

There's so much he can't do.

So much that's wrong. So much *not good enough*. There's blood on his face, his gloves. Caked in fur, full in mouth and under claws. Dry in the sand. Splattering the tunnel walls. There's fear and there's pain and there's people in goddamn pieces and there's a child, just a child, without a mother, *and it's all because of them, because of him, he didn't stop this—*

So this is what he does. What he can do, like he's always done. It's fine. He stands up and he forces it down and he looks at the others and what can be done and what they need and he does it and it's fine. He makes a list in his head, habitual, like chores and bills and food, always food, what's most urgent, what can wait a bit longer, what they can and can't go without — what he can go without, never them — and what's just not possible. You don't survive by trying to do everything. There's no such thing. He prioritizes. He looks. He notes. He makes a list and he starts on it. It's fine.

Nothing is fine and nothing is good enough, but he does anyway.

It goes like this:

There are the things he cannot fix or that he has no place or right to. There is Jet, newly orphaned, who he wants to focus all his energy on but knows, because he knows children, that delicacy is more required now, and that he is not the best person for — a stranger, a man, and an enemy, all things that a child raised in poverty or slavery or under a gang's thumb will rightly fear, at least slightly more than someone likely not familiar, like a female Twi'lek, relatable if only because his last guardian was his mother, and one who was not present for the fighting that *murdered* his mother. There's whatever is going on with Strong and Tali's concerns about Karran. There's Karran himself, who is no longer happy to see him, for obvious reasons. There's Sera.

Sera.

She smiles so brightly, sometimes, it hurts to look at her.

It's got all kinds, her smile. Always a little tooth. They're real white, which seems at odds — guess she took good care, and more the idiot him, thinking it odd at all. His own are yellowish and crooked, and he's missing some in the back on both sides; one or two to a fight, one or two given up for some credits, once, just like marrow, years and years ago. He'd been too scared of not waking up if he'd traded the kidney.

Toothy, toothy. Fanged, really. Made to tear into meat and used to complain about her vegetables and quirk these impish, wicked little bubbling laughs. Sweet but still sharp. Sharp. Sharp teeth, sharp horns, sharp angles and panther lines. But she isn't sharp. Not in a way that hurts. Not unless she means to, and she rarely means to. More like light. Like staring into the sun. She's so bright, so wide-shining, so brilliant that if that unrelenting smile of hers cuts, it's

not because she means it to. Her smile never means to hurt. Her smile is good and pure and just so alive.

Sometimes, sometimes, it just...shocks. Sometimes, brightness like that is just too much for the system, too pretty a promise, too hot to hold on to. He feels dim next to it, sometimes. Thin, and fragile, and pierced, like paper, like frost and dirt. Like little fungi growing on cave walls. They don't know anything that bright. They don't know how to handle it. How not to wilt or bleed. How to be worthy.

He's got practice. He has Cora. The kids. Good, beautiful, better things. Sera doesn't hurt often, when he's already been exposed, when he knows warmth and goodness like them. But just sometimes, still— she smiles, and it hurts, how bright she is, how much he wants, in different ways, how the shadow of him grows long in her wake and fizzles out at the same time.

Sera's smile is beautiful like her, and the universe should be goddamn grateful to be lit by it.

She's not smiling now.

Her face is somber. The reunion is...bloody. Fraught. Complicated. Maybe that's his fault. Maybe he makes it that way. He had a lot to say on her behalf — not for her, never that, just also, because she can damn well speak for herself and kriff Karran for taking that choice from her — and he knows how much she's got to say because she's been practicing it with him. But she doesn't say much. And she doesn't smile. Not long.

They go back to the surface.

It seems wrong that the twin Tattooine suns shine brighter. Harder. Harsher. Nothing outshines her. But these do. They're ugly and hot. They make him feel all his bones, the dust in his mouth, the gaps of missing teeth and the dried blood on his hands and clothes that flakes like ashes. And he hates them, because she's supposed to be the most her here, in the dunes and the suns that count her as a sister star, but she isn't, and that's wrong. He'd thought the desert would make her happy. That he'd go temporarily blind looking at her.

He looks at her, there, unsmiling. He looks at her and knows he's useless in this except to wait, to wait for the smile to come back like waiting for a sunrise.

He cannot do anything for Sera. She, like Jet and Karran, is on the side of the list that has to be let go. But the others. There is some possibility.

There are things he is less sure of, both in his *place* to do anything and in what he can do. There is Zig Kaliska, the one unluckily in charge of this frang and the one who tried to offer the gangers peace, who got splattered with the blood of their prisoners she was trying to be good to. His stomach knots for her, a twist of sympathetic fear and failure, imagining being in her place, knowing how much is his fault, but knowing how much more he'd probably feel it than he

already does if it was actually his job and he wasn't just a nagging, stuck-up, self-righteous hanger-on. He doesn't know how to approach her, or if it's even a good idea. She's nice, but they don't exactly have history, except the sparse glimpses at the pool she's been kind enough to have him at and the one time she told him off for losing his temper with Avery Watson — and, yeah, he shouldn't have lost it or raised a hand, never, but he'd known a remark with intent when it was made. Either way, he didn't think Zig liked him, if she even had any opinion. And what if he was just some dumb guy trying to solve her problems? He thought of the times he'd accidentally pushed too hard, worried about Qyreia, and shrinks away.

Part of him is angry, and wants to both reprimand Sulvir and tell him to go clean the hell up. The carnage bothers him. But it's not a fight to pick, not when he's prioritizing. He thinks he might have turned a condemnation on L'ara, but it's so obvious that she is being absolutely *rocked* by the consequences of what she's just done in part today that he thinks what she really needs is help. He doesn't know who to call for her. He doesn't know if the *Voidbreaker's* medbay has a therapist for this. He does recognize shock, and is glad when, with a careful suggestion to Sera, they can get her to come with him and Karran to the medbay with Karran's father. L'ara sits on one of the beds and stays there in her armor, dropped off like a sack of luggage. She shouldn't be alone. Thankfully, there's at least the medics on the team, and Sera lingers, unsmiling.

He leaves. He checks briefly on the others, more a visual study than anything else, goes down the list. Archian, unhurt and seemingly unconcerned. Just tending to some new desert pet. Edema and her partner whose name he didn't catch or remember, off to themselves on their own ship. Sulith doesn't seem bothered by the violence or the wounds, is positive as ever, and tending to people as they go. No one there needs *him*.

And then there are those that he can do something about, that do need — or at least, *should* have, because people *should* be cared for — checking in. Mune, who was so scared but strong. Kaled, shaken by death and pained. Zuza, who fought and laughed doing it and who was injured. Sage, who shouldn't have even been exposed to more violence, with the mindset Ruka was starting to suspect he had. Eleceos, who'd had some terrible vision, probably as bad as reality turned out to be. Eilen, who was already hurting over Sera and Karran and everything else. The bodies that needed burial, what was left to bury, damn the *Voidbreaker*, damn him, damn them all. Joseline and the remaining gangsters, who needed justice— *not* vengeance, dammit, Karran.

Once the *obviously* wounded are settled, he starts with Zuza.

She's been helping him drag the corpses around and gather kindling — well, he's been floating it, because she's hurt and she's lying to his and everyone's face about it — when they realize it's a pointless endeavor and just decide to give the bodies a vacuum black burial. She's mentioned that her dad will take Jet, and that means that later they'll be stopping by his home to drop the child off, if Jet agrees. But for now there's going to be some travel back to Mos Kenny and regrouping, and that means time.

"You gonna head to the medbay?" he asks her, pointed, as they finish getting the corpses onto the ship, including the Trandoshans he'd taken a speeder back for, most careful with Jet's mother. Ruka doesn't use telekinesis for her. He carries her, armor and all. He gave Jet his cloak, but Jet has used it as a sheet — "it's a *blanket*," the child comments, wooden and broken and numb and too knowing — for her body. Ruka tells him that's nice of him since it's chilly onboard compared to the desert. Jet doesn't respond. He doesn't think he hears him. They give him space.

"Oh, naw, I'm good, thanks tho~" Zuza brushes off, grinning and making finger guns at him with her hands. But he sees. He knows. She's paler than normal. She moves gingerly. Her pupils aren't pin pricks anymore. She's not up on adrenaline or painkillers. He sees phantoms of filthy refresher stalls and needle-pricked arms in the shadows of her freckled, tired eyes, tight with pain.

"Zuza," he says, "please. C'mon. That was bad. Just. It's just the medbay here. Sully is helping. L'ara and Kar are there too."

"I don't need it really, just some pain meds, which I have in my room. I'll be fine."

"Your ribs were *broken*. You were in a speeder crash. You had cuts, and your arm was healing before this. That's stuff to take care of."

"It's just bruising now, I'll be fine just resting. Rather be in my bed than a medbay's."

She looks away from him when she says that and won't meet his eyes. It almost looks casual. Almost.

He clenches his jaw. Nods. Says, "Okay, ay. Feel better. And thanks."

"Hey, you okay, though? That was pretty rough yanno."

Ruka makes an expression like a smile for her, and when she meets his gaze, he stares right back.

"I'm fine."

They hold that look for a second, but she looks away first and mumbles a little, then makes an excuse that's not an excuse about being tired and heads off.

It's one more failure. He sighs and moves to the next one.

Eilen is...hard. Not because she's difficult, but because it hurts to see her upset, to know their earlier talk didn't hold up in the face of actually seeing Sera and Karran reunited. He pulls her aside for a second and just opens his arms, reaching up, and she buries her face in the top of

his head while he buries his hands in her fur and rubs her ears. They both sigh into each other like it's exhausting, but it's because this is something safe.

She doesn't linger though, pulling back quickly. She rubs at the back of her neck and bites her lips like when she's nervous or wrecked but doesn't wanna be obvious about it by gnawing on her fingers.

"So, eh..."

There aren't really words for today, for right now, and neither of them is normally good at words as is.

He reaches to cup her cheek, smooth his thumb under her eye. "Why don't you go shower up, *arrarmia*? Get that dust outta your fur. Get some rest?"

"That was... *Yeah*, actually, the plan." She leans into his touch, then butts his hand away to poke him in the chest. "*You too*. You need rest too."

"I will, ay, promise. Okay?"

"Okay."

She hesitates a moment, so he turns away first, so that she's free to go without obligation. He listens to her footsteps drag when they retreat more than scamper.

Eleceos is curled up with his cythraul practically on top of him, both of them still covered in gore, and Ruka doesn't dare go over there when the wolf lifts her head and fixes eyes on them. Instead, he gets a bowl of water and some towels and a robe from the mess and from the pool and floats them over to set in a pile before the pair, then calls over to the Miraluka that he's around if anything is needed. Eleceos just trembles, but the wolf *huffs*.

He doesn't run, exactly, but he sure leaves fast. He's met those teeth.

Kaled is listing about as if lost, and Ruka finds him standing frozen just inside the ramp. Like he didn't know where to go and couldn't move alone. The ship was probably unfamiliar to the Miraluka, and Kal in particular didn't seem as confident navigating the world as others of the species he'd met — though that was only Eleceos and the pregnant one from the picnic months ago, Atyiru.

"Kal...Kal, it's me. Can I touch your hand? Let's go to the medbay, ay? The others are there."

Kaled babbles a little, like he does, but his grip is ironclad. Ruka takes him to join Kar, L'ara, and Sera. Karran has left, and while he can sense him, he doesn't know where to. He sits with them

for awhile to talk to Kal until the Miraluka seems to fall asleep. Hard to tell, without the eyes, but his breathing evens.

Sage is sitting at one of the weird tables in the hangar area, his hand swollen two sizes too big and purple instead of red. He's quiet. Weirdly so. And staring at his clothes.

"Hey," Ruka says to the huge Zeltron, who is looking at the torn coat in his lap like a lost child. "Ay, hey, I can fix that for you, if you want. I got needle and thread. S'just mending. How about you let me fix it up and we can go out your drawings on the cryo, yeah?"

Even sitting down the Zeltron doesn't look *up* at him, but he does burst out into a sudden, loud yell about how his art is the best and should definitely go on the fridge and yes fix the jacket and something about getting drinks together and being the boss. It honestly makes his head ache, as does when Sage grabs his arm and shakes him in excitement.

He takes Sage to the mess and finds some magnets to use to put the gruesome drawings up and then sets Sage the task of it.

"Here, bud, you pick the best spot to put them and pin 'em up. Think you can do that while I'm sewing?"

**"THE BOSS CAN DO ANYTHING!"**

It's a good distraction. Give kids a job like that and they'll usually fuss around with it for awhile. Sage moves his drawing eight different times while Ruka sits at one of the long tables and quickly and methodically stitches the rents in his jacket shut with tight rows, legs crossed and thread dangling in his mouth, head bent, eyes focused but routinely flicking up to check on the Zeltron. When Sage is finally satisfied with where it's placed, Ruka bets him he can't stand to hold his hurt hand in ice for more than five minutes. Sage replies that he could do it for five *years* if he had to, and proceeds to demonstrate when Ruka tells him to prove it. That's how the Zeltron ends up sitting on the counter with his hand buried in a sink full of ice while Ruka finishes repairing the jacket; Sage is a big guy and it's a big jacket, even if he's fast at sewing.

Unfortunately, Sage won't go to the medbay or anywhere else now until they find Law. Also unfortunately — *stop it*, Ruka tells himself, firmly — they find Aru quickly enough with the Voidbreaker's scanners tracking his location. The ship lands outside a kriffing Sand People colony and they nearly end up starting another shoot out, but Zig gets things resolved quickly and Aru gets put back on board. With a bantha that he refuses to get off.

It goes in the hold. Ruka wants to scream.

But the list is moving along, and there's more to do, and do he keeps doing it. Just doing, just go, just move, it's fine.

Finally with the Aedile — *scoff* — reacquired, it's back to the town. They get back to Mos Kenny, tell the citizenry about the compound and its weapons and few riches and resources, and let locals decide what to do with the surviving Crimson Sarlaccs and Joseline herself. Her parents seem devastated and angry at once, with which he sympathizes. He doesn't know what he'd do if Noga or Leda had ever run off with the gangs, if he'd failed his children *that badly*. He suspects it'd break him. Or maybe that he'd follow them in if he couldn't pull them back out. It's not really worth thinking on, and it's far too painful to really imagine.

The merchant who'd traded information for his emerald dagger tried to give it back. He tries to insist they keep it, feeling like he's cheating them, like it's not right. They won't take it, so he gives them all the credits he's carrying at the very least.

After that, he and Zuza depart with Jet for her father's home, and he briefly, awkwardly, painfully meets Gwaine Lottson. It isn't a fun time, because there's an *orphan*, but Gwaine seems...kind. Ruka tries not to be suspicious of him just because his own issues run deep. He gets hugged, which nearly breaks him in half right between the ribs, and he nearly shoves Gwaine away simply because it's an older man doing it. But he holds himself stiff and still, and when they leave, Zuza seems moderately relieved. She goes right back to her room, though. To take painkillers. Alone.

The twin suns are setting as there's a last stop to the original scrapyards, so Zig can speak to her junker friend, but Ruka doesn't disembark for that one. He needs to check on Mune.

Mune had retreated almost immediately to their quarters, and Ruka knocks lightly. The Shistavanen peers nervously around their door in a cloud of steam, though it widens a crack when they see it's him. They're looking pretty pristine, or at least clean, and seem to be mid way through breaking a brush.

"Hey, Mune. Sorry. Don't mean to bother you or interrupt or nothing. Just... Wanted to check on you. See if you'd called Caleb. I always call Cora, y'know?"

"Ruka, yes...no trouble, thank you. I was just ah... freshening up." Their tail is between their legs, but they make a little smile, shuffling. "Thank you for asking. Yes, I'll call. Our loved ones are... Very precious and supportive for us, aren't they?"

"Yeah," Ruka agrees. "They are. Ay, I'll uh, leave you to it...but hey. Mune? You did really good. And you saved us. Thank you."

Mune's ears fold back. They nod, then shut the door as if hiding.

He doesn't know whether to count that as a failure or not. He thinks of Cora and decides to be kind to himself and call it good.

By the time he makes it back around the ship, at least the places he thinks he's allowed to go, it's dark, the ship clock set to nighttime. Everyone is in their place, and Tatooine is finally becoming stardust behind them as Zig or whoever's piloting puts them into hyperspace. The bodies they carry will be consigned to the engines at a first stop to adjust their route; nobody wants corpses orbiting their atmosphere.

He thinks of his list again. What he can do. What he can't. That one is longer. Thinks. Finds he's run out of usefulness. Without something — someone — right in front of him, he feels every hour, every grain of sand, every scream and wet voice of people part of him hates begging for mercy in his ears.

It has been a very, very long day.

The *Voidbreaker's* halls are unfamiliar and dark. They seem like they're yawning even though they're not that large. He feels small in them. Small and beaten. There's not a place for him to go here. He doesn't know where to take himself. Even if he forced himself to impose for once and ask to crash with Eilen, she had asked for space, and he doesn't intend to interrupt that. Zig had welcomed them to the common areas before, but the pool seems like no place to curl up, and the hangar is full of corpses and damaged speeders. He'd want to crawl under those and start working on them until he fell asleep there to the smell of oil, if it wasn't for the corpses part. Sleeping with the dead was beyond the pale of disrespect, and he quickly prayed to his Ancestors and Ashla and Bogan just at the thought.

Part of him just wants to sit down right where he is in some hallway he doesn't know and just. Not move again. He is so tired. He's messed up so much. His skin doesn't sit right, and he feels the recycled air like steel wool scraping into his lungs. It's bad sometimes, being on ships. Reminds him of Nancora. Reminds him of a brief flash of burning and ripping and then a lot of nothing until Cora's voice called him back.

There's still something he can do. The one thing he always could. Stay up and make sure everyone sleeps soundly, safe. Just. Just safe. Not okay. Maybe not full. Not given all the best they deserved and in need of so much but— safe at least enough to sleep.

He goes to the medbay, where too many beds are full. Karran is asleep beside his father, Sera beside him. Sage got a cast on, broke it, then got another and went to drink with Aru; they passed out under a table. Kaled is in another bed, and L'ara is curled up on her own, the tense lines of her suggesting she's awake too.

Ruka takes a seat on the floor facing the door and settles into a meditative pose.

"It's okay," he whispers for the Twi'lek, "you can sleep. Trust me, that guilt? It's gonna be there in the morning.



She tenses at first, and stays rigid. But as he sits and the hours tick by, he notices her frame relax. It's probably exhaustion.

Minutes into minutes into hours. They sleep, and he keeps watch, half-sunk into the currents of the Force to keep himself conscious.

When the ship clock gets somewhere past 0500, he stands, rolls his shoulders, and creeps out to head back to the mess hall. He steps over an unconscious Zeltron and Human and hopes that smell is bantha and not them having pissed themselves. He goes into the kitchen area and starts quietly and carefully pulling out pots and pans, raiding the cryo with Sage's cartoonishly horrific drawings on its front, starting the caf machines.

He knows who's coming by their bond and by the familiar clicky-clatter of her toe nails on the deck. Eilen's furry face pops around the half-wall at the kitchen entrance and she squints at him in the dark.

"Can you even see what you're doing?" she asks, voice thready and stuck with sleep and rawness.

"Not really," he whispers back. "Just used to doin' kriff in the dark if I had to. Lost power a lot. There's caf." He flips eggs in a pan. It's the second of the two biggest ones he could find, and another two are full of meat, a third with egg-soaked carbs. Industrial stoves are *great*. So is telekinesis. "Be food soon."

"*Ruka*," Eilen hisses, coming closer. "Did you sleep?"

"I..." Kriff. "I meditated. In the medbay. I'm good."

"*Ruuuuka!*"

"I don't exactly have a bed here, EI."

The look she gives him runs a marathon through devastated to guilty to upset and then settles on...*indignant*. Oh no.

His senses do not need to warn him when a different telekinetic hold is sudden switching off all the burners and she's *grabbing him by a dreadlock*.

"Ayyyyy! Ow, Eilen!"

"*The heck you don't have a bed!*" She shakes him by the shoulders, by the hair, plucks at his shirt and armor and generally drags him out of the kitchen like a holo they saw once of a noodly little rodent dragging a melon across the floor. "You're, like, one of the *only* people, g-guys, I'd let in my room, if I have a place you have a place you *dummy*. That's what you'd say to me!"

"But—"

"Ruka, *you promised.*"

He shuts his mouth.

Eilen huffs at him. "That's what I thought. Just— just, *come on. You did.*"

"I did. I promised." Ruka slumps, and starts walking with her so his hair doesn't get pulled out. "I'm sorry, I just."

There aren't words. But maybe they don't need any. It's dark, still, but maybe they can wait for sun up together.

Maybe he's on *her* list like she's on his. In fact, he knows he is.

She drags him back to her room, makes a fuss about *let me just clean up real quick don't like GAH*, to which he replies he could not possibly care about what mess she's got right now, he's too tired. He's pretty sure she's hiding porn again, not that he'd judge. But he doesn't really wanna know either, so he waits. Then she does more dragging, kicking aside clothes and things, and then his armor that he never took off joins the pile on the floor and she won't even let him fold it up. Just shoves him into bed and weasels in next to him like they've done a couple times before.

He puts his hand in her hair again. She burrows under his chin like something between a cat and a snake. He doesn't know. He never owned either.

"*Arrarmia...*" he starts to say, because it has been a long, long day, and so much is wrong, and there's so much he couldn't do.

But he doesn't get any words out. It's dawn, and he's asleep the moment his head hits the pillows.