

"Thaaaaat was awesome!"

"The brake around that turn! You could *hear* the lines purr."

"And then with the loop—"

"—and the," hands came up, gesturing wildly.

"Yesss! And then the—" another gesture, but this one with the added benefit of a thick tail to wave and simulate a third racer.

"Yes!"

The pair laughed. And it felt. Good. Ruka craned his neck back to look up at his first and oldest apprentice and smile, his entire chest tight and light at once because she was smiling too. Eilen rarely showed her smile unless she was excited enough to forget how much she hated it, which he in turn hated with a burning passion. He wanted to find whatever sack wipe had first told her her smile was freaky looking and punch them in the teeth. And then the next guy, and the next. But he knew that wouldn't help, and he knew that would be an infinite number that just led right back to Eilen herself, saying her smile was ugly and hiding it behind her hands or pursed lips.

So instead he just offered her another fried fish, which she chomped on happily. He'd tried to find her raw, but somehow everything at the damn race track was some form of fried, battered, or oiled. He didn't kriffing know how.

He had discovered he had an opinion about fried things that weren't chicken or sweetbreads, and that opinion was negative.

"What do you want to do now, *arrarmia*?" the Mirialan asked as they paced along more miles of circular duracrete. The crowds were finally thinning just a bit, just enough the it felt like he could breathe through a vice, and so they'd elected to come down and find some food. The pair had spent the entire day up on the roofs of the race track where people without powers like theirs could surely never go, if not on the track itself, on top of stone pillars and canyon walls where the filming droids wouldn't spot them. Talk about close to the action. It had been a little more risky than Ruka had been since joining the Praxeum, but the way Eilen had lit up when the pods blasted by meters away with enough force to send them nearly skidding off the rocks in a wave of burning air had been worth it.

"Iunnfowhanennafuh," the Selonian-hybrid replied, which Ruka deftly translated as, *I don't know, what do you want to do*. Raising two kids had perks sometimes. Translating mumblese was one of them.

"It's your day, El, no wiggling out of it. What do you want?"

"To not decide," the hybrid eventually shot back at him when she'd swallowed, and he furrowed his brows at her, but she only snickered. Some folks might be surprised how wily and bold Eilen could be, but not him. She'd never given him much of a break, probably because they both *got it*. The pressure. The buzzing. The unease.

Course, it meant he got to deal with her being a smartass.

"Fine," the Mirialan huffed. He checked his chrono. They'd just come from the last race of the day. Everything now would be after parties and drinking and gambling as winners were settled and the tracks closed in favor of reaping as much tourist cash as possible. Great time to get the hell out. "Then let's get home after one more stop."

"What for?"

"It's a surprise. And it's staying a surprise, since you didn't wanna decide."

Eilen squawked at him. Her movements got a little more fidgety. He reached up and started scratching behind her ears, and she happily slumped half her lanky upper body weight over his shoulders and buried her chin atop his dreads. They walked with the gait of a three-legged, brain-damaged nerf all the way to the garages like that.

When they reached the right one, Ruka stopped petting long enough to disentangle them and pull a fob out of his pocket. The door to the garage gave a click as it was activated, and Eilen's ears stood up so straight they seemed ready to leap off her head. She was practically vibrating.

"What is it what is it what is it what is it—"

"Ay, ay, hush up. That won't work on me."

"Ru, what is it?"

She followed him into the rented garage, obviously eyeing the *huge* something covered with a tarp. He stopped in front of it but didn't pull the sheet aside yet, which got him another grumble. His palms were suddenly sweaty, and not from the day's sweltering heat. Ruka wiped them twice on his pants. It didn't help. They were shaking a little.

His apprentice made a noise that was much lower in pitch, concerned. The half-Bothan stopped her toe-tapping and hopping and slinked over, reaching out carefully to tug on his hoodie sleeve.

"Ruka? Um. What's wrong, hey?"

"Just. You know," he replied through gritted teeth, and she tightened her grip on his sleeve but didn't press, because she *did* know.

"Do you, uh. Want space? Water? Or, uh. I can call Cora! I'll get Cora, that'll be better."

"Elly-mine, the only one I need here right now is you. Just give me a sec, ay, okay?"

She nodded jerkily, ears folded back. He offered an arm and she ducked to be under it, scrunching awkwardly to his side in a way he knew made her back ache. He hugged her tight once to show it was appreciated.

After a few meditative breaths, the shaking slowed. His hands were still sweaty. He wiped them again and then went for the panel inside his hoodie, pulling out a thick set of flimsi and plastoid sheets. Stepping away from his apprentice, he held them out for her to take. Her cheeks and ears quivered in curiosity, and she quickly scrabbled to pull apart the envelope and examine the items, excitedly twitching again.

Ruka watched her carefully, watched her fur fluff, her feet and fingers tap, her expression shift. Confusion. Realization. Delight. Confusion again.

"Um, what—"

"Lemme explain."

She nodded. He pulled the tarp off, stalling her question. Eilen gasped in curiosity and recognition.

"That's a Nubian model X-163 internal combustor!"

"Yeah."

"It's!"

"Yup."

"What!"

"You gonna let me talk, ay?" He smiled. She was smiling back, clearly bouncing to just put her hands on the engine. "Oh, go ahead."

The hybrid darted forward and ran one finger over the metal. It was burnished, pearly and smooth. Not factory mint, but he'd scrubbed until it shone.

"It's, ay, it's a swoop engine. I built 'er. And I entered you in the races, for next year."

The Mirialan pointed at the passes, tickets, and forms Eilen held. She gaped at him. He hurried on.

"I know we haven't talked a lot lately. Not. Not about the things we need to. And I know we need to. About. Me. A-about the. What I. Did." His words started tripping, caught in his mouth, as he forced them out in cracked pieces. "But I also know how much you wanna race wanna these things, competition or not, so I thought...we could fix her up together. Gonna have to build the whole second one, and the carriage. Obviously we can upgrade this engine more, or if you want something else, pull it apart. And just when we got time together in one place between everything we'll work on it and."

She was looking more stricken now. He tasted bile. Remembered the feeling of his shoulder yanking out of his socket while his insides jerked down towards the ground. Remembered his throat ripping around the words *let me go* and her yelling in his face, crying, *what do you think you're doing?!*

*I have to*, he'd tried to tell her then. And she'd hugged him and begged and then promised with a forehead kiss and Cora's face. *Let us take care of you.*

Ruka took a breath, reminded himself they were at the race tracks and not on Atolli, they were whole and maybe not okay but getting there. He'd broken that. He had to fix it. An apology wouldn't be enough; he needed to reassure his not-so-little sister too.

"So see, it's a promise. It's proof you can hold on to. You're racing next year and that means I gotta be here for it, yeah? We both do. So next time you're scared or worried, just," he reached out and squeezed her hands around the tickets, "hold on to these, and remember we're both going to be here, okay, *arrarmia?*"

The next thing the Mirialan knew, he was being tackled to the floor by seven feet of fur and wiry muscle in a hug so tight it squished the breath out of him. He just got his arms around her and hugged back, and if there was snot in his shirt and hair or tears in her fur when they got done crying, well.

That was okay, they understood.

And he made her a promise more tangible.

*This time next year, I'll still be here.*

*We'll both be.*