

She is burning.

It was supposed to have been easy.

It isn't.

How long has she been awake?

*They'd underestimated him. Even with an arm broken two places at the wrist and humerus, even with a broken nose and minor concussion, the con-man could slip a pair of the highest grade stun cuffs, it seemed. He could still move well and quick enough to snatch the untouched scalpel from her open medkit beside him, to snake that same arm around her neck and yank her back into him, pressing the steel up to her throat.*

She stumbles through the wreckage. The platform of the dock and the entire section of the Ducts beyond that they had fought through were collapsed or collapsing. The smoke is thick. She feels the poor vagrants they had saved, left back in other rooms, die one by one under crushing metal and asteroid rock, smothered by the heat. She feels her allies nearby, having made their own ways free alone or in groups, protected from death by her barriers and protected from the ensuing danger, she suspected, by Wyn's. It wasn't her doing anymore. No, she had to focus.

She had to...to...

*Blasters, blades, bows, and sabers raised and then hesitated. All except Alaisy, who was prepared to kill them both easily, and Marick, who remained still in his seat where they'd strapped him after his dressing.*

*"Ah-ah," her father tsked. "One move and I will kill her. Many of you were plenty willing and ready to accept the loss of my impotent son, but not of dear Atyiru, isn't that right? Even you are faltering, little baby cousin Ele, in all your resolve for your vow. Maybe he's expendable after all, right? But not her. Not precious her."*

*The younger Miraluka snapped at him, energy bowstring taut, but he trembled. Zig growled, Sera bared her teeth, Eilen fidgeted. Wyn's normally steady hands wouldn't stop shaking as Rodrigue whispered in his mind: did you really think this would be different, boy? I always win. And you always disappoint.*

*"You're wrong," Atyiru said aloud. "Wynnie, he's wrong. Ele, it's alright. It will all be alright—"*

*Rodrigue pressed the scalpel closer, drawing blood and forcing her to choke. Tension spiked.*

She falls and can't catch herself. Her left arm is gone at the elbow, wires and steel showing spliced and burnt at the ends. Her chin clips rubble, and her clothes are smoldering where

they've burned away at the edges of her pantlegs, her sashes. Her boots have melted to the synthflesh and metal of her feet. They stick when she steps. Her face is wet with blood being rapidly cooked by the heat. Perhaps the fire suppression systems — so easy to imagine as rain — were blown away too. This entire area will burn until the oxygen runs out. A sealed-off pocket of negative space to die in.

She pushes herself up on her one good hand, clutches herself tighter, and keeps going.

*"Now it's been fun, but I think I will be taking my leave now with my new concubine and port. You all should be grateful I let you keep at your miserable existences. Do feel free to send me a card if you ever grow tired of mediocrity. Now, get off the shuttle, or she dies."*

*"Don't. He won't kill me," she cautioned them, as sure as anything. "I'm too much potential."*

*Rodrigue was not impressed by her continued defiance. The intent to cause harm — to hurt, to hear her wailing, to punish her for besting him for even a moment — rolled off him in waves.*

*"Perhaps not, daughter. But death is kinder," he hissed in her ear, mouthing at the shell, and then shifted his grip and plunged the knife into one of her empty eye sockets instead.*

*Atyiru screamed. The others shouted. The blade jerked, cutting across the bridge of her nose and slashing through the skin on the other side to make a sloppy, ragged match. He was cutting through delicate bone too, she knew; orbitals and nasal septum. But that was a part of her medic's mind. Most of her was reeling in agony as she clutched at her face while he shoved her aside.*

She hears coughing and lurches toward it with greater urgency. Her senses have guided her this far, but things are getting dizzy around the edges of her awareness. She has used too much energy, shielding and healing as the blast happened, and all through the day. Awake so long. Had Kirra slept yet, or just cried on and on?

Maybe when Marick gets there to hold her. It's easiest for her to sleep when he holds her, too.

She climbs over the warped durasteel shell of wall plating and nearly falls next to the spasming body hunched there.

*The Tyris progenitor needed only one second. Just one second for Wyn's concentration to falter as conflict warred over his handsome features, anger and hurt and betrayal and horror. As Wyn witnessed her writhing and felt failure engulfing him as if it was his fault.*

*And Atyiru, still connected to Rodrigue's mind, saw his intention even as it happened: the remaining denton charges, their simple trigger mechanisms, his ability to manipulate them and his desire to destroy them all for their impudence. She cried out, but there was no time. Her saber was in her hand and she was moving, diving, **praying**.*

*She's fast enough to slice through the straps, to yank the incredibly heavy pack off Eilen one-handed and nearly drop it as it dragged her down. She's fast enough and has enough presence of mind to know that she **wasn't fast enough to prevent this**, and so threw up barriers with all her strength instead.*

*There was fire and silence. It was so loud that it couldn't even be heard. Then it came rushing back in a roaring.*

"D-daughter," wheezes Rodrigue Tyris, and there's laughter in his rasp, mocking to hide disbelief. "What a good girl you are, come back for me. So well trained."

His words are nasally and choked with blood and smoke. He's trapped and he knows it. His hope had been for another droid to take over to help him, or one of their party, but none were in his reach with him so afflicted. Until now. Until she came back for him.

She feels his mind pressing at hers and doesn't even flinch.

"You don't have to do that, you know," she tells him, so, so tired. She is hugging the remains of her other arm to her chest. The thinning air and smoke lift her hair as the fire searches for more fuel to burn and finds it wanting. Her mind is largely spent now on keeping them both breathing despite the suffocating conditions.

Rodrigue must be either wounded enough or desperate enough in the moment to pay attention to her sincerity, to notice there is no resistance in her mentalscape. He stares at her.

"...you mean that. *Why?*"

It is the most honest she's heard him yet. Not even that cruel chuckle to accompany it, like earlier.

"I told you," Atyiru says. "You are my Father now. I will not leave you. Not you. Not anyone. That is what it means to be family. No one is left behind."

"You're not brilliant, you're mad."

"I'm your daughter."

"I have no daughters."

"You are brilliant and in denial. Now hush. No more speaking." Then, telepathically, *Only in our minds. I cannot heal us now, only keep us from needing the air. Do not make it harder.*

*You are a foolish girl, and I take nothing from you but what I please.*

*You are being given life.*

She did not answer his disdain, did not argue further or defend herself. She just stooped and looped her good arm around his back and helped him stand, dislodging panels and shrapnel. Step in step they staggered on, to a tunnel that was blocked, but on the other side, she knew, waited the others. They would clear the way for her. They would help her.

And she would help Rodrigue, because no one else would. Because even if he was an evil man in many parts, even if she needed to do what she was planning to to keep him alive but neutralized, even then—

No one. Not one more.

Not one more left behind.

