

He has one memory of a Life Day before his Mama became a drunk.

It's a hazy thing. He doesn't know how old he was, but his Aunt Zia is in it, so he knows he was very little. In the memory, her and Mama's tattooed faces still smile at each other, above his head. The countertops are out of reach, but he tries to stretch anyway, because they're baking. There's something that smells delicious and sweet.

In the memory, his Mama hands him a cookie, and that is sharp in focus; her hand, and the cookie in it. Her nails are bright pink against her green skin and her skin is bright green against the pale cookie. She says something. He doesn't remember the words or the sound of her voice saying them.

In the memory, Zia crouches down so they're eye to eye, and her hand is rough when she ruffles it through his hair. She gives Mama a present and she gives him a present, things from her adventures — he'd loved hearing about her adventures. The paper wrapping it is shiny and crumpled and really, it's terrible, but that isn't something his little self noticed. It's a detail he looks at with older eyes, examining the hazy memory through a different lense, like when he's putting on his glasses to read at night. Zia's crummy wrapping skills and how her hands were rough because she had callouses; how his Mama's face looked so much younger then, the better color to her skin and tautness to her cheeks, the bright clarity of her eyes.

In the memory, he rips into the shiny paper, not even thinking of carefully peeling back every bit of tape and folding it up to save it like his adult self would've. He opens the box and finds a toy sword, one to match the two real ones Zia carries that he isn't allowed to play with if Mama is watching them. It's orange. That detail is sharp too. Mama tells him to say thanks and he does, and they eat more cookies, he thinks. He isn't sure.

That's the end of the one memory.

He doesn't know what happened to that toy.

After that, Zia had, eventually, left. Mama had started to drink. Or, more accurately, as his adult self knows, *he* started to notice how much his mother drank, because she started losing any ability to keep a handle on or hide it.

He didn't really consider it much, after that. They didn't *do* Life Day when he was a kid. Mama didn't pay attention to holidays, Galactic, Kiastian — Sephi, really — or Mirialan. She didn't really pay attention to any particular day, not even his nameday, but that doesn't really bother him either; like Life Day, they don't do it, so there isn't much to miss. He knows he gets older, and so one time he guesses his age and starts counting up every nameday, which is enough.

Once or twice, every year, when he's reminded of it because of all the advertisements and parties and goings-on he sees everyone else going about, he considers bringing it up. Maybe

getting his Mama a gift. He knows she likes jewelry. She always wears it, and it's what all her dates get her, and she keeps it all even if she spends an hour drunkenly telling him how big of sleazebags they were and how small their dicks. Apparently sleazebags can still give good gifts, so it shouldn't be hard, right? He looks, sometimes, when he's out walking, or coming back from a shift at the mines or factories. All the stores in his neighborhood are cheap, obviously, but there's still big flashy jewelry in their windows, especially the pawn shops. He never has the credit though, so he always keeps walking, and when he gets home he has to pick her up from amidst the glass of a broken bottle or the wreck of a bad date or whatever it was today and get her to bed, so it's gone from his mind again.

But when the boys are born? Then he starts paying attention. He thinks of his one memory and he sees all the holos playing on the screens inside stores and he watches his neighbors decorate a little bit even if the gangs might come just tear it all down anyway just to laugh and burn something and he thinks— *they're gonna have this*.

*These kids are gonna have this.*

He can't afford presents. They're too little those first couple years anyway for it to matter. What's a baby gonna do with a gift? Poop on it and *then* try to eat it, that's what. He does pick up extra work and manage to splice and strip and solder together some strings of lights though from things salvaged here and there, and he puts them up around the kitchen, and the boys just sit on the floor on their blanket and *stare at them* for ages. Another year later, he adds some weird sparkly plastic plant rope that was on sale, and it glitters when the lights hit it, and oh, the toddlers love that too.

When they're old enough for solids, he bakes cookies. Tries to tell himself they're presents all their own, but still wishes he could afford more toys — more clothes, more food, more *everything*. They love the cookies, though, eat the whole pan. And then shit out the whole pan later while screaming and crying, after a whirlwind of bouncing off the walls and wailing about tummy aches in turns. He cleans up crap off of *every surface* and learns to enforce a little moderation next year.

The cookies become their first tradition. He sees if they want to bake with him, and they're so enthusiastic about it he cries a little when they're busy fighting over who gets to stir the bowl, even though it's him who gets to stir the bowl, because they say their tiny arms are tired after holding the spoon for maybe thirty whole seconds. He doesn't blame them; dough is a bitch. But they're happy to help with the eating the cookies after part, and, after it occurs to him to try it, the decorating part. That's what they do from then on, every year: bake the cookies and decorate.

He always invites their Mama to join them, but she always goes out, saying, "It's Life Day! They're having a party!"

There is a party, at some bar, every day, but he only fights with her about that sometimes and pointedly *not* on Life Day, because something has to stay sacred for the kids.

The years he can get them presents are his favorites. Those only start when he's older, somewhere between thirteen and fourteen. They're little. A new outfit, not new clothes but new to them, or a couple issues of their favorite holozines that they all share together, or a toy; usually practical things are all he gets, because they have to *survive*, but it's fringing Life Day, and he wants his brothers to get to *live* to, so their gifts get to be a little bit more whimsical. Noga has a small collection of plastic toy speeders. Leda likes hair clips of every color and degree of sparkliness. Ruka usually loses a couple more pounds the weeks before but it's worth it.

After he's fifteen and starts turning tricks, the gifts get more extravagant. They get holozines, yeah, and a new shirt and pants, but also a skirt Leda was staring at once, or the datapad to share and a game to play on it Noga had liked. He gets his mother earrings. She gives them back and calls him a whore, apologizes in the morning when she's hungover. He lets her have them anyway, and a cookie, because *Life Day*.

Years later, and he meets Cora, and eventually, Cora is there too. Cora *adores* Life Day, and most other holidays, but his family is noble and their traditions involve a lot more formal balls and fancy dinners and stiff clothes and speeches than flinging icing at each other and stringing popped corn together. Still. Ruka and the boys show him how to decorate cookies right, and they give the boys presents they've picked together, and they have gifts for each other, and hot chocolate, and that night together is the best Life Day he has ever had.

If asked, later, he would say it's his happiest memory. One would think it'd be something big, like how fringing lucky he'd been that the love of his life said he'd marry him, or their wedding day—both times. Or like when each of his brothers is born. Unlike his one early Life Day, he remembers every single second of that. Holding them. Feeling them breathe and when they opened their eyes at him the first time some days later. But it's not. It's Life Day with Cora and the kids. It's all of them making cookies and sitting together after the sugar wore off because that was all they ate that day and napping on the couch under the same ratty ass blanket and being warm and having Cora snuggled up under one arm and the boys on the other side. And the kids, they're full, not hungry, and warm, and— just that, really, his family, on Life Day, all together, that is what he thinks of when he thinks of happy.

Each one they share together after is just as good and just as precious and Ruka—

"...Angel, are you alright? You're staring."

—Ruka has a lot of Life Day memories now.

"I'm fine, *mhni ahmiao*," the Mirialan replied, pulling his husband into the kitchen doorway with him where he'd been leaning, indeed staring at the Pantoran as he busily and fussily kept rearranging gifts under the tree in the living room to his liking, for the last twenty minutes. Ruka was pretty sure everything had ended up back where it started, but he wouldn't say that. Instead, he pulled the other man into a slow kiss, feeling his partner melt against him and slowly slip arms around his neck. He swallowed the small sound Cora made; they'd managed to be quiet enough creeping around setting things up with their teenagers asleep upstairs and they weren't about to ruin it now.

The Force was a wonderful thing. Telekinetically hanging lights was *way easier* than climbing on the roof. And also, just *awesome*.

Their lips parted, and he watched the flush on his partner's cheeks, watched pink lashes tremble as beautiful, sunrise-saffron-golden eyes fluttered back open. The Pantoran gifted him with an adoring smile, and it made something syrupy and cottony at once choke Ruka, clogging his chest and throat for a second.

He was so damned lucky.

"What was that for?" whispered Cora, breath tickling warm over his skin, smelling like chocolate.

"...mistletoe," Ruka muttered, and the Jedi laughed, because they didn't have any. "I just wanted to kiss you, love. Plus it's almost midnight, so— Happy Life Day."

"Happy Life Day, darling," Cora murmured back, his stare sweet and knowing, knowing him like only the other man did, seeing only what he could; past the scars and the snapping, past the insecurities and hangups, past it all right down to his heart that wasn't really in his chest anymore because it belonged to the Pantoran in front of him. "You're really alright?"

"I am with you," he replied, sincere, and stepped away to grab his holocam, because that was another tradition he'd built up into the bones of this little family of theirs. "Smile," he warned, grinning wide, and snapped a picture. Cora squeaked. He tended to prefer to pose and check himself in the mirror first; old noble habits died hard.

"Hey, I wasn't ready!"

"Too bad, I'm keeping it."

The Pantoran huffed, but he was smiling too.

"Get one of the tree, please. And then us. And then of the boys when they wake up. And breakfast, and opening presents, and if your mother comes over later we'll need another group

shot, and my mother will want multiple copies for the albums. Including ones where we're actually dressed, not just pajamas—"

"Yeah, yeah, your highness," the Mirialan interrupted affectionately "I will. Won't miss a thing."

And Cora smiled so, so sweetly at him and murmured, "I know," and it was so pretty he took another picture.

Because he had one hazy memory of a Life Day before his Mama was drunk, but he had a lot of good ones scrounged and strung together after, and those, their images, he never wanted to forget.