

Good Intentions

They're standing on the bridge, leveling blasters at each other in a stand-off that's been going on for several too-long seconds with headhunters and starfighters dogfighting outside, insults and accusations about past wrongs and future dues flying, when the bomb went off.

He didn't see it coming.

He didn't see it coming.

There isn't time to think about why or how he didn't notice sooner, just the thought, the synapse of a trigger mechanism and then the entire frigate is *shuddering* and they're thrown from their feet.

Ruka caught himself by the grace of warning from the Force, but the Revenants went flying and so did half the Principate forces he came with— *only half*. The others had braced. Grabbed on to consoles or activated grav-augments in boots. They aren't surprised.

It's the first clue.

"What was that?!"

"Captain, an explosion is being reported in engineering!"

"YOU BASTARDS, WE'LL KILL YOU ALL!"

The shouting started to rise from both sides while klaxons blared around them anew. Plasma bolts burst in stray sprays. The Mirialan twisted around two and dragged aside a trooper next to him. They hit the floor, and then he was back up and the stalemate was more of a firing line now as the far more numerous Principate forces leveled far more blasters at the stunned and scrambling pirates.

"Don't fire, don't fire!" snapped Valis, an Umbaran and some sort of diplomat for the Principate that had come along with the strike team to seize the ship and negotiate a surrender. He had no idea if she was in charge or not — most of the Principate people he'd met all carried themselves like it, stiff and haughty, and Valis, in particular, dripped a similar, poised arrogance to his husband's noble mother — but the others at least listened instead of shooting. "Hold your arms! And you all, on the ground, drop your weapons!" she directed at the pirates, who mostly sneered at her. One, a Kiffar, looked ready to take a shot anyway. Ruka tensed, ready to move if necessary.

"Hell with yo—" she began, all snarling and burning-eyed, but another pirate shouted at her.

"Shut up, Nusha! Shut up! I'm not dying for your kark!"

"Secure them!" Valis ordered the troopers, who circled the bridge crew of the *Screeching Osprey* with rifles and kicked those still standing down. Ruka clenched his jaw. "What in the blazes is going on? You, prisoner, did you set off a sabotage?"

"Us?! We didn't blow up our own *karking engines!*"

"No, we did," said the Chiss soldier that stepped up from the Principate side, crowding Valis despite her smaller height. She had been unsurprised earlier. In fact, she seemed calmest. And a lot of the troopers were looking at her.

Valis gaped at the other woman, but the expression disappeared almost instantly behind a perfect noble mask of control. Cora had an expression just like it.

"This is our own action, Lieutenant Colonel Ni'Erilia?"

"Correct," Ni'Erilla replied, making a hand signal. The Principate troops grabbed the pirates' dropped weapons and backed away, keeping rifles leveraged at their heads, all slowly retreating for the door. "We had a team dispersed to Engineering to blow the section once the squadrons had taken out the engines, and the *Geta's* tractor beam has given the ship a helpful shove. Our work here is done. We're to retreat at once, before descent."

Blow the engines. Tractor beam. Descent. Descent? But we're in orbit. Descent to the planet? That would mean...would mean...

The frigate shuddered around them. The klaxons kept screaming. He hadn't felt the explosion coming because *it wasn't meant for him or them.*

Ruka was across the space, in her face, shouting before he knew it.

"What the *HELL ARE YOU DOING?!*"

The Chiss glared coolly up at him, red eyes all unphased, spilt blood. "Securing peace and safety once and for all. Orders are straight from the top, from Triumvir Kamlin herself. No mercy, no quarter, lethal force. Commander Reecchi has the same orders on the ground."

"Those aren't the kriffing orders! Vairya said *capture*, not kill. This is about stopping the violence, not goddamn *murdering* people!" And that *was* the plan. The fighters — Qyreia among them — were going to disable the *Osprey*, while the boarding party handled the crew on board.

"Listen, I don't know what you think you're hearing from the Lady of Oaths, but you don't know these scum. You don't know what they've done. You aren't a citizen."

"I DON'T CARE! They're still people and you've just kriffing killed us all!"

"Not *us*," stressed the Colonel. "Just *them*."

She looked past him, to the gaggle of pirates on their knees, unarmed, and there was *nothing* in her gaze but contempt. Like she was looking at garbage. Like they weren't even living things.

He'd been looked at like that for so, so much of his life. His shoulders twitched into a slump.

No.

The Mirialan clenched his gloved fists.

"No," he repeated out loud. "No, we're not doing this."

"We already have, and you, outsider, are in no place to say otherwise. Mind your tongue, or you will be restrained for impinging wartime efforts."

He and the Chiss stared one another down. Her fingers twitched, and some of the Principate troopers swiveled barrel muzzles his way.

Valis intervened, her pale, stark features displeased but tired. "Oh, cease your militant doctrine and dramatics, Jacinta, there's no need for it. Your attitude is half the reason we're fighting this war in the first place."

"It's Lieutenant Colonel Ni'Eriia," growled the other woman.

"Lieutenant Colonel, *desist*. Go and handle our retreat, then, as is your speciality."

The two exchanged narrowed eyed looks before finally the Colonel huffed and began ordering about the troopers. Some hesitated a second, but glancing at Valis, followed.

"I'm not done," Ruka barked.

"We can't stop what's done," the Umbaran insisted, and there was genuine grief on her face. "It's horrible, but we can't. The best we can do now is get our people out of here."

"What about *these* people?" The Mirialan gestured around them. "Capture, not kill! If we're evacuating, we're taking these people with us!"

"We haven't the room. Isn't that right, Colonel?"

From the bridge entrance, the Chiss looked back.

"No. Our breach shuttles are full. And we have no room for prisoners. That failed once. It will not again."

"Kriff that," snarled Ruka, and put a hand on his sapphire sword. His lightsaber was in his boot, where it wouldn't be easy to draw or reveal, only for emergencies. Valis drew sharply back. The troopers tensed, raising weapons. Jacinta actually looked eager.

"I will execute you," intoned the Chiss.

"*Try it.* We're taking them with us, we can handle the extra weight long enough for any of your ships with tractor beams to pick us up."

"We will do no such thing."

"Ma'am," piped up one trooper, the Human he'd protected earlier. They had their weapon ready, but their finger off the trigger. "Can't we just go?"

Valis chimed in, looking at him with pity even as she retreated smoothly behind the firing line proper. "Go ahead and let him martyr himself. What's one man going to do, Colonel?"

The Chiss glared, but then the *Osprey* gave a much worse shudder, groaning all through the hull, and more panels and consoles started to buzz. She shook her head.

"They'll all be dead soon. Move out, move out! We have ten minutes to depart, back to the breach point, full retreat. Move, move, move!"

And just like that, they were disappearing back down the hall and for the turbolift; there were too many of them to have taken the maintenance access tubes around. Just franging like that, leaving everyone on board the damned ship to *die*, deliberately or not.

And leaving him alone with the Revenants.

The Dark whispered warning in his mind, and he turned before the Kiffar from earlier was even finished lunging, catching her arm and the vibrodagger she clutched that had been aiming for his kidney.

"Back off!" Ruka gasped, knocking the blade away with a quick breaking motion and shoving her away. She bared her teeth at him and dove again, but he danced back. "I'm— would you *quit it*—"

"Nushalla, dammit, shove your dosh! Stop!"

"Die, die, I'll kill you!"

"I said stop!" It was the same pirate that had silenced his attacker earlier, a steely-haired older Human woman. "Captain, please."

"Heel, already, Nusha, frakksakes," grumped a orangish Twi'lek man with gnarled scars over his mouth and ink-tipped lekku.

"Cap, this Princy—"

"I'm not part of the Principate—"

"—done just did us in! Lemme kill him before we go. Lemme go kill all of 'em!"

"Nushalla, you mangy child, hold your temper," said the older woman in sheer exasperation. "The man just got left behind, and all you'll accomplish running after the Imperials is dying that much sooner. Peace."

"We dead anyway! I'm taking them with us!"

"*Hold on!*" Ruka shouted, projecting the same tone he'd used when the kids were in serious trouble and needed to listen. "Forget already dead. I'm not kriffing letting that happen. We've got how long until reentry? Aren't there pods on this thing? Let's get *off*."

The Kiffar stopped trying to argue with her captain about stabbing him long enough to round on him again. "Our ships aren't exactly factory freshy," she snapped. "We've gots what we've got, and *you* Principittys stole those too! There ain't hardly a working pod!"

"For the last time, I'm not Principate, I'm for a group called the Lotus— you know what, it doesn't matter. I'm *here*, ay?! With you, on this ship going down, trying to help! So let's franging save the grudges and figure it out. If we ain't got pods then...Well how many craft do you have? Fighters? Get people in them!"

The captain spoke up again. "Only a couple squadrons...forty? Fifty? Some are deployed."

"Then that could be...kriff, uh..." he struggled a too-long moment through a growing headache to do *simple kriffing math*, Bogan, he was stupid, "...eighty people, maybe? If they're fighters big enough to cram two bodies around the seat. Less if not."

Another pirate, who had made their way to one of the bridge consoles, scoffed and waved his arms, catching everyone's attention.

"The damn hangar is on fire! We're not getting down there!"

"There's four of them, some had to have sealed!" the captain snapped. "Nevi, what've you got?"

A spindly man scrambled to a different machine. "They took out the engines and the forward tubrolasers. Engineering is dead. First, second, and third cargo bay got damaged. Third's up in flames, fire suppression is poodoo in there."

"No vacuum?"

"Magshields are still up, wouldn't count on it though. We're already dead in the water and screwed as soon as any more systems go, and they're going to go."

The Revenants started arguing amongst themselves then, mostly cursing out the Principate and spitting venom and hopeless frustration. Fear was growing like a fog, like walking through a bar and smelling the stink of the booze, feeling the sweat and stench in the air cling to his skin. His own throat was closing, anxiety and panic and anger hot, forcing his eyes to clench shut, to prick and burn, and he grabbed his head against the pound-pound-pounding of his pulse and the klaxons and the screaming, *screaming* in the Force that was the doom of gravity, inevitable and crushing.

On the way here from Dajorra, Lucine Vasano and others had made a lot of noise, and they'd heard a lot about being discrete and all that. He'd kept his saber hidden and powers checked, only the occasional, unnoticed use of telekinesis to nudge opponents a bit off their footing when they took shots. Discreet.

Yeah.

Kriff that.

Ruka inhaled, held it. Let the Dark tide come in, stopped fighting, felt the waves come up and everything in his ears went deep and still and quiet. Just a moment, in the eye of a hurricane.

He exhaled.

"We'll go round up everyone left and get to fourth hangar," he said. When it didn't seem like they heard him, he let the Force carry his words, amplifying his voice in a way he never really did.

"LISTEN TO ME."

The chatter stopped. He'd drowned out the alarms for a second, there. Eyes on him now. He would have sweated another time, but this was a crisis, and those he could handle.

"I said, we'll go round up everyone left and get to the fourth hangar. You said there were pods. Ones that *didn't* work. Doesn't matter. We don't need thrusters. Just something that can survive atmospheric entry. We got that?"

The bridge crew exchanged glances. A couple at stations gave nods to the captain. The Twi'lek looked at him oddly.

"Aye, plenty of pods that're just hunks, but sealed fine. Why? What do you have in mind? And who the bloody hell are you to be giving orders on my ship?"

"My name is Ruka, and I'm going to help you. That not good enough?"

"I've seen a lot of crazy fraks in my time, *Ruka*, and you're more deluded than the spiceheads."

"You seen this?" he asked, and raised his hands, summoning his lightsaber and daggers above his palms. He activated the plasma blade and sent it in a little pinwheel around the bridge above their heads before calling it back.

They gaped at him. Except the steel-haired Human. She barely looked surprised. He decided he liked her. An elder, like his *aquayla*. *Grandmothers know everything, she'd say. We don't get surprises.*

"A Jedi?" the captain finally spoke. His expression wasn't *friendly*, but it was *sharp*. The kind of greedy look somebody got when they saw an opportunity.

It was pointless to argue about it, so Ruka just sighed, "Yeah. Jedi. And that means I might be able to do something with my powers to get us to the ground so— so *please, let me help*. Just. We have to try."

The Twi'lek burst out laughing, slapping his thigh. It made his leathers rattle.

"Ooooh, frak me sideways, we might actually get out of here! YOU WHELPS HEAR THAT? We have work to do! Nusha, don't argue, just move. Nevi, what's undamaged? Leira will need supplies, can we reach medical? Jennai, do you see anyone on the feeds?"

"Most of the levels are pretty clear, Cap, they only hit targeted areas—"

"—got people all over, but some are down, can't see in sections nine or eight Besh—"

"Okay but I still wanna skin 'im—"

"You really care, don't you?" That was the old Human approaching him. Ruka bowed his head to her like he would his *aquayla*.

"Yes, ma'am. Please. I just wanna help."

"You're not a Jedi." Her wrinkled eyes were shrewd. They lingered on all his scars, and he wanted to scream. Itch at them, at least.

"Ay, no. Not really. How'd you guess?"

"I've seen enough."

"I figured."

"Hmm." Bogan and Ashla, he wished Cora were here, for so many reasons, but not the least of which because she looked like she could dissect him. What was an old woman doing with pirates anyway? Had she been a prisoner on Tenixir? The Principate was so *wrong*. They'd barely been better than a bunch of active kriffing *pirates*, but this? Condemning a whole ship to die? Imprisoning people who probably didn't deserve it? He knew that too well, living under the Kastian Empire's heel every day of his life. "I am Leira, Ruka. If we survive, I may thank you."

The ship shuddered away again, shaking, shaking, a hard, long *thud*. He knew that feeling. They'd hit the very outer atmosphere.

Kriff, kriff, kriff!

"Alright, you karks, let's move!" the captain shouted. "Jedi, you're making yourself useful! However you do!"

Well, that was an order vague enough to follow.

Things were a mad blur, then, lit by the breath and space between red warning flashes from the lights to the drumbeat of their pounding feet racing the slowfall dying of their descent. They took the maintenance shafts because the Principate had blown or disabled the lifts on their way out, Ruka scouting ahead by just dropping straight down, no hold on the ladders at all, catching himself and checking entrances deck by deck. Some held heat behind them, and they knew those were lost. Each clear one he opened, either by the hatch or by shearing the door off with his saber entirely where stuck latches resisted. Crew were gathered in piecemeal, knowing every second counted, knowing they were leaving another ten behind for every one they found.

"There were over three hundred of us," Leira murmured to him at one point as he helped her out of the shaft, her back heaving as she panted. Single-file, the group of thirty-some trickled and climbed over each other out onto the next deck. Ruka swallowed, felt the rage and grief, squeezed her hand. She patted him, like she was the one comforting.

She probably was.

Leira, it turned out, was a doctor. She took the supplies in the frigate's medbay and threw heavy bags stuffed full at her various crewmates. Ruka decided he liked her.

They were just leaving, heading for the access tubes again as the captain shepherded everyone, when his senses *screamed*.

"RUN!" he screamed in turn, leaping forward and throwing up his hands as, in the space between heartbeats, his violet eyes watched the ceiling bend and collapse; watched flames and metal beaming rain down into the medbay; watched the oxygen tanks ignite. He watched it all, and thought, *no*.

And he *pushed*.

The explosion curled away from him, from all of them, threatening to burst. His eardrums burst. His vision blackened at the edges and something wet dripped from his nose. He shook, and his hands shook, and he *pushed the explosion back*, watching it shimmer and swirl and shudder, like the surface of a bubble, holding flame and shrapnel.

The pirates ran. He slid back an inch, gasped in a choked breath, thought of Corazon and their children.

The bubble burst.

Noise, then silence. Shaking, shaking, *shaking*. Heat. Falling. Down and up and from above and on top of him and—

...

He knew he was coming awake again when he tuned in to the panic, the pain, the confusion and distant, vicious glee. He ignored the surrounding white noise of blaring klaxons and shrieking metal. The important ones were closer, above and below and around. Some closer than others. He concreted on them, assessing, searching, screaming in his own head while he waited for his body to goddamn respond already.

Get up! Move! Do it for them!

Do it for them.

It hurt.

He ignored that too. Or tried to. It was bad. It was bad, and it felt like something soft inside him had to be ruptured or ribs had to be snapped, because he's had those before and he'd been shredded before and it didn't feel like shrapnel so much as it did like being beaten half to death, so.

Ruka shook his head. Everything swam, and he swallowed bile and blood and coughed on smoke. Focus. Focus! The others.

The Mirialan forced his eyes open. Forced himself to move. It was darker, but not too dark to see; light spilled from something burning somewhere and cracked glowbanks from the

overheads and walls and floors still glowed. The klaxon's lights made everything red. Cast hard shadows too. He could hardly breathe. Choked on an inhale. Coughed and crawled out of a wedged space between the curve of a hull wall and a plate of metal that might have once been a door or a bedframe.

The Force was with him. He ignored his pains, shut them away, focused on his senses and what he could see, hear through the tinny ringing. At the end of the hallway, most of the crew stood and knelt, helping each other up, various states of stunned and ashen but intact.

Almost everyone was okay. Almost, but not all.

A few bodies lay on the floor. Three. Two were...empty. He stumbled over to the Rodian, the one pulse he could still feel in the Dark and Light around them, found a hot, wet pool, tacky and slippery under the other man's body.

"Kriff," he swore, and hovered uselessly for a second between putting hands on the wound — which was...all of him — and going for the bacta kit he carried. For minor wounds. Three doses. What was that going to do? His gloved hands get warm and heavy when he sticks them to what seemed like the worst spot, around a hunk of metal. "Kriff, uh, hang on. LEIRA! LEIRA I NEED H-HELP!"

"Don't touch the metal!" The Human is there then and snapping, not really at him, just talking hard and cool. The older woman dropped down next to him with a huff and critical eyes, for all the world unflappable. "You're doing fine, good. Keep pressure there. We need something to pack the wound with...oh."

Her tone changed, her demeanor shifted. She put her hands on him, not on the Rodian. Pulled at him.

"Ruka, he's gone."

"No he ain't, I can sense him!"

"He's going to die. We can't do anything else. And the rest of the crew needs us. Come on. There isn't time." She looked down, around. "Captain, add Maria Lenn, Ashik, and Dwipp Bruskars to the casualties and let's go."

"Aye, Leira. You heard her. Come on!"

They went. Leira pulled him up. That shook Ruka out of his stupor, and he turned his back on the corpses and kept running. He was getting so tired, but he kept running. Kept moving. Prying open hatches and moving debris and ferrying people up and down when the climbing got to be too much. By the time they stumbled and staggered into the fourth hangar, smoldering and sweating and shaking, every one of them, the Mirialan had to catch himself against the hull.

His eyes traced over the hangar, the crew. There were indeed a handful each of Z-95 Headhunters and A-wing Interceptors docked to deploy, along with miscellaneous other machinery and a few escape pods. Some pilots and mechanics ran to join their crewmates as they arrived. Astromechs whirred by, rusted and patched. Dark patches evidenced fires that had been put out, and the magshields flickered *worryingly*.

Ruka counted.

Forty-two people. That's all there were now. Out of over three hundred, Leira had said. And they weren't even all dead yet. Ruka could still sense them. Trapped or hurting. He just couldn't get to them. He couldn't *do anything*.

Can't do anything right—

He shoved that thought away, choked on it, *choked* and grit his teeth and counted again to be sure. Forty-two people, plus him. Forty-three people. Twelve ships. The starfighters wouldn't fit more than one and still fly, but they could probably jump away. Those would go to whoever could fly them, or at least *steer*. That left...kriff...that left...thirty? No, thirty-one...

The pirates were arguing again.

"This is hopeless! We're— w-we're gonna die here!" one was babbling.

"Shut up!" Nusha snapped, slapping him. "Cap said go!"

"It's true! There's nothing left, we can't even fly!"

"I'm not...I'm not d...done yet," Ruka panted, pushing off the wall. Nobody heard him. "I'm not done yet!"

"This here's our pet Jedi," the captain said, introducing the new faces they'd gathered to the plan, which seemed to be 'the Jedi does Jedi things.' "He's gonna save us, so don't nobody stab him. Nusha."

"Cap!"

"How many of you can fly?" the Sith asked, wheezing. Leira was watching him like a hawkbat. She knew he was hurt, he could tell. At least she wasn't fussing. Several pilots, the mechanics, and most of the pirates raised their hands. He blinked. "I...right, okay, so some of you can take the fighters, right? Captain?"

The Twi'lek didn't seem too pleased to have that turned back to him, but he took to choosing who lived and who'd probably die real fast and easy. "I'll lead the way. Leira, you too, we'll need our medic. Nusha, Nix, Jennai, off you go."

"I can barely fly a bike, Captain. And I'll be staying with our wounded."

"We're all wounded, Leira! I said go."

"And I said no."

The steel-haired, steel-eyed, steel-hearted doctor stared the grizzled captain down like he was a misbehaving *took*a. Ruka prayed, brief and aching, that he could do one thing right, get her out alive, and make sure she had a better life than whatever had made her so strong.

"Pah! Frakksakes, fine. Where's Welb, come here, then, Fyyzzzk, and..."

For a bunch of pirates, they listened pretty well to who got the ships. But then, they did leave pretty fast too as soon as the chance to save their skin arrived, the fighters taking off without a second of hesitation, disappearing through the flickering shields. Out through the opening, Dandoran's surface loomed in full view, rapidly approaching.

It had been getting hotter and hotter the entire time, and he knew he wasn't imagining the sparks of flame on the other side of those magshields now. They were going to burn up before the ship did.

Disconcertingly, the remaining pirates looked to him almost as expectantly as they did to Leira once everyone else was gone. But, it was what he needed. He swallowed nerves and pain and pointed at the pods.

"Let's see if any of these work. Maybe we'll be lucky."

They got a *little* lucky. Exactly one of the fourteen available, mismatched life pods in the hangar actually had full functionality, but it was one of the large ones, fourteen meters, not one of the little single-person things. He and the other mechanics talk shop for a little bit about trying to fix up another, but they're pouring sweat bad enough to soak their clothes and the air is getting thin and hard to breathe. No more time.

Leira and Ruka shepherded those that were most wounded into the working pod, and nodded to each other like it was goodbye when he closed the hatch. She gave him a smile through the viewport before the launching mechanism jettisoned them out into the stratosphere. His stomach lodged itself in the back of his mouth as he waited to see the thrusters fire, but their view was cut off almost immediately.

Something is on fire.

No more time was right.

"Get in," the Mirialan gasped to those left. Nevi, the spindly little left behind navigator, gawked at him and then at the pod he was pointing at.

"That one?"

"It's got the best hull." The other mechanics made noises of agreement, but didn't move either. "Look, I'm a Jedi, or whatever, okay? I've got a plan. Just do it." His rasping was getting worse. It's too hard to breathe. "*Get in.*"

Whether to him or to their lungs, they listened. Thirteen people and him all crammed in, elbows to sides; it was a little pod, and it didn't have working thrusters. They were, more or less, crawling into a cannon ball.

And he was going to use it to get them through the atmosphere. And *then*, well.

As everyone crammed in and he had to telekinetically pull the closing mechanism, unable to reach it with them all packed so tightly, Ruka spoke up.

"I need you all to listen to me, *ay*, okay, *really listen*. This is important. When we get low enough, I'm going to open the hatch and jump out—"

"What?!"

"—*I'm going to jump out*," he repeated, going on and idly activating the launch controls the same way he had the door, "and you're all gonna give it a count of ten and then start jumping after me. I'm going to use the Force — Jedi powers — to catch you and set you down safe. Okay?"

"NOT OKAY?!"

Further protests were cut off as they were shot like a bullet from a gun out the magshield and through a wall of blinding flame. Several screamed, probably blinded by the light through the viewport. His teeth rattled in his gums, and he tasted blood when he bit through his tongue, knocking between the wall, the hatch, and the pirate beside him. The lights inside didn't work, and neither did the carbon monoxide scrubbers. Aside from the fire and sky outside the tiny portal of light, they were trapped in suffocating black heat, hurtling to their doom.

The Sith had no way to judge when it had been long enough, if they were low enough, or if he was too late entirely. His instincts and the very shadow and breath and bone of the universe whispered to him, urging, and that had to be enough.

Corazon, Noga, Leda, everyone — I love you. Be safe, be good. Ashla and Bogan protect us.

"Brace!" he screamed, using the last of the air he'd held in his lungs for as much, and yanked the emergency release for the hatch as hard as he could.

The lid ripped open, then free. Everyone's screams got swallowed. Air whipped in and out. Heat became sudden, freezing cold.

Ruka climbed, crawled, and jumped.

Flashes.

Open air.

Smears of color. Frost on his cheeks, his lips, his tongue, his *eyeballs*. He knew to point himself down, and did, tucking his limbs close to make himself small and fast. His cloak ripped free. Everything pressed tight.

The air resistance was terrible, and he had to turn his head to even try to keep his eyes open, dry and burning. His scalp stung along every single nerve as the wind tore his hair back. He couldn't breathe, not really— too much pressure, too fast.

But the dive, that was easy. He didn't have to really do anything to fall except let it happen.

The air got thicker and warmer, fast. The ground loomed closer and seemed impossibly far away at the same time. He'd never been up this high and not in a ship. It was beautiful.

It was his only hope.

Ruka twisted in the air, channeling the Force through his muscles to help him do it. He twisted as if swimming and put his back to the ground, shoulders tilted, head pointed down. His hair ripped up around him, but now he could look up, and—

There. The pod. The people waiting in it. Behind it, like a backdrop, he watched as the shape of *the Screeching Osprey*, massive and dark and bright and burning, became nothing more than a misty, mushrooming fireball. There would be debris, maybe. Or maybe they'd burn too.

He felt them die, up there.

Ruka's eyes went back to the pod. He lifted his arm, the air doing most of the work in keeping it out and up, less resistance now at this angle. He waited.

Waited.

Waited.

For a long, terrible, sick moment, no one came. Then, a body flailed out of the open hatch and pinwheeled out into the air as the pod kept racing past, momentum and mass carrying it down faster. Ruka's eyes locked on that body and he gripped it in a telekinetic hold, feeling his pulse thunder in his skull.

He couldn't be gentle right then no matter how much he wanted to.

Gripping the pirate from nearly a mile apart in open freefall, Ruka looked aside and found a suitable target, just a smear of land. He directed his charge that way, his supernatural hold a whiplash-inducing but non-lethal descent that directed their fall and stole their momentum. When he floated them to what *seemed* like several meters off the ground, he let go and looked right back up.

No time to be gentle. Gravity was winning, and he was trying to defy it.

One.

More bodies came, a nervous, manic, terrified rush spurred on by the first. Ruka had to reach and gesture, capturing each one in his mind's eye like cupping a firefly in his palm to show the children. Two at a time he guided them down: to the ground, some far apart and some close together; then, as he fell closer and closer and details of a city spun into view, onto rooftops of skyscrapers and the decks of random yachts and even, one, into somebody's skyhook pool.

...seven, eight, nine, ten.

Three more. Two came, and he set them down in a copse of trees, knowing the ground was coming. Where was the last? Were they too scared to *try*?

Come on, come on! Jump!

Ruka looked back. *Ground. Up. The pod.*

Dammit, dammit, dammit—

The Sith threw out both hands and *pulled* at the pod. It plummeted faster. *He moved up*, dragged by the superior force.

Impact. Metal. Spinning. He scrambled, found the hatch. Glanced in, spotted flesh tones, grabbed and pulled and *jumped*, the Dark bursting his veins and rupturing muscles and sinew and *forcing* his legs to move like they weren't meant to, with more strength than his body could correct for—

They crashed through branches, him and the body he was holding tight to his chest. He knew the green of it, the sweet smell of sap, the *snick-snap* of twigs both wood and bone.

And then—

He hit the ground, a comet come to earth.

-x-

He was floating.

Gray all over. Or not? He couldn't see. Did he even have eyes? He didn't know. Where was he? Where was Cora? He spun, or moved, or— something, but he looked for the light he knew so well, and couldn't find it. Just more dappled shades of gray, sinking into deeper pits of dark.

He belonged in there, some part of him knew. The dark. It had his soul. It gave him all he asked and never asked a thing in return, but eventually it would. His sight. Then the rest. Was that why everything was gray? Had it clawed his eyes out? That would be fitting.

Claws...dark...he remembered falling. Vaguely. Others. Trying to reach them. And burning. Were the kids and Cor okay? Was Qyreia, Sera, Eilen? Everyone?

That was a few too many names to think on right then. Thinking was hard. He drifted more towards those dark pits. They seemed quiet. Restful. He would drown in them eventually. Was eventually now...?

"Hey, 'Ka. Wait up."

That was a familiar voice.

"Yi?" he asked, but he couldn't see his friend. His friend who he visited every birthday, who had turned nine for the fourteenth time this year. "Yi... what're you doing here?" He thought of the black. "You're not supposed to be here, I'm not going where you did... You're supposed to be with your mama and Jekk. You gotta watch out for Cor for me when he joins you..."

"Ya dummy. You're not no anywhere. Not yet." Yi'o's voice had an eyeroll in it. "Hey. Bring flowers next time. Ma misses 'em."

"Okay," he agreed, not even knowing what he was saying yes to. Then, "...wait, what?"

And then a bolt of light lanced through all the gray, flashing twice, like two heartbeats, and it all broke down.

Ruka became vaguely aware, and all that awareness was pain. His everything hurt. There was just so much hurt. His chest. His lungs. His skin. His eyes. He wanted to scream or cry but couldn't move. There were voices.

"...need to reset this, get me the splints..."

"...the burns..."

Wind? An engine?

"Hey, got through to Zfyt, says..."

And then the pain just— *lit up*, and he slammed right back into full consciousness and movement like running into a wall. It wasn't pleasant.

"*Ahhh!*" gasped the Mirialan as his coiled muscles jerked him upright when his shattered who-knew-what let him know he shouldn't have, the smell of burnt hair thick and gross in his nose and blood on his tongue that ached like he'd bit it in half.

"HOLD STILL! Blast it, boy, you'll ruin all my work! Nevis, *get me that damn hypo.*"

"*A-aye!*"

Ruka's eyes rolled back and nausea took over, and then he was horizontal again and something pricked his arm. It was a rush of cool, and it made him feel loose.

"That's better. Easy, Jedi Ruka, you're hurt."

"Leira..." he wheezed. Still alive was good, but still alive hurt. He wished Cora was there.
"Y...you're...o'ay?"

"We made it down in the pod. Haven't heard from the captain and all the fighters yet, but some of them. And we rounded up the others. You. I don't understand it, and I have seen much, but they're— we're alive. And so are you. So try to hold still for me."

They've alive.

They've alive.

Not all of them. Not...not over two hundred. But. But some of them, *they were alive.*

Had he actually done something right?

"Need...nnn...n'e...need m'comm..."

The Mirialan dragged his eyes back open, but settled for moving very little. They were in a forest, and it was as humid as a Hutt's breath. Broken trees poked a very blue sky above him, and Leira leaned into his view all frowning steel.

"Your communicator can wait. I can't even believe it's still intact, but the infernal thing kept pinging."

"M'husband...please..."

Her hard face softened just a little.

"Which one is he? I can message them that you are alive."

"Cora...zon."

The Human picked up the device and showed him what she was doing, which was nice of her. She'd hardly sent the message when it started to buzz furiously again, but clicked it off.

"There." She set it aside. "Now, I have more to tend to, so go to sleep, and don't make trouble. I'm grateful, and you saved us, so I'd rather we not have to kill you."

Leira stood up and walked away. Ruka promptly tried to sit up again and only made it about two inches, snatching his communicator and looking around from an agonizing angle. The Revenants were milling in clumps. The trees stretched on around, but there was the city skyline closeby and ships moving above it. His gear, though wind-burnt and dented from impact, laid next to him in a picked-over pile, bandages around his chest and limbs. His armaments, particularly the crystal weapons, were being examined by some of the pirates, talking excitedly as the gem blades glittered in the sunlight. One played with his lightsaber. *Fantastic.*

Feeling every little pull of muscle, he rolled over, smothering a keen, and sent a few necessary distress messages to his Arconan allies before dialing his comm for the frequency the Principate had given them.

"*Relay Esk, what is your code?*" someone asked on the other end.

"This is Ruka Tenbriss Ya-ir," he coughed. "I need to speak to Valis."

A pause, then, "*Who?*"

The Mirialan Sith closed his eyes. Wanted to cry. Was far too tired for it.

He tabbed the button and made his arm lift again so he could speak.

"The guy you frangers just left on the *Screeching Osprey* after you blew it out of the sky. I need. To speak. To Valis. Or Triumvir Vairya. I don't care. Just make it happen if you want to know where the *surviving crew* of the ship are to save a *little kriffing face*."

That many words had him totally unable to catch his breath and gasping like a fish for a full minute, but it seemed the Principate were a bunch of frangers just like the Sephi and nobles of the galaxy-round that he'd known: threaten their social status or whatever and it got attention.

"...hello?" came a skeptic tone that he recognized as the Umbaran negotiator that had at least had the good grace to let him choose how he died earlier that day.

Too bad he was absolute sithspit at this stuff. Once again, he wished for his better half.

"Valis," Ruka replied, coughed and groaned, hunching further when a pirate walked by and then waiting until they were out of earshot. "Me again. *Congrats*, ay, your prisoners aren't all dead. We're alive. Kriff you."

"...that's impossible. You can't be serious. Who are you? How did you get this frequency?"

"You told Jacinta to retreat because it was her specialty and then left me and...nn...an' all the Rev'nnts to die."

The pause this time was much longer.

"I'm listening."

Ruka closed his eyes, opened them again.

Not done yet. Get up. Come on. Do it for them.

"Good. Y're gonna hear from some...people I know. Vasano, Arronen...my husband...you get one chance to make this right. Don't waste...it."

He cut the line, then summoned what pitiful spark of electricity he could muster in his hand and let it fry the communicator. He'd sent his friends the device's coordinates, and now the Principate wouldn't be able to ping it. Hopefully a rescue would show up before any of the jackasses around him cut themselves on his lightsaber, and then they could see the Revenants *actually tried* and treated fairly while the Principate sweated for this. Hopefully nobody killed him in his sleep, too.

But he couldn't fight it anymore, either exhaustion or whatever drug Leira had given him. His eyes closed again, and his hand slackened.

His last thought was that all this fighting could kriff right off.