

It tasted like smoke—

She fiddles with her hair — again. Tries tilting her head and pulling on the short tresses just a little tighter, ignoring the stinging of her scalp near her forehead, but to no avail. The strands won't stay in the tie, too short to gather up into a sad little tufty tail, nevermind a bun. She feels her lip wobble and catches it between her teeth.

She never thought of herself as a girl who cried over her hair — and she can't even cry! — but here she is, ever since she "woke up," always thinking of it. Missing the weight on her neck and shoulders, the familiar heavy swish of it dragging behind her heels. The way she could fiddle with it and pile it into braids and knots and twists and buns and loops, busying her hands and feeling silky curls pulled straight for a moment before they sprung back into shape, the cool-warm of metal or faceted smoothness of beads or jewels or the poking, velvet variance of flowers and stems or the dry crunch of leaves or so many things.

And now it just...sat there. Short and limp above her shoulders. She managed tiny braids at her brow when she got finer control of her "fingers" but...it wasn't the same.

It wasn't the same.

She didn't even know what her hair looked like and she missed it.

His breathing is a breeze behind her as he steps into the closet, that he normally dares not enter, claiming it to be her dragon hoard of clothes and such, kissing a whisper to her bare shoulder in comfort.

"What's wrong?" he asks, and she sniffles.

"Do I look alright?" she asks, at length. Because he'll understand. She doesn't have to find the right words, the right question, for him to know what music moves her.

He tilts her chin up and presses a thumb to her lip to smooth the pout, and of a height, their noses brush.

"You are beautiful as you are."

She touches her hair again, still self-conscious, but that makes her smile a teeny bit.

—She had forgotten what smoke tasted like.

It was thick in the air. There was screaming, screaming. Wails of pain. Those were more familiar. She'd gone on just one mission in the last months, to help the Vilcajans when sickness

ravaged their island. Some of them were here, just to see her. Along with others from Estle. Guests, friends, victims—

"You are worrying."

"Better to worry than to be a lettuce."

"Atyiru..."

"I just," she sighs, wrapping shawl around her shoulders. It matches her dress, he told her so. He'd used the tone he used to when she pranced around in something that others claimed made their eyes bleed but he was trying to be all impassive and beyond mortal emotion. It made her giggle. Now she hugs the wrap and takes comfort in the scratch of gauzy tulle covered in glitter. "I want this to go...well. I want to just have fun and for things to be perfect and everyone can be happy and we'll have cake and— a-and they will see m-me and not...not a thing wearing their friend's face."

"You are you and no one else," he reminds her, not for the first time. Because this dissonance, this disconnect, the you-aren't-her-you-aren't-real she senses from her clanmates, it kills her more than that lift, than the fire and the metal and the vacuum ever did.

"Do you really think so?"

"Atyiru," and he makes his tone deadpan because he knows it makes her giggle more, "you are wearing rainbows, and Ivoshar and Fela match. Yes, I really think so."

She laughs. He holds the door open with careless telekinesis.

—There was coughing, and moaning, and pain. Pain, pain, *pain*. It jarred up her senses like slamming an already broken bone against bricks, shattering nerve endings, scattering her spine to synapse. She grit her teeth, breathed smoke, tasted ash. What was burning? People? Draperies? No, it was closer than that.

Oh. Her dress. Her dress is gone, burnt up flashfire like the poof of netting it was.

The pain isn't hers—

"LUCINE!" she shrieks in joy, smile not even an effort of a thing. The woman had been avoiding her, and she'd been giving her the space to do so. But finally, finally—

"Ooomph, yes, h-hello, Master," greets the newest to bear the title of Shadow Lady, sounding not entirely pleased, nor feeling it, in the Force, to have the taller Miraluka hugging her so tightly to her chest. "Darling, please, my makeup—"

"Oh, terribly sorry, my sunshine-sweet," she sings, pulling back because really, yes, her "arms" are perhaps still a little strong gripping sometimes and she does not want to crush her apprentice with hydraulic pressure. Just hug her and never let go. A little. A lot.

Lucine wouldn't judge her as not-Atyiru, wouldn't wonder at cyborg or zombie or shadow instead of a person who had just gone away a little while. The Human had always been too practical, too thoughtful, for that. Some might have called her cruel or conniving. But she is relieved that she has another person to just look at her and see her for her.

"You look beautiful," she doesn't miss a beat saying, and Lucine stifles a sigh to instead titter a delicate laugh.

"As do you, Master. It is good to see you. You have met my Proconsul, Rhy lance, no...?" The Consul waves to the man at her arm.

"The esteemed Atyiru Arconae," says the Chiss, nodding. "I have heard much."

"A pleasure," she answers, unsure if somewhere they had met before and scared to find out and telling that thought to sit in the corner and think about what it had done. Her smile only flickers a moment.

"Come, enjoy the festivities..." Lucine invites, her own smirk fixed in place at Marick as well. "The delegates from the Principate have joined us, and the gala is open to the citizens...you will find many to mingle with I am sure..."

—Someone was crying softly. "Why?" they asked. Cried. Prayed. Others were shouting. Familiar things. Orders to the summit guard. Dispatches for security, and the fire brigade, and bomb technicians, and getting delegates to safety. Casualties. Casualties.

No, he thought, and it's that thought that moves her finally. Her hands clenched and then lifted. No.

I didn't come back for this.

Not for me. Not even for him. For—

Someone was crying.

I came back for them.

I came back for you.

I refuse. I refuse to let this happen.

Her dress was gone, but the pain was hers because it was theirs.

Atyiru raised her head, took one step, then another. Her bare feet crunched over rubble as she walked over small craters in marble, not feeling the blistering heat. Not breathing the smoke. They couldn't hurt her. Nothing could make her bleed ever again.

She refused, and so the Force bent the world to her will and refused too—

"Hello there," she says to the woman who clutches her small plate and dips her head. Many of the Selenian attendees have been staring at her. She recognizes some, from the clinic, from Vilcaja, from the streets. Even from amassings in front of that accursed statue. They whisper epitaphs when she goes by but won't come to talk to her. This is the first.

"My Lady, uhm, Night Lady, ah— her Grace, I—"

"My name is Atyiru," she says gently, helpfully, bolstered by knowing her partner is lurking close by, silent and supportive and never far from her side, even if he all but turned to a mannequin that tried very hard to be human at social events such as these. "And you are...?"

"D-Delia, my Lad— Atyiru. I. You ah, you held my husband's funeral. Gren Pele."

Her ears flickered. That was a memory. "Gren, yes. I recall. I am still terribly sorry." Would this woman appreciate hearing that her husband's spirit was uneasy? Likely not. "Are you and your family well? Your son and daughter?"

Delia wobbled with emotion. "It...you remember them? It is...it has been hard, my Lady—"

"Atyiru, please."

"Atyiru...I...it's been so hard, we..." she trembles. "We're so glad you're back, everything can be alright now."

Dread knots in her stomach like the bows on her dress. That sounded a little too intense. A little too much like what they whispered at the statue. "Ahh...of course. Ashla and Bogan bless and guide us, and if we are together we are stronger, my friend. Everything will be alright."

"Thank you," Delia says, and then she isn't the only one. The other islanders close by murmur too. "Thank you, thank you—"

She exchanges a few more pleasantries, squeezing the crying woman's hands and holding her gently, before she flees, Marick's arm on her elbow.

—Atyiru paused beside one body, cradled by hooting and wailing Vilcajans. Others were injured nearby, crying, burning. She reached out for them all, not needing to touch, and kept walking towards the pain, pain, pain—

"You are...forgive me, what was the term?"

"A representative of the Triumvir of Words, Adlez Freewoman, ma'am," replies the chief of the delegates of this Severian Principate. "My name is Kalee Reeche. The Consul Vasano tells me you are her predecessor. It is my honor."

"The honor is all mine," she says, and wishes idly she could be like Ivoshar and Fela, weaving between legs for scraps and making friends with tookas and getting hugs from their clanmates. It would be easier than stumbling into a political mire she knew nothing of anymore. But new friends were new friends. "Are you enjoying your stay?"

"Selen is certainly different than our capital. I admire the beaches. I would like to see more of your industry and how you all manage your cities...perhaps a tour?"

"I am sure Lucine would arrange something for you," she responds, smiling. "Would you care to dance?"

"...certainly, perhaps later? After I attend some more mingling, of course," is the polite overture, and they drift apart.

—Kalee was Umbaran, and Umbaran blood was red as a Human's, a humid coppery smell in great quantities. It mixed with the smoke and the singed flesh and the stone dust. Atyiru breathed it in, took it inside her along with the pain, pain, pain and the screaming and the crying and the prayers, and thought, *I refuse.*

She knelt next to the diplomat, who was barely breathing, barely moving any longer. She put her hands on the woman's wounds. She touched her and she touched all those around her who she had passed, whom she had not reached before the world went to fire, and she thought—

"I refuse—"

*Marick goes rigid in a blink as they waltzed, a treat just for her, to show how much he cared. She tenses as well, knowing him true, knowing he would **know**, know danger. He is gone then, moving to intervene. The Force turns, and he ghosts like lightning, but even he is not fast enough. He had hesitated, holding on to her hands, thinking to protect her first.*

Another one of the Principate delegates in their party stands from his seat, screaming, "TRAITORS! YOU DINE WITH MURDERS! FOR LYRA! FOR FREEDOM! FOR THE COLLECTIVE! UNTIL ALL CHAINS ARE BROKEN!"

And then he rips open his waistcoat and the explosives detonate and there is pain pain pain.

—She drew the Force into her and directs its life into them. Her mind to theirs. Her life to theirs. Her breath to theirs. It took nothing and everything from her, because that was the power she held, and she would not, *refused*, to let this hurt happen.

Not as long as she was alive.

And she was alive. And she was not alone—

The clock had been chiming midnight, and it is the final dance before the toast of the evening, and all the delegates are gathered at one side of a long table, with the summiteers at the other, and the guests of the clan and of Selen all gather, and the bombs go off, and there is pain, pain, pain, and she reacts without thought, without breath.

She falls to her knees and throws her whole self into the thought of a shield. Her barriers reach those nearby, Marick and assorted citizens, children, shopkeepers, workers, landowners. Arconans, Defense Force members in their dress uniforms, the cythrauls. They reach many.

But not all.

And not her.

And the fire comes.

—Beneath her fingers, Kalee gasped. Around her, others gasped. Breathed again. Stared in wonder at their unblemished skin under bloody, blown-open clothing where once intestines had spilled and blackened.

Not all of them did. She can't raise the dead. But most, the hurt...the pain...

She refused it, and made it whole again, and when she sagged back on her heels, clothed only in cinders and the itching heat of her cybernetics glowing so bright they hummed with how hard they were working, there was silence instead of sobbing.

And then it got worse.

Because someone whispered, "...like a starbird," and that started them all off.

"...Lady Cusi..."

"Lady of the Night..."

"Our Lady!"

"Lady N— Lady Atyiru!"

"Bless you, Our Lady!"

"Bless you!"

"Bless you!"

"WE'RE SAVED!"

"Bless me too, my Lady!"

"Shine! Shine your light, Lady of the Night, Lady Starbird!"

That one caught on, short and simple, easy for a mob mentality. The citizens crowded closer while the Principate delegates watched, mingled waves of confusion and fright and relief and awe and something more cunning still. Hands reached for her, trying to touch, to lift. She stumbled half upright, trying to duck away.

"No, no, I—" Atyiru tried, waving them off, hands up and warding, but that motion only frenzied them more, and she wondered if it looked like extending a blessing. "No, please, I'm not— I only healed—"

"Shine, shine, shine!"

"Shine your light!"

"SHINE!"

"SHINE!"

SHINE, SHINE, SHINE, SHINE, SHINE!

She touched her hair. Her lip wobbled.

"Pl-please, don't, I'm not, please—"

Their chanting drowned her plea. They crowded closer, nearly crushing both her and the delegates. Hands got on her and hoisted her half into the air to be carried, and she kicked, trying to get down without hurting anyone.

A howl split the air, and then there was snarling, a cry. She shouted, "Ivoshar, no, don't hurt them!"

The cythraul growled and roared, scaring a pathway open, and a ghost ferried through it. Marick appeared suddenly by her and took her in his arms, like wind over water, untouchable to the crowd, quicksilver and spectral. Her feet touched the floor again and then they were moving, wind *and* water, the two of them, their wolves snarling and snapping at their heels to keep back any of the grateful fanatics. He spirited her into a hallway and distantly she knew behind them Lucine and the others were getting things back under control, would have this whole mishap forgotten or spun into a story in a matter of hours, but she just—

Atyiru collapsed into her partner's hold, and he clutched her close in shadow, and kissed her hair and told her she had saved people and that everything would be alright. He wrapped his suit jacket around her and she clung to it like she would his cloak and tried to contain her sobbing.

He said nothing about the snot on him. At least it didn't get in her hair.

It was too short.

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"That was dramatic, my dear, even for you."

Long after midnight, in the shadows of her private office, Lucine batted her lashes over her teacup.

"It was certainly more...oh, extraordinary than I had intended, but one cannot control all variables when introducing outside pieces. One simply has to account for the results accordingly. And I think we did quite splendid. The Principate is all but falling over herself to apologize for bringing a *traitor* with them to our system's very heart." She shrugged one supple shoulder. "Besides, darling, I rather think your own contribution was quite dramatic. He would not have been so suggestible to my methods had your concontions been less effective, nor the crowd so eager."

The Chiss adjusted his glasses frames. "People should be more mindful of the food and drink they consume, especially when it is offered to them without a price."

"Yes, yes, darling. Now," the Consul set aside her cup in favor of one of her datapads. "I do believe we may call this *three* birds with one stone rather than a mere two. Reinforced trust in our *unique* capabilities from the Principate — they are already asking what more our 'healers' can do — and their feeling indebted to us over this debacle of theirs. Tsk, tsk. Endangering civilians and allies so. Bombings are terrible for business. I expect Miss Ha will find their prices considerably more generous on our exports and imports now. As for this...cult..."

"Zealots and fanatics, the deranged lot of them." Rhy lance rolled his ruby eyes. He held disdain for religiosity rivaled only by his disdain for stupidity. A redundant statement, really. "Ignore them."

"Now darling, why would I do that to such a wealthy resource? We can very much use this. The people will be much less keen on any insurrection or protest towards our persons when we are associated with their messiah."

"My dear, careful, lest your mind be so sharp as to cut *itself*. You cannot hope to work with religious peoples. They're impossible to persuade or threaten or rely upon. Their beliefs will come first, and damn any mortal consequences we can inflict."

"Dear, you presume I would *rely* on them? I'm insulted." She sniffed. "Enough so that I do believe you ought to take me to dinner for that remark. I will use them, nothing more, and they will inevitably either collapse upon themselves or become troublesome, in which case, we cut ties. Atyiru's return will be more...profitable than we may have expected. She will be aghast, and when the time comes, we can use that as well."

The Proconsul considered her a moment before tilting his head. "Very well. We shall see. Now..." His smirk was scalpel sharp. "What did you have in mind for our after party?"

Lucine set aside her datapad and smiled back.