

*Churning. Motion before anything else. Spinning, and falling, and rising, all at once. It was dark.*

*A flicker of light. Stars? No. Too uneven, diffused. Right way down was up, all up, no, down down down.*

*Movement.*

*It was gone too fast. Too dark. Up again. Starship spindles blown? No, no. Bubbles. He can't breathe.*

*He can't breathe.*

*He can't breathe—*

Ruka ran.

Howls chased him down the too-fancy street, screeches and siren calls that made him want to *scream* in turn. To scream and scream and cry and beg. *Not again, not again, please.* His skin scrawled, his scars ached, and he thought of Cora's smile, Noga flicking his hair out of his face, Leda crossing off days on a calendar until she could start her hormone therapy. *Please no no no I don't want to die, please.*

He wanted to scream, but he swallowed each one like bile and ran.

Because someone had to. Because he had to.

He skidded around a corner, pushing past fleeing Celestians, leaping over them to avoid going down in a tangle altogether. He saw each one of their frightened faces, man, woman, child, Selenian or alien like him. Saw each one, and kept running, because they were running from *something* and he had to *stop it*.

*His dreams had waves this time.*

*He sees them, feels them, the turbulence and foam. A white ribbon in the distance between two sheets of blue; then gray, then red. The red seeps away quickly, diffuses to pink. The seafoam is pinked.*

*He goes under.*

*Again it is black. Deep. Dark. Directionless. He is drowning, and he knows it.*

*But he is not alone this time. Something, someone. They grasp at him, and he knows, in his water-logged bones, that he can trust them. That they are safe. So when he opens his mouth*

*and the black water rushes in, he isn't panicking because he can't breathe. He doesn't need to breathe.*

*He just needs to—*

The Mirialan skidded around another corner. The Museum was just up ahead, and he'd already heard from the comm chatter and from the shouts of citizens that that was the epicenter of whatever was going on now.

He'd been having dreams, visions, for months. Since Atolli. Bitter ones, because the Force wanted to torture him with maybe-suffocation, but hadn't seen fit to warn him about those fringing monsters on the island? Of all the people in pain, ripped apart or eaten? Of how he'd break Zujenia's bones, try to kill his friends, think of how his own family would trust him when he lured them out of shelter and served them up to the temple? No. Instead, just the drowning. Just under the water and blood, and for what?

Now he knew.

*He's underwater.*

*There's light.*

*He can breathe.*

*He turns, gasps in, finds it easy, simple and clean. The water glimmers above him, curving away, convex, like blasterfire bursting on the edge of a barrier; but this barrier is enormous, and it holds back the sea. Two kinds of death, only one with any intent.*

*He's free, and he turns. There's white marble around, and color. Shells. Lamplights in crystal. It's all very...aesthetic. And expensive. He knows rich when he sees it. There are people, and he can see their faces, hear them speak. The words make no sense. It's like listening to another language. They skip and stutter in places. Not just the words— the people themselves. Their bodies shift, sometimes just a few feet, sometimes disappearing entirely. Like they might not be there after all.*

*Like they aren't going to be on this street, in this market, under this protected bubble deep below the sea today, whatever today is— whenever it is.*

*He feels the crack before he recognizes hearing it. It snaps in his bones, and for a wild moment, he thinks his leg just broke; it's that powerful. But then he looks up, directly up, because he knows now, he knows what's coming—*

*Water. Motion. Darkness.*

*It comes with a roar like stones, hits just as hard. He's swept off his feet, directionless. Movement. Other people in the depths. There is no one safe holding on to him this time. There is no such thing as safe here. He tries to breathe and he can't. He can't. The dark black water is everyone and gravity is gone and there is only crushing weight and the cold, cold, black and cold.*

*Movement.*

*Flashes of white. Marble. Foam. Red in the water. Bodies smashed to the buildings, the streetlights. The blackness eats them all. He can't breathe. He can't breathe.*

*They're drowning.*

*They go to the water and they all go to die—*

He wouldn't let that happen.

Ruka pushed shadows into his muscles in place of blood and launched himself up onto the next rooftop, some theater, and kept running. He saw the museum's domed roof ahead, saw a golden figure throwing out a hand towards a group of people, thought, *no*. Took one more step up to the ledge, ready to fall, and threw himself off of it like a comet come to earth.

His fist cracked into the ground, pretty marble, pretty white, smeared in great streaks of blood. A telekinetic wave erupted from it, blooming out like an explosion, shoving back the threatening figure, sweeping it right off its feet and throwing it up and into the museum's wall. The wave also threw the others — citizens, museum staff, Arconan troops, maybe — but he was quick to catch them in his telekinetic grip and set them gently down several meters back the way he'd come.

"Run!" he shouted over his shoulder, eyes burning, heartbeat galloping in his chest. The AAF soldiers had been dragging wounded. There were dead on the ground. Scorch marks on the marble. Blood, blood. Broken bodies.

Surprisingly, they listened. The civilians was no surprise, but the soldiers? Maybe because he was clearly a User, and those usually carried rank. Maybe because they recognized what he had realized the moment he'd sensed this presence in the Force, the moment he'd seen the lightning arcing in the sky under the dome and felt the tremors, the moment Corazon had gripped his hand like he resented nothing in the universe so much as the fact that he was going to let Ruka go, tell him to go and come back and kiss him like it wasn't goodbye.

The Sith turned his head back towards the figure, watching it rise. Him, apparently. It was a Nautolan, proud-shouldered and bare-chested and tall, yellow skin dyed with black and rippling with muscle. And he was—

It was like the air shivered around him with power.

Black, unblinking eyes stared back at him as the Nautolan stepped out of the little crater he'd been thrown into and shook off rumble and dust like errant flies. He flicked his headtails back into place and sneered, bellowing at Ruka while throwing his arms out as if speaking to a crowd that was no longer present.

"WHO DARES TO DENY THE GOD EULAUTI OF STORM AND SEA? WHAT FOOL?"

"Oh, for kriff's sake," the Mirialan muttered, and didn't bother answering.

He didn't so much as draw the Force into him as stop holding it back; it flowed, *poured* in, always there and always hungry to meld, like a tap turned all the way up, broken off. He didn't know why or how he'd gotten as strong as he had, if it was natural, like he'd been born this able, or if it was because in a way somehow he'd been unwittingly prepared for the burden of the Dark Side his whole life, or if he'd really just trained that hard. It didn't feel like he'd earned such things, so he doubted the last one, but knew, also, that he was prone to undermining himself.

Regardless of the cause, he held the Dark, and the Dark held him. He didn't often let those floodgates open, not all the way. It was always holding back a storm and siphoning off small bits of it.

Now, he just threw the doors open.

The storm was inside him, an answer and echo born of every emotion, every feeling, all those things— the anger, fear, love, worry, desperation, self-hate, anxiety, and guilt. It all boiled up like towering clouds, vast as the horizon, winds strong enough to fling boulders and rip up trees, thunder booming, lightning raging, just under his skin.

He lifted both hands, seeing the light coursing violet-white underneath, along his veins, coiling to spring from his forearms. And he threw out both arms and just let it go, like an exhale, like he could finally breathe.

Light lanced across the square, exploding not into the Nautolan himself, but the marbling below his feet. Chips of stone burst into the air and pitted the walls and street, and only warning whispered from the Force and his own reflexes allowed Ruka to twist and jerk around the fragments that blasted his way. Eulauti gave a gurgling scream of rage and pain as red rips streaked across his flesh, and the Mirialan cringed.

His scars ached again.

He knew the agony of a shrapnel bomb a little too well.

But as the white dust settled, his violet eyes widened even as his chest clenched; he hadn't quite hoped for much, but he'd thought maybe better than this. The Nautolan held a multitude of

marble fragments, small and large, the size of their forearms, around him in the air, telekinetically suspended. He sent them up in a dramatic flourish before letting them drop and bury like so many spears in the flooring.

"FOOL," he repeated. "YOU HAVE NO POWER, NOT AGAINST A GOD. I AM EULAUTI, AND I—"

Ruka drew both his daggers and threw them with