a chance to tell him first, explain your side. Will probably go over better than hearing from *me* that you asked me to *break up with him*."

The woman gave a small, not very ladylike groan. "That will be...difficult."

"Kinda brought it on yourself."

"I am aware," she commented, watching him get up to get his shoes back on, not that there was any hope of the outfit being as nice without his partner there to stuff him into it. He offered her her shawl, and she took it. "First, though, tell me one more thing tonight?"

"S'that?"

"What is your word for thank you?"

The Mirialan blinked. "*Vagraci*. Or if you wanna be more fancy and formal about it, *mhi ciinado illa tey jahriba*. Literally, my fate is changed by you. Like saying you've done something that can never be repaid or undone."

"And for an apology?"

"'I'm sorry' is *ceencteo*."

"Repeat them for me." He did so, and then she slowly echoed, "*Mhi ciinado illa ty jahriba, Ruka. Ceencteo.*"

"Your pronunciation so *awful*, Bogan. But...thank you. *Vagraci, suuegra.*"

"What did that mean? That last word?"

Ruka smirked, baring his teeth.

"Mother-in-law."

For the first time in nearly four years, he heard Araceli laugh.

He didn't have her blessing, but it was something.

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