

Not again. Please, not again.

The **thunder** was muffled now. The thunder was a growl. The thunder was in his ears, bleeding, blood rushing.

Th-th-th-t-t-thud-thud-thU-THU-THUD-THUD-THUD—

The screaming isn't muffled. The screaming is next to him. The screaming is him. The screaming is in his head.

No, no, no, not again, please—

Ruka gasped in a breath and breathed the shadows steeped into the very earth of Dromund Kaas in too. It **empowered** him, even if for a second, to focus past the noise in his skull, in his marrow, in his mind.

There, not here. Not here. He wasn't on Atolli. It wasn't those *things*.

It was something.

Ruka bared his teeth in a snarl and spun, turning his back on the bulky muscled monstrosity behind him to turn his attention to the two that had slipped past him when he stumbled. His violet eyes found the elder on the ground — *No! Kriff!* — and the freaky fringing long creature towering over him. He threw out both hands, eyes gone gold as his strained nerves blew past his growing panic and right into the glassy, angered calm of a battlemind, and the Dark answered him, surging from his fingertips to the beasts in arcs of blinding light. The one crowding near the archaeologist snapped and popped and hissed, crumpling with a cry as its spines smoked and then ignited in oily, fleshy flame. The tall one, though, it only convulsed, seemingly shrugging the attack off and whipping around to screech more as its fellow fell. He closed one fist, grabbing it in a telekinetic grip and yanking it up and away, throwing it overhead. He needed space, he needed—

A below, a burst, the stomp of heavy fists and feet, claws or hooves he didn't know, a screech in the Force—

Move.

Taking only a second to look between the old man and the beast coming at him and knowing he couldn't stop it if he tried — the thought of throwing it too briefly crossed his mind — the Mirialan leapt in a tumble as the beast charged him to land on its back. Crouching there, he hung on, determined to kill it.

It bucked, it roared, it tried to throw him off. The world was spinning. A tree there, crumbled ceiling and pillars and statues lit by lightning from the endless poison storm above here, a

distant flash of exploding plasma and a shout of fear closeby. Shouting. Growling. Rumbling. Colors in the dark.

Ruka held on, fixed his eyes down, and drew his saber with one hand, letting his mind and arm move with the motions, the flow of the battle, the heartbeat of the creature and the shriek of its scream. He turned the emitter downwards, activated the blade, and in a wash of brilliant blue like taking a deep breath after so long, stabbed down between the thing's shoulder blades with a swivel of his wrist that would sever ligaments, organs, spine, whatever this monster had. And it did, first giving out at the arms, slamming them into the ground at an angle that nearly knocked them both off, and then its hindquarters, its warble dying as blood pooled and it stilled.

The Sith was off the thing in an instant, darting over to the old man, looking for blood, for wounds, for horrible bursting *things*—

Where was the screaming, the song?

Stop it. Stop it, you're not there!

"Are you okay?" He can't hear his own voice. It's like he's *mute*. He wonders if he is. He wonders if he can't speak, if he's choking on blood, on ichor, on words that they won't let him say. "Can you stand?"

He must be speaking, because the withered, white-haired old Human groans and replies, "My leg, son."

He's no one's son. He never deserved to be. Not their parent neither, not their friend or husband, not with what he did — what those monsters made him do — what he *let* them do—

Stop! Focus. Focus. Do it for him.

"I've got you," Ruka said, because someone needed him, and he needed to push it all down down *down right now stop it you're not there it's fine it's fine shut up stop crying get up do it for them get up!*

His arms slid under the other man's body. He was surprisingly broad for a man his age. Maybe from all the ruin exploring. Maybe if he was smart this would teach him to never go into another kriffing Dark Side temple again.

There was an abhorrent, whining keen behind them. A roar. Not a scream or a song. The other creature. The other *creatures*.

The Mirialan clutched the elder to his chest, pushed the Force into his muscles, and leapt straight up. Claws skimmed under his boots. His jump crested over the head of a statue ten

meters high, over the mezzanines. The old man screamed. At least it wasn't in his skull. Scratching in his ears. Down his spine.

"Whaaaaaa!" the Human wailed, startled, jostled.

Ruka landed, threw his saber out, and watched the pinwheeling plasma slice the beast in two. As soon as the hilt touched back to his palm, he pivoted and *ran*.

Back through broken hallways, catacombs, great halls. Black stone and bloodstains so ancient they were black and stony too, like coal. Like carbon. The air here was so thick it felt like suffocating. The Darkness hummed. The night did too.

He dodged around the beasts he didn't have names for. They weren't like the horrors. It wasn't Atolli. But they weren't right either. Predators or mutations or something. Awful, powerful, better left alone, why didn't anyone ever leave it alone?

Out. Out. He crashed through the dense jungle thickets and sloping paths with the man in his arms, skidded into the closest to a clearing they'd found yet. He saw one of the other explorers on the ground with a blaster pointed up, saw the kriffing horror show of a thing on the tree trunk screaming at them.

Oh, hell with this, hell with all of this.

Snarling back at the monster, he raised one hand and let the storm of the Dark Side swirl up from the planet and explode through him, striking at the thing with an unchained, raw torrent of sheer power, bursting the tree behind it too. The creature smoked and screamed and then didn't anymore because ashes couldn't scream, and the wood caught fire, and he didn't care.

"Get up!" he yelled. "Come on, run!"

"Dad!" the woman shouted, spotting his charge. "Dad!" She clutched her blaster, rolled back to her feet, and bolted for them instead of for the transport. Wherever that was now.

"Where's the ship?" Ruka hollered at. Her own kid was on their ship. Grandpa and daughter band granddaughter. A family of archaeologists. He'd tell them about Selen and the museums. Or maybe he wouldn't. There weren't less monsters there.

"This way!" she yelled. Her name is Sagee. Her father's is Hukre. The baby's is Mita, and he'd promised her to being her grandpa back.

Growling ripped through the jungle behind them, and so did the thunder. Ruka lifted them *both* in a telekinetic grip, ignoring their yelling, and sprinted for the indicated direction. He could hear the engines now, if he focused. If he just focused. The screams weren't all real.

Something snapped teeth at his back, but he ran, ran. Ran.

The was steal, and roaring, and thunder. Thunder in the sky. Thunder was the engines. Thunder was the heartbeat of the little girl crashing into his chest, bawling.

Th-th-th-t-t-thud-thud-thU-THU-THUD-THUD-THUD—

He doesn't know when they got into the air. Or on the transport. Or when they stopped hugging each other and decided to hug him. But he does know this. He wraps his arms around Mita, **guiltless** for a moment, shushing and crooning and pressing a kiss to her hair. It's blonde. Dirty. She's a high crier, like Noga was, all in the lungs. Leda was warbly. He knows how to do this. The monsters on the island couldn't take that away from him, they just twisted it up inside him.

"Hey, sweetheart, hey, it's okay, I've got you. Hey, hey, it's okay. Your *aquaylo* is back, see? Mama too. Everyone's okay."

"Thank you," someone was saying, maybe Mita or her mother or the old man. No, his leg was getting tended. The others of the team?

Not again, and this time he is telling himself instead of begging.