

## Sudden

It all started when mom got a call.

Qyreia was in the entryway of the house, fussing with her hair and deciding between putting it up in some sort of messy bun or letting it hang loose, when she heard the comm in the go off in the kitchen. A quick “I got it!” from her mother instantly dissuaded any concern for the call and she went back to looking at her reflection in the mirror. Of course, just because she was focused didn’t mean she couldn’t hear the older Zeltron in the next room.

“Hello? Yes, this is Alayne.”

“We’d like to talk to you about your speeder’s extended warranty,” Qyreia muttered to herself, finding some amusement in eavesdropping.

“Yes? ...What? Since when...?”

Her mother’s increasingly tremulous speech caught Qyreia’s attention and she angled to look toward the kitchen. “Mom?”

There was an unfamiliar coldness in her mother’s swift but soft “One second.” Not only in her voice, but in the empathic wavelengths that floated between them. “Sorry, go ahead.”

Alayne stepped further into the house to seek some privacy away from her daughter’s sight. The young Zeltron was left standing alone in the hall, impotent to do anything, still feeling that *wrongness* that nagged at the back of her mind. She was frozen by it. It seemed that the world only started to move when she heard her mother’s muffled voice stop and the house was bathed in silence.

Qyreia’s feet took hesitant steps toward the back of the house, rounding the corner past the kitchen and into the living room. Her mother was sitting on the couch, clearly trying not to cry but failing.

It was hard not to be overtaken by the emotions permeating the room from her. “Mom?”

“H-hey sweetie.” Alayne did what many Zeltrons did when they were upset: put on a smile and tried to shift what they were letting out on the empathic waves. She wasn’t doing too well though as she motioned the younger Zeltron over to the sofa. “C’mere. I need to talk to you.”

Qyreia took a seat and nestled into her mother. She didn’t know what was happening, but she knew it wasn’t going to be good, so the snuggle was as much for her as for her mom.

“I was talking...” Alayne paused to steady her breathing. “I was talking to the hospital. Your grandma... Gram-gram got sick.”

The daughter’s comforting posture stiffened and she rose just enough to look her mother in the eyes.

“It happened fast and... I’m so sorry, honey.”

Qyreia froze. For a moment, all she could do was stare at her mother while her brain processed what was being said. “W-what?” she squeaked, unbidden tears already at the corners of her eyes.

Her mother was only able to mutter out another “I’m sorry” before the younger Zeltron’s expression and voice twisted into uncontrolled sobs, burying her face in her mother’s embrace. Alayne did her best to control herself as well, managing to let her daughter have the lion’s share of the release of sorrow, but she cried all the same.

*Gram-gram* was her own mother, after all.

The arrival of her husband, Beren — his work day cut short by her call — made things a little easier, if only because it diluted the concentration of malaise. It made his job at home no easier though, as he had to console both his wife and daughter at once. The former at least had composure borne of experience and adulthood, and Alayne was able to stabilize herself to start making other tearful notifications to family and friends once her husband was able to soothe them enough. Qyreia was no so equipped.

When she finally calmed, it was only thanks to the exhaustion brought on by grief, and she lost herself in an unexpected nap. When she woke up, it was to the sounds of her parents talking in the kitchen.

“I don’t know how to do this one, Ber. She saw mom, what, *two weeks* ago?”

“Mh.”

It was odd to hear them talking about her like she wasn’t there. It somehow hurt, but not the same way that her grandmother... she couldn’t think the word ‘*gone*’ rationally when it came to Gram-gram. Not yet. Not without tearing up.

“What do we even say to her? She’s *twelve*. She’s supposed to be worried about boys and school and dances, not...”

“I know.” She knew they were hugging; could feel the sliver of comfort in the air from them in that moment. “But we don’t get to choose when this stuff happens.”

“I’m just... I’m trying to hold it together *and* be mom, but...”

“It’s *alright*, Alayne. She was your mom. You’re allowed to be sad too.”

Sniffles followed, quiet but controlled. “Still.”

“No, not ‘still’. You do what you need to. I’m here for both of you.”

Between the renewed thoughts of her grandmother’s death and her parents’ discussion, paired with the lingering and muted sorrows floating in the ether, Qyreia couldn’t help but let slip a snuffle and sob buried into the cushions. Her parents both seemed to stir from their conversation. It almost seemed like they just materialized with how quickly they were by her side, dad kneeling on the floor and mom perched on the edge of the sofa.

“Hey kiddo,” Beren said softly, gently rubbing her turned shoulder. “You awake?”

Qyreia didn’t so much answer as just nod a little.

“I’m here too, sweetie.” Alayne rested a hand on her daughter’s leg; a move that had the younger Zeltron blindly seek it out and grab it, squeezing meekly. “It’s almost dinner time.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I very much doubt that,” her dad said, managing a chuckle despite the atmosphere.

She couldn’t see it with the couch filling what vision that wasn’t blurred by tears, but she could feel her mom giving him a deadpan stare. “I know you probably don’t feel like eating, honey, but you need to get something. We’re thinking of ordering out. No one’s really in the mood to cook, as you might imagine.”

There was the slightest flash of humor in Qyreia’s head at that. Somehow that made the sadness worse. Like being happy was something she shouldn’t be at all. It made her curl into herself just a little more, a shaky breath and some renewed tears making conversing hard. It did nothing to help the already twisted feeling in her stomach. Why should she eat when Gram-gram couldn’t? Couldn’t anything.

Alayne was struggling to hold her own tenuous composure, but she managed to anchor herself in the grip of her daughter’s hand, running her thumb over the red digits.

“Or we can just do ice cream and say kark it.”

Another painful jolt of happiness went through Qyreia. It wasn’t often she heard her mother *swear*. She managed a tear-choked glance over her shoulder, acutely aware of how she must look.

“Mom?”

“Yeah sweetie?”

Merely calling up the words brought choking sobs as she said, “I didn’t even get to

say goodbye.”

“I know, hon,” Alayne said, teary-eyed and squeezing the grip on her daughter’s hand. “I know.”

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Fester Lung. That was what took her. *Ascomycetous pneumoconiosis* if someone wanted to use the technical term. It was a hell of a way for Qyreia to learn about a disease, much less an otherwise rare one, and especially on a world like Zeltros. Unfortunately, the mold spores that caused it were, like most molds, able to grow just about anywhere. And like most things involving death, the young Zeltron didn’t really care so much about any of it.

She just wanted her Gram-gram back.

She could still freshly remember eating cookies and talking about her latest crush at school on a random visit. Forays to the larger star port turned sour and the latest acquired clothing. And at every turn, her grandmother kept calling her *Qyrie*, lilting on the *resh* like always. Like being called Gram-gram, it was her special name for Qyreia that no one else dared plagiarize.

Like so many things though, that was all over. No more cookies. No more probing conversations. No more Gram-gram. Ever. And every time she thought about it, it was like opening up the dam all over again.

That made the funeral worthy of dread. On any other planet with any other race or species, these affairs may be more somber or regimented. On Zeltros, they were practically a festival.

I’m a weird way, it made sense. Qyreia knew about off-worlder customs that touted “celebrating the life of the deceased,” but few if any genuinely managed that. A Zeltron funeral was not one of black clothes and sorrowful music, but bright dresses and lively music. Most often, everything would be a showcase of the person being celebrated: their personal music playlists; displays of their works be it art or craft; and of course their recipes and favorite foods.

That was especially difficult as she kneaded dough for a pastry out of her grandmother’s cookbook. Every turn of the rolling pin, Qyreia felt liable to break out in tears just thinking about the woman.

But every time she was met by a friendly hand. A distant cousin, or aunt, or uncle; even some of her dad’s family. The young Zeltron wasn’t particularly familiar with her extended relations, but there seemed a central gravity between them all that was focused on one unified task: support. Not a single word was said that wasn’t one of warmth or comfort, as if the space left behind was merely a new place for the waterflow of love to

fill.

“How’re you doing?” an older Zeltron asked, his features reminiscent of her dad’s long frame and chiseled face; an uncle whose name eluded her.

She slapped the rolling pin on the table. “About ready to murder whoever decided ‘elbow grease’ was an actual ingredient in pastry dough.”

“Well you’re doing a lot better than last I saw you in the kitchen.” He leveled his hand at about her thigh for reference. “Around yea tall and couldn’t get you to do anything but ‘clean’ the bowls of the batter and loose sweet bits.”

Qyreia managed to smile, some of the malaise replaced by memories of spatulas covered in chocolate chip-laden goop. And it was crazy to think about being that small, even though there were fragments of memories from that time.

Her smile seemed to appease her relative. “You want a break? Think I saw a bowl that could use some of your cleaning skills.”

Her face lit up. “Oh *frack* yes! Oop!” She instantly covered her mouth, looking to see if her parents were around to hear.

“Don’t worry,” her uncle whispered. “You’re safe. I won’t tell.”

She giggled quietly, still eyeing the entryways to be sure her deviance wasn’t discovered.

“Go on. Grab the bowl and a spoon and tell me about what you’re up to these days.”

That was how it went each and every time. The older Zeltrons could do it best, but every comforting maneuver seemed almost instinctual. For sure, part of it was pouring out happy vibes on the empathic waves; but it was also the genuine care at each interval that wasn’t simply a cliché consolation that she knew from the holos.

And when her friends showed up, there were even more distractions. Morine was still short — or Qyreia was getting tall — and seemed to be increasingly surly about it these days, taking on an amusingly stoic facet to her manners. Ourin, on the other hand, was pleased to find that so many of the cousins were cute boys.

*My friends, ladies and gentlemen*, Qyreia thought with amusement as they worked their way into the family throng. Even so, for the brief time that the mood dropped for their condolences, joviality abounded shortly thereafter. Even Alayne seemed in relatively good spirits, coordinating and directing people and food in every direction.

Somehow it all seemed to crumble the instant that Qyreia saw the casket.

It was honestly a thing of beauty. The wood was a deep reddish brown, polished and smooth. With all the flowers and neatly arranged foliage that covered it and framed her

form, its naturalesque shape made it almost look like she was resting in some fantasy tree trunk. And much like the preparations for the party, the tables to either side were replete with memorabilia of her grandmother. The music playing on the speakers was hers. The food that they'd worked all day to make was hers.

It was the strangest, sickly sweet feeling to have it seem like she was still there even though she was laying in state.

*Dead*, Qyreia reminded herself tearfully.

She wasn't the only one. Some would hide it behind a smile. Others would excuse themselves for minutes at a time. She'd even happened upon her mom in the refresher just shy of screaming.

But then they hugged. They smiled. They cleaned up and shared stories about how Gram-gram — mom's mom — would cheer Alayne up when she was Qyreia's age. And the stories just kept flowing from there. It kept them going; sustained them in happiness.

But then she was left to her own devices again, and the spiral started all over again as she approached. Her grandmother looked surprisingly serene. She knew they'd done quite a lot to sanitize... *her*, in the wake of the illness. Couldn't risk contact infections. The light lines at the corners of her eyes bespoke of years and years of smiling. She had her mother's long, thick midnight-blue hair, draped in attractive waves around her shoulders. It hurt so much to think that she looked like she was sleeping, and in the same thought know that she was never going to wake up again.

Just as Qyreia's shoulders were starting to shake and her throat started to hiccup with oncoming sobs, a firm hand grasped her shoulder. When she looked back, it was to see her dad standing there with his characteristically understanding smile.

"Hey you."

She wiped at her eyes, hiding the tears in vain. "Hey."

"Your mom's family did a good job, huh." It wasn't a question so much as pointing out the obvious.

"Yeah."

He looked at his daughter, her own gaze glued to the body of her grandmother. "You wanna know a secret?"

She managed to hold her gaze on him a little longer in anticipation.

"It doesn't get easier." He seemed to turn his voice to the casket even as he drew Qyreia into a hug. "Isn't that right, Kallysta?"

*"Dad."*

“What?”

“You shouldn’t talk at her like... like that.”

“Why not? She can hear you when you talk to her.”

That caught the younger Zeltron’s attention. “What?”

Bergen seemed to take a modicum of joy in offering her this solace. “Some folks think that the departed can hear you when you talk to them; especially when you’re close to where they’re resting.”

Qyreia seemed to chew on this. “Can I talk to her?”

“Sure. Worst that can happen is you get some things off your chest.”

She looked back at the woman laying in the casket, swallowing back a knot in her throat as she thought of what to say.

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“Hey Gram-gram. It’s me, Qyreia. Qyrie as you’d say it,” she added with her grandmother’s characteristic roll of the *resh*.

It was a warm, breezy day, with only the occasional cloud interrupting the steady stream of sunshine. The cemetery was fairly quiet, save for one or two other groups strolling through, but they were far enough away as to be easily forgotten. Qyreia, with her wife Keira standing beside her, was more intent on the headstone engraved with her grandmother’s name.

“You’ve met Keira. She’s here too.”

“Hi there, gramma-Q,” the Force user said, even offering a little wave for effect. Somehow it felt well received.

“I brought some of your favorite cookies.” As if leaving an offering at a shrine, the Zeltron pulled a couple of the named confections from a bag and gingerly set them on the clean stonework. “I also brought a *different* sort of cookie.”

She motioned to Keira, who approached and squatted low by the headstone, cradling a bundle of ruddy pink with deep blue fuzz.

“This is Ileta, *our* cookie,” Qyreia said, using her grandmother’s name for children. “She’s a handful, but I know you’d love her.”

“Qyreia tells me that, with her hair and mine, it’ll be a lot like yours. Dark blue.” She gave her Zeltron an appreciative grin. “I’m okay with that.”

The wind rustled overhead, and the light that filtered through the leaves danced

across them. Keira was a skeptic in her wife's particular beliefs, but even she felt a certain modicum of *otherness* in the air and in how the warmth caressed the skin of her arms.

“So Gram-gram. Lemme tell you about what's been happening lately...”