

He dreamed of this:

It felt like moving through water, like cement, limbs slowing to a crawl. Not fast enough. Never fast enough. And no amount of struggling or screaming, no offer of sacrifice or careful planning, nothing could stop it.

It started, every time, in the void black lit with starshine. Like floating. Like falling. Drowning in air. Burning in cold. There was the Dark, and the Light, and the shades in between.

And they were sick. So sick. Something was wrong. Twisted. A fault in the code. A broken gene. Like his mother's liquor-hunger in his blood. A poison he couldn't ever get away from. Nothing he could ever cut out, or grow bigger than, or overcome. He just had to live with it inside him.

But this wasn't so natural as being born wrong. Not even a malfunction of something natural, a tumor out of control.

This was.

Red.

It bloomed in the dark and the gray and the light. Until everything was oversaturated. Until it blinded, and oh, Stars, he was blind again. He was always so blind. He felt his eyes liquidate, dribbling down his cheeks and chin, touched and knew it was red red red, knew his skull had emptied out, skeletal, and...

But now wasn't a dream. Not a vision. Now was—

—brrrrzzzzzzZZZ.

Laser cannon fire pelted into the ground along their flank. People screamed, and the Force screamed too. Ruka threw out a hand, pushing away a sailing grenade, far up into the sky. It exploded and rained heat down around them to join the Selenian swelter and he turned, lightsaber lifting, catching a bolt, and—

Too much.

The massive punch that *cracked* into his head sent him flying, straight off his feet and *cracking* a second time into the duracrete.

"Scion!"

"Sir!"

Footsteps rushed back towards him. The scenery around him hadn't stopped spinning when he forced himself to sit up, catching blurs of rubble and bodies and red red red. The klaxons were red washed out in bright, shining, tropical daylight. The blood and blaster scorch on the stones and the sand was dark and kaleidoscopic. The crystals bursting out of throats and eyes and arms, plated shining and seamless in armor and over ship hauls, burned scarlet.

There were still civilians. Doctors, mechanics, technicians, therapists. Soldiers' families.

The citizenry and crew alike of Blindshot fled in tight lines behind him, behind the half-broken Cresh Regiment and remains of Besh, soldiers herding like canines to cattle. A cadet who looked like a little girl to his concussed mind grabbed a piece of twisted rebar from the street, picking it up like a club, as if she was going to join the fighting to defend her home

No, no, absolutely not, not while I'm breathing.

Spitting a flood of blood, he screamed, "GO! GET THEM OUT OF HERE, THAT'S AN ORDER!"

At the very least, Ruka didn't have to give too many of those. The troops were predominantly under Blindshot's own Colonel's command, directly reporting to Qyreia.

The Mirialan staggered back to his feet as the AAF forces obeyed, though not without leaving him with sprays of supporting fire. The shouting was loud and lost. He couldn't really hear out of one ear, the good one that his comm had been in. He could feel when he reached up that it was still there, though, just...deeper. Jagged edged.

Ruka shook his head, shaking off the distraction, the wandering thoughts, syrupy, focused on the Force in his veins. He spotted his saber and summoned it back to his hand, igniting it and launching himself up into the sky, legs empowered by shadow. At the peak of his arc, he descended like a comet, two-handed grip on his weapon spearing into the armor of the Ascendant that had hit him. The man, woman— thing, it growl-screamed, trying to shake him free as his blade sank in and dragged, as though he were cutting a hole through durasteel blast doors a foot thick.

Without lifting a gloved hand, the Mirialan set his eyes on a dead raptor in the street ahead of him and snapped a just of crystal free of its corpse. While his saber struggled downwards, gravity and grit, the trooper dropped its rifle in favor of reaching for its own, bringing it up in time to deflect the crystal Ruka shot at the back of its head.

The Proconsul cursed, deactivating his blade and leaping back. Those lightsabers were dangerous. He and Socorra had been back to back, the Mandalorian sworn to him unwilling to leave his side, right up until they'd discovered the enemy's weapons could cut through beskar.

She'd dropped like stones. It was all he could do to get her out of the way and to the medic line behind the vanguard.

"ay down...y..uuuh...eponz," the trooper attempted to say. Unlike Dandoran, these people were still in possession of their facilities. He was fighting other soldiers, other parents, other people. That they looked and moved like abominations... "G...g..give us...suren...drrr."

"Lay down yours," the Proconsul retorted, dripping words and red red blood around missing teeth. "Take your damn kriffing rock back to space and go. Please. Just go."

The soldier began another advance, and Ruka briefly closed his eyes and hated them a little, hated himself for this choice.

But it had to be done.

He didn't know why they'd chosen here to make their foothold, and it didn't really matter, not for him. They had people whose entire job it was to figure such things out, anticipate enemy tactics, plan solutions and strikes. He wasn't a planner. He wasn't even really a commander.

His one and only job was to hold the line.

Lifting his hand, the Sith grasped his opponent in a telekinetic hold and catapulted them to the shoreline close by. However invulnerable and inevitable they were, whatever power the crystals gave them, however advanced their armor and dedicated their ideals...they *were people*.

And they needed to breathe.

The pool had worked on Dandoran. This was just worse. Bigger. An ocean and an army. He couldn't drown them all.

But he could hold this line.

The trooper went below the water, salt and foam, crystal clear, blue to their bleeding red. They thrashed, but Ruka held them down until it stopped, then kept moving.

Couldn't pause. Couldn't stop.

Just.

Hold the line, and he'd trust everyone else to do the same.

He looked behind him to the evacuation at the seaport, watercraft full of bodies. Ahead and around, to the animals and armies. Off in the distance, to where the red red red sickness had made planetfall.

He dreamed of something like this...

The Mirialan ran, throwing himself into the next skirmish bodies with a scream.