

It was so very dark, in the moonless night.

Ruka crouched, impatient after hours, in the underbrush, observing the outpost like everyone else in the company. His position up in one of the trees gave him a good vantage point, though he didn't have a sniper's scope; no doubt over somewhere to the east flank, Qyreia was watching these frangers pick their teeth through the lense of a cannon. The lack of visibility made him itch, but his senses were strong, like a heartbeat tied to every shift of air, every slip of jungle-jarred shadow, every lap of the waves against the sand and creak of armor. They hadn't been noticed yet. And they wouldn't be. Not until they struck.

The Mirialan counted under his breath, waiting, waiting, listening and watching as signals were passed. He tensed. Gripped his branch. Wished he could grip his lightsaber, but it was locked into the sheath of his boot, for an absolute emergency only; they didn't want to give away to any of the enemy forces exactly what kind of power they had in their arsenal, Force Users included. He wasn't supposed to use the saber, only normal weapons, and nothing flashy as far as his powers. Nothing to give them away.

He waited. They all did. The branches swayed. Clouds dragged by. The darkness was deep.

And then the shooting started, as planned.

After that first volley, everything turned to chaos, like fighting always, always did. Their forces started picking off mounted guns and pirate commanders, while the enemy swarmed. Darkwing Squadron was due to strafe over in moments, and come they did, whistling and deadly to blow holes into the Fort's pallisades. That was Ruka's cue to rush in with the rest of the vanguard, concentrating the pirates' attention on specific spots so that their sharpshooters could more easily pick them off, distract them.

He leapt in an arc out of the tree and touched down full tilt at a sprint, barreling over the terrain and skidding through grassy patches of sand and mud into the first pirate he could, whose blaster shot might have blown open his chest, if not for the Force guiding him instinctively. Ruka's elbow smashed into the side of the large alien's head and they wrestled briefly over a dangerously spitting blaster carbine before a quick, short telekinetic hammer strike to the gut sent the franger tumbling into the dirt. Ruka kicked away the carbine just in time for one of the Eldarian Rangers to shoot the guy in the head, and then they kept moving, breaching the walls.

It was chaos, more chaos. Bullets and plasma ripped the air apart, and so did shouting. He thought he saw their target, Scalebeard, moving towards another grouping of huts at one point, and was about to throw himself in with the group advancing after him — wasn't that Qyreia? — when a sound stopped him.

It was a small thing, distant, but Ruka had grown up in ghettos with blasterfire for his bedtime stories, with his ears trained for small sounds like this one with a singular purpose, the way only

a parent could pick out a muffled whimper from a nightmare or a creak of a floorboard after curfew or the rumbling of a hungry tummy.

"*Oomaxexhdarrxht!*" yelled someone in Kadean. "*Oomaxexh rrie! Rrie, rrie!*"

He'd learned quite a few of their words since joining the Eldar Operation at Skar's request for Lotus aid. That one meant, *please, wait*.

*Please, no.*

*No, no, no.*

It was a tiny, distant sound, but it was scared, and it was pleading, and he moved before he even realized it. He didn't even think, *kriff the mission*. There wasn't any thought to it. He was just running. Running to stop whatever was going on over there. Not towards Scalebeard, but away. Away from the breach point he was meant to stay at. Away, and around the inner side of the compound, towards a slope of the hill that trailed down towards the coast. He vaulted up, up, up onto the top of the encampment wall and peered over. And he saw. And then he was running again.

Running, because *no*. Because this, *he would not allow it*.

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"You gonna be good on our little trip, righ', scaly?" Keeka's captor breathed against the side of her neck, dragging her along while they stumbled in the dark.

He was bringing them to the boats. The fort was being attacked and they were fleeing and they were taking them to the boats! She wanted to cry out, to hiss and screech, but she couldn't make her throat vocalize the noises. She doubted they'd even be heard. It was a very loud attack that had disrupted the moonless Eldarian night.

Help us, they're taking us, don't let them, she wanted to yell, because certainly, no one would be attacking the pirates but— but their people? Even though their people had no such weapons. It was an easier hope to have than entertaining it was but a different set of slavers come to take them.

But even if it were help, it wouldn't reach them. Not when these deserters got them into the boats.

"NO!" came a screech just ahead. Keeka's head snapped up, turning to set one eye on her hatchmate, mouth open to catch scent. Maiko. Maiko dared to yell and plead. "Please, wait! No! No, no, no, do not take us!"

*They do not understand you, Keeka wanted to tell her. They do not care. They will hurt you more now.*

But she also wanted to scream too.

Just so, one of the pirates kicked Maiko in the knees, then the stomach when she went to ground. Keeka flinched. The others did little to respond, just walking on dazedly. They had eaten the pink powder the pirates kept feeding them most recently, and they did little but hum for mates and stare at the bright streaks of color that flashed in the sky from the weapons on either side, burning.

"You're not gonna be like your friend, right?" asked the one who had kicked Maiko, sauntering over to Keeka. She had seen him quite a lot. He liked her. Leaned close. "Oh aye, you'll be good. Makin' pretty sounds lik—" he started to say, and then cut off, because the knife that punched through the side of his throat with a sick squelch made it impossible to speak.

Several things happened at once then.

Blood sprayed, splashing over Keeka's nostrils and maw as the brigand wheezed a terrible, wet, rattling sound and fell to the ground. The other pirates yelled and whirled, drawing weapons. The one holding her shouted and jerked them both around, his blaster leaving her backside long enough only to come up in front of himself defensively. Keeka yanked away on pure, unadulterated instinct and dropped to her knees, and not a second later another knife — the same knife? — whistled overhead, slamming into the man's forehead with a crunch. He dropped.

More shouting, more running. More blades. Three more pirates, two other men and a woman, fell. Keeka looked up to see the man vault over the parapets and drop down several meters to the dock below, rolling into the landing. He sprang up and dashed, a blur of motion. An entire *sword* appeared in the shooter that had taken up position on the boat, lancing his chest; he tipped over the rails, landed on his face with a crunch against the dock, flopped backwards into the water, and didn't move again. Then suddenly there was another blade, glinting amethyst in the firelight of the burning base, and sprinting, and sliding, and more screams. A dance of death. One massive bandit, the largest of the lot, struck out with a vibroaxe, and the figure just flowed away, dipped under it, quicksilver, and slammed his kukri into the brigand's torso. Red sprayed when it pulled back out. The man staggered, bellowed, but swung again, too slow, too close. The figure went to one knee, leapt up, and the blade flashed again over the massive man's neck, and there was more red red red.

The figure moved again, spinning to meet the roaring warrior charging him. A powered hammer swung, missed, and dropped when the figure's hand struck out, slamming the butt of his weapon into the pirate's inner wrist. The outlaw brought up his energy shield to bash, but the

figure had already thrown himself backwards in a full-body flip, tumbling head over feet and then reverse-rolling back upright. In the same fluid motion, his arm struck out like a snake. The kukri flew, disappeared, and reappeared lodged in the bandit's eye socket. He, too, dropped.

And then there was no more moving, no more shouting. Not in their little corner of the compound next to the boats. All the blasterfire and rubble and explosions were inside the walls.

Keeka gaped. Tasted blood. But not her own. Hot and tangy, softskin blood. It was all over the docks. Dripping into the water. The figure, the man, turned towards her and she flinched briefly.

She flinched much harder when another hissing mowl, quiet and afraid, caught her attention. She jerked around to see Maiko crying in a different pirate's hold. One of the meaner ones, dirty and always around them. He held a vibrating dagger to her snout. The figure that had attacked the others straightened up.

"Let go of her and back off, right now, or I will kill you," he said slowly. He had a different accent. He looked only at Maiko.

"Y-you thinkin' an awful lotta yerself, boy. You ain't even armed no more! No more throwing knives!. No, no, you're gonna get your hands in them cuffs ya got real kindly and be a good lad 'til we figure a nice ransom for you from all your little friends picking us off up there that ridge. You're walkin' me outta here, and I'm takin' me girlies too." The blade dragged over Maiko's cheek, peeling off scales and drawing blood, and she warbled. "Or else."

"That," he growled, soft, "was a mistake."

His empty hands thrust forward, fingers curled like claws, and then ripped apart, side to side.

So did the pirate.

Keeka wasn't sure then what softskin parts hit her. They were all very very warm, slimy with blood and some else that stunk. A bit at her foot, by her talons, looked like kidney.

On the ground, Maiko, drenched in red, sat down and warbled again. Keeka gathered enough of her senses to scurry over to her hatchmate and wrap arms around her wet form, facing the stranger. He walked over to them very slowly, palms out, but after that display, such was hardly reassuring.

"Hey, hey, ay, it's okay. It's alright now, you're safe—" he began, only to cut off abruptly and spin around as if something had called to him.

Moments later, another jumble of pirates came fleeing from the fort, down the path behind them. He barely cast them a glance. He twisted both hands, wrists flicking, and there were two

simultaneous, loud *cracks* as two of the pirates' heads spun 'round at unnatural angles, sagging on their shoulders before their bodies dropped. The others stumbled over the corpses with confused screams lost to the sound of aircraft overhead. As missiles rained down, the man gestured again, and the remaining three went into the air and glided almost delicately over to the channel. Then, they went down, and under the surface, and though the water churned with their thrashing, it was as though something or someone held them under.

They went still after a minute or two.

The stranger and Keeka both waited. Maiko hissed, and the others milled in their pink-powder waking dream, wandering or resting or playing at the blood. But no more came. It seemed the raid was well and truly near complete. He turned back to Keeka. Again offered his hands.

"Yes," he was saying, but not in any of their outsider tongue. In Kadean, if with heavy soft speech. "Yes. *I am...Ruka.*" He touched a bloody hand to his bloody chest. "Yes, yes? *We...uhh...ay...*" his words flipped back to Basic, "we come from somewhere else. We're friends. We're working with Toranaga. Here to help you. Yes?"

He took some steps closer. Took off his cape. Slowly, slowly moved to drape it about Maiko's shivering shoulders, looking to Keeka all the while as if for permission. That done, he retreated and went to the others, gathering them one by one with a prod or gesture to sit close to the hill, in its shelter. Only then did he collect his weapons — only three, he'd had only three this whole time, how? — and then turn back to Keeka.

He crouched down to their level. His eyes kept moving to the others, watching carefully. He offered her his hand again. He was very gentle about it, just as he had been about putting his cloak around Maiko. Ruka, he had called himself, but she thought, *ripper. Riptide. Ripped them apart. Like sea in storm.*

She'd wished to cry out, and Maiko had been brace enough. The sea had answered her.

Keeka put her palm in his. It was time she spoke for her hatchmates too.

"Yes," she replied. This Ruka-ripper smiled at her, kind despite the blood.

"*Hxe,*" he echoed.

And the waves were gentle and moonless beside them.