**Blackbirds: Year One**

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**Blackbirds: Year One**

by SLWalker

**Summary**

Eleven clones, one half-zabrak and all of the inherent chaos one might expect when you stick those things together. Maul gets his own squad of clones.
Or maybe the clones get him.

Notes

<3 Feedback, prompts, questions, comments, you name it: I love it all. I'm sl-walker on Tumblr, too. Don't be shy! I try to update this story once or twice a week, when real life allows.
Dear Flanker,

Well, I’m onboard the Negotiator now. Heck of a surprise, getting diverted from Orto Plutonia. I didn’t see that one coming, but I can’t say I’m complaining, either. At least, not about not having to spend however many months strapped to that iceberg of a planet.

I met a couple of the guys who are going to be in our squad. Tally’s the name of our medic. He’s a little older than we are, though you know as well as I do that doesn’t mean much. He’s real calm, though. He was on Christophsis, like you were, but he said he never ran into you. I wish he had.

The other one I met is Raze, and I bet he’s gonna live up to his name. He was pulling apart a grenade launcher while I stowed my gear. Swear by the looks of him that he was in love. There are gonna be eight more of us here soon, and then I guess we’ll get a proper briefing.

I wonder sometimes why we’re all different like that. None of us are ARCs or anything, we all had the same training, but here we are with all these different quirks. Makes you think, eh, brother?

Anyway, though, I gotta tell you about our CO. You won’t believe this.

I got onboard and after I settled into our quarters, I get a call from the hangar deck from General Kenobi himself. That’s a pretty big deal, so I make sure I’m all turned out and then I double-time it up there, and I have to admit that I’m wondering why he didn’t call one of the other two.

I get there, and he’s arguing with the scariest looking zabrak I’ve ever laid eyes on.

Around now, I started getting a sinking feeling, but I just stood back and waited. It was definitely an argument. The general looked frustrated. The zabrak just looked terrifying. They weren’t shouting at each other or anything, but they both had their arms crossed and were firing words back and forth, and I stayed well out of the way because I didn’t want any part of that.

Except, then General Kenobi made me a part of it.

He threw his hands up and then came my way and looked me over. Polite as could be, like he wasn’t just in the middle of an argument. "You're Shiv, correct?"

"Yes, sir," I answered.

“Wonderful.” I got the feeling that he actually meant that, which made me feel a little better. "Shiv, this is your new lieutenant, Maul. Maul, this is your new sergeant, Shiv. I expect you to schedule a meeting in briefing room three as soon as the rest of the squad gets here."

Heck of a way to get a promotion.

General Kenobi claps me on a shoulder, and then he walks by and I swear, Flanker, I catch him smirking to himself out of the corner of my eye.

The zabrak – our lieutenant – glares after him with these eerie yellow eyes, then he looks at me and visions of snarling and death cross my mind, though it sort of becomes less of a glare and more of a stare, like I’m some kind of strange thing he’s never seen before. Talk about irony, right?

Then, damned if he doesn’t speak, and I’m not kidding, he has the most proper inner core
newscaster accent I’ve ever heard. Never in a million years, did I imagine that voice going with a face like that. "Hello, Shiv."

“Sir,” I answered, once I got over my surprise.

“I’d like you to know that I have precisely no idea what I’m doing,” he went on, looking me in the eyes. "If anything goes wrong, I think we should blame Kenobi."

I have no idea how to answer that. Good thing he didn’t seem to want one, because he walked past me and left me standing there, with a brand new promotion and a commanding officer who’s even greener than I am.

I don’t know if there’s anything after this, for us clones. But brother, wherever you are, if you are, save a beer for me. I think I’ll need it.

-Shiv
The couch was military blue-gray and not particularly long, sitting across from a holo display in the tiny area that one might call a living room, if they were feeling generous. On the other side of it was the door to his private ‘fresher and a very small kitchenette. On this side of it was the reason why Obi-Wan Kenobi did not turn down the larger quarters afforded to a general: An actual bed, rather than a bunk, with a decent mattress and pillows, and with standard issue bedding in addition to a couple of personal blankets folded at the foot of it. It even had netting that could be raised that would prevent the sleeper(s) from being knocked onto the floor in the event of an attack.

It was a very comfortable bed.

The reason Obi-Wan was contemplating the couch, however, was because he was pretty sure he was going to be sleeping on it for the foreseeable future.

Maul was furious with him. Not Sith Lord furious, but how dare you furious.

Standing there with arms crossed furious.

I might never let you come back to bed furious.

It didn’t honestly matter that Maul had his own assigned quarters on the Negotiator. As far as Obi-Wan was concerned, home was together and it would never occur to him to have it otherwise. They hadn’t even really discussed it; it was a given. Just because he came in through the door and Maul came in through the access hatch didn’t make it any less theirs. They slept in the same bed, they edged past one another in the ‘fresher while half-asleep to brush their teeth, they both kept the place tidy and made sure the tea was stocked in the cupboard.

Hell’s teeth, they even co-mingled underwear.

“All I’m asking,” Obi-Wan said, gentle, “is that you give it a fair shot.”

“It’s a horrible idea, Kenobi. I’m not—” Maul gestured sharply, frustrated. “—leadership material. I don’t even work well with others, I don’t know what makes you think I could lead them.”

That Obi-Wan had been reduced to his surname was indicative of how angry Maul actually was. “Intuition, mostly. But I do have plenty of tactical reasons.”

“So you’ve said.”

“I’ll be glad to go over them again with you.” Obi-Wan edged a little closer, walking the very fine line there sometimes was between being soothing and being unwittingly patronizing. “The backup alone makes this worthwhile. But it also widens your mission parameters considerably. They aren’t ARCs, but all of them have good notes for independent thought and decision making, too.”

“I don’t know the first thing about leading troops. The closest I’ve ever come was hiring a mercenary force at Orsis and leading a mock raid at the academy,” Maul pointed out, still glaring at him.

Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows, imploring. “Given the black ops angle, that’s a good foundation.”

This wasn’t their first argument about it. The first argument was on the hangar deck, in front of the Blackbirds’ newly minted sergeant, Shiv. Obi-Wan had made a strategic decision not to warn Maul.
he was about to be given his own squad, mostly because he had wanted to delay sleeping on the couch for as long as possible. He also hoped that it would be a case where begging forgiveness would ultimately be easier than asking permission would have been.

“I watched you teach Cody some truly diabolical methods for rigging relays and explosives,” Obi-Wan said, inching closer still. "I also caught you teaching some hand-to-hand to those new transfers, remember? You’re not as ill-equipped for this as you think you are.”

He could see the wavering resolve; Maul certainly didn’t quit glowering, and his posture remained just as closed off, but there was that little flicker of something on his face that suggested he wasn’t stone-cold set against the idea.

Frankly, if he really and truly decided not to accept this position, there was no amount of persuasion in the galaxy that would change that.

"Two months,” Obi-Wan said, pressing his advantage while he had it. "Give it two months. Some training exercises, then missions if they come up. If you still don’t want to do this at the end of seventy days, then that’s it; I’ll turn the Blackbirds over to someone else."

Maul wrinkled his nose up, the mildest form he had of a snarl, but he didn’t say no, either. He also didn’t push Obi-Wan backwards, when Obi-Wan made to creep into his space, which boded well.

Not only for the Blackbirds, but for Obi-Wan’s back if he was spared the couch.

"Why name them Blackbirds?" Maul finally asked, which was about as close as Obi-Wan was going to get to a surrender. And even that was a conditional surrender, he knew.

“Oh. Well, once long ago,” Obi-Wan answered, grin spreading as Maul gave him a flat look for his opening, “my master and I were visiting a world in the Outer Rim and while we were there, I saw these birds flit across the fields of grain, chasing insects. They were small, but fleet and graceful; I found out later that they were also quite good hunters, eating half their body weight per night.

"But even while they did that, they landed so lightly that they didn’t even bend the stalks of grain.” Obi-Wan shrugged, close enough now to duck his head and rub the bridge of his nose against the line of Maul’s jaw, and smile to himself when Maul finally uncrossed his arms and rested his hands light on Obi-Wan’s hips. "They’re technically called Antarian Red-Barred Blackbirds, but that’s a rather cumbersome name for a squad, so Blackbirds it is."

Maul made a vague, noncommittal noise, but then huffed out a quiet sigh. "Two months. And I’ll hear no more about it, if I decide that’s all."

“Two months,” Obi-Wan confirmed, drawing back enough to capture one of those hands that rested on his hips.

He was still grinning when he kissed the red bars on the backs of Maul’s otherwise black fingers, and he didn’t stop grinning until he fell asleep.

Particularly because he did so in his own bed.
Grammar

Chapter Summary

The Blackbirds spend the beginning of their first briefing having a very important debate.

“No, I just think it’s kind of funny. I mean, what are the odds?” Tango asked, leaned back in his seat with his arms behind his head. ‘

“Apparently pretty good?” Brody asked back, bemused. “Since we’re here, and so are they?”

Tally looked up from where he was going through the squad’s medical records on the datapad, familiarizing himself with the history of ten of his brothers and one zabrak-human hybrid with extensive cybernetics, making use of the time while they were waiting in Briefing Room 3 onboard the Negotiator. He tended to arrive to meetings early, if he had the chance, so he had already been seated as the rest of them started trickling in, also early.

That, he guessed, was probably curiosity on their parts. None of them had expected to be transferred here, so it made sense that everyone would want to get this show on the road and see what they were dealing with.

The two shinies – and boy were they, they’d only been aboard for two hours and came right from Kamino – were sitting together, talking quietly to each other. They were batchmates; they had probably expected to be assigned with their platoon, only to find themselves separated and sent elsewhere. They didn’t even have names yet, though doubtless they would soon enough.

Castle was the other one who had arrived today; he was pretty quiet, just sitting there watching the rest of them play the ‘getting to know you even though we’re all genetically almost identical’ game.

Husker, next to him, was the oldest of the clones (and the one who had taken a piece of shrapnel to his neck, injuring his vocal cords during a training exercise before war was even declared and thus earning his name); he had been transferred over from the 501st. Like Castle, he didn’t talk much; supposedly, if scuttlebut was right, he had originally been approached for sergeant and had turned it down.

Raze was their appropriately named weapons specialist. He was also the only clone who wasn’t already in the briefing room, absent Shiv.

And Shiv was their newly promoted sergeant; he seemed pretty serious on first glance, but once he got talking, he had a pretty good sense of humor. He was sharp, too. He and Tally had fallen in fast and Tally was sure they were going to work well together.

Tally himself had been with the 212th already; so far, he was the only one. He was also the only one next to Shiv who had met their CO, but not onboard ship – he’d met Maul back on Christophsis, trying to patch him up after he’d jumped in front of a bomb blast protecting General Kenobi.

Just based on that initial meeting, Tally was going to guess they were in for some interesting times ahead.
He hadn’t gotten a feel for Smarty or Misty yet, but he figured they’d all likely be hanging out together later swapping yarns and getting used to one another.

Now, though, Tango rolled his eyes. “I can’t be the only one who’s thought about this.”

Tally hadn’t been paying much attention to the conversation, so he asked, “Thought about what?”

“Both of the guys directly in charge of us are named after weapons,” Tango answered, emphatically, raising his arm from behind his head to gesture as the door opened. “Maul, Shiv. I mean, if you ask me, it’s an omen.”

The two shinies scrambled to their feet while Castle and Husker both stood more leisurely, and it was right about then that Tally realized that, in all likelihood, one of the two named individuals had just walked into the room. He set down his datapad and got to his feet as the rest scrambled to follow, caught off guard.

Scratch that. They had both walked in.

Maul eyed Tango, head tilted a little bit. “What if I was named for the verb?” he asked, with a seriousness that could have been real or could have been deadpan humor; it was impossible to tell. Behind his shoulder, Shiv rubbed over his face, clearly failing in his effort not to grin.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tally could see the shinies staring wide-eyed. Maybe a little terrified. Tango, on the other hand, cleared his throat, face flushed. “Sorry, sir.”

“Technically, you’re still a noun, sir,” Tally pointed out, coming to his rescue.

Maul turned his attention to Tally next. “I am a noun, but the premise is that I was named for the noun. The entire argument falls apart if I was named for the verb.”

Someone – either Misty or Brody, they were standing close together – snorted a laugh.

“Were you named for the verb, sir?” Tango asked, more tentatively, still red-faced.

“I’m not sure. Perhaps.” Maul quirked his brow, then eyed Tally again. “I know you, don’t I?”

“Yes, sir. I tried to patch a hole in your side on Christophsis and you grabbed my wrist and told me you’d take care of it yourself.” Tally answered, just a little bit dryly. " Looks like you succeeded."

Maul gave a nod back, eyes narrowed a fraction, though it didn’t really look like anger. "I did. I thought I recognized your hair," he said, and Tally reached up and ran a hand back over the medic’s cross he’d had his hair shaved into, originally a joke and later surprisingly practical.

Then Maul turned to look at Shiv. “Shiv is both noun and verb, as well. Which were you named for?”

“Definitely the verb, sir,” Shiv answered, color rising on his cheeks. "It’s a– it’s a long story."

"I stand corrected," Tango said, sheepishly. “But it is kind of funny anyway.”

“It could still be an omen, if they’re both considered verbs,” Maul agreed, and this time, it was definitely dry, deadpan humor. Then he blinked as if he was remembering something and gestured. “Oh. As you were.”

The rest of the squad all slowly lowered themselves back into their seats just as Raze came through the door, stopping when he noticed he was the last man there. “–kriff. Sorry, sir; Sarge. What’d I
“A grammar debate,” Shiv said, a smile lurking on his mouth as he gestured. “Have a seat, Raze.”
Now

The briefing was going surprisingly well. There was nothing too specific to brief the squad on, just their mission parameters and why they had all been assembled, but as first meetings went, it was turning out– unexpectedly painless.

“I blow stuff up,” Raze said, grinning.

“I put it back together,” Castle added right on the heels.

“I make sure everyone’s intact to do both of those,” Tally put in.

The two new clones who didn’t have names had numbers so close together that Maul just designated them Six and Eight in his mind for now. Six said, nervously, “We aren’t specialized. I guess that means we’re the distraction while you guys get to blow stuff up or put it together?”

They went around the table; Tango was a pilot, Brody was trained in computers, Husker and Shiv were both more widely trained in extreme environments than the others, Smarty apparently had taken a particular interest in self-studying cultures and customs in his free time and Misty was an aquatics expert.

Even Maul had to admit that covered just about everything a well rounded group of soldiers would need in the field, and they would inevitably gain more skills with more experience. Completely despite his absolute reluctance to have anything to do with this leadership business, he caught himself plotting to teach them teräs käsi as he listened to them.

When he realized he was doing that, he internally cursed Obi-Wan again.

“What about you, Lieu?” Raze asked, and it took Maul a moment to realize that was actually short for lieutenant. “What are you specialized in?”

He opened his mouth to answer and–

Earlier

“I have a briefing in two hours and I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Bail Organa looked back in his small blue holographic form, and even in miniature, Maul could see the amusement on his face. But it was either ask advice of him or ask advice of Obi-Wan, and frankly, Maul would be damned before he would give Obi-Wan that satisfaction, since he’d
orchestrated this business in the first place.

So, after pacing around the general’s quarters for a solid half-hour, trying to picture even talking to these troops, Maul had called Bail, who took being woken up an hour earlier than he would have otherwise with admirable patience.

“I– okay, which part of this is giving you trouble?” Bail asked, eyebrows wavering a little, once he was done scrubbing at his face, doubtless trying to finish waking up.

“All of it.” Maul gestured, frustrated, and barely managed to keep himself from pacing again. “I’ve never done this before. I don’t know what to say, I don’t know how to act, I don’t even know how I’m supposed to greet them, yet I’m expected to be in charge? This is–” He paused and squinted. “Are you laughing?”

Bail had one of his hands over his face and his shoulders were shaking. Completely ignorant of – or intentionally ignoring – the glare that he was getting, he laughed for perhaps twenty seconds before shaking his head with a breath out. “It’s just– I’m talking to a former Sith Lord with a fear of public speaking. I can’t say I expected to start my morning like that.”

“Bail.” That came out a little more pathetic than Maul had meant it to.

“Listen,” Bail said, taking another breath and smiling some, one of his fond looks, “I’m going to give you the most trite, cliché piece of advice there is, but in your case, I actually mean it. Okay? Go, and be yourself.”

“Be myself,” Maul said, flatly. “Which self are you suggesting I be? The one who’s been a prisoner for a third of my life, the one who knows a way to kill almost every sentient in at least one fashion, the one who has no military or proper leadership experience?”

“All of the above,” Bail answered, shaking his head, holding his hand up to tick off his fingers. “And don’t forget blunt, stubborn, funny, loyal and clever.”

Maul crossed his arms. “Flattery doesn’t solve this problem.”

“Maul, you know me. I don’t flatter.” Bail shook his head again. “Just– trust me on this one. We went through hell together, I know what I’m talking about. Take my really cliché advice and go be your blunt, stubborn, funny, loyal, clever, inexperienced and deadly self.”

“If this goes horribly wrong–”

“Then you have my permission to call Breha and tell her about my bad advice.”

Maul eyed Bail; that was a pretty undeniable vote of confidence. “Fine. Thank you.”

Now Again

—Stealth. Infiltration. Mechanics. Hand-to-hand and bladed combat. Wilderness survival. Explosives. I know of at least one way to kill almost every species of sentient in our known galaxy, but more often several.” Maul said, more aware of the eleven sets of eyes trained on him than he really wanted to be. He drummed his fingers lightly against the table’s surface, leaned back in the chair. “What I don’t specialize in is military protocol and I have very limited experience in working
Six and Eight were staring with their jaws dropped. Tango was, as well. Raze—Raze was grinning in a manner which one might consider disturbing.

“You’re—a Jedi?” Brody asked, tentatively, sounding like he was fairly sure that the answer was exactly the opposite of that.

“I’m under their banner, but no.” Even Maul had to smirk just a little there. “I’m something else entirely.”

A glance at the chronometer told him they had been there for the allotted half-hour, so Maul dismissed them, but not before telling them all to meet him in one of the training rooms in the early afternoon, an hour after lunch. He figured that they would be deployed for training soon enough, so he might as well make use of the time here to start teaching them what he knew, in the hopes he might learn what he didn’t at the same time.

“Not bad, sir,” Shiv said, lingering; even just in the past two days, he had proven himself an invaluable second-in-command, and much like Maul had with Bail, he had decided he liked Shiv almost instantly.

On the other side of the door, just before it closed, Tango was saying, “Definitely an omen, boys. We’re in trouble.”

Raze answered, “Are you kidding? This is going to be great.”

Maul tipped his head back to look at his sergeant standing there. “We’ll see about that.”
She carried herself differently, from the last time they had crossed paths.

It was a subtle enough difference, but a difference nonetheless. Maul wasn’t sure what to make of it, but it was enough that he mentally noted it when Ahsoka Tano, padawan of Anakin Skywalker, decided to slip into the training room where he was currently teaching his squad their first lessons in *teräs käsi*.

He didn’t intend to interrupt his lessons, though he shook his head to himself and chewed down a grin when Raze – who Maul had quickly figured out was the most easily distracted clone he had under his still quite new command – completely broke form to see who had come in. Tango followed suit, followed by Misty, and by the end, the only two who didn’t turn around were Six and Eight, likely because they were fresh out of Kamino and therefore freshly indoctrinated to military protocol.

(Maul was still figuring out how to get them to *not* be terrified of him. He was hoping this would help.)

“Need something, Commander?” Shiv asked, brow furrowing in confusion, which saved Maul from having to ask himself.

Tano chewed her lip briefly, looking for all the world like she didn’t know whether she should be standing upon her rank – she was currently the highest rank in the room, which struck Maul as downright bizarre given her age – or whether she should defer to the squad she was interrupting. “No, I just—” She shook her head, then gave them a bit of a rueful smile. “I was curious, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“If you’re looking to learn,” Maul cut in, folding his hands behind his back, “then form up.” A beat. “Commander.”

It wasn’t mocking; he had no desire to cut the girl down. But it was pointed; he certainly wasn’t going to defer to her authority, either, especially in his training room and with his squad. If she wished to learn, then so be it; in the military, she ranked him, but in *teräs käsi*, he was a master.

He had to give her credit, because she didn’t try to push the issue, just squared her shoulders and then nodded and stepped over to stand next to Brody, the brief hesitation of before gone in favor of what looked to be still-new confidence. “Yes, Lieutenant.”

Maul asked Shiv to go and catch her up, and then just resumed his lesson like he *wasn’t* walking all over Skywalker’s toes, even though he was so very aware that he *was*.

Unsurprisingly, that made the lesson much more satisfying.
There were several reasons why Maul wanted to teach his squad teräs käsi. One of those was, of course, the various Sith pretenders running about. Dooku and Ventress both would have no issue with cutting down clones, and Maul wasn’t about to let the likes of such trash cut down these clones.

(For the sixty-eighth time in just shy of two weeks, he cursed Obi-Wan in his mind. Because Obi-Wan knew. He knew Maul wouldn’t be able to resist taking charge of this squad because he wouldn’t be able to resist teaching them all kinds of things that the Jedi Council would have tooka kits over.)

Anyway, that was the second reason. To score one on the Council. Training a bunch of non-Force sensitive clones in how to take down Force sensitives was a subtle defiance, but Maul would take it.

A third reason was that teräs käsi was a very inwardly focused discipline. It involved knowing oneself and knowing how to use oneself, in body and in spirit; the squad could only benefit from such things. Maul could already see that Raze -- if he could just focus long enough -- was going to excel at it once he had the foundation work done, and Shiv was also likely to do the same; the others were less certain, but all of them could gain something from the learning. A master of it could even control their autonomic functions to some degree; while it would take some years for them to become masters of it, there was plenty to be gained for the practice, including learning meditation, mindfulness and how to shield their minds from Force users and other interference.

A fourth was that a master of teräs käsi could prolong their own lifespan and health several fold beyond the mean natural. And for beings whose clocks were artificially fast, that could give them something that the GAR, the Republic and Kamino wouldn’t: Lives after the war.

Maul wasn’t altruistic, but once he decided he had liked them, this unlikely lot of eleven clones that he was going to be in charge of -- (there was the sixty-ninth curse) -- the realization of their status became important in a way it hadn’t been to him before.

There were other reasons, too. Practical or otherwise. But those four were the serious ones.

Tano turned out to be something of a natural at it; her thin, whipcord frame benefited her in many ways, whereas the clones were bulkier and had to work harder to control themselves for the more delicate moves. More, though, her Jedi training gave her a strong advantage; teräs käsi may have been created to fight Jedi, but to fight something effectively, you had to know it and understand it and then build on that foundation. There was a reason why Maul knew all of the traditional Jedi lightsaber forms, instead of simply focusing on one or two.

Once she was caught up, she fell right in with the current lessons, expression intent and focused. Maul wondered, a little, what she was trying to prove and to whom; desire to learn simply to learn existed, but she didn’t seem the type to pick up a new martial art just to know it.

Once the lesson was over -- Raze was already trying to figure out how to weaponize meditation, of all things, discussing it with animated hands on the way out the door with a very bemused Tally, leaving Maul to stare after them and wonder for the umpteenth time just what he had gotten into with this -- Tano lingered behind.
Maul wasn’t very surprised by that. “Your master doesn’t know you’re here,” he said, because that much was a certainty.

Tano shook her head, smirking a little bit, though her shrug seemed both sheepish and guilty. “He’s busy, and I’ve already done all of my lightsaber drills.”

“What were you working on?” He remembered she had been on Niman, but that might as well have been a lifetime ago. It felt like it for him; he thought it probable that it felt like it for her, as well.

“Ataru,” Tano answered, flashing a quick (and apologetic?) grin before turning and heading for the door. “Maybe with that, some Niman and some teräs käsi, I might almost know what Juyo’s like.”

"I thought you wanted to learn Jar’Kai," Maul said, after a moment, not liking how that statement made him feel. It wasn't anger, but whatever it was, it also wasn't pleasant.

Tano stopped and half turned back; somehow, the girl managed to look both oddly confident and equally fragile, in profile. Not for the first time, her age -- fourteen? Perhaps fifteen? -- struck Maul, though he wasn't sure why. He had already been neck deep in lightsaber combat techniques by then, facing off against assassin droids and his own Master, and he was fairly sure the only reason he didn't have more scars from it was because his Master had been content with inflicting pain and that permanently maiming Maul would have been counterproductive.

Somehow, she seemed younger. Maybe it was how Jedi raised their apprentices.

"I asked Master Obi-Wan, after Christophsis. He said you were master of three forms and at least knight level on all of the rest of them." Tano chewed her bottom lip, another of those nervous ticks, then turned back to face him fully. "You were only seven years older than me, when you did that, but I was just working on first level Niman last time we talked."

Maul thought he could see where she was going with this, even if she was attempting to land on it from an elliptical orbit. Her proficiency in lightsaber combat was, though, none of his business; that was her master's job to teach her.

But there was something else which whispered -- the Force or just some echo of who he used to be, when he could walk into any combat situation with nothing but a blade and know he would walk back out because he had been that good -- keeping him from throwing her out of his training room. Some combination of Kilindi Matako's bright personality paired with incredible competence and his own late teenage years, where the one place he belonged to himself was with a blade in his hand.

"I've only just gotten back the right to carry a saber," Maul said, folding his hands behind his back again. "Training you behind your master's back would likely see that right taken away again, if I'm caught. It's his job to teach you these things; why are you asking me?"

Tano started; she probably hadn't thought he could guess what she had actually come here for. Though he didn't doubt she would also learn teräs käsi. But she didn't flinch away, even if she looked guilty, as she said, "My Master is a good teacher, but lightsaber training is mostly deflection practice and basic forms these days. Which I guess makes perfect sense, since we're mostly dealing with tinnies, but if I want to become more than proficient at dueling, I'm either going to have to wait until the war ends, or seek out a teacher who is willing to teach despite the war."

Maul raised a brow. "And you think I am."

"I think you might be." Tano fidgeted yet again, then looked down for a moment, clearly thinking. When she looked back up, there was something-- sly? on her face, and a smirk on her mouth. "I
think you really like knowing you can score points on him. But if that's not good enough, I have something else to make it worth your time."

Completely despite all of his better judgement, Maul asked, "And that is?"

Tano bit her lip again and then grinned, enthusiastic rebellion in skinny teenage form. "I might know when your squad's first training mission is going to happen. And I might know where. And I might know the parameters and who you'll be up against."

Maul was not particularly talkative. Nor was he given to saying more words if fewer could be used. He struggled with knowing which ones to use, and sometimes even to speak them when he did know them, but that wasn't the same thing as actually being knocked speechless.

Yet, Ahsoka Tano had managed to do just that.

His being knocked speechless must have shown on his face because her grin broadened further and her brows went up in a look between imploring and barely-contained glee as she rushed on, "Okay, I know what you're going to say, but it's just a training mission. And we're all part of the same army. And your squad is going to be infiltration and covert ops, so that means subterfuge and knowing how to get informants, right? How to get people on the inside? So, consider me your person on the inside. You train me in dueling as compensation, your squad gets valuable experience, you get to score all kinds of points on Skyguy without anyone getting hurt; it's a win for everyone. Except maybe my master, but he wins other things all the time."

He wasn't sure whether it was her audacity, her nerve, her ridiculous amount of enthusiastic glee, the madness of this proposal, but Maul was sure that he hadn't laughed like that in a long time, startled right into it, something he was still learning fell under the definition of happiness.

"So..." Tano said, drawing it out, when he'd finally managed to get that back under control; something in her expression had softened. "Deal?"

Maul rubbed over his face one-handedly, and then jerked his chin towards the door, not quite able to smother a half-grin he was still wearing despite his best efforts. "I will think about it. If you come back tomorrow, I'll probably have an answer."

"Fair enough." She sketched a salute, then turned and headed out the door, a bounce in her step.

Maul did think about it.

By the time he was deep into contemplation of the whole thing, even the desire to stick it to Skywalker had become a peripheral (though not non-existent) factor in it.

He wasn't a master swordsman anymore. Even able to practice openly -- and he did, whenever he had any downtime which wasn't spent with Obi-Wan -- he was no where near what he had once been. It wasn't just the lack of practice; he no longer could ground the way he always had. These metal legs precluded it, and even though he was still strong in the Force, he was never going to be able to attain the sheer fluidity of movement that he'd once worked so hard to refine; he would never be able to re-attain the connection to the Force, the perfection of motion.
One of the more wretched and useful things that he took off of Zigoola was the acceptance that he would never know that kind of perfection again, but it didn't take away how much it still ached at the base of his throat when he thought of it. One of the more healing things he had taken off of Alderaan was having that loss acknowledged for what it was -- Orders or morals or Light or Dark aside, just for what it was -- but that didn't mean the pain of it had vanished entirely, only that the anger attached to it was finally gone instead of just buried deep.

He sat with elbows braced on unyielding knees, hands playing over the increasingly familiar hilt of his staff, the casing slowly gaining the inevitable signs of wear, marks to a story being told. He still didn't feel bonded to it the same way as he had his original, but as time wore on, it was becoming more a part of him; its living crystals sang a different song than the ones he had forged himself so long ago, but sometimes he could feel the resonance in his blood again.

Even now, practicing against droids or sparring with Obi-Wan, there were moments where he wished Obi-Wan had aimed higher. Even for all that he had gained since. Moments where the hurt in his chest was such that he didn't want to keep drawing air past it.

Yet, still he did. And inevitably he figured out how to breathe and to be again.

Tomorrow, he would tell Tano that he agreed. And they would work out some way to make it a learning experience for the Blackbirds, gaining that intelligence; it was a teaching exercise, after all, just handing them the intel would not gain them anything genuinely useful.

But tonight, he would let Obi-Wan drag him in and hold him, and he would listen to the man breathe, listen to his heartbeat through his chest, and give himself some time for the ache in his own to fade again.
Brody had learned a lot, in his time as a computer specialist.

For instance, there were more kinks than there were species in the galaxy. There was an entire HoloNet community dedicated to holo-manipulations of Jedi generals wearing either very little or nothing at all. (There was also a fiction section about them, but Brody knew some things were better left unexplored.) There were virtual sectors dedicated to everything from propaganda to conspiracy theories to love connections between Republic and Separatist beings.

Beyond that, he knew for a fact that Vice Admiral Dode had an account with the sector The Furry Lekku, which was devoted to amateur porn between wookiees and twi'leks. General Skywalker, despite being far better than most at covering his tracks on the information stream, had an account on a sector which tracked and discussed Outer Rim pod racing. The senator's aide from Galvoni liked to listen to the Mystery Series Broadcast weekly.

Brody had a bit more knowledge about the galaxy than many of his brothers just because of his specialty. And he was pretty damned good at slicing into difficult systems, if he did say so himself.

What he didn't expect was for his CO to ask him to do the nigh-on impossible.

"I need you to infiltrate the Jedi Temple's system," the Lieu said, gold eyes narrowed.

"--uh, can't we just ask General Kenobi?" Brody asked back, breaking into a cold sweat at the idea of trying to slice into that particular system.

"Not in this case. It's about our first training mission."

Brody blinked back. He's crazy, he thought, staring at the zabrak. Okay, so that wasn't the first time Brody had thought that, but he was pretty sure this proved it. "What-- what am I looking for, sir?"

Maul pulled out a piece of flimsi and set it down on the console. "These files, specifically."

"Where did you hear about this, sir?"

"I may have someone on the inside." Maul nudged the piece of flimsi over closer. Brody stared at it and felt the sweat run down his back. "Try not to get caught. It's no great loss if you can't get it, but I would be grateful."

Well, that took a little of the pressure off. Brody waited until he was alone again to pick up the flimsi. The Temple's system was a fortress, like the Temple itself was. He'd never done more than go to the public facing sector, which was bland and boring, but even then he could see the firewalls behind it. And kriff, getting caught--

He stared at the file names.

Looked like he would just have to be really careful not to get caught.

(He would be lying if he said he wasn't just a little bit intrigued.)
A few hours or so later, two decks away, General Obi-Wan Kenobi was watching his other-half sit in the middle of the floor with droid parts everywhere. He, himself, was not particularly mechanically inclined, but he knew Maul was quite adept as an engineer and mechanic both.

Still, this was the first time he had ever been witness to it in action.

"There must be a thousand parts here," he said, stepping incredibly carefully in order to make it past the minefield of them.

"Nine hundred and thirteen," Maul answered, looking both endearing and ridiculous with a pair of magnifying goggles on. When he looked up, eyes magnified to cartoon proportions, Obi-Wan had to bite hard on his inner lip to keep from busting out laughing. "If you want something useful to do, you can make me a tea," he said, adjusting the magnaspecs and then going back to his work.

"Yes, darling," Obi-Wan answered, like a well-pecked husband, knowing full well that Maul wouldn't get the joke as he turned around to go and make some tea. "What is that for, anyway?"

"It's a training droid. Or, it will be."

"For your squad?"

"Not quite. Could you make that black tea Bail sent and add some cream and honey?"

Obi-Wan rubbed over his beard, grinning broadly, and then did as he was asked. Perhaps later he could find out what the droid was going to be for. And if he had to excuse himself to slip out and laugh at the image of Maul in those magnaspecs in the meantime-- well, humor was scarce in war, Obi-Wan would take what he could get.

Onboard the Resolute, Ahsoka Tano was busy with her own bit of intrigue. She leaned against Hardwire's terminal, waving a datachip at him, smiling big and bright. "I just need these files inserted into the Jedi Temple system. It's part of another squad's training mission; their computer expert needs to practice his slicing," she said, which happened to be the truth.

What she didn't tell him was that it wasn't for one of the squads in the 501st. And she also didn't tell him that it was basically her playing double-agent for someone her Master really, really didn't like.

She had meant it, though; they were all on the same side. No harm would be done, except maybe a little to Skyguy's pride, and it wasn't like he couldn't use the occasional ding to that. Ahsoka thought highly of Anakin Skywalker, and every day she thought she understood how his mind worked just that little bit better, but she was still stung about how he had treated her between Christophsis and Bothawui, too.

And besides, she kind of was rooting for Maul and his Blackbirds. She knew what it was like to be underestimated.

"Do you have the access codes?" Hardwire asked, eyebrows drawing together.
"As a matter of fact," Ahsoka answered, smiling even bigger and brighter, canines showing, "I do."

Four decks away, on a very well-encrypted comm connection with his wife, Anakin remained oblivious to the fact that his credentials were being used to ruin the surprise training mission he had lobbied the Council hard to be able to design.

"You've got this, Brody, I believe in you," Misty said, yawning, with just enough ironic cheerleading to flavor the words, setting the cup of caf down next to Brody's hand fourteen hours later.

"Shut up," Brody muttered back, scrubbing at his bloodshot eyes with one hand. He had been excused from their regular training exercises and lessons in teräs käsi in order to keep working on slicing into the Temple's system, and while everyone -- including Maul and Shiv -- had told him to take a break and get some sleep, he had only managed an hour of that before inspiration drove him out of his bunk and back to his terminal.

Now, it was two hours to morning muster, and he was this close.

He took a sip of caf. Stared at the datastream; the evolving firewalls. The adaptive response programs.

Slowly -- with trembling fingers -- he reached out and tapped execute and watched his own program, custom build over the past not-quite-day, start seeking the way in.

There was a third of a completed droid on the floor, sitting next to a half-zabrak, who was laying sprawled out amongst scattered parts wholly asleep.

Obi-Wan had given up trying to drag Maul to bed some hours before, having been reduced to being Bringer of Tea and also Bringer of Headache Pills, both of which were not roles he minded playing, but in moderation. He discovered fairly quickly, though, that when Maul was intently working on something, moderation went out the viewport and thus he was stuck going to bed alone without his favorite body pillow and/or blanket.

Now, he just stood in his underwear, not very awake himself, and surveyed the scene; he sighed, too, knowing that Maul was going to be especially surly in a couple hours when he had to be up and moving, and that it was possible that this would keep happening until the mystery training droid was complete.

A couple hours in a proper bed wouldn't likely hurt anything, though, so with some use of the Force
-- to extract Maul from the scatter of parts -- and the rest of muscle, he hauled his other-half to bed, trying to mentally prepare for the coming day and (at the exact same time) put it off as long as possible.

Of course, any fleeting frustration Obi-Wan might have felt vanished entirely when Maul curled up against him; he just shook his head and smiled to himself, dragging the blankets up over them both.

It had taken Shiv very little time to figure out the best way to approach his new position as sergeant.

For as intimidating as Maul had first looked -- before he opened his mouth and sounded like a newscaster about to read the headlines, anyway -- he had not been kidding when he said he had no idea what he was doing. Since Shiv was sane, he found that to be an extremely worrisome declaration, because while he and all of his several hundred thousand brothers had been raised and trained to follow orders, and many of them followed the orders of actual children, you wanted to have some kind of confidence that your CO maybe hopefully knew what the hell was going on and how to deal with it.

What he had expected was gross incompetence. What he got was a mix between a complete lack of military knowledge and a truly terrifying amount of hypercompetence in a lot of things, up to and including many, many methods to slaughter people in sometimes wildly creative ways.

Maul's saving grace wasn't in his rather startling ability to name sixteen ways to kill Rodians with his bare hands without blinking once, though. It was his complete lack of pretentiousness.

When Shiv made a suggestion, Maul listened. If any of them made a suggestion, and it was something they knew that Maul didn't, Maul listened. Then he went one better: He learned from it. In those areas where he was the best authority, he commanded just fine; when he wasn't, he paid close attention and while he didn't defer his command, he was perfectly willing to step aside and encourage someone else to show their skills.

So, Shiv found himself in the position of teacher as much as he did sergeant (and sometimes student), which suited fine. And even just over a number of weeks, he watched the squad get more and more cohesive and comfortable with that dynamic.

But the best approach was actually much more simple: A quick sense of humor and the durasteel balls necessary to deploy it.

"Someone woke up on the wrong side of their plug-in station," he observed, when Maul made it into the briefing room that had become the unofficial headquarters for the squad. The fact that Maul's cybernetics didn't require it didn't matter; the quip was too good to pass up.

"I know of thirty-six separate ways to kill humans without so much as a knife in hand," Maul answered right back, without missing a beat, voice calm and utterly at odds with the fact he looked like death warmed over, squinting and bleary-eyed and wearing a rumpled shirt.

Shiv snorted, moving over to the caf-maker that someone 'liberated' from the galley only a week into their time as a squad, recognizing a caffeine withdrawal headache when he saw one. "Maybe when you're awake, you'll remember a dozen more, sir."
"Maybe. Maybe even two dozen," Maul said, archly, though without any heat. For being a very adept murdering half-machine, though, he looked less dangerous than the average tooka when he sat down and put his forehead down on his arm, braced on the briefing room table.

Shiv smiled to himself, just shaking his head as he brought over the fresh cup of caf and set it in Maul's reach. He was just about to make another -- likely far softer -- comment when Brody came in the door, doing a very fine impression of their lieutenant, right down to the rumpled black shirt and bleary expression.

"I did it," Brody said, holding up the datachip; for as bad as he looked, he sure sounded proud.

Shiv wasn't sure exactly what Brody had been working on, only that it had been Maul who had put him to it. He blinked, looking between them.

"Very good," Maul said, sitting up, a smirk on his face and a wicked glint in his eyes. "Very good."

Shiv was, in a perfectly understandable manner, suddenly very grateful that Maul was on their side.
"Okay. The good news is, I got in, I got out, I have the files, I have the bumper sticker for whatever ship we eventually get assigned and I didn't get caught." Brody paused, presumably for dramatic effect, then continued, "The bad news is, they're bio-locked."

Nine of them groaned. Maul didn't, and Shiv managed to refrain, but he had to work pretty hard to cut that one off in his throat.

Biometrics were standard procedure on high level classified information; they were incredibly hard to fake and that required access to levels of technology that a squad of clones, even black-ops clones, didn't routinely have. At least not in full. And that meant that the only way they were going to be able to do it would be by actually obtaining each 'key' to the bio-lock and doing it within a very strict timeframe; each key had to be input in order, in a set amount of time, or the files would not only lock themselves again, but the bio-lock programming would also note and log every attempt. If they also happened to contain coding to send the log to the originator, well--

That meant none of them wanted to ask the next question, so Shiv sucked it up and did it. "Who's it bio-locked to?"

Brody set the chip down and winced. "General Skywalker."

This time, they all groaned, absent Maul.

Maul seemed more contemplative than irritated; while the caf hadn't done much for the fact he still looked sleep-deprived and rumpled, Shiv had to give him credit on his ability to at least sound like he was as fresh as an Alderaanian daisy. "The way I see it is this," he said, leaning forward and folding his hands on the table, resting on his elbows and taking them all in, "we can continue on as we have been, training for any eventuality and simply go on this mission as we're intended to without any foreknowledge." A beat. "Or we can stick it to Skywalker, crack his files, get his plans and then possibly humiliate him. We just need to decide which option to take."

"Are you asking for a vote, sir?" Misty asked, tentatively, after a long moment of anticipatory silence.

Maul looked back at him like he was surprised that was even a question. "Of course I am. This isn't a requirement and I most certainly can't do it myself--" Shiv woulda bet that Maul would have just for the fun of it if he could have, though. "--which means we would need to do it as a team, and if you don't want to, then so be it. This isn't some-- some objective from higher up."

Silence fell again, no small part incredulous, especially among the younger clones. Raze, Six and Eight were staring at Maul with lovelights in their eyes, which was probably the first time Shiv had ever seen their shinies look at him like he was about to eat them. Tally's eyebrow was trying to climb off of his forehead. Even Husker and Castle had both sat up straighter.

Maul glanced around at them with brows up. "So, yes? No?"

It was a very unanimous and largely enthusiastic yes.
"You look-- about as well as expected, I suppose," Obi-Wan said, from where he was sitting on the small couch in their quarters, sipping tea and reading the night's reports. Maul had come back in order to get himself a shower and a fresh set of clothes, since he had woken up to his alarm, then made the undeniable mistake of closing his eyes again for a few moments, only to wake up again with three minutes to get to the briefing room.

Obi-Wan wasn't due to the bridge or briefings for another hour; rare was his chance to catch his breath, but Maul was pleased he was taking it.

"I'm fine," Maul said, gesturing vaguely. "I do need something, though."

A look of surprise crossed Obi-Wan's face and he sat up straighter, something lighting up in his eyes. It was only when he did that, that Maul realized how-- very few times he had ever actually asked the man for anything. Or asked anyone for anything. He furrowed his brow at himself at the thought, then shook it off; something to think about later, if he needed to think about it at all. "Name it," Obi-Wan said, almost eagerly.

There was a moment there where Maul felt a nervous jolt, like the anticipation of a blow. He was so caught off guard by that feeling that it took a moment for him to answer, "LiMerge's files. I don't need the whole database, just copies of my old droid programming files."

His Master had scrubbed the system before Maul had been broken, but Maul had kept his own backups, and when the Jedi took LiMerge, they copied everything they could get their hands on. In retrospect, keeping those backups had been a childish whimsy; he had thought, at the time, that he would someday be good enough to put such information to use, perhaps when given more freedom. Now he knew he had been given only scraps, just enough to make him feel vaguely important, just enough to secret away like one buries treasure, hidden deep in the permanently embedded system files for the building's environmental controls, in the anticipation of mattering.

His programming had been his own, though; his training droids had been able to learn and adapt. Maul had rebuilt them so many times that he could have done it asleep, and they kept him on his toes even after he was thoroughly proficient at lightsaber combat.

Sometimes, even now, he missed them. Missed his bike. Missed his Scimitar, the first real symbol that he was worth anything to his Master; even after he knew better, though, he remembered her with affection.

Droids, a bike, a ship; the only things in his life then which bore him no malice.

Obi-Wan cast a glance to where the training droid Maul had been working on was, still in its scatter of parts. Then realization dawned in his eyes; Maul didn't correct his assumption, though he would if asked directly. "I can get those for you," he said, something a little more solemn in his voice. He doubtless thought the droid was for Maul.

Maul was delaying letting Obi-Wan find out that it was for Tano; while it was inevitable, he had a feeling he might end up being the one sleeping on the couch then.
Problem was, Husker liked General Skywalker.

He'd been with the 501st; he knew and followed the man into battle and even interacted personally with him. He also respected the hell out of Rex, but who didn't? He even thought Tano was pretty sparky, with loads of potential.

So, the idea of acting against his former legion was one that didn't sit quite right.

Though-- it didn't sit quite wrong, either. Especially when he saw the brightness in his brothers' eyes here. He had never been given a say in a mission to that degree, let alone a vote, before Maul had offered that out on the table. Like they weren't grunts. Like they were people. Like it didn't even cross the Lieu's mind that they were just clones and shouldn't be having opinions on things, like the missions they accepted.

He held his peace even when they were brainstorming at the briefing table. Of all of them, he was the one who could most easily get in, get some part of the information and get back out, but first he had to reconcile how he was feeling about the whole thing. Because it was one thing to be given a vote, but it was another to actively take part in going against your former CO, especially when you respected them.

Despite popular belief, Husker hadn't ever been approached for sergeant in the Blackbirds. That had always been Shiv, and even after only weeks, it was perfectly clear why; when there was something Maul didn't know, he automatically looked to Shiv, and when Shiv stepped in, he never stepped on the lieutenant's mechanical toes to do it. Tally formed the third part of their command structure, and between the three of them, things were settling steadily into cohesion and they were gaining momentum.

Husker thought sometimes they were as much shield for their Lieu as a bridge to the rest of the GAR, too. He'd sure been in combat long enough to know what damaged looked like. And despite himself, he found himself kind of wanting to be a little bit of the same.

"The synthskin will match the prints, that's not the problem. And we can probably piece together the voice recognition. It's the retinal scan and the DNA that we're going to have a hard time with," Tally was saying, leaning on the counter with his arms crossed. Husker realized, as he sat there looking around at them, that they were all dressed in fatigues, except for him and their shinies. When he did, he snorted. "Thinking something, Husk?" Tally asked.

The snort hadn't been related, but maybe-- well, maybe it actually was. In a round-about way. Husker felt the entire group focus on him and after one more moment wrestling, he said, "I think I can get one of those. Maybe both of 'em."

It would just involve convincing General Skywalker that he was a turncoat while being a turncoat.

Shiv looked up and a grin cut across his mouth. "You've got a plan?"

Husker hated talking; doing so for long periods made his throat ache. So, he tried to be as expedient as possible. "If you haven't noticed, those two can't stand each other. If I happen to slip over to the 501st for some sympathy, the general probably wouldn't be able to resist the bait. And if I happen to bring some unbranded shinies--" he nodded to Six and Eight "--testing new tactical binoculars..."

Six and Eight both looked at him wide-eyed. Along with Raze, they were the youngest in the room, so what better way to make use of that than by just sliding them right into the 501st for a short mission? New shinies came from Kamino all of the time. No one would look twice.
"Kriffing brilliant," Brody said, then barked a laugh. "I can program them to backscan on the calibration sequence and he'd never even notice!"

"What about the DNA?" Tally asked; he looked a little skeptical, but not dismissive. "We need more than just a few skin cells. We need quite a number of samples to piece together enough to fool the print lock."

It was right around then Maul walked in, and then paused inside of the door; Six and Eight jumped to their feet, but the rest of the squad paused right on the edge of doing so. "At ease," the Lieu said, automatically, since this exact scene had played out a couple dozen times now. When everyone relaxed again, he looked around at them. "I'm guessing you've been planning?"

"Yes, sir," Shiv answered, leaning way back in his chair and folding his hands across his midsection, grinning broadly. "I think you're gonna like it."

He was absolutely correct.

"I need alcohol," Maul said. "A-- case. Or two? Could you get me that?"

Bail tilted his head, looking back in bemusement. "Having a party?" he asked, his eyebrow going up, though he didn't sound reluctant.

Maul gestured, then crossed his arms again, shaking his head. "Not quite. It's for a mission. If you sent it, could you make it so that it wouldn't be confiscated? Or noticed? And how long would it take?"

"A mission? And yeah, I could, and I think post is two weeks currently. But I can probably have it put into a priority shipment to the nearest base and get it to you in two or three days, if you can get off of the Negotiator to pick it up."

This plan was getting more complex by the minute, but time was certainly of the essence. Even for as often as Kenobi and Skywalker were deployed together, it was possible for things to change at a moment's notice, too. And they were going to be sent on that training mission in three weeks. That gave Maul and his squad fifteen days to crack the files, assess the situation, specialize their training and then go out there and hopefully humiliate Skywalker's intentions, because Maul was absolutely sure Skywalker intended for them to be the ones who were coming back in shame.

The fact that he could just look at the files now didn't bear any consideration, not if this was going to be a shared triumph with his squad.

"Our first training mission is-- soon. Skywalker's planning. We've acquired the coded files detailing it, but we need to break the bio-locks. Thus, the alcohol will-- undoubtedly help. I hope," he finally answered. "I can get off of the Negotiator, so yes, let's do it that way."

"All right." Bail nodded back, seriously, then his expression turned distinctly concerned. "Hey, are you okay?"

Maul had never figured out his own transparency issues, which had become clear before Zigoola and seemed to be continuing long past it, but with Bail -- sometimes even more easily than with Obi-Wan
-- he was able to accept it without too much frustration. "I like them," he just said, not knowing how else to say it.

Bail didn't answer aloud; didn't give back any platitudes or empty words. Just nodded, something solemn reflecting in his own eyes, visible even in hologram form. "I'll send two cases of something that won't arouse too much suspicion and shortburst you the coordinates on your comm. Keep me updated?" he asked, after a few moments of mutual silence.

"I will," Maul said, nodding back, unsurprised by his own gratitude and affection for the man he was talking to. "Thank you, Bail."

"Anytime. And I mean that." Bail pointed, then grinned some. "Happy hunting, Lieutenant."
The Great Double-Cross Planted Information Heist, Part 3

The beauty of building a droid from parts on up was that no one else had come before you.

EL-10's programming was Maul's entire; his own droids in the Works had not been given any personality programming, but he had automatically backed them up every time before a training session and had shielded their processors, and thus had copies in case they were damaged badly enough to require the data to be reloaded. Because of that, they had certainly become very good at their primary purpose, which was to try to kill him in creative and unexpected ways. Maul double-checked all of the files Obi-Wan had retrieved for him, and even after a decade and some months of imprisonment, he found the lines of coding intimately familiar.

His own work, from long ago. He had been proud of that then, and he was surprised that he could find the same pride in it now.

EL-10 wasn't going to be nearly as lethal as Chain or Hammer or any of Maul's others. Its specialty was going to be combat, but he didn't want to see Ahsoka Tano maimed; Jedi didn't send their apprentices up against homicidal droids with no safety measures, and she would be at a distinct disadvantage. The point was to teach her dueling, not watch her get slaughtered by something that had the programming which had challenged Maul at his prime. It wasn't pride (all right, maybe it was a little bit) that made Maul think that few current Jedi would be able to face off against the droid and survive, if safeties were disabled.

Gathering the parts hadn't been too difficult. The most important thing was making sure EL-10 was going to have the maneuverability and speed to match a lightsaber duelist, and the shielding necessary to survive a strike. Though, as she became more proficient, Tano was probably going to have to learn how to repair it, as well. And while EL-10 didn't have the Force, it would have years of prior experience against a Force-sensitive lightsaber duelist to draw on.

He had finished the droid in two days, and now he was working out its final programming on a shuttle to a supply depot to pick up alcohol.

Shiv was riding along with him; of all of the Blackbirds, only he and Tally knew Maul was still prisoner to the Order, and it was less suspicious if they both went together. It certainly helped that Obi-Wan never held his leash and would approve whatever ventures Maul wanted to undertake (and had, though he had been curious and it was only fortuitous timing which prevented Maul having to explain), but he was still logged and flagged wherever he went in Republic space or on Republic ships.

Even if no one bothered to look at those logs, they were there. The logging was passive, so it wouldn't likely interfere with missions, but it was something Maul never really lost sight of, either.

"Droid programming?" Shiv asked, leaning over a little on the sturdy bench seat. The back of the cargo carrier was bare bones and empty right now, but it was likely to be thoroughly uncomfortable on the ride back.

Maul handed over the datapad, though he didn't know if Shiv understood the programming language enough to make sense of what it said. "If an unconventional sort. Half mine, half the experience of a dozen training droids long destroyed." His master never would have allowed them to continue to exist; out of anger if nothing else, they were doubtless scrapped.

Shiv looked over the screen, then handed it back. "Lookin' for a sparring partner, sir?"
"No, it's for Tano." Maul scrolled through to where he was working. "I'm not sure whether I should add in any personality programming, though."

"Hm," Shiv said, crossing his arms as well as his armor allowed for. "Maybe a base one and potential for growth?"

"Why?"

It was an open question; Maul wasn't looking for any specific answer, just Shiv's thoughts behind why he gave that particular one. Thus far, Shiv had proven to be level-headed and level-hearted, and while it was strange for Maul to have a sounding board for his own thoughts, he found it came more naturally than he might have expected it to. Shiv made a considered noise, head tilted over, then said, "If you want what my official answer would be if asked, I'd say it's because an adaptive personality makes a droid learn more effectively. But if you want my actual answer--" He shrugged. "--she's young. She's got a lot of responsibility and a lot of expectations pinned on her, and maybe could use another friend."

Shiv was technically younger than Tano, but there seemed little point in saying that; he carried himself as grown and had a certain level of maturity even many of the other clones lacked. For that matter, he seemed to be considerably more at ease with other people than Maul was, and thus there had been several times already when Maul had looked to his sergeant for cues on how to act.

It was that thought which had Maul nod back and turn back to his programming; he could dig through the various basic personality programs that came pre-installed on most droids that interacted with people and see if he could cobble a custom one together.

He happened to have an excellent example of the kind of personality he thought would do well by Tano sitting next to him.

The station's quartermaster hadn't given them any trouble over their picking up the crates, though he had been curious. "A priority shipment from a senator?" he had asked, eyebrows up, when Maul transferred the pickup order. He wasn't sure how to even reply to that, so he was relieved when Shiv did it for him. "Classified," Shiv had said, which was being quite selective, though he had given the other clone one of those commiserating looks that Maul had often seen exchanged between the troops.

The quartermaster nodded, mouth in an understanding line, and then ticked off that it had been logged out. Just that easily.

The crates were heavy; they were also extremely well packed. Maul wouldn't have guessed they contained bottles of whatever alcohol Bail had sent even on picking one up.

They were lucky enough not to run into Obi-Wan on the way between the hangar and their briefing room, absconding with their contraband, and once they were inside and the door was locked, Raze was already on the crates and using a multitool to pry them open.

Briefing Room 3 had become their unofficial staging point for everything; it helped that Obi-Wan tacitly approved it and thus, no one else was ever scheduled to use it. It was small, relatively, but it was fairly central to everything they needed and Brody had perhaps done a little work slicing into the
Negotiator's systems to make sure only the Blackbirds could come and go. Somehow, a caf maker had ended up on the counter within days of them 'claiming' the room, and now, there was a hot plate next to it. Maul didn't ask questions about any of it.

But having the room made it much easier to hide the contraband. Ranks of bottles gleamed inside of their hollow-foam packing.

"--well, hello," Misty said, with a whistle.

Tally pulled one of the bottles out, eying it over. "Not swill, but not pricey. Good choice."

Everything Maul knew of alcohol was down to some rum on Iloh and the wine from House Organa's vineyard, so he was even less knowledgeable in the subject than some of his troops. And certainly less so than Bail was. "The sort that would not arouse too much suspicion about its origins?" he asked.

"Exactly the sort," Tally said, smirking.

The thing about Skywalker was-- well, Maul couldn't stand him.

He had been indifferent towards Obi-Wan's padawan, absent some vague and ill-defined annoyance, all the way up until he was actually exposed to the so-called Chosen One. Typically, increased exposure to people could lead Maul one of two ways: Either he would grow to at least tolerate them (or perhaps even like them, and in one or a few cases, more than like), or he would grow to find them the opposite. Skywalker had started out mildly irritating, but between his enmity on Christophsis and then his actions on the heels of the separatist bombing that had hurt Obi-Wan, he had firmly placed himself into the intolerable camp.

Maul still didn't regret pinning Skywalker to the wall by his throat; if Vokara Che had not intervened, he also wouldn't have regretted choking the Jedi unconscious and perhaps beating his limp form off of the walls a dozen or two times.

But while Maul quite disliked him, the time imprisoned had greatly humbled his tendency to underestimate opponents. While he thought Skywalker was arrogant and sometimes reckless, there was one place where Maul had a grudging respect for the man, and that was in how Skywalker treated his clones. Some of the Jedi, it seemed, viewed the troops as little better than battledroids, and Skywalker wasn't one of those.

Maul himself bore no good nor ill will towards the Grand Army as an organization; it didn't much matter to him. He didn't really care much about the Republic, either, except insofar as he cared about Bail and Breha Organa. He didn't agonize over dead troops, be they clone or not, but a lifetime spent largely as a nonentity meant he understood, deeply and fundamentally, what it was to be a weapon and tool. That Skywalker treated his men as people with their own minds and thoughts and feelings wasn't lost on Maul, whatever else he felt about the man.

In this case, it was something which he was counting on.

Tally had been playing a very high stakes game of sabacc for the downtime of the past day over on the Resolute, there under the guise of conferring and training with his fellow medics, and the alcohol
which Maul and Shiv had retrieved the day before happened to be his closing bet. According to Castle, who had donned some unmarked armor and was in the audience, Tally was doing a brilliant job at looking like he wasn't trying to lose.

That just left getting the rest of the pieces in play. Maul eyed his squad, absent Tally and Castle, arms crossed. "All right. Everyone knows the plan. Are you ready?"

Husker's armor still had the chipped blue paint of the 501st on it, whereas Six and Eight both wore the bright, clean, unscratched armor they had been issued with. Husker nodded. "Yes, sir. We'll hop a ride over with Commander Tano. Mingle. I bump into General Skywalker and act reluctantly disgruntled about this assignment, keeping his attention and recording as I go. Six and Eight do their thing, then we lay low until Misty, Raze, Smarty and Brody sneak over tonight with the payload after Tally loses the game."

"Most of the payload?" Tango asked, hopefully, holding up two bottles of the whiskey from the crate.

Maul thought probably they needed all they could get -- two cases was the maximum number he thought wouldn't arouse too much suspicion and he had no idea how much it would take to get various targets drunk -- but after a moment, he waved Tango off. "Most of the payload. But no one touches those if we fail."

Tango blinked in surprise, then flashed a sharp grin. "Yes, sir. Fair enough."

Most of this plan had been devised and was being implemented by the squad. It was the first time Maul had really gotten to see their potential for the work they had been assigned; the way they had taken what had been presented to them and then came up with a crack plan to see it happen, throwing ideas around a table until they had a workable, if unconventional, solution to it.

The hard part was that he couldn't be more directly involved himself. He was far too distinctive to make an appearance on the _Resolute_, either to help or to gloat, which meant that he and Shiv were going to have to wait and hope that the rest of the squad could pull off this mission from start to finish with only minimal input from them on the _Negotiator_.

It also meant trusting them not to get caught. If they were, there were going to be a lot of questions to answer and he-- really didn't want to know what Obi-Wan would do.

Then again, Obi-Wan had insisted on this squad's existence. They were doing what they had been tapped to do. One could hardly blame them for that.

After another moment, huffing a breath and trying not to think of all of the things that could go wrong, Maul nodded. "Very well."

"And good hunting," Shiv added, with a half-grin of his own.

Half of his squad was on their way to the-- not-enemy's ship. And most of the rest were either already there or waiting to be there. Shiv was catching a little sleep to make up for what was going to be a late night, and Maul supposed he probably should have gone and done the same. His nights over the last week had largely been spent working on EL-10, while his days had been spent training,
and sometimes in there he managed to make it to bed. Thanks to Obi-Wan, he always woke up there, at least.

Instead, he sat contemplating the droid in front of him. It wasn't particularly attractive; its armor plating was functional, rather than polished, and its joints were made for durability instead of streamlining. It had similar framework to an assassin droid and just as many photoreceptors, but configured such that it wouldn't be mistaken for the enemy without a second look. And really, Tano could likely customize its looks further if she so chose, to make it more-- hers.

The successor to Maul's droids; his companions and adversaries and teachers, all at once. Inside of EL-10's programming, hints to a thousand untold stories and unknowable hours of combat practice. The droid had the bare bones programming of two different personality templates woven together: a tutor and a companion. The new programming was encrypted and locked to a key only he and Tano would have; the lines of code originating with Maul's old droids were locked to him alone.

Sitting there looking at its slumped form, Maul wondered what his own droids might have said, had they ever been given voices and thoughts beyond combat.

He knotted his jaw, rubbed over his face and then he reached out and flicked the power switch that was currently coded to his prints, and later would be coded to Tano's, too.

In a soft whir, the droid straightened from its slump, photoreceptors lighting up blue. Even as different as this droid looked outwardly, Maul felt himself tense automatically when it focused its attention on him, ancient anticipation of an attack that would not come now unless he invited it.

"Hello, Lieutenant," it said, after a moment, doubtless having been accessing its recognition files.

It had a soft voice; higher pitched than his, no definable gender-expression, but the similar received pronunciation accent of the inner core worlds that Deenine had imparted upon Maul, likely without intending to, and none of the fussiness of a protocol droid.

Unbidden, he wondered how much of his own history, beyond the files, he had built into this droid without even realizing it at the time.

"Hello, EL-10. Will you tell me your purpose?" he answered, resting his elbows on his knees.

"I am programmed to be lightsaber combat instructor, sparring partner and companion to Commander Ahsoka Tano. I am to be her personal droid, outside of the ownership and authority of the Republic's armed forces. I am to answer to no one but her or yourself and I am to give no information to anyone else asking without prior approval."

Maul nodded; he hoped Tano kept that in mind when it came to where she kept and how she used EL-10. The last thing they needed was for the droid to be victim of mistaken identity. Or, for that matter, to be caught by Skywalker. "Do you understand your role as combat instructor?"

EL-10 took another long moment to answer; no surprise, given this was the droid's first activation with its full personality and programming enabled. "I am to unlock new levels and intensities of instruction and sparring only after she has become proficient with each prior."

Tano would likely chafe against that, but it made perfect sense to Maul. And unlike most Jedi, EL-10 was programmed with knowledge of all of the lightsaber forms, including Juyo. And, too, how to fight someone who used it.

"Good," Maul said, rising to his feet and picking up his saberstaff. "Take a moment to orient yourself, then we can spar."
"Yes, Lieutenant."

He wasn't sure the impulse; it wasn't to see if EL-10 was proficient, even if it also served that purpose. Nor was it to hone his own skills, though he was always seeking to do that.

But by the time EL-10 had him disarmed and pinned against the wall at the end of a training saber, having all but mopped the training room floor with him, he thought maybe it was a final salute to all of the droids that came before it.

Even though they were gone and he was broken, he was oddly glad that some part of them lived on, in their shared and untold stories.
Losing at sabacc was galling.

Tally had been playing cards from his first night off of Kamino. Stuffed in a troop transport with only enough elbow room to shift awkwardly, one of the NCOs in charge of them had apparently been stir crazy enough and bored enough to bring a deck, and they managed to barely clear enough space to get a game going. Tally had been cynical even as a shiny -- came with learning the projected statistics of the survival rates of his brothers -- and therefore had plunked himself into the circle without hesitation, even knowing he was going to lose. And he did lose the first couple games, but he’d picked it up fast and now, he was willing to put himself up against all but the professional gamblers who did this for a living.

He let the game seesaw back and forth between him gaining and then losing ground, pretending to be frustrated at the latter, and when the final bets came in, he was almost tempted to win since it would have gained him a whole box filled with contraband holos, some more risque than others. Instead, he made a subtle but critical error and ended up giving up two cases of perfectly good whiskey.

Fives was a little insufferable, but at least it was in a likable way.

"So, about my winnings...?" he asked, grinning as Tally got up, the latter throwing just enough disgruntled annoyance into his expression to make it look good.

"Tonight. I've got a shipment of supplies for trade with my counterparts to cover our gaps, I'll have it brought over then," Tally grumbled back, before stalking out of the room, catching Castle's wink on the way out the door.

Out of the Jedi that Husker had met, the only one who looked comfortable being in the middle of a galaxy-wide war was General Skywalker. He didn't seem stressed or exhausted, at least not anytime Husker had ever seen, just competent and quick-thinking and quick-acting. There was a change in his leadership style as time went on, a certain maturity he seemed to gain, but he never looked or acted uncomfortable. The general wore his confidence outwardly, not only in himself, but in his troops. It was one of several reasons why Husker liked him.

Another was how easily he mingled with his men.

He made it a point to use their names, to remember things about them. And his eyes lit up when he saw Husker making his way across the mess, occasionally stopping and visiting with his former mates and generally enjoying the chance to catch up with them. When the general came over with a genuine smile and a, "Hey, Husk. Did we get you back?" the smile that Husker returned was every bit as real.

"Ah-- no, sir," he answered, shaking his head. "Guess I was a little homesick, was all."

He didn't know why General Skywalker and Lieutenant Maul hated one another; far as Husker could tell, they didn't interact regularly. But he did know it, partly from scuttlebutt, partly just from
observation.

Therefore, General Skywalker's look of disdain came as no surprise. "Well, you're welcome back anytime," he said, clapping Husker on the back of the shoulder. "If you ever want transferred back over here, I'll find a way to make it happen."

"Admit it, sir, you just want me to strum some sappy love songs on my guitar for you," Husker joked back.

"You caught me," the general said, holding up his hands, pretending to reel back from an invisible blaster bolt. "No one plays the Ballad of the Theed Maiden like you do."

A voice drifted into earshot; Husker didn't turn to look, but he had to chew down a grin anyway.

"No, I'm telling you, the switch is..."

"--here, give me that, you're going to break it."

"Will not!"

General Skywalker leaned over to look around Husker, and it was only then that Husker turned himself. And right there, arguing over a new pair of tactical binoculars, dressed in their pristine white armor, were Six and Eight. The general gave Husker another pat on the shoulder and sidled past him, heading over there. "Hey, guys. What's the problem?"

Six and Eight did a fabulous impression of two baby shinies in the presence of a rapidly growing legend and straightened up, eyes wide. Either really good method acting or actual shiny enthusiasm, Husker thought, still wrestling with his mouth as he tried not to grin.

"It's-- it's these tactical binoculars, sir. They're a newer model than the ones we trained with," Six said, then elbowed his brother. "My brother thinks the button on the side is the calibration, but I think it's the magnification--"

Eight elbowed him back. "But we have to figure out how to turn them on first."

General Skywalker raised an eyebrow, but his expression remained good-natured. "Here, let me have a look," he said, and then took the binoculars. He pointed to the switch, "This is the power, and--" he lifted them to his eyes and flicked the button on the side. "--the one on the side is definitely the calibration." He looked through them for a moment, then offered them back. "I don't recognize you two; do you have names?"

"Not yet, sir," Eight said, giving back a sheepish grin as he took the binoculars. "Long as it isn't dead-eye, now."

"No dead-eye, then," the general said, with a scoff and a smile. "Welcome aboard, make yourselves at home."

"Yes, sir!" Six and Eight answered in unison, straightening up and all but beaming back.

"Got it," Tally said, as he checked the binoculars, smirking. He passed them around, and on the
heads up display was a perfect map of General Skywalker's retinas.

The clone known largely by the last number of his designation -- Six -- breathed out a sigh of relief, slumping against the wall of the janitorial supply closet. Among the idled mouse droids, the four of them were checking in with each other, and the fact that they had completed their objective was a rush of relief.

Or a high, given the way his batchmate punched the air, hissing, "Yes!"

When Six and Eight had been pulled from their squad, without any warning, it had made both of them nervous. They had originally been slated to join General Krell's company, but then they found themselves landing on the Negotiator, only to be confronted with a scary-enough looking CO to compete with Krell. The next several weeks found them learning a whole different method of hand-to-hand combat than what they had learned on Kamino, but it wasn't until they got an actual vote on this mission that, for the first time, they stopped expecting their Lieu to bite their heads off or something.

Of course, going all black ops on their own people was a bit of a surprise, but Six figured maybe that was the point: Practice against the safe people so they'd be more ready when it came time to be deployed into life-or-death situations.

He was still catching his breath, heart thumping, when Husker rasped, "Good job, kid," and reached out to give Eight's head a gentle shove.

"Kid. What are you, a few months older than us?" Six asked back, but he was grinning so broadly that his face hurt.

"Maybe even more than a few." Husker handed over the recorder next.

Tally checked that over, too; given the way he frowned, though, the news wasn't good. "We need another minute or two of his voice, if we're going to get the voice emulator working right," he said, thoughtfully. "And I doubt he's still in the mess."

"Could we get it tonight?" Six asked, the elation of their successful retinal retrieval drifting away, though not entirely.

"If he takes the bait," Husker answered.

"You're rotten to the core, Fives."

"Not my fault you lost, Tally. Hopefully by the end of the night, I'll be drunk to the core."

Tally rolled his eyes, arms crossed, as he waited for the cargo transport from the Negotiator to land. It had been dead easy to talk to his counterparts in the 501st and trade for medical supplies. Beyond the fact that it was an accepted practice in the fleet to cover each others' asses like that, he had always gotten along with the medics here. That, no doubt, was going to come in handy later on in the evening or maybe the next morning, when they had to figure out how to get enough DNA off of General Skywalker to fool a thumbprint reader that a synthskin print was actually a real thing attached to a real person.
Once they got the print, anyway.

Tally could probably coax cells to divide and some skin to grow, but even that required a good sample. He was chewing it over as he watched the cargo hopper from the Negotiator land, Tango at the helm and Raze in the co-pilot's seat.

They didn't need a demolition specialist, but if they happened to need any chaos to make their escape in, there weren't many clones who could create it quite like Raze could. Tally was just relieved that Raze was gonna stay with the ship, because Raze's ability to create chaos wasn't necessarily restricted to when he should be doing it. His reputation had preceded him even before he had arrived on the Negotiator.

"What the frip did you put in these boxes, bodies?" Misty asked, right on cue as he hauled the first crate of whiskey down the ramp after it had been lowered. Given he knew full well what was in the boxes, Tally was especially pleased by the complaint.

"Everything in there is medicinal," Tally answered, and when Fives started snickering next to him, he aimed a light kick over at the back of the other clone's calf.

"Here, I'll help carry 'em," Fives said, still looking insufferably pleased with himself. He whistled Echo over, and after five solid minutes of those two arguing -- Fives pleading, Echo trying to quote regulations -- apparently Fives won because a very disgruntled Echo helped him by grabbing one of the crates.

Once they were gone with their ill-gotten gains, Raze was poking his head out of the cargo hold, followed by Brody and Smarty, the three of them reminding Tally of some kind of bizarre prairie rodent family, all lined up checking things out. "How's it going?" Raze asked, eagerly, looking a little like he was ready to launch himself out of the transport in his enthusiasm. "We on schedule?"

"So far, so good." Tally looked after Fives and Echo, then smirked to himself as he grabbed another box, this time of legitimate medical supplies. "Brody, Misty, Smarty, gimme a hand with these."

It was a good thing, Husker reflected, that Rex was off with Cody on some kind of mission. Because if anyone was straight-laced enough to confiscate contraband, it would be Rex. Helluva captain, but not exactly all that big on letting decorum slide... or, at least, not slide enough for everyone to get hammered together. Echo was enough trouble about such things, but at least he could be won over with enough affectionate peer pressure, if not enough to participate, then enough to turn a blind eye.

"Ready to do your thing, Husk?" Shiv had asked, over the encrypted comm line, once he had been updated with what they had so far.

"Go and get drunk with my buddies? Oh, definitely, Sarge. I'm ready to take one for the team," Husker had answered, dryly and with as much faux solemnness that he could throw into his tone.

Next to him, Brody had started cackling, though he at least had the good sense to cover his mouth and try to muffle it. But that nearly had Husker snickering himself, and after wrestling with his composure, he signed off with Shiv and promptly swatted Brody -- lightly -- on the back of the head.

Fact was, it was dead easy to get an invite to that private party. It hadn't taken Husker too long to
realize that his friends in the 501st thought that his assignment to the 212th and the Blackbirds was probably miserable, and therefore he deserved all the sympathy he could get. Maul's reputation, however wildly inaccurate, apparently walked way the hell ahead of him; to listen to the members of the 501st, Husker might as well have just been put feet first through an industrial meatgrinder, and that would somehow be less cruel.

It was a useful thing, though Husker honestly wondered how the heck it had happened.

Once he had updated their sergeant on what was happening, he left Brody to do his thing and slipped out to go back to meet up with his old group. It didn't take him long; Fives worked quick when he wanted to, and the party was already mostly planned.

"Your medic's loss, our gain," Fives said, slinging an arm around Husker's shoulders as they were making for their quarters.

When General Anakin Skywalker stopped on his way back to his own quarters, he was surprised to see that he had missed his inspection of the troop quarters. He had thought for sure that was supposed to be tomorrow, but his datapad made it clear that it was today. He sighed and dropped his head, then clipped the datapad back to his belt, turning around to go and perform what was, to him, a relatively pointless action of bureaucracy.

As he retraced the steps he had made only moments before, he walked past the maintenance closet where Brody had sliced into the *Resolute's* network in order to tweak said schedule, none the wiser.

"Uh-- we can explain, sir," Echo said, as the entire group of fifteen (absent Husker) scrambled to their feet upon the appearance of General Skywalker in their quarters unexpectedly. Open on the floor were two crates containing many bottles of whiskey, the bottles that weren't already in someone or another's hands. Echo had forgone the opportunity to drink, but he had agreed to keep his mouth shut about it. But now, confronted with his general, he apparently was caught between a rock and a hard place. "See, we, uh--"

"--were just-- disposing of this contraband--" Fives tried, when Echo trailed off.

"Took it off Tally," Husker spoke up, as loud as his damaged voice allowed him to. "Beat his ass in a game of sabacc, I heard."

"Tally?" the general asked, and then his eyes lit up as recognition clicked. "Where did he get it?"
"Supposedly beat a civilian the same way a month ago."

Were it anyone else, Husker had a feeling General Skywalker might have waved it off and left, tacitly allowing them their-- disposal methods. But given it was Lieutenant Maul's medic that had lost to his own troops, there was an added sweetness to it, the kind of which might tip the tide in their favor. There was a sharp-edged amusement on General Skywalker's face, a sort of almost mean delight that not only was the Blackbirds' medic out gambling, but also smuggling around contraband; Husker didn't need to be a mindreader to see that.

"Do you maybe want to help us dispose of it, sir?" Fives asked, shifting his weight between his feet. Echo, meanwhile, slapped his palm down over his face.

_C'mon, c'mon_, Husker thought, not having to fake the hopeful look on his own face.

General Skywalker was wavering. "Well, I _am_ supposed to be off-duty..." he said, clearly wrestling between a chance to socialize somewhat with his troops and what he should be doing as their commanding officer.

"Now that you know about it, it's definitely your job to make sure it's disposed of properly," Husker cut in, raising his eyebrows hopefully.

"Ah, all right, you got me." The general flashed a grin and then turned around and locked the door.

"That's the voiceprint made," Tally whispered, sitting in the closet with Brody. "Now let's see how lightweight a Jedi is."

"Wanna make it a bet?" Brody asked, leaning against the wall with eyes closed, while they listened in on the soon-to-be drunken shenanigans. "I'll bet he'll be slurring his words inside of four shots."

"I've gambled enough today, thanks." Though, even as he was sitting there, Tally was estimating Skywalker's body-weight, combined with the fact that he grew up a space monk and probably didn't drink regularly (if at all), in addition to the proof of the not-cheap-but-not-expensive whiskey that Maul had somehow sourced by means unknown, trying to guess the odds.

"Six, maybe seven," he said, after considering it.

_Highs and Lows of the Blackbirds_:

_Two shots later_

"The taste doesn't improve, does it? But I think my tongue is going numb."

_Four shots later_
"I'm just saying that-- that I wanna know who came up with that idea for the Naboo handmaiden pinup--"

Six shots later...

"And another thing! --wait, kriff. I forgot what the other thing was."

Eight shots later...

"I just-- it's such a beautiful story, I love it so much. The way they have to hide their love from a whole galaxy..."

"Sir, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm really fine, it's just-- it's such a beautiful story, guys, I hope every one of you finds love like that--"

Smarty was willing to lay odds that General Skywalker was seeing double.

Husker looked a little dazed and drunk himself, but per their plans, he was the one who got under the tall Jedi's arm and got an arm around his waist and was leading him back to his quarters, leaving behind the rest of the clones to finish disposing of the contraband. All the while, Skywalker was mumbling about all of the things he loved, from pod-racing to the planet Naboo -- "There's so much green and water--!" -- to his troops.

Smarty was the one who got tapped to collect the thumbprint and DNA, because Husker was supposed to get mildly pickled and therefore couldn't probably handle the delicate biopsy kit that Tally had sent along. Authenticity being what it was. He waited down the hallway, pretending to read a datapad, and watched as Husker half-carried the drunken Jedi to his door.

Skywalker reeled a little bit, then pressed his thumb to the pad, completely oblivious to the fact that it was, in all actuality, a print recorder. Then he made a bemused face, lip a little curled, when the door refused to open. "Eaugh. It's sticky."

That was Smarty's cue; while Husker pretended to take a long look at it, Smarty just slipped right on over in his pristine, borrowed armor and stuck the diagnostic plug-in into the port. "Hang on, sir," he said, "this whole deck's been registering issues. I'll have it cleared right up."

General Skywalker blinked slowly, wavering some on his feet, then turned to look at Husker. "You staying? I mean, not in my quarters, but onboard?"

"No, sir. Gotta get back to my own post."

"Oh. Kriff." Skywalker literally pouted at that, but he also missed Smarty removing the print recorder
while doing so. "I dunno what they're thinking, giving a squad to a prisoner. But maybe they'll come to their senses soon."

--what? Smarty stopped a moment, staring at Husker wide-eyed. Husker looked back just the same, but recovered fast.

"Here, sir. I think he's done fixing it," Husker said, turning the Jedi more back towards the door. And after a few more moments of staring blearily at the print reader on the door, Skywalker thumbed it and this time, the door hissed open.

It didn't take Husker long to lead the beleaguered general to his bunk; with some careful maneuvering and a bit of a controlled fall, Skywalker sprawled on the relatively narrow bed, eyes closed. Smarty slipped in behind them, mind still running balls-to-the-wall fast, trying to piece together what he knew of their CO versus what Skywalker had just rambled out drunkenly.

Husker was nice enough to tug Skywalker's boots off for him, though he was not exactly one hundred percent steady himself. The Jedi made some inarticulate sound, and before the second boot was even on the floor, he was snoring softly.

Smarty still waited another two minutes, while they stood there in silence, but when Skywalker didn't so much as stir, he pulled out the biopsy kit Tally had provided and snuck over, gingerly rolling up the sleeve on Skywalker's mechanical arm to get to the nerve-dead skin above it. The biopsy needle was tiny and fine, barely enough for someone to note even on feeling skin; on the numb space where flesh gave way to cybernetics, the only way that Skywalker would even notice would be if he woke up.

He was still holding his breath through the whole extraction, and once he stepped back and sealed the sample in its sterile container, he was glad as all hell to get out of there with his mildly drunk squadmate.

Husker had apparently sobered up pretty quick; when they were out into the comparatively safe hallway, his face went grim. "You get that?"

Smarty nodded, pensively. "Yeah. What did he mean, prisoner?" he asked, as they made for the rendezvous on the hangar deck.

"I dunno, but I intend to find out."
The ride back was awful quiet, considering that they had accomplished their mission without being caught.

Tally had been listening in from the closet where he and Brody had ensconced themselves; before Husker and Smarty even made it back to the hangar deck, he cornered them. "Two things," the medic had said, looking between them with chin tucked a little and eyebrows up, voice quiet and serious. "First, that's the Lieutenant's story to tell, if and when he feels like telling it. And second? Judge him on his actions now, not his legal status."

Husker looked less than pleased about being cut off by Tally before he had even started to ask questions. Smarty looked confused. Either way, Tally wished he could kick a Jedi right now, because of all of the ways for them to learn that particular piece of information, this was a bad time for it to happen.

It wasn't that Tally didn't believe in transparency among squads. Frankly, given their ultimate objective, they needed to be transparent to one another, because they were supposed to be opaque to everyone else. But the timing of it was awful; they were only starting to really work as a unit, for one. And Maul was still spring-green as yet; he was doing a pretty good job, considering his lack of experience, but he wasn't anywhere near prepared to deal with the kind of flack this could cause, either. This woulda been better settled after their first official training mission, not before. After they had the chance to build more trust, instead of when they had only just begun to.

Both Smarty and Husker had nodded -- Tally wasn't officially ranked over them in anything but medical matters, but he was still pretty much one of the top three dogs anyway -- but they didn't look happy about it.

Later, maybe, Tally would talk more with 'em. Not to tell Maul's story for him, but to point out that he'd never been convicted by a court. Tally didn't even know the story, beyond that fact and what he could glean from medical records (and those told a hell of a harrowing tale all by themselves), but he had been there to watch Maul throw himself between General Kenobi and an explosion, putting life and remaining limb on the line, and never once breaking stride in hesitation to. Whatever his legal status, his loyalty to their general was a real, observed thing.

"Feels a little like a body transport in here right now," Raze finally spoke up, voice a little hesitant. "Did I miss something?"

Husker looked long at Tally; Tally looked back at him, unblinking. Then Husker shook his head. "Nah. Just been a long night, kid."

And that it was.

"You know, sir, pacing isn't gonna bring them back any quicker."

Shiv kept his tone pinned in the middle between dryness and good-humored patience, as he leaned against the engine housing of another cargo hopper, arms crossed, watching Maul try to wear a line
in the decking. They had already gotten the mission accomplished transmission from Tango, which just meant waiting for the rest of the Blackbirds to land on the Negotiator so that they could take what they had gained from said mission and hopefully break the bio-locks on those files as soon as possible.

Maul waved him off and then turned and started another lap.

It wasn't as if it was a long flight between ships, though the CAPs being flown by the starfighters on a near constant basis, as well as the usual traffic, meant that their transport was low priority in terms of being given permission to land. Even then, it was only about twelve minutes before the cargo hopper descended into the hangar, Tango's expert piloting pivoting the small ship and setting it down light as a feather.

There were two bottles of whiskey waiting for them to celebrate, but Shiv knew better than to celebrate before they had cracked those files and made sure no one was coming to haul them to the brig to wait for a court-martial. They had a lot of leeway, given their intended purpose, when it came to rules and regulations, but Shiv was reasonably sure those didn't apply to espionage inside of their own fleet for the sole purpose of wrecking a Jedi general's possibly nefarious plans.

For some reason, the thought of the word nefarious made Shiv have to choke down a laugh. He half-failed, and when Maul raised a brow at him in question, he ended up giggling uncontrollably for half a minute before he managed to get it back under control, shaking his head at the bemused expression that gained him.

Okay, so maybe he'd gotten a bit nervous over it all himself.

The ramp descended on the cargo carrier, and it didn't even touch the ground when Raze rocketed off of it; before Maul likely even had time to process what was going on (going by the entirely startled look on his face), he was tackle-hugged by the demolitions expert, knocked into a stumbling reel backwards in an attempt to keep both of them upright, while Raze yelled enthusiastically, "We did it!"

Shiv rubbed over his mouth in an attempt to keep from giggling all over again; he almost missed the small hand-signal Tally gave him that suggested they needed to have a talk about something.

The look on the medic's face was a little worrisome. Shiv nodded back, and then went back to greeting the rest of the squad, not failing to notice how subdued Brody, Smarty and Husker were looking as he did.

"He what--?!

Shiv had the longest fuse of any clone Tally had ever met. He'd figured that out within a week, watching Shiv deal with Raze, which was like trying to herd a whole group of feral tooka kits into a bathtub while keeping them from shredding the bog paper. So the fact that he looked, for the moment, like he was ready to stick his whole armored boot up General Skywalker's ass said quite a bit.

"In fairness, he was pretty hammered. But Husker, Smarty and Brody all heard it." Tally carefully moved the growth solution to the next station in the medbay. "Which means we'll have to deal with
this sooner rather than later."

Shiv's expression was thunderous. Whether it was out of loyalty to their CO, the breach of common decency or the fact that it complicated things for the squad was impossible to know. Probably a bit of all of those, Tally thought. Though, credit to the sergeant, he was clearly already working out how to do damage control; even as much as he was glowering, he was also obviously thinking.

*Yep, he's a good one.* Tally smiled a little to himself, shaking his head as he moved down to the sterile enclosure where he would try to coax General Skywalker's cells into making a delicate sheet of new skin.

This was way above Tally's official paygrade; this was the type of stuff best left to *real* doctors, supposedly. Nothing galled him quite like that implication, which he had gotten from the Kaminoans and the hired doctors who had been training him and his fellow medics on Kamino; that the clones were somehow incapable of learning that far. Medicine fascinated Tally. Not just turning it over to droids or throwing someone in bacta, but the art and science of healing. Of diagnosing something and then coming up with the correct treatment. He had come out of training the best of the group he had gone in with, being ultimately selected for the field surgery program, and he had excelled there as well.

When this war was over, he wanted more than anything to go to medschool. Become a proper doctor, even if his accelerated aging was going to make it a comparatively short career.

That was, if there was ever an end to the war and he lived to see it. If they were given their freedom then.

It wasn't too hard for Tally to give Maul a chance. None of them were free by any real measure of the word, and without any solid information to go on, Tally could only really go on observation and intuition, and both of those were in accord with one another. Combined with an almost-painful-to-read medical history, Tally thought anyone who could remain even passably sane after all that had some quality worth taking a shot on.

"I think we should tell Maul," Shiv said, breaking into Tally's line of thought. "Then we can see what he wants to do with it, and if that means we run interference, then we run interference."

Tally had been planning on doing at least some of the talking himself, but after another moment of thought, he nodded. If Shiv thought that, it meant he had already reasoned about why, and sometimes just going straight-on at the problem was all anyone could do. "Yeah. All right, you go do that while I try to coax this to grow fast enough to be of some use."

Maul took it pretty well. He didn't seem to be all that surprised by the fact Skywalker had rambled that out drunkenly, though like Tally and Shiv both, he rightfully figured that this was going to be something to address sooner than later. The majority of the squad had gone to get some sleep after their long day and night, and a meeting was called for mid-morning, which was too few hours away, but at least they would get a *little* rest. Absent Tally, anyway, who was running on caf and probably stims to make sure they had enough skin to sacrifice to their objective, thankfully none of theirs.

Maul was already in the briefing room when Shiv got in, drinking tea and looking calm if a little bit
remote, leaning against the counter. He gave Shiv a salute with his mug, but didn't bother to say anything.

"Tally's still in the lab, sir," Shiv reported, moving over to get himself some caf so he could make it through what was sure to be an interesting meeting. "I stopped by on my way here, and he said he'll probably have enough skin to pass the DNA reader by this evening. Said something about timing a bacta infusion just right."

He didn't get anything back more than a nod, but that wasn't any shock. Shiv didn't exactly have a ton of dirty laundry of his own to air or anything, but he had a few stories he wasn't in any great hurry to tell just yet, waiting until he felt more comfortable with this squad. He supposed all of them likely felt the same, too; they were all brothers, but they were also all different. One face, a bunch of personalities and stories.

Instead of saying anything else, Shiv just leaned next to Maul and worked on his caf, a silent support if it was needed and backup if it was wanted. When the others started filtering in, it was clear that Husker, Smarty and Brody hadn't said anything, because the rest looked kind of confused. Those three looked wary, and Shiv frowned internally, not because he was angry with them for it, but because he didn't like what their wariness suggested about their own histories.

Not surprisingly, Raze was the last one to fly in the door, two minutes late. Everyone had long given up on getting him there on time, and now they were just working on getting him there within a couple minutes of it.

By then, the subtle tension had bled through the whole room, even though only half of 'em knew why.

He knew Maul was about to speak up because he felt the lieutenant shift slightly, moving his weight from one foot to the other, their shoulders barely in contact. Resisting the urge to say something to break the thick atmosphere, Shiv just kept quiet and stayed there, right hand and a loyal presence to brace against.

"Some of you have questions. Ask, and I'll do the best I can to answer them," Maul said, voice quiet, though the room was so still -- even Raze was sitting perfectly motionless, looking nervous -- that he had no difficulty being heard.

Pretty much everyone turned to eyeball the three in question, because it wasn't like they didn't all share quarters and mess times and showers and routines. Even though they were all still figuring out how to relate to each other, there wasn't a whole lot of room for privacy. And after a successful operation, everyone should have been feeling pretty good and-- obviously not everyone was.

Brody looked down at his datapad, scratching his thumb a little against the side. Smarty went to speak, then shut his mouth again.

Only Husker seemed inclined to throw his balls out on the table. "Is it true?"

Maul didn't blink. "Yes."

"Wait, is what true?" Raze asked, sitting up in his chair, gaze darting around the table.

"I'm a prisoner of the Jedi Order. I have been now for ten years and some months," Maul said, plainly.

Shiv didn't fail to notice that Maul didn't make eye contact with the demo expert. Given just how intently Maul usually did with anyone, that was more telling than anything.
"Why?" That was Brody, finally finding his voice. The entire table was leaning forward; the expressions they were wearing a range between shock and dismay and curiosity. Raze, of all of them, looked the least shook up by the revelation, though his eyes were wide.

Maul took a moment to answer, holding a hand up to ask for said moment, obviously working over how to explain. But when he did, his voice was the same level calm as before. Steady. "Before the blockade of Naboo, I was a Sith assassin in training. Similar to what Asajj Ventress is now, though I was considerably better trained than she is." Apparently even in this situation, there was room for their lieutenant to find a hint of smugness. Though it disappeared as he went on. "My Master sent me to bring the situation there under control for the Trade Federation. While I was there, I engaged two Jedi." There was a beat there, just a momentary hesitation, then, "I killed the first, the master. I nearly defeated the second -- then padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi -- but when I paused to gloat over my victory, he regained the upper hand, cut me in two and while I managed to survive it, the Order captured me before I could escape."

There was a collective gasp when that piece of information hit the air. And immediately, the Blackbirds started whispering to one another. Reminded Shiv a little of their childhood, what they had of one, where they would get some juicy tidbit of information and immediately discuss it to death, probably because Kamino itself could be so damned boring.

Shiv himself hadn't known that bit about General Kenobi, but now that he did, he wondered how the hell the two of them could even stand to be in the same room, let alone interact so comfortably with one another. Obviously, there was a much longer story somewhere between all of those words.

"So, why-- why are you here, sir?" Tango asked, which hushed the chatter again.

"I'm wasted in the Temple," Maul said, holding up a hand and ticking off fingers. "I have extensive training in stealth and a number of other useful disciplines. I'm another body who happens to be sensitive to the Force and capable of using it to further the aims of the Republic. The Order doesn't know what else to do with me." He paused there for a moment and then crossed his arms; even if Shiv wasn't standing right there, he probably woulda been able to pick up on the way Maul was wrestling with himself internally. "I'm here to make sure General Kenobi lives to see the end of this war," he finally added, the vaguest hint of defiance in his voice, though Shiv wasn't sure what against. "I'm here to see to it that the eleven of you do, now, as well. And if, in the meantime, I can make life a little more miserable for Dooku or Ventress or even my old Master, then all the better."

Silence fell again there, tense and heavy all at once. Shiv looked at each of them; took in their expressions, from thoughtful to touched to steeling resolve, and he almost smiled.

"Well, sir," Husker finally said, "I think that's good enough for me."

There were no murmurs of dissent, either. Shiv didn't think the issue was totally resolved, but he thought they'd probably put to bed the worst part of it, and he was kind of proud of 'em right that moment.

"Anyway, unless you have any other questions, you should probably go and finish catching up on your rest. We're going to try for those files tonight, as soon as Tally tells us he's ready," Maul finished, upnodding towards the door.

The Blackbirds filtered out with Raze talking to Six and Eight about how they had the baddest CO in the Grand Army. Shiv snorted at that one. It was only after everyone was gone but for the two of them that Maul let out a slow breath, the kind which trembled a little at the end.

Really, Shiv was proud of him, too.
"None of us are free, sir," he said, pushing off his lean against the counter to stand straight. "You did fine."

Maul looked at him for a long moment, then gave a nod back.

Shiv's day after that went well all the way up until it was time to actually complete their objective.

He stared at the small droid on its creepy spider-like legs as it stood on the table. "Don't make me do this," he said, shuddering from his shoulders on down at the thought of that thing crawling down his kriffing throat. "Can't we draw straws?"

"Sorry, Sarge. We've already held a vote," Brody answered, as he used his datapad to remotely finish adjusting the voice emulator droid, which had the nerve to bounce once on the table like it was excited to be able to claw its way into Shiv's throat and wrap its legs around his voice box.

"You started this," Shiv said, accusingly, eyeballing their lieutenant. "Now look where this democracy business got me."

Maul held up his hands in the universal gesture for surrender. "I volunteered and Tally intervened."

"No hybrids, we need a full-on human to impersonate a human," Tally explained, as he delicately overlaid the incredibly thin sheet of skin over the hollowed out synthskin thumb with the pronounced print on it that Shiv was going to be wearing. "I mean, I don't know that for sure, but why take chances?"

"So that I don't have to swallow that thing?" Shiv asked, shuddering for a third or fourth time as he stared at the droid and it stared back at him.

There was plenty of cheerleading and cajoling from the rest of the squad. Shiv considered himself pretty tough, but there was something about that droid which was creeping him out to no end, and it was only the peer pressure of his brothers that had him even tenuously willing to swallow something that large, never mind its nasty little legs.

"You've got this, Sarge," Tango said, pouring a double shot of whiskey. "Here, something to chase it down with. You get the first drink and if this doesn't work, maybe the only drink."

"Every last one of you owes me," Shiv answered, reaching out and resisting the urge to fling the voice emulator against the wall when it jumped into his palm. He raised it up to look it dead in its single photoreceptor, face puckered in deep distaste. "Okay. Here goes nothing."

It was every bit as awful as he'd thought it would be, though it wasn't actually painful. Just incredibly weird and uncomfortable. He gagged a few times before the thing was settled and once it was, he threw back the double shot of whiskey desperately, hoping that the burn of the alcohol would numb the wildly bizarre sensation in his throat as fast as possible.

When he managed to pry his eyes open again from where they had been squeezed closed, the entire squad was leaning in towards him staring at him.

"What?" Shiv asked, and then squeaked, slapping his hands over his mouth when General Anakin
Skywalker's voice issued out from it. Tally apparently thought that was the height of comedy, because he started laughing his head off; it was around there that Shiv remembered that Tally had been running on stims and caffeine for two days straight and wondered how safe he was, trusting their medic to not be unhinged.

The others didn't have any excuse, though. But half of them busted up, too.

"Sorry, General, sir," Tally said, dryly, once he managed to get his laughter back under control. He stepped over and grabbed Shiv's left hand, slipping the synthskin thumb-glove on it delicately. "Don't touch anything with that until it's time to use the scanner," he warned, before moving off to take what looked-- like an eyeball--

Shiv had been wondering how they were going to pass the retina scan. Despite his weird new voice, he had to ask, "You're not going to pop my eye out and replace it with that one, right?"

"Nope. I managed to print the retinal pattern on the inside back of it with successive layers of plastifilm. Just hold it up to the scanner when it's time." Tally set the case with the blue-iris'd eyeball in it next to Shiv's right hand. "It's for the left eye, so reach across yourself."

Shiv was getting tired of things staring at him, but he nodded back, taking a steadying breath. Maul sat down across from him, sliding the datastick into the security reader, and then turned the whole thing around and pushed it across to Shiv. "Ready?" he asked, brows up, looking like he didn't have a doubt in the galaxy that Shiv would carry this off.

Shiv nodded back, resisting the urge to massage his throat, and turned the reader on with his right hand.

The entire squad, absent Tally and Maul, crowded around him.

*Voice print recognition required,* the terminal prompted on its screen.

"This is General Skywalker," Shiv said, shuddering vaguely at both the sensation and at the fact he was impersonating a superior officer.

There was a moment where everyone was holding their breaths, then it read, *Accepted. Please verify thumb print and submit to the DNA scan.*

Across the table, standing behind Maul, Tally shifted; he couldn't read the screen from his vantage, but Shiv didn't doubt he could tell what was going on anyway. Shiv gave a nod and pressed his thumb -- or rather, a puppet of General Skywalker's thumb -- to the reader. Now, he was holding his breath too, as the scanner lit up yellow underneath of it.

The moment drew out an almost agonizingly long time. Like the computer had to think about it. Shiv held as still as he could.

*Accepted. Please put your eye to the reader for a retinal scan.*

Shiv almost gasped out a breath in relief, but they weren't through this yet. He plucked the false eye out of its case and turned it between his fingers, then held it to the scanner, having a momentary panic attack that he hadn't held it there correctly while the computer's reader lit up blue.

A drop of sweat hit the table next to his arm. Shiv glanced up and saw Misty there, staring at the terminal like he could will it into acceptance.

There were a couple of flashes on the scanner, and then--
For a long several seconds there was silence, and then it was shattered with a roar of triumph, most of the Blackbirds sounding off at once in elation. Shiv had no idea how many hands slapped his back, as he slumped in the chair and folded his hands under the table to hide the fact that they were shaking. Even the voice emulator droid was temporarily forgotten as he tried to catch his breath.

They did it. They actually did it.

"Lieu! Can we have our whiskey now?" Tango asked, which was when Shiv looked up. Maul looked back at him, something soft written even in the sharp black lines on his face, then he nodded to Tango, who promptly whooped and ran to get out enough disposable cups for all of them.

"Okay, Sarge, time to give your little friend back," Brody said, picking up his datapad. One uncomfortable extraction later, and Shiv was rubbing at his throat, glad the thing was gone and put away. He saluted the squad with his cup, now with considerably more whiskey in it, then checked on the decryption. Half-done.

By the time it was complete, the noise level had died down some and the sheer amount of relief in the air was infectious. They all gathered in their usual seats around the table, drinking and chatting. Shiv interfaced the reader with the holographic display built into the table, though he didn't turn it on just yet, enjoying the way his shoulders had unwound thanks to the combination of alcohol and victory. At least in this phase of their overall intention.

As he listened to the happy sounds of his brothers, he smiled to himself.

It was probably another ten minutes before anyone broke into that; Smarty was the one who spoke up loud enough to be heard over the more aimless conversation. "Hey, Sarge, is it done?"

"Yeah," Shiv answered, appreciating his own voice like never before. "We ready, Lieu?"

"Likely not." Maul said, deadpan, but he nodded anyway. Shiv was sort of pleased he had his own whiskey in hand, anyway.

Shiv nodded back and turned on the display even as the rest of the lights dimmed, bringing up the files related to their training mission, starting with the maps.

Silence reigned anew. Then someone said what they were all thinking:

"Oh frip."
Dear Flanker,

I know it’s been awhile since I’ve written. Sorry about that, things have been busy, but not in the bad kind of way, just hectic. Who knew that being a sergeant was so much work?

I think I love it, though. I mean, I know in my last couple letters I was worrying about being able to handle it, but the longer I’m at it, the easier it’s getting. It feels right, I guess. Or more right, anyway, this whole leadership thing. I was sort of expecting to have to spend all my time barking at people and cracking the whip on them, but it’s not like that at all. Tally says that it’s because we’re not just some random squad of foot-soldiers and that they needed a sergeant who was a thinker, instead. I guess there’s merit to that, but it almost makes me wonder why they wouldn’t pick one of the others. Husk’s been around longer than any of us and on more battlefields. And Tally and Smarty are both really sharp. And me, aside my environmental training, I’ve never been anything particularly special before.

Ah, kriff. Sorry, brother. I’m not complaining, just sometimes still trying to figure out why me. Y’know?

But yeah, I kind of love it. I think I do.

Oh! I got my first taste of a voice emulator droid. That was frippin’ awful, Flanker. I know that’s probably not the last time I’m gonna have to let one of those nasty little things violate my vocal cords, but I can hope it will be. Remember how I said we were going to try to get information about our first training mission? It was for that, we had to unlock all these bio-locked files and someone needed to pretend to be General Skywalker. Guess who got voted into it?

I’m sure glad we did it, though. Because this mission—this mission is going to be tough. A lot tougher than any training mission I’ve ever been on and then some. I don’t think even the ARCs get put through this kind of thing, though I could be wrong. I’ll tell you more, but I should wait until after it’s already over before I get into detail. I know this datapad’s secure, I even had Brody check it once I realized how good he was with systems, but it never hurts to be cautious.

There’s one thing that came out that’s now common knowledge, though; our lieutenant’s a prisoner. I knew that within two days, both Tally and General Kenobi briefed me on the situation, though apparently General Kenobi left out the part about where he was the one who took Maul down. I gotta say, brother, that kind of worries me some. I’m not entirely sure why, I can’t explain it, it’s just a feeling. I mean, it’s not like any of us can just muster out of the army and walk away to live civvie lives, the Republic literally holds the papers on us, but I guess maybe it’s because he’s not a clone. I’m gonna keep an eye on it, anyway.

He did good, though. Didn’t try to hedge his way around it when the squad found out, just called us all together and told ‘em to ask questions if they had them, and then gave it to ‘em straight. I don’t think he’s ever gonna be a military man, no matter how much I’ve been trying to teach him more about it, but the more I watch, the more I think that might actually be in our favor. I guess maybe we’ll just keep working on his self-confidence and see how things play out. I don’t think I’ve ever had a CO turn so often to check in with me before, but it’s been working fine so far.

In fact, Maul pulled me aside just a bit ago and said he wanted to set up an assessment run with the squad in the field and see what our weaknesses were in an actual unknown environment, and I agreed that was a sound idea, so apparently he’s gonna ask General Kenobi for a little time on the
closest life-sustaining planet around and he said something about seeing if Tano would give us a hand with it. We'll have to see if that actually pans out, though.

Otherwise, things are doing fine. I still don't know where our caf maker came from yet, but Tally's the one who's been smuggling in the caf itself. Apparently, somebody lost to him in a card game from the galley, so we're always supplied. Maul brings in tea sometimes and leaves it there, too. Tally claims he doesn't know where the hot plate came from; I'm eying Castle for that one. He's a combat engineer, but he's also pretty mean with small-time mechanics, too.

I know I'm forgetting something.

Oh! The Raze Report. That's what I almost forgot, before I signed off to turn in. This week, while we were building up to our mission, I caught him sitting with these tiny tools making little balls of puddy explosive. And I mean really little, Flanker, too small to do much of anything. Then, a day later, he comes in with both his ears pierced and I didn't even start to put it together. But you know Raze -- or, you're getting to know Raze -- and he was happy to tell me that one earring was the puddy explosive with a thin coat of nail polish on it (of all things, I don't even know where he got it) and that the other was a custom built mini-detonator. And apparently, he made more than one of each. In different colors!

He's literally wearing weapons in his ears, brother.

Anyway, that's it for me for now. I'll write again soon.

I still miss you.

-Shiv
Chapter Notes

This is the next chapter, courtesy of guest writer B_Radley; follow the link below to read and comment there! (And I also totally recommend B’s other works; there's a lot there, but also a lot for everyone, especially fans of Ahsoka Tano.)
Poaching, 102

Chapter Summary

Rodents, Not Apprentices
Or: Why Shiv is a Verb, How the Blackbirds Got Their Names (Most of Them) and How Tango Got His First Kiss

Chapter Notes

Forgive me for all of this unabashed camping fluff.

"You know, sir, if we ever get a bucket that'll fit over your horns, you can have marks on the side for every half-rodent consumed."

Maul gave Shiv a very flat look, not particularly caring if he looked ridiculous doing that with his toothbrush hanging out of his mouth. Shiv looked back at him with barely concealed amusement, his helmet under his arm splattered with fluorescent green paint to match his likewise splattered armor, humor hiding in his gold-brown eyes and hinted to at the corners of his mouth. It was almost enough to make Maul want to throw the container of toothpaste at him, but if he ended up consuming any other raw rodents, he wanted to have enough to last him.

The fact that he ate the thing so he wouldn't lose face to a Togruta padawan who wasn't even half as old as he was wasn't lost on him, no.

It wasn't that Maul had never resorted to eating raw meat before. The earliest years of his life were that and little else. He hadn't even had a cooked meal for the first time until he was at Orsis, and he remembered being genuinely shocked that there were actually different things he could eat; he had known that different species consumed different things from his education under Deenine, but he hadn't thought that he ever would. Then again, he hadn't even known at that age that he was a hybrid, though apparently Trezza had and his meal plan reflected that fact.

Given he was usually treated as some stereotype of an uncivilized wildling, an image which he cultivated until he was old enough to understand how demeaning it was intended to be and started to chafe against it, he eventually lost all taste for it and now largely preferred his meat cooked. Not to say he wouldn't eat anything to survive, but crunching small bones between his teeth had long reminded him of little more than starvation and humiliation, though nowadays mostly all he felt was annoyed at how stringy it was and how much work it was cleaning said teeth again after.

He finished brushing, rinsed his mouth and then eyeballed Shiv anew. "You're eating rodent tonight yourself; if I have to mark mine, you have to mark yours."

Shiv looked down at his bucket, then scratched a line in the green paint and flicked the flakes off after, grinning openly now. "Done."

Maul managed to smother a groan, but he didn't resist the urge to give his sergeant a light shove in
the shoulder on his way by to put his kit away again.

Though, he also didn't resist the urge to smile some when Shiv started laughing behind him, either.

Dusk came in pastels and with the crackling of cook fires and the smell of meat.

Maul supposed that he could have set up an evening training scenario for the squad, but after watching them scrambling around to catch their dinner and listening to them laugh while doing so (and occasionally failing to stifle a laugh of his own), that thought drifted away and he didn't revisit it. Even though they only had three days here and the training mission was less than two weeks out, even though they clearly had plenty of work to do and not enough time to do it, he didn't really want to break into the evening's peace. If he were looking for a justification for it, he would probably make an attempt to argue that the squad needed more time to continue building their bonds -- and such things were practical, especially given how new they were -- but he didn't have any need to, and so he didn't bother.

They were sprawled out in scattered little groupings, most of them using their armor as a backrest, and roasting rodents to varying degrees of success. Smarty had been talking to Tano for the past hour about hunting culture on Shili, and she apparently was enjoying the conversation, given the amount of smiling she was doing. Once, she bent her head over to him so he could inspect her headdress, and then picked up a stick to draw on the ground; from what little Maul bothered listening in, she was describing methods of hunting akul and he thought he heard something about using the right kind of bait in there.

She was also making sure Smarty's food didn’t burn, since he was too distracted talking to notice it. Brody's, however, was black on one side and pink on the other, given how he was absorbed into his datapad; Tango apparently couldn't bear to look at it anymore, because he reached out and turned it without saying anything. His own rodent on the same fire looked fairly evenly roasted.

Mostly for the sake of variety, Maul had used his own survival training -- if one could call it that -- to find some edible tubers to add to the dinner, and those were likewise heating, though they were doing so in one of the four modular pots that were assigned to the squad. They smelled good, and as he was reasonably resistant to many kinds of poison (both natural and otherwise) he had tested them out, much to Tally's immediate chagrin, and when they turned out safe, he gathered enough for the whole squad before finding his own spot to settle and brood over what Skywalker had planned for them.

Admittedly, it was hard to brood too much; the Blackbirds were in fine spirits despite Tano wiping them out once, and Maul was still trying to figure out how to even cope with how much that actually meant to him.

He wasn't given to forming attachments. Not because he thought the Jedi were right (in fact, he often still thought they were ridiculous and wrong), but because what you cared for could be used against you. He knew that lesson well.

But it was becoming rapidly fact that he cared about this squad. They were his responsibility, and the more time he spent around them, the more their lives mattered. Not only during the war, not only on a battlefield, but in the between times and the after times, and in the future.
It was a dangerous enough thing. Maul knew well how many of their brothers died each and every
day, never having once known a life without being a soldier.

He shook himself out of those thoughts to find Tally eying him with a brow up. Maul raised his right
back and the medic snorted, though not without a half-concealed grin. "Just making sure you taste-
testing strange roots didn't have a delayed reaction," Tally said, poking the fire with a stick.

"I've poisoned myself enough times that I know how to take care of myself," Maul answered,
waving it off, then crossed his arms and leaned back a little more against his own makeshift backrest,
which consisted of his gear and his rolled up jacket.

Tally scoffed. "That might've worked when you were just the 212th's designated Kenobi body-
guard, but you're my responsibility now. Grab my wrist now and I'll pull rank on you. And if you
poison yourself biting random roots, you get to sit through any lectures I deem necessary, too."

Maul didn't doubt that; were he in a less amenable mood, he'd probably wrinkle his nose at it, but it
wasn't really anything worth picking a fight over. They all had their roles and Tally had thus far
proven to be hands-off until he thought something was necessary. Similar to Vokara Che, in that
regard. So, he just nodded and watched the flames for a moment, then asked, "Where did you get
your name?"

"He keeps count of all the contraband he wins off of the unsuspecting in cards," Shiv said, lightly,
plunking himself down beside Maul and sticking his own newly dead, newly skinned rodent over the
fire.

"No, but I should." Tally grinned at that one. "Bragging rights, if nothing else." His expression
softened then, just a little bit, to something either wistful or sad or both. "Back when I was brand
new, I started marking the number of troops I saved versus the number of ones I lost on a whiteboard
on my locker, so my sergeant at the time called me Tally. I still do it."

Apparently, this topic was enough to attract attention, because the other small clusters of Blackbirds
fell quiet. When Shiv caught them watching, he raised a hand and gestured them over, and before a
half minute passed, most of them -- absent Smarty and Tano -- had all settled themselves down close
by.

"I got mine before I even left Kamino," Raze said, face greasy from where he had been
enthusiastically tearing into his rodent-on-a-stick. He gestured with it. "I chained together a bunch of
charges and almost blew up the Citadel." He grinned broadly. "Didn't hit any of my own squad,
either."

"Of course you did," Maul answered, laconic. He wasn't the least bit surprised by that. "Tango?"

Tango cleared his throat. "Uh. Flight training, sir. Three of us were-- you know, kind of show-offs.
We ended up doing this hare-brained stunt while buzzing the control ship. The deck officer bawled
us out and then called us Whiskey, Tango and Fynock."

There had to be something there which Maul was missing; he frowned a little bit in confusion while
the rest of the Blackbirds started snickering -- except for Tango, who was slowly turning red -- and
then Shiv took notice, leaned over and whispered the explanation. When Maul just said, "Oh,"
nodding for the context, Tango covered his face with his hand, red to his ears.

Husker snorted at that, giving Tango a little nudge with his elbow. "At least yours is interesting,
Jethead. Mine's obvious."
"You could tell us how you got that scar in the first place," Six said, raising his eyebrows. His rodent was, apparently, there and already gone, and he was tossing the small bones into the fire as he took the skeleton apart.

Husker let out a gusty sigh, though his expression wasn't particularly irritated. "Hot-headed ARC set some charges wrong, and I got hit before I could get under cover." He tipped his head back, rubbing at the jagged, paler scar on his throat. "The long-necks did what they could, I spent a few days in bacta, but my voice has been wrecked since."

"Your guitar fingers make up for it," Tally commented, off-handedly. "What about you, Castle?"

Castle smirked. "That's easy. I helped rebuild the Citadel after Raze blew it up."

"That was you?!"

"Me and fifteen others. You were a frippin' legend by then, it was a good thing the 2nd Engineers were back on Kamino doing upgrades at the same time." Castle waved a hand in the air. "Nobody missed the chance to talk about the crazy-ass shiny who managed to wipe out half the kriffing course."

Raze, unsurprisingly, sat up a little straighter at that one. He looked decidedly pleased with himself, too. Completely despite himself, Maul was having a hard time chewing down a laugh at the mental image of his demo expert, standing in the middle of a smoking course with a remote detonator in hand, wide-eyed wonder at his own unique brand of chaos.

"Misty?" Six asked next, after smirking at the back-and-forth.

Misty groaned a little bit and turned his roasting rodent. "It's nothing as fun as blowing things up. Somehow, I got designated as the weather guy with my AIT platoon. Before we'd go out for dives, they'd ask me what the weather was, and since it was Kamino early on, the answer was always some variation on wet. Apparently I answered that it was misty enough times that I became Misty and that was it."

Misty was going to be one of those Maul was relying on to keep them alive through Skywalker's training exercise. He thought, probably, that would be an odd relief for the aquatics expert; there hadn't been terribly much for him to do onboard the Negotiator.

"Smarty's too busy making eyes with Tano's culture to answer, but I think his is self-evident," Tally said. "Brody?"

"Sportscaster for the Rastar Rancors." When that got a bunch of raised eyebrows in response, he rolled his eyes, huffing a sigh. "I did my AIT on Coruscant, because Kamino has lousy network connections to the rest of the kriffin' galaxy. So, imagine a bunch of clones, raised in the backend of nowhere on a planet where you can't even go outside for a walk without-- well, without being Misty," there, Misty threw a small stick at him, "suddenly having access to the HoloNet. I mean, our teachers were hired slicers. So, aside from the whole official curriculum, with presentations on the projector and all, we had the unofficial lessons and those were a lot more fun, for obvious reasons."

Maul's experiences with the HoloNet were more limited than not; while he was prisoner to the Temple and restricted to the grounds, he had no access at all. And when he was off on missions with Obi-Wan, he generally had better things to do. He knew that most beings who were from Republic worlds (and more besides) grew up using it, to where it was incorporated into their everyday lives, and there had been times where he had used it for research before Theed, but he had never found much purpose to it beyond seeking information.
He supposed, with that background, he could understand to some degree how it would be for a clone having access to it for the first time. Albeit a very limited degree.

"Anyway," Brody continued, apparently enjoying having an audience, "somehow, we got into an online gambling sector for null-g sporting events, the kind where you can make out with real credits if you win enough virtual points. Our instructor, who only went by the name of Hax, thought it'd be a good thing to teach us how to slice into that system. Of course, he took most of the winnings as commission, but we didn't do too bad."

By now, the other clones were staring at him in shock, and even Smarty and Tano were listening.

"Part of my job was keeping an eye on a set of teams and reading out the scores. Apparently, this made me sound like a sportscaster, so Hax started calling me Brody, after a local guy who did the sports on his homeworld."

"What did you do with the credits you ended up with?" Tally asked, looking fascinated probably in spite of himself.

"Oh, well." Brody paused and looked around, checking over his shoulder, then looked back ahead. "Stuff I won't say in front of Commander Half-Pint."

"Hey, Commander Half-Pint here took your squad down earlier," Tano complained, sitting up straighter. Then she waved her comparatively tiny hand. "Besides, if you're talking about sex, I've had the talk already, so..." she trailed off when she noticed the entire squad was staring at her. "What?"

"Anyway," Shiv cut in, raising his voice, pulling the squad's attention back to forward. "Moving on."

"You're the only one left," Tally said, a smirk crossing his face. "Which means you get to regale us with the story of how one of the nicest sergeants in the GAR ended up with the name Shiv."

"Nope." Shiv crossed his arms, abandoning his rodent temporarily to the mercy of the cook fire.

Maul looked over, brow furrowed; it was around that time that he realized his sergeant was blushing.

"Why not?"

Shiv flicked a glance sideways. "Commander Half-Pint."

That was apparently enough to get her to throw her hands up in frustration. "Oh, come on! I'm older than you are! And I outrank you!"

"Technically, Commander, but you're also a teenage space monk." Shiv gave a slow, casual shrug despite his red face.

Tano looked a little amused, but also offended. Not, Maul thought, devastatingly offended, but she still seemed about two seconds from huffing and perhaps declaring how unfair that was. When she noticed that all of the other Blackbirds were watching her again, she finally rolled her eyes and sighed out, standing up and brushing her leggings off. "Fine. Fine, I'll just go and see if there's anything more interesting to hunt than squirrel, while you guys have your dirty secret exchange or whatever."

"Much appreciated, Commander Tano," Tally said, dryly; despite the tone, his expression was genuine good-humor.
She muttered a little as she slipped away; just for the sake of making sure she was actually slipping away, Maul kept his own Force senses tuned to her signature. When she was out of range, he gestured. "She's not in earshot anymore."

Shiv groaned, but then heaved out a breath and leaned forward, shifting his rodent before settling back again. "Okay. Fine. Same thing -- AIT. Our instructors were a couple Mando mercs that got hired specifically because their resumes said they fought wars and tracked bounties from here to Wild Space on every kind of world and didn't have any recorded convictions by any Republic courts. Both of 'em were practically too thick around the middle to fit into their beskar'gam and they were old, which might have seemed counter-intuitive, but apparently old for a Mando bounty-hunter meant you were good enough to live that long. And I gotta say, they actually were. One time, they did this demonstration; they had us stick a non-powered, non-tracked target anywhere within a sixty thousand hectare area, in the most brutally cold temperatures I'd ever been exposed to, without telling them even what direction it was in. We did, and we came back, and those two went off in nothin’ but their armor, took nothin’ with them and were back by the next evening, with the target in hand and without so much as a hint of frostbite. Said they found it by tracking us, and that was even after we sent squads in different directions to make false trails. Then, they started to teach us how to do it."

Shiv was a good storyteller; his voice fell into a smooth, rolling rhythm, and it was pleasing to listen to. Maul had talked with him at some length about their duties, and some more length about the scenario Skywalker had set up, but this was the first time he'd had the chance to listen to his sergeant telling a story and he found he was listening as raptly as the rest of the squad.

"We didn't do too bad, being all shiny and new. I mean, we sure weren't their caliber, but we did okay. They said give us enough years and we might get close, and I guess that's fair enough. Experience counts for something." Shiv cocked his head some, looking into the flames. "After we finished that training run, spent three weeks freezing and learning as much as we could about survival in sub-zero, we were told to report back to Kamino for assessment. It was all a mad scramble after Geonosis, I'm sure some of you remember that--" Husker snorted there, and Tally echoed it precisely. "--and by then, we'd been training with these Mandos for two months straight, in deserts and swamps and everything between. We had a little time, though, so on the way back, they diverted us to the Wheel."

"Mid Rim," Maul said, just noting it. "Known for its casinos. Black Sun had some interests there, if I remember correctly, though that was before your time." And before Maul slaughtered the entire syndicate, though he heard that since then others had rebuilt with the same name.

"Right." Shiv rubbed the back of his head, where his hair was starting to grow in from the distinctive bands he had shaved into it at some point. "Obviously, none of us had ever been to that kind of place, but our trainers said we'd be fine and that they had a few more lessons to teach us. My batchmate and I, we were together from the moment they popped the bubble on us, and we were there too, and before we knew it, the whole platoon was in one of the bigger bars getting progressively more drunk. We were light-weights, let me tell you. A few cocktails and I was laughing at everything. Anyway, we weren't the only people there; there were plenty of other folks and there was this one dynamite woman. Zeltron, I think. She was sweet, and a few of the more outgoing guys in our squad managed to find their balls and were chatting her up."

"Zeltron? From the pleasure planet?" Six asked, leaning forward, his brother doing the same. It made them look a little like their shoulders were glued together.

"Yeah, I think so. Anyway, my brother was more outgoing than I was. He was a real charmer. One of the Mandos -- I don't remember which, I was a little hazy by then -- saw him looking and leaned over and said, 'You can get in there, just flank 'er.'" Shiv dropped his head and started chuckling.
"Well, from that night on, he was known as Flanker, and let me tell you, the looks of shock anytime he told that story made the night worth it. Even if it took him a full three days to forgive me for what happened next."

Tango was practically leaning into the fire, he was so fascinated. "What happened next?"

"Well, I followed my brother. Of course." Shiv pointed to Six and Eight, sitting there with identical looks, doubtless in illustration of similar batchmates. "I had no intentions of trying to make a play for her myself, I could barely see straight. He did flank her, he slid in from the side and started stealing her attention from the other guys, but then she said something and I must have found it funny, because I started laughing. I didn't even introduce myself, but I was laughing and I was thinking that even if my brother went and got laid, the night was probably worth it because of that, I couldn't remember ever laughing like that before. But then, the next thing I know, there are these red hands on my chest and these gorgeous dark eyes looking at me, and I stopped laughing and then she smiled -- and wow, was it a smile -- and kissed me." A beat. "Right before she dragged me off for, uh-- obvious reasons, my brother asked me, real incredulously, 'Did you just shiv me?' And from that night on, he was Flanker and I was Shiv."

Tally was roaring with laughter himself by then, arms wrapped around his middle, and so was half of the rest of the squad. "The verb, not the noun!" he managed to gasp out. "Kriff, Shiv. Way to slip the blade in."

Shiv was a little red-faced again, grinning sheepishly. "Yeah, well, you asked. Now you know."

There was a few moments there where things wound out, then Tango spoke up and asked, "Okay. I have to ask, but how many of you other clones have gotten laid?"

The only clones who didn't raise their hands were Six, Eight and Raze. Tango stared at the group with his mouth hanging open, and Maul was pleased to be left out of the question; he didn't feel like getting into that particular discussion. "Okay, that's-- really?!"

"Prostitute," Brody said.

"Observing medical student," Tally added.

"Tropical dive instructor." Misty grinned, tongue in cheek.

"Jazz musician in a tapcaf we went to for R&R," was Husker's answer.

Smarty cleared his throat, mumbling; when they gave him a look, he spoke up louder. "Librarian, in a holo storage archive."

"One off with a hitchhiker who talked my former sergeant into a ride in our cargo repulsorlift."

Castle gestured.

Everyone, by then, had started eying Raze. Raze just blinked back at them. "What?"

"No shenanigans?" Tally asked, eyebrows up.

Raze shook his head, shrugging nonchalantly. "Nah. Doesn't really interest me. I've gotten a lot of hugs, though."

Meanwhile, Tango was looking thoroughly crestfallen. "So much for everyone wanting to sleep with pilots."
After dinner, and after the name discussion, which had somehow ended up being a discussion on the various sexual experiences of the clones -- Maul had to admire their ingenuity in such things, if nothing else -- conversation had tapered off somewhat. Tano came back with a slightly larger, different kind of rodent, which she actually did roast over the fire and share with the rest of the squad. Shiv dozed here or there, close enough to hear his breathing, and Maul could understand the urge; the firelight was relaxing, and the night was warm enough to be comfortable, but cool enough to make being next to the fire pleasant instead of overly warm.

A few of the others retired to their small tents, leaving only a handful of them; aside to throw more wood onto the fire, no one really moved or spoke.

It wasn't the first time Maul had ever been camping in adulthood -- if one could call it that -- but it was the first time he had done so with anyone who wasn't Obi-Wan. Therefore, it made a sideways kind of sense that his thoughts drifted that way.

He was a little surprised to realize that this was the first night in weeks now that he wouldn't be sleeping next to the Jedi. And that even when duty parted them, it was rarely enough that it was now months where they shared the same bed, in the same relative place, aside from those rare partings.

He was more surprised by the sharp edge of something he could only tentatively identify as longing at that realization.

War was never a time for stability and predictability, even though he and Obi-Wan had done well with defining their own reality outside of all things, including Temple and legal status. They rarely had opportunity to interact outside of late-night talking in bed, one or the other playing pillow, and in the morning before they went off to their respective duties, but Maul had come to rely upon those times as something to ground against while the rest of his galaxy was in several kinds of upheaval. Something familiar and comparatively steady; whatever catching up he was trying to do, whatever new things he was being tested against, whatever new affections were forming, he knew that on most nights, he could lay his head on Obi-Wan's chest, or feel the years-familiar weight of Obi-Wan's head on his, and that this was the only definition for home he had ever known.

Therefore, it wasn't hard to imagine Obi-Wan curled up in bed alone, wrapped up in the blanket Bail and Breha had gifted them with and probably using all of their pillows at once, even though that made the knife-edged longing worse.

That also might have been why what happened next did.

Despite being quiet now for an hour or more, Tango had been brooding quietly on the other side of the fire. Now, he spoke up, a tone that bordered wistfulness and bitterness both, "We clones die off in droves, and I haven't even had a kiss, let alone gotten to go to bed with anyone."

"Are you kidding? You saw what General Skywalker has planned for us. And that's just the beginning."

"I'll kiss you, if it means that much to you," Tally said, clearly teasing.
Tango wrinkled his nose up. "No offense, Tally, but I'd like my first kiss to be with someone who doesn't have the same face I do."

"I could," Maul said, on something of a whim. The only person he'd ever kissed was Obi-Wan, but he figured that he was competent enough at it, anyway. At least, it would perhaps help disarm some of Tango's clear unhappiness over things.

That had Tally and Shiv both eying him with some surprise and amusement. "Well, if he doesn't care that you ate half a raw rodent earlier, anyway," Tally said, after a moment, smirking.

"He brushed his teeth for a solid ten minutes after that, though," Shiv pointed out, also smirking.

Meanwhile, Tango was squinting suspiciously. "Really?"

Shiv nodded. "Ten minutes, no kidding. Ravaged that toothbrush."

"Or ravished it?" Tally asked, snickering.

"No, I mean--" Tango trailed off, looking at Maul across the fire.

Well, there was no point to backing out of it now. Doubtless there were rules against this sort of thing, but a lack of paying attention to those had led to Maul getting his first kiss (and second) on Iloh, so he couldn't see any reason to follow them now. He shrugged to himself and got to his feet, stretching his shoulders and cracking his back (which made Tally wince), then nodded. "I don't see why not. Unless you'd rather wait for someone more suited."

Tango gave a nervous little huff, face coloring. "Uh-- no. No, that's-- that's perfectly fine." He scrambled up to his feet, dusting himself off a little more than necessary, and then there was a decidedly awkward moment where they were both standing there somewhere half-way between where they'd been sitting.

It made Maul wonder a bit if Obi-Wan had felt awkward about it on Iloh and decided that no, the Jedi was rather shameless about the whole thing, which was probably a large part of the reason why Maul had gone along with it. That and being entirely surprised by it. Then again, Maul wasn't the first person Obi-Wan had ever kissed, so perhaps that was why it had seemingly been so easy, especially with the amount of rum involved.

He was just taking note that Tango was taller than Obi-Wan by a small amount and was about to ask if Tango wanted to back out, and then Tango was kissing him.

It was tentative, a little clumsy, but not unpleasant. After a split second of noting how different it was kissing someone without a beard, Maul returned it, keeping it just as light and unassuming.

He was surprised at how red Tango was when they broke apart and he furrowed his brow, going to ask if everything was all right, but then Tango was kissing him again.

It was definitely not light, even if it was still a little clumsy, that time. Somehow, the space between them had been reduced to nothing and he ended up grabbing onto Tango's back just so he wouldn't go tumbling backwards, caught off guard.

Somewhere off to the side, Tally gave a low whistle.

Tango let go, then stepped back, huffing out a breath or two and then gesturing back over his shoulder, still very red. "Uh-- I'm gonna just-- let that be goodnight. Sir. Thanks."
Maul was taken aback that he was actually breathless after that, blinking after the retreating pilot before turning to the other two. He thought he had a question, probably one about whether or not he’d broken their pilot by accident, but wasn't quite sure how to ask it.

"See, now, I'm kind of jealous," Tally said, leaning back further and folding his hands across his midriff, grinning tongue-in-cheek.

Maul closed his mouth with a click, then narrowed his eyes. "I'm not kissing you, you threatened me with a lecture."

"It's okay, I've got an imagination. Hey, Shiv, did it get hot around here all of a sudden?"

Shiv gave a considered nod. "Definitely felt like a temperature increase in the immediate vicinity, Tally."

Realizing he was being ribbed, Maul just huffed and grabbed his gear from the ground. "Either of you. Ever."

"You willing to put a bet on that?" Tally asked, grin sharpening some.

Maul snorted right back at him, making for his own tent and not looking back. "No. Goodnight."

Admittedly, he was still having a hard time not smiling when he heard the two of them start laughing behind him; it was that laughter that made sleeping alone that night just a little bit less lonely. The laughter of the day, too; the ridiculous hunt, the squad chasing down their dinner under the tutoring of a padawan. The meanings behind names; the stories, serious or silly. It was enough for Maul to get his first inkling that the definition of home could broaden, over time, even if the heart of it remained the same and ever would.

When he fell asleep, slowly though not uneasily, it was with the remembered sound of Obi-Wan's laughter next to his head.
Chapter Summary

...or under it.

**The place: Blackbird Headquarters**
**The time: T-minus three days to training mission**
**In attendance: Everyone**
**The mission: Survival against--**

"--Tango, what are you doing?"

Tango felt his face go warm as he looked up to find Brody eying him across the briefing room table with one brow going way up. "Just having some fun. I mean, since I'm the one designated to take notes," he answered, a little more defensively than he meant to. But he hadn't known that he was actually reading aloud. "I don't know why I'm the one who has to."

"We voted on it," Smarty tossed in, absently, with his face stuck in one of his eight datapads; he had one helluva start on a beard, but this was the first time in days that he seemed to be-- well, not stewing in deep despair about their training mission.

Tango made an unhappy noise; yeah, okay, they voted on it and he got voted in as the guy who took the notes this time around, because their brainstorming sessions tended to get chaotic and someone needed to keep track of all of the ideas, but at least they could let him be creative about it. It wasn't like anyone outside was going to be reading it.

Just to deflect the attention, he jerked his chin in the direction of Smarty's collection of datapads. "You got something?"

Next to Smarty, Castle was sucking down caf like it was going out of style, only slightly less scruffy looking. He was the one who answered, voice gravelly from a lack of sleep, "Might do. I'm running all these through a structural soundness algorithm, but it doesn't like the natural variables at all."

Across the room, in deep head-bent discussion with Shiv, Maul paused and looked over at them. He was probably just taking note of what Castle was saying, but Tango still felt himself flush even worse, as if the mere possibility of their CO making eye contact with him was enough to get his motor running. He tried to chase the feeling away by scrubbing his hand over his face and redoubling his effort to pay attention to the notes he wasn't taking yet.

"Someone has it bad," Tally whispered aside, smugly, and then just barely got his leg out of the way before Tango could kick him under the table. "So bad."

Tango didn't part his teeth to answer, "Shut. Up."

Tally smirked back, but at least he did shut up; he had his own work to do, though like the rest of them, they wouldn't be able to finalize anything until they had all of the pieces together and something of a tentative plan.
"All right, what do we have?" Shiv asked, finally coming over to the table, settling himself down in his usual spot.

"A whole lot of whiskey-tango-fynock," Husker answered, pointing to Smarty, and completely ignoring the eyeroll that Tango responded with.

Smarty looked up like he had been caught doing something illegal, then blew a breath out and interfaced his datapad with the table's central projector. "He's not wrong."

When the display came up in its three dimensional glory, rotating around with notes and arrows scribbled in aurebesh, it was Eight who asked, incredulously, on behalf of the uninitiated: "What the frip?"

The objective was about as basic as it could get: Capture the flag.

The rest of it--

Skywalker had set the scenario on one of the Republic's small, barely inhabited planets. It wasn't too big a surprise which one, because it was one the Grand Army used for training exercises before; Shiv and Husker had both been on it, in different periods, for their cold-weather survival training. It had no native sentients, only a couple of small settlements of miners, and there was no one disputing its use for such things. It didn't even have a name; it was only known by its designation, which was Bravo-984.

Anyway, it was clear pretty much from the outset that they were being set up to fail. And fail hard.

Smarty had been chewing himself up now, absent a brief break for that pre-training-training-mission with Tano, since he got his first look at the cracked files. It was a nightmare scenario; a well-fortified bunker smack in the middle of a genuinely inhospitable mountain range, where if the anti-aircraft and anti-personnel measures didn't get them, the environment just might. Even Maul seemed a little distraught -- hard as it was to read his face -- by the whole thing, given the grimace he gave when he saw what this was going to entail.

The anti-personnel measures were all non-lethal; it was obvious Skywalker didn't want to kill any of them, just leave them to slink back failures. Even the self-deploying stun grenades, which would register them as taken out of the scenario, were set in places where they wouldn't fall off a mountainside or something if they were hit. But there were an overwhelming number of them, set in every single accessible mountain pass and at several more points besides. According to the schematics that were in those now-cracked files, the launchers not only scanned for heat signatures -- easily enough dealt with -- but also motion patterns and certain sounds. Even if half of them failed -- and that was unlikely -- there were still more than enough to wreck the Blackbirds.

Especially since they were rigged to signal the bunker if they were set off, which would allow a team of soldiers to come out and catch them.

If they did manage to make it to the bunker, there were passive and active scanning towers and a detachment of 501st clones, including a couple of ARCs, to mop up whoever had made it through the minefield of stun grenades.
Of course, at any point they could flip the switch on the mission and call it off; if any of them were injured or if they were in genuine danger, all they had to do was activate their distress beacons and they would be picked up post-haste by the emergency forces from the bunker, forfeiting the scenario. Smarty appreciated that, even if he could also see how confidence-shattering it would be for all of them to have to go that route.

It was Maul who came up with the idea Smarty had turned into his life's mission, ultimately; almost off-handedly, right before their little field trip, he'd commented aside that since going over the mountains might prove impossible, then perhaps going under them would work. It sounded crazy at the time, but Smarty had idly gone and researched based on it and--

It was still crazy, but Smarty thought maybe it was a crazy General Skywalker hadn't thought of.

"Six hundred years ago, give or take a decade, the Sheenan Mining Company did an in-depth geological survey on Bravo-984. I had to go incredibly far back to find it, and I found it in the Republic's mining permit request archives; it hasn't been cataloged anywhere else that I could find, but thanks to Brody, I did manage to get complete copies instead of just the briefs," Smarty said, bringing up the broad-view survey map next to the projected crucible they were going to be heading into in a few days.

Six was the one who caught on first, grinning. "If it wasn't anywhere else, what do you think the chances are that General Skywalker knows nothing about it?"

"Fabulous," Tally said, with a sharp grin of his own. "I’d throw in all my credits if that was the bet."

"Right." Smarty could almost feel the buzz of excitement, like electricity, roll through the room as everyone started grasping the implications of what he'd found. "They were looking to mine in the mountains and they did get approved to do it; it turned out that there wasn't much there, but they didn't know that when they started digging. The company's long since gone under and their internal records were lost, but according to that geological survey, there's every chance that the logical path their tunneling would have taken will get us almost three quarters of the way to the bunker. Going off of all recorded data since then, Bravo-984 is a very stable world, with no notable seismic activity; those tunnels are likely to still be there."

"So, basically, we're looking at possibly going into a bunch of abandoned mining tunnels in the hopes we'll get close enough to make a run on it?" Tally asked, tone bordering both intrigue and skepticism, though it was in a good-humored way that suggested he was mostly just making sure they had all their banthas in the herd.

The enemy's advocate was a role the medic often played, but Smarty liked it. It kept him on his toes and challenged him, and Tally was a keen debate partner; thankfully, Smarty came prepared because of those debates. "What we're going into would be the natural cavern system that already existed when they did their geological survey, and using backwards engineering--" he nodded to Castle, "--taking the path that the miners would have most likely taken, using the geographical features already in place, in order to do their exploratory tunneling. It's not a guarantee and this is potentially risky, but most of the danger exists in the possible flooding of the tunnels and not in the caverns themselves. If we fail to find a safe path forward, we can backtrack and try an alternate route."
Misty cut in there; he leaned forward and put his elbows down on the table, adding, "There are sections, from what we can guess, where tunnels might have flooded. The underground temperature is just above freezing; in the case of a flooded tunnel, it's possible for us to swim for it, but it would require us to carry yet more gear on top of the dry survival gear we're already going to be carrying, and obviously we're gonna have to be really well coordinated if we attempt anything like that."

"That depends," Shiv said, shaking his head. "The equipment, I mean. We're going to be in cold assault armor, the Lieu and I have already requisitioned it. It's easy to modify it to work with the water-rebreather and it's already waterproofed. We should only have to carry fins, provided we're not going to be underwater for too long."

Misty looked skeptical. "That's some pretty heavy armor to be swimming in, Sarge. We'd need to up the buoyancy somehow, or we'll be exhausted within minutes."

"I agree." Tally rapped his knuckles on the table lightly. "A rebreather'll keep you alive if you founder and sink, but if no one else can get you, then you'll eventually suffocate to death when it can't scrub the air anymore."

"On the other hand, no one wants to carry around twelve separate propulsion systems, either."

"Weight's going to be a consideration whichever way we go," Maul said; otherwise, he had just been watching them handle the briefing quietly. "We can abandon equipment with a marker for later retrieval, but it's easier if we can minimize it from the outset."

"There are portable, self-inflating floats," Misty suggested. "A good life-vest is pretty light weight, too. I'm just not sure those would be enough, considering the weight of the cold assault armor otherwise, and it'll make it even harder to move."

"Why not a relay?" Husker pointed. "We're not talkin' kilometers of flooded tunnels. We carry enough gear for one or two guys to swim underwater and enough rope for the rest to pull themselves through. Two personal water-jets versus twelve, and once we're in the open, we can just abandon them like the Lieu says."

Shiv was frowning as he tapped into the datapad he had in front of him; after a moment, an inventory list in-progress jumped up as a third panel over the table. "Right now, we're allotting for two white-out tents, eleven sets of cold assault armor -- since a certain party both won't wear it and also isn't tall enough to fit into it -- one full dry-suit with a helmet, a field medic's kit, four large warming blankets, enough cold-weather rations so we can replace the ridiculous amount of calories we're going to burn, three datapads and three wireless broadcasters, all necessary mountaineering gear and now we've got longer ropes and water-jets. We're pushing it on the amount of stuff we're going to be trying to get through."

If Maul minded being poked about the armor (or height) issue, it didn't show on his face; then again, from what Smarty could tell, he had gotten rapidly used to Shiv ribbing him regularly and probably took it with a grain of salt. Or a bucket of it. "Said certain party is more than capable of carrying a large amount of gear, if it's packed correctly, and also doesn't have to worry about the weight of the cold assault armor in addition," he said, dryly.

"Don't forget bags we can seal our non-waterproofed gear into," Husker added, pointing to Shiv's datapad. "The kinds with anchor points."

Shiv sighed and added those to the list, then ran the numbers. It was a lot to carry for one squad on foot, no denying that; Smarty could already see where that would slow them down, though probably not quite enough for them to go over their allotted ten days.
"What's the backup plan if this one doesn't work?" Tally asked, picking up his own datapad, probably to work on what the best weight distribution would be, in order to save their backs from stress injury. "And what are we going to do about the last stretch between where we hope we're getting out of the underground and the bunker?"

Maul lifted a hand and all eight of Smarty's datapads rose smoothly off of the table; the lieutenant just quirked his brow as he held them there. "We improvise. There are only between three and six launchers, depending on our chosen path to the bunker, from the intended exit point. If, however, we have to backtrack to go over the mountains, then we'll likely have to get even more-- creative in our strategy." He set them back down again, just as smoothly, and Smarty was wondering just how close Maul had to be to something to pull that off.

But remote triggering a launcher -- or a dozen -- would definitely keep the soldiers in the bunker hopping, chasing the shadows the Blackbirds were supposed to be. Though, the risk of being spotted was still a hell of a lot higher the longer they were out in the open, regardless.

Tango picked his jaw up off of the table from the little Force display there, then bent his head to the notes he was supposed to be taking, clearing his throat. "Everyone send me what they've got, and I'll, uh-- format it so we're all on the same page."

There was one thing Tally could definitely say for all of the Blackbirds: They were some of the least risk-averse clones he'd met outside of the commandos. He could see about a dozen ways that trying to go under a mountain range could go wrong, but the moment that the possibility was out into the open, they were all immediately figuring out how to make it work, and Tally could really do no differently.

As if it was going to be an adventure and not a grueling mission they were supposed to fail at.

He went over the schematics for the cold assault armor and he was pretty sure that even though they were going to smell pretty bad when this was over, they would at least be warm enough. The white-out tents would be a little packed for having six people in each, but they were insulated enough to keep heat from escaping, too. The rations were going to be the dense, somewhat nasty-tasting high calorie kind, but Tally made sure to throw in some hot drink packets to go with the water purification tablets that were standard and enough individual heating pads to warm hands at one setting or warm canteens at another.

His main part in it was the same as it always was: Keep everyone alive and healthy.

"You wanted to see me?" Maul asked, after he wove his way through the Negotiator's medical bay back to the area where the battalion's medics were given space to store their supplies and deal with the minor injuries that didn't require a higher up or a bed.

"Yes, sir." Tally turned and leaned on the counter, gesturing to his CO's cybernetic legs. "How do those hold up in the extreme cold?"

Maul eyed him, crossing his arms -- something Tally had already figured out was a pretty sure sign of some kind of uncertainty or insecurity -- before answering, "Well enough. I didn't have any trouble, functionally, on Ensolica."
"Over four years ago, right?" Tally had already known about that mission, it was in the files he'd gotten at the beginning of this assignment, though since there hadn't been any injuries (at least, not any reported), all he knew was that it had taken place. "How did you protect the hydraulics then?"

"The same way you would protect your legs without armor: Thermal leggings, good socks and good boots." A little edge crept into Maul's voice, just enough to clip his words.

Tally guessed that was probably a signal he ought to cut to the point, and so he did. "I'm not trying to sound any alarms, sir. But those are civilian technology; they aren't shielded like they woulda been had they been made for a battlefield. And they're ten years old now. I know they haven't given you any trouble yet, but I'm worried that under these kinds of extreme conditions, their age and make are gonna come into play. This is gonna be pushing their limits pretty hard."

There was a moment there, then Maul huffed once, not quite a laugh. "I don't exactly have a more suitable set I can use instead, Tally. This is what I have, ergo, this is what I'll go on this mission with. If you've any suggestions that fall within those facts, then you'd best speak up now; otherwise, I have other things I need to be doing."

The tone wasn't mean, but it was businesslike. Tally supposed that he understood that, too; being questioned about your suitability for a mission you didn't ask for by a medic who hadn't lived with your gear for ten years would probably be a little galling. As such, he offered back a half-grin. "Point taken. Are you able to change the hydraulic fluid to something with a lower freezing point and better viscosity for these temperatures?"

"I have very limited access to their internal workings, frankly, and I'd rather not trigger any of the security measures by trying to do more than adjust the tension levels on the joints, which I have done and could do again, if necessary. In the meantime, the usual methods will do." Maul never looked away; he wasn't glaring, but he clearly was ready to be done discussing this. His next question was pointed: "Are we finished?"

Tally didn't like any of that -- who sent a soldier out without at least giving them access to repair their own cybernetics? And what happened if there was catastrophic damage or failure in the field? -- but if there was anything he could do about it, Maul wasn't going to be able to help him.

Especially not in the time frame they had to work with.

Tally would just have to keep an eye on it and work out whether there was a passive way to do damage control, if it became necessary. He nodded, then, pressing his mouth into an apologetic line. "Sorry, sir. That's all I needed."

Maul nodded back and turned for the door; after two steps, he paused, but whatever he might have said ended up being lost to a shake of his head, and then he was gone again.

Tally went back to his work, pushing aside his worries for the time being to focus on the rest of the mission.
Chapter Summary

Plans, psyches, jaws? All of the above!
Or: Obi-Wan finds out what his darling has been up to with his squad, and is suitably god-smacked.

When Obi-Wan received his copy of the brief for the Blackbirds' training run, his heart hit his boots and then felt like it maybe went through the decking under them, too.

It wasn't the brief itself. That was all in order; it was laid out like a standard (if difficult) training mission. Location, personnel, objective and safety precautions were all included, as well as the required map. A list of recommended supplies for the squad was also included; Obi-Wan was a little amused for a moment that Maul and Shiv had already apparently heard rumors or otherwise, because they had already requisitioned half or more of the supplies, the ones that were harder to source, before the brief was even received. On the surface, the whole thing looked perfectly above-board.

Until Obi-Wan saw who the overseeing officer was.

He had done a fair job keeping Anakin and Maul out of one another's sight line; it wasn't terribly hard, now that Maul had something to do that wasn't haunting Obi-Wan's shadow. The only direct bridge between them aside Obi-Wan was Ahsoka; she had started showing up whenever they were in range of one another to take lessons in teräs käsi, and while Obi-Wan was cringing in anticipation of the day that Anakin found out about it, he turned a blind eye because from what few times he had seen them interact, Maul and Ahsoka had apparently reached a fair level of mutual respect with one another.

He'd even asked Anakin if he, himself, could 'borrow' her, only to send her off to train with the Blackbirds.

But all of that had been clandestine; Anakin didn't know about it, because if he did, Obi-Wan would have had his ears gnawed off the side of his head by now. And really, what he was allowing was poor form, in terms of tradition; the master was in charge of the padawan's education, had always been, and they were circumventing that. And Anakin did care for Ahsoka, more as time went on, bonding with her; Obi-Wan might have been the only Jedi in the Order who not only tacitly approved of but also encouraged that attachment and affection.

Still, even accounting for that, Obi-Wan wasn't sorry that she and Maul were interacting regularly. If there was anyone who could offer a counter-balance, even a small one, for Anakin's daredevil brilliance it was Maul, who was perfectly capable of sowing chaos, but who tended to temper it with a lot of pragmatism and common sense. If Anakin was the one who would destroy a power plant to shut down an unruly appliance, Maul was the one who would just pull the plug. Ahsoka could use some of that tempering influence, and Obi-Wan was too busy most of the time to provide more than the occasional sounding board or gentle suggestion.

Digression aside, though, there was no reason why Anakin should have any current, immediate grudge against Maul. But looking at that training brief, even as innocuous as it seemed, Obi-Wan couldn't shake the feeling of dread.
Having anything like a life outside of military strategy, troop movements and galaxy-wide implications was hard. In any given day, Obi-Wan was doing so many things at once that he sometimes felt like he'd ceased to be a person and had just become the term 'general' incarnate. The only times when he could remember that he was a man and not a figurehead were those times with Maul; those moments where they talked before falling asleep in bed, tangled up in one another, or those moments where they woke up and fell into a domestic morning routine that felt so much more familiar than a war. Even the rare sparring session, made much easier now for the fact Maul was allowed to carry his saberstaff openly, was a reprieve from everything else.

Still, Obi-Wan definitely took the time to track his darling down after reading that training mission brief.

"Oh! General!" Raze rocketed to his feet, when Obi-Wan slipped into Briefing Room 3 -- after convincing the door that he was actually General Obi-Wan Kenobi and allowed anywhere he wanted to go on his own ship! -- and then immediately put his body between Obi-Wan and the counter where...

There was the caf maker that had gone missing from the galley, and what looked to be a hot plate. There were pods of caf, some tea in a tin and some-- cookies? Cookies. There was a bottle of whiskey with about a third left, and a small but apparently growing collection of mugs neatly hung on hooks on the wall over the counter. Obi-Wan boggled for a moment at the amount of 'personalization' the Blackbirds had done. He had known they all gravitated to the room as their squad room, he'd even made sure no one else was scheduled to use it, but he--

Actually, no. He wasn't that surprised by it. Despite his anxiety and the reason why he was there, he failed to completely swallow the laugh that bubbled up, not only for their contraband, but for the fact that Raze was trying to block the view with a body too small to do so.

"We can explain," Raze said, his still-boyish face going steadily darker.

"Queen Breha sent the cookies," Maul said, casually, from where he had been practically in a huddle with Shiv, Tally, Smarty, Castle and Misty across the room. "Make yourself at home."

Obi-Wan quit trying to stifle his own laughter and busted up, startling the clones -- was it really so rare that they'd seen him smile? -- and shook his head, face aching for the broadness of his grin. The urge to say something unforgivably revealing and domestic was a little easier to hold back, but not much, and when Raze sheepishly brought him some cookies in a napkin and a cup of caf, he took it and found a seat at the table.

"So, uh, what brings you by, sir?" Tango asked, giving up on trying to hide his cookies behind his mug.

"I need to borrow your lieutenant for a short time," Obi-Wan said, eyeing the cookies he'd been given himself and wondering if Breha had baked them. He wouldn't have been surprised, given her affection for Maul, if she had done so and sent them in a care package. He was almost jealous; they certainly looked good, and after a moment, he picked one up and bit into it and then had to stop himself from closing his eyes to moan at the taste.

He might have taken advantage of his privilege for the sake of having quarters large enough to share with Maul, but he ate no better than his troops, and the taste of real food on his tongue after only the rare cooked meal was amazing.

When he looked again, he was getting a bunch of soft looks from the Blackbirds, and Obi-Wan's heart twinged in ache at the fact that these men -- his darling's squad -- apparently found something
as simple as him enjoying a cookie to be worth a fond look.

"It's okay, sir, we all looked like that when we opened the box," Raze offered helpfully, sitting back in his seat at the table.

It was tempting to get sheepish, but Obi-Wan didn't allow himself to, and instead gestured to the small, glittering green earrings Raze was wearing. "When did you get your ears pierced?" he asked, both curiosity and a chance to interact while waiting for Maul to wrap up whatever mission-related brainstorming he was doing now.

"A few weeks ago." Raze grinned back, shoulders hunching in a frankly cute shrug. "Tally did it for me. I'm trying to talk the Lieu into getting his done, but he hasn't given in... yet, anyway."

Obi-Wan vaguely remembered that Maul had once had one of his ears pierced, but it was before his capture. Though, he could easily imagine that any jewel would look good in those black earlobes and quietly hoped Raze succeeded in his efforts. "I like them," Obi-Wan offered back, and grinned at the beaming smile he got in turn.

Maul made it back over before Obi-Wan was finished with his second cookie and eyed him. "You wanted a word?"

The reminder of why he was here settled in like a shroud, heavy and uncomfortable, and Obi-Wan slid his untouched third cookie over to Raze before rising to his feet. "Yes, I do," he said, tipping his head towards the door in request.

If Maul suspected anything, it wasn't evident on his face; he nodded and followed Obi-Wan out into the hallway, and Obi-Wan's heart gave another little ache when Maul brushed fingers against his hand in a subtle little show of affection that would doubtless look accidental, before they fell into step to walk together.

Obi-Wan would prefer to make it back to their quarters, but he didn't want to leave Maul guessing for too long, either. So, eventually, he just said, "I'm thinking of cancelling your squad's training mission."

That stiffened Maul's shoulders and he looked over in both surprise and displeasure. "Why?"

There was little point to hedging. Obi-Wan gave back an apologetic look. "Anakin's in charge of it. I don't think that's wise, to say the least."

"Oh." Maul's reaction sent Obi-Wan's eyebrows shooting up; his gaze skated away in what looked to be dangerously close to sheepishness. "I already know that. As well as what it entails, including--" A beat, and then he huffed out and finished, "--including all of his tactical planning, troop placements, armaments and defenses. As well as at least one way to potentially circumvent most of those."

Obi-Wan tried to absorb that, but he was honestly a little too jaw-dropped to do so in any elegant manner. He gaped for a moment more, then fell quiet so they could get back to their own space; this was clearly going to be a conversation they should hold well away from any potential eavesdropping. When they got through the door of their quarters, he turned and locked it and then eyed Maul, who somehow managed to pull off looking both defiant and guilty at once. "How?" Obi-Wan asked, a little incredulous. (Though, he did notice he had a smaller box of cookies sitting on the counter with his name on it.)

It quite said something that Maul was acting like he had fire-beetles crawling up his spine; he sort of hunched his shoulders inwards a little bit, still not exactly making eye contact. "We-- acquired his
planning files."
"Acquired."
"Clandestinely."

Obi-Wan had to pick his jaw up a second time. "How?"

Somehow, Maul managed to look even more guilty. Guilt was not exactly something Obi-Wan associated with his darling, so he wasn't sure how to feel about it; on one part, it was worrying, but on the other, seeing that handsome face painted in an expression which usually belonged on initiates who were caught with their hands or other grasping appendages in the sweets jar made him want to laugh and not stop for awhile. Maul actually winced, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "I-- made a deal with Tano, some weeks ago. Her proposal, after a lesson in teräs käsi, was that she would bring me the information and I would train her in dueling."

And then a third time.

"I agreed, but wanted it to be a training exercise for the Blackbirds to aquire the related files, so I asked Tano to bio-lock the information to Skywalker and insert them into the Jedi Temple's system." Maul gestured, then started pacing, apparently not noticing that Obi-Wan was having trouble with the hinges of his jaw right now. "I then told Brody about it and asked him to slice into the Temple's systems to retrieve them. In the meantime, I managed to scavenge enough parts to build EL-10, given that Tano and I would have little time for me to properly hold up my end of the bargain; that was when I asked you for my files from LiMerge, so that I could program EL-10 off of my former training droids."

Even as Obi-Wan was trying to grasp the sheer intricacy and illegality of the plan, he couldn't deny some admiration for it. Maul could have easily just taken the files and run with it, but like any good teacher, he'd instead identified a learning opportunity for his squad and made use of it.

He just happened to commit any number of crimes while doing so, and apparently without any of them getting caught.

"Brody successfully retrieved the files and the squad discovered they were bio-locked; I didn't tell them that was under my orders. They proceeded to collaborate on how they could acquire the pieces to unlock them; I mostly left them to it, though when they needed some-- contraband for it, I called Bail."

Obi-Wan slapped his hands over his mouth. Maul winced even more graphically, but gamely continued his explanation. "Bail sent two cases of suitable whiskey; that was why Shiv and I left the Negotiator to go to the supply depot, so that we could pick it up. Tally went over to the Resolute and took up a game of sabacc with some of the 501st, and threw the game intentionally in order to lose the whiskey, minus two bottles Tango requested for our victory, if it was indeed a victory. In the meantime, Husker, Six and Eight managed to get Skywalker's voice print and retinal scan, the latter by back-scanning on the calibration sequence of a pair of tactical binoculars." Maul paced another lap, gesturing again. "Brody had ensconced himself in a janitorial closet and had sliced into the Resolute's intranet, moving Skywalker's scheduled inspection of the troop quarters up by a day, after Tally delivered the whiskey. Husker managed to gain himself an invite to the private party amongst his former friends and they were apparently only getting started when Skywalker came to do the inspection."

"You... got Anakin drunk," Obi-Wan breathed out, caught somewhere between wanting to hyperventilate and wanting to laugh until he fell over. "Oh, darling."
Maul flung his hand up, but it wasn't agitation so much as an attempt to ward off the accusation. Obi-Wan was sure that if Maul had the ability, he'd be blushing right now. "I did not. Skywalker got Skywalker drunk, we just happened to maneuver it such that it would be easy for him to do so. It worked, and Husker kindly escorted him back to his quarters; Smarty was in the corridor and sticky-gelled the thumb-print reader on Skywalker's quarters in order to obtain his print. Apparently, Skywalker was too drunk to really notice and Smarty came and 'fixed' the problem, though not before Skywalker informed Husker and Smarty about my status as the Order's prisoner."

That sobered Obi-Wan rather quickly; his face fell and he frowned. "How did the Blackbirds take it?" He had taken both Tally and Shiv aside very early to explain things, and both the sergeant and medic had handled it without any real trouble, but it hadn't seemed prudent to tell the rest until such time as they were more cohesive as a squad.

"Well." Maul finally stopped pacing, expression settling into something easily recognizable as a quiet pride. "They asked questions, I answered them and aside Raze apparently thinking this gives them, ah-- some manner of rogue credibility, it hasn't come up again."

Obi-Wan nodded, breathing out a sigh of relief. He'd had a feeling that the Blackbirds would take it all right when the time came, he had been so very careful to choose that squad not only based on their specialties, but on their personality profiles -- in the cases of Six and Eight, from Master Ti's personal notes -- but it was something he hadn't anticipated coming out so early on. Then something else occurred, and his brow furrowed. "How did you get enough DNA to unlock the last piece of the bio-lock?"

"Oh. Tally gave Smarty a biopsy kit, and while Skywalker was drunkenly snoring in his bunk, Smarty took a sample from just above where his arm was cut off." Maul didn't seem to think that was any big deal, though when Obi-Wan's eyes went saucer-wide, he paused and looked back warily. "It was easier than perhaps snatching a handful of his hair out by the roots. Or some other such action."

After a moment more of numbering the charges that could be brought against Maul and the Blackbirds just for this single adventure in espionage, Obi-Wan managed to finally properly re-hinge his jaw. "--and that's how you know about the mission."

Maul just nodded back, then pressed his mouth into a rueful line. "I won't blame you if I end up on the couch tonight."

The thought of relegating Maul to the couch for this hadn't even occurred; Obi-Wan would sooner cut off one of his own legs than give up a night sleeping with his other-half. In fact, it was quite the effort for Obi-Wan to not grab Maul and kiss him until he was panting for air.

He held up a hand, asking for a moment to just-- grasp all of this, and the more he thought about it, the more brilliant it became. The layers of planning and the intentions behind it; the unorthodox methodology and the clever way they had pulled it all off, all before their first official training mission. He had known the Blackbirds would likely be quite unconventional just because of who they were, but he was a little amazed at how quickly they had gone and proven it.

Of course, that reminded Obi-Wan that said training mission was still in the air.

"Since I have only the brief to go on," he asked, "how bad is it?"

Maul quirked his brow. "It's designed to see us fail, and rather badly. I doubt the commandos often saw training missions of this type. But despite that, I think we're equal to it."

"I don't doubt you are, but it hardly seems fair to send you into a scenario where you're intended to
lose," Obi-Wan said, gently. "The point was supposed to be training; I think it might be wise to bypass this and make sure your squad is going to be treated fairly."

Maul shook his head, having apparently regained his ability to look Obi-Wan in the eye. "We've been idling for training now for months; even if it's for a larger purpose, we need to be able to act and soon, in the capacity that the squad was assembled for. There will be plenty of situations in the future that we face where we are against overwhelming odds and have little more than our wits to fall back on. Skywalker means to see my ruin, but if I back down, it will just delay us getting into the fight sooner. If it proves to be genuinely dangerous to my squad, I will forfeit the mission for their sakes, but until then, I think we should take the challenge head-on and then shove it down his throat."

The words were calmly delivered, all just statements of intent and fact, but Obi-Wan could hear the subtle note of imploring in there, too.

The most damning part was, Obi-Wan could see all of the threads of Maul's reasoning; could see why Maul would rather just go and tackle this now, instead of hope for a chance for the Blackbirds to prove their mettle later. Having a general step in would likely lead to all sorts of rumors that no one wanted to deal with, too.

As he so often did, Maul took the challenge presented and then he had set about finding a way to beat it, and went to quite some interesting unorthodox solutions while doing so, and all the while he did so as teacher, if not perhaps commander, of his squad. And his squad answered it with cleverness and cohesion and were prepared to follow Maul even into a situation as bad as this one seemed to be.

Taking them out of the fight before it even started would make all of that work seem poisoned.

Obi-Wan took a breath, then another, and practiced yet again his lessons learned on Zigoola. "All right, darling. I'll give you any supplies you request in the next two days, no questions asked, and--"

He wasn't sure how to finish that statement, but the tangle of feelings -- love and pride and worry and a thousand others -- that he felt when Maul huffed in relief and practically sagged in place was poignant in its strength. And instead of bothering to say anything more, Obi-Wan finally gave into his urge to laugh; at the scheming and the cunning and the sheer audacity of what they'd already accomplished.

And he also gave into the urge to kiss Maul breathless, too.

They parted ways after; Maul back to his squad, Obi-Wan back to the rest of his neverending duties, where having the space in his mind to think about anything outside of the war was precious and scarce. He took every request the Blackbirds sent and made sure to fill it exactly as requested, and over the next two nights, he spent a few more minutes than normal just laying awake, holding Maul tight, something to ward against the ache of the time they would be apart and against the worry he was certain to feel.

On the last morning, Obi-Wan made Maul tea and stuck it in a covered mug, tucked a pair of cookies in plastic in the pocket of his white parka, and then adjusted the collar of it after Maul pulled it on.
On the sleeve was the pale gray variation of the Blackbirds' patch, and seeing it made Obi-Wan smile.

"Make him regret it, darling," he said, holding on for one more moment to the front of that parka just to steal a kiss.

Maul kissed him back, then flashed a grin, lopsided and a little fierce at once. "I intend to. I'll see you in a few weeks; be safe until then, Obi-Wan."

"I will be." Obi-Wan took a breath and then stepped back. "I love you."

It was only the third -- perhaps fourth, if he'd actually said it while falling asleep instead of just thought it -- time that Obi-Wan had spoken those words. In that moment, he felt them so deeply that they rang against his soul like a bell.

Maul was always more awkward with it, but no less heartfelt. "I love you, too," he said, after a moment, before picking up his pack to throw over a shoulder; he left without a backwards glance, all purpose and nerve.

*Maybe try being proud of him, instead*, Bail had said, on Zigoola, those months ago.

*I am*, Obi-Wan had answered then.

He was every bit of the same now, too.
"Tighten your harnesses, guys, this is gonna be a rough descent."

"Oh, frip-- Tango--"

"Can't you hold us steady?!"

"You try to set a courier down in the middle of a blizzard!"

"I don't feel so good..."

"Raze, I swear, you hurl on me and I won't step foot off this frippin' ship until you hand-scrub my armor!"

"Deep breaths, Raze. Here, pass this down; Eight, stick it on his neck."

"What is it?"

"Motion sickness patch."

"--thanks, Tally."

"Wow, boys, listen to that wind."

"I hate everything."

Maul watched, gaze pinging around to each speaker -- absent Tango, who was piloting -- and while he was used to the Blackbirds bantering, he had never heard them *bickering* like this before. It was a little bit alarming, so he leaned over, against the harness keeping him otherwise pinned into place on the bucking courier, and asked Shiv quietly, "Are they angry?"

Shiv glanced over, amused, though his expression softened quickly. "Nah, sir. Just being brothers."
Maul still didn't get it -- and the arguing and complaining didn't abate, though Raze had closed his eyes with his head leaned back, complexion no longer quite so sickly -- but he didn't exactly have all that much experience with brothers himself, so he just nodded and took Shiv's word for it.

The lights flickered when a particularly hard gust buffeted their ship, silencing the Blackbirds for a moment.

But only a moment.

"What the hell, Tango, why not let us get blown into the side of a mountain?!"

"SHUT. THE FRIP. UP!!"

"Ooh, testy."

"Brody, if you keep whining at Tango, I'm going to stunbolt you."

"Guys, it's just nerves, can't we please get along?"

"Ah, kriff, Raze, don't look like that, we don't mean it."

"Guys? I have to go to the 'fresher."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they landed; Six bolted for the 'fresher and the rest of the squad stretched as much as they were able to while wearing most of their cold assault armor. And all of them listened to the wind howling outside, shrieking against the ship and making it clear that their disembarking would be at least four times as unpleasant as their descent had been.

The motion sickness patch had apparently had some kind of sedative effect on Raze; he kept mixing up the order of things, motion slow, until Maul intervened, pulling the insulating hood over Raze's spiky hair before Raze managed to pull the specialized bucket on without it. "Are you going to be able to walk?"

Raze blinked back at him sleepily, though he obligingly lifted his chin some so his hood could be fitted under it. "Yessir, I'm just-- a little drowsy."

It had become quickly clear that in addition to having the attention span of a child, Raze was incredibly physical. He was the first one to sling an arm around a brother's shoulders, or to lean against someone. Even Maul hadn't escaped this bizarre facet of the demo expert's personality; case in point, once his hood was on, Raze leaned into Maul and plunked his brow against the top of Maul's shoulder, mumbling his gratitude.

Maul just endured it, though after a moment he patted on the back of Raze's head awkwardly. "You need to get your helmet on, you can't sleep here."

"I like the parka better than the armor, sir, it's much softer and not as heavy," Raze said, not yet picking his head up.

Maul caught half his squad watching this, some of them from behind their helmets, the neck-less effect of them rather unnerving. "The armor has an environmental system in it. Raze--"
"Okay, I'm up." Raze straightened himself up and thankfully Tally came over and got him the rest of the way suited up, which gave Maul a few moments to sort himself out.

Even as Tally was manhandling Raze into his helmet and arranging the windbreak, he was saying, "Taking bets on this ship being buried by the end of the day."

"No one bets with you. At least, no one with any sense. Besides, what do we even own to bet?" Brody asked, skeptically. "We don't even own our clothes."

That had Maul raising a brow; even his few possessions were at least his, though he was well-aware that they could be taken away from him if he displeased the wrong person enough. But then again, he was a prisoner, whereas the troops were fighting for the Republic. "What about your contraband?" he asked, before he had a chance to really think about it.

"Fleeting." Tally patted the top of Raze's bucket, then shook his head and picked up his own. "Hard to get, we lose it if we get caught and, depending on who's doing the catching, we get into trouble. I mean, I still have it, but it's not the same thing as betting a paycheck."

"But at least we get to paint our armor," Misty commented, voice vaguely distorted from behind his faceplate, and there was no placing that tone on the spectrum between sarcastic and genuine.

Maul nodded back, half-absently, still chewing over the thought as he finished getting ready to go out into the cold himself.

Tango had set them down as close as he could to their entry point into the mountain range, bringing the courier down in the valley between two peaks despite the vicious winds he'd had to wrestle the ship against, but there was still a long hike to get to where they were hoping an old mining tunnel was open enough to get into. Castle was in the lead; the scanner he held had a limited range, but he also had the contour maps on his heads up display and was the best equipped of the squad to be able to read both of those things in order to determine where they were precisely without having to rely on the satellites.

Maul figured that if they had the idea of using the satellites to guide them, then Skywalker's cohort would be able to track them by the same; while it was technically against the unspoken sportsmanship of training exercises (at least according to Shiv), Maul thought that likely Skywalker had thrown sportsmanship to the wind when he designed this scenario and therefore any paranoia was well founded.

So, he had Brody slice the geosynch satellites -- which had no serious tactical value while surrounding a non-strategic world and were therefore very easy to get into -- and set up a series of scrambled pings coming from all over Bravo-984 before they left the ship. If Skywalker's troops were also sliced into the system intending to use it to track the Blackbirds, then it would look like the Blackbirds were ghosts, flying around the globe faster than the sound barrier. And if Skywalker's troops weren't watching them that way, then nothing much was ventured nor gained.

It was a strange thing for Maul to actually listen to his own paranoia. He had spent the past number of years trying to disarm it enough to function without checking every corner of every room compulsively, without stiffening for a fight the moment someone came into his space. Willingly
giving it any additional rein now made his skin prickle in anticipation of disaster.

The blizzard hadn't let up any; walking into the winds shearing down the mountains and blowing snow ahead of it meant that they had to walk close together or risk losing each other. Maul couldn't see Castle in the lead, nor Shiv bringing up the rear; for that matter, he could barely see Tango directly ahead of him. The effort of walking through snow would have had his legs burning, had he actual muscle and bone; given how quiet they were even over the radio, the Blackbirds likely were feeling the strain of it and didn't want to waste any breath. The only time anyone spoke up, it was checking in that they were all still together, or occasionally Tally giving Raze a nudge to wake up.

Even without feeling the burn in his legs, Maul could feel the effort; he was carrying as much as Tally would allow him to, taking advantage of said cybernetics, and the only way to do that was to drop his head like a pack animal in a harness and lean into the wind.

It was somewhere around the fifth hour when Castle started relaying back how close they were getting. Maul had some knowledge of how to read contour maps, but nothing the same as the combat engineer; it seemed, then, to be intuitive to hand the leading off to the one equipped for it. Listening to Castle calmly reciting distance and lines of elevation they crossed -- which were buried under snow, and therefore could only be detected by scanner -- and that seemed to have been the right call.

Maul still had no real, solid idea of how much time had passed between them leaving the courier behind and when Castle stopped the line, though. "Got a problem, boys."

"What is it?" Maul asked back, through his own headset, ignoring for the moment the way his shoulders were burning for the weight on them.

"There's an entry point, but it's half caved in and about thirteen meters up a steep slope and buried in snow, Lieu. Looks like this area's weathered over the years; it's listed in the survey maps as bein' close to ground-level originally."

They had known that if they took this route, there were going to be obstacles. And not only a few of them. Maul found himself nodding despite the fact no one could possibly see it, then pushed ahead, brushing past Tango and Misty to get up to Castle. He couldn't see a thing for the white-out conditions, but clearly standing out here waiting for what passed for spring on this rock wasn't an option.

"It's just the snow and the steepness?" he asked, once he was alongside Castle.

"Yes, sir. We could maybe manage against the one, but not the other at the same time, not if we don't wanna take any falls." Castle held up his gloved arm, showing the angle of the slope; somewhere between fifty and sixty degrees, closer to sixty. Steep, certainly; impassible, no.

"Where exactly, relative to us, is that tunnel mouth?" Maul asked, trying to calculate the best way to get a squad in heavy equipment up there, squinting into the whiteout through his goggles, though to no avail.

Castle pointed unerringly up and to their left. "Right there."

Maul looked in that direction, despite not being able to see it. Then he started off-loading the equipment he was carrying. "Let me see if I can't clear us a way."

Once he was burden free, he pulled his saberstaff from where he'd strapped it across his chest -- since his back was occupied -- and lit a blade.

Over the radio, Raze sighed, "That's so badass."
"And hot," Tally added, mischief in his voice, before he ended up grunting. "Literally hot, Tango, for frip's sake."

Maul couldn't quite help but chuckle at that; despite the fact that they were in the middle of what appeared to be a never-ending blizzard and things were likely only going to get harder from here, at least Raze sounded awake again and no one was grumbling or seemed to be in poor spirits. For that matter, despite the fact that he deeply despised the cold, Maul was in a fair mindset himself, something that surprised him; not so much that he was, as that he recognized it as such.

Just to test his theory out, he stuck his blade into a spot well away from the troops and watched the snow rapidly retreat from the glowing gold; after a moment, he widened the area and then tested the consistency of the bared ground with the toe of his boot, watching intently to make up for the fact that he couldn't actually feel it.

It was rocky enough over permafrost to not turn too slippery; he had been a bit worried that it would become nothing but mud. Satisfied, Maul raised his blade again and looked up.

There wasn't any point to waiting around; after a moment, plotting whether a straight shot up would be better than side-hilling, he put his blade out in front of him and started carving their way upwards, the hand not holding his saber digging into newly bared ground.

"I'm so glad I'm not claustrophobic. So, so glad."

"You've said that thirty times, Tango, we got it the first time."

"Tango's only said it six times."

"Well, sir, it feels like thirty. But even then, it's five times more than I needed to hear."

There was some indistinct grumbling that was undoubtedly Tango's. Despite privately agreeing with Husker, Maul could certainly understand Tango's desire to repeat that, even if it suggested that the pilot actually was a little claustrophobic and that he was reassuring himself that he wasn't.

Getting all eleven of the clones up the slope had been some effort; their cold assault armor was heavy enough that with that, and the gear, they struggled to make such a steep grade. After Castle's boot slipped, Maul positioned himself about halfway up, dug his boots in sideways against the slope, kept one (very uncomfortably cold and now ungloved) hand on the ground, and used the Force to brace Castle and pull against him at the same time, until he was past Maul, and then it was all push.

"What a garden spot," Castle had said, sardonically, while Maul dragged Tango up next. Given that Maul had cleared the entrance and taken a look in himself, he could only agree with the sentiment.

They were slowed some for the fact that Maul could only safely manage one at a time; this world was no Zigoola, and he wasn't feeling negatively enough to draw on the dark side, which mostly left him with a more neutral, less powerful access to the Force. Good enough, for this purpose, but slow.

Now, there was the scrape of arms and packs against the walls, and the illumination of headlamps against the back of the person in front. The rock walls on either side of them, rough-hewn centuries before, were close enough that occasionally it did feel as if they were closing in. On one low spot,
Brody didn't duck far enough and smacked his bucketed head off of the ceiling, then let out a string of colorful curses. Apparently, just to amuse himself, Smarty named the culture each one came from right after.

"Unless something else has changed, twenty meters before we get some space to breathe," Castle reported.

There was a groan of relief from someone. Maul silently nodded; he genuinely wasn't claustrophobic, but he still didn't care for the tight quarters, either.

"Where are we relative to our first camp?" Tally asked; he was somewhere behind Maul, though he no longer had to mind Raze, who had shaken off his drowsiness.


"What were they looking to mine here, anyway?"

Smarty took that question, being the one who did most of the research that had brought them here: "They thought they found a kyber deposit. Turned out that it was only the kinds of run-of-the-mill crystals that mystics try to pass off as being healing or whatever else, but it took 'em so long to figure out because the Jedi refused to confirm or deny it. Eventually they managed to get ahold of a kyber from Jedha -- no mean feat -- and run comparisons on the lattices."

The topic had Maul grinning a little bit. "There are more ways to focus a lightsaber than just a kyber crystal. The Jedi prefer those because they're alive; they resonate in the Force. But my blade prior to this one was focused with crystals I forged myself."

"What about the ones you have now?" Smarty asked, instantly curious.

"Kyber. They live, though I'm still getting used to them."

"How did you make the other ones?"

After Maul told them the brief story -- covering his days spent in meditation, in a specialized furnace, where he was not only forging crystals but keeping himself from being baked alive or dying of dehydration -- it was Raze who got the final word on the subject: "Definitely the most badass CO in the Grand Army."

They couldn't see Maul rolling his eyes, but he did anyway. Nor could they see the vaguely sheepish quirk of his lips, which was certainly for the better.

By then, they were near the first cavern. Castle's gusty sigh of relief carried over the radio when he finally left the tunnel, which made enough of them break into questions to cause radio interference until Shiv told them to can it and see for themselves.

In the light of headlamps and little more, the ceiling above was tall and incredibly spikey, while there were mounds of mineral deposits on the winding, uneven ground. They stood in a group of twelve, turning in each direction to look; where their lamps illuminated, everything sparkled across the spectrum, throwing back glittering pinpoints of light in a multitude of colors.

There was little in the way of even ground, but there was some. Tally took his bucket off, the thermal hood under it soaked in splotches from sweat, though he kept the headlamps on and used the bucket as a directional lamp. "I think we oughta set camp here. We've been on the move almost nine hours and all of 'em hard."
Maul had no heads up display to rely on for timekeeping, but he was still some surprised they had been moving that long. "How far are we from our first projected camp, Castle?"

"Forty-five minutes, sir, unless we run into obstacles."

Maul thought about it; he would have pushed on himself, were it just him, but it wasn't just him and the troops were suited up in heavy enough armor that fatigue was a real concern. Nor could they lean on the Force to keep them going. This was probably one of those moments for a command decision; for him to decide based on both objective and reality what the best course would be, but ultimately, Maul couldn't figure out which of the two options was the better of them.

So, he just fell back on what had worked before: "Vote. Who wants to go ahead and who thinks we should camp here?"

It turned out that it was an hour and a half, and by the time they did stop, all of them were exhausted. Even without the snow to push through, there was nothing kind about the passage between one point and the next.

The ground was just as rough here, as well; this cavern had a lower ceiling than the prior one, though it was still better than the tunnel that they had to practically crawl through to get to it. It took more precious time for them to find enough level space to place their tents, which would keep them warm enough to sleep, and everyone had fallen into a kind of weary quiet, speaking up only to coordinate where to put things.

Maul was rather surprised at how guilty he felt over it. He could have just set camp back there, and he knew that none of them would have kicked about him doing so if he'd made it an order, but instead he had left it up to a vote and when that turned out to be seven to five -- his own apparently being the tie-breaker -- they had gone ahead.

Seeing how beat they were by it left him feeling edgy and uncomfortable and also wondering why he was feeling either of those things, especially since they were all soldiers who answered to higher authority, himself included. But even as he threw in on making camp himself, he noted the stiffness in their shoulders and backs, and how comparatively slow they were now, versus when they were rested.

Setting a watch was only debatably necessary. There were no signs of life in these caverns thus far, and it was highly unlikely the enemy was going to stumble over them. But before they had even embarked on this mission, they had decided to set one anyway, just in case. One person, two hours, four rotations, so two-thirds of the squad would get a full night's unbroken sleep each night, and the others would only have theirs broken up once every third day.

Driven on by that unfamiliar guilt, Maul took the first watch.

Driven on by an unsurprising difficulty at the prospect of sleeping crammed into a tent with five other bodies close, he ended up taking all but the last of them, too.
When Tally woke up with an arm and a leg over him, and a nose nuzzling the back of his head, he had a long moment where he wondered if the mission and everything leading up to it had been a hallucination and if maybe he was still in the rented room of that Navy nurse he'd given a thorough kriffing however many months back. Then he realized that he could only smell the not-yet-rankness of his brothers and had to bite back a groan of minor disappointment.

"Raze, get off of me."

Raze grunted sleepily, but instead of unplastering himself, he just turned to rubbing his whole face against Tally's hair.

Shiv was laying directly across from Tally and already studying one of their datapads; he glanced over, amused. "Guess that answers whether you're the big spoon or the little spoon."

"You smug asshole," Tally answered, without any heat, as he reached back and scritchted at Raze's head. "Raze, please get off of me, I'm not a damned body pillow."

"Unh-- what?" Raze asked, before apparently waking up enough to let Tally go. He peeled himself away from where he had been pinning the medic to the sleeping mat, rolling onto his back and then sitting up. "Didn't I have a watch last night?"

"You and me both," Shiv said, without looking away from his datapad, some undefinable note in his voice. "The Lieu took 'em."

Tally found himself frowning at that, as he sat up in his single-body-wide space in order to gather up his armor, which was piled neatly at his feet. But he didn't say anything.

Yet.

The caverns weren't particularly treacherous, but they were miserable in terms of claustrophobia. Tango was having a harder time the longer they were underground dealing with the perceived weight of a mountain on top of him, and Tally was keeping an eye on the pilot; Tango already had a bend towards superstition and flights of fancy, so it probably wouldn't take all that much for his imagination to run away with him.

Castle, on the other hand, seemed to be in his element; he wasn't a geologist, but his grasp of engineering -- mechanical and structural -- gave him a heck of a leg up in terms of being able to interpret some very old maps and allow for the fact that things probably had changed some over the centuries since they had been made. As they occasionally had to slither over rock-falls and sometimes leave it to Maul to clear a wider space with his saber, Castle was usually relaying what was coming; unless they needed space cleared, he was the one leading this expedition.

Tally didn't have much in the way of an opinion on it, himself. He found it easy to focus on his own job and follow those doing the leading; he didn't really let himself think about the cramped conditions, beyond making sure he was listening to his brothers. In his bucket's heads-up, he could
pull up their vitals and watch, and even though he would have preferred to leave his head uncovered, he kept the bucket on specifically so he could watch Tango's bio-signs and call up any others he might have needed to.

The only person he couldn't watch the data on was their lieutenant. He knew that those cybernetics had a limited life support system -- had to, in order to be able to make up for the fact Maul was missing some vital parts of his guts -- and he knew that if he had the actual ability to access them, he could probably have them transmitting the data back the same as their armor did, but he didn't have any access.

That left him more traditional methods to keep an eye on Maul; namely, observation.

If the night up had any impact, it didn't show; Maul seemed just as alert and ready as ever. And really, all of them knew what it was like to go a night without sleep -- sometimes many -- so he wasn't too worried yet, but he resolved to keep watch anyway.

Tally would have done so with any CO, he used to with General Kenobi, but Maul was an undeniably different case entirely. Kenobi tended to grind himself down without a second thought -- something he and the Lieu had in common, from what Tally could see -- but there was a lot less in Kenobi's medical records to suggest he'd be at risk for psychological instability, too.

Maul's, on the other hand, were something of a mess, albeit one where the disasters seemed to happen in clusters, and the rest was all comparatively calm. The healer who was in charge of his care at the Temple had been pretty thorough in including scans and notes; there didn't seem to be a bone left in his body that hadn't been broken at some point, all prior to him being captured. An old shoulder injury occasionally acted up, though not enough to do anything about. Being cut in half was obviously a big kriiffing deal, and the period after that even made Tally queasy, even if it was all just notations on medical interventions.

Tally was pretty sure he was the only one of them who knew Maul had tried to kill himself. He didn't think even Shiv was privy to that information.

That was a decade ago, but the ensuing period of despondency was incredibly long. The word *depression* was never added, but then again, the Jedi had some weird ideas about how living people worked and Tally knew what depression looked like, even when it was only revealed in notes and observations. More recently, Maul had managed to get two concussions inside of two months, and both of those only a couple months ago -- Tally knew about the one on Christophis, but the other following had been fairly quickly thereafter -- and while zabraks were pretty tough, there was only so much anyone could take before it started doing permanent damage. More minorly, he had some peripheral neuropathy in his right hand from around the same time as that most recent concussion, and Tally had caught him rubbing at his wrist and the heel of his palm the night before, though he hadn't said anything about it.

Anyway, Tally would have preferred to be able to call up vitals with the right glance, but since he couldn't, he just kept his eyes and ears open.

It wasn't warm underground, but it was warmer than it would have been had they tried to cross the mountains above. Still, the air had a constant clammy feel to it; Tally took water samples from any available whenever they stopped and found nothing that would be dangerous, though he insisted they purify the hell out of anything they took to drink, lest he end up dealing with *another* kind of river, of the disgusting type.

But after about six hours of calm walking, all of it relatively level with only minor variations, that was when they started going down.
And down.

And down.

In the seventh hour, Tango started to lose it.

"I can't do this. I can't do this, I need to go back, I'll stay with the ship, I can just provide air support--"

It was damned tight quarters for a pilot to be in the middle of a panic attack; Tally had made sure to position himself right behind Tango at the last spot where they had some room to get around each other, but it was in the hopes that he wouldn't need to be there. Now, it was clear that he definitely had made the right call.

They had all taken their buckets off, except for Castle and Misty, who both offered to scout ahead for a wider space, and who got Maul's okay to do so. Now, Tally crouched in the chokingly narrow passage, hoping they could get Tango calmed back down before he ended up hyperventilating. He was pretty close to doing so now.

"We need you, Tango," Raze said, surprisingly softly, from behind Tally's shoulder; everyone had their headlamps pointed to the walls to reflect light, rather than burn anyone's eyes, buckets in hand or resting on the ground. It was pretty good light, too; Tally would require Raze to pull his medpack off for him, if he needed it, but they at least could all see one another provided they were able to peer over shoulders or over heads, depending on who was crouched or standing.

"I'm a pilot, I'm not supposed to be underground," Tango gasped back, trembling in place with his eyes squeezed closed and sweat beading on his face despite the cool, musty air and his armor probably trying to compensate.

Even Brody, though, sounded more reassuring than snarky. "I know you've sat in tiny cockpits with some transparisteel between you and the unfeeling vacuum of space, brother, this is nothin' compared to that. I don't know how the hell you don't piss your blacks every time you climb into one of those single-man fighters."

"I can see when I'm out there, I can see the stars, I can see space, I can't see down here, I can't breathe down here," Tango babbled, and Tally winced when the tears started falling, heart aching some for the sight of their ridiculous, creative, crushing-on-their-CO brother in that kinda state.

For all the snark there had been coming down to land, none of the Blackbirds were being anything but supportive with Tango now. From the other side of Brody, Maul pointed out, rather gently himself, "You can breathe; you are breathing. If you're able to speak, you're able to breathe."

Tally's mouth quirked up on one side at that being pointed out, reaching out and taking one of Tango's gloved hands. "Lieu's right. But listen; just keep your eyes closed and breathe slower, okay? In through your nose, deep into the bottom half of your lungs, then hold it for two seconds, then let it out through your mouth. Can you do that?"

He'd had the foresight to pack a pretty broadly useful medkit, and he happened to make sure he had
brought along the strongest tranquilizers he had access to, enough to cover situations exactly like this. But for someone who wasn't used to 'em, they had a pretty strong sedative effect, and they still had some ways to go before they were going to be at their next stop; they'd known starting out that this day's hike would be anywhere from ten to twelve hours, and more if they ran into too many obstacles. If he could get Tango calmed down enough without 'em, that would definitely be ideal.

Tango gave a sketchy nod and tried, albeit with some real difficulty at first, clinging to Tally's hand. But within twenty seconds, it sounded like the whole squad was breathing with him in unison.

Tally mentally shrugged and fell into that rhythm himself, especially when he could see and hear Tango slowly settling down. It went on like that for the better part of another minute before Husker said, "I'm sure as hell glad no one ate onions before this."

It startled Tango into a little laugh, and a few others into snickering like schoolboys, but when it was over, Tango was at least breathing right and looked kind of exhausted, but not on the edge of hysteria. Still nervous, but not quite as bad as he had been.

"Thanks, guys," he said, voice thick.

"What're brothers for?" Brody asked back, nonchalantly. "Claustrophobia or getting you out of a jam with the Chadran mob, we have each other's backs."

"--the what?" Smarty asked, from the back of the line, incredulously.

"The Chadran mob. Look, it's a long story, I don't know if now's the time to go into it--"

"I, for one, would very much like to hear it," Maul said, amusement sneaking into his voice.

"Me too," Tango added, still sounding a little bit breathless, but considerably better.

Brody huffed. "Fine, fine, but only if we can keep walking, I can't wait to get this stuff off my back."

Tally helped Tango up, and rested their foreheads together for a moment in silent affection and reassurance, and then they all got moving again as Brody started, "Have you ever pissed off a bunch of naked, meter-tall furballs with sharp buckteeth? Because thanks to one of those little side bets on a sports sector, I managed to do just that, and let me tell you, friendly as those chadra-fans are, they take their grav-ball pretty damned seriously..."

Brody's story of how he managed to barely avoid four life-debts with wookiees and being in the hole for six million and thirty-three credits to the Chadran mafia, all thanks to the intervention of a more experienced brother slicer, morphed into Maul telling a story about an undercover mission in his former life that involved a chadra-fan artist and convict; that story involved a lot of brutality, bloodshed, clawbirds and a deathspine varactyl (among other things), and Maul glossed over the actual fights he'd been thrown into cage-match style, but it was still entertaining if kind of horrifying to listen to.

(He probably wasn't helping Tango's crush any, but he was definitely keeping Tango's attention on something besides the tight space.)
Castle and Misty had backtracked with news of a slightly wider section of tunnel where they paused to eat, and when everyone started moving again, the stories kept being told.

By the time both Brody and Maul were done talking, they had finally reached their next stop and Tango was reeling with exhaustion, but still on his feet, and aside all but sobbing when the tunnel opened up into a low but broad cavern with crystals growing all around it, he seemed to have his claustrophobia contained, even if not perfectly.

Tally didn't need to be told that both their storytellers had been talking the last near four hours specifically in order to keep Tango focused and to give the others something to listen to as they walked, thereby distracting them from the heaviness of their packs and the tight spaces they had to negotiate, but he was grateful for it anyway, even for his own sake.

Everyone had dropped their packs the moment they could, and now Smarty was eyeing the crystals reflecting the light of their headlamps back at them in frosted, pale colors and sometimes catching a facet just right enough to throw rainbows. "So, you said that there are more ways to focus a lightsaber than just kybers?" he asked Maul, who was taking a moment and absently rubbing his wrist.

Maul nodded back; his voice had gotten a little more hoarse for all of his talking, but he still answered, "Several. You'd have to break me off one before I could tell you if these are capable, though."

Smarty apparently felt that was a challenge he wanted to take up and went to it; Maul, in the meantime, went to crouch in front of Tango, who was sitting and doing the same breathing exercises Tally had talked him through earlier, though more calmly.

Tally wasn't close enough to listen in, but he watched for a few moments while Tango shook his head, and then eventually nodded, albeit reluctantly. And then, absent Smarty, they were all pitching tents and getting out rations and setting up for the night.

That didn't take long, either, before they were eating enough to try to replace some of what they'd just burned on their long and aching downhill hike inside of the mountain; Smarty came back with his crystal and plunked down next to Maul, offering it over for inspection.

"It might be capable of focusing a low-power blade," Maul said, after holding it up in the light of Smarty's headlamp, squinting at it and turning it in his fingers. "Not stronger than an initiate training saber, but it would burn skin, if not cut through it." He offered it back and when Smarty took it and asked a bunch more questions, the kinds of which didn't interest Tally enough to follow, he answered them one and a time and patiently.

Tally wasn't listening, but he was watching when Tango -- who was supposed to take the first watch tonight, though Tally had been ready to volunteer in his place and rearrange things so he could just pull a double one himself, since he was supposed to take the third -- turned in. And when their lieutenant made no move to himself.

Shiv caught his eye from across the semi-circle they naturally gravitated to sitting in, raising an eyebrow in question, but Tally just pressed his lips into a line and gave a minute shake of his head. And when he turned in, twenty minutes later, he made sure to set his gauntlet to buzz at the right time to wake him up.

He was going to say something, but not yet.
"Feel like talking about it?" Tally asked, still trying not to yawn, four hours after he had fallen asleep.

In the very dim light of a single handlamp, Maul peered back at him steadily, arms crossed while he leaned against his pack. Even just waking up, Tally wanted to shake his head for the instant (albeit subtle) wariness he was having aimed at him, though he refrained.

At least Maul didn't do him the discredit of asking what about; he raised a brow instead. "If I had wanted to, I would have."

The tone was even, a statement of fact, if maybe a bit defensive. Tally took it in stride, sitting down crosslegged across from the zabrak, finally giving into that yawn that he couldn't seem to stuff down. However, he did have to put some real effort into not smirking knowingly when Maul instantly echoed it, failing to muffle it into the back of his arm.

"Here, lemme see your hand," Tally said, holding out one ungloved palm, though he had most of the rest of his armor on just for the sake of staying warm on his watch. "You've been worrying at it all day."

"It's minor, and there's nothing to be done for it anyway," Maul said, but after a moment of eying Tally's outstretched hand, he gave his own over.

"Humidity's a bastard sometimes, especially chilly humidity like this," Tally agreed, turning Maul's hand over in both of his, before pushing the sleeves of his parka and undershirts up, then rubbing into his wrist with both thumbs from the heel of the palm back; his own skin was still really sleep-warm and it must have felt pretty good, given how quickly he could feel the tension go out of Maul's forearm. He kept at it for awhile as he chewed over what he wanted to say; he wasn't above getting snappy and pulling rank if need be, but fact was, he didn't think that was going to actually do much good here.

Just foster a distrust that they sure as hell didn't need.

Between hiking and handling a claustrophobic Tango and listening to storytelling, there had been plenty of time to think, so Tally had used it and he hoped he'd used it well. "Look, sir. I can't pretend I know any of the reasons why you're out here pulling a second all-nighter, I'm not a mind-reader or anything, but I do know that Force or no, it's gonna catch up to you. And I know you're used to people, healer or medic, just making moves on you without bothering to tell you why, but all grousing aside about how I'll lecture your ears off your head if you do something stupid -- like poison yourself taste-testing weird roots you dug out of the ground -- I haven't actually pulled rank on you yet. And before you go thinking that means I'm leading up to it, I'm not."

Maul had the best sabacc face Tally had ever seen outside of his own; he didn't pull his hand back, but he also didn't blink once when Tally spoke, and that was its own kind of tell.

"So, I'll make you a deal," Tally continued, unperturbed, not looking away himself. "I won't act on you without your direct, explicit consent, at least outside of emergency situations where you can't give it and your life's on the line, but you've gotta trust me to have your best interests at heart and take it for fact that when I say something, I do know what I'm talkin' about. I don't want to have to wrestle with my CO to keep him alive and healthy, and I can't imagine you want to spend the rest of this war worrying about what I'm gonna do or not."
There was another moment while he was on the other side of that intent gold gaze, then Maul finally asked, "What are you proposing?"

Tally had just given one proposal, but he was quick enough even after a long day and four hours of sleep to know Maul was talking about this specific situation. If he had his own way, he would have shoved Maul into the closest tent -- maybe next to Raze, who could pin anyone to a bed cuddling -- and told him to spend at least the last few hours of the pseudo-night sleeping, but this was as much test as question, no matter how neutrally asked.

So, he just pulled out one of the warming pads from one belt pouch and a small roll of gauze from another; broke the seal on it and let it heat up, then got to wrapping it to Maul's hand and wrist, making sure not to restrict the motion of that joint more than necessary while keeping the pad secure. "Tonight? Keep me and Husk company on watch and doze if you can. Tomorrow, I want you in a tent and sleeping."

"I'm not very good at sleeping close to others," Maul said, at length, though his eyes slid closed as that warming pad went to work on his sore hand and that made Tally grin some. "It won't do me much good, nor them, if I'm jumping all night."

Considering that Maul had him by a wrist before he'd even woken up entirely on Christophsis, that didn't surprise Tally too much, though the admission did more. "I brought half a pharmacy with me, and I've got the same kinds of acute anti-anxiety meds that you've had before. Nothing you can't push past if you have to, but I'll bet you'll sleep pretty well anyway."

That had Maul squinting at him, vaguely incredulous, though there was an amused quality to it that Tally definitely took as a good sign. "Anxiety?"

"Yep." Tally finished tying off his impromptu dressing. "It's good stuff, too; if Tango can't cope tomorrow, I'll probably give him a half dose and then babysit him like I did Raze."

Maul made a noncommittal noise, a low hum, then only said, "We'll see."

Testing boundaries, probably; Tally just nodded back, gave his CO a friendly clap on the upper arm, then got up to get himself a cup of hot cider.

He was definitely heartened when he handed off the watch to Husk a couple hours later, though, and Maul dozed right through it.
"Raze--"

Raze grumbled and then groaned, piteously, "I know, I know, get off of you."

Shiv drifted awake to something he could already sense was going to be a reoccurring scene, variations on a single theme, and found that he couldn't bring himself to mind. Between him and Raze, Tango was getting cuddled like he was a stuffed fen-hare; after the day before, though, Shiv figured that if anyone needed a good night of cuddling, it was probably their pilot.

Especially since today wasn't likely going to go easier on any of them.

Despite saying that he was going to get off of Tango, though, Raze didn't yet; within ten seconds, he was back asleep and Tango rolled his eyes and then snuggled back against their brother, apparently looking to steal a few more moments of his own.

Shiv grinned, scrubbed a palm down his face, and carefully extricated himself from blanket and tent, pulling his armor on outside so as to give them those few moments despite the chill.

Six and Eight were steadier than Shiv had necessarily expected them to be, given how little experience they had in the field. They slept curled together like tooka kits, and during breaks or meals, they chatted with one another. They never seemed to get annoyed with being in each others' company; even on the occasions they bickered a little, the bickering was fangless and friendly and more a well-ordered dance than a spontaneous event.

It reminded him of Flanker, and how they were early on until they were assigned to different units; that kind of closeness that happened when you were raised right next to one another and hadn't ever known a conscious time when your batchmate wasn't there. When you were almost two halves of one whole, instead of a single person; where a glance could convey a world of information without a word being spoken. Not all clones had a batchmate like that, who was suited to sharing a specialization and therefore got to stay together once they were properly graduated from being cadets, and Shiv considered himself lucky he'd been one of them.

It wasn't even that long ago, but just like their accelerated aging, time didn't mean quite the same thing for a clone. It felt like it had been a long time; felt like it had been twice as long as it had been since Mag came and told him his closest brother had been shot down on Christophsis. He didn't feel like the same person, even though he knew he was.

Then again, a lot had changed. Shiv hadn't expected to make sergeant anytime soon; hadn't even actually expected much of anything, except to go to Orto Plutonia and make use of his survival training to test prototype cold weather gear. Being diverted into this was a complete surprise, but the longer he was at it, the more and more right it felt. Like maybe there were parts of him that someone else saw and decided, "Hey, there's a guy who's capable of wrangling a bunch of independent thinkers and a green CO with some hefty baggage."

Shiv-before thought, Wow, someone wasn't thinking straight, and Shiv-now thought, These are my
troops and that's my lieutenant and my job is to make sure they all work together so we can stick it to the Seppies once we clear this hurdle. And-- hey, Flanker, I'm not too bad at this, I'm not too bad at it all.

His brother would have probably said something like them figuring out the truth if he ever got another shot at that three-bean salad they'd managed to score at an outpost, and Shiv would have pointed out that Flanker ought to not ever go near egg-salad again, and then they woulda slept curled up together like tooka kits -- unless one of them managed to score a sex partner, anyway -- or chatted about things and argued like dancing.

He didn't think he'd ever fill the empty spot beside him, but it didn't hurt like it did when it was new. Sometimes the ache caught him, made his throat go thick and his eyes sting, the instant desire to turn to Flanker and say, "Hey, check our shinies out, were we ever that young?" or go, "Lookit that kid, he's wearing explosives in his ears," but it was an ache he could bear and it had its own strange sweetness to it.

Flanker would have loved Raze, he would have instantly adopted the demo expert as an honorary batchmate and taught him all about how to be even more of a pain in the neck.

Probably the strangest part of all of this, for Shiv, was the shift in thought from, *I'm going to die hard and fast and young* to *We might actually make it out of this alive.*

He didn't quite go so far as to wonder what would come after, but he could almost conceive of an after, and that was weird and new and oddly kind of wonderful.

They set off again once breakfast was had, painkillers distributed and packs were back on; Tally stuck Tango between himself and Maul, and Shiv fell back to the back of the line just to watch their rear ends, even though they hadn't met so much as an insect. Even though parts of these old tunnels were caved partially in, Castle's analysis was bearing out so far; Misty's, too, though that meant they might encounter some really hairy situations as they went deeper, towards where the main deposit of false-kybers had been found and partially mined.

There wasn't a back that wasn't sore down here; they were due to surface for air the day after briefly before entering some higher elevation exploration tunnels, but until then, they only could keep going down.

So, they did.

Tango had been hanging on all day so far; Shiv thought it was partly because he'd managed to handle his panic attack the day before and partly because he didn't want to lose any more face because of it -- not that anyone was blaming him, even Shiv found the weight of the rock all around and on top of them oppressive -- but it was when they encountered the flooded tunnel that his tenuous composure shattered so bad that he was sobbing between desperate gasps for air.

Both the flooding and the panicking pilot required them to turn around and backtrack to the last space that had some room; it wasn't much, just a glorified staging point carved out centuries ago for miners to coordinate supplies going down and crystal coming back up, whatever antigrv infrastructure they used long since gone, but it was adequate enough for the Blackbirds' purposes,
even if it probably didn't feel like that to Tango.

Shiv couldn't pretend that staring into the black water, the beam of light vanishing into its murky depths in a very narrow passage didn't chill him right down to his bones. He had gone back down to look at it with Misty and shuddered in his armor, while Tally did his best to get poor Tango back to some form of stability.

“Well, we knew this was a possibility,” Misty said, sounding almost like he was excited to have found such a low-key nightmare in their path. Shiv couldn't get it, but he kind of could, too; Misty was specialized in something they didn't get to encounter very often, and so any opportunity for him to show his chops was probably something to look forward to. “Probability, even.”

“Visibility is awful,” Shiv said, swallowing down his jitters and trying to recenter himself, staring into the deceptively small pool that he knew went very deep and maybe very dangerous. “And we don’t know what’s down there.”

“Nothing alive to worry about, though.” Misty shrugged. “Look at it like this, Sarge: the worst thing that can happen is that there’s no way through and we have to switch to plan B. Visibility will be better when we can use the water jets, anyway, those have high power lamps.”

Shiv could frankly think of a lot of things that could happen and be worse. The idea of being pinned somewhere down in there, for one. Or hopelessly turned around and lost, for another. Slowly suffocating while within radio contact with their brothers, but too deep into the mountain for emergency beacons to work, and even if they did, being too deep for help to arrive in time.

Kriff, there was no way they were gonna be able to get Tango through this, either.

Shiv made a noise of acknowledgment, if not agreement, then turned to head back up to the others, Misty following behind him.

Plan B was another set of tunnels, a bit higher in the mountain range, but they were sketchy at best. The old maps of them suggested that they were more preliminary than the ones they had chosen to follow and therefore not so carefully carved. There was a much higher probability of large scale cave-ins, too, the kind that they couldn't fight their way through.

When Shiv and Misty made it back up, Tango was the artificial calm of tranquilized out of his mind and even then, the mask of tears on his face reflected the light of headlamps. Most of them had their packs off, and Raze was sitting with an arm around Tango, pretty much cuddling in situ. Shiv didn't know if it was going to do much good, especially if they decided to press on, but it sure couldn't hurt anything right now.

Castle was neck deep in discussions with Maul, both of them as far apart from the others as they could get, voices low and quiet and heads bent together; when they saw Shiv and Misty were back, both of ’em nodded the other two over.

"The debate right now," Maul said, once they were in a cluster, "is risk versus time, and the obvious personnel variables."

Personnel variables meaning Tango, though Shiv silently added Maul to that list; while their
lieutenant seemed just as capable of moving as he had at the start of this mission, he'd been even quieter than usual today before this stop, and if he didn't take his rack time tonight, Shiv was going to sit on him all night, rank be damned.

"I think this is doable," Castle said. "We've got a pretty solid idea of what we're going to be up against down there, and how much it's going to take to traverse back above the floodline. Backtracking to Plan B will see us losing about ten hours overall hiking time, and that's if we push right on through when we're supposed to rest."

"Same," Misty agreed, readily. "Castle and I can get us through the flooding. We're gonna have to have a smart plan and we don't have a lot of room for screwups, but we can do this."

"I think even doped up, Tango won't be able to manage this," Shiv said, frankly, albeit quietly. "I mean, beyond the risk that his reflexes are gonna be compromised -- because they definitely will be - - he might still shake it off enough to panic and none of us are gonna be in a position to do something about it. And we do gotta keep this all in perspective: This is just a training run. Yeah, an important one and I want to make the five-oh-first eat it as much as the next man, but we're definitely out of range with our emergency beacons and if something bad happens, we're on our own."

Misty looked disgruntled by that, though Castle only nodded; their engineer was one rock-solid guy, aptly enough, and Shiv appreciated that. And really, he even understood Misty's displeasure with his words, but somebody needed to say it.

"So, do we put this one to a vote?" Misty asked, after a few beats of silence.

Maul hadn't said anything yet about which way he was leaning, but like he did anytime something like this came up, he was looking to Shiv for his cues. And for the first time, Shiv couldn't really take this one off his lieutenant's shoulders, even though part of him really wanted to; not even because he wanted that power, but because he had a pretty good idea how hard this was gonna be for Maul.

He gave back a rueful look and then shook his head at the other two. "No voting, we need this to be a command decision, for everyone's sakes."

Voting in this case had far more of a chance to lead to disaster; Shiv did appreciate the hell out of how much Maul took their thoughts, feelings and very lives into consideration, something he knew without being told was separate entirely from Maul's comparative lack of confidence in his own leadership abilities -- even if one seemed to enable the other -- but this wasn't the time for either democracy or dictatorship, just a solid call by the commanding officer and all those capable focused on seeing it through.

He didn't imagine the panic, subtle as it was, in Maul's eyes at those words.

"Go see what Tally thinks, but quietly," Shiv told the other two. "Specifically about whether Tango's gonna be able to survive it without dropping dead of a coronary event, if that ends up being the call."

They weren't slow; they knew. They gave a smart nod and then turned to go do that; Shiv took a breath and looked back at their CO.

The way Shiv figured it, this was either going to be a tempering moment -- the first of many, he hoped -- or it was going to be a shattering one. And the circumstances weren't ideal, they had one man in a state of serious psychological instability and Maul was working on catnaps at best, but the situations weren't ever gonna be ideal and Shiv found, as he stood there looking at his anxiety-stricken lieutenant, that he was absolutely sure that Maul wasn't going to lead them wrong.
It was just convincing Maul of that.

"You can do this," Shiv said, plainly, if softly.

"What if I'm wrong?" Maul asked back, immediately.

"Well, sir, then you're wrong." Shiv drew the words out into a bit of a drawl, not irreverent, just keeping his tone relaxed and patient, then continued easily, "You pick up the pieces and you learn from it, and then you keep going. But you know what we're up against, you're damned good at risk assessment, and I'm ready to go whichever way you decide."

He could see Maul calculating it out; even as tired as he had to be, right about now, and in over his head, it was clear he was definitely taking those words in and working over the variables. And Shiv just left him to it; this was the whole point of a training mission, anyway. They had time here and a thin-but-real safety net, and if Maul needed to take his time to figure it out, he had that and Shiv would be behind him regardless.

Admittedly, there were a few times where Maul was obviously about to ask Shiv what he would do; the fact he cut himself off each time had Shiv chewing down a bit of a grin.

The zabrak sure wasn't slow himself. When he seemed to come to some internal accord, he palmed over his face -- even with his glove on, Shiv could see his hand shaking -- and then called, "Tally?"

Tally looked up, and when Maul nodded to Tango -- who was leaning with his head back, eyes closed, still tucked against Raze's side -- he pressed his mouth into a line, but then he nodded, albeit reluctantly.

Having both of them holding similar opinions about this venture, even if Tally's was unvoiced and only clear by his expression, had to make this even harder, given how much Maul usually relied on them to fill in the gaps. Tempering or shattering; he just waited to see if Maul was going to bear up under the pressure or crack.

Either was possible, but Shiv thought only one of those was likely, and it turned out that he was right.

"We knew when we chose this course that we might encounter this," Maul finally said, raising his voice enough to reach all of them; it quivered some tiny amount that Shiv was pretty sure only he or Tally would notice at the start, then steadied. "We're going to press on. Castle, Misty, Husker; work out the logistics. If anyone has any ideas to make this run more smoothly, speak up, and hopefully within a handful of hours, we're celebrating on the other side."

Tango drew his knees up and rested his brow against them, shaking once so hard his armor actually rattled, taking slow and deep breaths that trembled like he was, but he didn't say anything. Aside him, the smattering of acknowledgment from the rest of the squad -- including Shiv and Tally -- was both immediate and without reluctance.

Raze leaned his head over, pulling Tango tighter against him, and murmured to him probably in reassurance; despite having made a perfectly acceptable call, Maul watched with a look that could only be called guilt and anxiety in equal measures.

There wasn't gonna be any way to disarm either of those fully until they were on the other side of this, hopefully triumphant and heading back upwards into more forgiving territory, but leaving Maul to stew in it wasn't a good idea. So, Shiv leaned over and said, "You're doing fine, sir," before nodding towards where Misty and Castle and Husker were all going over the maps and inventory,
the former two looking more excited and Husker looking perfectly game, "let's go give 'em a hand."

After another moment of looking at Tango and Raze, Maul finally nodded.

Being pretty doped up didn't completely disarm Tango's panic, but it was keeping it manageable. Once Maul had made the call he had, Tally had turned to brainstorming the best way to pull the pilot through; both Six and Eight were right there offering suggestions and even though some of them seemed almost frivolous, there was a quiet amount of genius in them that had Shiv grinning despite the harrowing situation. Singing, for instance. Or telling jokes. Raze continued to be the physical support, and sometimes Tango even managed to speak up, though he still sounded completely terrified as he did so.

"The hardest part is making sure that all our supplies come with us and that we traverse the caverns without losing track of everyone. The water's pretty murky, so the light off our headlamps gets swallowed up pretty easily. The water jets have higher powered lamps, but we do have to make sure that we have enough power in them to get us through this and any other situations we might run into like this before we have to abandon them," Misty said, summing it up professionally, clearly thrilled to be in his element. "We don't have enough rope, even if we tie the segments together, to bridge the projected distance, which means coming up with a way to get everything from one spot of dry land to another. And I think we've got a solid, reasonably risk-free solution."

"A relay," Castle picked up, using the holographic function in his gauntlet to pull up the map of the cavern in blue, with a reddish line showing their hopeful course through it. "Misty and I are gonna do a full run with the water jets just to make sure that things haven't shifted so much as to make this impossible, and obviously if there's a major cave in or otherwise, we'll abort to Plan B, but provided there isn't, we can anchor the first rope here--" he pointed with his free hand, "--and here. Each man brings a waterproofed bag of equipment, and at least one of us is gonna have to come back for more than one. Then we transfer man and gear to this rope," he said, pointing to the third anchor point, "here, and they pull themselves along all the way up to dry land."

"Since our armor's so heavy, Castle is gonna stay to bridge the rope relay; that way, we have a water jet and combined with some air in the bags, enough buoyancy to make it. Then, after the last man and supplies are past, we abandon the first rope, and Castle brings the second one in, and then we're good. An hour to two uphill and we get to stop and kiss the ground and get some sleep," Misty finished.

Tango's complexion looked washed out at the thought, and his eyes were a bit glassy, but he seemed a resigned kind of calm as he stared at the holographic projection. Raze looked unflappably ready, Six and Eight both seemed more eager, and the rest all fell in between those two poles, absent Misty and Castle.

Shiv wasn't in love with any of this, but it was a good plan, making use of their gear as efficiently as possible and minimizing the risk to everyone going. And Plan B would have been its own kind of rough. Any which way, he was ready.

"Misty and Castle, go ahead. Give us the stroke by stroke as you go. Raze, Six, Eight, Husker, you'll go first, and once you're assuredly on the other side of the relay, Smarty, Brody, Shiv and Tally."

Maul paused a beat. "I'll bring Tango and any gear that's left behind," he finished, no hint of nerves
this time.

Shiv's eyebrow went up, and he could see Tally's do the same in his peripheral vision, but then he
nodded smartly and didn't bother chewing down his proud little half-grin. "Yes, sir."

Tango didn't look any less sick, but Shiv could see something else in his expression, too: An achy
and battered but real gratitude.

He made sure to give Maul a pat on the back before turning to help pack their supplies into the
waterproofed bags.
Misty hadn't been in the water properly since he'd been assigned to the Blackbirds.

Unsurprisingly, he missed it.

Even though the tunnel-and-cavern system was less than ideal, the feeling of a water jet humming back through his arms and the gentle clinging pressure of the water all around him, compressing his heavy, ill-suited armor closer to his body, was as familiar as any embrace. Underwater exploration in sometimes harrowing (and often dark) circumstances was nothing new to him; several of their training missions took them under Tipoca City, into the supports of the structures and into various formations close by.

Castle was the one with the maps, but Misty was the one who was trained to see looming threats in the deep semi-gloom, so he took the lead. It was a longer trip than either of them had quite anticipated, something they relayed back, but not so much that Misty would have aborted the attempt.

Looming stalactites gave everything an almost disorienting cast; the sharp shapes coming down off of the ceiling, formed when the cavern was relatively dry and the water working its way down through the mountain from above could drip into the cavern and now, currently, hanging there like ghosts until the floodwaters receded and left the space open again.

They'd had to basically creep down the rest of the way into the cavern through the flooded tunnel, then go up to the roof of it, and once they were fully on the other side, they'd have to dive again to find the exit point.

"Getting close to the projected end-point," he said, keeping the group back on the other side abreast of the situation; when the crystal studded wall on the other side became visible, he paused, Castle joining him, as they used their water jets to scout the wall and make sure it was actually just a wall and not one of the cavern's natural support structures. Dimly, the crystal that wasn't covered in mud flashed back reflections, a murky point of dark greenish light through the water.

"Saw a few decent anchorpoints on the cavern ceiling, too," Castle added; he was just behind Misty and when Misty stopped, he came alongside. "Wonder how many floods it took to carve this place out," he added, and Misty grinned to himself, given he'd been thinking about that.

"Eons worth," he answered. "Ready to find our way out?"

"Should be down and to our left, between two-twenty and two-thirty degrees, fifteen to twenty meters," Castle said, after a moment where he was orienting himself. "Lead on, brother."

Castle, meanwhile, was more interested in how the cavern had formed than the fact that it was currently underwater; he had studied the geological structures before they'd come on this mission, and while he mostly worked with sentient-made structures -- a bridge, a tower, a bunker, an encampment, you name it -- there was a certain beauty that came with seeing what the nature on various worlds carved out. In this case, the cavern had been formed by floods over a very long-ass
time, and the supports which held it in place were made of the denser, more resilient seams of rock and mineral that held when the rest had been washed and worn away, leaving behind something both ordered and chaotic at once.

*Kinda like Raze,* he thought, absently, as he followed Misty down again so that they could find their exit. The outer walls of this cavern were made of the same dense rock that its support structures were, so Castle thought there was a much better-than-average chance that the tunnel out was as intact as the tunnel going in, allowing for time.

Being underwater didn't bother him; being an engineer meant he had gotten trained for dives, though no where on the level Misty was. But he could handle himself under here and didn't feel any more bothered by it than he had any other part of this little trip through the mountains. He was more worried about how Tango was going to handle it, but that was out of his hands mostly; best way to see Tango through was gonna be in making the passage as quick and easy as possible.

"There?" Misty asked, pointing at one hollow, then dismissing it almost instantly and pointing to its left where a much deeper shadow was. "*No, I'll bet that's it.*"

"Lemme see," Castle answered, moving ahead of his brother and letting the water jet turn off so the weight of his armor pulled him down further.

He got a fair jolt of adrenaline when the floor wasn't where it shoulda been; he quickly reengaged the jet to pull him to a more stable hover.

"*All okay?*" Tally asked; the radio communications were a little fuzzy, but Tally had positioned himself at the flood line when they'd dove and Castle thought probably the medic caught that jump in his heart-rate.

"Yeah, Tally. The floor's just not where it should be," he said, huffing a few breaths, but calming down again quick. Beside him, Misty actually just let himself sink and Castle watched the light of his water jet dimming as he got deeper. "The flooding that made this place washed more away over the years, I'm guessing."

Misty came to a gentle stop just barely in visibility. "*Not by too much, though. So, if someone sinks, there's at least an okay chance we'll be able to find them, provided the rest of the cavern wore similarly.*"

"Thank frip for that," Tally muttered, standing right above the flood line, looking down into the utter blackness. If it woulda been on the surface, it would have looked like a damned mud-puddle, for all the more innocuous it was. Except stepping into it would have meant vanishing underwater and disappearing quickly, completely.

He had put himself here because there wasn't much more he could do for Tango that Raze wasn't already doing, but if something happened to Castle and Misty, then at least he'd be closer and maybe able to talk them through it; he'd be there to pull them out and help drag them back up to the waypoint above. He wished that they had brought another water jet along, but even as he wished it, he knew that it would be more weight on some already borderline overloaded backs.

Frankly, Tally considered it more luck than anything else that there had been no torn or pulled
muscles yet. Everyone was sore, but no one had been hurt and Tally didn't want that to change.

"All right, going in to map the exit tunnel," Misty said, cool as could be. The way he and Castle kept talking, it seemed like a walk in the park that Tally knew it wasn't, but he was glad that they were so calm about it, because Tango was doubtless listening. "Hey, tell Tango it's not as narrow as the one comin' down."

Most of the guys above had their buckets off, but Tango doubtless heard it anyway, they woulda just set the radio to speaker. Still, just to do it, Tally said, "Hear that? The exit tunnel's not a straw."

"And the giant slurped up the clone troopers through Big Murder Mountain via his stone-straw..."

It took Tally a moment to realize that was Eight -- who was almost as quiet as Maul by nature -- and the smattering of giggles through the radio made him grin despite himself.

Someone made a slurping, lip-smacking noise and then Brody deadpanned in a goofy, deep voice, "Hmm, clone nuggets. Never know what you're gonna suck up when you stick your lips against a mountain."

It was ridiculous and only passably funny, but listening to Raze start laughing hard had him laughing himself; all the way on the other side, crackling some thanks to the distance and structures between them, the other two were chuckling themselves.

The mental image of a giant with lips against the mountain was more than Raze could take; he laughed so hard that tears were streaming down his face and his ribs hurt, because he thought probably a giant would crack some teeth on their armor, but also maybe because he was a little nervous -- not a lot, or anything, not like Tango -- but just a little bit, and laughing made everything feel better.

Poor Tango was having such a bad time down here; Raze wished he could fix that, but since he couldn't fix it, he just made sure Tango knew he wasn't all by himself and that they would be there for him and they would get him through this.

He had kind of hoped that he would get to use some of the charges he brought with him to blast a passage open, but he knew that if he did that, he might end up bringing a whole mountain down on them, so he was ready to just use them on the other side, maybe the Lieu would let him blow up General Skywalker's stun grenade launchers or something.

Raze wiped his eyes with the soft inner part of his glove and then checked on Tango, who was really drugged and pretty dazed because of it; he had his eyes closed like he was dozing, but Raze knew he wasn't yet because he shivered here or there occasionally, and Raze knew it wasn't because it was cold; their armor was really good at keeping them warm even if it wasn't all that comfortable to wear because it was so heavy, and then there were the supplies on top of that, too.

There weren't any animals down here, either, which meant no more fur for his hat. He had a good start on it because of Commander Half-Pint, she had even gotten him an extra tail somewhere and sent it for him as a gift, but piecing it together was going to take forever. Still, it was a fun diversion and maybe he'd even get some use out of it.
"Okay, we're above water!" Misty's voice was triumphant and cheerful, and beside Raze, Tango gave another long and rolling shiver.

"Relay time," Castle added, and Raze could hear him grinning even through a slightly staticky connection.

"Not long now, then it'll be over," he said himself, aside to Tango, and leaned their heads together. "We've got this."

"No slurping giants, huh?" Tango asked, voice kind of choked, and Six bounced on his toes some just to deal with his own jitters about going down there. Watching their pilot have a series of breakdowns over this had been hard, because some part of him thought that if Tango was that scared, maybe there was a reason to be. But Shiv was calm and so was everyone else mostly, so he swallowed it down and just stuck with his brother.

They didn't have names yet, except Six and Eight, and those weren't names so much as ways that other people addressed them. To each other, they were only you and me; they weren't numbers, they just were. Not that being referred to as the last number of their designation was bad, and they knew they'd get names soon because everyone in the Blackbirds was thinking of names for them -- sometimes goofy but sometimes really sweet -- and it was just that nothing had stuck yet.

"Maybe I can be Giant," his brother said, grinning. "I can slurp with the best of them; someone gave us noodles once, I can prove it."

Six snorted at that; he remembered that. They were just two packages of instant noodles, but they were the first things that they had ever eaten that weren't given to them by the Kaminoans or older brothers who were support staff on Kamino.

"Just once?" their lieutenant asked, brow furrowing. He'd been quiet all day, except to do planning and coordination, but it didn't seem like he was disappointed in them or afraid of whatever was ahead. Maybe tired; he was carrying a lot of gear and without the support structure that armor provided to balance the weight.

"We've had some different things since then," Six offered, shrugging. "Well, you know, sir. Rodents and cookies and whiskey and all that."

Their sergeant was smirking and dropped his head, rubbing over his mouth; Maul caught him at it and reached over to give his head a light shove. "Not a word."

"I didn't say a thing," Shiv answered, rolling with the little shove he'd been given, but he was still grinning tongue-in-cheek and Eight was grinning right along with him, mostly for the immediate memory of their L-T with his toothbrush, scrubbing his teeth for ten minutes straight post-raw-rodent.
"You were thinking it," Maul said, archly, though by now Eight had gotten pretty good at knowing when the zabrak was unhappy versus when he was having a playful go at them. Not that it was easy to tell, all the time, but practice made perfect and where his twin was the quick, canny action-guy, he himself was the patient, observant, watch-then-move one.

"I can't help it, I was just internally lamenting that there's a serious lack of small furry bodies down here for you to snack on."

"I noticed that you weren't turning down the rodents you roasted on the fire."

"But sir, they were roasted and that's the difference."

Eight watched between them, thoroughly entertained; he'd heard tell of command teams that actually hated each other, and he'd heard some rumors since being assigned to the Blackbirds about what went on under General Krell, so he was grateful all over again to be where he was.

"If she'd handed you half a rodent, what would you have done?" Maul asked, crossing his arms over his dry-suit, eying Shiv.

"Politely handed it back," Shiv answered, flashing a grin. "With a reminder that she's skinny enough to need the extra calories."

Maul went to say something, then closed his mouth and worked that over, narrowing his eyes before conceding defeat. "I might have to remember that for next time. If there is a next time."

They had already packed their gear into the waterproof bags and switched over the rebreathers in their buckets. Eight still couldn't say he was one hundred percent ready for this, but he felt pretty good about it, especially since the only person who seemed genuinely scared was Tango, and Eight figured that he'd probably be okay once he got to the other side.

"All right, boys, all ropes are anchored and the course is mapped. Come on down," Castle said, through the radio; Eight took a deep, slow breath and picked up his bucket, swallowing down once before putting it on and sealing it in place.

"I'll see you shortly, Tango," Raze said, getting up and suitting up the rest of the way, just as Tally was making it back up into the chamber with them. Husker had been watching the drama play out mostly quietly, though he joined in with his brothers in offering encouragement or supportive words to their pilot; in that time, his estimation of Raze kept climbing. Who knew the flighty, sometimes-clingy, almost-certainly-crazy demo expert could show such a knack for setting an example? Sure, he never made it to briefings on time, and he was the first one to abandon armor in favor of fatigues, but when it came down to the wire, he was rock-solid.

Right now, he was heading down the tunnel, the thick white of the big, partially air-filled waterproofed bag looking ghostly. Their shinies followed right after carrying their own bags, and Husker gave a wave before going down with them.

He'd been in a lot of places in his time, but he'd never spent so much time underground before. It wasn't as bad as he probably would have thought, though; it was easy enough to just put his head down and follow their leads. And since Castle proved to be damned good at navigating even this
sketchy a deal, he didn't have any misgivings about it.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, most of what was troubling Husker was the scenario General Skywalker had come up with.

It felt-- merciless. And unfair. And Husker had problems with thinking anything was unfair because they were soldiers and they didn't get to have opinions on what the battlefield was going to be -- at least, not outside of the Blackbirds -- so that just added to his conflicted thoughts. Their general trained them hard, but Husker couldn't ever remember Skywalker setting them up for failure; even when he pushed them, he was also the guy who was cheering them on and encouraging them.

And it didn't feel like this was something he woulda done to just any squad in the 212th, either. It felt a lot like Skywalker was playing out a grudge against their lieutenant, and if that meant letting them fall on their faces--

"Here we go," Raze said, taking a deep breath that they could hear over the radio; it was narrow enough now that Husker couldn't watch him disappear into the black hole of water, but he'd find out soon enough what it was like when it was his turn.

"Standing by," Castle answered, no longer sounding crackly.

Raze was their test subject as to whether or not the waterproofed and partially air-filled bags were going to add enough buoyancy to overcome the weight of the cold assault armor and allow him to reach the rope relay without an assist. Husker figured right now everyone was listening in, because it would change the scenario if Castle had to play escort.

About eight minutes later of quiet, tense silence, Raze came back with, "No can do, Castle. Feels like a low-grav situation, but I can't float."

"All right. So, plan change: I get all four of you on the rope, then you get to the midway point, I play water taxi, and Misty catches you at the bottom of the other side."

Husker thought about the power in the water jets and tried to mentally calculate it; the reason Castle and Misty couldn't just ferry them was to preserve the batteries.

He hoped they didn't have to do this a second time.

The next several minutes passed slowly; Six and then Eight went down, and when it was Husker's turn, he looked down at the black hole and couldn't help but suck in a breath, swallowing down a sudden bout of realization of just how dark it was down there. No kriffin' wonder Tango had a major meltdown. He listened to the checks and affirmatives of his brothers, and then finally took his first steps down into the water.

It wasn't cold inside of his armor, but he could feel the pressure and a vague edge of coolness as he carefully descended down below the surface; this armor was insulated enough to manage this, though it hadn't originally been designed for full-submersion, but it was still kind of unnerving. He found himself breathing in that rhythm that Tally had taught Tango the day before, guiding himself down with a hand on the wall; his waterproofed bag kept wanting to pull off his back, but it was a small concern.

His headlamp didn't do a damn bit of good. And he didn't even notice that he was at the bottom until Castle was saying, "Whoa, Husker; hold there, you're about to step off and sink to the floor."

Husker immediately froze; he couldn't even see the cavern he was on the edge of. Just the faint, green-tinged light of his headlamp, disappearing into perfect blindness. But once he was still, he
could make out the brighter lights of the water jet coming down to get him, and he couldn't entirely hold back a huff of relief when Castle turned and Husker could grab hold for his ride up to the rope.

When it was Smarty's turn, after the other four had already gotten to the other side and were safely climbing back up to above the waterline, he'd had a long moment where he debated on whether to ask Tally to dope him out of his mind, too. And not for the first or hundredth time, he thought about whether they wouldn't have been better off taking an overland route, even if that would have put all of his research in the trash compactor.

Not to say he wasn't proud of it. But dragging himself hand-over-hand along a rope that vanished into blackness both ways was a particularly awful and surreal experience, and his shoulders -- which had been sore for days -- were burning with every forward motion.

Sometimes, out of the darkness, the sharp spikes of stalactites caught the light from the edge of his headlamp. Castle had anchored the rope to either go under or between them, only a few hung low enough to bump against, but every time they appeared out of the murk, Smarty's heart gave a little jump.

*Stalactites are formed by a variety of water soluble materials carried by ground water depositing the solution over time; the most common forms are found in limestone--*

Another of the monsters faded out of the black into a dim green, and brushed past Smarty's waterproofed pack as it floated half above him despite its anchoring. He clung to the rope, shuddering, and then gasped when he felt the motion transfer through said rope when Brody joined him; in a moment of panic, he wondered if the rope was going to be able to hold all of their weight, but then he had to remind himself that it had already tested secure for the previous four, and--

He *hoped* that was Brody, anyway. He'd tuned out of the radio chatter briefly, absently, and didn't actually know.

"This is the actual, literal pits."

Yep, definitely Brody.

--but maybe each jolt against the anchors loosened them, then they would plunge down--

"How deep is this?" he found himself asking, dragging himself along more because he didn't want to block traffic than anything else.

"You heard 'em earlier, Smarty-pants," Brody said, grinding it out as he started his hand-over-hand walk along the rope. Kriff, what a pain in the ass. He'd gone through plenty of field training like all of them, but he never wanted a computer terminal and a cup of caf as much as he did right now.

"Probably not deep enough for us to get lost forever."
"Aren't you frippin' original," Smarty shot back, but at least his voice sounded a little steadier. Brody couldn't even see his brother ahead, he could only feel the motion transfer down the rope, and he didn't know whether he found that reassuring or creepy.

"What can I say, I'm a born unique genius," he grunted. Really, though, he pretty much knew what Smarty was thinking, because Brody was thinking it himself: This sucked. They were more trained for support than field work, and with every single hitch down the rope, Brody was reminded of why.

Still, he thought, if he'd been given a chance to stay back with the ship-- well, he probably wouldn't have taken it. He'd probably be right here with the rest of the guys, even if it was miserable. After all, he got to tell his story of the Chadran mafia, and the squad made a great audience; he'd had more fun than he'd probably ever admit answering their questions and maybe only embellishing a little bit. For dramatic effect.

(It was only three million and twenty credits and not six million and thirty-three, and it was only one wookiee and not four, but the incident with the chadra-fan stripper and Brody wishing desperately there was some way to sterilize his brain was dead accurate. Unfortunately.)

"If I ever want to make a killing, I think I'll film a horror holo and set it someplace like this," he said, as he watched the downward spike of a stalactite fade into view. He made the mistake then of tipping his head back and seeing how close, comparatively, a bunch more spikes were. "Scratch that, I absolutely will."

There was a little jerk on the line and Shiv asked, voice strained a bit, "That furry little stripper going to get a cameo?" Then there was a long beat while Brody actually shuddered at the mental image, hanging off the line like a bat, and Shiv added, "As long as--"

Maul's voice broke in over the static, "I will kill you, Shiv."

"Oh frip," Smarty managed, through peals of laughter, and even though it meant clinging for his life to the rope, Brody started roaring with laughter himself.

"--I was just going to say as long as she was clothed." Shiv didn't sound half as innocent as he was trying to, though, even through radio interference, and it took more will than Brody thought he had to keep hand-walking the rope when he was laughing so hard. "And nothing at all about carnivores."

"Of course you were," Maul growled back, and Shiv barely managed to keep himself from snickering. Still, hearing all of his brothers laughing -- with a notable exception in the form of Tango -- made him feel lighter. He was already doing pretty well with things, even this particular thing, but he knew this wasn't easy on anyone in this squad and they weren't even near their objective yet.

"I can't believe you think I'd make a cheap joke like that," he said back, as he crept along the rope, glad as hell for his textured gloves.

"You haven't been able to control the urge thus far."

Shiv grinned to himself, wanting to shake his head but not really having the ability to do so at the moment, thanks to his arms being up and the unwieldiness of both armor and cargo. He was carrying
a bit more weight himself, just to make sure Maul had less ferrying to do later -- he knew Tally wasn't thrilled with the lieu volunteering, but Maul's logistics were sound, he was the one least encumbered by armor and therefore quicker -- and the bantering provided a nice distraction from the ache in his shoulders.

"Oh, sir, you don't know how many times I've bit my tongue," he huffed, pulling himself along and blinking widely behind his visor at the thing that came fading out of the dark at him.

There was a long beat of silence there, then the disgruntled concession, "Perhaps not."

Tally interrupted them, dryly, "You know, I think I can tell exactly when each one of you sees something creepy, it's like watching your vitals form a sine wave."

"You mean the giant roof spikes adorning Big Murder Mountain?" Eight asked, crackling from the far side.

"Stalactites," Smarty said. "They're called stalactites."

"Roof spikes sounds much neater, though."

Shiv smiled as he picked up pace a little bit, buoyed more by listening to his squad's chatter than by anything else. The rope dipped as Tally joined them, and up ahead, Brody gave a little motion-sick kind of groan. "Reverse fishbowl would be awful," he said, and Shiv snorted back, though his face scrunched up at the thought.

Beside him, like a phantom of green and light, Castle jetted by them with a snarky, "Good thing someone called for a taxi, then, isn't it? Not that those protein bars taste much different coming back up than they do going down."

"I didn't need to hear that, brother," Smarty said, distaste clear in his voice. "Get over here and give me a ride and pick another topic."

Tango only heard them sometimes; most of the time, he was floating. When he wasn't floating, fear had a clawhold on his throat, squeezing low down below his adam's apple and making it feel like something heavy was sitting on his chest. It wasn't as bad as when he couldn't breathe; that pain was awful, he felt like his heart was going to explode, but it was still terrible and he didn't actually know of the tranks were doing what they were supposed to. Yeah, he could breathe, but he didn't quite feel like he was in his skin anymore.

Worse than that was the shame of it.

Brody was right; he'd climbed into any number of small, single-man fighters and been perfectly fine, even though those were so cramped that he could only move his forearms and head. He'd taken those into space, where if he wasn't fast enough or good enough, the vacuum of space would turn him inside out when the seals of his armor finally broke. Or he would freeze to death or suffocate if they didn't.

But none of those times scared him as much as this was, and he didn't even know why. Cramped conditions were common on Kamino, hell, their bunks were like miniature caves when they were
cadets, stacked like honeycombs. But every time he looked at the walls, they seemed closer; every
time he thought about that black pool of water, he wanted to scream.

He dragged in a shaky, miserable breath and rubbed his hands over his face.

"Do you want to go before the supplies or after them?" Maul asked; it was down to just the two of
them, and Tango felt another spike of shame that he had to be baby-sat of all things, especially since
he'd been pretty useless since they'd landed.

"Doesn't matter," he gasped back, hating how he sounded. "Whatever's easier, sir."

There was a long moment of silence there, and he heard the short chirp that signaled Maul had turned
off his transmitter, though some quieter Tango could still hear the receiver picking up the bantering
of the other Blackbirds in unison with his own bucket. It was enough to pull him out of his circling
thoughts, and he managed to make himself open his eyes, shivering. He turned his own off, with
shaking fingers, not sure what precipitated it but following the lead.

Maul wasn't looking at him, but he was looking thoughtfully into some middle-distance; they were
down to two lamps, so in the dim light, his markings seemed to fade into the shadows, his otherwise
red skin a dusky purple. The only true color was the gold of his eyes, albeit darker. After a moment
of quiet, he spoke again, "With me, it's nearly always my arms first. Someone says something, or the
wrong thought goes through my mind, and my arms stop feeling right; stop feeling like they belong
to me. I don't usually remember what comes after."

Tango blinked, drawing his arms and knees tighter to himself, brow furrowing some as he took that
in. When it clicked, what he was being told, he wasn't even really sure what he felt. "What about
when you do remember?"

Maul tilted his head some, worked his jaw, and then said, "Pain. It feels like someone put a knife
through my chest and I have to try to breathe anyway, even though it's still there cutting."

"Sounds about right," Tango managed, feeling new tears as they streaked hot down his face. As if
saying it made it fact, his chest ached in echo, though not so bad he couldn't get air past it. "What do
you do about it?"

Maul finally looked at him, quirking his brow tiredly. "Nothing. I live through it, and then try to put
myself enough together to keep going. It does-- get easier, though. If not always in the most
predictable ways."

That there wasn't some answer to just making these feelings go away was almost disappointing; that
there wasn't some kind of drug or meditation or whatever that would fix it. That there was any kind
of answer at all, though, even if it was just in enduring it and then forging on was more than Tango
would have expected, especially from their lieu.

It was honest, even if it was a painful honesty.

Tango fought to get his quivering mouth under control, taking a few slow, deep breaths and then he
said, "Since Castle's gonna-- gonna be on this side to pull us up anyway, he can push the bags, they
aren't that heavy and won't waste much more battery power. If he-- if he anchors them to the rope.
Like a supply train. Then all you have to do is get them to him. Then we can go."

Maul thought about it, then gave a nod. "Good thinking." He picked up his headset and pulled it
back on, turning the transmitter back on. "Tango has a good idea to cut down on how much longer
this is going to go on. Castle, be prepared to play catch at the entrance tunnel mouth."
Castle's answer was a curious but ready, "Yes, sir. Be back there in a couple minutes."

Tango watched as Maul reconfigured the straps on the bags, then pulled his helmet on and locked it to the seal of his suit where the rigid neck would hold it into place.

He didn't exactly feel better, but-- he at least felt more ready, as he started making himself move enough to get his bucket back on and stretch the stiffness out of his cold, fear-chilled body.

Given the dimensions of their waterproofed bags, the weight of their supplies and what buoyancy could be added to said bags by leaving an air cushion, it was going to take a few trips to get them all down to where he could hand them off to Castle.

For the third or fourth time in a row, Maul checked the seals on his dry suit; he had thermals on underneath of it, and the suit was doing a fair enough job keeping him warm, but he didn't feel like testing how hypothermia worked when you only had half the circulating blood volume of a person with a whole body. He was tired enough now that his thoughts kept trying to wing off in different directions on him anyway; he was disciplined enough to keep them in order, but it was taking some effort and giving himself a new potential disaster to work over wasn't going to help anyone, not even himself.

The good cheer of ten of the eleven clones did help, though. Their quick adaptation and resilience was being put to the test, and they were managing it. And even though Tango was struggling, he hadn't actually bolted back for higher ground; even though he was sick with terror and hurting enough that even Maul could sometimes feel it ping off of him, he was still there.

As Maul usually did when fatigue became a real factor of his existence and not simply something to push through or ignore, he focused in the moment and didn't really allow himself to think ahead any further than necessary to stay alive, encountering each obstacle, dealing with it, and then moving onto the next. As such, he didn't really even let himself think as he went underwater, toting cargo; noted it, noted that he could feel the cold pressure of it, but then just kept moving, guiding with one hand against the tunnel's wall and toeing ahead every few steps to make sure he didn't step off the end of it into the cavern.

He was leaning on the Force to get through; both in lending some strength to his protesting back and in trying to keep some form of stable footing when he couldn't actually feel his feet. His ability to use the Force had been choppy ever since that temple on Zigoola and his confrontation with his former Master; usable, it never abandoned him entirely, but where before it was seamless and smooth and as natural as breathing, now it seemed to bunch up at odd times, or narrow to a trickle, or occasionally become a flood before receding again and leaving him feeling the echoes of his prior burn-out.

He hadn't said anything about it -- what would be the point, except that it would worry Obi-Wan and perhaps make his own life harder if it made it back to Che? -- but the more tired he was, the more he was increasingly aware of that inconsistency.

If he trusted it, this would have been a lot faster; he could have hauled everything telekinetically. As it was, they couldn't afford to risk supplies on a connection that might falter.

"All the little bags in a row," Castle said, as Maul handed them off, two at a time. Luckily, there
were only three trips required and by the time he got the last of them down, they had managed to smooth the transition and he had a solid idea of where the tunnel mouth was.

That just left Tango.

"Ready?" Maul asked, after a few moments of catching his breath from playing back-and-forth.

Tango had gotten himself the rest of the way suited up, and he wasn't very steady on his feet, but he answered roughly, "Yessir."

Several things went wrong.

First, the water jet wasn't able to support the weight of two clones and one half-cybernetic zabrak. Maul had known that they were going to be pushing it with that, but he had been hoping that they could pull it off anyway; it turned out that they couldn't, which meant Castle had to take Tango up, then come back for Maul, and listening to Tango panting in fear over the radio was several kinds of unnerving and upsetting.

Maul had rigged a harness from some of their mountaineering gear to keep Tango on that rope even if he couldn't manage to hold on, but that probably didn't feel very safe.

The second was that he had never been properly underwater with his cybernetics in a free-floating environment. Their weight had been useful coming down the tunnel -- he hadn't actually even thought about it while he was ferrying cargo -- but it worked against him once they were in the cavern, overriding whatever buoyancy he gained from being unarmored and from his organic half; he hadn't realized just how much it was. He knew they were weighted to match the organic body parts they replaced, but they had no buoyancy to balance that out in this situation, which left them largely useless deadweight, not even good for kicking and swimming.

He-- probably should have thought of that before now.

Still, it was too late to change the parameters, which meant making due.

"Tango, listen to me," he said, once they were both on the rope, recentering himself in the moment and focusing on the panicky clone he had to get through this. "Nothing is going to happen to you, I won't let anything happen to you. All you have to do is hold on, close your eyes and think about something else."

"Like what?" Tango asked back, but he took that first suggestion at least and wrapped both arms around Maul, tight enough that for a second Maul wondered if he was going to have the air squeezed out of him.

"Like what?" Castle suggested. "I'm right beside you, brother. Neither of us are gonna let you hit the deck."

Maul nodded, rather pointlessly, and he didn't exactly care for the way the rope was holding them, but there wasn't anything to be done for it now; he just grit his teeth and dragged them along, working against the weight of both pilot and cybernetics, dragging on the Force as much as he could. In a last-ditch emergency, Castle could just pull them both to the other side, one at a time, though that
would likely leave them with only one water jet at the end of this adventure. Muscles could recover; batteries without a charging station couldn't.

"Uh. I-- I guess. It was-- I mean, I had always done really well when they put me in a simulator during sorting? And I used to play games with the others in the simulators, so I wasn't surprised when they put me with the other flyboys."

From the other side, Raze cut in, "I remember those. I crashed six times on take-off and they never put me in a simulator again."

The Blackbirds had been quiet as they had coordinated that last leg; hearing Raze speak up was an odd relief. Tango apparently thought so, as well, because he wasn't bruising Maul's ribs quite so badly anymore.

"I never crashed once. I mean, I was nervous when I got into my first cockpit, but-- the good kind. The excited kind."

"Probably like how I felt when I watched my first big explosion."

"Yeah, probably. The first time wasn't anything exciting, though, except to me. Just orbit and deorbit. Our instructor was there to walk us through it."

Tango's voice had smoothed out some, and while he didn't sound good, he didn't sound quite so bad, either. Maul just let them talk and focused himself on getting them to the bridge between ropes. Castle and Misty had already handled the cargo; as Tango had suggested, just pushing it, transferring it and pushing it had proven easy enough, even if it did add to the battery drain. That just left them, though he thought he'd probably have Castle retrieve both ropes for the sake of possibly needing them later.

It was slow, decidedly laborious, but it wasn't until they were on the second rope that the third and fourth things went wrong.

The anchor point behind them gave.

Maul had sensed it coming a split-second before it did, just enough time to switch his grip before they were plunging down, falling away from Castle's brighter light; instantly, the noise over the radio was so deafening from both voice and interference that he couldn't keep a thought in his head as he tried to keep a hold on the rope with Tango squeezing the life out of him as they went down.

It wasn't the swiftest swing, given the drag factor of the water, but it was fast enough to be disorienting and when they came to a halt, Maul's hands slipped for half a meter before he could dig back in and stop them from sliding right down into the blackness below them.

Tango slipped himself, and the fourth thing went wrong when he scrambled back up using whatever handhold he could get; the dry suit wasn't meant to support the full weight of a heavily armored, panicking pilot and the seal broke, which had Maul dragging in a sharp breath for the very cold water that flooded in.

There were safeties; the helmet sealed itself to the rubberized, rigid neck, cutting itself off from the rest of the suit and the rebreather kept working fine, but the shock of cold was thought-shattering and they hung there for a moment, Maul clinging to the rope with a death grip, Tango clinging to Maul just the same, and neither of them able to drag enough air into their lungs to think clearly, let alone speak.

"Cut the chatter," Shiv barked, after the radio squealed, and everything fell silent but for Tango's
small, terrified noises at the end of every breath. "Situation?"

Maul tried to haul them upwards and couldn't; it took him every bit of focus he had just to hold them firm and get his own breathing under control. "Anchor gave and we fell. I have the rope, but I can't pull us up."

"Just found the first anchor and I'm coming down now," Castle said, and within moments of those words, the light of the water jet was descending on them.

"Right behind him," Misty added. "I'll get Tango."

"Tango, breathe," Maul ordered, though it probably lost something for the fact he had to do it through his teeth and somewhat breathlessly himself.

Tango's only answer was a pitched whimper, shuddering.

"C'mon, Tango, just reach out and grab my armor," Misty encouraged, hovering alongside. "I'm right here, it's a real quick ride back up above water."

The cold water soaking in was making Maul's muscles stiffen and ache -- not that they weren't already sore before -- and every time Tango shifted his grip, the armor dug in a few more bruises. Finally, arms shaking, waterlogged and at the end of both his literal and figurative rope, Maul tried again: "Tango. You have to breathe and you have to go with Misty," he said, steady by a feat of will, throwing something of a Force suggestion behind it, similar to what he had done with Obi-Wan on Zigoola; not quite to the level of coercion, but something hopefully Tango would want to listen to, and Maul was projecting as much calm as he could possibly muster up.

It took a few seconds, but then Tango said, in a shaking whisper, "Okay. Okay. Okay, I can do this, okay," and the-- emotional feedback, as it were, was so painfully sharp with fear that it had Maul baring his teeth silently.

Once the pilot let him go, though, he hung there for a long moment feeling dizzy and a little disoriented before redoubling his shields and getting his bearings.

"C'mon, Lieu, elevator for one going up, waiting on your floor," Castle said, tone somewhere between reassuring and casual.

By that point, Maul didn't have it left in him to worry about the battery charge on the water jets, the rope or anything else; he just pried one hand off of the rope, tucked his fingers into the joints between Castle's armorplating, and then abandoned the rope, swallowing down for the brief dip before they were heading upwards.

The last thing to go wrong was the one he wasn't even sure actually happened.

It was while he was trudging, heavy and tired and shivering, up the dry part of the exit tunnel, reeling some now from genuine exhaustion and thinking about changing into dry clothes that he went to take a step and-- for a fraction of a second, didn't.

It woke Maul right up, but it was so brief that he wasn't sure he'd actually felt it; he paused there,
hand on the tunnel wall, and lifted his foot, rotated it back and forth, put it back down, then did that all over again. But everything was working the way it was supposed to; his cybernetics responded as they always had, once they had adapted to his nervous system, no hitches or delays.

"Everything okay?" Castle asked, water jet hooked to his back and bucket under his arm.

Maul tested it one more time, then slowly nodded, trying to ignore the grain of nervousness that remained as they went on to join the others.

"Fine."
Interlude: Elten

Ahsoka tapped her chin with the side of her finger, head cocked, taking in the droid in front of her.

EL-10 -- quickly dubbed Elten -- looked back at her steadily, its blue photoreceptors giving it a calm, almost soothing look. Which was some trick, since Elten was modeled off of assassin droids enough to give her a jolt when she first opened the crate to reveal it in full.

"Well, what pronouns do you feel like?" she asked, because that seemed pretty important. She knew that most lower-level droids, the common laborers with only the most basic function and programming, didn't have any gender preferences (and no droids were considered sentients, which Ahsoka thought was banthash-- bantha leavings), but Elten was definitely a higher class and therefore could. And she didn't want to misgender the droid.

"I'm a droid, Commander Tano. I don't have feelings," Elten replied; even its voice didn't really hint one way or another, though it did make Ahsoka grin the first time the droid spoke, because it had the same accent that Lieutenant Maul did, and the same soft tone of voice, albeit pitched higher.

"Now I know that's not true. Or-- I guess you are pretty new, so maybe it is true, but it probably won't be as time goes on." She wrinkled her nose as she thought about it, then huffed a sigh and plunked herself down on the lid of the crate Elten had come in, now closed up. She didn't know what she was going to do with the crate, but for now, keeping it to hide Elten in if necessary seemed a good idea. "You really don't have any preferences? I mean, there are hundreds of genders in the galaxy, you aren't just stuck with him or her."

"I can confirm that I have no preferences." There was a beat. "What would you prefer?"

"Oh no." Ahsoka shook her head, lekku swaying with the force of it. "Not a chance, El. Don't you have any programming on cultures of the galaxy you could look at and see which one-- I dunno, which one interests you?"

"I'm programmed as a combat instructor, Commander," Elten answered, and Ahsoka squinted her blue eyes at those steady blue photoreceptors at what definitely sounded like a dry tone. "If you prefer and with your permission, I can access the Resolute's intranet and research, given my role as your companion in addition to."

Ahsoka hadn't known how to feel when Elten had been delivered; it wasn't some chrome-plated beauty, but there was an elegance to the droid that was immediately notable from the first reveal, and when Elten had rattled off its origin and purpose, she had a long moment where she put it all together and was-- maybe touched? Okay, definitely touched, because no one had ever given her a custom-built droid before, but she also wondered some if Maul was looking to dodge teaching her himself.

When she asked after that -- politely -- Elten informed her that, given the war effort, it was meant to supplement and instruct so that what times she could learn directly from its builder were spent as productively as possible.

After that, she was both touched and excited. Especially when Elten told her that Lieutenant Maul had included instruction on Juyo, as well as the six approved of forms of lightsaber combat, and that Elten had actually been programmed with the skills of the combat droids that had taught Maul when he was her age.

But now, the important thing was making sure that Elten was-- well, happy.
"Okay. Okay, how about you research it and until you know-- what about they and them?" she asked, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees and her chin on her hands. Thinking of the droid as 'it' made her feel uncomfortable, but they/them was nicely neutral even in Basic, and she'd known plenty of people who preferred those pronouns.

Elten's photoreceptors brightened briefly. "They and them is acceptable."

Ahsoka found herself beaming. "Great! So, wanna spar?"

"Yes, Commander."

Elten proceeded to dance with her back and forth across the training room, giving her one hell of a workout, showing an almost impenetrable defense and a sound offense.

Ahsoka started to think of all the ways she could deploy her new friend against her old ones in practical jokes and smirked.
Many thanks to my best fiend Shadowmaat for betaing this and telling me what it needed! And I owe the inspiration for part of this chapter to one of my very dearest friends; should you ever stumble across this, Cara, thank you. <3 I hope it makes you smile.

"Raze?!

Shiv had never heard that particular tone from Maul; if his voice hadn't been pitched so low naturally, it would have easily been an incredulous squeak.

There was a shuffle, then a mumbled, "Don't headbutt me, Lieu, it's just that you're really warm."

Shiv pried his eyes open and took in the sight of Maul; he was the latest in the line of living body pillows claimed by their demolitions expert, half-pinned by an arm and a leg thrown over him, and he was currently looking at Shiv with wide, pleading gold eyes. If a bit glassy, yet.

After a deep yawn, Shiv pulled the datapad out from under his makeshift pillow and checked the time, then flicked the screen off and put it right back where it was. "Not time to get up yet." Then he closed his eyes, chewing down a smirk. "Raze is right, though, sir: you're keeping the blankets nice and toasty."

A snore rose up from Raze -- Shiv knew that sound well by now -- and then Maul said, "You can't just leave me here like this."

"Sure I can." And with that, Shiv turned over and threw an arm over Tally, since Tally insisted on sleeping on that side of him, and settled in for another hour himself.

He didn't know if Maul gave up trying to escape a clingy Raze, but before he drifted back off, he did hear Tally mutter something about definitely not being the little spoon.

The night before had been mostly a coordinated, minor amount of damage control. No one had it in them to hike much further, so they made use of the first even barely large-enough space to make camp. Fortunately, they were all good at making camp fast; the incentive of a vaguely soft surface to sleep on and getting out of the cold assault armor was enough to prod them on despite exhaustion and aching muscles.

Tally had declared that no one was moving again for twelve hours and no one had even considered arguing. They weren't wildly ahead of schedule, but they definitely were ahead of it by some, so they could afford a couple extra hours of rest and recovery time.
Shiv didn’t feel too bad; he was sore like everyone else, but he was more just very frippin’ relieved that they were heading up now, because the chances that they would encounter another underwater obstacle decreased the higher their elevation. He had sat listening to the quiet conversations of the others, picking apart the high calorie nutrition bar that-- yeah, okay, it did taste a lot like a compressed brick of wet wood pulp, even when it was dunked in some spiced hot cider. Shiv got that they couldn’t exactly bring down fresh ingredients and cook full-course meals down here, but the lack of effort to make these things taste good was something he was eternally irritated by.

By the time he was ready to turn in, he had found himself cocking his head at the unmoving lump of parka and legs that was his lieutenant, who apparently hadn’t thought to actually get into a tent before hitting oblivion.

"Just how doped up is he?" Shiv asked Tally, kind of amused.

"To the tune of three hundred milligrams of isonazam." When Shiv blinked at that, Tally had raised his hands and added, "I didn’t spring it on him or anything, he knew exactly what he was taking and what it was gonna do. Though he might have misjudged how well it would work."

Shiv had found himself snorting at that; still, even with a parka, he wasn’t about to leave Maul out there crashed against a pack of supplies, so with a drawn groan of reluctance, he got up and went over and jostled the zabrak awake, which was a surprising amount of effort, and then dragged him up to his feet once he was passably aware and capable of standing.

Maul blinked at him and said, with perfect enunciation, "It's a little like being drunk, but less--" he held one hand up (the one that wasn't currently hanging onto Shiv's shoulder for support) and wagged it back and forth, "--sloshy."

This declaration was made out of no where and was the only thing Maul had said; Shiv found himself wondering, as he’d manhandled his CO into the tent, out of his parka and back horizontal again when Maul had ever had the chance to get drunk. And if he was half as entertaining as Shiv suspected when he did.

Thankfully, for everyone’s sanity -- no matter how debatable -- the rest of the night had been peaceful. By the time Shiv woke up for real, feeling about as ready to move on as he was going to, the squad was in various stages of doing the same. He managed to refrain from groaning as he pulled his armor back on, piece by piece, stretching in place as much as possible to warm up before he did, and when he finally exited the tent, he walked right into an amusing, somewhat baffling debate.

"--st saying, you should share the wealth," Brody was in the middle of declaring, as he sat looking disgruntled with his nutrition bar.

"I didn't mean to," Raze said back, rubbing at the back of his head sheepishly.

"What kind of wealth is Raze supposed to be sharing?" Shiv asked, plunking himself down and taking a quick gander around the rest of the squad; Tango still looked kind of subdued and groggy, but all right compared to yesterday, and despite some sore movements, everyone else seemed to be doing fine.

He was, admittedly, kind of surprised when it was Maul who answered, dryer than a desert, "My ability to produce body heat in excess to the human norm." He sounded more awake, now, too; Shiv wondered if he’d managed to escape his limpet after their brief conversation a couple hours ago.

"Yeah, I mean, who wouldn't want to sleep next to a living space heater?" Brody asked back, as he procrastinated on eating his breakfast. "The blankets are good, but still."
"Shame on you, turning our CO into a free commodity," Tally said, from the side. "If you want to sleep next to the living space heater, you should have to earn it."

What ensued was one of the more jawdroppingly absurd conversations that Shiv had ever been privy to.

"Marching distance?" - "No, we have to stay together." - "How about whoever complains the least?" - "Hey, I could go for that!" - "Wait, hold on; you would have to define complaints, because if you twist an ankle, you'd best be letting me know." - "But complaining about foot marches is a time-honored tradition, and I know I'd lose by default." - "Best singer?" - "--please no, anything but that." - "How about jokes?" - "Do you think jokes are gonna fill an entire day's worth of marching?" - "Maybe; we can sure try--"

"What about stories?" Tango asked, the first time Shiv had heard the pilot speak yet this morning. "Best story wins."

Everyone fell silent for a moment, all looking at each other, gauging the interest.

Maul had been meticulously testing out his cybernetic legs while he watched the whole thing happen, looking amused and incredulous. He was the one who broke the silence by asking, "Do I get a say in any of this?"

Another round of exchanged looks passed, then Raze said, with a cheerful shrug, "You can pick the best one."

And that settled that.

Tango hadn't ever been one of the strutting, confident kinds of clones, but this mission had gone a long way towards reminding him of why.

At least now, they were heading up again; at times the way was steeper than comfortable and he had to find a handhold on the rough-hewn wall, but he did feel a little better about it. Even though it didn't actually make any real difference, it felt like there was less on top of him.

Though, that didn't take away the blow his self-confidence had taken in all this.

After setting the Courier down -- and he knew he did that well because he had managed to land that thing light in the middle of crosswinds and a blizzard -- everything had just started going downhill, first metaphorically, then literally. He hadn't minded the march through the snow and wind to the caves, grueling as it was, and he even did okay that first day, though he'd started getting uncomfortable the further into the mountain they got, but after that he just kept having to fight to control his thoughts, which raced in every black direction they could.

Every narrowed part of the stone tunnels had felt like it was squeezing him. The occasionally low ceiling had seemed ready to cave in. He hadn't known he was claustrophobic; all of the times he'd been in tight spaces before had never fazed him, but there was something about the size of this one that stuck in his brain like a pointy rock would stick in one's boot, making walking painful and miserable for so long as it lasted. Except here, he couldn't just dislodge it.
He'd accomplished nothing, except slowing them down and making them waste time talking him down off of the panic attacks he couldn't seem to control, and kriff, did he appreciate the effort, but he hated the awful feeling of shame that came after.

His suggestion of telling stories hadn't even been because he thought he stood a chance of winning -- Brody, especially, was a hell of a good storyteller -- but because in all the time they'd been walking, the easiest for him had been listening to the stories the others told, when they told them. He could get lost in the words of his brothers and lieutenant and instead of picturing the next cave-in, or a sink hole no one could see coming before they fell, or another cavern filled with black water, he could picture the events of the story. There, he could kind of walk in their boots, rock-free, instead of his own.

It occurred to him, though, as they were walking and he was listening to his brothers talk that they were all autobiographical in nature. He could take a guess where there was some embellishment going on, and where the events were fudged to make them funnier or more entertaining, but all of them had a ring of reality to them; the feeling of having happened mostly like they were relayed. Half-absently, he wondered if anyone had ever thought of just-- gathering stories like that, maybe putting them all into some type of anthology.

Maybe then they would be like real people, to the rest of the galaxy.

One by one, the stories came, broken only when the climb was steep enough that it took all of their concentration to climb. Sometimes they had to stop and clear things out, and in those times, feeling hemmed in, Tango closed his eyes and listened while whichever of his brothers was speaking carried on.

Tally and Shiv didn't add in any, and Tango thought probably no one was taking this all that seriously, but it was keeping him sane.

Misty talked about the time he had gotten to swim with a pod of whales on Iloh, and his love of the water and the time spent there colored every word of his story so strongly that Tango could almost smell the salt in the air; could see the pale colors of the shallows, the deep blue of the depths, the dappled light that fell on the mottled skin of the whales and the wonder that Misty had felt just-- being there, with these giant creatures, watching them move through the water. After he had relayed that, Maul had mentioned that he had been to Iloh once himself, on a mission for the Jedi Order; when he said that was the first time in his life he'd been drunk, the entire squad had asked so many questions that the Lieu cut 'em off and told 'em to get back to their own stories.

Castle's storytelling was like Castle himself; blunt and straight-forward, told without a lot of flare and it required him to pause more than once to explain a term or a piece of equipment that the others hadn't encountered yet. It was still good listening, though; he explained how they'd had to build a bridge in two days, and the amount of work and effort it took to dig footers into a fast-moving river, and how exhausting and rewarding the whole thing had been.

It was amazing, how they all came from one genetic template, but were all so different. It was rarely so apparent as it was in story form.

Unsurprisingly, it was Brody who talked longest and kept everyone, even Tango, amused. Instead of the Chadran mafia, this time he told them all about his first, last and only misadventure with Hax in the Crimson Corridor and just how close he came to being hitched to a Psadan.

"--I might actually be married. I'm not sure, I was pretty drunk at the time and my bride-to-be-or-was apparently found me gross and ditched me before we could, uh-- consummate anything," Brody said, clearing his throat. "Not sure what the customs are, there."
Aside nearly getting married, he'd also apparently nearly joined a Weequay pirate crew and had *definitely* joined the Church of the Sacred Sarlacc, though he wasn't sure if he was still a member because he hadn't attended services except the once.

Tango was pretty sure Brody's story was going to win, if only because it was funny, long and had enough of an open ending to let the imagination run wild there. He was even smiling about it, especially picturing the sign above the Church of the Sacred Sarlacc, because that description had been hilarious and evocative at the same time.

That was why he was a little surprised when Tally tapped him on the shoulder. "Your turn, Tango. Tell us a story."

The mental image of a hutt groping desperately out of the many-toothed holy sarlacc with spirals for eyes quickly dissolved and Tango's mouth opened and closed a few times before he said, "I don't-- I don't really have-- I mean, I've never had anything that wild happen to me."

The suggestions came quickly. "What about your first big scare in the cockpit?" Six asked.

Misty chimed in, "That's a good one. Or how about that time you buzzed the control ship and got your name?"

Behind him, Tally sounded like smugness incarnate, "Or you could tell the story of your first--"

Tango stopped dead just fast enough for Tally to run into him with a grunt, because the last thing he wanted to do was tell those who hadn't witnessed it all about kissing their lieutenant. Not that everyone didn't know about it, but he'd had enough humiliation for one trip. Tally gave him a shove in the back of his pack, but he thankfully shut up there.

"What about the story you started telling me a few weeks ago?" Raze asked, maybe coming to his rescue, from up ahead towards the front of the line. "About Etah and Adao?"

Even though they were still marching, Tango could practically feel the full attention of the squad sharpen and his own face go hot. He swallowed, stepping up the pace again now that he'd shut Tally up, grateful that his bucket currently hid his blushing. "That's not really the same kind of story, though. I mean, it's all made up."

"But it was really good." Raze's voice took on a little bit of a pleading note. "Even just the first part."

"No one said the stories couldn't be fictional," Shiv pointed out, reasonably.

Tango swallowed a second time, feeling a nervous tremor in his belly that didn't have anything to do with claustrophobia. He didn't say anything yet, just focused on Eight's back in front of him, and tried to imagine sharing any of the stories that he made up.

He daydreamed a lot, especially when things were slow and didn't require his attention, and while often it was about what was happening in the real world -- the war, their training, his really kripping inconvenient crush on Maul -- sometimes it was about things that had never happened, except in his mind's eye; an image would just hit him and then he would start to think of all of the things that went with it. Sometimes it was a person, sometimes a place. Sometimes just an impression that he'd spin out into some fantastical tale to entertain himself, laying in bed at night thinking about these things, even though he knew they weren't real. He would snag pieces of folklore, or draw on events or observations, and then he would weave it all together into something else.

The story of Etah and Adao had come from listening to some merchant shippers in his former posting; he had been on a supply run and they had been talking about the fabled beings who came
from Iego, the Diathim and Maelibi. None of them had ever claimed to see one or the other species, but they all claimed to have known someone who did once, long ago or far away, and he was so taken by the descriptions that he had chewed it over for months afterwards.

Sharing that seemed—really personal, even kind of vulnerable, but after a moment more of silence, he took a deep breath and tried to work out how to start it— it was such a long story in his head, crossing a lot of time and covering very long journey—and how to do justice to the visions in his mind with only words. He had started telling it to Raze one night, and Raze had really liked it, but this was the whole squad and...

He trembled once, not because he even noticed the rock around him anymore, but because he felt a little like he was offering his unguarded heart out in his hands and if they laughed, he knew it would break.

But then, he breathed out and spoke.

"Etah was broken for a long time," he said, starting softly. "It didn't happen fast; first came the war, and that itself would have been enough to chip away at anyone's spirit. He went into battle and watched his siblings fall around him, and even more damning than that, he was good at war. A good soldier, a natural, but for every cut he made, for every life he took, it took another piece out of him too. When it came time to kill the defectors, he was usually looking into the eyes of someone he had played with and sang with as a child; when it came time to kill them and those they fought with, the ash clung to his wings like blood. And this went on, and on," he paused a beat, and finished heavily, "and on."

Tango didn't know exactly where this story itself came from; he could recognize bits and pieces of lore he had overheard and he could recognize some of what his brothers here and abroad had said or felt, but the story was different from everything he'd ever heard the other clones tell even if it was a hero's journey like many others.

The more he thought about it, the more real it became to him; infused with imagination and life and color. It made his heart ache and sometimes he felt like he was as much spectator as storyteller or daydreamer, a conduit for the tale to be told.

He could feel the weight of them listening to him as he continued, "The war wounded him, not outwardly, but inside where it couldn't be seen; after that came a long wait, a cold war replacing the hot one, both sides strong enough to hold the other in check and with the understanding that someday would come a reckoning. He might have healed more, if it had been peace instead of just waiting, but he had been a soldier for so long that he didn't know what else to be, and so he waited for the next battle, the next call to action. His species -- long before they were called Diathim, though I'll call 'em that for this story -- were long-lived, and there were times Etah thought, as he watched his world and the sentients evolving who would someday become all of us, if he wouldn't have been better off if he would have been less good at war. If he hadn't been such a good soldier.

"If he'd fallen in a previous battle, and gone to a place where no war could touch him again.

"Mostly, Etah was tired; he was tired deep down, where no healer could reach."

None of his brothers spoke; none of them were asking questions or snickering, and Tango put his hand out on the wall just to remind himself to pay attention to his steps as they climbed. They were due to see air again, outside air for the first time again today, and maybe this story could be the wind at their backs as they made for it. He didn't know, but his heart twinged for relaying what his main character had been feeling at that point.
"Like all cold wars do, this one had to end and did; it took thousands of years, but it did. The beings who would someday be called Maelibi rose up and the armies fought a war of attrition; unlike the Diathim, they had taken those years to evolve and learn, and where before they would fight all in, now they fought smarter, often using the mortals as shields or pawns against the Diathim. But as time went on, even they suffered their losses; on both sides, more and more of the elders fell and everything seemed compressed, like it was faster and harder and meaner than it had been even in the beginning.

"Adao was younger than most of the Maelibi, but he was canny and cunning; he could see better than nearly anyone on both sides the costs of fighting like this. Maelibi were being cut down faster than new ones could be born, and there had been no new Diathim since before the last clash of open warfare. He wasn't idealistic or altruistic, but he was practical and more than anything, it seemed senseless and wasteful to spend so much time fighting when they could be building their power and gaining control of their respective kingdoms, both above and below."

Kriff. Even as Tango was saying it, he had a moment's panic about whether his brothers thought he was drawing a direct allegory to this war they were in. Saying stuff like this about the Seppies would probably sound like treason. He worked his jaw as he walked, having to grab more handholds on the wall to lend him some stability, and barely managed to resist the urge to break into his own story with rapid-fire reassurances that he was definitely not a Seppie collaborator or anything, it's just that--

"The Jedi would probably spontaneously birth tooka kits if they heard you say that," Maul said, and his smirk was audible even over the radio; it was such a tone of approval that Tango found himself giggling a little bit, some of his nervousness fading.

"I won't tell if you won't, sir," he said back, biting his lip behind his faceplate, letting that comment buoy his storytelling. "Anyway, Adao had no love for the Diathim, but he did love his own life and didn't want to die, and it was through his plotting and planning that he was able to meet Etah.

"Etah was the last, the youngest of his kind, though much older than Adao; still, after thousands of years, that didn't matter anymore really. They looked completely different; Etah was bright and ethereal, seemingly lit by some internal glow, with shining blue eyes, though the ash on his wings turned them a duller and dimmer gray. Adao was stocky with hard scales in red and sometimes gold, with burning and fiery eyes, and had great horns that curled around his heavy head and a thick tail he could use as a weapon. It seemed even their appearances spoke to the realms they inhabited; Etah, the sky; Adao, under the mantle where the world was molten. But there was one thing both shared, even if neither of them knew how to make it happen: They wanted the fighting to end, even if their reasoning for why was different."

"Hang on one second, brother, we've got a rough patch ahead," Castle said, then added more hastily, "Not too tight or anything, just a sharper incline."

Tango huffed back, but this time he was more amused than ashamed for the reassurance; he listened to the low grunts of those ahead of them as they climbed, and when it was his turn, he dug in with his boots and put his head down, using the floor or the walls to scramble up higher. "If you ask me, every step up is definitely-- an up."

The smatter of good-natured groans he got at that made it worth it.
Tango had to stop telling the story for awhile, as they went up a series of steeper, rockier passages, making a sharper ascent than the slow and winding descent had been. Raze was disappointed that he had to wait, honestly; when Tango had started telling him this story sometime back, he had immediately been taken by the descriptions of the world and the people who would someday become them, the idea that once they were all one people and then became humans and zabraks and twi'leks and togruta and kiffar and all the other people of the galaxy; that long before time was measured, maybe they were all once the same, and therefore maybe were all kind of a part of one another even now.

Raze thought Tango was definitely the best storyteller. Brody's stories were great and they were funny, but Tango's always sounded like he put his whole soul into them, and Raze thought it was honestly about time that their pilot brother got to showcase that talent of his.

They stopped for dinner in a smallish opening, a few small pockets of crystals glittering on the walls, and the second everyone had their buckets off, they were looking at Tango expectantly.

Tango looked back at them, nervous all over again, and Raze silently cheered him on as he asked, "Do you-- do you want me to keep going?"

The instant chorus of yes and hell yes and at least one you frippin' better made him huff and smile, and Raze was smiling right along with him. Tango turned red and rubbed at the back of his head before taking out a ration bar and sitting on his pack. "Uh-- okay. Uhm-- okay. All right."

He was smiling so wide at that point that it took him a little time to continue. But then, as he broke open his ration bar, his face softened and went more serious and kind of sad, as he looked down and went on telling his story.

"The second thing that broke Etah was the punishment," Tango said. "Before Adao found him, he had broken orders because he felt they were wrong, and since that was treason, he was punished for it, horribly. The superiors he once thought were fair and honorable turned out to be anything but; they were willing to sacrifice their own soldiers for the sake of a quick win, even if there were slow and less deadly ways to do it, and when Etah -- a leader of his own battalion -- broke those orders and came up with a different battleplan to minimize the deaths, he wasn't given a chance to defend himself."

Raze glanced around and saw the rest of the squad watching; a few of 'em were even wide-eyed. Tango took a couple bites of his dinner, then went on, "Adao found him soon after that. He was still bleeding from his injuries, but Etah was proud and arrogant and didn't want even the practical help of an enemy. He might have even tried to kill Adao, if he'd had the strength, but since he didn't, he just acted condescending and threatening.

"'Suit yourself,' Adao said, when his offer for help was pushed aside. 'But I heard about what you did. I think we could come to an accord, you and I.'"

"'I don't bargain with your kind,' Etah answered, before taking flight again.

"But somewhere in the back of his mind, the calm demeanor of Adao struck him. The Maelibi, he had been told -- and observed in battle -- were chaotic, hateful enemies, driven on by spite. But here was this Maelibus who came to talk to him, who offered to at least help patch his wounds, who wanted to talk instead of fight. Etah knew better than to trust him, but as the war ground on and more and more people died on both sides and caught between both sides, his own desperation got stronger. They were driving each other towards extinction. They were driving themselves towards extinction."

Sitting next to Raze, Six gave a little shiver that Raze could hear, when Six's shoulderplate rattled a
little against his own. Across the smallish space, Tally's eyebrows were pegged up.

"Finally, with the ashes flaking off of his ever-grayer wings, he met Adao again. 'Speak,' he demanded, as he stood looking at his opposite, blazing like the heart of a star. 'What are you proposing?'

"Adao had been waiting for this, and all the while, he'd been building his own power base. He had other Maelibi who were loyal to him, and he had great fiery beasts he had raised himself from embers, but there was always more power to be had and who wanted to rule over an extinct people? 'An end to this wasteful war, for one,' he said, his barbed tail curling around in front of his legs as he crouched watching the Diathim. 'You're different. You're a rebel, a traitor some might even say, but I happen to think you're onto something.'"

Tango quieted again, like he had before, and picked apart the last half of his ration bar more slowly. Then he seemed to come to some kind of decision inside himself, because he didn't need prompted to continue this time. "Etah had been alone in heart, if not in presence, since his punishment. He was wary, but Adao's flattery and manipulation worked on him; Adao talked about how clever Etah was. How he knew what would happen if he didn't act. How the Diathim would survive and maybe even thrive and repopulate under his leadership, and how if Adao led the Maelibi, peace could be achieved.

"It wouldn't have worked so well, except Adao's words were true. He was manipulative, but he was truthful about the outcome he wanted. And so, even though he was uneasy, Etah was desperate enough to agree."

"Oh kriff," Eight breathed, making Tango startle a little bit. Then Eight winced. "Sorry, Tango. Just- - you can kind of see the bad coming down the pipes there, y'know?"

Tango gave a quick breath out, then a sheepish smile. "No, it's okay. I mean, you guys can-- you can say stuff, I don't mind."

"Oh, thank everything," Tally said, falling backwards a little bit like he was relieved. Raze thought for a second maybe the medic was being snarky, but when he sat back up, there was open admiration on his face. "This is-- really good stuff, Tango, I mean--"

"--frippin' wow," Brody agreed, cutting in.

Tango somehow went even more red that he had before, visible even in the low light of the headlamps, and once he finished his ration bar -- chewing slowly -- he cleared his throat. "Thanks, guys."

Misty pointed at him in mock-threat. "You better not leave us there."

Tango shook his head, grinning some. "I won't. Okay. Anyway, they planned together, gathering what allies they could. Etah was still too proud to consider Adao a friend, and only barely could look at him as an ally, but they worked together as though they'd been made for it. And between them, in the end, they managed to seize power of their respective people." He held up a hand there, though, as if to say that wasn't the end. "The thing was, no one had ever told Etah how hard leading would be, especially of a broken people who had known nothing but one kind or war or another for what seemed to be their entire lives. He was also the youngest, so many more doubted his wisdom, even though he was ancient by mortal standards. And finally, when they found out that he had gained his power by making a pact with a Maelibus, well, that was when they went into open revolt."

"I knew it," Eight whispered, though Tango apparently heard it because he nodded.
"The situation fell apart fast. Instead of bringing peace, he only turned their war from one with the Maelibi to a civil war, sibling against sibling, friends slaughtering friends. Those loyal to him, and those who rebelled against him. And Etah didn't know how to do anything else himself, but to wage war; he didn't know anymore what peace looked like, let alone how to bring others to it, and so he waged the war and took the lives he'd been trying to save.

"Adao, on the other hand, had solidified a cast-iron grip on his own people. He offered, at one point, to help Etah end his civil war, but Etah blew him off. Adao was angry about being spurned like that, but he just turned his attention to rebuilding his own kingdom and letting the Diathim bleed their way to extinction.

"Tens died. And then hundreds." A beat. "And then thousands. They fell in battle, or if they were captured, they were executed as traitors."

Raze could almost feel the weight of those last words, like something pressing down on his shoulders; the heaviness that Tango spoke them with. Because they all knew, except for Six and Eight, what it was like to lose brothers right in front of them. It was hard to like Etah for that, but it was hard to hate him, too.

Shiv gestured Tango on, but then got to his feet, making it clear that they had to move on. Especially if they were going to reach the outside world today, even if it was only for a quick valley crossing.

Everyone else got up, too, getting their packs and buckets back on, dissolving the wrappers from their meal with a little bit of water.

Tango waited until they all had their buckets on and were ready to move out before he went on: "In the end, though, Etah lost. His loyalists were eventually too few, and what few elders remained were able to rally, and in disgrace he fled to the ground and once there, he covered himself in clay and wove it into a mask to hide what he was, and it was there, living among the mortals and an outcast from his own kind that he broke for the last time, not because he was hated by the other Diathim, but because he realized how he had only led them to even more ruin. Those loyal to him died for his cause. Those against him were slaughtered. All of them were his own, and he did this to him."

"The population of tooka kits around the Jedi Temple would quadruple," Tally commented, playing off of the Lieu's prior words, and just like Maul, he sounded really amused by that idea.

Raze didn't quite get it, but it didn't bother him anyway, and he smiled when he heard Tango chuckling over the radio.

They were back to climbing again, though at least right now, the grade wasn't quite as steep.

"Heartbroken and prideless, Etah wandered for a year, then two; a long time for a mortal, though only a blink for a Diathim. He thought about turning his sword back on himself. He thought about going back home and letting them judge and punish and likely execute him. He despised so deeply that his feathers started falling out, and sometimes when he would walk, they fell to the ground behind him, silver and ash and charcoal, like blood dripping from a wound.

"And that was how Adao found him, by following the trail of feathers."

"He was angry with Etah; angry because Etah had been arrogant and condescending, angry because Etah had slapped aside Adao's offered help, and angry because the truce they had planned had fallen apart, though for now the war had turned cold again, thanks to the Diathim being so devastated. But Etah wasn't the same being he had been before; his spirit was broken and he ached for nothing now but rest and an ending, the kind where he wouldn't ever know anything again, good
or bad. When Adao came to confront him, Etah looked to his old ally and said, 'I was wrong about you. Where you had built a kingdom, I had caused nothing but destruction."

"But was that his fault?" Six asked, quietly, almost like he was asking himself.

Tango paused there, story-wise. "What was who's fault?"

"Etah's. I mean, he was trying to stop the war, right? And save the Diathim? But no one taught him how, so-- I mean, it'd be kind of like throwing a bunch of shinies into the middle of a major, high stakes operation and telling them to make it work, wouldn't it?"

"Tango said he was a good soldier, though," Castle pointed out, with a little grunt that warned Raze that they might have to climb or crawl over something shortly.

"But not a leader," Six answered, then there was a long beat and he said, "Wow, I just realized how messy that situation was. I mean, he was right because it seemed like the two sides were just fighting because they didn't know how not to fight, but then when he tries to get them to at least kill each other less, he gets punished, and then when he comes up with an idea for a truce-- wait, did he ever try to ask his superiors about Adao's offer?"

"No," Tango said, with certainty. "After they punished him, he didn't trust them anymore. That was why he thought he had to stage a coup."

"Kriff, this is so good," Tally murmured.

Tango had never had anyone debate one of his stories before, but that was what they did for the next two hours as they climbed, scrambled, cleared the occasional rock fall, and when his face wasn't burning in embarrassment and something like pride, he was in awe of just how much his brothers were taking from this story he spun out in his head, built from little pieces and mental images and feelings, even if it felt like it had come more like a gift.

It seemed like almost everyone had an opinion. Husker's was that Etah had kriffed it up good by not trying to change things from the inside, through the right channels. On the other side, Tally was the most sympathetic to the Diathim. Maul offered no opinions on character motivations, but his admittedly wicked glee at them relaying and debating what could definitely be called subversive material was pretty damned gratifying.

Tango didn't even get to continue the story before they reached the outside.

The first hint was the faintest realization of light; not from their headlamps, but light from outside, pale and limited as it was, and the stir of colder air that Tango only could see when the temperature indicator on his heads-up started going down. Castle didn't even interrupt the debate to tell them they were getting close until it was patently clear; only then, he said, "About a hundred meters up and another hundred across."

Tango couldn't blame them when they all fell quiet for that part; even though his legs ached something fierce for the long day, he barely felt it as he climbed.

"Oh," he said, quietly, when they reached the opening.
It looked like it was carved by sentients, not natural; a rough, rectangular opening in the mountain half sheeted in ice. The frigid, vicious wind blew into the cavern (shaped almost like a ship's hangar, maybe it would have been if the operation had continued) and Tango could feel it sort of pushing against him even in his armor.

"Look at the stars," Raze said, almost reverently, standing to the side of the ice sheet with his head tilted back and the light from the two moons and the stars above reflecting off of his armor. The entire squad gathered there to do the same; twelve bodies, taking in the brilliant showcase of the night sky. Completely caught off guard, Tango's eyes stung and even though it was really damn cold, he pulled his bucket off just to be able to see the whole thing clearly without his visor in the way.

Everyone else did the same, absent Maul, who had pulled the hood of his parka up at some point; in the thin light, the white ruff stood sharp contrast with his face, shades of gray and black in the night. Across the valley, more mountains were pointing up to the sky, jagged and forbidding, but oddly beautiful.

On the other side of those and some further, their target was waiting for them.

"Will you be all right if I seal this entrance?" Maul asked aside, to Tango. "Snow and ice, not rock. Just a wind break."

Tango didn't want to lose his view of the stars, but it was so incredibly cold that he nodded immediately. "Yeah. I mean, yes sir, I'll be all right." Honestly, he was relieved that they weren't going to try to scale down even with the moonlight on them; daylight felt a lot safer for such ventures, even if it upped the possibility of them being spotted.

Maul shoo'd the rest of the squad backwards and toed to the edge of the cavern's mouth, looking down; after a long moment of what definitely looked like thoughtful contemplation, he pulled his gloves off and handed them back to Six, then pressed one hand against the rock and raised the other.

Despite being shoo'd back, Tango drifted closer anyway, breath caught in his throat (definitely from the cold, didn't have anything to do with Maul) as he watched the snow drift up the mountain like it was caught in a wind, swirling crystalline and sparkling under the light of the moons and stars. It hissed as it started building up against the tunnel mouth, at first impossibly fragile looking. It reminded him of the way metal shavings stuck to a magnet under a table.

It seemed almost too gentle to ever hold, but more and more snow piled up, pulled from above and below until Tango couldn't see well enough to watch anymore and had to move back.

One careful pass of the saberstaff later, and they had a new ice wall to block the wind.

"So, Tango," Castle drawled, voice light. "You gonna leave us there?"

Tango pulled his pack off and chuckled, feeling better now than he had since before they even embarked on this mission. "There's not much more to tell, at least in this part of the story. I mean, Etah was walking among mortals, drowning slowly in his despair. And when he told Adao that he had been wrong, Adao didn't want to believe it.

"He wanted to stay mad. He told himself that it entertained him to see a Diathim so broken and humble. He told himself that he could use Etah as a bargaining chip, if he had to, to the rest of the Diathim. He told himself a lot of things."

Once again, he had the full attention of everyone; no one had moved yet to unpack their tents, and if
there was anything that made Tango realize how into this story they were, beyond their prior debate, it was that they were willing to delay warmth, comfort and sleep for a few more minutes just to hear it.

Maybe he was good for something here, after all.

He took a breath. "But looking at his former enemy turned ally turned-- he didn't even know, he couldn't make himself kick Etah while he was already miserable. Snorting, jets of smoke burning out of his nostrils, he just left the Diathim there to wander the shores of the great ocean and hide in the clay that hid his light and held him to the ground; he intended to leave Etah to waste away as it seemed Etah wanted to.

"And that worked-- until it didn't. Until Adao came back." Tango grinned a bit to himself. "And that's where the story really starts, but you guys will have to wait for the next part because I'm ready to sleep about three hundred years."

"So, Lieu, who won?" Raze asked, tongue in cheek, despite the grousing from the others about not hearing more yet.

Maul scoffed. "That answer's obvious. But feel free to cast a vote anyway."

The response was instant, unanimous and simultaneous: "Tango!"

Maul took the first watch, since it was his turn to, so Tango didn't even hear him come into the tent.

But as tired as Tango was, he still woke up at some point after that; in the dim light from a single headlamp, he tried for about ten whole minutes to work up the nerve to snuggle closer -- and frip, Maul really was a space heater; even with a little distance between them, Tango could feel the warmth reflected off the zabrak and the blanket -- and in the end, he couldn't make himself do it. So, instead, he half-drifted into the story he had told and let it mingle with the moment; thought of Adao's red and gold; of his fire and cunning and power, and about how none of those colors were accidental.

But his last thought before drifting off to sleep was that the back turned towards him was made for wings.
"--Raze, if you're gonna lay on me, move your elbow?"

"Nn. Sorry, Sarge."

Maul pried his eyes open to the sight of his slightly disgruntled sergeant, whose turn it was to play mattress for their demo expert. When Shiv opened one eye to look back at him, Maul didn't even try to keep from smirking in satisfaction over the role-reversal, while Raze went back to snoring softly. Shiv wrinkled his nose at that smirk, then just closed that eye again, huffing but otherwise staying put.

From the other side of them, Tally's voice was no less smug as he asked, "Now who's the little spoon?"

Maul wasn't sure what cutlery had to do with anything, but Shiv's exasperated sigh was gratifying, and all in all, that wasn't too bad a way to start the morning.

It was a shame that the same couldn't be said for ending the day, as well.

The space they had to get across was a shallow bowl -- a saddle -- high enough in elevation that breathing was a chore, but low enough that Maul didn't need to rely on a rebreather, though he had one just in case that changed. One of the few -- benefits, if one could call them that, to having only half a body to oxygenate while still having full lung capacity was the ability to push the limits in that regard, and that was on top of the efficiency lent to him by the zabrak half of his heritage. And his troops had their cold assault armor, which was made to regulate their temperatures and air flow in this environment, adjusting automatically as needed; its weight was a hindrance, but the trade off was ultimately worth it.

There was little chance in them being spotted; this area was considered so rugged and impassable that there were no regular patrols and the nearest scanning towers were on the peaks and not down in the bowl; those were anti-aircraft, and not aimed at the ground. Even droids would find navigating this rough country to be more work than worth it, especially as droids were considered disposable and a more straight forward assault would likely yield similar enough losses.

The morning light was thin, pastel pinks and yellows over an iron gray that foretold yet more snow coming when they left their cave and the long trek through the tunnels behind them; they had spent an extra hour loading up on hot drinks and repacking their supplies, not out of reluctance, but to give them the best start possible. There was no guarantee there would be another set of tunnels on the other side that they could get into, but for now, they operated under the hope that there would be.

Maul had been testing his legs out every chance he got, trying to see if there was any other hitch, but it hadn't happened again. And he had been so exhausted that he still wasn't sure that it had even happened the first time; if it wasn't in his mind, a combination of his own fatigue and anxiety, preying on him in a state of weakness, distorting his perceptions. His paranoia in himself was such that he couldn't summon up any paranoia for Tally offering him a couple of pills and an explanation; he just knocked them back, had dinner, and then didn't remember much of anything until he woke up.
to Raze pinning him to the sleeping mat.

The rest had done him good, though; probably, in retrospect, the medication had too. He wasn't overly fond of being drugged -- for many reasons -- but he was used to it enough to tolerate it, and at least this time, he could have chosen not to be. He was a little drowsy through the prior morning, but his mind was calm and that same steadiness lingered through most of the day, helped along by having some enjoyable stories to listen to. The trade-off there was that it muzzled his already occasionally debatable sense of the Force, so he'd waved off the same offer the night before, but aside waking up a dozen times to assess where he was and who was close by, he did stay in the tent and managed get a little sleep.

Castle was leading again, as he had been pretty much since they landed; much like the last time they were out in the open, the Blackbirds were quiet as they worked their way around the perimeter of the bowl, heads down despite buckets just in response to the shearing wind that came over the mountains ahead of them, blowing snow into streams like smoke before cutting down into their midst. Even with that wind, though, this was still the safest way around. They had climbed down out of the cave, rappelling in teams, before starting into the march proper and Maul was hoping that they would be into the next underground section by late afternoon.

As such, he was irritated when the snow started falling again, but it wasn't until they clambered over spurs and up to the next hopeful point of passage that they discovered their way blocked, and Maul found himself nodding along with the rest of the squad, most of whom were swearing in every language they knew and possibly inventing a few more besides.

Castle's holo display was small, but it was detailed enough to do the job; they huddled in the mouth of what was going to be their next passage under a mountain, if not for the massive cave-in that cut them off before they could even properly get out of the snow, and tried to figure out the best way out of the bowl and hopefully back down to more forgiving ground.

"At least we didn't find out after we were halfway through or something," Shiv said, an attempt at optimism, though there was no denying the disgruntled note under it.

Tango was the only one who didn't appear to mind the setback, which wasn't any great surprise. "I'd say that's a bright side."

Maul just listened to them grousing as he studied the map projected above the engineer's gauntlet. The mountains around this bowl were undeniably deadly; sharp and steep, poorly mapped, and it was late enough in the day that temperatures were going to start falling soon, leaving them stranded on a mountainside when it plummeted. There wasn't even enough space to make camp in this cave mouth; it took being packed in tight to even have all twelve of them on stable ground, and while Maul thought it possible that the Blackbirds could sleep in their cold assault armor if they had no other choice, it was still far from an optimal situation.

"There are a few spots that might be passable," he said, holding a hand up to shield his radio from the wind that swirled chaotically into the hollow, and using his other to point. "There, and there."

"I was thinkin' that," Castle agreed, tapping a few controls to narrow in on the two spots. "Wouldn't touch either of 'em if we had better options, but right now, those look like the best ones."
The other Blackbirds fell quiet as they realized it was being discussed, though they likely had only had been murmuring to one another to stave off the sense of defeat at their setback. Maul leaned in a little and eyed the two prospects, now magnified. "Projected time to each?"

Castle grunted. "Not before nightfall."

It was a chilling thought, and not only because of the miserable terrain and the frigid weather. But trying to stay huddled in this little hole wasn't much better, and backtracking to the prior camp would be the easiest, but would also find them losing the time they'd managed to save up and then some more, while bringing them no closer to their target.

"Who knows when the moons rise?" Maul asked, after a few moments, feeling the frission of anxiety humming in the base of his throat for what he was reasonably sure was coming next.

"Forty-five minutes after sunset," Misty answered, promptly.

Maul stared at the two prospects; the closer one was steeper, the other was far enough that they might be on the move all night, and that after another arduous day of marching and climbing.

He could feel Shiv at his back and he knew that this was another one of those situations where he had to make the call. He found it was no easier, but he did his best to sound confident about it when he said, "The less vertical we have to go, the more likely we live through this. We'll make for the second passage, stop between sunset and the moons rising, and then keep going until we can make camp."

Maul wouldn't have been able to blame them if they grumbled or groaned about it; he wouldn't have even thought to reprimand them over it. Frankly, he would have had his own misgivings if he had been told to follow orders like that. He had-- precisely no idea what he would do if the Blackbirds ever just outright refused to follow along with something he ordered, but he already knew that he wouldn't ever bring charges up on them for it.

But none of them grumbled; after a moment where they all were silent, absorbing the idea, the chorus of *yessir* was more commiserating than Maul felt he had any right to.

He was still grateful for the squeeze of a heavy hand between his neck and shoulder and Shiv's silent approval, though.

Whenever Maul tried to sort out how he felt about any of this, it tended to get jumbled up like a speeder wreck in his mind. Sometimes he felt equal enough to it, especially those times when he could lean on his own prior training; other times, he felt woefully out of his depth and bound to get them all killed. He had never been good at teamwork, in the broad sense; at Orsis, he had worked well with a partner, with Kilindi, and since then he worked well with Obi-Wan (and Bail, on Zigoola), but working with eleven other individuals was taxing sometimes in ways he was unprepared to deal with.

He second-guessed everything, it seemed; every decision took on weight he was still trying to figure out how to carry. Before Theed, he had followed orders; any decisions he made in the course of following them was limited to circumstance and the best way to complete his objective. After Theed, he followed Obi-Wan; it wasn't really until Zigoola that he had started pushing back against that, and
even in that, it was not so much a desire to assert whatever illusion of authority he had as it was not wanting to be overprotected to the point of being treated as if he was helpless.

Somehow, now, he ended up with responsibility for those eleven other lives, in addition to his own, and suddenly everything was more complicated.

He was intelligent enough that he could glean some of what he was supposed to be learning in all of this, but even knowing that didn't make it easy to do so.

Right now, his method of coping was by taking things as they came and relying heavily on the actual soldiers to guide him, either overtly -- outright looking to Shiv, in particular, for some kind of cue of what he was supposed to be doing -- or covertly, by asking their opinions or for their votes on things. Maul knew that wasn't what was done in the military, he knew that it was a loose way to run things, but trying to pretend that he was a career soldier, let alone an officer, was a hubris he couldn't swallow.

Sometimes, he wondered how the Jedi could pretend as well as they did. Obi-Wan's projected confidence as he led his battalion was mostly real, but not entirely; the troops, absent perhaps Commander Cody, didn't get to see the aftermath of a high casualty count, didn't get to see the way Obi-Wan would get back to their quarters and go silent, gaze distant and arms tucked firmly around himself, at least until he had Maul's arms to hide himself in. They didn't get to see just how much Obi-Wan chewed himself up over his place in the war, and what being a general meant, and how far it was away from what he had considered himself to be.

(If there had been one good thing about the long period of training that the Blackbirds had been given, it was that Maul was there to do the holding and the tea-making and the hair-petting; now, here on this ragged, miserable, cold rock, he also occasionally found space in his mind to worry about how Obi-Wan was doing without someone there to do all of those things.)

That, it seemed, had become the crux of Maul's very existence of late: Worrying. If not about one thing, then another or another or yet another.

He took up position right behind Castle and with Shiv directly behind him and Husker bringing up the end of the line as they worked their way back down to a lower line of elevation, the snow sometimes piled up past their hips, sometimes even as high as their chests, and the progress forward painstaking for how carefully they had to move towards the spot they were going to cross so as not to hit a crack or obstacle that had been lost under said snow. The four of them were easily the most trained in environmental hazards like this one, though Maul was constantly at a disadvantage because he couldn't feel his feet as anything more than pressure on the ground; he had mountaineering spikes on to give him purchase, the same kinds that the rest of the squad could deploy with the press of a button from their boots, but only having a sense of pressure and resistance made every step more precarious.

Still, there was nothing to be done for it, so he plowed on, taking care to keep as much of his sense of the Force gathered around him as he could at any given moment.

The sunset found them two-thirds of the way from the pass they were going to attempt; they only exchanged a few words back and forth across the squad, and the speed with which they managed to hollow themselves out something of an impromptu trench to huddle in spoke to how long the day had already been and how much they wanted to rest.

"It's kinda pretty, in a really punishing way," Raze said, pressed against the wall of their trench as the light left the sky; the snow had stopped falling again only an hour before, and between the breaks in clouds, the sky faded from the pastels of sunset towards the deep blue of night.
Maul looked up, the ruff on the parka framing his face giving his view a bit of a gauzy quality. He couldn't quite assign much on this world the label of pretty, though. Beside him, Shiv snorted, a good-humored if tired sound and said, "We do any more training, and I vote we go AWOL if they try to send us somewhere cold."

It was clearly an insincere threat, though Maul contemplated it seriously for a few moments anyway. He wasn't above absconding with his squad, if it came to it, he had no real loyalty beyond his own personal loyalties; in relation to the Republic or its army, he didn't feel he owed them anything. But between the security measures he was walking on and the fact it would mean leaving Obi-Wan and potentially destroying the Blackbirds, he knew he wasn't going to.

"I've heard about troops that ran," Tally said, tone neutral. "Can't say I blame 'em."

"I can," Husker shot back, without a pause. "Cowards run; we took an oath."

"What's an oath worth, if you never had a choice about taking it?" Tally asked, leaning forward to eye the older clone, black eyebrows furrowed. His voice remained even, though; not antagonistic, even if it seemed Husker was ready to take it as such.

Maul looked between them; took in Husker's angry expression and wondered if he should be trying to smooth things over, or if he should let them hash this out between them. Shiv hadn't spoken up yet, though, so for the moment he held back. Husker scowled and shook his head, "It's worth whatever kinda honor you've got. You say the words, you make a promise, you don't get to break it later just because it's inconvenient."

"Yeah, but Husk, what're the words worth if the only other choice you have is decommissioning?" Tally shook his head. "Basically, you either agree or you die."

"You what?" Maul asked, before he realized he was about to, sharp enough that it surprised even him.

The looks the entire squad gave him at that made his skin crawl, not because they were angry, but because they were-- sad. Resigned.

Husker looked away first. Tally's mouth thinned, then he shook his head again. "If you don't agree, if you act-- disloyal, you're considered a defective product," he said, plainly, and Maul didn't even know how to feel about the almost gentle tone he took. "Mild physical deformities or genetic faults can get you reconditioned, or they'll try to find a support staff position for you -- like, Ninety-Nine managed to escape being decommissioned by being so loyal and being one of the first, kinda like a test case -- but being disloyal? Being subversive? You don't come back from that, not unless you're one of those Alphas or something, and bred for that kind of independence."

"Then how'd you survive?" Husker asked, voice gruff. Maul snapped a look over at him, but the expression on Husker's face kept him from jumping to Tally's defense; it wasn't a mean look. More weary.

Tally fell quiet for a long moment, looking down at the package of the nutrition bar that he had been ripping into tiny squares, before answering, "--I don't know. I guess I barely kept my mouth shut just enough and I took my oath like a good boy when it was time."

Husker didn't seem like he was all that happy with having an answer to the question he asked. He grabbed his bucket. "This ain't a topic I'm keen on," he said, before pulling said bucket on.

Maul went to take a breath and try to say something himself -- he wasn't even sure what -- but he
couldn't find the right words, and couldn't quite get the right amount of air to produce them if he did. Absently, he flexed his hands and tried to just--

But one thought sat on the surface of the maelstrom of unease and tangled, complicated feelings, and no matter how much he didn't want to have it, it was there anyway.

*Does Obi-Wan know about this?*

The moons rising, their light reflecting off of the snow, gave them enough to see by in order to continue. They tackled the summit at an angle, in deference to just how difficult it was, and more than once had to slow down to navigate some obstacle; a head-wall, a crevice, glacial patches, boulders and great slabs of granite that pushed up towards the bright night sky. It wasn't much of a reprieve for Maul, though, from his own wild thoughts and the unexpected storm that came with that particular piece of information.

It *shouldn't* have shocked him. He had already figured out that the clones had been dealt an unfair hand, and for everything that had happened in Maul's life to date, he had never quite lost the ability to distinguish between what was fair and what wasn't. He knew they were essentially little more than slaves, created to die for a Republic that didn't even really consider them people, and yet still, somehow it was the thought that they were just-- killed, if they acted in any way too contradictory to their purpose, that was gnawing a hole through what was left of his guts.

It wasn't as if Maul didn't know -- know well, know intimately -- exactly what kind of life that was. He had lived it. He had lived knowing full well that if he strayed, if he faltered, if he failed, his Master would end him and none too quickly. For that matter, since his Master couldn't kill him bodily, he'd torn Maul's mind apart instead when he had fallen to Obi-Wan's blade, then discarded him for the Council to work over.

*I would kill them*, he thought; if the Kaminoans came for his Blackbirds, if they tried to 'decommission' his squad. *I would kill them*, he thought hotly and with something invisible squeezing at the base of his throat.

It was almost more than he could cope with, however certain it was; behind it was equal parts terror and ferocity, neither of which he could pick apart one from the other. It was breath-stealing and he didn't know how that happened; that after so short a time, he knew that he would kill for his squad, swiftly and mercilessly, and damn the consequences.

He knew he was attached to them -- he'd finally given up trying to kick back against it sometime between when they landed on this world and this moment now -- but sounding the depths of how far he was willing to go over it was terrifying. Before Zigoola, only Obi-Wan Kenobi had occupied that position in his life. After Zigoola, Bail had ended up in that same space, as easily as drawing breath, as if he was always supposed to be there. Breha was there because Bail was, though Maul was growing more and more comfortable with her and fond of her as time -- and the occasional letter, comm call and care package -- went on.

It was one thing to find himself responsible for eleven other lives. It was another to be a *part* of them. And to have them be a part of his.
The final crawl up to the pass was gruelling; far to their left, the warning beacon on the anti-aircraft scanning tower, blinking red light to keep pilots from smacking into it, gave them as good an orientation as they were going to get without the satellites as to how close they were to the base they needed to take. If Maul remembered the maps right, they would get there well within the tenday allotted for this exercise, though too many setbacks would make it dicey.

If they had gone the way Skywalker had wanted them to, the way they would have gone had they no prior warning, they probably would have timed out if they hadn't gotten taken out by the perimeter or the detachment at the base. The surge of anger that hit Maul at that realization was a welcomed break from the more complicated issues he was trying to sort out; that they really were intended to lose.

That they had been set up in a way that nearly guaranteed it, barring a miracle; that if Tano hadn't shown up and offered to negotiate for information, they might already be defeated.

He wasn't sure which part he was more surprised by: The fact that he had thought Skywalker would give them any quarter at all in even a token attempt at fairness, or his anger at finding out that Skywalker hadn't.

"Oh frip," Castle said, as he finally crested the peak, and that tone boded very poorly; Maul managed to claw his way up just beside of the engineer and immediately saw what the problem was.

"What?" Shiv asked, but then he was landing on the other side of Castle. "--Oh, frip."

The top of the pass was narrow and rugged enough to be an obstacle on its own, but the deep drop on the other side, a wide crack where the mountain had split open at some point was the real problem. Between them and the opposite ground, which was mercifully less blade-like, there was at a deep notch at least sixteen meters across.

Maul leaned over further, body dug into the snow and ice, and looked down; the notch went so deep that he couldn't quite make out where the bottom even was.

The rest of the Blackbirds had come up by now; the number of groans and quiet curses colored the radiowaves, as they all laid there in a line, the wind slicing across their backs.

"We could backtrack to the other pass," Castle said, after a moment. "But frankly, given the looks of this place, we might find the same thing there."

Even with an uneven sense of the Force, Maul could feel some edge of the frustration and near-defeat that the rest of the squad was; he narrowed his eyes, studying the other side. It was some lower, and if they could get to it, the ground beyond seemed to be at least less punishing; it was that gap that was a problem, obviously, and how the twelve of them could traverse it safely. If not for his unsteady connection to said Force, it would have been a fair bit easier; if he trusted it like he had before Zigoola, he could have maybe hovered his squad over there, one at a time, and set them down on the snow. After all, he was definitely angry enough about Skywalker that pulling on the dark side would have been possible.

But-- he didn't trust it. He certainly didn't trust their lives to it.

He had spent years at Orsis -- eight, all told -- and but for one notable incident, he hadn't used his Force-given abilities beyond what he couldn't help, which was usually just perception and some sense of imminent danger. He had learned how to do everything a highly trained assassin would do just the same as his non-Force sensitive classmates.

It was that which had him already thinking up an alternative. "We have a couple of pulleys, don't we?" he asked; the angle was good, their rope was solid -- it was the anchor which had given before
in the cavern -- and there were a few higher spots across the gap that could be used.

"Three," Shiv answered, and he actually leaned forward a little himself to eye Maul. "You thinking a zip-line? But how do we anchor it on that side?"

Absolutely in spite of the large setback, his anger over this mission and everything else, Maul started grinning.

He didn't trust his connection to the Force enough to risk their lives, but he wasn't the least bit worried about risking his own.

The Blackbirds were totally silent when Maul landed on the other side, coming down hard enough that he had to tuck and roll, lest he damage his mechanical legs, but something about it felt good; about grabbing onto the Force, what he could get of it, and throwing himself across that wide divide, kicking off of the sharp peak and sailing through the air to land where he meant to. He had a rope tied to him, just in case -- and it would definitely break something if he'd fallen and the Blackbirds had to arrest that fall -- but it turned out that thanks to several factors, including the Force and the cybernetics, a good tailing wind and the fact that his landing spot was lower than the point he leapt from, he landed with some room to spare.

He came back up to his feet, breathless and triumphant, and once he was there, the rest of the squad cheered, once again overloading the radio.

While Raze was declaring, again, that Maul was exceptionally badass -- something that still confused Maul -- he pulled his saberstaff. He didn't like the idea of igniting a blade up here; didn't like its visibility, even on a bright night, on the off-chance any of the 501st detachment was watching, but after that incident in the cavern before, he also didn't want to take any chances on anchoring.

He made sure that he had the rock he was going to put a hole in between himself and the direction of the base, then lit a blade and got to work boring a hole through it, listening to the hard and mildly chaotic hum of his saber.

"Okay, yeah, that is hot," Tango was saying, which provoked half of the rest of the squad into giggling, of all things. Even while he was sabering his way slowly through the rock, Maul was a bit bemused by that reaction.

"Kinda sexy, too." Tally added, mischievously, and then something thumped loud enough to be heard even over the radio and he immediately yelped, likely more in surprise than pain given his armor.

"Are we all going to be okay with this?" Shiv asked, breaking into the bantering, though his voice sounded lighter and more cheerful now that there was a plan of action and part of it had already succeeded. Maul had set him and Castle to rigging the pulleys -- which were made for mountaineering, not zip-lining -- together so that they could hold the weight of the troops and also be pulled back to the other side via the second rope. All of the gear, though, was rated to be able to handle this weight and unlike the water jets, there was no battery to run down.

"Definitely," Tango said.
"Oh, hell yes," Raze added, with no small amount of glee; it reminded Maul a little bit of Tano's tone when she had proposed playing double agent for them. "I call dibs on the first trip."

"Sure, go fling yourself off the mountain, we'll be back here with a shovel." That was Six; despite the words, it was clear he was joking. Brody cut in right on his heels, mimicking Eight's giant with, "Mmm. Clone paste, on Big Murder Mountain the Second."

Once again, Maul just listened to them chattering to one another; Husker was quiet, but everyone else seemed to be openly anticipating their rather sketchy adventure across the gap and their good humor, even after yet another long day, chipped away the edges of unease that Maul had been dwelling in since they left the cave-in and took to the slopes.

He watched the molten rock drip, and finally his saber was through; rather than pulling it free, he extinguished the blade and strapped the staff back across his chest. He'd left his gear behind to make this jump, so it would have to be sent down at some point, but that was a relatively minor concern. "Before you come across, Raze, send my pack?"

"Yes, sir!" Raze answered readily. "Be a good test case anyway."

There wasn't a ton of redundancy built into their inventory, given weight, but it probably was prudent to test it. Maul stuffed snow into the hole in the rock, though it was cooling quickly in this altitude and at this temperature. By the time he was satisfied that it wouldn't burn the rope, he unwound said rope from himself and threaded it through the new hole, tying it off with a double bowline and then clipping one of the carabiners through it so it could be loosened again once they were finished. He figured that he could probably pull himself back up top and then untie the other side once everyone was across, saving them the rope.

"Ready?" he asked, once he'd thrown all of his weight back against the knot to test it again; up top, the troops had already anchored the other side, and nothing about it gave Maul any misgivings.

"One pack of supplies, comin' your way. But sheesh, Lieu, you've been carrying all this all this time?" Raze asked, using more of their carabiners to hook the pack onto the pulleys.

Maul shrugged, even if the gesture was a bit useless for the distance. "While I don't recommend getting cut in two, cybernetics don't suffer fatigue and I'm not working against the weight of the armor like you are." Admittedly, he did get knocked backwards a few steps in the trampled snow when he caught the pack, given its weight and momentum, but the impromptu zip-line worked exactly as it was intended to. And once it was unclipped, the pulley was drawn back up via the second rope.

Unsurprisingly, Raze whooped as he slid down; he had to tuck himself pretty tightly given the lack of height on the lower anchor, and he landed a little closer to the edge than Maul was comfortable with, but his laughter was somehow gratifying anyway.

Given how many set-backs they had gone through so far, even though most of them were minor, it was a relief that something was going as it was supposed to.

And it did. Until it didn't.
Smarty got a little motion sick, though he didn't end up throwing up. Brody managed to choke down most of a howl, but when he landed safely, he started laughing. Six, like Raze, had given a whoop and practically jumped on his more stoic twin when he was free of the line and back on his feet in what seemed to be excited happiness. Misty seemed to be perfectly at home going from one peak to another, Husker was just as easy with it, and Tally grumbled some, but came down just fine.

After his long and difficult journey so far, Tango had the best form of them, executing an unsurprisingly perfect landing and then giving a joking bow when his brothers clapped for it, silly. Castle followed, and Shiv was the last one to make the trip.

The rope never gave, the pulleys worked exactly as they had been asked to. It was the edge of the cliff face that couldn't take the consecutive landing of eleven clones in heavy armor, carrying gear; it was something that they couldn't have anticipated. When Shiv landed, there was a moment where all seemed calm; he just unclipped his jury-rigged safety harness from the zip line, then took a step forward.

There was a crackle, an awful rumble and the sergeant instinctively set his stance wider, but not even two seconds later, the ground under his feet gave and he barely had time to shout before he vanished, flailing out to try to catch the stable ground in front of him and managing to for a split second before it crumbled under his hands.

Maul had been moving before he'd even had time to realize he was; he had been closest and he dove on his belly, sliding nearly to the point of falling himself before the spikes on his boots found purchase in the ice and ground under him, throwing an arm down and just barely catching Shiv's forearm. He was just starting to get a grip on Shiv with the Force, as well, when all of that weight sent an electrical, white-hot rod of pain through his shoulder, enough that it actually tore a cry right out of his throat, as it felt like his arm was about to be ripped off.

The sudden pain shattered any attempt he had to focus through it to grab hold of the Force; it was as much a scramble to ease it as it was to execute the rescue that had him throwing his other arm down, trying to relieve the weight by wrapping his left hand around Shiv's gauntlet clad right forearm, even as Shiv reached up with his own left to try to hold on back. Far below, the sound of that section of rock and snow and ice breaking up echoed back up to them, and despite how loud it was, Maul could barely hear it past the roaring rush of blood in his own ears and the torment of trying to keep Shiv from following the same path.

Even then, the thought of just letting go never once crossed Maul's mind.

There was the clacking of armor and weight over him and against him and the hands of the others -- he didn't know how many, his vision actually blurred for how breathless he was -- reaching down to get any grip they could, and their frantic near-whispers of mindless pleading hissed into his perception from his headset, but somehow in all of that, he managed to hear Shiv say, "Don't let me go," and somehow, he found enough air to gasp back, "Stay with me."

"C'mon, Sarge, I need your arm," Husker said, gritty and strained, and Shiv again tried to swing his left arm up high enough for one of his brothers to catch it; the weight of the motion had Maul grinding his cheek against the ground, in some desperate, helpless attempt to offset the pain in his shoulder and chest with the cold of the snow against his face.

It was an eternity before someone else finally took a bit of the weight, and then they were hauling Shiv back up and someone grabbed Maul and dragged him back out of the way; the motion was nearly enough to make him gag, jarring him, and he only got his eyes open in time to watch as they got Shiv back up on stable ground and far enough back from the edge.
Tally was already back together and giving orders, before anyone else had even managed to speak up, "Castle, find us a landing site--"

"No," Maul ground out, barely able to raise his voice enough to be audible; his head was spinning, he couldn't force himself to stop splinting against the pain in order to get enough air, but he still said, "No, wait."

Tally swung around, and even with his bucket on, his incredulity was clear in his posture. "Sir?"

"Not yet." It was more of a plea than Maul meant it to be. "Please."

It was enough that the medic took off his bucket, face bloodless and expression drawn in worry; he shot a look over to Shiv, who was leaning against Tango, shaking hard, then looked back to Maul again. "Sir--"

"Tally, just-- wait," Shiv said, raggedly.

Tally looked between them again; the rest of the squad held quiet, waiting on their command team to come to a decision.

"--kriff," he swore, quietly, before jerking his head towards the slope downward. "Castle, find us the closest tent site you can."

Maul didn't remember most of the next hour in any detail; it kept blurring, time stretching or contracting. He refused any pain medication just yet, but he did use his rebreather to help compensate for the fact that he was having a hard time forcing his lungs to expand when every breath seared pain through his shoulder and upper right chest, letting it pull more oxygen from the air for him. Distantly, somewhere in the gray haze of waiting, he wondered when he became so-- susceptible to this kind of pain. There had been a time, before, when he could at least push himself through it. Now it was all he could do just to breathe and think in more than sentence fragments.

Through it all, Tally proved to be good for his word. He didn't intervene; he offered, but he never forced the issue, even though it was clear from the look on his face that he was extremely worried and could barely hold himself back from acting.

The trek downhill was slow, spent leaning on Misty's shoulder on his good side; Shiv was still shaky on his feet, too, so Tango made sure to keep an arm around him, as well. There were a few stumbles and trips, a few moments of jagged, hot agony, but by the time they made it down there, the rest of the squad had already set the tents up in the eave of an overhang, sectioned together per Tally's request, though there was a divider between them that could be lowered over the narrow tunnel that joined them together to help with heat rentention.

The sudden near-death of one of their own had subdued the squad all over again. By the time they were all clustered in the two linked-together tents, their faces were drawn and sometimes blanched of color; Shiv was especially rough looking and Maul imagined he was little better himself.

It was Smarty who spoke first, after several long minutes where they only breathed, dazed and shaken-up, probably as exhausted mentally as they were physically: "Why aren't we calling for an evac?"
That was on Maul to answer; he found that if he held still, kept his dislocated shoulder and strained elbow tight against his side, he could manage just enough space to think between breaths. He wet his lips, taking a moment, then said, "We're safe for now. For-- the next several hours." A beat, a breath. "I wanted to give everyone a chance to vote on it."

No one answered right away, but they all stared, some incredulously, some just deeply worried. Maul hoped that they weren't going to ask him to detail out his thoughts on why; he didn't even know if he had any, except that this seemed to be a vital time to give them this choice.

"It's a training mission," Misty said, after a few long moments. "One of us nearly died on a training mission."

"It wouldn't be the first time that's happened," Castle said, and half of them glanced at Husker, who was staring at Maul down from the other tent with an inscrutable expression.

"That's why you should vote on it," Shiv finally broke in, hoarse; he was still shivering intermittently, and it was strange to see the normally unflappable sergeant so rattled, but there wasn't any hesitation in his voice.

"Now?" Six asked, sounding nervous and upset and frightened, sitting pressed against Eight.

Maul shook his head a little. "Tomorrow. Nine hours from now. Set the usual watch and we'll-- we'll vote when it's time."

There was a murmur, but he couldn't think clearly enough to pick out the words. All the while, Tally had been waiting with an admirable amount of patience, considering what he was being asked for; this was, perhaps, the first time that Maul could say he had any real trust in the medic to hold to what he had said he would, and while the concept of having any kind of say in his own health and welfare was incredibly new -- he had never had a say in it, not when he was a child, not when he was an adult -- Maul was grateful for the respect that conveyed. Tally had his kit out, but had made no move to use it.

"Rest now. Think it over. We'll vote in nine hours," Maul said again, something of both prompt and dismissal.

They took it as such; started doling out nutrition bars and blankets, while Tango looked on anxiously for a moment before pulling the rest of his armor back on so he could guard the camp. Maul was not especially surprised to see Raze sliding into caretaker mode with Shiv; warming a canteen, mixing up a packet of cider for him, staying close enough to be a physical support and very likely to end up using the sergeant as a body pillow for the second night in a row.

After watching for a few minutes, and finding it oddly soothing to do so, Maul finally looked back at Tally and quirked his brow in silent question.

Tally looked right back at him, some mix between rueful and affectionate. "If you try to tell me to take that parka off of you without pain medication, I'll hold you responsible for telling your squad why the tent smells like vomit."

Maul almost laughed at that, even if it would have been a frayed sound. "I've held my stomach through worse."

"Not your stomach I'm worried about, sir. It's mine." Tally raised an eyebrow. "If you ever point out to me what prick taught you to be such a stoic in the face of pain like this, I'll turn their wedding tackle into a bolo ball and kick for orbit, but in the meantime... don't make me put you through any..."

"Nothing that could possibly happen, sir. That's not a detail that I'm... for that, sir."

"Well, thank you for not being a damfool and making this even more difficult."

"You're welcome."

"I'm not sure I'd like to find out what would happen if you turned out to be correct."

"Sure I would."

"I'm sure you would."

"Remember what I said about turning wedding tackle into a bolo ball and kick for orbit?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm thinking that's a plan that I'm not keen on sharing."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll see you in the morning when we vote."

"Yes, sir."

"Good."
more without letting me do everything I can to alleviate it."

It was its own kind of plea, if delivered bluntly; Maul gave back a facial shrug, acquiescing, and tipped his head over, baring the side of his neck and closing his eyes, which was not quite as hard as he expected it to be. Though, he did ask, as Tally shot him with something that instantly made his mind go even foggier and made the pain go distant, "--what's wedding tackle?"

Halfway across the tent, someone giggled, but Maul didn't even hear the answer before he was gone, drifting out of reach of everything.

True enough, he never felt a thing.
A Runner of Fire, Part 7

Chapter Notes

This is a long chapter, because of the multiple POVs; it's also written present tense. If you're needle-phobic, you might wanna skip some parts; nothing graphic, but it still gets mentioned. Thanks again to my best fiend Shadowmaat for reading it as I wrote it, and telling me that I got this. <3

Tango doesn't think about voting.

He stands watch and he thinks about how much he'd rather be flying. About how angry he is. About how real this all suddenly feels; about how, even compared to the panic attacks under the mountain, the situation seems more deadly and immediate. He thinks about all of the things that happened during this day, or over the mission, or the time since his transfer, and sometimes he goes even further back.

He thinks about how much he wants to go home, but then he amends it in his mind, because it's not really the Negotiator that is home.

He replays the scene on that broken cliff a hundred times in his mind, trying to get a handle on his own fear at how close they came to losing their sergeant, just that fast; over and over, he has to swallow down how much the sound Maul made when he caught Shiv's weight hurt to hear.

Tango thinks about how this is a crucible harder than the Citadel ever was, because for as hard as that was, they never had their heads held underwater like this, an attempted drowning, bloodless but lethal anyway; he wonders at how he once looked up to General Skywalker -- and who didn't? -- and now any thought of the Hero Without Fear is accompanied with the twisted and slimy sensation of having been deceived. Betrayed. Somewhere back inside the tents that Tango's guarding, Husker is probably even more confused, because how much Husk loves Skywalker is still evident every time he speaks of the Jedi, and this has to be tearing him in two.

Tango thinks of a lot of things, as he stands out there in the cold; he thinks of a lot of things, but he doesn't think about voting in eight and a half hours.

Instead, he imagines Etah and Adao, and the story he has started telling the rest of the squad, except further down the road than where he left off; he thinks about how they feel when they wake up from their long period of unconsciousness and how they believe they've lost one another. That despair, fathomless, where they believe one another dead and find themselves wandering a world turned unrecognizable, the very last of their respective species, or so they believe at the time. He thinks about their loneliness and their aching yearning for that thought-to-be-broken connection, for someone to remember them as they were, for someone to believe in what they could still be.

He thinks he wants to go back inside and tell his brothers and L-T more of it, though now isn't the time. But soon.

He thinks, don't let me go, and stay with me, are another way to say I love you.

No matter what kind it is, no matter how new, or whether it's romantic or platonic or familial or
something else entirely that hasn't been defined yet, Tango thinks: This is still love.

The imagined confusion on their faces if he ever says this makes him smile despite everything and his heart settles a little as he sinks himself into telling and retelling and expanding on the stories in his mind, weaving new layers into them drawn from the threads of their lives, as he stands the watch.

Tally doesn't think about voting, either.

He's grateful as all hell that Maul basically handed him a blank credit chip in the form of a bared neck, because if Maul had asked him to just pop that shoulder back into place and slap a bacta patch over it, Tally would have done it, but he would have probably been reduced to tears of angry frustration. That joint was already mildly damaged before, though not badly enough to require rebuilding it, and it's definitely a hell of a lot more serious now.

He had recruited Raze into giving him a hand getting Maul's parka off, since that couldn't be replaced, but he'd just cut through the undershirts, though not until he had made sure that Maul had replacements in his pack. He'd also gotten Raze to act as a counterweight once the cocktail of sedative, narcotic, muscle relaxer and anti-inflammatory had time to work so he could reduce that dislocation; it's a drug combination he wouldn't have dared try on a full-blooded human in the field, but where a human would have probably stopped breathing, it just turned Maul into a ragdoll of a zabrak-hybrid and Tally's pretty sure he wouldn't even feel minor surgery at this point, let alone anything less intense. Tally's watchful, but not worried.

(Despite countless university hospital studies, zabraks are still chronically under-medicated by medical professionals -- even on Iridonia! -- especially in relation to pain medication; the perception of their high pain tolerance combined with their high metabolic efficiency, plus a large dose of this is the way things have always been done has long led to a lot of quiet or silent suffering. Tally's been doing his research from the moment Maul became his responsibility; he'll also be damned if he lets that happen to his L-T.)

Now, he uses his handheld imager to get a look at the injury and he's more relieved than he could coherently explain that while there are plenty of tears and some other soft tissue damage to Maul's rotator cuff -- on top of that old damage that didn't get bacta treatment fast enough however many years ago -- nothing's broken loose that would necessitate a surgical theater, which they clearly don't have up here.

"I think I can fix this," he says, more to himself than to Raze and Shiv, the former having put himself firmly between lieutenant and sergeant as if he could protect them both from invisible threats, the latter of whom is probably still awake despite being tired. Tally had offered him something to help him sleep, but Shiv had turned it down -- "Give me some time to sort my head out," he had said -- and since Tally has his hands full anyway, he doesn't bother pressing the issue. Shiv is sound in all the ways that Maul isn't; he isn't apt to just suffer in silence because he doesn't know any better, so it's easier to accept his decisions without worrying about the underlying reasoning or lack of.

"Really?" Raze asks, apparently taking it as opening to a conversation, curious.

Tally nods, looking over the imager's screen again; it's a high end piece of gear, which he had acquired on the battlefield out of the kit of a fallen senior medic (after holding said medic's hands for
his last breaths), and while protocol would have dictated him turning it in to be reassigned to another senior medic, he's kept it and kept it in good order because to hell with protocol. Then he turns back to his kit, just checking again visually the inventory he already has in his memory: saline premix, individual bacta packets, sixteen gauge needles, tubing, and a reversible heavy-duty sling.

Then he finally answers Raze, in a rush of confidence and an anticipatory excitement at figuring out a way to beat the odds, "I'll have to get pretty inventive with gear and he won't be able to carry anything for at least a couple days -- more, if I have my way -- but yeah."

"Whatever happens when the vote comes?"

Tally doesn't want to think about voting. He wants to think about medicine. He wants to see if he can save Maul a trip under a laser scalpel. He wants to see if he's as good as he's studied, fought, desperately needed to be.

He wants to prove to himself why he's been allowed to live despite his cynicism and subversive leanings and disloyalty.

But Raze's voice is small and vulnerable and he looks like the whole thing makes him queasy, and so Tally presses his mouth into a thin smile, reassuring as well as he can, "Either way it goes. If we keep going, then I'll have him back in decent form by the time we get to the base. If we don't, then I'll hopefully be saving him trouble further down the road anyway. No downsides. It'll be okay."

He can think about voting later; right now, he has a job to do.

Shiv doesn't think about voting because he thinks about Flanker instead.

He lays with his back to the others, blanket up to his ears, half-listening to Tally and Raze talking, and something inside of him twists and aches every time Raze reaches over to pet his hair. His shoulder is sore and he has some pretty bad muscle strain, a couple pulled tendons and ligaments, but he's in better shape than Maul is, anyway, and even if he didn't want to be drugged to sleep, the anti-inflammatory and bacta patch Tally gave him is keeping the soreness tolerable enough that he probably can and will fall out on his own, once he's got himself put back together.

He thinks about Flanker because he doesn't want to die, and the realization of this fact hits him like ice water on a hot day, sudden enough to make him shiver all over again. Because he's been getting more and more comfortable with his role here; with being part of this squad and command team. Because he's swan-dived into acceptance of his future as sergeant here, turning his eyes away from the losses behind him in favor of studying the terrain ahead.

But Shiv not wanting to die isn't down to rank, or mission.

He doesn't want to die because he loves them, and it's that realization that slams home hard enough to shake him down to his core.

He loves them. His brothers here. His unlikely CO. Because when he's hanging over the edge of a cliff, he can hear the desperate fear and anguish in their voices, as if they're hanging there with him. Because Maul doesn't let go even when it hurts. Because when they pull him back up, Tango holds onto him while he shakes from it. Because every last one of them puts a hand on him before he
He started writing his letters because after the better part of that first month, living in a fog, his body on autopilot, he couldn't bear the permanent silence. The empty airwaves, the forever of it. He wrote because he couldn't live in a universe without his twin, but he had to somehow keep living anyway. He still writes because yeah, it helps him order his thoughts, but he writes to Flanker specifically because he wants his brother to hear him, even knowing he never will again.

Shiv knows that he doesn't want to die.

What he doesn't know, can't know, is if he can survive loving like this again. Survive losing it again.

The thought catches him, hitches the breath in his throat, and then there's a shuffle and Raze is under the blanket with him, pressed up to his back and wrapping an arm around him, and he doesn't know if he can survive this, either, but he doesn't pull away or push his brother off.

"All okay?" he manages to whisper, sounding less steady than he wants to, but more steady than he is.

"Yeah," Raze whispers back. Then he raises his voice a little, "I figured it was time to tap out when Tally got ready to stab the Lieu with the scariest needle I've ever seen."

It takes Shiv a few seconds to realize Raze is actually poking fun at Tally, but then he asks, "Tally, why're you stabbing Maul with scary needles?"

"Really, 'cause I'd faint if you came at me with that thing," Raze complains, as he snakes his arm up under Shiv's in order to press a hand over his heart.

Tally huffs in clear mock-annoyance. "Bacta's too thick to run it through a smaller gauge and I want to dilute it as little as possible. Trust me, he won't feel it. You could dress him as a cantina dancer right now and his blood pressure wouldn't waver."

"Carry on stabbing, then," Shiv says, voice still rough from earlier, but an attempt at humor as Raze snickers at what is undeniably an amusing mental image.

"Thanks, I was planning on it," Tally says back, dryly.

"I'll just hide under here with you," Raze finishes, and then he drops his voice back to a whisper as he gives Shiv a long squeeze. "It's okay. We're all gonna be okay."

Shiv doesn't think about voting.

He thinks about Flanker, and he thinks about the Blackbirds and he thinks about how devastating it would be to lose one of them, and how devastating they would find it to lose him and he thinks about what it means to want to live, what it means to love, and he knows he's supposed to be an example and a leader, but right now, he holds onto Raze's words with desperate faith and finally lets himself relax.
He doesn’t think about voting; he thinks *don’t let me go*, and when he drifts off to sleep, the tears that cut across the bridge of his nose and back to his temple have a chance to dry.

Raze is thinking about the vote. At least sometimes, when he's not thinking about how cool the zipline was, how spine-jerkingly scary Shiv's fall was, how their Lieu would look dressed as a cantina dancer. (Raze has no real grasp of attraction but he totally gets aesthetics; he thinks probably something light-weight, lots of scarves, playing to Maul's colors and they could all watch Tango keel over on the spot. He'll tell Tango about this idea later, because he’s a good brother and has Tango's back.)

When Tally says it’s gonna be okay, Raze believes him. Why shouldn't he? When Raze tells Shiv, he doesn't know if Shiv believes him, but he's gonna take care of him anyway.

He doesn't know what he does think about voting, as in actually casting one and for what. If he thinks about it just for himself, he would go ahead. But it's not really just him, it's everyone and what's the best thing for everyone? Their Sarge is pretty shaken up; even before he falls asleep, settling properly into Raze's arms, he trembles here or there and Raze can't blame him. Raze would probably still be shaking, if he'd been the one to fall.

Well, maybe. He wishes they had jetpacks because that would make that whole thing moot. And those would be *so much fun*. And so badass. They could have some kind of wings made so then they'd really be blackbirds.

But for as scary as that was, he's ready to leave it behind and move on. It's not that he forgets when bad things happen, but he figures that they all survived and if they think too long about it, then they're gonna end up just scaring themselves out of continuing on. He thinks that probably he's not the only one that wants to go and beat the snot right out of the 501st detachment down there -- kriff, the bragging rights alone! -- but he does have a responsibility to the rest of the squad to take into account what's best for the majority.

In line with that thought, he's kind of worried about Husker. Husker's always been a little more uneasy with the squad than everyone else. Not mean or standoffish. But like he's always afraid that he's going to end up stepping wrong or like he doesn't know if he really fits. And he's too gruff and insular to reassure the same way, he looks at whoever tries like they're speaking some other language.

He doesn't really touch anyone often or get close, like most of the rest of them do. Raze has cuddled with literally everyone -- even Brody, even Maul -- in the squad by now, except Husk.

Raze thinks that has to be so lonely. He can't even imagine being so alone. Did Husk get close with their brothers in the 501st? Maybe that could be why it's so much harder for him to fit in here; Raze has gotten along with everyone he's ever been assigned with, but not all clones have an easy time moving from one place to another, and Husker's been bounced around a *lot*, so it might be that the 501st was his first real chance to settle and bond, only to be pulled out for the 212th's Blackbirds.

It's past time for Husker to get out his guitar again. He did when he first joined them, but then he put it away and he hasn't played since, even though everyone likes it and he's really good. Raze thinks that it might be a good thing, and he makes a mental note to ask Husker if he'll play whenever they
get back to the Negotiator. Be it sooner, or later.

(Come to think of it, Tango’s good at words and Husker's good at music; Raze bets they'd write some great songs together.)

Right. Voting. Raze knows Maul will want to keep going. He's not sure about Shiv or Tally, but Tango will want to keep going too. Six and Eight-- probably they want to leave pretty bad, but they're going to wait to see what everyone else has to say. Castle will want to keep going. Misty probably won't. Smarty probably won't. Surprisingly, Raze thinks Brody actually will want to keep going. Husk is up in the air.

He tries to add it up, but he's not sure enough about his guesses to know for sure.

So, he thinks about voting, but he honestly doesn't think too hard about it. Because jet packs and Maul as a cantina dancer and getting Husker integrated and taking care of Shiv is all more important, and whatever they all decide, Raze will be okay with it. He wants to go ahead, but what he decides is that he's gonna be with them regardless of what the choice is, and that's really the most critical part of choosing, anyway.

He falls asleep peacefully, shielding his sergeant's back.

Castle doesn't realize that Raze has already pegged his vote. He thinks about voting, but he only does it for about ten seconds after they've been told to rest because he already knows what his choice is: Kriff the 501st, kriff Skywalker, this is banthashit and damned if they should eat it just because they're supposed to.

Not much gets Castle's hackles up, but this does. So, he decides within ten seconds and then dozes off until it's his turn to take the watch over from Tango. He's pretty much forgotten what it's like not to be sore somewhere on his body, but that's nothing at all new to him, nor is sleeping in adverse conditions, so he knocks out pretty fast and easy.

When he wakes up for his turn to the vibration of his gauntlet pressed under his chin, everything's quiet. The lights are turned off, except for one in each tent, and he can hear the sounds of his brothers breathing in the comparative darkness. He knows that pattern now, learned it quick, so he knows that even after two hours, he's not the only one awake.

Even so, he's quiet as he pulls his armor on and heats his canteen, throwing in a packet of instant tea just to have a break from the cider. He switches his radio over to one-on-one with Tango, and slips out with his bucket on, moving from the warmth of the inner part of the tent to the partitioned section of the entrance, closing the flap behind him and opening the one to the outside.

There's a hint of dawn on the horizon.

"'Nother day," Tango says, and when Castle finds him, the pilot is leaning against a boulder looking towards the base.

"Yeah," he just says, leaning beside Tango and trying to shake off his sleepiness. "Figure out which way you're gonna vote?"
Tango scoffs, a more cynical sound than Castle's used to hearing from him. "I want to go down there and kick the hell out of them. I don't know how many of the others do, though." His voice goes a little softer. "Or-- or if it's a good idea. Shiv was shaking so hard and Maul--"

Tango cuts himself off, but Castle kind of guesses at what he's thinking and feeling. Tango's invested a hell of a lot of his heart in their CO -- more than Castle thinks wise, but even he knows that hearts don't listen to reason or wisdom -- and a hell of a lot of his self-esteem into the squad as a whole, and this has been more of a roller-coaster for him than most of them. "They'll vote for themselves, brother," he says, leaning over against Tango's shoulder some; even with armor between them, even unable to really feel it except as pressure, there's comfort to be found there in the gesture. "I'm with you. I plan on voting to go and shove their faces in this."

"I don't know how they could justify this," Tango says, after a long period where they just rest there together. "I can't-- fathom how our brothers down there can think this is fair. Or how General Skywalker can think it is."

Castle has no easy answer for this. He's a combat engineer; give him a bridge to build, a structure to mentally pick apart, and he's at home. Give him questions about the psychology and motivations of people he doesn't live with every day, and he's lost as can be. "I dunno, Tango. Maybe they don't think it's fair, but what can they do? And I never really know what the Jedi are thinking."

There's another moment of silence, then a slow breath out that's loud enough to carry over the radio and Tango stands. "I better get what sleep I can."

Castle would nod, but cold assault armor's not exactly that friendly to the gesture. But before Tango's out of reach, he catches the pilot's arm. "Hey, before you go... why did Adao go back?"

"Trying to jump ahead of the others?" Tango asks, but his voice has gone warm. He pauses and then he says, "He went back because he thought-- he thought it likely that Etah wasn't going to be able to survive. Etah was all alone; he didn't have anyone left at all who cared about him, or didn't wish harm on him. And even though Adao had succeeded in taking control of his kingdom, ruling was a lonely business too. No one looked at him as an equal; only as someone to fear or someone to grovel before. He was still angry, he had good reason to be, but the part of him that knew that kind of loneliness drove him to go and follow the trail of fallen feathers and find Etah again." Tango's smile is in his tone. "Basically, he lied to himself a lot because he didn't want to care and ended up caring anyway."

Castle could probably listen to this story all day (again); he doesn't catch some of the nuances that their other brothers do, but he definitely wants to know what happens next.

But it wouldn't be fair to jump too far ahead, so he says, "Thanks. Gives me something to think about while I'm out here."

It sends Tango to bed happy, which is another bonus, and Castle settles in for watch thinking about how the story will play out from there, running scenarios for it in his head and content enough with his choices.

Misty mostly sleeps, but it's uneasy enough that he wakes up whenever Brody shifts next to him, and
he wakes up when Castle slips out, and during those times he wakes up, he thinks about the whole frippin’ mess and about which way to vote.

His mind keeps going back to it's a training mission, an incredulous loop of anger and disbelief. We're not supposed to almost die on training missions, when we're facing dying every damned day out there on real ones. He does know that it happens, he's not naive; Husker's an example himself, embodied in flesh, of someone who almost died on a training mission and bears the marks of it.

It's that this isn't an accident. It's that this mission was designed to break them. That if there wasn't so much animosity between their CO and Skywalker, they would have gotten a fair scenario. And Misty's complicit in it, because he went right along with the rest of them about taking it on anyway, but now-- he thinks they should have just balked and not gone. Have someone else set up their training run, someone who doesn't have a grudge to play out regardless of who gets hurt.

He wants to get angry with Maul for not digging in against it; that's what a CO is supposed to do, they're supposed to make the calls on these things. But it's hard to get angry, because Misty likes being given a say. He likes being able to vote, he likes that his voice and experience matters, he likes knowing that his vote will weigh no less than Shiv's or Maul's, when it's given. It's wouldn't be fair to accept a stake in the responsibility and then turn around and get pissed off at his lieutenant for not ignoring that he did. He could maybe argue that no good officer should be offering a stake and therefore such responsibility to the grunts anyway, but--

But.

Misty's heard about companies like that. Where the clones aren't even allowed to use their names, let alone have a say. Where they die and die, and the person leading them just walks away with a list of numbers to be marked off and no hesitation. Where a general or a commander thinks so little of them that the unilateral orders given means piles of bodies with faces like his own. Maul could probably do better at balancing when to give them a say and when not to, but even as Misty's trying to find a target for his ire, he knows that their lieutenant is doing the best he can.

And anyway, this is supposed to be a kripping training mission; he shouldn't have to be making life-or-death decisions here. None of them should be. There're gonna be plenty of those coming, they shouldn't be needing them here.

Ultimately, it's General Skywalker he's most angry at, for letting whatever personal feelings there are get in the way of the actual good of the troops. Misty can't figure out what this is supposed to teach them, except that they can't trust one of the most admired generals in the Grand Army. If he's desperate enough, he can think that it's supposed to teach them how to lose gracefully, but--

But he knows better.

Misty doesn't sleep well, but he does think about the vote; even as he decides which way to go, the whole thing leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

(The only thing they're learning is distrust and persecution, on top of what they already live with every damned day.)

On the other side of Brody, Smarty's of a mind with Misty, but he doesn't know that yet.
What he does know is that they should evac, go back to the Negotiator and build a case against General Skywalker. Because he knows exactly which rules and regs it can be argued that Skywalker is breaking. There should already be regs that make this kind of training mission impossible, but even with what there is, Smarty thinks he could make a case and heck, maybe save some other squad trouble down the line.

The Grand Army is, to put not too fine a point on it, slapdash. The clones were raised for a war that might never have broken out, only to be given to peacekeepers acting as commanding officers, some of them having not even reached the Age of Responsibility, to face off against droids, none of whom bleed. Smarty's loyal, but he's not blind; a lot of their brothers take pride in their skills -- and why shouldn't they? -- but the whole war effort stinks of having been thrown together in completely haphazard ways. That'll change over time, it kind of has to, but for now everyone's trying to figure out where they fit and how. And a lot of people die because they don't know already.

Even though the Kaminoans have their flaws, they had limits set on training scenarios. A minimum number of days, for example. Giving ten days for them to get to this base against these odds is asking them to have wings to fly. They've done well, Smarty thinks they probably could get to the base before they time out, but only because they went off course and under a mountain. There are regs about gross negligence, if nothing else.

He wants to believe General Kenobi will stand up for them. He worries because he isn't sure General Kenobi would, since it would mean standing against his former apprentice.

Smarty chews up real estate in his mind. He thinks he's gonna hug Commander Half-Pint when he sees her again, for giving them the narrow chance they even have (he already knows she's the one who tipped Maul off about the files and where to find them), but he's going to vote that they abort and get out of here. Go back. Find a way to make Skywalker accountable for this, instead of give him the dignity of considering his scenario worth completion.

He knows this won't be popular, but he has a vote, so that's his.

Brody, between them, sleeps like the dead, having known instantly which way he's planning on voting. He also knows that when he gets back, he's going to subscribe General Skywalker's accounts to every single human-male-enhancement-product advertisement list in the known galaxy. He might even do a holo-manip of an ad and release it, of the good general talking about how Viable helped him straighten his lightsaber for only ninety-nine point nine credits per month, in the hopes that it goes wildly viral.

A membership to the Church of the Sacred Sarlacc probably wouldn't go amiss, either. Especially given how aggressively they fund-raise.

Further back, though, tucked into the corner of that tent, oblivious to pirate-like plans of chaos or the idea of rules and regs, Six lies wide awake and thinks about something more terrifying than voting,
something more terrifying than *dying*: He thinks about what would happen if he loses his twin.

He knows that they've had a pretty charmed life for unspecialized shinies; instead of being thrown into the war effort, into a company with staggering losses, they ended up pulled into a black ops squad in training and they haven't seen a real battlefield once yet. He feels insecure sometimes about it, because everyone else on the squad has seen action, but no one ever gives them any flack over it and so he doesn't think about it too often, and instead he just learns what he's supposed to be learning and waits for when the stakes become real.

Except, they're real *now*. They're real now, and he's terrified.

*I'm a coward*, he thinks, his chin on top of his twin's head, anxious and unable to sleep.

He can think of few worse labels to give himself. Few more shameful. He feels like he's letting everyone down just by thinking about it at all, but he can't seem to help it. He wants to run and he feels the bite of shame at that, too. He doesn't really have more nuanced thoughts about the ethics of it, or whether General Skywalker is doing wrong by them, or whether their lieutenant is capable of leading them; he just thinks about what would happen if he loses his batchmate and it freezes his spine in his back, leaves behind nothing but a static-filled howl of fear and desperation to spiral around his mind.

Of the two of them, he's always been the more eager and outgoing one. He's always been the one jumping ahead into things, and his brother has always followed him.

The half-hysterical thought crosses his mind that he hopes he dies first, because then he won't have to live through losing his brother, and he hates himself right after having it because he doesn't *want* his brother to follow him there, too.

He doesn't think about voting, he doesn't sleep. He just holds on for dear life.

(Eight doesn't sleep, either, but not for the same reasons: He doesn't sleep because he can feel the terror in the tightness of his brother's arms and the tremble in the jaw against the top of his head, and it hurts his chest that he can't fix that. All he can do is hold on and feel angry -- deeply, hotly angry -- at the architect of this mess of a training mission, and even though he won't know it for a few more hours, for the very first time in his life, he steps ahead of his brother in making a choice about which way he's going to go.)

The first time someone who wasn't a brother treated him like a person, it was General Anakin Skywalker, of the 501st.

By then, Husker had been living and training for a veritable eternity, then bouncing around different units as the GAR was being built up; his assignment to the 501st came halfway between Geonosis and Christophsis, and Skywalker had greeted him personally, asking his name, asking specific
questions about his training and history, the likes of which he wouldn't have known to ask unless he had bothered to read the file sent to him. And then, when that first meeting ended, Skywalker had grabbed him by his shoulders and beamed an infectious, roguish grin and said, "I'm glad I've got your experience behind me, Husker. We need every advantage we can get, and you're definitely one of them."

Husker, by then, was used to being viewed as damaged goods. Older than most -- his designation was double-digits until they reformatted it -- scarred up, his only claim to anything was his ability to navigate just about any kind of terrain, his marksmanship and his ability to pick at a guitar, which he had gotten because one of their instructors had thrown it away with a broken neck, and he'd repaired it and kept it.

He wasn't a shiny, so he didn't buy the general's words, not until Skywalker started asking him specifically for help when his specialization came up. Not until Skywalker sat in a circle with him and a bunch of the others and watched him play guitar; his face had seemed so young by the firelight, expression open, and at the end he smiled sadly and said, "It's been a long time since I've heard anyone play."

Husker played for him anytime that chance came up. And he bonded with the other men of the 501st; bonded with his squad, bonded with others, bonded with his general. It didn't seem like mere months; it seemed like a lot longer. Like he could leave behind a history where he'd overheard the long-necks discussing, blandly, whether to treat him or decommission him when that shrapnel tore a hole in his neck, and live in a present where someone thought he was worth listening to and caring for, brothers he could laugh with, a general who inspired them all.

Husk knows that the rest of the Blackbirds are getting steadily, swiftly more sour towards General Skywalker. They never served directly with him, so they don't know him like this. No, he doesn't ask for a vote or anything, but he does care; he comes up with brilliant, off-the-cuff strategies and plays them out and relies on his men because he trusts them.

What Husker can't reconcile is how that good man, the one who remembers their names and knows their lives, could have ever been party to this training mission.

It's easy for him to think that it's meant to be hard for their own good; the work they're intended to do will often be long odds and slim openings. Setting up a hard scenario is perfectly in line with that, and besides, they're soldiers. They follow their orders even when those orders are impossible.

But the reality of it -- the sheer hopelessness of it -- came rushing up at the same time Shiv almost fell away.

They hadn't taken any of the intended routes. Husker could pretend that if they had, things wouldn't have been as bad as they looked, they could have gotten through, there would be some kind of an out or opportunity. He's been in agreement on bypassing those routes, just as a matter of tactics, but when he realizes that this has just become a game of life-or-death, regardless of intentions, the unease he felt before is inescapable.

Why would you set us up to lose? he asks in his mind, trying to fathom what his former general could be thinking.

It can't just be malice. General Skywalker might hate their L-T, but he doesn't hate them; he's always cared about the clones, his or others. It can't just be hatred, because if it is, that means they're just collateral damage and that doesn't fit with everything Husker knows.

He lays there thinking, as the hours tick by. He comes no closer to any answers. He only feels-- soul-
sick, and under siege.

When his gauntlet tells him it's coming up time for Tally's watch, he sits up and quietly dons his armor, pulling his bucket on and switching to one-to-one with the medic, speaking quietly since he's pretty sure Tally's not wearing his yet. "Tally. Copy?"

There's a delay on the reply -- the curtain between the tents is sealed so that it's easier for the heat to stay contained, and it does a pretty good job containing sound too -- and then Tally answers, "Husk? What's up?"

How Husker feels about the medic is just as damned messy and complicated as everything else about this kripping disaster of a mission. He's known from the get-go that Tally's barely a step up from deserter; that Tally is sharp and opinionated and probably bucks authority. That he looks at Kamino and sees a war crime and not a homeworld. That if he didn't have something to stay for, he'd break his oath and disappear.

But on the other hand, he's a damned talented, skilled medic. Under his sharp edges, there's a depth and a kindness. It's hard to hate him; hard, even, to dislike him, even when Husker wants to. And Tally is loyal to those who earn it.

Is that better? Is that better? Is it worse?

"Husk? You okay?" he asks again, concern creeping into his voice.

"Yeah." Husker knots his jaw for a moment, then says, "Figured I'd take your watch, since you're busy and since mine's right after."

There's another long pause, this time on the other end, then Tally says, "Thank you."

"No problem." It's not a problem, either. Not this. This is easy; cover for a brother. Tally's got at least one person to look after and maybe two, depending on how Shiv's doing.

He switches over to one-to-one with Castle, slips outside. The searing light of day makes him grateful for his visor; the sunlight beating down on the snow. They trade off the watch.

Husk keeps thinking. And thinking.

Going under was swift, but coming back up is a slow process.

It's considerably less disorienting than Maul expects it to be; he's used to not knowing where he'll wake up after any given period of unconsciousness. In the early days at the Temple, his life was a series of jumpcuts; even as recently as Alderaan, he would black out in one place and wake up in some other place, though the fact that he knew it was Obi-Wan hauling him around takes the edges of anxiety off of it.

There's no eddied presence here, but he knows where he is and with whom; his mind is surprisingly clear, though also-- tired. A sense of exhaustion, not physical, even if he also feels very heavy in
It's not unpleasant. This actually surprises him. He feels, simultaneously, like he's been asleep a long
time and not more than a minute, a dichotomy he doesn't have it in him to reconcile; when he
furrows his brow as a precursor to fighting off the heaviness enough to open his eyes, slightly cool
fingertips trace the top edge of his mask, invoking memory, soothing.

"You've got another hour, Lieu. Sleep a bit more," Tally says, voice pitched soft.

His mind drifts to Obi-Wan, who seems drawn to that same spot as a place to touch, but at the very
edge of sleep, another (older) impression comes: Of white, of confused, hopeless, desperate, soul-
deep love; of pale chameleon eyes that seemingly shift between green and blue and gold and gray.

One day, he'll see those eyes again in another face, but for now, the impression slips gently away,
like mist, like a ghost.

Husker watches the sun cross the sky.

Sometimes he gets so sick of thinking that he kicks up a flurry of snow in frustration, watching it
become a cloud before settling again, sparkling under the punishing light. Sometimes he just wants to
shut down and not do it anymore; to hell with everyone, they can vote, he'll just follow his kriffing
orders. If he can find someone to give them, anyway.

The base that's only a few days away steals into his thoughts often. Those are his brothers down
down there. Do they know? Would they care if they found out Shiv had nearly turned into a broken
meatbag at the bottom of a long drop?

'Course they would, he thinks, scoffing.

It's General Skywalker that Husker's less sure about. And he hates that. He keeps circling back to
wondering why his former CO and his current one hate each other. To listen to the scuttlebutt from
the 501st, Maul's some kind of monster who probably roasts babies over a fire while cackling. And
those men couldn't have gotten that impression from interacting with Maul, because that's definitely
not what Husker sees. Monsters don't look like you gutted 'em when they find out what happens
when you're defective.

Maybe it's 'cause he's an ex-Sith. Of all of Husker's thoughts, that's the only one that makes any
sense. The only reason he can see why General Skywalker would hate their lieutenant. Maul's a
prisoner and an ex-Sith and had a part in the genesis of the conflict they're seeing play out now, and
looking at it from that angle, Husker can almost grasp it.

He slows his breathing, unconsciously falling into the pattern that Tally had taught Tango, pacing the
well-trampled ground.

But why this?

General Skywalker had to know that throwing this kind of mission at them wouldn't just disgrace
their lieutenant. That it would also disgrace them. That unless someone actually bothers to look at
how incredibly stacked against them the scenario was, they'll really only see a failure for the squad
and that's after a longer period of training than most of the GAR gets once they're off Kamino. The only thing that could come of it--

Husker stops, staring in the direction of the base, heart squeezing painfully in his chest.

No, he thinks, shaking his head as hard as he can, in his bucket. No.

The thought refuses to leave him, though. And he's being a coward by ignoring it.

The only thing that could come of it would be the squad being disbanded. Not right away, maybe. But the mark would follow them; they could maybe try to fight it based on how stacked it is against them, but--

But who's going to listen to clones and a prisoner over a general? Especially one like Skywalker?

Husker remembers the general offering to get him back. Right now, that feels considerably less--casual, than it had at the time. Less like an expression of commiseration. Could he have been hoping Husk would take him up on it before this mission went down?

The thought of that makes his gut churn, and it's then that Husker knows which way he's going to vote.

"Full disclosure: If we do vote to keep going, then we're going to be down two backs to carry the weight for awhile, so we're going to have to get brutal on shedding gear and it's going to be slow going at first."

The entirety of the squad is pretty much packed into one of the tents; there's just enough room if they're sitting to fit into one, though Raze and Brody are both laying on their bellies side by side in the tunnel bridging the two, chins resting on their hands, to make it a tiny bit less packed. They remind Tally of boys, posed like that, enough that it makes him smile even under such a weighty atmosphere.

Maul wasn't thrilled about being told he wasn't going to be able to carry anything; he had been their main pack-mule thus far. Tally left the ball in his court; Maul could either listen and take it easy on his shoulder for a couple to three days, or he could try to use it now and undo all the work Tally put into fixing it. Tally wasn't going to force the issue, but he also didn't pull any punches, and even though Maul wasn't happy about it, he caved to the requisite, no doubt helped along by having half the squad adding some affectionate peer pressure.

Shiv kicked less; he managed to carefully negotiate himself into carrying some of the mountaineering gear on his un-strained side, and he didn't need a sling, so it was easier to talk him into it. Plus, Tally was rather unashamed of making use of Shiv's willingness to listen to his judgment to set an example for their lieutenant.

The decision to sit together, even in very cramped conditions, is easy. They need to be able to look one another in the eyes to do this.

It's Raze who speaks first, after a murmur of acknowledgment over the conditions, "I'm with whatever we decide. I mean, I'm behind everyone no matter what? But for me, I think we need to
keep going. We're pretty close and we've been through so much to get this far, I want to see this through."

"Same," Brody says, casual. "I'll carry a damned bantha down the mountain if that's what it takes. The only difference between yesterday and today is that we thought this was a training missions yesterday. Now, we know better."

Castle holds a hand up. "Third vote for going. Kriff this."

Smarty doesn't look surprised; his mouth goes into a rueful line, but then he shakes his head. "I vote we bow out, then go back to the Negotiator and see if we can't get at least an investigation into General Skywalker's planning and intentions."

Tally watches Husker flinch, just barely, but the older clone doesn't say anything about it. Beside Smarty, Misty nods. "I hadn't thought about calling for an investigation, but I do think we should quit now. This is a training mission -- or, it was supposed to be. I mean, we can't claim we came into it with good faith, given Commander Half-Pint and our own espionage, but there has to be a point where we decide that enough's enough."

"I think we should keep going." Eight's voice is quiet, and the wide-eyed look of shock and anxiety that Six gives him makes him wince, but he doesn't take it back. "Enough is enough. I know-- I know I'm just a shiny and I've never been under real fire before, but I'm gonna be soon enough and I'd rather go down there and fight alongside all of you and earn my scratches here than go back to the ship feeling defeated."

When they all look to Six, he just shakes his head, and the sight of the tears that have welled up yanks on Tally's heart. Before they leave, he's gonna have to take Six aside and see if there's any way to help, because Tally can't think of many things more awful than taking a terrified kid into a fight he doesn't want.

His heart tugs even further, both aching and warm, when Husker reaches over and pets the back of Six's head.

"I'm gonna go up top," Husker says, still soothing the little brother at his side, "and sharpshoot our rope off that summit so we've got it if we need it. Then, I think we need to go down there and show 'em why we're all together."

Completely outwith the seriousness of this discussion, Tally finds himself grinning. Both for that vote, and for the fact that Husker's declaring what he's going to do without waiting for orders.

He's not the only one smiling, either; Tango is, too, looking at the older clone with a soft sort of admiration. "Count me in with that, too. I mean, I hear what you three are saying," he says, nodding to Misty, Smarty and Six. "But I didn't crawl under a frippin' mountain just to go home now."

There's really only one more vote needed before the majority is reached. And the three top dogs left to vote. Tally can see the math hit Maul because he can see the way his eyes go a little wider in what's pretty clearly anxiety over the idea he might be the tie-breaker, and so Tally takes a breath and scrubs over his face before doing it himself: "Medically speaking, we should abort. We've got two injured and a long way down to the base. Personally speaking?" A beat. "I say we go. We can still forfeit if we absolutely have to, but I think we're on the back side of this now and that if we're smart and keep it together, we can take this. And that doesn't take away the possibility of an investigation later on, anyway."

"If they investigate Skywalker, then they will inevitably start investigating us," Maul says, after a
moment, looking subtly relieved that it wasn't on him to have to cast the pivotal vote. "It's a good idea, but if they do that, then--"

"--then they'll probably find out how we got word ahead of the mission and knew to go so far off course," Smarty says, shoulders slumping a little. "Which puts us, and Commander Half-Pint, in the crosshairs."

Maul just nods, then adds, "I would go alone, if the option were available--"

"--but it's not, because you have us," Shiv interrupts, a smile making an appearance on his face for the first time since his fall.

Maul rolls his eyes, huffing at being cut off a second time, though he's obviously not genuinely annoyed. "--but since the option's clearly not available, I do think we should continue."

"So do I," Shiv adds, more quietly. "The only way we're gonna be able to rend this right is if we do it for ourselves."

Smarty and Misty both nod; they don't seem to be disappointed that they were in the minority, or bitter because of it, and Tally's honestly not too surprised by the rush of affection he feels for all of them. Six still looks scared and upset, but they have some time before they break camp that Tally can talk with him and hopefully help.

There's a long beat of silence, then Maul nods. "All right. Let's work out what we can safely abandon and rearrange what we can't, and then we'll figure it out from there."

There's a smattering of yessirs and a bunch of uncomfortable shuffling as they disperse, too many knees and elbows in a confined space, but there's also a hum of determination in the air.

Later, after Husk comes back with their rigging that had been abandoned when Shiv fell, Tally catches him just as he's pulling his bucket off and rests their heads together; after a long moment, Husk reaches up and holds on back, and for a moment they stand there, just being brothers.
He was back on Kamino.

The white and gray should have felt familiar, maybe even soothing, but it didn't. Instead, it felt cold, sterile. Oppressive. He was somewhere he had never been before, a long room filled with beds on each side of the lit center. In each bed was a brother, still and seemingly peaceful. Down at the other end were two Kaminoans, speaking in their soft way.

He made his way over to one of the beds, and then recoiled, backing up, his heart suddenly hammering in his chest and all of his limps jerking once as the adrenaline hit his brain like a runaway skytrain.

It was Husker. Except, he wasn't peaceful. He was awake, and his whole body was stuck to the bed like it was molded into it, and his eyes were pleading and when he opened his mouth to speak, nothing came out and where his throat was supposed to be, an empty hole gaped open between bloodless, clean, surgical edges.

He turned, he looked; the others were all there, too, and all of them were missing pieces of themselves, like they were machines that had been taken apart. But all of them were awake. All of them were terrified.

All of them looked at him.

His brother was at the end. His middle was gaping open, empty, just the same.

The first Kaminoan said, "These parts are still useful. We'll simply arrange them into a better unit."

The second one said, "Yes. They are designed to be interchangable."

They didn't seem to see him, they just moved over and he tried to go and claw his brother free from their grasp, but he suddenly couldn't move and even while he stood there with his brain screaming coward coward coward at him like a klaxon, they reached in and they took out his brother's heart

and Six woke up with a strangled scream.

"Whoa, brother, easy," his twin was telling him, wide-eyed and worried, and for a moment Six was in two places at once; that awful place on Kamino, and here, on Bravo-984. He scrambled upright,
gasping for air, and slowly the nightmare dissolved away into the present.

"Just a bad dream," he said, shaking hard and drawing his knees up, curling up into a ball and trying to kick away the terrible images that his mind had produced. He could feel the film of sweat on his face and his neck, and he couldn't make himself look at the guys in the tent who he'd just probably violently dragged back to awareness.

They hadn't gotten very far the day before; after they had jettisoned every bit of gear they could afford to and broke camp, it was already edging towards evening. Everything took longer, both for the way the weight of the remaining gear had to be distributed without Maul and Shiv being able to carry their usual loads, and for the way that injury made everything more precarious. In the end, they only made four hours and not all that much distance downwards before they had to set their next camp.

Six hadn't known if he would ever be ready. Even with such a short day, he could feel them drawing closer to the inner perimeter; they had come by such a brutal, punishing route that they had avoided crossing any of the countermeasures yet, but that wouldn't be the case soon. Soon it would be scanning stun grenade launchers and heat sensors and motion sensors and audio sensors, and even if they had bypassed the outer perimeter by going under one mountain and over another, there was plenty left for them to trip across.

He had no idea how they were going to get through. He had no idea how he would be any use to them, since he couldn't control the terror that had lodged itself in his spine since Shiv had taken his fall.

Sometimes he wasn't sure what shocked him more; that it turned out he was so shaky, or that his twin had wanted to go when he hadn't. It wasn't like they didn't disagree on things, but on the big ones, they'd always been in accord and now-- they weren't.

He had made himself move, helped where he was supposed to, listened to Tally trying to reassure him and talk him down.

But today, he felt no better.

"It's unlikely that they changed much between when we got our intel and when we were deployed," Smarty was saying, as they spiraled their way slowly down from the peak, working their way around obstacles just as painstakingly as the day before. "Which means we'll have to cross the first launchers before nightfall."

Taken individually, the countermeasures were all easily defeated. Taken together, though, and they became a nearly impossible task; a single mistake in slipping past them would launch the stun grenades, and it that wasn't enough, then the detachment at the base would also be alerted to come and take care of them that way. They had two of their three datapads -- one was left behind with the flagged gear on the mountain for later retrieval -- and Six could barely look over the map without getting queasy.

*They're just stun grenades,* he kept telling himself. *No big deal.*

He wished he could believe it.
"I think I've got a plan," Brody said, thoughtfully. "I mean, since we're gonna be sneaking by in daylight."

"What's that?" Maul asked; Six had overheard him this morning knocking heads a little bit with Tally, and he sounded kind of disgruntled even now, but he apparently lost that fight because he was still in that sling and relying on Misty or Smarty to help him navigate the terrain since he was down an arm.

"Well, those outer perimeter scanning towers are contained; made to just drop off fast and pick up fast. All those sensors are in one tower. I think if I can get close enough without it seeing me, I can probably slice into it and loop back say-- ten minutes of its log, have it overwrite the present, then go back to regular scanning."

"So, we sneak past one, then you go ahead and do the same with the next?" Misty asked.

"That's a little harder; their scanning range overlaps just enough that there's no blind spot for the squad to hide in. And I don't think it's smart to try to loop more than ten minutes, because the longer you do, the more likely someone is to notice it, especially getting closer to sundown."

"If the scanning range overlaps, then our datapads should be able to network," Shiv broke in; he had been quiet the past day, but he sounded together again, and that was a small comfort that Six held onto with both hands.

"Send someone else to the second tower in the line, then we leapfrog until we reach the hole where we were going to come out of the mountain; we can hide in that for the night."

"If it's open." That was Castle.

"Whoever it is would have to be fast," Brody said, bypassing Castle's caveat. "Who's the fastest here? I mean-- the fastest person with all limbs working and capable of running in this armor?"

Maul's little grumble was cut off by Raze: "I'm pretty quick."

"I'm no slack myself," Tango added.

Six swallowed; he could feel his brother's gaze between his shoulders, and no amount of armor or bucket could take away the way it was searing into him. He gave a little shudder, as he listened as the others started comparing their times from back during their training.

He was faster than all of them. He had been the fastest guy in their platoon, on Kamino; even carrying weight, even across the simulated rough terrain, he was always the first one across the line and--

"I am," he whispered, feeling the clawing anxiety jump back up from where it had been balled up, laying in wait, under his breastbone. Then, realizing that they didn't hear him, he said it again louder, even though he couldn't keep the tight note out of his voice. "I am. I'm-- I was--"

"He's one of the top-rated runners in the GAR," his brother said, from behind him, tone a mix between worry and pride. "Number twenty-two, in the entire army."

Everyone fell quiet for a long moment, apparently just to absorb that. Six started breathing the way Tally had taught Tango; everyone had been really nice to him about this, nicer than he deserved, but he was still waiting for someone to laugh and ask if the shaky little shiny would be able to pull it off.

"Perfect," was what Brody said, a note of wicked glee in his voice. "Up to playing some high tech leapfrog, kiddo?"
No, Six thought, eyes stinging. No, I'm not, I'll never be ready, pick someone with a spine--

"Yeah," was what he said anyway.

No one commented on how quivery that one word came out.

Lunch, or what passed for it, was spent huddled in a chute. They were getting close enough to the base now that while they weren't in range of any patrol, caution was still the watchword of the day. It was there that Shiv finally managed to talk Tally into letting him carry more weight; he'd been wearing bacta patches on his strained and pulled shoulder since he'd fallen, and Tally grudgingly agreed. Maul tried the same, and was again overrode; he looked no happier about it, face set in lines of frustration, but he didn't grumble any further than he already had.

Packs were redistributed yet again, to free both Brody and Six, and Six cringed behind his bucket for every quiet groan he heard as the rest of the squad tested the weight. Tally handed out painkillers and advice, looking worried, but he didn't veto anything and was carrying just as much as everyone else who could. Castle and Husker were both well-build across their shoulders, both of ’em went beyond their usual exercises on weight lifting, so they took the heaviest loads for themselves.

The only thing left out was the fabric that made up the bridge between their white-out tents.

"So, the plan is that I wrap myself up in this in order to protect me from any possible heat leakage points from the heat sensors on the scanning tower," Brody had said, throwing the thing around himself like a cloak, "and creep in close to it, while our Lieutenant makes us enough of a snow storm to hopefully confuse the motion and audio sensors, just in case I ain't as light on my feet as I should be. Then, as soon as I manage to get into position, I'll start the loop there; Six grabs the cloth from me, runs ahead with his datapad, creeps in close to the second tower so I can get a network connection and loop it. Meanwhile, the rest of you follow slow enough that he and I can play leapfrog until we get to our next set camp."

"I'll take lead of the rest of the squad," Maul broke in, nodding his head towards Six. "I can hopefully manage to keep up the snow blind ahead of him, even at a little distance."

Six had wondered a little how Maul was going to actually make a snow storm happen, but he had made an ice wall once already, so it didn't seem too far fetched. He also didn't know how he felt about possibly having his CO witness it in case he blundered and failed, though he couldn't exactly just come out and say that.

He had nodded his agreement, but he didn't say anything; beside him, his twin sat close, a silent pillar of support. He had been fast, but what if the cold assault armor proved to be too heavy for him to manage? And what if he tripped? What if he fell?

"You've got this," his twin had said, quietly. "We've got this."

Now, as the day wore on and they were getting closer, all chatter had fallen quiet. Even if they weren't in the range of regular patrols, their purloined intel was just old enough that things could have been changed in the interim and so all eyes were open.

It seemed, though, that this time luck -- or mercy -- was on their side.
Six laid next to Brody on the ridge; the sky was cloudless, but the light was lowering as they got closer to nightfall, and according to projections, they would hopefully reach the cave mouth within the next hour and a half. Over two hundred meters ahead, glinting in the thin light, the scanning tower was elevated on its weighted, temporary base; to their right was a passage that would have funneled them to it, had they taken a more conventional route than they did.

Somehow, the realization that they had bypassed several more countermeasures made him feel a bit better, even if it had been almost deadly to do so. There was a strange comfort in seeing that scanning tower, even if right now it looked like a failure in the making; if it was there, then they were close enough to the base for rescue if something did go catastrophically wrong, and if it was there, then even if they did get hit, no one was going to fall off a cliff. Six didn't like General Skywalker's weighted scenario himself, but he did appreciate that the general had at least taken their safety into account.

"So," Brody whispered, even though their radios were shielded, sounding kind of excited, "who wants to see me go down there and do my magic?"

Tally snorted, just as quietly. "Oh, great wizard slicer, get thy ass down there and get us moving, because my back hurts and Raze promised to rub it for me when we make camp."

"How come you get a back rub and the rest of us don't?" Misty griped, without any heat.

"I had the foresight to ask."

"If you're done negotiating, gentlemen, can we get this little magic show on the road?" Shiv asked, though there was a note of good humor in his voice that made Six's heart feel a little lighter even yet.

"Yep." Brody made to creep over the ridge. "C'mon, Six, I'll tell you when to stop and go."

Six swallowed again, clinging to the bantering and the minor boost to whatever he had that passed for courage, and then gave a nod and an, "Okay," before following Brody down.

All thoughts of slicing General Skywalker's accounts aside, Brody was glad that he had some kind of serious use on this mission.

He was well aware that he was more of a thinky kind of soldier than a gung-ho kind; not that it bothered Brody, really, but when it came to physical missions like this one, he usually resigned himself to the idea that he might not be able to contribute as much as some of his more athletic brothers. In fact, if he had his way, most of the time he'd be back playing support, slicing into whatever system was needed in order to keep things running as smoothly as possible.

Still, he had an objective to achieve and he was the best one to achieve it. He'd take what victories he could get.

Crawling towards the tower was painstaking. The snow was deep enough that moving was both louder than he liked and more laborious. He had the tent material wrapped around himself, but he did worry some about the idea that maybe the 501st detachment was going to come out this far and see their tracks. Especially since they were drawing close to their time limit. Those guys down there had to be feeling the anticipation winding up, just like the Blackbirds did.
He took a breath and kept going; right behind him, Six and Maul were following his track. Further back, the rest of the Blackbirds were creeping along single-file.

"Two," he whispered down the radio, counting off the meters to the scanning perimeter.

Around him, the snow started swirling in what looked to be a wind--

--but the wind wasn't touching him.

Maul.

Brody crept forward a bit more, but he couldn't resist turning and looking back; behind Six, Maul had his eyes closed and his free hand raised, and even that far away, Brody could see the tension written on his face and in the way he was holding himself.

"One; you two wait there," he whispered, after turning back forward, using his body as a snow plow. "Going radio silent."

There was no acknowledgment. All around him, the white flakes increased, thickened, until it looked like a blizzard had come down on him. The sky was getting dark enough, with the peaks, that hopefully it would look like the wind had just kicked up. That happened often enough, apparently.

Brody crept past the line, aiming true in the Force-created white-out, waiting for the alarm and stun grenades with every breath and every step, even as careful as he was being. If he was going to pull off slicing through Six's datapad, then he had to get as close as he could to the tower, given the overlap. It wasn't ideal, and one single break in the network connection might see 'em sunk, but it was all they could really do and still make enough headway to get to their camp.

So far, so good. He had the datapad scanning the tower, and even as he was pushing through the snow, he kept an eye on the network signal. Just for the sake of making Maul's life easier, he also kept his profile as low as he could get it, which wasn't too hard given just how deep this snow was.

The utter silence of the radio was unnerving; even when they were walking before, he could usually hear any breath loud enough to be picked up by the mic, and the Blackbirds were a talky squad anyway. He knew the likelihood of the scanner picking up radio chatter was slim -- unless they used their speakers, anyway -- but they were taking no chances and so Brody felt alone like he hadn't so far on this mission, even knowing they were behind him.

*One thing at a krippin' time*, he thought, slowing his own breathing down. *Just one.*

As he got closer, he slowed his steps even further, all but inching; without the momentum, the effort to push through was even worse.

*Almost.* The network signal was pegged to its highest. *Almost,* Brody thought.

He almost ran into the base, and pulled up as it dissolved out of the whiteout in front of him. Gritting his teeth from the tension, he hunkered down there and immediately got to work, interfacing the datapad with his heads up and working as fast as his thickly gloved fingers would allow.
It was the slowest race that Six had ever run.

He couldn't see more than a meter or two, but he knew they were all behind him; even as quiet as everything was, he could feel the tension like a wire running through the entire squad, pulling tighter with every moment of silence that passed.

He had no idea how Maul was creating the white-out; there was no actual wind, but the snow was moving regardless. And a lot of it, too; pulled from the high ground around them and from behind them, it was swirling like a blizzard, even though it wasn't. Whenever he could see, past the snow, the Lieu'd had his teeth bared and it looked like whatever he was doing, it was taking a lot out of him to do it.

Six had tried to shove down the guilt that threatened to choke him, either preempting failure or for what effort had already gone into this, and had faced back ahead. After days and days of carrying gear, the cold assault armor alone felt light; he knew it was going to work against him, but compared to trying this with a pack on, he had least stood a chance.

He had still ended up jumping half out of that armor when Brody's voice came over: "Got it; Six, go!"

He had dragged in a hard breath, but thankfully he hadn't hesitated; he'd plunged ahead desperately, following Brody's line and picking up speed, boots grabbing the snow and kicking up clods of it behind him as he dug in.

Now, he had the white-out fragment wrapped around him and was leaping and pushing, plowing, breaking new ground; his legs and lungs were burning for the effort, but he gripped that datapad desperately and tried to ignore the time countdown on the heads up between when Brody's tower went back online and the last second when his had to go offline.

"C'mon," he thought, tears burning in his eyes, his own teeth now bared.

"Five," Brody's counted; he was following the datapad that Six had.

Six couldn't afford to slow down until the last second, when he would have to creep just across the line into the range of the next tower. Lucky for him, it was pretty hard to get caught at that distance; unlucky for him, this was only the first damned leg of this race.

"Four."

"Kriff, that's insane speed," Raze broke in, in apparent enthusiasm, startling Six all over again. "Run, Rabbit, run!"

Six didn't have a chance to wonder what the hell a rabbit was; a split second later, Shiv's voice was shushing Raze and then Brody said, "Three."

Two minutes left on the timer. The rest of the squad was somewhere between Brody's tower and his, and if he flubbed this, they would be pinned there between two active scanners and would have to make a stand when those went off.

"Two."

Six grit his teeth.

"One."
He pushed on, watching the timer desperately. Brody had built in enough time to give himself a chance to slice in, and that was something, but it was still cutting it close. The second Six hit the mark, he slowed down and ducked into the snow, pushing on and gasping as quietly as he could with the whiteout fabric wrapped around his head and shoulders. Brody wouldn't tell him when to stop; he'd just get into the datapad and do his slicing, and in the meantime, Six would keep blazing trail until it was time for him to start running again.

He was shaking like a leaf from adrenaline and exertion, waiting for the grenades, waiting for the failure--

"Done!" Brody called, voice pitched sharper in excitement.

"Double-time it, boys, there's no going back now!" Castle barked, but even his tone was one of triumph.

--I did it, Six barely took a second to think, before taking off again, no longer feeling his burning muscles.

"Good work, kiddo," he heard Husker say, and this time... this time, he even started to believe it.

Eight was almost at the back of the line, but his heart was with his twin.

Brody had plowed past them all, occasionally jostling them as he ran; Maul had fallen back and when Eight looked behind him, he got to see why: Their tracks were being obliterated by the flying snow. Then, Maul would push through them again to go to the front, though he never spoke a word while he did it, bouncing from one end to the other.

Eight's job in all of this was simple; keep moving at the speed set by their sergeant, even if he felt like an overburdened bantha and was waiting at any second to overbalance and go down under his too-heavy pack. But compared to what his brother was being asked to do, it seemed almost painfully easy to keep moving, especially given that the trail had been blazed for them already.

The timing of it couldn't be a beat off. They had to be ready to cross the tower ranges as they went down, before the one behind came back up again, and even stopping to take a breath was out of the question. Periodically, things went silent and tense again as they came up on the next one in the descending valley. Once, Misty slipped and had to be hauled back up by Castle and pushed ahead and steadied at the same time. Periodically, his twin and Brody switched places on who was doing the trailblazing.

It was in the space between two towers that their proposed camp was, just in range of one and not quite in range of another; that was, if the cave mouth was open. If it hadn't fallen in like the other side of it had.

If it wasn't there, then Eight knew they would be running until the first even barely tolerable space was available, and he didn't know if any of them had that in them.

"Last one," Brody managed to gasp out. "Hey, Rabbit, go see if that cave's open?"

His brother sounded just as beat and breathless, but he also sounded so much better than he had this
morning, too. "Only if someone promises to tell me what the frip a rabbit is."

"Deal," was the immediate agreement.

Eight swallowed hard, shifting to the side a little to let Maul behind him, and kept going. Up ahead, when he picked his head up, he could see his brother scrambling and fighting his way uphill to disappear between two formations, and he dug deeper, redoubling his speed and panting through his nose while his armor compensated by pulling more oxygen from the air. It didn't take away the desperate need for it, but it helped a little bit.

One by one, they followed his twin's tracks; little by little -- slower now than before -- their tracks in the snow vanished behind them, filled in by the swirling snow.

He almost collapsed with relief when he heard his brother say, "Oh, thank everything. It's open."

The weak and breathless cheer from the squad sounded downright pitiful, but to Eight, it was the best sound he could have hoped to hear. He scrambled up after them, not letting himself get complacent just because relief was in sight; crossing out of the sight line of the scanners was a huge relief, but it wasn't until he was at the tunnel mouth that he let himself sag.

It wasn't very big opening, and it was natural and not like the ones before, which had been carved out. Eight had to duck before getting inside, but before he did, he looked back to make sure their CO was coming up.

Maul was slower, and he was clearly struggling to make the grade, though he had his head down and was using his free hand to steady himself; Eight took a few quick breaths, went back and caught him under his good arm, then hauled him up and stood by while he finished making their tracks vanish behind them.

"So, what's a rabbit?" Six asked, after ten minutes where the entire squad just sat, finally sans packs, panting. Completely outwith his control, he'd started crying when he got his bucket off, but the tears didn't feel like terror, or weakness, just like-- like too much pressure had built up and needed released before he could get enough of his mind together to talk.

No one made mention of it, but his twin sat on one side and Husker sat on the other, and they all leaned together in a cluster.

"Prairie animal; some type of rabbit lives on most worlds with forests or grasslands, ranging in size between two meters tall and no bigger'n your palm," Smarty said, head leaned back against the rock in a manner that had to be uncomfortable. "Herbivores, almost exclusively."

Six felt his brow furrow. "--okay?"

"They're also really fast," Raze added, grinning; of all of them, he seemed the least exhausted, but even he was sitting still for the moment. "Cute, and fast."

"Oh, kriff. I don't wanna be something cute, even if I am fast," Six complained, but without any heat.

"Cept, you are cute," Husker said, eyes closed, looking amused. "Rabbit."
"They're also really, really virile." Smarty went from smiling to grinning broadly, tongue-in-cheek.

"--okay, that part I like."

His twin snickered. "Guess that means you're Rabbit, now?"

Six tried it on in his mind; looked around at all of his brothers and his lieutenant, all of whom were watching him, just as warm and supportive as they had been since he had come aboard the Negotiator, only hours from Kamino. He thought about how the day had started, with tears and terror, and how it ended with tears and relief, and how he had managed to blaze the trails that kept them safe from detection, relying on the speed that apparently was going to give him a name, even if there was an element of cuteness to said name.

He took a breath, just a little shaky now. "Guess that means I am."

Later, just as Six was about to go crawl into the tent and hope that no nightmares followed him, the Lieu paused on his way to go stand watch -- finally having been let out of his sling, with instructions to only do gentle range-of-motion exercises -- and pulled a bag out of his parka's pocket, offering it over.

Six -- Rabbit -- took it, and found a very smashed cookie (or two or three) in the bag; when he looked up in question, he only got back a half-shrug and a warm look. "I hear that there's some manner of tradition involving baked goods and naming days," Maul said, the corner of his mouth going up.

Rabbit looked down at the cookies, crushed as they were, and swallowed down the lump in his throat made of too many things -- good things, heavy things -- before answering, "Thanks, sir."

Needless to say, he shared them with everyone before sleeping, even if that meant only sharing crumbs.
"I don't know. I mean, we should have heard something by now."

"Well, they are supposed to be a black ops squad."

"Yeah, but a brand new one!"

Time was ticking down on this training mission. Ten days had been allotted, and frankly, they should have heard anything by now. Crest was getting more and more nervous as the clock kept running; on one part, he expected an attack at any moment, but on another--

He was worried that squad out there was in trouble. The scenario was pretty hardcore, not in terms of goal -- they'd been playing Capture the Flag since they were all barely out of nappies -- but in terms of obstacles. Crest had helped deploy all those countermeasures; either the Blackbirds were really just that good, or something bad had happened to them and their emergency beacons had failed them.

The idea that he might go out there and find eleven frozen, lifeless brothers-- and kriff, their CO was dangerous, everyone knew that. General Skywalker had been deathly serious about making sure the Blackbirds didn't come to any harm, and the implication was that the detachment might actually be protecting them from the zabrak leading them. Not that the general had outright said as much, but it wasn't hard to tell. And Husker was out there, too; he was one of their own, even if he had been transferred, but even if he wasn't, those were still Crest's brothers.

Taxi, despite playing devil's advocate, was clearly worried himself. Most of them were; the only one who wasn't was their resident ARC. They were supposed to have two, but one of 'em got pulled back last minute for another mission, only to be replaced with a shiny who spent more time admiring the Freeco bikes than patrolling. Not that Crest blamed him. Playing antagonists for friendly forces, sitting in the middle of jagged mountains, freezing their shebs off going outside wasn't anyone's idea of fun.

"They're probably fine," Taxi -- short for Taxidermy, not for the livery service -- said, shaking his head as he watched the monitors, though he still sounded kinda worried too. But aside the usual gusts of wind and blowing snow, and aside the occasional false positive thanks to those things, there was nothing out there.

"Maybe. But I think we should start widening our patrols." Crest chewed on his lip. "You know, just in case."

"The 1600 patrol can go out to the perimeter towers."

The slightly rougher voice of another brother broke in; their ARC was standing in the door, fully-armored but for his bucket; in fact, Crest hadn't seen him out of his armor yet, not even at breakfast. Crest didn't quite know what to make of the commando; he was standoffish and aloof and always
seemed to hold himself apart, though he wasn't mean about it, exactly. Not friendly, but not nasty, either.

Mostly, he just seemed to be very focused. "All right," Crest agreed, breathing out a sigh of relief as he looked at the chronometer. "Same number?"

"Two men per patrol; one takes the north, one takes the south. The rest of us continue our usual rotations."

That felt a little better, anyway. Crest exchanged a glance with Taxi, then went to go gear up.

"I don't want the squad hurt," General Skywalker had said, grimly. "But they can't be allowed to succeed on this mission. The last thing the Republic needs right now is a former enemy with access to some of our most sensitive intelligence. It's only a matter of time before he turns on us."

General Skywalker was a decent general, given his age. Less apt to go all mystical on them, he tended to go on his gut instincts, and those seemed to be pretty damned good, considering. The ARC didn't really get along with Rex, didn't feel any great attachment to the other clones, but he was available to do the jobs that might've needed someone a little more elite, and he was willing to follow orders that might've seemed a little sketchy.

He didn't really require an explanation as to why Skywalker felt it so necessary for him to take this particular duty on, but Skywalker had provided it anyway.

"They're always saying that once you go down the path of darkness, it'll forever dominate your destiny." A beat. "I don't know how they could let themselves be so blinded to the risk of letting an Darksider out of his hole, armed, in command of living, breathing men."

There had been another long pause there, then Skywalker had looked him in the eyes. "Keep the Blackbirds safe, but take Maul down as hard as you can get away with without killing him, Alpha. Sith aren't exactly known for keeping their cool, hopefully he'll go off like a volcano and everyone will see how bad this idea really was."

Now, standing on Bravo-984, Alpha pondered thoughtfully on why Skywalker hadn't just asked him to arrange a fatal 'accident'; then again, arranging an accident wouldn't prove the general right in his assumptions, where the zabrak going crazy might.

Either way, he had a job to do, and he'd do it. He looked out into the cold, forbidding landscape and then down at the droid popper in his hand.
Morning twilight came too quickly.

"Well, boys, I guess I'll be seein' you on the other side of this," Husker said, after testing the weight of his pack, looking at the rest of them assembled there with clear eyes and a certain rueful expression on his face, presumably for the necessary split.

The first of several.

Maul barely managed to bite back the urge to ask yet again for Husker to go over the plan for the final assault on the base; everyone knew it, they had conceived of the bones of it before they had even gone on this mission, and there was no reason to change things now. It was sound, there were contingencies in place, and regardless of the wreckage it would leave their pride in, they could still forfeit if things went too far wrong. Despite Shiv's fall and the subsequent emotional jarring it had given everyone -- even Maul -- they were close enough to the base that emergency help could be called upon.

Everyone knew the plan, but actually implementing it was surprisingly difficult. At least, Maul was finding it so, though he thought everyone else likely felt similarly given their expressions.

"I'll buy the drinks after," Tally said, giving Husker a half-smile. "Win or lose."

"I happen to have some credits stashed to help out." Brody gave a shrug and a grin when the rest looked at him. "I didn't spend it all on the Church of the Sacred Sarlacc."

"Or the furry stripper?" Shiv asked, and then grunted when Brody's elbow hit him, even if neither of them could feel it through the armor.

"Long as you didn't fish it back out of her clothes, I don't care where you got it," Husker said, gruffly. But he looked ready, and able, and he nodded towards the opening of the cave mouth as he pulled his pack on. "I got a lot of climbing to do, so I'm gonna get a start. Good hunting, Blackbirds."

Half of the squad, those in reach, put out a hand to ghost past his shoulders as he left. The silence left in his wake was heavy, until Raze said, softly, "He'll be okay."

"Yeah, he will." Tally let out a slow, heavy breath and then moved. "Here, a couple of you come over here and gimme a hand cutting the rest of these sections."

The past couple of days had been an ongoing lesson in moderation.

Maul was well-familiar with limitations, from his status as a prisoner to his attempts to reattain some state of grace in combat, but he was getting quite an education on just how many more there were that he had not yet realized before now.

First was the shoulder; Maul had expected Tally just to put it back in its socket and perhaps
immobilize it for a day. What he had not expected was Tally to spend a night infusing bacta directly into the joint and then lean on him to keep his arm in a sling for two days and then a bit more. The amount of effort that the medic had put into repairing the damage made it much harder to refuse to listen to him, even if the forced moderation made Maul’s bones itch. It had worked, and now, aside from some stiffness, there was no pain and he had back a full range of motion, so clearly Tally had been right regardless.

More distressing was the frank, if gentle, way that Tally had pointed out that he couldn't keep walking through every beating he took as if there were no lasting repercussions. Maul wasn't given to reflecting back on his past often, at least not intentionally, but having that handed to him made him look back at the many, many times when he just powered through an injury, allowing the pain to fuel his strength through the Force. That had not always been his own choice, mostly it had been his Master’s, but even those times when he could have gotten a medical droid to patch him up or when he could have gotten into a bacta tank, he had only done so when it was so grave that he had no other options. Most of the time, he had just kept going, and finding out that there were long-term ramifications to that bothered him, in ways he couldn't even put words to.

It was a reminder, if nothing else, of what his worth had been to his Master. And a reminder of his own naive and incorrect belief that even if he wasn't indestructible he could somehow become powerful enough in the Force to get close.

He had done his best to shake the thoughts off, and it had taken some self-control to avoid getting too snappish when he couldn't even pick up a pack and help carry the squad's gear, but they had come back the day before.

By the time he was done covering the squad in a telekinetic snowstorm, his nose had been bleeding steadily and his head pounding terribly; thanks to the waterproof (and apparently blood-proof) parka, the constant movement and the abundance of snow, he had managed to keep that particular issue to himself, but it had hammered home how badly Zigoola had damaged his ability to use the Force; before now, he could just guess it was a worrying inconsistency, but it was clearly worse than that. Not that the world itself had, not bathing in the constant power of it, but that last confrontation with his Master and then immediately getting lost in the entirety of said Force, unshielded and blown wide-open, channeling far more power than one mortal being ever should, had broken something and the thought that it could be permanently broken was terrifying.

The only way to achieve that snowstorm was by dropping his shielding and reaching well past himself, and even as of the next morning, his head still hurt and he knew that trying that again might end up with him flat on his back, overloaded, helpless and useless.

And he also knew that he was going to have to, unless an actual blizzard came down to do the job for him.

"Sir?"

Maul looked up from where he was reordering his own pack; Tally wanted him to keep it light yet, but thankfully that was about to become much easier. Sir-- Rabbit was standing there, looking pensive. "Yes?"

Rabbit dropped himself down to sit, crosslegged; in the thin light that managed to reflect into the cave, he looked a little tired (they all did), but much better than he had been the past few days. "I-- I was actually going to volunteer to go with Misty and Tango," he said, then chewed his lip.

Maul paused packing and regarded him, resting his elbows lightly on his knees. "Despite what you said during our initial briefing, you're not just here to be a decoy."
"I know." Rabbit looked down at his hands as he rubbed one over the other. "But I am fast. And I think I can probably get further than they could because of it. I mean-- I know this is last minute, but after yesterday, I think I can do it."

Maul considered it for a long moment, then nodded. "All right. As soon as they're done with Tally, I'll update everyone."

Rabbit nodded back and took a deep breath, then gave a wavering kind of grin, somewhere between confidence and nervousness. "Thanks, Lieu," he said, standing up and slipping back to the rest of the squad.

Maul took his own deeper breath, blew it out slow, and went back to arranging his pack.

"I've got this," Misty said, looking at his brothers and Maul, grinning. "I guess if I'm gonna get my first taste of leadership, this is as good a place as any to do it."

"If you don't have this, I'll mutiny," Tango muttered, jokingly. He looked more nervous, turning his bucket in his hands as he stood there, but not a terrible amount.

Rabbit and his twin were standing a little apart, foreheads just leaned together; a silent until later that no one had the heart to break into.

The decision to split so far away from the objective was multi-factored and at the time they had come up with it, it had been fairly easy to contemplate logistically. Now, actually faced with it, after all of these days of living in such close quarters and sharing such experiences, it became something else entirely. Their reliance on each other since leaving the courier was the only reason they had made it so far, and now they were going to have to rely more upon themselves. Maul was used to doing that, but he was startled for how little he liked the prospect right now.

Still, it was a sound plan, in no small part because it was unconventional. It meant splitting the squad four ways, maintaining radio silence and relying on planning and nigh-on blind faith to see it through. Even with the contingencies, should someone need to call for emergency evac, its best chance for success was in all parts coming together at the right time, in the right order. When they had all been together, one person forfeiting would have meant the whole squad forfeiting; now, split up, they had until the last man was lost or they ran out the clock to succeed, and that improved their odds greatly.

"Well, at least we don't have to carry so much," Misty said, shrugging. "I feel like I've got wings right now."

"Yeah, but it also means sleeping is going to suck. If we even get the chance." Tango made a face at the prospect.

"Just be careful anyway." Tally pointed at them both. "That way everyone's intact when it's time for us to be court-martialed for destroying military property."

Maul snorted at that. They had cut the white-out tents up with Tally's laser scalpel so that each member of the squad would have a piece big enough to cover them, and given how expensive said tents were, it was likely Obi-Wan was going to let him have it over it, but he didn't think for a
moment that Obi-Wan would actually do anything.

They had also jettisoned the last of the extra rations; now, each person carried only enough to see them through the following night. Each troop had only enough mountaineering gear to cover themselves, those who were going to take to the rugged wilderness.

"We can start up our sewing circle, I guess." Shiv smiled, shaking his head.

They were dawdling a little bit, but finally Misty pulled his bucket on. "All right, you two. Let's go and have an adventure."

Tango heaved a breath and Rabbit held onto his brother more tightly for a moment, then let go. "See you guys tomorrow," Tango said, taking them in each in turn, then joined Misty.

"Good hunting," Shiv said, expression soft and rather proud.

"You too, guys," Misty said, before turning to lead his group out.

After they were gone, to the shoulder-pats and brushing touches of those left, the eight remaining all looked to each other before hoisting their packs and pulling on the rest of their gear, unable to find anything more to say.

It wasn't a blizzard, but it was snowing; Maul wished it was snowing harder, but even that much was enough to take a little bit of the pressure off of him. The wind was blowing steadily and all he had to do was add to the flurries as they moved. He also had fewer people to cover, which helped, though they had to change their tactics to make up for the fact that Rabbit had gone with Misty and Tango. No longer able to rely on Brody's slicing, they instead made ample use of their stealth, moving with painstaking slowness, silent and tense at any moment for one of those towers to pick up on them despite the snowblind and the whiteout fragments covering any heat leakage points.

It turned out, more by guess than observation, that there were four more towers before they hit the much more serious countermeasures surrounding the base. That would have been easy enough, if time-consuming, but then it also turned out that patrols had been extended.

Whipping the snow over top of them and over top of the pieces of the whiteout tents that they each carried was easy enough, but the sound of the two Freeco bikes going over them upped the stakes; according to their prior recon, the base detachment hadn't intended to send patrols out past the inner perimeter. Maul suspected it was because they were counting down on the clock, but any which way, it complicated moving. It was luck alone that they were in the thin overlap range between two towers and could afford the risk of radio communication.

After the sound of the bikes were gone, Shiv whispered down the radio, "Well, this just got even stickier."

Despite the invisible, serrated spike currently jabbed into the center of his brain, Maul snorted back, albeit quietly. "We should probably stay here and see how long it takes them to cross back over."

"If it were me, I wouldn't make it too predictable," Smarty murmured.
"That was dead on the hour, though, adjusting for distance," Brody pointed out.

Despite not bothering to slice into the towers any longer, Brody was still leading the line because he would need to again soon enough; when Shiv's party broke away to take into the ragged range again, instead of this comparatively tame passage, he would need to buy them a decent amount of time to execute said split. At the highest point of daylight, the amount of time he could get away with looping the sensor feed back on itself was a fair bit longer.

Then all they had to do was get to the edge of the inner perimeter and wait for the assault the next day.

"Should we take advantage of this somehow?" Eight asked, after a few long moments of silence where they were just laying in their dark, individual snow caves contemplating the change in patrol routes.

"I don't think so. We ambush them, it only takes one startled shout on their radio frequency to alert the base," Shiv answered, though there was a thoughtful note in his voice which suggested that he had been considering it himself.

Brody made a little noise. "What if we used the scanning towers as a jammer?"

"If we ambush them, then we would need to figure out what to do with them," Maul said, eyes closed as he tried to rest while they considered their options. "If they disappear and don't report back to base, that will have those remaining searching far more intently. If we replace them with two of you, you would have to somehow keep that from being found out for an entire day and we still would have to keep them contained." A beat. "All of that being said, if they decide to fly a patrol tomorrow around the time that we intend to take down their perimeter, I wouldn't be against ambushing them and taking their bikes. Jam their radios, restrain them somewhere safe and we've just gained a two man advantage over the detachment and additional transportation."

The sound Raze made down the radio sounded almost like a cross between a-- a purr and a giggle; even with his eyes closed, Maul's brow knit as he wondered what it meant. Though it sounded pleased, certainly.

"You're going to leave us out of the fun?" Shiv asked, clearly amused. "I'm hurt."

Maul would have rolled his eyes -- his nearly default reaction to his sergeant's poking by this point -- if his head weren't hurting so much. Even if it wouldn't have been seen. "You're the hingepin of this entire plan, isn't that good enough?"

"I dunno, jumping some troops and jacking their bikes sounds more exciting than yet more mountaineering..."

"Tough."

"Really, sir, your sympathy is bowling me over. I think I might shed a single tear over here."

"Keep it up, and I'll take my saber back."

"You can't, I'm the hingepin of the entire plan, remember?"

Maul just gave up with an only slightly exaggerated groan, resisting the urge to shift around and scrub his face with his palm, not wanting to disturb his cover.

Thankfully, Raze took over bantering -- poking Shiv about how much fun it was going to be to steal
the bikes -- and Maul could turn his attention to trying to recover enough to make it to their next stop.

When the GAR had planned where to set the base, they had certainly done so to make use of the natural defenses of Bravo-984. The number of ways someone could die just by putting their foot down wrong, unless they stuck to one of the two open approaches, was large enough that even thinking vaguely about it had Maul wanting to drag his entire squad back out of the range of operations, find some stable ground and just refuse to move. It was an irrational urge, he knew that, but it was still clawing at his throat, especially when he saw the next section that Shiv's party had to tackle.

Maul didn't need to go with Shiv's party to see them off -- in fact, doing so was risky -- but he ended up going anyway, driven on by some complicated mix of feelings that he had no time or mental space to pick apart and examine. Hauling themselves up the thin, rocky, ice-filled chimney to get the group out of the passage they had been in was physically taxing, and he might regret it later, but as yet he didn't. Even if it was making the anxiety worse.

From the top of the chimney, there was a rocky ledge that descended into another deep, unforgiving crack in the ground, barely wide enough for the men to traverse; just looking at it was enough to give Maul a jolt, thinking of the way Shiv had disappeared when the cliff broke under him, and the sharp little breath he pulled in at the sight must have carried down the radio, because the hand that Tally had used to help him up didn't release his until well after he was on semi-level ground again.

They had gotten a fair idea of the patrol rotation, and it was near midday. The shadows cast by the brutal rock around them were narrow, but incredibly thick. Between the time and the still-falling snow, Brody was able to keep the tower they were under the range of looped for the better part of an hour; even as he stood there looking at the miserable terrain he was sending a third of his squad into, Maul knew he shouldn't be dawdling, he should just turn around and go back to his own group, but it was proving-- difficult.

"Be careful," he said, emphatically. "If it's your life or the scenario, forfeit."

There was no bantering now; Shiv was frowning a little bit as he pulled his bucket off, and Maul felt disgracefully transparent at the look he was getting. "We will," the sergeant said, seriously. "We've got a whole day to make this little trip, I'll make sure we take our time and exercise all due caution."

Maul nodded, after a moment, a quick bob of his head, and tried to force a grin he couldn't really feel. "Remember to point the business end of that away from yourself when you activate it, too," he said, gesturing to where half of his saberstaff was hanging off of Shiv's belt.

Shiv glanced down at it, a smile tugging the corners of his mouth. "Thanks," he answered, dryly but not unkindly, "couldn't have guessed that on my own."

"I'm glad I bothered to climb up here to tell you, then." Maul looked back over his shoulder, back down the chimney, then took the four of them in, trying to calm the twisting anxiety that was showing no sign of abating. "Good hunting."

Shiv shook his head, went to say something, then just reached out and caught Maul by the back of the neck; after stiffening for a moment in surprise, Maul let Shiv draw their brows together, being
mindful of horns. "We'll see you tomorrow," Shiv said, with calm certainty. "You be safe."

It was a gesture that generally belonged to the brothers; there was no word Maul knew that could convey what it felt like to be included in it. "We will be," he managed to say, steady by some miracle.

Shiv gave his neck a squeeze -- something that would probably have felt threatening even only months ago and now felt *comforting* of all things -- then let go and jerked his head to Eight, Castle and Tally. "C'mon, boys, let's go make ourselves inconvenient," he said, with a little grin, before putting his bucket back on.

It was another emotional jolt when Eight and Castle ran a hand past his shoulder, and started after Shiv.

Tally lingered a bit longer; he'd taken his own bucket off at some point, and now he pressed his mouth into a line before he said, "You look like hell, sir. Gonna explain why after this is over?"

Maul had not actually been intending to go into his issues with the Force and the consequences of Zigoola, except perhaps to Obi-Wan (maybe, if it became necessary, if it wouldn't get him pulled off of the line, if it wouldn't get back to Vokara Che, if--), but now didn't seem like the time to argue about things. "I don't know," he answered, frankly. "Regardless, I'll submit myself to whatever you deem necessary after the mission's over."

Tally blew a breath out, then shook his head, rueful. "Kriff, Lieu. I don't want you to *submit* to anything, just to let me know when you're struggling so I can help, so we can figure out what to do to make it better."

Maul couldn't quite bring himself to *grasp* that, let alone agree to it; the concept was so foreign that Tally might as well have been speaking another language entirely. "We'll see," he finally said, which was all the further he could push himself in that regard.

Tally nodded, then just like Shiv, rested their brows together in a moment of affection. "Do me a favor; stick close to Raze until it's go time?"

"All right." Maul wasn't sure what good that would do, but unlike everything else, it seemed an easy thing to agree with. "Be safe, Tally."

"Count on it." Tally pulled back, then headed after the others, putting his bucket on as he did.

Maul watched them as they started picking their way down to the ledge, took a few careful breaths, and then turned to go back to the three men waiting down below for him, hearts aching.

When night fell, it found Husker huddled alone, tucked into a rocky little platform most of the way up a mountain; high above him, the stars moved in their slow trek across the sky, and despite himself, he found himself thinking of Tango and Tango's storytelling; found himself drawing lines between them, forming pictures of animals or Jedi or brothers, as if he couldn't point out which were systems or parts of trade-routes or which belonged to the Seppies and which were theirs.

As if they were all new.
"'I would settle, I think, for just-- feeling I have done all right. I don't know what peace looks like, I don't think I can anymore. But having done well. I think I would settle for that,' Etah said, and Adao could hear all of the things that the Diathim wasn't saying."

Sleeping in full armor was more than uncomfortable, but they didn't have time to try; instead, they kept moving through the darkness, crawling with the utmost care towards their objective. Rabbit and Misty had fallen quiet, but this time, Tango didn't worry about being judged for the story being told, or whether it made him a sympathizer, or whether it was even worth telling. Instead, he thought of enemies, turned allies; enemies again, turned tentative friends; friends, moving inevitably and inexorably towards falling in love, and a shared moment of rest between them.

"'Uncertainty again,' Adao answered, carefully. 'Which of us can say what will happen? We once found peace, so it is possible.'

"Etah shook his head, his great, ragged, ashy wings twitching once before settling again. 'A different sort of peace,' he said. 'We are-- soldiers, allies who cleave together in the face of odds.' He paused. 'What would we be, if there was no war?'

"'What are you asking? Whether there should be a balance of forces?' Adao asked."

Tango smiled to himself, as he helped Rabbit down off of a small, if steep, ridge.

"'If our species are to survive, it would have to be,' Etah answered. But then he said something that he wasn't sure he had ever put words to before. 'I mean-- what would our world look like if I no longer had to be a soldier, and you no longer wished to be king? It's impossible. And I can't even grasp it, not really. But I wonder sometimes.'"

When they finally stopped for the night, no one said a word; everything was conveyed by hand gestures. On the other side of the wall of rock was the beginning of the sensor net; only a handful of meters beyond it was the base itself. It was so close that if they shouted aloud, provided the wind was light enough, they would probably be heard.

They covered themselves in pieces of the whiteout tent; in the dark, Tally dozed uncomfortably with his bucketed head against Shiv's shoulder while Shiv kept watch over all of them.
locations; it wasn't like the towers, where Brody could slice one and loop its logs. When he took it down, everyone would know that the base was under attack.

There was no going back from there.

He sat in their self-carved little snow cave, close to the well-concealed sensor base; where the towers were all easily visible, this one had been hidden and if not for the intel they had stolen from Skywalker, they wouldn't have known where to look for it. It was all pointed back to the base, overlapping its fellows, and Brody was looking forward to the chaos that was going to happen when it suddenly stopped working.

The patrols had passed by again and again and again; they had moved between them, then split up right at the end of the line many hours earlier, with Brody and Smarty on one side of the pass, and Maul and Raze on the other.

Now, Smarty dozed uneasily beside him; in a few hours, he'd wake up and Brody would try to catch some sleep.

In the meantime, he had the start on a holomanip of General Skywalker advertising Viable to work on.

Raze talked. Quietly, because even with the snow cover and the whiteout pieces and the wind above, he didn't want to be heard beyond the space of a meter, but he talked anyway because it seemed that the Lieu liked it, or at least didn't mind it. He chatted about his training on Kamino and some of the more exciting things he'd gotten to blow to smithereens, then switched to recounting some of the funnier stories he had. None of it was particularly structured, he sure wasn't as good at this as Tango, and there were probably a bunch of times when he started one story only to end up telling another one, but he was having fun anyway.

Maul had been really nice; when Raze complained about trying to rest in his bucket, the zabrak had just stretched out his parka-clad arm and so Raze got to take his bucket off and use that arm as a pillow, and that was a heck of a lot more comfortable. The white-out fragments were enough to keep them dry and it was actually pretty decent, as a place to hunker and wait.

After awhile, he realized Maul had dozed off, even though his arm was probably asleep by now; when Raze noticed the line of tension between Maul's brows, he just reached out and brushed his fingers over it until it disappeared, then settled down to rest quietly for awhile, smiling to himself.

This mission, he decided, was going to be a great story to tell and he couldn't wait to see how it ended.
Dawn rose to...

Absolutely nothing.

Crest watched the pink light break through the clouds, bringing with it daylight. He was in a weird place, mentally; he was worried about the Blackbirds, he had been on alert for most of two weeks for the squad's arrival and attempt on the base, but he was also tired. There was only so long the mind could be alert and only so long that anyone could balance on the edge of tension's wire, trying not to fall to either side of paranoia and apathy.

So, Crest went on patrol with Taxi, then came back so that he could grab a snack. Then he went out again, his second for the rotation. And then he went out yet again, looking at the seemingly unchanging terrain. He'd stopped caring about winning because mostly, he just wanted to get confirmation that his brothers on the other side were safe, and then get the hell out of here and do something else. Anything else.

When the stun bolt hit him precisely between bucket and shoulder, he didn't see the muzzle flash from under the white scraps of former tents; didn't see Taxi go down just the same way from the other side of the pass; didn't have a chance to even realize what was going on before lapsing into unconsciousness.

He never felt himself land in the snow, more softly than he might have, and he didn't see the gold-eyed zabraek who had both eased his and Taxi's landings and slowed the stalled bikes before they could crash, telekinetically.

His sensor registered him 'killed,' his radio was disabled but for an emergency override; at the same time as that happened, the base was alerted and the alarm sounded, letting everyone conscious know that they were under attack. But for Crest and Taxi, at least, the training scenario was over.

From either side of the pass, the small team of Blackbirds jumped into action when Maul said, calmly, "Go."

"Kriff!"

Rabbit jumped when Misty's voice came over his radio, because after a very long night scrambling along the sides of mountains in order the flank the base, and after slipping past countermeasures and avoiding the northern patrol and finding a place to hide, there hadn't been any real time left for sleep.
He had grabbed a fifteen minute catnap, but all that had done was make him feel even more exhausted.

"Frip, that's eight minutes early!" Tango sounded just as startled, which was kind of a relief.

It took Rabbit a few seconds to catch on; he did when he saw the light on the sensor base they had been parked close to had gone from a tiny blinking green light to a tiny blinking yellow one, meaning it was no longer online. He remembered Brody saying he was going to force the sensor net into a deep diagnostic, rather than shut it down, because it was a lot harder to reboot from that.

"Switch to the squad's frequency. Rabbit, you're up," Misty said, voice a little shaky.

Rabbit scrambled to do just that, just in time to catch the rest of the Blackbirds reporting in.

"Able is go," Shiv said, calmly.

"Bravo in position." Husker's signal was crackly for his distance.

"Condor on the move," Misty added, breathlessly.

It was Raze, rather than Maul, who howled the last one with laughter in his voice, "Delta incoming!"

Rabbit had half a second to feel some perfectly understandable concern at that, before he was running past the now disabled sensor-net, making for the base with all due haste, blaster up and ready and with the other two members of his team spreading out behind him to take each side, until it was time for them to peel off.

They had quickly dragged the two unconscious 501st clones to the side of the passage, then promptly stole their Freeco bikes.

Upon reflection, Maul would wonder what had ever possessed him to allow Raze to do the driving.

The decision to start the assault early by a number of minutes had been specifically because the patrol happened to be there to ambush; Maul wasn't worried about the Blackbirds adapting to it because while they had set a time to go, they had also made certain to give ten minutes leeway in either direction for unforeseen circumstances, and the addition of the bikes was worth moving things up by that small amount, especially since it would bring them into the heart of the base much more quickly than running would have done. That would also save Misty's party the effort of trying to play the main bulk of the distraction while waiting for Maul and his group to travel between the perimeter sensors and the base proper; the distance of the perimeter to the south was greater than that to the north.

He scrambled up behind Raze, while Brody and Smarty got on the other bike. "Right down their throats, Raze," he said, adjusting in his seat and pulling his half of his saberstaff to have in hand, ready to jump into the fray and deflect bolts to try to buy Shiv's party the longest time possible to take the command center.

"Hold onto your horns, Lieu!" Raze called back, and Maul had precisely two seconds to wonder why he would do something like that before the bike practically stood on its engine housing for the
way Raze hit the accelerator, like a kybuck rearing.

Maul actually made a startled noise, snapping his arms closed around Raze in order to not spill off the back of the bike, and was consequently speechless when the bike screamed forward and Raze took the opportunity to declare they were incoming.

A more apt word could not have been used.

Husker couldn't help but feel some approval when only three of the 501st clones came out of their command center.

The base was laid out with supply sheds, enclosures for the Freeco bikes, support structures, a landing pad central in the valley and then two decoys of the command center in addition; if not for their stolen intel, they might not have chosen the correct building. But since they did have advanced warning, he was able to watch the actual command center through his scope.

His HUD told him that two were already down, which currently put the Blackbirds at a two man advantage. And until the northern patrol returned, they would be at a four man advantage. In a situation like that, the smartest thing those boys defending the base could do would be to turn their command center into a fortress while sending out their best battlefield operatives to pick off as many of the Blackbirds as they could before it came down to a siege. Even if they were on the opposite side, Husk felt himself smiling in pride for their smart tactics, as he zoomed in a little bit on the three troops who slipped out and dispersed.

Then he stopped smiling.

Alpha-17 was one of them. Husker narrowed his eyes behind his bucket and scope, jaw knotting; the temptation to pull the trigger and just pick the ARC off was pretty high, because out of everyone General Skywalker could've sent, he had sent the most dangerous commando he had. But Husk knew that once he pulled the trigger, sensor net or no, his advantage and position would be given away and then they would turn the base guns on him and frag him with stun bolts from the safety of their command center, which meant he wouldn't be in the sweet spot he was in order to coordinate the Blackbirds on the ground.

The auto turrets hadn't been set off yet, though that was bound to change when the men on the ground got a better idea of the situation. As long as Husker stayed put and stayed down, they wouldn't even think to turn those in his direction.

"Three men on the ground currently; one of 'em's Alpha-17," he reported, keeping them abreast of the developing situation. "Rabbit, change of plans; I want you to make for the manual gun turret on your right hand side, two o'clock, around the storage shed you're about to pass. Once you get it, I'll tell you where to point it."

Rabbit was flying across the snow; he didn't even bother to acknowledge that, but Husker watched as he immediately turned and went around the storage shed and made for the turret. Everything down there was set to stun, not kill, even the big guns. Might as well make use of them.

Alpha-17 immediately backed his men up to behind the storage buildings on the eastern side, taking him out of Husker's line of sight, but that wasn't any surprise.
Now, the sound of screaming Freeco bikes had him spin his rifle the other way, and that was a shock.

Husker damn near laughed, as Raze blasted right into the heart of the camp with Maul hanging onto him for dear life, while Smarty and Brody peeled off, making for the false command center as per their plans, putting that between them and the auto turrets, though a lot faster for the stolen bikes. Raze turned his bike sideways, the repulsors sending up packed snow in clods from the angle, and before he’d even come to a full stop, Maul leapt off of the back with his saber igniting like the shiny target it was, landing light and graceful, sweeping his blade out in a flourish that Husker might’ve thought was excessive if it wasn’t so-- well, frankly, badass looking.

And that was when the auto turrets came online and the real chaos began.

"Fire discipline," Alpha said, to the two clones he had with him. "Stay under cover and don't take the shot unless you're sure you've got it. That frippin' zabrak'll send your bolts right back into your faces, so focus on the other clones. Spread out north and south."

The acknowledgment was quick, while Alpha went back to assessing the situation. It took him less than thirty seconds to guess that the Blackbirds had a spotter up in the surrounding mountains, probably with a rifle, so the first thing he had done once they were outside was set them up behind the storage buildings and command center on the eastern side of the base; the sheer cliff wall behind them precluded their little bird watching from there, so there were only so many ways to keep any element of surprise.

The loss of the sensor net was more annoyance than critical; all they had to do was make sure to hold off any attempted siege of their command center until the squad was down or until they timed out. He wasn’t happy about the fact that two of his own were already picked off, thanks to their good samaritan patrols, but ten was enough to see this through, if they were smart about it.

"North Patrol. When you cross the perimeter, split up and skirt the outside of the base. Do not dismount. Pick off any Blackbirds you see."

There was another acknowledgment; from Alpha’s reckoning, their ETA was about two minutes.

He narrowed his eyes and peeked around the corner, noting the sounds of the auto turrets firing, though according to his HUD, none of the mock-enemy had fallen to them yet.

What are you doing? he silently asked the zabrak out there drawing fire like this was some kind of game; pinned between two auto turrets and just outside of the range of a third -- enough to activate its tracking but not enough to activate its fire -- he was deflecting bolts with the speed and precision of any Jedi, a single gold blade moving so fast it was just arcs of light and afterimages. That part was no surprise, but his positioning was.

Putting himself out in the open like that was either reckless bravado, or--

Or he was intending to be a distraction. Alpha considered for a moment more, then got back on the radio to the two clones he had on the ground with him. "Disregard my last command, ground team. Pull back in and watch our backs, I have a feeling we've got more incoming from the east."
"From the cliff?"

Alpha scoffed to himself. "Or from behind it. One of you go down and check that short rise in the northeast."

"--copy."

Raze was having the time of his life.

He had no gear on him now but his armor, his explosives, his blaster and his white-out fragment, which was like the most epic cloak ever, tied under the shoulder straps of his armor and fluttering like a legend when he wasn't holding it close to make him harder to track. And while his lieutenant stood in the open like a dare, drawing the fire of the auto turrets with the heat of the saber and his quick, graceful movements, Raze had ditched the bike and let it hit the ground as he was tucking and rolling behind the sewage processing plant across from the command center.

His job wasn't the command center, though. He listened to Husker's coordinating, but only halfway, because he only had one job and it just so happened to be his specialty.

Chaos.

This-- this was the best part of any mission. He was grinning wildly as he pulled the explosive charges out of the bags at his hips, then started creeping up on the auto turrets, taking full advantage of the fact that Maul had them distracted and that they only had one blaster per, and looking forward to watching them explode.

"Tango, mind your flank. Thought I saw one of 'em dart between a couple buildings over there. You've gotta clear it quick, before Able Team's swooping in."

Tango didn't have words for how glad he was Husk was out there, playing spotter for all of them. "Copy," he answered back, putting his back up against a supply building and holding his blaster at low ready as he moved.

Unlike going under a mountain, this was pretty damned exhilarating.

"Rabbit, turn your gun; when that patrol out of the north comes barrelin' home, pick 'em off if you can."

"Copy that, Husk," Rabbit said, and for how scared he had been before, now he just sounded breathlessly determined.

Misty was somewhere behind him, so Tango was pretty sure his back was covered. That just left going forward. He took a breath, then peeked around the corner and spotted one of the 501st brothers approaching the rise where Shiv's team was due to cross; even as he brought his blaster up,
the brother spotted him just the same and then they were exchanging fire and diving back for cover. "Got one, ten meters north of the command center; I've engaged!"

"Keep him pinned down, kid, and get him if you can," Husk said, gruff voice nonetheless filled with approval.

"C'mon, Raze, raze that bathashit," Brody murmured to himself, hunkered beside the false command center and waiting for the auto turrets to go offline so that he and Smarty could take a charge on the front door of the real command center. There were plenty of them scattered around the base, but the only few of consequence were the ones that Maul was currently deflecting fire from because those were the ones guarding said door.

Not that watching that was any kind of hardship. The Lieu was currently in range of two of them, and watching him bat the bolts away with his saber, somehow managing to make every single trajectory look purposeful even at that speed was kind of hypnotic. Brody had only gotten to see one Jedi do the same once, and to him, that had looked jerky, all quick sharp jabs of the blade into position.

Maul, on the other hand, seemed more like a symphony conductor out there, shifting so smoothly from one deflection to another that it looked like it was all one movement.

No wonder Tango's in so deep, Brody thought; he wasn't really into other males, give him a female-identifying person with some curves and he was happy, but he could definitely see where Tango was coming from.

There was a flicker on his HUD and he watched another of the 501st clones go down; a split second later, Rabbit's voice broke in, high and excited, "I got one! But not the other one--"

Brody caught a glimpse of another Freeco bike making for the eastern side of the camp even as Husker was barking, "Misty, Tango, incoming!"

"I--"

His heart hit his boots when Misty's number flickered red on his HUD.

Husker swore up and down as Misty went down to the other clone on the Freeco, the one that had peeled off in the direction away from Rabbit's gun. It was rapidly coming up on the time when Shiv's party made their grand entrance, and now there were three clones, one on a bike, and a frippin' ARC still back there defending the back of the command center.

If something didn't change fast, this was going to turn rapidly against them. Right now, Tango had apparently managed to throw himself behind some cover, but he was pinned down between auto turrets on one side -- even with Maul distracting, that was no guarantee -- and the enemy on the
other, between two buildings.

This was all down to Raze now; even Husk had a hard time seeing the demo expert as he crept between the bases of the auto turrets, hidden under his whiteout fragment, but if Raze didn't get a move on--

"Come on, Raze. We're just about out of time," he said, keeping his voice steady and turning his attention back to where he had last spotted Alpha.

"On it, Husk," Raze whispered back, some of the wild excitement bleeding out of his voice for a more serious note. "Thirty seconds."

Husker grunted back. He hoped they had thirty seconds.

Even Alpha hadn't seen the demolitions expert. But when he peeked around the corner to get a lock on Maul, the zabrak had apparently either sensed him there or was just that quick, because on a swift turn of his toe, he batted a blaster bolt right at him. Alpha jerked his head back as it dinged off the edge of the command center and then narrowed his eyes.

Despite his willingness to undertake this mission for General Skywalker, Alpha didn't have any real opinions about Maul himself. If the GAR wanted to employ a hardcase and make use of him, well, it didn't matter. Thus, he was only mildly irritated by having a blaster bolt redirected at him off of the blade of a lightsaber, but at the same time he could admire the competency of the move.

What he had to do next was just a matter of duty; it wasn't personal. Not for him, even if it might've been for General Skywalker.

He pulled the droid popper out of his pack and armed it with a flick of his thumb. He was gonna have to be both quick and accurate, because damned if he wanted to catch one of those deflected bolts and get knocked out of the scenario. Listening to the guns firing, the whine of them, he hefted the ball in his hand once just to remind himself of the weight, then came around the corner low, throwing it underhand and thinking, not for the first time, that it was probably a good thing the zabrak wasn't a droideka and that it was just as good that the grenade didn't even need to make contact in order to do its job.

He had a only a moment to see the results; at the exact same time that droid popper discharged, jagged arcs of electricity jumping to and then playing around the zabrak's cybernetic legs, the auto turrets kriffing exploded, the pieces of them flying backwards in muffled bangs, shrapnel missing anyone living with admirable distance and precision.

Alpha's last conscious thought before a stun bolt hit him from a distant, high powered rifle was a belated, curious, Wait, why was he only using one blade--?

He wasn't awake to see that he and Maul hit the ground at the same time, too.
If Shiv had been aware of that thought, he would have answered, Because I have the other one, asshole, and with a viciousness he rarely felt.

He had been watching on his HUD as he and his party made for the break in the rock wall that would let them out on the northeast edge of the camp, watching the markers flickering off one by one, all 501st until Misty's went red; they laid themselves out before they went over the comparatively low rise, waiting on their bellies just below it for their chance to come over it and get to the sealed, back emergency exit of the command center.

Then Maul's name went red, followed only seconds later by one more of the 501st.

The note of sharp terror in Raze's voice in his ear made Shiv's blood turn to ice. "Lieu?!

"Raze, stay down!" Husker barked, in a voice that would have had even Shiv pausing to follow the order, rank or no. "Wait for backup. Tango, you're clear around front, all three turrets are down, so try to circle around and clear the back. Brody, Smarty, get a move on; Rabbit, hold position. I just tagged Alpha-17; looks like he hit Maul with an EMP."

Shiv had to snap an arm out and literally take Tally by the back of the neck, quietly as he could, when he saw the medic tense to bolt. Even though his own heart was trying to claw its way out of his throat, giving away their position before the ground forces on the other side of the rise were distracted or disabled would negate the entire point of their creeping in this close anyway.

Tally gestured, jerkily; he tapped a gloved finger on the ground, then jabbed it away, a silent signal: Going to tap out.

The sharpness of the gesture made imagining what Tally's expression was easy; Shiv signed back, Okay. Wait, knowing that he was asking for something Tally might just punch him out for later. Tally's hands tightening into fists beside him backed that thought up.

"Suggestion; Brody, Tango, Raze and I suicide-rush the guys around back, no holds barred," Smarty said, breathlessly, clearly on the run. Distantly, Shiv could hear some auto turrets spinning up and firing, but they were likely firing too far to make a dent. "With the ARC down, we've got 'em seriously outgunned."

Shiv finally broke his radio silence, unable to hold it anymore, murmuring, "Do it; Tally's gonna tap out to get to Maul."

There was a warcry that was almost chilling, and Shiv realized that it was both Raze and Tango in unison, and he closed his eyes for a moment, mentally calculating the distance. Just over the other side of the ridge, he heard the Freeco bike rev up.

Come on, he thought, tightening his hand around the saber he had in it. Come on.

Surprisingly, another of the 501st numbers went red despite a lack of blaster fire, but Shiv didn't have a chance to parse it out before he heard the suicide run of the other Blackbirds and he reached out and gestured for Castle and Eight to crest the rise and join them.
It was a metaphorical bloodbath.

They didn't even bother trying to draw out the men guarding the back of the command center to the front, relying instead on strength in numbers and pure frippin' anger; Smarty came around the corner and started shooting, only barely avoiding Tango with friendly fire, and just in time to see Castle and Eight come over the rise and pick off the brother on the Freeco in unison. The other two were quick to go down; one in shiny armor didn't even get a shot off before he hit the ground.

Tally's number went red and the second it was clear, he was off running, not saying a word -- not that they would hear him anyway, since his radio was blocked the moment that he forfeited -- and making towards where Alpha-17 had dropped their CO. Smarty almost went to follow him, but until the scenario was over, the 'dead' were supposed to be persona non grata, lest they end up illegally coordinating the squad, using their new noncombatant status to take advantage. To go after Tally without forfeiting would mean losing the entire scenario for an illegal action.

*Like a damned droid popper shouldn't be considered illegal,* Smarty thought, bitterly, falling in to cover the others' backs, forming up in a semi-circle. There were only two men left, and only three of the Blackbirds were down, but at this point, he wasn't ready to put anything past them.

He hadn't even seen the EMP grenade go off, just the flash of blue-white like lightning reflecting off of the snow from his spot under cover with Brody, but that was more than enough to make his stomach try to reject every ration bar sitting in it.

Shiv came over the rise and made for the back emergency exit; normally, it could only be opened with the correct code or from the inside, which made it perfect for their purposes. Since it could also be opened by a lightsaber.

Shiv ignited the gold blade, visor lit up eerily by it, and then jabbed it into the seal between the door and its frame, stuttering a little bit while he was probably getting a feel for it and then sliding the blade down slow, the molten metal falling to hiss against the snow on the ground.

If Tally were a lesser man, he would have stomped on Alpha-17 when he went past the unconscious ARC.

The temptation was certainly there.

As he ran, he tried to calculate every bit of potential damage that an EMP grenade could do to a half-cybernetic half-zabrak and even for all of his research and skills, he found himself largely in the dark. He knew how to handle electrical burns, he knew how to deal with it when someone accidentally grabbed the wrong thing without taking precautions and made themselves a path to ground, he even had some idea of how to handle kriffing lightning strikes, but he had no solid idea how the intersection of cybernetics, limited life support, organic flesh and electrical discharge meant to disable electronics was going to work.

He knew those cybernetics weren't hardened beyond the obligatory amount most civilian grade tech was, though. He knew that they weren't shielded against something like this.

And he didn't even have access to them. Nor could he force access, not without potentially killing
Maul, if the damned nasty security measures mistook medical intervention for an escape attempt and were still even minimally operational.

He tore his bucket and his gloves off in motion, dropping them as he went, and he swore a blue streak when he picked up the faint but real scent of ozone and burned skin; every other breath was a curse against the Jedi Council, and the only positive thing Tally could say was that he knew the immediate danger from that grenade was past.

Unsurprisingly, Maul was out cold; he was breathing quick and shallow, but at least he was breathing, sprawled on the ground. Tally was just checking his pulse, taking that extra second or two required to note the twin hearts beating and make sure they weren't arrhythmic, when he heard a noise behind him.

Without thinking, he grabbed the closest weapon to hand -- Maul's fallen saber -- and turned with his teeth bared, holding it up, thumb on the button. He didn't even know if the thing would work or if the EMP damaged it, didn't have the first idea how to use it beyond igniting it, but for the moment he was on a real battlefield with real threats, and he was ready to defend his fallen CO to his own last breath.

One of the 501st clones stood there, a jump bag hanging on a strap over his shoulder, bucket off and hands going up; his hair was shaved down to the hint of stubble, and there was some tattoo on the side of his head in aurebesh. "I tapped out; I forfeited," he said, eyes wary and worried, but his voice was steady and his tone disarming and quiet. He turned just enough to flash the shoulder of his armor, where the red cross was there, the same as the one Tally had. "I saw the monitors; I wanted to help. I'm Kix, I just transferred to the 501st a few weeks ago."

Tally stared at him for a second more, then set the saber's hilt down. "Tally. You got a neck brace in there?"

"Kriff, we surrender! Sarge! Sergeant, call your frippin' rancor off, please!"

Eight currently had one of the last two 501st clones pinned against the wall with a bloody mouth, fist drawn back, as Shiv moved past the other one, who did indeed have hands up in surrender, in order to get to the panel where he could input their code and end this scenario. "Eight, put him down," he ordered, without looking, though later on he would be kind of surprised that Eight had just silently come through a door with a molten hot edge and punched the first 501st clone he saw in the teeth.

Right now, he had more important stuff to worry about; he stabbed the code in and then hit the round button. After three seconds, the panel lit up green.

The Blackbirds had won. Shiv wished, in that instant, that he could feel like they actually had.

"We didn't know," the other clone said, voice shaking. "We didn't know Alpha was going to do that." He looked around at the grim-faced Blackbirds, eyebrows drawn up and a real note of pleading in his voice that instantly eased Shiv's feelings, even if not his worry. "I swear, Sarge. We didn't know."

Shiv swallowed down hard, trying to get rid of the red hot ball of rage in his throat as his anger shifted targets back to the ARC outside; he didn't bother responding before he got back on the radio.
"Everyone get to the command center. Tally, is Maul okay?"

There was a long moment, then a subtly different voice answered. "This is Kix, Sarge, the other medic. He's breathing, anyway, hearts are both beating right, but we're gonna bring him inside so Tally can do a better assessment in our medical unit."

"Copy." Shiv ground his teeth together, then took his bucket off before looking to his own men. "Go help collect all our brothers who were stunned. Except Alpha, I've got him."

There was a ragged murmur of acknowledgment, and then they dispersed, leaving Shiv to try to comprehend that it was over.

That all they had to do now was survive the aftermath.

His heart squeezed painfully in his chest, and he walked out without another word.

Alpha woke up with his bucket off.

The next thing he saw was a fist and a flash of light, and he felt a crunch that told him that his nose was broken, and then he landed back turtle on the trampled snow, turning to his side and managing to bring his hand up to cover his nose.

When he could see past the blur of a stun-addled mind and the tears that came from the trauma to his face, he took in the three slashes on the other clone's shoulder and then gasped, with a ragged laugh, "Couldn't even wait until I was standing, sergeant?"

Sergeant Shiv looked down at him, jaw tight and eyes narrowed to slits, before he said, hot coals of anger simmering in his voice, "You aren't worth that courtesy."

Alpha would have snorted, but the state of his nose precluded it. He just shook his aching, foggy head gingerly and got up to his elbows before sitting against the side of the building, cupping his nose to protect it from the cold wind, prepared to wait for the expected fallout that his general predicted would come of this, as Shiv turned and walked away, leaving him there.

Plucky baseline. Alpha liked him.

Crest and Taxi trudged their way towards their base, feeling tired and sporting headaches. Their radios were working again, but it was clear from their HUDs that they had lost the scenario; that only two Blackbirds had gone down under fire and one had forfeited. Crest tried half-heartedly to feel disappointed, but ultimately, all he could make himself feel was relief.

That was all they knew, until a brother with spiked hair came out to get them, face etched in misery and worry.
His name was Raze. He also rewrote their entire perception of the Blackbirds.

And the Blackbirds' lieutenant.

"We thought-- we heard--" Crest said, after Raze had explained how the rest of the assault had played out, feeling kind of sick, "We heard he was dangerous. But we didn't know what Alpha was gonna do."

Raze didn’t answer right away, as they walked. Then, he said, quietly, "He let me sleep on his arm last night, 'cause I was complaining about how uncomfortable it was trying to sleep in my bucket. Before that, he got his arm pulled out of joint saving Shiv from falling off a crumbling cliff. Before that, he carried Tango across a flooded cavern, on his back. Up until he hurt his shoulder, he was carrying the heaviest load of the group. It's not my CO who's dangerous to us, but maybe you oughta ask some questions about yours."

The tone wasn't mean; if anything, it was weighted with affection and concern. Crest boggled for a moment wondering how the hell the Blackbirds managed to encounter a dangerous cliff and an underwater cavern, but then he realized that he didn't have a right to that story; that he had no right to ask after this, though he hoped he would get it someday anyway.

Instead, he just said, "I'm sorry."

Raze only nodded, and they walked the rest of the way in silence.
He's burning.

It flickers at the edges of his awareness; the ghost sear of a lightsaber passing through him, the--
incomprehension of it, the unreality of it. His lungs freeze, his hearts flutter ineffectually; the shock of
it is so complete that it becomes the entirety of him. No thoughts cross his mind because there are no
thoughts that can encompass it; when he falls, he only feels burn and phantom electricity

and he's burning, on a stone floor, invisible knives stabbing into every nerve. He knows this feeling;
he cannot remember what he did to provoke his Master into raining lightning down on him, but he
knows exactly what it feels like to regain awareness afterwards and knows that he must have done
something, he must have displeased his Master,

and he's burning, a raw broken half-body on the floor of a cell, mind cut to ribbons and then they are there and he burns and burns

and

burns

and

sound and

he begs, "please," over and over and over and over, screaming desperation, and they don't listen

"--kriff, Lieu -- shhh, shh shh, you're safe--"

If Tally hadn't already been nursing a grudge against the Jedi Order -- as part of his grudge against the whole frippin' establishment from the Senate to Kamino -- he would have gained a huge one in the span of time between when he and Kix moved Maul inside to the bunker's small medbay and when Maul went from semi-conscious disorientation to full-scale disoriented panic, crashing to the floor on minimally functional cybernetics and immediately putting his back into a corner, dragging himself on his hands and heedless of whatever equipment he bruised himself on in his efforts to escape.

As it happened, that just sharpened said grudge to a cutting edge.
It helped to have another medic there; Kix had brought out the jump bag, which did have a soft neck brace and an extendable backboard with antigrav function. Tally's mind had been running a mile a second, trying to figure out which part he should have been worrying about first, before Kix's appearance managed to snap him into triage mode and he was able to work systemically. There wasn't much to be done for Maul out there on the snow; getting him indoors was the first priority.

Beyond how incredibly useful Kix's help was, the younger medic also provided something of a positive distraction, not from treating Maul, but from Tally's anger over the situation.

"Want me to fire up the droid?" he had asked after they were in, which Tally thought was adorably ironic given the tattoo on the side of his head, and when Tally shook his head, Kix's eyebrow went up.

"Can't stand 'em," Tally'd said, as he grabbed the overhead imager and brought it down. "I mean, I'll use them if I have to, but I know how to do most of this stuff myself, so--"

It didn't take more than a half-minute to establish that the shock didn't end up breaking any of Maul's bones -- a good thing, given how fiercely muscles contracted when hit by electricity -- so Tally could breathe a sigh of relief about that, at least. He took off the neck brace, hooked up a few monitors -- the ones he could actually do first -- then picked up a laser scalpel after taking a moment to read them; blood pressure was up, but Maul's hearts were still beating right and his blood-oxygen levels were likewise acceptable. "You know how to draw blood for a comprehensive metabolic panel?" he asked, as Kix got a pair of shears so that Tally could wreck the last set of shirts that Maul had on him, once he got done cutting the parka apart with said (very carefully handled) scalpel.

Kix sounded a little uncertain. "I know how to start an IV..."

"Similar." Tally took the shears next and got to work, cutting through Maul's shirtsleeves first. "Just a different stick angle. Say-- forty-five degrees, instead of thirty. Use a twenty gauge. Best spot's around here," he said, tapping a spot on Maul's newly bared inner right forearm, about five centimeters down from his wrist. "Not the elbow. He's got thicker skin than we do. Vacutainer instead of catheter, and I can do the analysis myself. Just grab one tube of every color, I'll sort what I need later."

The other medic looked worried, but he moved to go to the cabinets lining the one wall. "Are you a senior medic...?"

"No. But I did come out of the field surgery program." Tally finished cutting those shirts off and his mouth briefly went into a flat, tight line at the sight of the burns creeping up above the leather brace Maul wore to reinforce where his organic body met his cybernetics. "--frip." He was oddly glad that the zabrak wasn't awake yet, though it seemed that his respiratory rate had settled back to baseline again and he would likely come around sooner than later, unless something catastrophic was wrong. "I'm-- self-taught. Which is about as ethically sound as everything else about this army, but I'm not going to lose someone just because I didn't have the most basic knowledge needed to try to save them."

Kix startled -- probably not used to hearing that kind of frank complaint expressed openly -- but then he went back into motion, pulling his gloves on after sterilizing his hands and getting out the necessary equipment; he seemed a little hesitant but not too bad, considering. "I was supposed to be in the field surgery program, but they've lost so many medics recently that they rushed me into service."

Tally did glance up at that, taking in the other medic's expression; the ruefulness of it. Kix caught the look and shook his head, before getting back on task, adding, "I'm not a shiny, but I haven't been out
Basic medic training on Kamino was-- frankly, laughable. They relied heavily on accompanying FX-3 medical droids, bacta and an emphasis on the most straight-forward emergency triage. And all of it -- every last bit -- was centered on the clone body, the relative uniformity of the same genetic model. Even the field surgery program, which was a little broader and more comprehensive, focused almost exclusively on human anatomy.

Everything Tally had learned about Maul's physiology, he had learned by studying the hell out of Surgeon General Che's records and every text on zabraks and zabrak-hybrids (of the Iridonian variety; there were no texts on the Dathomirian variety) that he could get and understand, and even several more he was still struggling to. He wasn't anywhere near as trained as a proper doctor would be, given he'd only been at this for months now, but he was at least confident that he was a good choice when it came to having medical responsibility for his CO.

"Do yourself and everyone a favor, and study." Tally held back a reflexive wince as he unfastened that brace, and gingerly peeled it back, revealing both old scars and evidence of new burns, the scent of it as stomach-turning as ever. "If they tell you that you're not smart enough, study it anyway. See if you can get your general to get you simulator time with medical programs. It'll piss you off, but you'll be a better medic for it."

Kix was busy drawing blood -- Tally noted with approval that he nailed the stick on his first try -- and setting the tubes aside in a row as he went. When he finished and happened to catch a glance at those burns and scars, his eyes went wide. "--what the--"

"Dress that first, then you can help me get bacta on this." Tally leaned in, looking over the burns, eyes and mouth tightening some as he did. "You can't just-- stick half a body on a cybernetic platform," he explained, as much to keep himself arrow-focused as to walk Kix through it. "First, it's wired into his spine with a neural net connection, which is probably why he's still out. But there's also the loss of support from connective tissue -- muscle, tendons, the whole thing. So, there's biomesh protection between the metal and his organic body, but there's also a coated surgical durasteel mesh under his skin, almost up to the bottom of his ribcage, fully grown into the tissue; it can flex, and it can stretch and contract some if he gains or loses weight, but more importantly, it does some of the job organic connecting tissue used to. Otherwise, even just a bad kick to the side would be pretty catastrophic."

Kix sucked in a breath as he came back, now that he'd moved all the test tubes and taped a tiny bacta patch over where he'd done the stick. "That's why he has those burns?"

"Yeah. I think that most of the EMP would have stayed in his legs, but he fell and grounded the rest of himself at the end of the discharge."

"We'll need the hyper infused extended-release dressings, then."

Tally looked up, surprised that he had it in himself to grin for how quickly Kix put that together, but grinning nonetheless. "Yeah, exactly."

He was kind of relieved that Kix didn't ask him to get into the original damage -- what made Maul need half a cybernetic body -- because he wasn't prepared to break confidentiality to explain it, if Kix didn't already know. Heck, even if he did know, Tally wasn't going to say anything about it. Not that clone medics even had a confidentiality oath, but Tally had made himself a promise in that regard anyway; he might not be a doctor, but he could conduct himself with the ethics of one.

Once the burns were protected and wrapped, they could try to figure out how critical the cybernetics
themselves were going to be, or if they needed to make a mad dash back for the Jedi Temple so that someone with actual access could repair them. If the high capacity kinetic batteries were still all right. If the circuitry was. Thankfully, for Maul's sake, none of it was so immediately critical that he couldn't be kept stable if they were totally offline long enough to do that, but if they had been any further away from Coruscant, that would have been a different story.

They had just finished wrapping the bacta dressings around the burns, then bandaging over that, when Maul started to come back to his senses.

"You happen to have a clean shirt he can borrow?" Tally asked, pulling the monitors off just in case Maul got fighty on him, not wanting to damage either equipment or zabrak.

"Yeah, I've got one. I don't have a parka, though."

"It's all right, Tango will go get our courier." Tally kept his voice down, fingertips on Maul's radial pulse, mildly worried for how much faster it had jumped to being. "Hey, Lieu. If you can hear me, you got a pretty bad shock, but you're safe."

He didn't get any more of a chance to reassure.

Maul was off the table in an instant and a crash; one of his boots clipped Tally hard enough to knock him backwards, and even after what had to be a bruising fall, Maul was in a corner gasping, legs half-twisted from being dragged. Tally froze himself for a moment, heart hammering before it made a painful slide for his boots, after detouring into his throat; the sight of his CO's eyes flickering with gold light actually gave him a jolt of-- not fear, but something a cousin to it.

The zabrak never made a sound, but he was panting, shaking and clearly terrified and just the sight of him like that was breaking Tally's heart. When Kix went to move, Tally held out a hand and gestured him back, shaking his head and crouching himself -- out of reach -- soothing half-mindlessly, his own voice a little shaky until he managed to force it to something like steadiness.

He knew Maul had a history with anxiety. But it was the first time Tally had ever seen him in a full-on panic attack.

"Nothing can get to you here, they'd have to come through me to do it," Tally murmured, as he shifted a little to get more comfortable, ready to wait it out unless it became dangerous.

"Me too," Kix added, nervously, which later on Tally would smile about. Whenever he felt like smiling again.

"Hey, Kix, go grab that shirt?" he asked, keeping his voice soft, though he never took his eyes off of Maul. Who wasn't so much looking at him as through him, eyes wide, lost and wounded both. When Tally heard Kix leave, he went back to shushing, and for all the worry he was feeling, he was actually heartened when one of those mechanical legs twitched, and then the other. "Remember that breathing exercise I taught Tango? When you can, try that?"

He didn't honestly expect Maul to listen to it; wherever he was in his mind, it was clearly a hostile, awful place. So, it came as another surprise when Maul did focus on him and ask, voice ragged, "Tally?" between desperate drags of air.

"Yeah, it's me." Tally still didn't come any closer, but krieff, at least Maul was semi-oriented. "You got hit with an EMP grenade. What's the last thing you remember?"

Maul gave a short, sharp shake of his head, and then proved that his cybernetics were partially functional by pulling his knees up; it was slow, there were a few hitches in the motion, but once he
did that, he buried his head in his arms, still trembling hard from horns to boots.

Tally wished he wouldn't put pressure on his dressings like that, but now wasn't the time to worry about that part. "Okay. It's okay, Lieu. Just try to breathe slow and if you want something to take the edges off, it's on offer. All right?"

He didn't get any answer, but after a few more minutes, he finally took a chance and moved slowly closer; reached out and stroked his fingertips back and forth across one of those sheltering forearms, and took it as a good sign when Maul only startled a little, and didn't push him away or worse.

It wasn't all the problems solved; still, he would take what he could get and work his tail off for more.

"I like it. That way, when we want to get both of you to pay attention at once, we can just call you Corbit."

Rabbit groaned at that, pushing Brody in the shoulder.

The Blackbirds were all worried sick; for that matter, so were the 501st clones, absent Alpha, who sat around waiting until Kix paused to fix his nose, grabbing one of the small first aid kits, straightening that nose carefully and taping it over with a bacta patch. The medic didn't say anything to the ARC, but it was clear to anyone watching that he was no more happy about what had happened. He did, however, at least let them know that Maul was awake and not in critical danger, which wasn't the same thing as saying he was okay but Eight, newly dubbed Rancor, would take it. Then Kix was gone again, saying something about getting a clean shirt.

Rancor flushed, face hot, and rubbed the back of his head with a sheepish grin at Brody's words, before looking over to Timber -- the clone he'd decked and was now sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with -- and offering yet another, "I'm really sorry about that."

Timber snorted, pulling the ice pack away from his split lip. "S'okay, at least I didn't go down like a tree. Don't worry about it." Timber shot a glance to Alpha, leaning against the wall, "Can't blame you anyway, little brother."

Rancor still felt kind of guilty about it, but he nodded and leaned over a little more in gratitude and affection. Hearing every single one of the other clones apologize for what happened to their CO was- - he didn't know. He didn't really know how he felt about it. Touched. Upset, because they didn't deserve this either, being set up on this scenario without knowing the nasty trick that was going to be pulled.

Shiv had taken Tango and one of the Freecos to go and get their courier; Rancor thought probably that was a good idea, because the molten way Shiv kept looking at Alpha was almost terrifying. Shiv was always so calm, and patient, that seeing him so angry that he was willing to break noses and maybe worse was unsettling, to say the least. Even if Rancor absolutely understood it and felt a lot of the same way.

Raze was the other one Rancor worried about, because he'd been quiet since coming back with Crest and Taxi, pacing around the little group, though he gave a small smile every time one of them reached out to ruffle his hair or touch his shoulder. Raze and quiet weren't usually things that went
together.

The door opened and a very sought-after voice joined them; Husker took one look at Alpha, then glanced around at the rest of them, rifle slung over his shoulder and bucket under his arm. "Which one of you punched the ARC?"

Even as Castle was saying, "Shiv did," Rabbit and Rancor both practically tackled Husk, wrapping around him, almost in tears from the relief of just having him back. "The rest of us wanted to queue up for it, but we don't want poor Kix to work overtime."

"Our sergeant broke a nose?" Husker eyed Alpha again. "Hell, saves me from having to do it."

Alpha made a crude gesture back, but his expression was just as relaxed as it had been when he'd hauled himself back into the bunker. As if he hadn't just alienated all of them. Rancor didn't know how to feel about that, either; the ARC shoulda been pissed off, but he clearly wasn't. If anything, he seemed like he was waiting for something.

Rancor finally let go of Husker, though; they leaned their brows together for a moment, then he went back to sit with Timber. "I just hope the Lieu's okay," he said, and tried to take some measure of comfort in the murmur of agreement almost all around.

The thing was-- Alpha really wasn't bothered by the collective ire of the baselines.

He was a little more startled by how much damage his grenade might have done, though. The point had been to KO the zabrak in an infuriating manner, preying on one of his weaknesses, and reaping the rewards of him losing his temper, stability or more. It hadn't been to do any potential permanent damage to the horned bastard. General Skywalker had said that it would be a nasty shock, the droid popper; painful, because he'd been hit with one once in his own cybernetic arm and knew. But he hadn't mentioned that it could be potentially deadly.

If the general wanted Alpha to arrange an 'accident' and kill Maul, that was one thing, but that hadn't been the point.

He didn't feel particularly guilty about it. Not knowing the outcome made him look incompetent, which bothered him, but taking down a target was what he was bred and raised for.

That wasn't apparently the only miscalculation, though. None of those Blackbirds acted abused; the care and concern they had for their L-T was real and clean. There wasn't any hesitation in it. Even Husker, who of all of them Alpha expected to be more resentful, kept shooting glances down the hall towards the medbay. It didn't seem coerced or shadowed, that worry, that loyalty.

Alpha was sure reporting that back was going to be popular. But just like he wasn't going to refuse an order, he wasn't gonna lie to his general, either. The squad cared about their lieutenant. And they didn't seem brainwashed into it, or just too blindly loyal to see the truth.

He sat listening to them, letting the occasional barb slide off without hooking into him, and waited to see if there were any other miscalculations to take back with him.
"I know this isn't what you want to hear, but Lieu--"

Tally ended up cutting himself off, though.

It was hard to be on the other end of that look.

Once Maul was out of the corner, he sat still on the table for less than a minute, still trembling intermittently, letting Tally make sure he didn't disturb his dressings, but the moment Tally made the mistake of turning to check on the incoming results of the metabolic panel he was running through the analyzer, Maul was up and pacing. Whatever hesitation there had been seemed to be gone from his cybernetics; he didn't look steady on his feet, exactly, but it was impossible to tell whether that was because of the effect the EMP had on the mechanics or the effect it had on him.

He was short answering questions and not entirely accurate; he couldn't remember anything past him jumping off the bike and starting his deflection at the auto turrets, and there were a few times that he shut up in the middle of an answer, struggling to find the right words for it, before managing as close an approximation as he could get. He kept rubbing at his head, and sometimes would overcorrect on a turn when he went to pace another lap.

*Postictal*, Tally thought, at some point. It wasn't like it wasn't known an electrical shock could set off a seizure, and while Tally had no real way to confirm it, it was probably a good guess, given the confusion and other symptoms.

Now, though, Maul was staring at Tally with wide gold eyes again -- no glow in them -- and looking somewhere between an awful kind of resigned and an even more awful kind of pleading.

The discussion, what there was of it, was whether Tally would throw down with the Jedi Council about the make of Maul's cybernetics, in order to address what was clearly a big, dangerous issue now that there was actual data to back it up. Tally's hope being that they would realize that they were risking one of their officer's lives, regardless of his legal status, when an upgrade and a couple of weeks of adaptation would be all it would take to prevent that.

"They'll--" Maul paced a couple steps, then stopped again. "--they'll-- make me go back. To that cell. I'm not-- they're not--" He took a few rough-sounding breaths, then shook his head, hissing in apparent frustration through his teeth. "Obi-Wan; I'm here because-- he's the one--"

It was hard, Tally reflected, trying to translate 'mildly disoriented and anxious' when he was missing large chunks of context. "You've proven yourself on the battlefield, sir. And now on this training mission. Why would they waste a good officer by taking him off the line permanently?"

Maul huffed out, a mirthless breath of a laugh, though at least some of the wound-up tension eased out of his posture. "Near half the Council wanted to *execute* me at first," he said, carefully, and Tally's blood went cold. "I saved O-- General Kenobi and Senator Organa, and Chief Healer Che spoke on my-- my side-- my *behalf*. To be here. But it's--" he held up a hand and wagged it. "--shaky." A beat, then he clarified, "Precarious."

*Your life is precarious right now*, Tally thought, but the instant he heard the word 'execute', the picture Maul was trying to paint became sickening clear. "This can get you killed," he said, keeping his tone gentle, but not pulling the punch. "Leaving it unaddressed. That was one regular droid popper, sir. What if you got caught in the blast radius of a large-scale version of the same?"
"I know." Maul wavered on his feet, looking thoroughly exhausted and heartsick enough that Tally almost couldn't bear it. "But I don't want this."

He sounded about like he thought Tally was going to just ignore that, and that was almost worse. Tally glanced at the metabolic panel results again -- electrolytes were a little off, but by less than he had expected; there was a lot to be said for Maul's physical durability -- then looked back at his L-T, who was rubbing at his brow with a thumb and forefingers.

There was also plenty Tally wanted to say about how far a person shouldn't be pushed, too.

"Let me note it in a report. That this needs addressed. I won't--" Kriff, he couldn't believe he was saying this, but he wasn't going to just throw away the amount of trust he'd earned so far. "--I won't send it to them, I won't push it yet, but-- but let me note it, Lieu. Let me put down a record-trail so that when you're not on such precarious footing, we can try to get them to listen to reason. Will you let me do that much?"

Maul eyed him, searching and wary, and Tally just looked back at him, adding, "And in the meantime, we can come up with some kind of exterior armor. I'll bet Castle would have some good ideas."

He didn't know if Maul really believed him, but when the zabrak gave a tentative nod, Tally knew he'd made the right call.

Even if it was going to take awhile to feel like that.

"C'mon, hop up here and let me get a look at you, okay? Without you jumping down the second I turn my back." Tally pointed at the table. "Bet Shiv and Tango'll be back within the half-hour, and we can get out of here."

The last miscalculation was the zabrak's temperament.

When he rejoined his squad, he looked rough, but he didn't look like any kind of raving lunatic. He didn't look like some unstable, dangerous element slathering to take lives without worrying about the ones he was leading. He just looked tired and rattled and surprisingly composed despite that. Dignified, maybe. The Blackbirds' medic was at his shoulder, looking no less so.

It had been about an hour since the assault and the ending of the training mission; Alpha stood up, ignoring the way the entire squad of Blackbirds stiffened up as if he was a threat. He could see Shiv bristling out of the corner of his eye, just back with their pilot from bringing the Courier in, and bacta or no, his nose ached like hell at the reminder of who'd broken it. But he still said, "Nothin' personal, Lieutenant."

Maul looked back at him for a long moment, then gave the stiffest nod possible before asking, "Who broke your nose?"

Alpha smirked a little, even if it made his face ache worse. "Your sergeant."

There was another beat there, then Maul looked to Shiv, the hint of a grin appearing on his mouth. "Thank you."
Shiv scoffed, but his demeanor had softened. "My pleasure, Lieu."

General Skywalker wasn't going to like what Alpha had to tell him, no. But those were the breaks; Alpha had done as he was told, the Blackbirds had routed them hard and thoroughly, and Maul had proven to be more stable than General Skywalker suspected.

"That little deflection you pulled, knocking a bolt at my head," Alpha said, just before he turned to leave and start working on his report in his quarters. "Pretty sweet move, sir."

Something unidentifiable flickered across Maul's face. "I don't remember it."

Alpha shrugged. "Then take it from me: It was good. Congratulations on your win."

He didn't look back when he walked out, but he could hear the Blackbirds swarm the zabrak, relief and worry and affection coloring their tones.

It was slow going, getting back on the Courier, not because they didn't want to get out of there, but because they had to exchange letter codes with the 501st squad and because they had to detail where they had left their gear abandoned on the mountains. They had to send a signal to the Negotiator; when they received the recording -- by General Kenobi himself -- that the fleet was out of range and that they should wait until the next contact for coordinates to reunite with it, no one quite knew what to do.

Even Shiv felt at a loss.

"Damned if we're staying on this rock," Husker had declared, and so they had finally boarded their ship, stowing the cold assault armor with various groans of relief, and then sitting down to wait until Tango had them up into the black in their undersuits.

It was quiet, though. None of the complaining or banter; everyone seemed to be lost in their own thoughts, and Shiv couldn't think of what to say, as he just tried to -- grasp it. That it was over. That they had survived it. That they had even won. His knuckles ached, even though he'd been wearing his armor, and his heart ached, and he wasn't sure why. Everything just felt-- heavy. Almost too heavy.

It was Rabbit who broke the silence, tentatively. "Are we allowed to be happy now?" he asked, a bit plaintively; not quite to the level of tears, but Shiv wouldn't have been surprised if there were. And not just from the shinies. Or were they ex-shinies now?

There was a long moment, and then--

"That subversive asshole owes me a drink," Husker said, gruffly, pointing at Tally. Tally looked up and huffed a little laugh, holding his hands up in surrender, but the smile that stole across his face was fond and real, and it lightened Shiv's heart some to see it.

"What's the closest planet with cheap booze?" Brody asked, looking up from where he'd had his nose buried in his datapad. "I'm not rich, but I can buy us some rounds."
"Corellia's closest, if you want good booze cheap," Smarty answered, immediately. "We'll have to get permission to land and sign an affidavit that we're not there on military operations, because they're doing their-- meditative solitude thing, but we should be allowed to land. I mean, credits are credits and we're legitimately there to purchase goods and services and not to do anything else."

"They're doing their what?" Husk asked, sounding incredulous.

"They don't agree with the war, so they're using their privilege gained under their early special provisions of the Republic Constitution to sit it out. Contemplany's Hermi it's called." Smarty shrugged, tiredly. "They withdraw from the Senate and therefore don't have to aid in the war effort without losing their status as a Republic world. Their sector's the only one allowed to do that."

"Smart," Tally said, at the exact same time as Husker snorted, "Bantrashit."

The two exchanged a long look, but now, it was tempered with mutual good humor.

Shiv didn't really care about the politics of Corellia, but the idea of spending a couple or three days on a world that wasn't going to break out into a battle sounded good to him. They could always just sleep on the courier, if need be. "Well, Lieu? Corellia or bust?"

Maul had been quiet since he'd taken that hit, and had only gotten more so; still, he apparently hadn't dozed off, despite sitting with his head back and eyes closed. "Set the course. If they tell us no, we'll figure out something else."

"Setting course," Tango replied, from up front.

As if it had broken open some kind of dam, the Blackbirds started talking again; Raze was still sticking to Maul's side, but even he had apparently managed to shake off his upset from before. Shiv didn't really talk himself, just rubbing at his aching knuckles, but he watched and listened to them as they plotted and planned and tried to make bets on who was going to drink who under the table, while Brody got to work doing something probably-illegal-that-Shiv-didn't-want-to-know-about on a datapad and Tally got up to dig his own, physical credit chips out of his carry-on in his locker.

Are we allowed to be happy now? Rabbit had asked.

Shiv looked at all of them -- tired and battered, but alive and together -- and decided:

Yeah, you bet we are.
Bad Puns, Narrowly Avoided

Chapter Summary

--the bottles and chairs, on the other hand, not so much.

Chapter Notes

With much love to B_Radley for the worldbuilding help and allowing me to borrow the beautiful zeltron; with the same amount of love to shadowmaat, for being my cheerleader and sounding-board on all things Witness me.

Now

"So, let me just-- make sure I have this down. You guys managed to convince your way into Corellian space despite the closed borders, parked an entire courier on a public landspeeder deck -- and talked your way out of the ticket because the traffic codes weren't written to take into account that someone would park a starship there -- and then you went and got drunk at the first five watering holes you encountered, only to take apart the last one?"

Bail Organa's prior day had started with a dignified breakfast with business, political and military interests, the kind of official breakfast where expensive food was consumed while everyone thought about the various ways to slip a knife into the next person's back. This was followed by three hours of committee meetings, a Senate session to vote on bills, then two hours of more committee meetings; he didn't get a chance to eat lunch, and by the time the Security Committee was in session, he was starved and tired and sporting a headache. This was followed by him trudging back to his apartment, grabbing a chunk of bread, calling Bre and talking for awhile, then falling asleep on the couch while he was working his way through briefs, only to be woken up by a ping on his private comm line and the entirely unexpected 'rescue mission' he had to go on.

This day was starting very differently.

The same incredibly sheepish expression graced twelve battered faces -- eleven of them sharing the same genetic template, one very different -- and even with the headache he still had, Bail was having to work pretty damn hard not to laugh. "Which one of you threw the first punch, anyway?"

When the eleven clones looked at their lieutenant in unison, Bail actually squeaked, "Really?"

Maul ducked his head, cleared his throat and said, "--yes, I did."

Bail couldn't hold it back anymore; he started laughing so hard that tears ran down his face and his ribs hurt, some combination of affection and pride and humor culminating in him leaning against the bars of the holding cell that the Blackbirds were in, almost unable to breathe for the force of it.

When he finally managed to get it under control, he shook his head -- still giggling! -- and said, "Okay. Okay, lemme go and make-- well. You know."
One of the Blackbirds started snickering uncontrollably at the near-miss of the pun, and Bail's face ached for his laughter as he went to go and bail the squad out of the drunk tank.

_The day before..._

Watching Smarty wrangle the hassled Corellian bureaucrat responsible for giving them a landing permit made Tango feel better. Smarty had a datapad out, and he was wording things so precisely that Tango thought maybe his brother should have been some kind of lawyer; maybe could still be, if the war ended and they were allowed to have lives after it.

After the end of the training mission, anything was a reprieve from Tango's thoughts about it. He was glad Shiv had taken him to go and get the courier, because he wanted to throttle Alpha to death for hurting Maul. Even seeing the ARC's broken nose hadn't taken the edge off of it; seeing Maul up on his feet helped a bit, but Tango still worried, because that was a _nasty_ thing that was done to him.

Tango was still having a heck of a time even comprehending that the mission was over. It felt like it had been a lot longer than a couple of weeks; it felt like it had been a lifetime. Like he'd left things under the mountains and gained new things at the same time; like he had found something in himself that he hadn't known to look for before. Now, on the other side of it, he was trying to reconcile who he had been before it, and who he was now, and how so short a time could make such a difference.

"Hang on," Smarty was saying. "I'll take the datapad, get the signatures and our numbers, and transmit them."

The Corellian glowered, tiredly, from the holo projection. "Hurry up."

Tango quickly signed it, grinning, and then listened as Smarty went around and got everyone else's signatures on the affidavit. Once it was transmitted and a landing permit was sent back to their console, then came the debate about _where_ to land.

"The beach!" Misty said, immediately. "Any beach warm enough to swim at?"

"I don't care where we go, but no mountains!" Tango called back, as he adjusted his flight plan, now that they had permission to actually enter the sector. Whatever else was going on, there was something deep and fundamentally soothing about playing his hands over the panel; to feeling the hum of the ship's engines through her structure. He hoped they got to keep her; she was a pretty big ship for a single squad, but she had a sweet hyperdrive and even if she didn't like wind shear, she answered to Tango's piloting well anyway.

_Our nest_, he thought, smiling to himself.

In back, his brothers were all shouting suggestions and requests. Brody didn't care, so long as he had a good HoloNet connection available. Smarty wanted somewhere with some cultural enrichment. Tally wanted them to make sure there was at least a level one clinic close by, though Tango didn't know if that was for Maul's sake or in case they ended up in trouble themselves.

"Slow down," Shiv broke in, his smile in his voice. "Booze is our first priority, so wherever we land has to have some kind of quick access to alcohol, and it has to have some kind of place we can set
Tango kept half an ear out while Smarty started going through options on his datapad, listing the pros and cons of each. The moment he mentioned a city in the mountains, there was booing from the squad, but otherwise, they didn't interrupt.

They were just on approach when the decision was made, a consensus reached by popular vote and debate, all very parliamentary for a squad of government owned men and a prisoner.

Tango sent their new landing permit for authorization and keyed in the new coordinates.

Cosaintheas -- Southshield in the vernacular -- was beautiful.

A harbor town, its historical district was well-preserved, hugging the coastline; landspeeder traffic was heavily restricted, so everyone was either on foot or on old-fashioned pedal-powered bikes. When Smarty had seen someone actually riding one of those antiques, he'd stopped and stared after it for a long moment, surprised and already pleased that they'd come here instead of going to the bustle and chaos of Coronet City. The air was warm and smelled of salt and some kind of sea-plant life -- Misty was practically bouncing in place at the idea he might get to swim -- and even though they garnered a lot of looks from the people in the streets, it was still preferable to the speed and noise of a larger urban area.

Smarty was already feeling pretty good; when Tango had set their ship down on a public parking deck, taking up almost the entire top level, the traffic patrol droid had just about rattled itself apart in its indignation. It took some quick work on Smarty's part to dig out the local ordinances on a datapad and he would swear on-- something important that the droid's head had smoked when he pointed out that there were plenty of regulations on parking speeders, but none on parking ships. The ticket was avoided, at least for the time being; by the time they updated the ordinance, the Blackbirds would be long gone.

(Castle had already eyed their parking spot with his trained engineer's eye and told Tango it could support the weight of six couriers and all the landspeeders already parked there on top of it. "Those Corellians make stuff that can take a beating and last," he had said, with a shrug. "It'll hold her safely.")

Now, they were exploring a little, a cluster of black-clad clones with their likewise black-clad lieutenant, the heat of the early autumn sun baking through their clothes in a manner that was undeniably enjoyable after their time on Bravo-984. And while mostly they were looking for a bar that they could afford -- they'd bypassed some sketchier prospects inland towards the parking deck -- they were also just taking the moment to breathe. The cross-streets leading to the main drag of the town were all smooth, flat stone, colorful and fitted in; along the way, small businesses were open, cheerful flags from all over the galaxy fluttering in the warm breeze off of the ocean.

It was all really charming. For all of the studying Smarty had done, he had comparatively little on-the-ground experience with different places and cultures. Growing up on Kamino had felt like starvation, a lot of the time; it didn't matter that he had a full belly or a warm place to sleep, like a lot of their brothers were resigned to being grateful for. He wanted to know things and see things and take some part in the beautiful, vast galaxy they inhabited. He wanted to taste new foods and pick up
new languages; he wanted to learn new cultures, maybe because their own seemed so--

So hopeless. So many of their brothers identified themselves as Mandalorian, because of Jango; Smarty knew better than anyone that Mandalore, under Duchess Kryze, would never take them in because of what they were. Clones of an exile, soldiers in a war. Mandalore's pacifist culture was fascinating as a sociological study, but whenever he used to hear one of his brothers daydreaming wistfully about maybe having a homeworld that would accept them and cited Mandalore as an example, he winced inside.

Smarty didn't identify as anything, except maybe Citizen of the Kriffing Galaxy. And he wanted to see as much of it as he could.

If that meant he had to get shot at and risk death between brief stints of rest and recreation-- well, at least he had something to try to live for. And Maul, so far, seemed willing to indulge as much of the latter as possible, which made Smarty grateful for this assignment all over again.

They came out onto the main drag of the town; it was built above the sea, a barrier wall protecting it from tide and surf, even though the harbor was reasonably sheltered. Standing there, looking down, it was several meters to the blue-green water lapping gently against the buff-and-reddish stone wall, and Misty drew in a breath that sounded almost like a sob when he leaned his hands on the railing to peer down into it.

"You okay?" Smarty asked, watching him.

Misty nodded back, though he did look kind of choked up. "Yeah. I just-- I don't know. I kind of--"

Smarty waited to see if he was going to finish; when he didn't, Smarty rubbed at his back, holding his datapad in the other hand.

"I just miss it," Misty finally said, jaw quivering a little before steadying. "I'm okay."

"That's it. We're building or stealing a kiddie pool," Brody joked, slapping his hand against the railing, dramatically. "We'll stick it in the back of the briefing room so our fish out of water has a habitat."

Misty scoffed at that, but he was smiling some when he said, "You're such a kriffin' ass, Brody."

"Hey, guys, what about that one?" Rabbit asked, and they all turned as he pointed to the facade of a bar; pretty flowers were hanging in pots from hooks inset into the side of the building, and there was a patio out front with chairs and umbrellas.

Smarty thought they might afford a single round in a place like that -- if they were really cheap about it -- but he didn't bother saying anything while a few of them went to go investigate, slipping into the cool-looking, darker interior.

They came back out less than ten seconds later, shaking their heads, and Castle just said, "Frippin' expensive. I wanna get hammered before we go broke."

Privately, Smarty didn't mind; that meant they could explore a little more before he was too tipsy to really appreciate the place.
It took them another hour to find a bar they could tenuously afford on the main drag; it was down south some ways, in a less picturesque part of the old town, closer to where that gave way to the more modern section yet further. Castle thought probably they should have just cut their losses and gone inland, where the bars were cheaper and rougher, but mostly all he wanted by the time they had found this one was a glass of cold water before they started up on the booze. The sun was nice after all of the time on Bravo-984, but the Blackbirds were starting to wilt under the heat they weren't yet accustomed to, and the humidity was going up steadily as the day wore on. Though, the sea breeze did help.

They bought one drink there per each clone -- some kind of summery cocktail, sweet and crisp and sharp -- though Maul waved it off and stuck to water. Castle was kind of disappointed, because just like the rest of the squad, he had a feeling their L-T was probably quite an entertaining drunk, but it was likely more to do with Tally's worrying than it was unwillingness or stodginess. Maul had maybe said a dozen words since they landed; of all of them, he seemed to still be halfway back on the planet they'd just left, which -- well, Castle couldn't blame him any. He kept pace with them and listened to them when they talked, but he still seemed kind of shut down.

That mental turn of phrase made Castle wince internally.

(But that holo-manip Brody was working on intermittently was coming along well; General Skywalker was going to become Viable's biggest celebrity without knowing it. Castle was meanly delighted with that thought, especially now.)

After that cocktail and a recounting of their credits, they migrated to another bar, this one a block inland; there, they managed to score happy hour drinks and put down two more cocktails apiece.

"These are so good," Rabbit said; his boyish face was flushing some at the high points, and Castle -- who only felt the mildest buzz so far -- rubbed over his mouth trying not to grin for how damned cute that was. "How do people even come up with this stuff?"

"Experimentation!" Smarty was nursing his drinks, the slow poke. "Never underestimate the creativity of people who want to get smashed in fun, colorful and tasteful ways."

Rancor was likewise apparently just as lightweight; he was throwing down his cocktails and then sitting eying everyone else's drinks. When Tally -- who was drinking lightly himself -- pushed his second cocktail over, the ex-shiny took a few slower sips before gulping the rest and then wavering in place just a little bit.

They got a little more chatty at the third bar -- even more inland, on the south end of the city, where there was a mix between professionals and dockworkers haunting the place -- and by then, Rabbit and Rancor were both in the giggling phase of pickled, leaning against each other and murmuring back and forth, then cracking up until one or the other was laughing helplessly face-down on the table. That was enough to keep Raze in stitches, too; hell, he didn't even seem to need to hear things to find it funny, as if the mere fact of his brothers laughing was enough to set him off. Shiv had finally loosened up enough to smile regularly again, occasionally making commentary on the brief conversations, most of them to do with how jealous the other squad probably was since they were stuck on Bravo-984 to wait for pickup, and Husker was just watching the kids laughing and smiling himself, quietly, looking pretty content.

Castle was still relatively sober, enough to note that the reactions to them by other people were an interesting mix between curiosity, disdain and sympathy of all things; he noticed Maul was watching too, though he had switched from water to tea.
"You all right, Lieu?" Castle asked, leaning over to keep his voice down between them.

Maul blinked once like he was surprised, then gave something of a facial shrug. "Fine. There's been a zeltron following us for the past two hours; I was wondering why she was."

Shiv's head shot up like he was jabbed in the ass with a stun stick, and he started looking around; Castle immediately remembered his sergeant's story while they were camping with Tano and thought, *Seems he has a type.*

"I don't think she means us ill," Maul said, probably not realizing that Shiv's looking around had less to do with worry and more to do with where he wanted to spend his night. But he upnodded to the windows; across the narrow side-street, barely wider than a walk, there was a zeltron woman sitting in the windows of the restaurant across eating. "It could be a coincidence, too," he added.

Castle eyed her with unabashed curiosity; she had dark hair with strands of blue running through it, and skin just a slight shade different from Maul's. She wasn't very big, but she was dressed in a way to show off that smooth skin, and Castle could see Shiv internally chewing over whether or not to walk across the street to chat her up.

If she was watching them, then she was doing a nice job pretending not to; instead, she ate and read her propped up datapad; the way she held that fork in her slender fingers made Castle honestly kind of jealous of the *kriffing cutlery.*

"It's about time to move on anyway," Tally broke in, counting out his credit chips. "I'm down to buying straight shots, so if we want more to drink, it's time to move onto the rotgut portion of the evening, and they don't serve that here. If she is following us, then we'll know soon enough, right?"

"Guess so," Shiv said, mostly managing to hide his disappointment. "We ready to go?"

The looks got more hostile and less sympathetic the further they went into the rougher sections of town. Not that any section of this place was as rough as some of even the mid-levels on Coruscant, but by comparison to the idyllic downtown, they might as well have been dives.

Misty was drunk enough to turn giggly or morose by turns; most of the time, he thought about how badly he wanted to swim. He knew he wasn't going to get to today, the sun was coming down on the horizon now, painting the town in reddish gold light and the haze in the atmosphere burnished everything with it. Tomorrow, though; if they were still here, he was going to go swimming.

For now, even the salt in the air felt like a comfort. He hadn't been prepared for how deeply it had resonated, when he got to lean over the railing and look into the water; hadn't been prepared for the sharp tug and ache in his chest, the burn in his eyes. Like greeting a long-lost friend, or a part of his family. It didn't matter that he'd never been on Corellia before; the sea called to him, the life in it, the rhythm of it. And this world had so much water; there were seafarers even now on these worlds, plying the waters for their living. He had spied a big sailboat out there, cutting through the water, and ached to be on it.

*I could be-- a marine biologist,* he thought. *After the war's over.*

He could swim with whales again; could track down harmful illnesses and parasites threatening the
marine life; he could go and help protect reefs and endangered species. The mere idea made Misty want to cry with longing.

For now, though, he was an aquatics expert on a black ops squad, aiming to get drunk enough to retire so that tomorrow could come.

Now, they were in the fourth bar; it was a workman's bar, dockworkers and sometimes fishermen scattered around it, and all of them clearly local. The smell of frying food made his stomach rumble, and Misty realized he hadn't eaten anything since a slightly less nasty ration bar before they left their courier.

He was just thinking about that when one of the dockworkers spoke up, voice coarse and mocking, "Hey, look boys, we're hosting the Republic's finest!"

The Blackbirds all paused their conversation, four bottles of cheap whiskey sitting on their two tables; Shiv just scoffed quietly and gestured them back to their business.

The guy apparently wasn't done. "Whatchu think, Darl, you think they got anything under those black leggings? I bet not, bet it's all smooth sailin' down there; wouldn't want them to breed a million little lookalike babies, after all."

"Don't rise to it," Shiv said to them, shaking his head, waving the guy off.

"Yeah, we wouldn't want to show him our gear; it might disturb him out of his meditative solitude," Brody said, raising his voice a little bit with every word and completely ignoring Shiv's attempts to deescalate the situation. Shiv facepalmed and went to interrupt, but Brody went on, "Hey, hey, guys," he pointed to the Blackbirds, "listen to the wage slave, insulting the guys who actually have the balls to go out there and fight, while his planet benefits without any skin in the game."

Misty made a mental note that Brody was a mean drunk, even though his eyes were sparkling. He also failed to stop himself from laughing, covering his hand with his mouth.

"Who you callin' a wage slave, clone?" the dockworker asked, bristling, pushing away from the dinged up, elbow polished bar. "At least I'm worth enough to be paid. Who cut your last paycheck? No one? You got some interesting definition of slavery, you half-chewed Mando copy."

"Come on, we're all exploited by the same damned system," Tally said, standing up and holding his hands up; Misty was kind of surprised he was being as diplomatic as he was, but then again, he probably didn't want to have to treat any injuries from thrown glass. Or thrown bodies. He eyed the dockworker, mouth in a line, then said, "You make low-end wages so that some asshole with a star-yacht can sexually harass a twi'lek serving girl, paying you a fraction of a fraction of a cut. We clones, none of us asked to be bred and born to go out there and get ourselves blown up. None of us have any real power here, not you, not us. We're not your enemies."

Somewhere down the bar, someone grumbled, "A kriffin' clone trade-unionist? For real?"

The man who had been poking at them opened his mouth and then closed it, something sort of-- less antagonistic in his expression. He muttered something under his breath and then palmed over his scruffy face. "Yeah. Point. Darl, send those dupes another couple bottles, put it on my tab."

Tally huffed out and offered a half-smile. "Thanks."

"What I wanna know, is how long it'll be before they're clonin' replacements for the rest of us," another dockworker said.
"It costs a small fortune to clone just one person," Tally answered, shrugging. "The only reason we're a hair cheaper is because we're all one genetic template, but we're still expensive. Frankly, it's a lot easier for them to wait until desperate, poverty-stricken people have kids, then exploit those kids while ensuring that they never make enough or get enough chances to break the cycle. Why spend the money on clones when all you have to do is continue the systemic economic oppression?"

By then, everyone in the bar was staring at Tally. It was only then that Misty noticed that Maul was conspicuously absent from their two tables; when Misty looked around, he finally spotted the zabrak in the back corner, blended into the shadows, watching the whole thing silently, still clear-eyed and sober.

Guarding over us, Misty realized, giving his Lieu a little smile, and the mirror he got back of it made him feel good.

The conversation that followed involved the entire bar, and by the time it was over, mostly everyone was incredibly drunk, Misty and the others had gotten to try fried sherrah strips on the house -- and geez, those were so good -- and they might just have incited the dockworkers into forming a trade union.

"You guys ain't nothin' like the news says," Jib -- the first dockworker -- said, arm slung around Castle's shoulders, before planting a big, smacking kiss on Castle's cheek.

"I hope they still feel that way during tomorrow's hangover," Castle just said, after he was freed from his limpet and they were out the door, ready to head back to the courier.

If-- anyone could remember which way that was now. Misty just followed, because he sure didn't.

In retrospect, the decision to stop at one last bar was probably not a good one.

Shiv and Tally were less pickled than some of their brothers -- they were practically carrying the Triple R Trio now -- but they still weren't quick enough to stop Tango from wandering into one more place, drawn by the rocket ships glowing in neon in the windows, steps reeling some. Shiv opened his mouth to try to call to Tango, but then Rabbit moaned and he had to deposit the kid in an alley to make use of the compost container, and the next thing he knew, half the squad was missing and the voices from inside that bar were getting loud.

"Kriff," he murmured, head spinning some, but still steady enough on his feet. "Here, Rabbit, c'mon. Just--"

He didn't want to leave Rabbit alone, but he also didn't want to drag him into a hostile situation, so he leaned the kid against the front facade of the building -- which only had high up, narrow windows, presumably so no one could be thrown through any larger ones -- and then glanced around again before slipping inside the building.

"--frippin' Republic military--"

"--better than stinkin' dolls, on an assembly line--"

"--least we're not a buncha shitworm cowards hidin' behind closed borders--"
"Uh-- economic oppression?" Misty tried, looking around at the extremely hostile faces of a bunch of dockworkers. "We're all screwed by the same people? No?"

Shiv might have actually started laughing at that, even as he grabbed ahold of Brody -- by far the most belligerent of their squad -- to try to drag him back outside. Tango just looked thoroughly confused, wavering on his feet; Tally had moved to try to get hands on Rancor, who was likewise reeling and confused. Raze was-- frip, Raze was already at the bar and somehow managed to go completely ignored, chatting at the tender in a friendly way that seemed to disarm the man. Smarty and Castle were bristling some.

One of the bar-goers started crowding Tango, who seemed more baffled than angry about it, and said, mockingly, "Get outta here. You cut-outs are all gonna be dead within the month anyway, we don't--"

A red-and-black fist came out of seemingly no where, and the meaty thudding sound it made when it hit that guy in the mouth silenced the entire bar.

Someone asked, whispering, "What the frip is that?"

Maul squared his shoulders -- outsized by pretty much everyone around him -- put himself between the crowd and the majority of his squad and said, "That is their lieutenant. Would anyone else like to threaten my squad?"

Despite everything, Shiv found himself grinning broadly. Brody quit trying to throw himself into the fight. Tango-- unsurprisingly looked like he was in love.

And even though an unbroken glass bottle clipped him in the head within the next ten seconds, and several chairs were broken; even though fists were flying and so was the occasional tooth, Shiv was still grinning when CorSec showed up.

He only stopped briefly and cursed internally when the beautiful zeltron was one of the arresting officers.

(Senior Deputy Constable Dani Faygan, in the meantime, managed to get the situation under control with the minimum of CorSec injuries and the maximum of trussed up hardcases, clones and one zabrak-hybrid who surrendered without fighting them; as the entire population of the bar was being loaded up, she stopped when the warm tan hand wrapped around hers from the ground and looked down in surprise at the clone trooper sitting on the walk outside. "'s my squad," he slurred, looking up at her with pleading dark eyes. "C'n I come with you?"

Dani felt her face soften as she projected reassurance and comfort, turning and helping him up, then getting his arm across her shoulders. "We won't leave you here, sweetheart, I promise."

She didn't charge him, not even with disorderly conduct, even if he was stuck waiting in the cell so he could be with his brothers and CO.)
Bail leaned against the bars as he listened to the story, even as he counted up the number of small political favors he was going to owe for getting the charges dropped. Or the number of cigars and brandy; Draq' Bel Iblis could go either way on that. He winced a few times, he laughed several more times, and then he just looked over the men in the cell and shook his head with a smile. "You guys are something else."

He knew their names, faces and some things about them, but he had never met them before. But Bail had gone over each of their files (along with a number of others) when Obi-Wan had sent them, taking extra time out in the evenings to get an understanding of who would be added to this squad, making suggestions himself, so even though he had never met the Blackbirds in person before, he felt nothing but affection for all eleven of them.

"--if Queen Breha takes exception, I can-- do the explaining," Maul said, and winced, and Bail huffed fondly at that look, on the face of someone both he and Bre considered family.

"You think my wife hasn't taken apart a bar or two in her day?" he asked back, rubbing his cheek from how much his face ached for all the laughing. "Kriff, Maul. She's going to fall off the throne laughing when I call to tell her about this."

The looks the Blackbirds were giving him were such a strange mix between wonder and wariness; Bail was already trying to think of excuses to buy himself some hours to spend with them, and to check in with Maul. There was something about the zabrak's demeanor that was worrying him, and he knew he wouldn't be able to get over that worry if he didn't manage to wrangle enough time to find out more.

Luckily for all of them, that was when the guard came to unlock the cell, looking disgruntled. "Charges were all dropped. Get out of here, don't cause any more trouble," they muttered, turning and walking back out.

The Blackbirds all looked at one another -- some of them still slightly drunk, others looking painfully hung over -- and then managed to crawl to their feet. Bail watched them, glancing over the patches covering cuts on their faces and the bruises (even Maul had a few good dings on his face that Bail could see), and stepped out of the way as they shuffled out of the cell. "Don't go running back to your ship, okay? I'm gonna see about getting you guys a place to rest and recover."

Tally, the medic, eyed him warily again and Bail offered what he hoped was a reassuring look. "A nice place," he clarified, raising his eyebrows.

"What do you want out of it?" Tally asked, as he slipped past Bail; the fact that he was bold enough to ask that somehow made him even more likable.

"To take care of my friend, and my friend's squad," was all Bail answered, shaking his head, at nearly the same time as Maul said heavily, "Nothing; good luck trying to pay him back, too."

Bail chuckled quietly at that, wrapping his arms around Maul when he was finally out of the cell -- the last one out -- and feeling another spike of worry for the faint tremor through Maul's shoulders, even as he rested his brow briefly to Bail's shoulder. "Having credits is pointless, if you don't use them for the people you care about," Bail said, holding on carefully for a moment in deference to bruises, resisting the urge to squeeze, before letting go and stepping back, though he kept one hand on the back of his best friend's shoulder, trying to lend some steadiness. "So, let's go see if I can find
you guys a decent rental until Obi-Wan's done getting himself into trouble and can come back for you."

(It didn't take long for Bail to find a beach-side rental, since it was just before the beginning of the tourist season; not huge, but big enough if the squad didn't mind sharing the beds. The longest delay leaving the station was Shiv slipping over to talk to the zeltron; Tally, even hung over, just murmured, "Lookit him go," as they talked.

It ended with Shiv securing a date with the officer who arrested him, for later that night, and precisely no one in the squad was surprised. Even if a few of them were a little jealous.)
Husker had never seen the like before.

Frankly, it was almost *intimidating*.

The rental was a two story house, both of which had balconies with metal safety rails twisted into matching sunset patterns out the front, populated by comfortable looking chairs; it wasn’t beachfront, but it was only a block away from there, and since the city itself climbed upwards as it went inland, one could view the ocean from the second floor balcony with ease. It had four bedrooms, two bathrooms, an open kitchen and several other places one could grab a nap on the mostly-open main floor. Tile mosaics made up that floor; blue swirls that faded to green, to yellow before going more and more pale, tiled between in white and eventually blended into the same. The furniture looked so pristine and comfortable that Husk was almost afraid to even sit on it.

And it was all paid for by a senator.

A *kriffing* senator. Who was currently half-carrying Rancor to ease him down onto a lounge sofa that Rancor sank into, head lolling before he just groaned quietly and turned to his side. A senator who not only did that, but crouched next to the kid, rubbing his back and talking lowly.

Whatever Rancor said went unheard, ‘least by Husker, but Organa nodded and stood back up and went to the kitchen, coming back with a bucket from under the sink and a glass of water with ice cubes in it.

Husker’s boggling must’ve been obvious, because Tally slipped over to check on him after setting Rabbit down just the same way on another absurdly comfortable looking sofa; the medic’s eyes were ringed in red from his hangover, but apparently he wasn’t feeling mean about having one. “Need an arm?” he asked.

“What? No. Just–” Husk shook head slowly, gesturing around. “Kriff, this is a *lot*.”

Brody had appeared next to him, as Organa kept moving around the place, checking cupboards and drawers in the kitchen and apparently not happy with what was in there, because he pulled a datapad off the holster on his hip and started tapping in it. "You don’t suppose he and the Lieu–“ Brody said,
barely keeping his voice down.

If Tally looked hung over, Brody looked like he’d been dragged behind a landspeeder by rope for a dozen klicks. Husker’s eyebrows drew together as he tried to figure out what Brody was asking, but Tally seemed to have caught on quick. “I think they’re friends.”

Oh. Husk rewound the morning so far in his mind; chewed over the fact that the senator had shown up as fast as a ship could travel between Coruscant and Corellia from when Maul made his single allotted comm call. The easy way that Organa would just put hands on Maul; the way Maul didn’t stiffen up whenever he did, like the Lieu did when most everyone else did. The fact that Organa just rented a beach house for a squad of clones and their prisoner lieutenant, after bailing them out of the drunk tank, without a moment’s hesitation.

He could see why Brody thought that, but Husk had to agree with Tally there. “Yeah,” he said. “Besides, Organa’s married.”

“Arranged marriages usually allow for lovers,” Smarty said, joining them in their little cluster by the broad, gracefully paned front windows. “Do you guys want to know how much this place rents for even in the off-season, especially on short notice?”

“Nope,” Tally said, crossing his arms. “But I’ll bet it’s enough that it’s damn rude to speculate on whether Maul’s the senator’s piece on the side when said senator’s paying the tab for all of us.”

“You don’t even like him,” Brody said back, screwing his face up.

“I don’t trust him, but he hasn’t given me any reason to dislike him. At least beyond the fact that he’s a politician.” Still, Tally softened his critique on Brody’s poor manners by giving him a nudge. “Go lay down before you fall down and pick up a dozen more bruises.”

Brody had taken the brunt of the fists in that fight, mostly because he’d been the one looking for it. But the fight was over now, and the slicer looked like the piss and vinegar had gone with it; he stuck his tongue out at Tally, but then made his way slowly and carefully for the stairs.

Husker glanced around; Misty had disappeared into the downstairs bathroom. Shiv was currently sitting in a bench seat drinking another glass of water in front of different set of windows. Tango and Raze were both collapsed on what looked like a sectional couch of some kind, surrounding an entertainment holo system, though no one had turned it on yet. Castle was in there with Organa, talking to the Senator now, looking relatively unscathed. Maul was just inside the front door, leaning against the wall with eyes closed.

Husk was still trying to grasp the change in circumstances -- from being nestled on a ledge on the side of a mountain about a day ago to being in the lap of luxury -- when Organa looked up from his datapad, taking in those both present and conscious. "I can only stay until early afternoon. How about you guys get some sleep, and if you're up in five or six hours, I'll make you breakfast before I go?"

"Breakfast?" Husker asked, though out of respect, he tried to keep from sounding incredulous.

Organa shrugged, smiling. "I'm pretty good in a kitchen. I can definitely poach a mean egg."

"Sold," Tally said, before putting both hands on Husker's shoulders and steering him for the stairs.

"Uh-- thanks, sir," Husker added, back towards the senator, and just let himself be pushed along.

There was a hell of a lot he had to work through; had to think about what he could say to General
Skywalker, when they next encountered each other, had to think about how to just process everything that had happened over the past few weeks, but when Tally pushed him towards the bed and Husker collapsed onto the soft sheets, the mattress that perfect kind of consistency between firm and soft, he decided that he could worry all about that later.

"Sleep well, brother," he told the medic.

"You too, Husk," Tally said back, dropping next to him, a smile in his voice.

"You look like you need to lay down yourself."

Bail's voice pulled Maul out of his own thoughts -- or lack of -- and he blinked his eyes open. The front of the house was in shadow, for the morning light, but everything still seemed somehow too bright and had done since he had woken up in the base on Bravo-984. He didn't know if it was from fatigue or from the electrical shock, but the visual distortion occasionally made him feel queasy. "Maybe," he answered, though, noncommittally. "You're going to make breakfast?"

Bail's expression was searching and quietly worried, but like it had been since Zigoola -- really, even, since they met -- there was something calming about the man's presence. Maul had not quite figured out how to quantify it, even having noted it before to himself, but that much had apparently not changed. Bail inevitably felt kind to be around; there was no sense of pressure or expectation, no weight to it. Just an acceptance, warm with affection and loyalty.

Right now, that felt more necessary than sleep. It ached, for some reason Maul couldn't understand, but he was loath to give it up.

"I was, yeah. If you're not gonna go lay down, want to walk with me to the store?" Bail asked, tilting his head towards the door. "I figured if there was a general store on the way to the grocery, I could pick your squad up some clothes and toiletries and that, too; save 'em wasting time going back to the ship."

"I could." Maul pushed himself up from where he had been leaning, opening the door and holding it open, temporary losing himself in the way the stained-glass window bowing over the top cast muted colors of reflected light on the wall.

Bail's hand brushing over his shoulder pulled him back out of it, and he followed the man out, letting the door close behind him. Outside, the air was still warming from the night; the humidity was high enough to cause haze in the distance. Maul tried and failed to imagine how the Blackbirds would react to being showered with new clothes and the like, and found he didn't have the first idea himself; even when Obi-Wan got him things, he never quite knew what to do with them, or what purpose it served, unless there was some form of necessity involved.

Though, he supposed this could be slotted into necessity, if he pushed it far enough. But they weren't so far from the courier that they couldn't manage with what they already had; further, the rental had a laundry unit. And the rental itself was unnecessary, but the looks on the Blackbirds' faces, even if they were hungover, had made him smile anyway.

Maul's understanding of economics went only so far as understanding that many people were inherently greedy and that could be manipulated. And that those who had, were privileged to have,
often wanted more long after they no longer needed more. Bail and Breha were notable exceptions to that rule, the only two he had ever met who were independently and jointly wealthy, yet gave without reservation anything beyond what they needed to maintain their family legacies and care for their extended families and estates. And even now, Bail was ready to spend more to look after the Blackbirds.

He tried to work it all out, but his thoughts remained elusive and scattered. They kept falling apart into fragments, then dissipating; losing themselves to cuts of sunlight between buildings, to the idyllic scenery.

"They kill them," he said, after they had been walking awhile, having cut down a block, now walking along the sea wall. "The clones. If they're disloyal or-- defiant."

He heard Bail suck in a breath next to him, clearly startled by the words, probably especially so given where they were. Maul felt a sharp twinge of guilt at bringing it up, but at the same time, almost a sense of relief of having done so, especially to someone who might have the power to do something about it.

"I've been looking into their situation since Geonosis," Bail answered, after a few moments more, quiet and decidedly subdued. "And I've been keeping an eye on it. The Jedi assigned an overseer, and we -- the Security Committee -- demand weekly reports on losses, both on the battlefield and off. I'm still pushing to get them recognized as having basic sentient rights, but there are a lot of factions that would stand to lose by it, so they've been burying it every time I've managed to get some headway. But the-- the killing has stopped, at least there. A bunch of us managed to get language into the bill handling funding to Kamino that the Jedi overseeing had the final word on-- on the fates of clones the Kaminoans would have otherwise killed. It's not as good as I want -- I'd rather have a full panel's oversight -- but it was the one that was easiest to get done quickly."

Maul couldn't say that was a relief, exactly; it seemed precarious to trust their fate to the Jedi.

Everything seemed, right now, to be precarious.

Still, it didn't surprise him that Bail had been working on it. He nodded for the information, then said, "I keep wondering if Obi-Wan knows. But he has to, doesn't he?"

"Probably." Bail's voice was still somber, though Maul appreciated the straight-forward answer. "But I doubt he's any easier with it than we are."

Maul nodded again, falling quiet and rubbing at his forehead absently. He didn't have a headache anymore, though yesterday's was vicious enough that the memory of it lingered like an impression, like a threat behind his eyes and across his brow. Whenever they crossed a band of sunlight, even though it felt good against his skin, the afterimages it caused made his stomach twist. The burns hurt, in a sore and dull way, even with the bacta dressings, but all of it felt like it was through several filters and far away.

They walked another block, while he tried to pull it together, then Bail spoke up and broke the silence.

"You don't have to answer me, but--" Bail paused a beat, then asked, "are you okay?"

For a few moments, Maul went to nod and give the automatic answer -- *I'm fine* -- and the words were on the tip of his tongue when another answer presented itself.

It was the first thing he'd felt strongly since shaking off his terror after the EMP on Bravo-984, and it
was no less than that had been; a cold spike of it right through the core of him, sudden and breath-taking and he didn't even realize he had stopped walking until Bail had hands resting on his shoulders lightly, and the man's expression when Maul looked up was one of profound concern, a match to the same radiating right off of him, and Maul tried in some desperation to push *I'm fine* past the clawing in his throat and chest.

But what came out was, instead, a tight and plaintive and almost questioning, "I don't think I am."

Bail listened to it all.

They found a bench on the main drag, on a little overlook platform built out from the seawall, and spent a good three hours there. The whole thing was interspersed with long lapses into silence, and Maul would seem to alternate between wound-up anxiety and almost numb recital of the entire training mission, from start to finish, but Bail didn't try to prompt or push, just sat and listened and felt about a thousand different things himself about all of it. Love for the Blackbirds, with their unique personalities and their willingness to band tight together, between themselves and with their lieutenant. Admiration for each, too. A special amount of respect for Tally, who apparently had taken it upon himself to help Maul rebuild -- or maybe even build for the first time -- some concept of boundaries and consent in the medical context.

He felt warm to his soul for Shiv's supportive steadiness (and for punching that ARC and busting his nose). Felt delight at the youngest clones gaining their names. Thought that Padmé might not forgive him, because if he happened to catch Skywalker before he had the chance to cool off, Skywalker was going to need some teeth replaced. If Bre didn't find some way to reach out from Alderaan to punch him herself, first.

Bail felt brightly proud of their bravery. And he felt aching worry for how dangerous their lives were, and more determined than ever to give those men a chance at better. Them and all of their brothers.

Them and the zabrak sitting next to him, arms crossed tight, looking both nerve-frayed and absolutely exhausted in equal parts.

Ultimately, he was damned proud of Maul, too. Because it was clear that it had all been hard on him; it was clear that the emotional and mental weight of the mission was no less heavy than the physical had been, and that the past few months created some kind of deep change, because even as of the last time they had been together in the same physical space -- on Alderaan, right after Zigoola -- Maul had been reserved, guarded, though Bail had caught plenty of glimpses behind those walls anyway. And this kind of openness, this kind of vulnerability, wouldn't have been displayed at all, even haltingly and fraught with fear.

Even if it made his heart ache to see it, and not be able to just fix it, Bail still thought that it was a good thing.

When it was over, he sat quietly absorbing it, letting it settle into his thoughts. When he was finished, he knew he didn't imagine the relief in Maul's expression when he said, "I think it's pretty normal to *not* be okay after all that, but for what it's worth, I think you guys did an amazing job."
Maul didn't reply, but to huff a little breath of a laugh out. But the corner of his mouth crept up, and Bail couldn't resist slinging an arm around his shoulders just to give him a squeeze; he smiled himself when Maul leaned into it for a few seconds.

"I think we're supposed to get groceries, aren't we?" Maul asked, after Bail let him go.

"Yeah," Bail answered, getting up and letting his best friend retreat from the subject without fuss. "Clothes, too. I saw a little shop about a block back, I bet we can find something there for your flock."

Maul nodded, getting up himself, none too quickly and rather gingerly. He seemed to wrestle with himself, then he just said, "Thank you. For listening."

"Someday," Bail teased, after nodding in acknowledgment of it, "I'm going to convince you of what the definition of anytime means."

The wry grin and the, "Maybe," Maul gave back just made Bail proud all over again.

"They look like flames."

The shop they went into did have clothes, but none of them were simple. Instead, a bright and colorful array of satin shirts covered the walls and the racks, and there was a holo-catalog with yet more that were stocked in the back and could be bought. The colors weren't doing Maul's vision any good, but he still was grateful for the distraction and the chance to let himself calm down again after his and Bail's long talk on the seaside, even if he was letting Bail do most of the actual shopping.

Now, Bail was holding up a shirt with what looked like blotches of flames, red and orange and yellow, on a black background. "I think they're actually flowers."

Maul tilted his head. They still looked a bit flame-like, but he supposed that he could also see where the streaks could be flower petals.

"I want to get it. Which Blackbird would like this one?" Bail asked, checking the tag for the size. Maul was still wearing the shirt he had borrowed from the 501st medic (even if he wasn't sure if he'd ever have an opportunity to return it), so sizing was easy enough. They had to guess when it came to pants, though most of them had an adjustable waist if they guessed too large.

"If it looks like fire, Raze," Maul decided, after a moment. He was rather startled to discover how easily he could picture Raze wearing it, and for that matter, Raze's delight in getting it.

Bail broke into a broad grin, laying the shirt over his arm and grabbing the matching swim-shorts that went with it. "One down, eleven to go."

"Ten."

"We'll see about that."

Maul snorted, rolling his eyes, though he regretted it a moment later when that made him mildly dizzy. Still, he couldn't quite manage to stifle the grin that stole up on him as he watched Bail moving
around the shop in some manner of glee. Perhaps despite himself, he found himself looking around more carefully, trying to imagine which each of his Blackbirds would like to wear. He didn't know how long they had here, but the idea of them being able to-- to take something with them, something that would be theirs, felt right.

Misty's was the easy one; there was another shirt with an undersea scene, Corellian marine life on a turquoise-to-deep blue background. When Maul pointed it out, Bail snapped it up. The others were a little more difficult, and Maul had never in his life tried to parse out fashion; the closest he ever concerned himself with was the cut of his own robes, back when those mattered to him, both for ease of movement and also to strike an intimidating picture.

Bail, however, picked up whenever Maul faltered. He picked out a falling star pattern for Tally, yellow stars falling down into a dark blue, then black, and a hunter green forest pattern for Shiv; Maul suggested a pair of interesting patterns in two different colors and gradients for Rabbit and Rancor. Castle was going to get a printed scene of the downtown, done as if in a painting. Husker's was more subdued, a twilight beach scene with palm trees arching over a man in a hammock. Smarty's was a print of the flags that adorned the various shops in the area, from all over the galaxy. Brody's was a vivid green street map on a black background.

Tango's was the hardest, in the end; it seemed nothing suited the pilot. Even Bail was stumped. Where the rest had been more easily found, they both wandered through the store, looking for inspiration, until Maul thought to ask the clerk, "--do you have anything with dragons? Ah-- or wings?"

The problem was very quickly solved when the clerk nodded enthusiastically, his lekku swaying from the force of it.

Even Tally, who knew how to get into beds that weren't provided by the Grand Army and had quite a few times, had never woken up in such a nice one.

He hadn't been asleep long, but long enough to shake off the worst of the hangover, though the lingering exhaustion from the mission itself protested from half his joints and made itself known in the heavy sensation of his limbs. He groaned quietly as he stretched and then turned onto his side; Husker was still racked out beside him, flat on his back and snoring softly at the ceiling.

The midday sun was filtered through skylights which had darkened to only allow so much light in, and from the windows that were open along the side of their room, sheer off-white curtains drifting lazily. From downstairs, Tally could smell breakfast cooking and his stomach rumbled in response to it.

He came downstairs just in time to see Raze tackle a senator from behind, and said senator go oof and catch himself before he could be knocked face first into a skillet where eggs were being made.

"I take it that's a yes vote?" Organa asked, once he managed to regain stable footing, though he was doing that with Raze literally hanging off of his shoulders in an oversized bear hug. Still, he was grinning broadly as he asked it, color high on his cheeks. For a second, Tally eyed him up and down and thought some very inappropriate thoughts about what the good senator would look like under him on some bedsheets. Or, for that matter, what those long legs would feel like wrapped around his
He shook it off, clearing his throat quietly, and intentionally ignored the questioning look that Maul shot his way. Explaining to his CO why he was undressing a politician with his eyes was definitely not on his agenda.

"Kriff, I love it!" Raze answered, voice high and excited, before he let go and landed back down on his feet. When he spotted Tally, he waved what looked like a black shirt with fire on it at him. "Tally! Look! The senator got us things! I got a shirt and some swim-shorts, I think I'll go with Misty when he wakes up, I know he wants to go swimming."

"Raze. Raze, keep it down," Tango groaned from the sectional couch, where he hadn't gotten up yet. Rabbit and Rancor, though, had both clearly shaken off their own hangovers; they had glasses of water in hand and still looked kind of rough, but they were dressed in-- some wildly colorful clothes and Tally felt his own lips twist into a bemused grin at the sight of them. He wished he could shake off the indulgences that fast himself, but apparently, even a year and some months in age made it harder.

"Wherever you go, stay in groups of at least two," Maul said, leaning against the counter. He looked like he was on his feet by willpower alone, but there was also something clearer about his expression; Tally had been worrying since that damned droid popper and the subsequent aftermath, but whatever Maul had been doing while Tally was asleep had been good for him, judging by the relaxed state of his shoulders and the good-humored, engaged tone of his voice. "The locals aren't universally friendly and I'd rather not have to call Bail again to, ah--"

Organa dropped his head, shaking it and giggling -- the man actually giggled-- as he moved to dump the eggs on a series of plates lined up on the counter, where there were already steaming piles of what looked like potatoes in a warming tray and some kind of meat in another. "Should I leave a coded credit chip, in case you do need ah--?

Maul failed to hold a straight face for about two seconds before he started laughing, though it was accompanied by a wince; still, an open, full-on laugh was a rare occurance from the L-T and absolutely despite himself, Tally felt his distrust in Organa dissipating like the fog in the morning sun.

"I sure wouldn't turn down some spare credits," Tally piped up, throwing some mischief into his voice, though firmly keeping any flirtation out of it. Or trying to.

"Done, then." Organa set the skillet in the sink and then gestured. "Order's up, boys! Whoever can't eat yet, I'll stick theirs in the oven to keep warm."

How fast Blackbirds appeared at that call was impressive; Shiv swooped in from the back of the house, Brody came down the stairs, Rabbit and Rancor both leapt from their loungers. Even Tango managed to drag himself up.

Tally just stood back and watched the swarm, smiling and shaking his head to himself as he did.

The Negotiator's call came just before Bail was going to leave.
The Blackbirds took to him quickly; a few of them were more awkwardly formal -- Tango and Husker, mostly -- but after breakfast and another two hours of conversation, it was clear that the squad had folded Bail right into their social structure. Raze adored him, which wasn't much of a surprise, but even Tally had apparently decided that Bail was good company and took to ribbing him occasionally, usually about economics. Maul only half listened, but when he did, it made him smile; he wasn't ready to go and try to lay down yet and free-floating anxiety kept deeper sleep elusive, but he did doze here or there, and whenever he woke up to the latest conversation, it was always entertaining.

"--not saying it's perfect, Tally. But we've come a long way since our civil war, and we're still pushing forwards. None of us are sitting on our laurels."

Tally was sitting on a lounger across from Bail, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, feet up next to the senator's hip on the opposite chair, which had been moved apparently to make the debate easier. Bail, in turn, was reclined himself, though he kept his feet on the floor. "I hear a lot about incremental change. It's usually an excuse," Tally said, dropping his chin and eying Bail down the bridge of his nose.

Smarty was also there, leaning forward from a third chair off to the side. "Playing senator's -- sorry, sir, in this context it would be Viceroy's -- advocate, Alderaan's shifting political structure towards total democracy is demonstrable. I mean, yeah, it's slow. But it's clear and on record."

Bail nodded, agreeing. "You also do have to take into account the overall political opinion," he pointed out. "Alderaan's been a monarchy from the beginning. Since House Organa took the crown, my mother instituted a census poll not only for Alderaan, but for our whole system and all of our extra solar colonies, as to what public sentiment was towards the representative monarchy we currently have, and the polls are consistently in favor of continuing it. That might change now, with the war, and if it does, then we're going to have to take that into account, but as of right now, our citizenry wants things to continue on the track that they have been."

Maul understood Alderaan's social structure barely at all, but he knew enough to know that it was a happy world compared to most. No one wanted there; no one was left out in the cold. And it was not a case of them just closing their borders to non-Alderaanians; as a world, she regularly took in refugees, as many as they could support in any given year.

He was just about to weigh in and perhaps say as much, wanting to offer support to Bail's side of the debate, but then his comm beeped in his pocket. Maul had made sure he had his issued comm on him, though it had been temporarily confiscated in the drunk tank, and had also made sure that the courier would relay any messages to it with its more powerful transmitter. When he saw who was calling on the pop-up display, he got up; at the questioning looks, he only said, "It's General Kenobi."

Obi-Wan's image appeared; he looked not-too-much the worse for wear, though tired. The connection wasn't perfect; it held, but it occasionally blurred or shifted sideways or crackled with interference. "We're just coming back into range now," he said, without preamble, though the way he actually leaned to the side as if somehow he could see from his end whether Maul was by himself was oddly endearing.

"I'm out here alone," Maul said, a half-grin sneaking up on him. Though it fell away again anyway. "We beat the scenario. I imagine Skywalker already knows that, though."
"Oh, darling. Hello." Obi-Wan blew right past the report, shoulders sagging; he leaned forward as if he could reach right through the comm connection. His eyes closed for a moment, and his voice was thick as he said, "I've missed you so. I doubt he knows, he was diverted the moment we got back, him and Ahsoka. Are you all right? Are the Blackbirds? Where are you?"

There were too many questions there for Maul to answer in full. And he was unprepared for just how intensely he felt himself; as if the longing in Obi-Wan's voice reminded him that it mirrored his own. He took a slow, slightly trembling breath in deep, then let it out just as carefully. "We're-- we're all right. I mean, we are safe. We're on Corellia; Bail's here. He, uh, had to come and-- rescue us from the drunk tank."

Obi-Wan's blink was gratifying amidst the more complicated, tangled emotions. "I-- wasn't expecting that," he said, before he broke into a smile, sort of wondering. "I don't have long, I have a lot of calling to do--" and there, Maul realized Obi-Wan had called him first, before anyone, even the Council. "--but I am looking forward to hearing the whole story. We should be in range to pick up your courier in another sixteen hours. If you want to save on fuel, then eighteen."

Maul nodded back, calculating the time in his head; they'd have to leave fairly early in the morning, but it would give the squad the rest of the day to enjoy, too. "All right. Send the rendezvous coordinates and I'll make sure we're there in eighteen hours' time. Are you all right?" he asked back, raising his brows.

"I am. I'm tired, but I am." Obi-Wan's grin took on a more rakish quality. "Better now, by far, for having seen you even in hologram form."

Maul scoffed, trying to chew down a grin, "Reprobate."

"But always yours, darling." Obi-Wan heaved out a breath. "I have to go, I've quite a bit to report to the Council. I'll catch you up when we rendezvous."

"Be safe." It was rather hard to actually let go of the comm connection; yet another surprise after so many. "We'll see you soon."

"Be safe," Obi-Wan said back, looking exactly as reluctant.

When the call ended, Maul rested his head back against the side of the house and tried to figure out how he was ever going to tell this story a second time.

Right after breakfast, most of the Blackbirds had dispersed, following Misty to the seaside, all of them adorned in their new clothes. Tally thought he was probably going to have to have a word with Tango about not glaring darts at Bail Organa's back every time the senator wasn't looking -- he knew why Tango was, because if Brody was willing to speculate on the senator and their Lieu, then of course Tango would see Organa as competition -- but for he, himself--

Aside any inappropriate lust (and kriff, that was made no easier when he actually had Organa's full attention; those dark eyes and high cheekbones were frippin' devastating), he found himself really believing that Organa meant it when he said he was trying to change things. His answers didn't sound like excuses; he was frank about how much the Republic had to lose economically if the clones were given basic sentient rights, and why so many politicians who were supposedly
honorable wouldn't sign onto his bills attempting to make it so, and he was also really clear in how he wasn't going to give up.

Tally could have brushed all of that off, but not so much how they left things.

"Thank you," Organa said, the good-natured affability usually on his face gone in favor of an earnest, serious look. "I know being a medic is your job, but handling things the way you did--" He shook his head. "Just-- thank you."

Tally had been surprised when the senator had approached him just before leaving, and he was more surprised by that. "How much did he tell you?" he asked, after a moment, because it was hard for him to even imagine Maul actually discussing things with someone, but it was also pretty obvious that he'd been talking to Organa about it.

"I imagine most of it. I mean, given I wasn't there myself." Organa looked to where Maul was across the road talking to Misty and Castle, who had apparently come back for lunch and towels and were still dripping water on the walk, then back to Tally. "But he especially made it a point to tell me how much respect you gave him, and I wanted you to know that I appreciate it. Even if it's not my life and health, I appreciate it. And that if this war ever ends, and you still want to be a doctor, I'll make sure you have a spot in our program at the U of A's School of Science and Medicine at Aldera."

Something about that statement hit Tally right in the throat; some part of him that was still an unnamed baby clone on Kamino, being told he didn't have the necessary intelligence and temperament to advance further into medicine than the field surgery program, even though he was trying so damned hard to prove them wrong. He dropped his head, swallowing, and tried to find an answer to that.

And he tried to keep his eyes from stinging too hard, too.

"And just in case you ever need to know, I'm working on Maul's situation too." Tally leaned into the hand Organa rested to the front of his shoulder, as the senator said, "Much as I'm hoping for a chance to relieve Anakin Skywalker of a few teeth, the real issue there is the Jedi Council. But I'm working on it."

"I'm glad you're his friend," Tally said, taking a few breaths to try to get himself back contained and under control, voice a little rough.

"I'd say I owe him for saving my life at least twice, maybe three times, but--" Organa offered a shrug and a small smile. "That's not why. But now, I have to go. Thank you again, Tally. Stay safe and stay alive, because I'm working on all of this."

Tally scrubbed a hand over his face, realizing that there was every damned chance he was going to go find a pillow to have a breakdown into, and bobbed his head in a nod back. "Yessir. Thank you, too."

Organa -- Bail -- gave his shoulder a squeeze, then headed out of the gate and out to join Maul, who was presumably going to walk him back to where he could get to his ship. Tally looked after them, the unlikely friends walking together, and then vanished back into the house.

The pillow was tear-stiff when he fell asleep, but the long nap he took after was more healing than any he'd ever taken, too.
(They all came back together after the sun went down; the back deck of the house had not only a place to grill -- and Bail Organa had made sure they had enough food to see them through the day, never mind the credit chip he handed over, just like he said, to cover any other expenses -- but also a jacuzzi that it was apparently possible to fit no less than eight clones in, which they knew because of course they tested it out first. Misty was sacked out on a deck chair, skin darkened by the sun, a hint of red across his cheeks and nose from sunburn; Tango, newly reassured that the senator was not stealing his crush, was trying his hand at grilling meat over charcoal, wearing his shirt with the red dragons curling over the shoulders to meet face-to-face at his chest. Husker was relaxing in the jacuzzi with Castle, while Brody was working steadily on his advertisement for Viable; Shiv had slipped out to go on his date after checking in with them, and Smarty was reading a book that had been on one of the shelves inside. Rabbit and Rancor looked the best sort of dazed, as if the whole day, minus their hungover morning, had been the very best they had ever lived. Raze, unsurprisingly, was sprawled on Misty, snoring and peaceful. Maul was relaxing in a hammock at the very back -- wearing a loose, subdued blue button-down over a new black t-shirt -- and dozing occasionally, or looking up at the stars through the trees the rest of the time.)

(Tally just watched over them all and waited for dinner to be finished and loved them and dared to feel hope.)
Dear Flanker,

I know it's been awhile.

I must have started this letter a hundred times in my head, while we were out there on Bravo-984. Maybe more. And the longer I went without writing, the more I panicked because how was I ever gonna catch you up? How was I ever gonna fit it all into one letter? How would I ever be able to tell you everything when there was so much of it, and make it so you could follow along? I mean, writing the squad's after-action report is one thing, there I just have to cover the facts, at least all the facts that I can cover. Some things never make it into reports, even though they happened. You know how it goes.

But the rest of it. How do I tell you the rest of it?

I kept thinking: I gotta tell Flanker--

Our brothers out there face loss by saying that our dead are only marching far away. And the Jedi always say that no one ever really dies, they just become one with the Force. I know why they do it, I guess maybe for the same reason I still write you letters; in the end, we want to believe that our dead can hear us and see us and are never really gone.

But I don't feel like either of those, brother. I feel like-- I feel like I'm the one marching, instead. And that you're a fixed point in time which every step leads me further away from. And like these letters are me looking over my shoulder and seeing you getting further away in the distance behind me, and not being able to stand it.

Kriff.

I don't know how to catch you up. You keep getting smaller into the distance no matter how many words I put down. And I don't want to leave you behind, but every step I take forward means that I have to. And you're forever frozen there, just as I remembered you, and I guess sometimes I get scared that you won't recognize me anymore, and that one day I'll look back and you'll be around a bend I didn't feel myself taking.

I don't know why my mind's going there. We're back on the courier -- Tango's started calling it the Nest -- and we got about two hours before we rendezvous with the Negotiator. We got to spend about two days on Corellia, and were put up by Senator Organa in this nice beach house after he got us out of the drunk tank; I knew he and Maul were friends, but I don't think I realized that it wasn't some kind of political thing or some kind of odd acquaintance until I got to see them interact with each other. Now I think they'd probably lay themselves bodily across a river of lava, if it would give the other a bridge to somewhere safe, and maybe that's why I was reminded of you.

Or maybe it was Dani. She's with CorSec, a senior deputy constable. I met her officially for the first time when she arrested us for a bar fight. Lookin' at her made me think of the Wheel and think of you; here I was, meeting another beautiful zelliron, and you weren't there to groan at me or accuse me of stealing her attention or anything. Instead, I went and talked to her while we were being
outprocessed, scored a date and spent the night with her, though I had to leave early to get back to the courier.

The sex was dynamite. So was the pillow-talking. So was the holding and the breathing. Waking up with her head on my shoulder and her hair all over my arm and chest, in the pink dawn light--

She was funny and kind and I hope she feels as taken care of as I do.

Geez, brother. There's nothing coherent about this letter, I'm sorry.

I almost fell off a cliff. One second I was standing there, then I was falling. If not for the lieu and then the rest of the squad, I'd be my own fixed point in time. Would I be allowed to walk back to yours, if I was?

Would they keep looking back over their shoulders to find me, if I did?

Oh frip. I was getting kind of emotional and one of the guys asked what was wrong, and I explained about what it felt like thinking about you and it got Rabbit crying. We're about a half-hour from the rendezvous now. I think he'll be okay. I guess maybe he gets it better than most, him and Rancor, not because they've lost each other, or because one of them walked too far ahead, but because they've probably thought about it themselves. What they would do, if it happened.

I want to tell them that they would be okay, maybe not right away, maybe not even for a long time, but--

But I don't know that, do I? Not really. Because I panic about trying to fit all these events into a letter that you can never read. Because I look back over my shoulder and watch you receding into the distance.

I guess, what I'm trying to say, is that I love them. And it hurts that I'll never get to show them all off to you, or find enough words to tell you about all these things that happened. That for the first time, I can't write everything down for you because it's so much. It's so much. And it hurts because I know, I think, that this is the first step I'm taking around the bend.

I love you, brother. I know I didn't say that when you were there to say that to. I know that I always felt it, though, and I know that I never doubted that you loved me. But I wish I had said it. Maybe it's not too late to shout it back down the road.

Anyway, I'll leave you with something good. This was this morning; I took it before I had to leave Dani and come back here.
And, of course, *The Raze Report*:
Check him out. I won't be surprised if I catch him wearing that shirt under his armor, he likes it so much. I've taken to calling him and Rabbit and Rancor the Triple R Trio, because they form a mini-squad inside the squad. It makes me happy that they have, just like it makes me happy that Tally and Husk have found their brotherhood and that our ex-shinies have names now, and that Misty got to go swimming, and that Maul has a friend who loves him enough to-- uh, rescue him and us from jail and make sure we're okay.

Not all of this road is pain.

I'll write again. Sooner, this time, I hope.

-Shiv
Extra: The Warmth of a Cold War

This awesome extra for Blackbirds was written by B_Radley, who wrote Dani's POV of her night spent with Shiv. Read (and comment!) on it here, and if you love Dani as much as we do, there are a ton of stories about her over on B's side of things! And if you're a regular reader, there's been a lot posted lately; I'd apologize, but instead, I'll just hope you enjoy the reading materials. XD
Chapter Notes

This chapter has its light moments, but it gets very heavy at points. Many thanks to my best fiend Shadowmaat, and to B_Radley, and to Laurel, for helping me get through it and get it right. <3

And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition—
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

-T.S. Eliot; East Coker

Standing on the Negotiator again was-- surreal.

Shiv still felt a little off-kilter from his letter to Flanker when they landed, sometime during the morning watch; shipboard time was coordinated to Coruscant time, and was a few hours behind that town on Corellia in that regard, which just added to the sense of being displaced.

He hadn't managed to completely sort through things, but he had gotten a start on his reports while they were making that last ten minute leg to the ship. He knew General Kenobi was going to want to have it in hand as soon as possible, and he kind of wanted to get it out of the way and hope it provided some of the closure that the actual mission's end didn't, thanks to Alpha's kiffin' droid popper.

"I have to include that, Tally," he had said, as they were finishing up disembarking; Tally had already chased Maul off of the newly (if unofficially) dubbed Nest, because apparently their lieutenant was just as mildly lost as they were about being back here and had lingered around looking exactly like he had no idea that he was supposed to get off the ship and go unpack and rest, and then once he was gone, Tally had brought up Maul's concern about word getting back to the Jedi Council that he had been compromised like that.

Hearing Tally, of all people, wanting to body-swerve bringing it up instead of going balls-to-the-bulkhead to get it fixed had knocked Shiv momentarily speechless. When Tally took in his look and explained why Maul didn't want to turn it into an incident, Shiv--

The idea that someone -- that the Jedi Council -- had once calmly discussed just killing their
lieutenant, as if he was some rabid akk dog to be put down and not a person, made Shiv's stomach crawl into his throat and twist there. But even as he shuddered to his bones for the thought, he knew he couldn't just ignore the droid popper happening at all, because it was almost certainly going to be in Alpha's and Kix's reports.

"Kix said he won't go into details," Tally said, seriously, standing and waiting for Shiv with his dufflebag's strap over his shoulder. "And I promised I wouldn't. And I don't think Alpha's in any hurry to go and volunteer that he coulda killed an officer on a training mission. I don't like it either, Shiv, but I'm not gonna put Maul back into their crosshairs until he's ready to fight that battle. And right now, he's really not."

"So, I should just say it stunned him and didn't end up with the burns and the rest?" Shiv asked back, his own anxiety over that idea threading its way through his shoulders

"Put down 'mild injuries' because that's something that can be confirmed." Tally scrubbed at his face one-handedly. "Technically, it's the truth."

"I don't--" Shiv grabbed his own bag, cutting himself off, then headed for the ramp down and off the ship shaking his head. "Okay. I'll do that. But I think we need to--"

"--get Castle on designing some kind of external shielding?" the medic asked, a hint of a smile tugging on his mouth, if wanly.

It did make Shiv smile back, even for the worry. "Yeah, lookit you, reading my mind."

"Part and parcel of my job," Tally just said back, reaching out to clasp the back of his neck for a brief, affectionate squeeze as they walked.

The other Blackbirds were long gone by then, probably back to their shared bunk room. Shiv noticed the way the other troopers on the hangar deck watched them, and he wondered in the back of his mind how different they looked since they had disembarked. At how much more like a unit they looked, instead of a scattering of clones stuck together.

"Feels like we've been gone longer than we have," he said, hefting his gear over his shoulder and looking forward to hitting his rack. Pleasurable as his night with Dani had been, he hadn't exactly gotten a full night's sleep.

"That's a surprise?" Tally asked back, casting a good-humored and tired glance over.

"Nah, not really." They slipped off the hangar deck and into the corridors; it was the middle of the morning watch and most everyone was at their stations working or preparing for work, leaving it quiet. Shiv figured they'd get their new orders pretty soon, so he wasn't going to fret about it until after a shower, some rack time and one very large cup of caf come morning. "Wonder if our caf maker is still there."

"I'll bet if it's not there, it will be by morning." Tally smirked, which was when Shiv realized who it was who liberated it in the first place.

He laughed at that, long and deep and much-needed; while he hadn’t asked any questions about who liberated the thing, he had his guesses and Tally had been on the very bottom of that list. Though, on reflection of all of the things Shiv had learned since then, he probably shouldn’t have been.

They fell into a companionable silence as they wound their way towards their bunk room, and Shiv almost didn’t process what he was seeing when he came around the corner to find their general had their lieutenant crowded back against the wall. He froze there, bristling instantly in his surprise as he
pulled Tally back around the corner, just to give them a moment to assess the situation and what it meant.

If he was bristling, Tally was outright ready to launch; Shiv could feel the muscles knotting under his hand, and he kept a grip on the medic while they peeked around the corner.

It was definitely not, uh– a fighting kind of pinning.

Maul had both hands in the general's hair, and Kenobi was kissing him with such fervor that he had Maul's head back against the bulkhead with the force of it. It was exactly the devouring kind of kiss of reuniting lovers, and Shiv had-- no idea how to feel about it. Shocked, for sure. Protective, yeah. But mixed, too; when Kenobi's hands drifted down and brushed past where Maul had been burned, and Maul flinched from the touch, Kenobi broke the kiss in what looked like clear worry, murmuring something or another and easing back a fraction.

Though he didn't get far before it was Maul who was pulling him back in for another kiss.

“Oh,” Tally whispered; the tension hadn't gone out of his arm yet, but it was clear enough he'd figured out the tenor of that at the same time Shiv had, and that neither of them had cause to rush in there and rip the general away from their Lieu.

Shiv nodded silently, then turned and pulled Tally the other way; they could take the long way back to their bunks.

Once they were definitely out of earshot -- even their Lieu's better-than-human earshot -- Tally said, "This just got really kriffin' complicated, didn't it?"

The question was clearly rhetorical, but Shiv nodded again anyway. "Yeah. FUBAR kind of complicated."

"Frip," Tally sighed. "Just-- frip."

If Obi-Wan had been aware that their display in the hallway had been witnessed, he would have spent the next however long in a panic, but he wasn't.

Instead, he was relieved. And glad that Maul had returned with his squad, safely.

And he also was overwhelmed.

After being drugged, chained to Dooku, dealing with Anakin and the Count both, dealing with Hondo-- after all of that, and the deep well of frustration that he couldn't do anything to capture Dooku and the even deeper well of hostility he had been pinned inside of (and unfortunately helped perpetuate), getting word on the Blackbirds' victory and their comparative safety was a sweet spot amidst a great deal of reporting, explaining, coordinating, catching up and otherwise Being a General.

But when they picked up the courier, he had managed to break away from his neverending duties and headed down to meet them, and the sight of Maul in the hallway trudging in the direction of their
shared quarters had cracked something in him.

Obi-Wan had known that they were alone, though even if they hadn't been, it would have taken all of his restraint not to do what he did next.

They hadn't even said anything before coming together; his hands lit on Maul's face, then shoulders, and then Maul slid fingers into his hair and they were kissing; pressed so close, feeling so unguarded and joyful for their reunion, Obi-Wan mapped his darling's mouth anew and squeezed his eyes closed tight against the sting in them, and against the desperation and longing that he had managed to keep banked in his heart, but never entirely forgot.

It was only after their second kiss had broken that he asked again, "Are you all right?" He'd felt the padding of the bandages through Maul's t-shirt and the subsequent flinch, and it had jolted him out of their first kiss, though he could sense no edge of serious pain and Maul had drawn him back into that second kiss before bothering to answer his question.

"Tired," Maul replied, with a head tilt in lieu of a shrug; Obi-Wan could feel that exhaustion radiating off of him, too, along with some phantom sensation of soreness from his midsection, which suggested that he was too worn to bother holding onto stronger shields right now. "Still standing, though."

Obi-Wan managed to resist taking his hand to lace their fingers together, though he put a hand to the back of Maul's shoulder as if he could lend a bit more strength. "Come on, let me walk with you. I'll make you tea and-- and we can talk, before I have to get to the command deck; we're heading for Juma 9, though we won't get there until tomorrow evening."

Maul nodded, falling into step with him; he was wearing his usual black, and an overshirt not dissimilar from the one that Bail had gifted him on Alderaan, albeit closer to his own size; there was no sign of his parka. His lips quirked in a rueful looking smile. "I'm not sure where to start."

"Tea. And you, off your feet for a bit; it looks like you need it," Obi-Wan said, even as he was surprised by the thumping of his own heart.

That Maul didn't offer so much as a token argument to that suggested how much he probably did need to sit down for awhile; he only nodded acquiescence, and once they were through the door of their quarters, he set his bag aside and then sat on the couch, leaning back into the space between the backrest and the arm of it, tucked into the corner.

It was decidedly hard to not just-- plaster himself against Maul, but Obi-Wan moved to go and get a kettle on. "Do you want to start? What happened, how did you get hurt? How bad is it?"

"Not bad. How did you end up in trouble?" Maul asked back, just pointed enough to get it across that he didn't want to be the one to start talking at length.

"Well, we had been on the way to Quell when you and the Blackbirds disembarked; we managed to get that situation under control for the stationed ground forces, and then Anakin and Ahsoka were diverted to Mon Gazza while I stayed to help with securing the situation on Quell, heading up our troops as well as the 501st. Which tea do you want, darling?"

"Any's fine." Maul stifled a yawn behind him, and Obi-Wan glanced back just to catch the end of it, which had his heart aching in warmth.

Something herbal, then, he thought as he got into their cupboards, searching through as he continued, "While I was there, Anakin had intelligence sent to him from the 332nd; he headed off in
a Starfighter to handle that at a Separatist outpost in the Outer Rim, and after he came back from destroying a prototype droid they were developing -- a Jedi Hunter, for Force's sake -- we met up again just in time to arrive at an opportunity to capture Dooku.” He frowned as he went through their boxes and tins of tea, lining them up neatly on the counter-top, looking for the perfect one: something with good body, but no caffeine, something Maul would find pleasing and relaxing both. “Since the 212th and the 501st were handling the mopping up operations on Quell, I left Cody and Rex in charge, and he and I and Ahsoka headed off with his starfighter and the Twilight to see if we could get him aboard the Separatist ship. We ended up dropping wreckage in an ice field, along with Anakin's starfighter -- and Anakin -- in the hopes that they would pick it up. Which, of course, they did-- only to end up capturing Anakin. Admittedly, that was the plan all along. I suited up for EVA and told Ahsoka to get the Twilight back to the Resolute and--” He paused, finding the perfect tea, an Outer Rim import that they had gotten a few years ago, vacuum sealed to keep it fresh, and turned with it--

--only to find Maul dead asleep, head lolled to the side at that neck-aching angle that reminded Obi-Wan of months ago, in the Halls of Healing.

He set the tin of tea aside, then covered his mouth with one hand, the other pressing over his own confused heart.

He had known, when he had started putting together the Blackbirds, that it meant-- it meant giving something up. That it meant sharing his darling’s time and care and attention. In fact, when he had been sitting there agonizing over it, bouncing it off of Bail, it had been very much with that as part of the goal; there was no strict logistical need for the Blackbirds to exist, but for as much as Obi-Wan appreciated having Maul at his side, on the battlefield and off, Obi-Wan never let himself lose sight of what Zigoola had taught him.

Watching Maul take so easily to Bail, and indeed Bail taking so easily to Maul in turn, had driven home just how alone and isolated Maul really was. That aside himself and Vokara Che -- and she was his healer, rather than his friend -- he'd had no one else who--

No one else who knew all of the good things about him. His courage and his loyalty, his quick and clever sense of humor. His dogged endurance in the face of odds, even the worst kinds of odds. They didn't know him; those who even knew of him rarely knew what to make of him, unless they had already set their minds on him being dangerous. They didn't know how long he'd had to walk, stumble and pull himself along to find even this kind of stability and peace in a galaxy that had done its very best to remove any trace of it from his life, before he was even old enough to walk.

They didn't know how deep his ability to care went, provided it was something which he chose for himself.

Putting together the Blackbirds was-- was not a question of letting go, but of giving his darling something that Obi-Wan couldn't provide himself. And it was giving those men, a small enough number that Obi-Wan could justify pulling them from all over the GAR, a CO that Obi-Wan knew would protect their lives and interests. He had chosen them for their ability to think independently, but he had been aware of their other qualities as well; of Tally's cynical distrust, and of Raze's difficulty focusing, and of Husker's rough and painful bouncing around.

He had hoped, when he had put the squad together and then handed them unexpectedly to Maul, that Maul would choose them; would grow attached to them and they to him, even if Obi-Wan had meant it when he had said that he would turn them over to someone else if Maul decided he didn't want to lead them.

He turned and took the kettle off of their stovetop, then moved over to see if he could get Maul into
their bed; he was careful picking Maul up -- for whatever was hurting him, for the sake of not startling him -- and it caused another sharp tweak in his heart when Maul didn't so much as change his pattern of breathing, apparently so beat that even being bodily lifted wasn't enough to stir him back awake.

There was a time, even only a few years ago, where Obi-Wan could not have gotten away with such a simple thing. He was intensely aware of that, too, as he stood for a moment with Maul up in his arms.

*I'm so very proud of you,* Obi-Wan thought, warm and aching with the truth of it, feeling it through his whole body, as he moved and carefully set his darling down in their bed, then went to get his boots off first; he thought it instead of said it, because he knew saying those words aloud would be met with confusion and wariness and uncertainty, or even outright deflection.

And so Obi-Wan lived it, instead, in the hopes that Maul would feel it anyway, asleep or awake, for now and for always.

"General."

Tally's voice had a frosty note in it that made Obi-Wan blink, but he offered back a smile anyway, moving back to the area the medics had in the *Negotiator's* medbay.

He had stayed in bed holding Maul for an hour before making himself get up; after getting Maul's boots off, he'd managed to wrangle the shirts off, as well, and the sight of the bandages wound from cybernetics up to Maul's lowermost ribs made his heart plunge and dip into something cold with worry, though he was careful to keep that to himself. Still, he was gentle and careful gathering Maul into his arms, tucked against him, head on his shoulder; just the weight of Maul there, warm and breathing and back somewhere that Obi-Wan could protect him had nearly moved Obi-Wan to tears.

He didn't nap during that hour, despite a long-delayed need for his own respite; he just held his darling and stroked the edges of his mask, and tried to remind himself that he would get the rest of the story later and that if Maul was this difficult to rouse, he was probably desperately in need of the unbroken rest.

He would have happily stayed there all through the day, if not for the Being a General part of things. Most of the Blackbirds were asleep, absent Raze and Tally, the former of whom showed off a shirt that Bail had bought for him. According to him, the squad was split down the middle as to whether those were flowers or flames on it; Obi-Wan had declared they looked like flames to him, which made Raze beam at him widely, since he thought so too. Then he had told him that Tally was off restocking his kit and so Obi-Wan had headed that way.

"Welcome back," he said, pausing a couple meters away, not sure what to make of Tally's standoffishness. "You and Raze are the only ones currently awake; I was wondering if you felt up to telling me about the mission?"

Tally eyed him, then went back to his meticulous resupply. "I'll turn in my report within the next day or so. No doubt the lieutenant and Shiv will do the same."
Obi-Wan frowned a little bit, internally; he probably could make it an order, but he was loathe to do so. This was Maul's squad, regardless of being under his own banner. "No injuries?"

That was apparently a question Tally found-- either amusing or troublesome, it was impossible to tell by his expression. The medic dropped his head, mouth twisting in a distinctly sardonic smile, jaw working, and then he looked up, brown eyes narrowing in a manner that seemed almost threatening. "You already know the answer to that. At least in part."

That was the truth, but Obi-Wan felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up anyway. He took in a breath and then just said, firmly, though not unkindly, "I'm guessing that you have a point to get to, Tally. I suggest you do, and perhaps we can work out whatever unpleasantness has sprung up between us."

There was a flicker of uncertainty across Tally's face and it reminded Obi-Wan quickly of how young the medic was, him and all of his brothers. But then that uncertainty vanished under a steel mask. "He's your subordinate. But more, General, you're holding him prisoner. I'm having a hard time imagining how you and Maul could have developed a relationship without coercion being somehow involved."

Obi-Wan's guts immediately flooded with ice water, and he must have looked as panicked by that statement as he felt, because Tally went from glaring at him to looking uncertain again, and perhaps a little guilty, though he was obviously trying not to look like either of those. Just to buy himself a few seconds to grasp that their hallway reunion had been witnessed, Obi-Wan held up a hand and worked on centering himself.

It wasn't as if Tally was not asking things which had already been asked. More recently by Bail, before Zigoola. But before that, by Obi-Wan himself. And while it was a shock to have yet more people know, including people who could make their lives very difficult, (though Obi-Wan didn't think Tally would), he held onto the truths that he and Maul had laid down, and at a time when both of them were defenseless to each other as they tried to survive the hostile world around them.

He tried to think of how to explain it, and that was no easy thing, but it deserved all due care. He rubbed over his mouth, then crossed his arms, unable to help the defensive gesture despite himself. "You're not asking anything new, I'm afraid. Before you, it was Bail questioning it. And I'd been asking myself that since Iloh, coming up on six years ago now," he said, breathing out slowly and controlled after. "I didn't even stop asking myself that until Maul quite firmly told me that he chose this, while we were on Zigoola. Mind you, I've never held the leash that the Jedi Council insists be kept on him regardless of how much he has proven himself, but I worried myself whether or not he felt he had a choice in it."

Tally crossed his own arms, leaning against the counter where his supplies were, putting that to his back and not taking his gaze off of Obi-Wan's face. "You cut him in half," he said, plainly and flatly, blunt like a mallet and nearly as painful.

Tally had been Obi-Wan's very first pick for that squad. And even if his heart was still pounding from adrenaline and his stomach was twisting miserably, this-- was a large part of why.

He closed his eyes at that, even though it stuck in his guts. "Not a single day of my life goes by that I don't regret it, too. If I could go back and change it, I would; in a moment, I would, in a heartbeat, without hesitation. I can't. I can only do my best by him now." A beat. "I don't-- think it is appropriate to go into the details of our relationship, though Maul is more than welcome to tell you whatever he likes about it. And if you don't believe me when I say that we are-- are together because we mutually chose one another, even accounting for the hurts in our past, then perhaps you'll believe him."
Tally's mouth was in a line as he listened to all of that, though he hadn't interrupted. Then he shook his head. "Sir-- I want to believe you, but--"

"You can believe him."

Both Tally and Obi-Wan jumped, heads turning in the same direction; like a ghost, Maul had somehow managed to slip in without either of them noticing. He had pulled his black t-shirt back on, and now he just stood there, just out of the shadows from the part of the bay that wasn't in use.

"Why are you up?" Obi-Wan asked, frowning. "I didn't wake you, did I? I hadn't meant to."

"My pillow vanished, and when I realized, I went looking for it," Maul answered, off-handedly. Despite the odd situation, that made Obi-Wan smile; it meant that Maul at least knew Obi-Wan had been holding him. Then Maul looked back at Tally again, and the-- the softness in his eyes as he took in the medic was something new, something Obi-Wan realized had been earned on Bravo-984. "I'm with him because I want to be, Tally. Because I chose to be. That's all."

Tally absorbed that, then nodded. "That makes him your, uh-- significant other? Next of kin, I guess? So when he comes around poking about you--"

"If it saves me having to detail it, by all means," Maul answered, with a hint of a tongue-in-cheek grin, though there was a rueful quality to it that was worrying.

"Yes, sir." Tally looked at Obi-Wan for a long moment, then they both looked back at Maul and said, in unwitting unison, "You should go back to bed."

The stereo of that had Maul jerk his head backwards a tick, though the way it made him squint at them in clear amusement had Obi-Wan grinning back, rather helplessly infatuated with that expression. "Well, when you put it like that," Maul said, shaking his head at them, before turning around to vanish into the shadows again.

Silence hung in the air for a few moments, then Obi-Wan said, "About the mission--" at the same time as Tally started, "Kriff, that explains the--"

They paused, then Obi-Wan gestured, smiling. "You first."

"I was just saying, that explains the horns." Tally gestured to his own temple, and Obi-Wan realized it was in reference to where Maul had had his temple horns cut flat after Alderaan; while Maul had never explained it to Obi-Wan, he hadn't had to.

"I love holding him like that," Obi-Wan only said, softly, feeling no need to fill in the gaps more than that. Then he asked, "Will you tell me what happened?"

Later, he would wish that he could have held onto the joy of reuniting longer.

Maul had an arm wrapped around Obi-Wan's usual pillow and his face half-buried in it; even for the anger burning in his veins, something in Obi-Wan remained detached enough from it to feel tender at the sight.
Tally had said that the burns would probably be healed before the week was up; that it was slow only because they weren't surface, and it took longer for the bacta to absorb deeper into the tissue. But instead of the sight of those bandages worrying him, now they made Obi-Wan furious.

He hadn't been surprised by Maul having some trouble sleeping in proximity to the squad, but he had been mildly, pleasantly surprised with how Tally had handled that. He had felt something in his chest turn to lead when he heard about Shiv's near-miss with death and Maul having his shoulder torn up to prevent it; it was on hearing about that part that the fear started creeping into his veins, though Obi-Wan could keep it contained.

But ultimately, it was the damned EMP grenade that had sent a shock through him, as if he had been hit with it himself.

"Maul doesn't want me to take a fight to the Council over it," Tally had said, sounding like he wanted nothing more than to do so. "I won't; I'm not going to break his trust. But this situation isn't going to go away. It's not going to magically resolve on its own."

Obi-Wan had always had mixed feelings about those cybernetics. He did have an appreciation that before anyone else in the galaxy would have thought to, Vokara Che had pushed hard to make sure Maul would have the best that he could be given. And there was no doubt in Obi-Wan's mind that if the Council would have denied her, in her pushing, Maul would have eventually found a permanent way out of living like that, largely immobile and denied any manner of dignity, probably by making sure that the next blood vessel he tore out was enough to make it too quick to prevent.

There had been a period of time, very early on, where Obi-Wan had reassured himself that while he could not take back his swing, the replacement legs would somehow balance the scales. That they were imperfect, maybe, compared to the flesh and blood and bone they replaced, but that they were a good thing. There had been a time after he fell in love, after he knew every line written in black on Maul's skin, that he realized he would never know the shape of the rest of those markings, or whether the tips of Maul's toes had been black like the tips of his fingers.

Every time the thought of sex even crossed his mind, he shoved it away.

Right now, though... right now, those cybernetics, the ones that had given Maul back mobility and some measure of limited freedom -- as much as Obi-Wan could debate and advocate for and more by the week -- looked like a terrible trap that was going to spring closed.

They looked like a weapon; the barrel of a blaster, pointed at Maul's head.

Or the lit blade of a lightsaber, just like the one Obi-Wan had held.

Anakin had been the one to wield the threat most recently.

Anakin had ordered that EMP attack.

Some part of Obi-Wan was still scrambling desperately to absolve his former padawan. He told himself-- he told himself that Anakin couldn't have done that; that he had sent Alpha-17 and Alpha (at the best of times a hardened soldier) had come up with the idea himself. He told himself that Anakin had not gone so far, as to try to actually hurt Maul, even if he had set up a dreadfully unfair scenario for the Blackbirds. He told himself that Anakin couldn't be that cruel. Or that if he had actually ordered it, then he couldn't have known about all of the thousands of ramifications; about the actual physical danger, about the potential for injury or death, about how the Council could and probably would react by pulling Maul back to the Temple if they were given even the flimsiest of excuses, about how the Blackbirds would be disbanded or handed to someone who they had not
been carefully picked to work with, about how shattered both of those things would leave Maul and
very likely his squad, because they-- because they had done what Obi-Wan had intended, and they
had bonded together just like he had hoped they would.

*Obi-Wan* hadn't even considered the danger of an EMP against unshielded cybernetics; he had not
even taken the time to figure out that they wouldn't have been hardened against it. He had just
assumed that the quality of them, as high as it was, would have covered that, too. He didn't think the
Council or Che had considered it yet, either; if they started to--

He lied to himself, but he knew the truth.

Anakin had wanted to *devastate* Maul. To what end, Obi-Wan wasn't sure, because from this angle,
it seemed little more than spite. And Anakin had been willing to forsake any amount of honor to do
it.

Obi-Wan wasn't really sure how to cope with that truth, no matter his scrambling attempts at
justification born of love for the boy he half raised meeting his love of the person he wanted to spend
the rest of his life with.

"He said the situation was precarious," Tally had said, mouth twisted in a wounded bow. "He was
understating it."

When Obi-Wan had come up with the idea for this squad, it had been with the best of intentions. He
had wanted to give Maul a chance to bond with others, people who he could teach and learn from,
much like Maul had discovered in befriending Bail. He had wanted to give the Blackbirds what he
could not give his battalion in full, despite aching to: A commanding officer who could prioritize
their lives and safety first, and the Republic's objectives only after; a small enough unit that they
could get away with being insular and loyal mostly unto themselves, even as he knew they would
also be effective.

He had wanted to give Maul a chance to show his hard-won skills; to give him a chance to build a
service record strong enough that even the Council could not argue with it, so that when the war
ended, Obi-Wan could petition for Maul's permanent freedom based on it, and then they could walk
away from all of it together. And, in the meantime, he wanted to give Maul enough *allies* who would
speak on his behalf when the time came.

Looking at his sleeping darling, he wondered if he had not been horribly naïve.

"What do I do with this?" he had asked, breathlessly, not even really asking Tally, though Tally had
been the only one to hear it. Perhaps asking it of the Force, or the galaxy, or-- or himself, even if
none of those provided answers.

It was Tally who spoke, though. "I don't know, sir," he had said, with the frank honesty that Obi-
Wan had always appreciated, and now more than ever. "It's too late to yank Maul back behind the
lines; we've walked too far together now for that. It's too late to take back the mission to Bravo-984.
It's too late to challenge Skywalker about it, because if you do, we're all going to be in the crosshairs
then, thanks to Tano and our espionage, including her. It's too late to take back any of it, so--" The
medic paused and rubbed his eyes, shaking his head, and Obi-Wan again thought about his age and
about *regret*. "I don't know. Let us do what you put us all together to do. And just-- keep Skywalker
the hell away from us. And maybe we'll know the answers down the road."

After leaving Tally, Obi-Wan had gone back to Being a General; he had gone back to receive
mission reports, updates on the too-many campaigns of the GAR; Anakin was radio-silent right now,
which was probably for the better, though thinking that made him feel guilty. He had gone and
coordinated protection details for supply lines and hyperspace lanes, and had worked on the inventory requirements for their next stocking run, and had reviewed the Juma 9 facility. He had managed to all of that, and then he had come back here again, no closer to solving any the problems looming over them.

Now, he sat on the edge of the bed and looked at Maul and burned in his heart with anger and love and guilt and fear and tried to figure out what to do with any of it.

He found he didn't know what to do with anger or the guilt, or the fear which came with that uncertainty.

Maul stirred a little, maybe having sensed him there; he scrubbed his face against the pillow he had been cuddling, then blinked sleepily, and Obi-Wan braced himself for the apology he expected, even if he had been one of the people who chased Maul back to bed.

Except, this time Maul didn't give it.

He looked, for a moment, like he was about to; like he was going to apologize for having the audacity just to sleep when he was tired and needed it, but then he shifted backwards to his own side of the bed and let go of Obi-Wan's pillow and held up his arm in invitation.

Obi-Wan took it; crawled into bed properly, heedless of boots or sheets, and plastered himself up against Maul, tucking his head under his darling's chin, minding the burns, and for as hard as he tried, he couldn't contain the tears that came from some place he couldn't even name, or the way his breathing turned to sobbing at the warm breath through his hair and against his scalp, to match the warm reassurance -- "It's all right, I have you." -- that came with it.

He didn't know what to do with the anger or the guilt, or the fear.

But at least he knew what to do with the love.

He had to believe that would be enough, for now.

Shiv's report was made up of events in bullet-points, which covered only half of the actual events and none of the emotions involved.

Tally's report was much the same.

Maul's was more succinct than both, and he filed it for the Council's eventual perusal without remorse.

We came, we saw, we conquered.

-Maul, 2nd Lieutenant, 212th Attack Battalion
"Feels a little like-- like someone else putting on your underwear."

Husker's eyebrow climbed of its own accord, as he swung his head over to look at the little brother next to him, at Rancor's whispered words; Rancor, sitting next to him, looked back at him expectantly, like that wasn't a weird thing to say at all.

Though, after Husker thought about it for a few moments, the analogy did seem pretty apt. He looked around at the few dozen brothers packed into the Nest with the Blackbirds; took in General Kenobi and Commander Cody sitting uncomfortably packed in just the same. Then he only nodded. "Yeah, it really kind of does, kid."

Juma 9 was a captured Separatist station; what made it notable was its high level scanning capabilities and the fact that it was within decent distance of several Republic interests. The intention had been for the Negotiator to refuel there, drop off a platoon of clones to bring the station's manpower up to acceptable levels, and then for the battlegroup to continue on to the 212th's next assignment.

Needless to say, that wasn't how it happened.

Husk was fairly used to the chaos that made up life in the Grand Army of the Republic. When the bulk of the enemy's forces didn't need to eat or sleep, when their side didn't bleed and need recovery time, only replacements, they could afford to fight on dozens of fronts at once without any seeming loss of efficiency. Blow one clanker away, ten more were right behind; take down one foundry, and there would be two more coming online somewhere even harder to get to. Situations changed not by the day or week, but by the hour; most of the time, it frankly felt like they were all just playing catch up.

Privately, Husker thought that they could just pin a star map on a wall, throw darts and find trouble anywhere those darts landed, for all the more sense it ever seemed to make.

Ryloth, in particular, was an ongoing mostly-but-not-always-unmitigated disaster. Even though Husk tended to just keep his eye on his own null-g court, he was aware that the situation on Ryloth was particularly complicated and never seemed in sight of ending. While the Blackbirds were in training, the 212th had been there. Now, most of the 212th was going back there, as was General Skywalker, Commander Tano and General Secura's forces, in addition to however many others.
Except, not all of the 212th. Because Juma 9 still needed its reinforcements.

It only took Husk about five seconds to realize that the Blackbirds were tapped to play escort because General Skywalker had made it back from Maridun alive, and General Kenobi didn't want them in proximity to Skywalker right now. Husk wasn't sure how to feel about that part; he wanted to talk to his former General and see what he had to say for himself about that training mission, both in how unfair it was and in how Alpha had taken Maul down. On the other hand, Kenobi probably thought it would be a good idea to let tempers cool some -- not unreasonable, really -- before putting them anywhere near each other. They'd only just gotten back yesterday morning, and now, they were right back off again.

Well, this ain't exactly what we were trained for, but it's closer, Husk thought, with a mental shrug.

"I think we should look into getting some paint," Raze was saying, where he was sitting with Brody, who looked disgruntled about not being able to bring his datapad to work on. He'd updated all of them the night before that every account Skywalker had now was receiving a flood of virility-enhancement solicitation and that once the General signed on the HoloNet, the algorithms that handled advertising had pegged him as a man in need of serious help in that department.

Husker might have admonished him about it, but it was ultimately harmless and it made Brody feel better.

"For what?" Rabbit asked, from the other side of Rancor. Despite none of the Blackbirds considering their ex-shinies to still be shinies after a training mission that was a little too real for all of them, their regular issued armor was still pristine and white; when Raze pointed to his armor, Rabbit looked down at it and his cheeks flushed. "Oh."

"We don't want you mistaken for new meat," Husk added, kind of side-ways reassurance. "Since you're not anymore."

Rabbit's face went even more red, but the grin he wore was nice to see. The entire squad was still tired from that run on Bravo-984, and therefore, more subdued than they had been before it. Husker thought probably that would correct itself once the whole thing had a chance to settle into their minds, though.

And in the meantime, he could keep trying to work out how to reconcile himself between his new commanding officer and his former one, in the hopes that he could find some way to be at real peace with both.

He had a long way to go to get there, but not as long as it had once been.

Maul had probably been transparent to at least eleven people in the back of the Nest when he had claimed the co-pilot's seat, but he still wasn't sorry he had.

He had rapidly adapted to being surrounded by people since his inclusion in the war effort; there was no avoiding it, when you were moving around as part of an entire battalion, but adapting to it didn't mean it ever sat easily with him. He had an easier time with the clones than he did with civilians or Jedi, at least; while they were all individuals, regardless of their genetic code, he knew essentially what to expect of them. Even then, being packed in on a courier with a platoon's worth, in addition
to his own squad, was enough to have him feeling on-edge.

Tango was apparently enjoying the company, though. He talked about the courier, and what he wanted to do if they managed to score her as their permanently assigned ship. He talked about other ships he had flown, and launched into a rambling but interesting discussion on the latest class of starfighters. He didn't seem put off by having a mostly quiet audience, and he was excited when Maul did engage some by talking about his Scimitar; after dragging out every possibly detail Maul could remember about his old ship, Tango expressed jealousy that he hadn't ever gotten to fly one like her.

Now, though, they were on approach to Juma 9 and Maul was looking forward to off-loading their guests. Like Husker, he had realized this little escort mission was mostly to keep him and the Blackbirds away from Skywalker; also like Husker, he wasn't sure how he felt about Obi-Wan shielding them like that. He tried to ponder whether it had anything to do with Tally and Shiv being in the know about their relationship, or whether Obi-Wan was protecting Skywalker as much as he was them, but frankly, Maul was too tired to really do more than skim across the thoughts and then promptly let them dissipate, leaving him back in the present moment. If there was an answer there, it would just have to wait; he didn't have it in him, right now, to chase it down.

The more damning part was that the exhaustion wasn't entirely physical; he could still feel the toil of that mission, but mostly the pervasive sense of being tired was in his mind. And he couldn't figure out how to make it go away.

Tango's hands danced across the console gracefully; as he maneuvered the courier into the hangar, elegantly turning her to line her up with her mooring and coordinating with docking control, there was a look of quiet pride and pleasure on his face that had Maul smiling to himself, grateful right now for just about any reprieve from the heavier concerns they were all dealing with.

"Nicely done," Maul said, as the courier landed in one of the spaces for larger ships, light enough that there wasn't even a bump.

He wasn't sure why Tango flushed red to the roots of his hair, but the pilot mumbled, "Thanks, Lieu," and then went to shut the courier down into standby as someone or another hooted from the back, presumably in agreement that it was a perfect landing.

It was a relief when the sounds of the troopers in back started offloading; snippets of conversation ranged from being excited about the assignment to resignation for the same. Maul waited until it was fairly quiet before he unbuckled and got up himself, taking his jacket from the back of the chair and pulling it on, and he huffed to himself when he slipped into the back only to find his squad waiting for him. "Don't tell me you're waiting for orders," he said, noting that Obi-Wan and Cody were also lingering, though back more amidships instead of clustered with Maul's squad, in the middle of some manner of deep discussion.

"Nah, sir, we were just waiting to see if you and Tango had a steamy makeout session in the cockpit," Brody said; Tally immediately kicked him in the calf, but thanks to armor, all it did was make Brody snicker.

As if someone had fired a signal flare, Obi-Wan's head turned in their direction despite the distance between them. Maul, on the other hand, went to ask why they would even think that, but Shiv interrupted: "We're only here for an hour. So, no games of sabacc, Tally, and no unauthorized marriages, Brody, and Raze, please don't blow anything up."

"I hear they set up an actual kitchen in this place," Misty piped in. "I'll bet we can score something to eat that isn't ration related."
Maul just shook his head, mildly amused. "Go. Eat or do whatever, just keep your comms on our frequency and be back on time," he said, eying Raze, who only beamed back in a sheepish manner.

The smattering of acknowledgment preceded the Blackbirds’ exit; Maul watched them filter past Obi-Wan and Cody and then went down to join the other two.

"Lieutenant," Cody said, at the same time as Obi-Wan clearly restrained himself from greeting Maul with darling. Someday, Maul was sure that Obi-Wan was going to slip and say it; he didn't look forward to that day, but the thought had him fighting a grin nonetheless.

"Commander." Maul had yet to call anyone 'sir' in this army; he wasn't about to start now. But he did respect Cody; he didn't know the man well, but he knew that Obi-Wan relied on Cody, often for his very life, and that was more than enough reason to afford him that respect. "What's the plan?" he asked Obi-Wan, raising a brow.

Obi-Wan was clearly trying not to give in to his own grin. "No plan, really; I wanted to get a tour of the facilities once I was done discussing things with Cody. But unless there's some surprise Separatist attack, that should be all. Then back to Ryloth. Again."

Later, Maul would take a moment to hiss at him, "You had to say it, didn't you?"

But for now, he just nodded and headed for the ramp with the reply, "Master Jedi," and threw enough mischief into the tone to keep it light.

He didn't think to look back, though, and therefore missed the way that it made Obi-Wan blush.

The station had the distinct styling of the Separatists; the sense that it had been built for droids, rather than people. The reliance on energy-field bridges for foot soldiers, instead of solid structures, was the first clue; it was more efficient for droids with repulsors and boosters to move through the base, ferrying cargo for reloading and fueling Separatist ships. Maul could see some evidence of the Republic's forces planning to retrofit the station to be more biped friendly, but that hadn't happened yet.

Maul didn't really have anything he wanted to do and unlike Castle -- who was already walking the edge of the hangar studying the architecture -- he didn't have any particular interest in the enemy's aesthetics, though before he had even gone five meters, he'd already mapped where he could set charges in order to wreck the deck and make it unusable. No doubt Raze had done the same, and probably within only two meters.

As such, he stayed relatively close to the Nest (wincing internally, good-naturedly every time he thought of the ship's new-if-unofficial name) and waited for some manner of inspiration; if worse came to worst, he could just reboard the courier and relax, or perhaps try to catch up on what the situation in the wider galaxy was, and therefore what their next assignment might be after Obi-Wan cut them loose.

He wasn't sure if he was meant to wait and join Obi-Wan on whatever tour Obi-Wan intended to go on, though, so he stayed on the hangar deck, letting his mind roam.

All of that vanished when he saw the Kel Dor Jedi.
Even before he had been captured, Maul had known who Plo Koon was. Koon was considered one of the finest duelists of this age, and Maul had even studied what few holos of the Jedi his Master had provided for him, mostly in the hopes of someday getting to cross sabers with him. Koon was not only well-trained in the Jedi arts, but he was also one of the few Baran Do sages, and beyond that, he knew a little teräs käsi, as well. In every possible respect, he would have been the exact kind of adversary that Maul had once ached desperately to test himself against.

Maul had admired him.

Plo Koon was also a member of the High Council when Maul had been captured. And still was to this day. He'd had a vote when they were debating Maul's interrogation. He'd had a vote when they were debating Maul's execution.

Despite being under Obi-Wan's banner, too, the Council still could snatch away Maul's commission and squad, as well. Without even meaning to, Maul's posture stiffened and he drew his shoulders back, though he resolutely kept his hands away from the currently split hilt of his saberstaff, hanging one half on each side of his belt.

Even if some itch in his fingers made him want to reach for them anyway.

"Lieutenant," Koon greeted, as if he was not one of those currently holding Maul's very life in his hands, likely once he had realized he was being watched. Then he straightened his shoulders even further and added, with more-- warmth? familiarity? "Master Kenobi. I had heard you were on your way just before you arrived."

Maul didn't look back over his shoulder, but he felt the brush of Obi-Wan's hand across his back, unobtrusive, before Obi-Wan was standing beside him and acting no less friendly. "Master Plo. It's a pleasure to see you," he said, cheerfully. "What brings you to Juma 9?"

"Awaiting my new ship. That should bring my battlegroup back to full strength after our losses to the Malevolence. We'll rendezvous at our next assignment."

"How many was that, General?" Tally asked, and Maul blinked, looking over at his medic, who had appeared on the other side of him just as silently as Obi-Wan had. The look on Tally's face was one of polite interest, but there was a confrontational note under his likewise polite tone that had Maul unsure of whether he should be excusing himself (and Tally) to go elsewhere, or whether he should be dropping his head to try to chew down the grin that wanted to cross his face. Not because the subject was funny -- it wasn't -- but because Tally was so willing to take shots at a Jedi without remorse.

The Kel Dor didn't rise to challenge, though; did not even seem to note it. Instead, his voice was measurably heavier when he replied, "Too many. Far, far too many." There was a beat there when Maul started bristling at the lack of a specific number, then Koon added, "Twenty-seven thousand and fifty eight lives lost, in total. Only a handful of us survived both the Malevolence and the pod hunters."

"Tally, didn't you say you wanted to look at the medical equipment that they're going to be installing?" Maul asked, after a long beat where he could practically feel Tally ready to launch into an attack. Tally had mentioned being curious, offhandedly; now, Maul latched onto it as an excuse. "I wouldn't mind seeing for myself."

Tally swung his gaze from Koon to Maul, eyes fierce, then opened his mouth for a moment; at the last second, he stopped himself and then gave a curt nod. "Sure, Lieu."
Maul nodded back and glanced to the other two; Obi-Wan was frowning, though it seemed more confused than anything else, and Koon's expression was impossible to read through his goggles and mask. "If you'll excuse us," Maul said, and then didn't wait for dismissal before pressing a hand to Tally's shoulder and steering him off, not really caring where. But he didn't want his medic in the crosshairs of an offended Jedi general, even if he had some measure of faith that the other Jedi general would smooth things out again.

They barely made it into the a hallway before Tally leaned against the wall, thumping his head lightly back against it, setting his bucket aside on a crate. He took a few breaths, clearly upset, then shook his head. "He led them right down the enemy's throat, Lieu," he said, voice quivering. "After a whole damned other battlegroup went missing, he just went right in, full sublight and clustered together in formation, and they didn't even get in weapons range before the Malevolence disabled 'em."

There were a few seconds there where Maul wondered how Tally even knew that; Maul did because Obi-Wan had briefed him, albeit unofficially, but he didn't think Tally -- not yet in his squad at that time -- would have been informed, at least in terms of details.

But that quickly dissolved on the realization that it didn't matter how Tally knew that, only that he did. "I know," Maul just said, because there was nothing at all he could do about it. And he couldn't make himself admonish Tally for being himself, or upset about the whole thing, nor did he have any desire to.

Tally went to say something else, then just shook his head to himself, rubbing at his eyes. After a few moments, he said, "I keep thinking about how-- how damned scared my brothers had to be, when those kriffing pod busters came for 'em. A bunch of kriffing droids without heartbeats, blithely slicing their way through escape pods, and now he's going to be given more men and more ships."

"I suppose one could only hope he would have learned something, at least," Maul said, but he doubted that was any consolation.

"It wasn't worth it." Tally pushed off of the wall, picking up his bucket, mouth tight.

Maul could only agree: "No. It wasn't."

He didn't need to know any of the people behind the twenty-seven thousand and fifty-eight lives lost to know that they were worth more, by far, than one Jedi's life and lessons in tactics, if how he felt about the eleven lives he was currently responsible for had any bearing on it at all.

"They're right to hold me responsible," Plo said, and vocabulator or no, Obi-Wan could hear the sorrowful note in his words. "Your medic and his brothers alike."

Maul's medic, Obi-Wan thought, absently; he was still adjusting to the changed dynamic of the Blackbirds himself, but had he not already figured that part out, the exchange of only moments ago would have cemented it further. He couldn't say he was surprised by the way Tally had acted; he had gotten his name for a reason, and even Obi-Wan knew that it was because he kept count of their dead. The only thing that surprised Obi-Wan was the way Maul had disarmed the situation, though Obi-Wan knew full well it was not for Plo's sake that he had done so.
It felt like a week since the squad had gotten back, despite it only being not quite two days, and it felt like Obi-Wan had been awake and scrambling for the whole of it. Much like Maul, he was tired; not physically, so much, but mentally and emotionally.

"I wish there was something we could do beyond 'get better at this,'" Obi-Wan answered, falling into step with Plo as they headed in the direction of the command center, though slowly.

"As do I." Plo gave a subtle shake of his head. "But if that is our only recourse, then get better we shall."

Obi-Wan huffed out a mirthless laugh, then shook his own, ready to set the topic aside for the moment. "They're not sending you to Ryloth too, are they? I'm starting to wonder if half the Grand Army isn't being diverted there."

"No, we're being sent to the Mid Rim." Plo folded his hand behind his back as he walked, and Obi-Wan unconsciously mirrored the pose. "I believe that the foothold--"

The words were cut off by a low rumble.

Foreboding immediately slammed into Obi-Wan, instinctive and Force-driven both, and his hand was on his saber's hilt as he turned around, looking for the source. Beside him, Plo did the same, and just as they had fully made their turn, the station's klaxons engaged, the warning whooping through the air, and a Separatist frigate came out of hyperspace, visible through the high up transparisteel landing control windows, right outside of the station.

Within the first five seconds of its appearance, a swarm of boarding shuttles was making towards Juma 9.

"Well," Plo said, as chaos broke out on deck. "It appears they've taken exception to our occupation of their former station."

"All personnel to their stations, we've got incoming!" the station's clone commander ordered over the comm, voice hard. "Lock and load, boys!"

Obi-Wan started to say, "Oh, I have a bad--"

A red and black finger cut him off, pointing right at his face; when Obi-Wan turned his head with his mouth still hanging open, Maul -- newly reappeared and with a lit saber in his other hand -- said, "Do not."
Chapter Notes

Thanks to the heat and some rocky mental health days, this one's a little late and probably a little rocky to read, as well. <3 Sorry about that. Thanks to shadowmaat, as ever, for the beta and encouragement.

When Rabbit looked back later, with a few more missions under his belt, he would think about Juma 9 with the words: *It figured.*

Right now, though, was not that time.

He stared in awe and horror at the swarm of boarding shuttles making for Juma 9, and temporarily everything else faded to the sound of his own heart hammering in his ears. The realization that this was the real thing landed as the first shock of contact hit the station, the small shuttles attacking the station's deflectors with such overwhelming numbers as to punch right through.

"*Blackbirds, back to the hangar,*" was what broke him out of his wide-eyed stare. Their lieu sounded more annoyed and vaguely disgusted than anything else, and Rabbit didn't know if Maul *meant* for that to be so calming, but it really oddly was. Like maybe this was an inconvenience instead of a catastrophe in the making.

"*Oh boy, oh boy, this is so exciting,*" Brody said, sarcastically, grabbing Rabbit's arm and then nudging him from the back of his shoulder, propelling him towards the hangar, his bucket already on. "*It's just clanker target practice, kid; don't worry too much.*"

"Okay," Rabbit answered, admittedly kind of breathlessly, clutching his blaster close to his chest from where it had been slung on a strap over his shoulder as he hurried along, staying to the right side of the corridor so that their brothers from the station could move deeper into it as deployed.

They hadn't gotten far from the hangar deck; even as he could hear the sound of metal tearing through metal behind him, they emerged out onto said deck. No clankers had gotten there yet, but he could hear the two Jedi coordinating, calling for pilots and directing the action.

"I need deflector control secured," General Kenobi was saying, just as General Koon was on his own comm going, "Station an extra contingent outside of the reactor room--"

"*Already done, sirs,*" the base commander replied, kind of testy.

Maul had his headset on and half the squad was already there; in one hand, he had a lit saber, but otherwise he looked really calm. He gave them an upnod in greeting, standing apart from the Jedi somewhat. "Tally wants to commandeer that cargo storage room for a triage area," he said, pinning his gaze on Brody. "Can you go slice the door and get him into it?"

"*In a snap, Lieu,*" Brody said back, before jogging in that direction.

By then, the rest of the squad had shown up, a few of them with singe marks from blaster fire. "What's the plan?" Shiv asked, as they formed up in a semi-circle with blasters at ready. Down the corridors, the sounds of fire-fights in progress were filtering in as the contingent of droids drew
closer. Even to Rabbit, it was pretty clear that they didn't want to do overwhelming damage to the hangar deck, probably for the sake of not ruining their ability to use it to take back the base.

"If I may," General Koon said, stepping over and ignoring the way the squad stiffened up, "I'd like to secure the hangar. I'm planning on launching fighters and making sure your courier can help with evacuation of the wounded if need be."

Tango's whole body went more upright and he turned to Maul. "Sir, permission to go jump in a bird and wreck shuttles?"

"When the hangar's secure? Go, have fun," Maul just said, then gave a nod to Plo before looking back at the rest of them. "Rabbit, you stay with Tally and help him get any wounded back here. The rest of you, help secure this hangar."

"Yes, sir," Shiv said, in a way where Rabbit could hear the grin in his voice. He pointed. "Rancor, Castle, Misty, over there. The rest of you with me. Set your radios to scan between station ops and our private channel."

Rabbit took a few deep breaths and leaned into Husker's hand for a moment when Husk patted him on the shoulder, then took off at a jog for where Brody and Tally were breaking into a supply room, arriving just as the doors opened.

And just as the clankers started flooding into the hangar themselves.

It had been a very long time since Castle had engaged with clankers.

He set up a fast nest with some cargo while Rancor and Misty laid down covering fire at the incoming droids. He wasn't surprised when Shiv went to do the same, and behind him, he could hear the hum of lightsabers covering the other entrances to the hangar. The shuttles could only drop so many of those bastards at a time, and the hallways themselves could only allow so many through at a time, at least. And backup was already arriving, in the forms of brothers stationed here; in one corridor, they plowed through the clankers from behind and Castle waved a few over to join them in their impromptu sniper's nest.

He aimed and fired, picking off B-1s with ease, but mostly he was hoping none of his brothers from other units got careless with their droid poppers. They were likely to be used less here on the station, but he didn't want that to happen to Maul again before he could finish designing exterior armor for those cybernetics; didn't want to try to imagine how taking a second hit like that would affect their CO, because even Castle could see that the first one had messed him up pretty bad, if not physically, then mentally.

He wasn't so sure their lieu could shake it off a second time. And he didn't want to test that, either.

"We've got the station's pilots making for us," Shiv said, over the comm. "Anyone in position not already picking droids off, focus fire on Section 30."

Rancor, Misty and their yet unintroduced brothers were doing a decent job themselves, so Castle turned and aimed for the corridor Shiv had directed 'em to. "Copy that, Sarge," he said, shouldering his blaster anew and right back to firing.
All in all, it didn't take them long to clear the corridors; when the pilots started streaming in, Tango actually leapt up from behind cover with a whoop and ran to join them as they made for the fighters.

"The droids are overrunning deflector control and the reactor!" station ops reported, making Castle wince internally, even as pilots were jumping in fighters and launching and the sound of the organized chaos made it even through his bucket.

"Cody, take some men and retake deflector control," General Kenobi ordered, then gestured to Maul and General Koon. "We'll go and handle the reactor."

"Mind if I tag along with a few of ours, Commander?" Shiv asked.

Cody's voice sounded serious, but kind of amused right under it. "Been missing clanker cleanup, Sergeant? Yeah, the more the merrier, c'mon," he said, as he jogged for the corridor they had just cleared out.

"Brody, Castle, Husk, Rancor, c'mon; the rest of you, hold the deck and help Tally," Shiv said, back on the Blackbirds channel, following Cody after waving them over.

Castle grinned behind his bucket as he fell in behind them, looking forward to jumping into the thick of it. "Right behind you, Sarge," he said, reaching out with his free hand to pat Rancor on the back as they went.

Before this, Plo Koon had been in the seat of his starfighter, contemplating the same subject that the medic would bring up to him in an hour's time.

He was old enough to have spent the past couple of centuries and then some watching those with lesser lifespans grow, grow old and then pass into the Force; time had given him perspective on such loss, despite the sorrow that accompanied each one. He knew that the loss was inevitable, and that his sorrow was not for the sake of the dead themselves, now one with the Force, but for his own loss of their presence and companionship. Grief was selfish, by its nature, but it was a component of love; unlike some others, Plo would not eschew either word, quietly embracing them. He mourned, and then he moved on.

The inevitable losses didn't stop him from caring; from building new friendships and maintaining older ones. It only offered him a certain serenity that was difficult for many to achieve.

All of that was thrown into disarray, painfully and suddenly, with the outbreak of another war.

Plo had not wanted a seat on the Jedi's High Council. Not for any desire to shirk service, never that, but because he felt it would not be entirely fair for him -- with his long lifespan, and all of the benefits and detriments that came with it -- to be making large-scale decisions for those who were often younger than he was, and whose lives would likely be lived within the span of his own. But his master's death in the Stark Hyperspace War saw him installed there in the newly vacated seat, and he accepted the appointment with due humility, still feeling the deaths that war had caused and some of them genuinely horrific.

While on the Council, he often held silent, waiting for the best possible course to reveal itself. His conservative approach was, at least he wanted to believe, tempered by compassion.
But being the veteran of war did not make a career soldier. And twenty-seven thousand and fifty-eight lives were lost because Plo had considerably less experience in handling soldiers than he did in handling a lightsaber. And unlike losses due to natural old age, or fighting in battle, there to be mourned and then released with the knowledge that those lost were returned to the Force, he had been given command of young men who were born and bred specifically to face death without ever having had a real chance to live in the first place.

Plo was not given to spending a great amount of time going over his mistakes, but this one had haunted him since it had happened. He had played out what he could have done differently over and over again; he could have split formation and gotten the other two ships out of the way of the Malevolence's weapons. He could have ordered an emergency hyperspace jump; even as dangerous as blind jumps were, the odds were still so much better than the reality had been.

He could have done things differently.

The young medic, with his flashing eyes and anger, would not be the first clone trooper to look askance at him. His own men, the very few survivors and the new since, were loyal to him and he tried every day to prove worthy of that loyalty. But those who looked at him in suspicion and pain--

He would try to prove himself worthy of them, as well. And fight just as much for them as for the Republic which claimed them as a military force without giving them the honor of citizenship and recognition, so that when the time came, as many of these men were alive to have the lives they had been denied as possible.

The Council had forgiven his actions, citing his lack of pre-knowledge of the situation, but Plo had not yet forgiven himself.

Now, they headed for the reactor room and Plo found himself hanging back slightly, ostensibly to cover their flanks and backs, but also just to watch. Obi-Wan and Maul moved together with ease, seemingly intuitive in covering one another's open spots while quite effectively rendering droids into scrap. The hall was narrow enough that Maul apparently was opting to use only one saber, though he had recoupled both together; Plo approved of the tactic and the foresight.

"I'm almost tempted to keep count," Obi-Wan said, voice lilting in jest. "We could make a wager of it."

"Droids are poor sport," Maul answered back, throwing out a hand and knocking back several before moving to the door controls and crouching to bypass it, seemingly having no worries about Obi-Wan watching his back while he did that.

Obi-Wan indeed did fall right in to do so, guarding over the zabrak while Plo Force-crushed a couple of straggling B-1s. "Maybe I wasn't talking to you, maybe I was talking to Master Plo," he said, with a likewise light-hearted sniff.

Plo hummed back an acknowledgment, tusks jumping slightly in appreciation for the humor. "The lieutenant is correct, however. It's not very sporting."

The blast doors slid open to reveal a number more droids -- more B-1s, but also a number of B-2s -- and Plo could hear the sounds beyond of droidekas coming their way.

"You were saying?" Obi-Wan asked, taking a split second to eye them both archly, before leaping forward.

Plo didn't miss the way Maul rolled his eyes and followed, not bothering to banter back as he came
out into the open of the station's larger cargo shuttling columns and lit his second blade.

There were troopers on the other side of the wide, open column, desperately trying to slice the doors that would allow them to escape being pinned down by the droids streaming in, hoping to get into an adjacent corridor. Between them were deactivated energy bridges.

The reliance on energy bridges was something distinctly Separatist in design; the force-field generated walkways were temporary and could allow easier shuttling of large cargo up or down in the station's superstructure. They were also wretchedly dangerous, with no guard rails and no way to protect the person should malfunctions occur. Then again, given most stations like this were occupied by droids, the lack of safeties made more sense.

"Can you get those bridges on?" Obi-Wan asked Maul, calling over the sound of blaster fire and droid and sabers humming, having to stop the automatic *darling* from accompanying the question yet again.

Maul was making quick work of the B-2 battledroids; he sabered one through the chest, deactivated his blades, then turned and dragged the thing by its limp, malfunctioning body, using said body as a shield as he made for the bridge controls. Even through his jacket, Obi-Wan could see his muscles flexing from the weight. "On it," he said, curt and businesslike.

Plo was doing a fine job himself; he was no less quick, and Obi-Wan jumped back in at his side, deflecting off of one of the droidekas as Plo leapt acrobatically over it, flipping mid air and landing behind it on the circular platform, arm shooting out to grab onto it telekinetically and fling it off of the side of the column they were in.

The troops on the other side whooped and the bridges flickered on, humming, as the Jedi both finished mopping up. Moments later, the clones got the blast door open; the other side, at least, was clear for the moment. "C'mon, sirs, we were heading for the reactor room ourselves before we were pinned down!" one of them called, before they went through the door.

Obi-Wan gave an extra stab to the twitching droideka that had been previously damaged, then headed that way, running across the pale blue forcefield bridge; he could hear Plo and Maul right behind him.

He was halfway across when the doors they had just left behind them blasted open; he didn't see the piece of debris slam the bridge controls, but one moment there was something solid under him--

--and the next there wasn't.

The air rushed past his face and tore at his clothing; he deactivated his saber on instinct and managed to gasp in a breath as he turned his attention and his Force senses downwards, looking for some place to land safely; through that opening into the Force, he could feel Plo doing the same as him and Maul-- trying to.

And failing to.

There was no time to think about it now, but when Obi-Wan spotted the power conduit, he used the Force to telekinetically redirect his fall and then slow it, cushioning his landing; at the same time as
he landed in a deep crouch, the soles of his feet stinging hard even inside of his boots from the 
impact, he snapped out a hand to try to catch Maul, managing to finally get a telekinetic grip after 
Maul had already fallen past the conduit.

It wasn't a sudden arrest of motion; it wasn't until Plo added his power that they managed to stop 
Maul falling any further, and by then he was at the limit of Obi-Wan's ability to influence.

"I've got you," he called, and he could feel the jagged edges of waxing and waning fear rolling off of 
his darling, like rocky outcroppings that pushed past Maul's mental shields enough to sense and 
radiated outwards after. "We've got you, hold on!"

This close, and working together, Obi-Wan could also feel Plo's confusion and curiosity; he didn't 
waste any time trying to reel Maul in, and for Maul's part, he didn't try to fight out of the grip, 
physically or metaphysically. When he was finally high enough to grab, Obi-Wan and Plo both 
reached down in unison and supplemented their grip with the Force with the strength of their arms.

The conduit wasn't terribly wide, but it was wide enough; it took all Obi-Wan had not to throw his 
arms around Maul right there, but he didn't even try to resist the urge to grip Maul's upper arms, 
searching over his face, taking in the wide eyes and the rigidly controlled breathing. "Are you all 
right?" Obi-Wan asked, thumbs ticking against the slightly rough fabric of Maul's jacket.

"Fine." The answer was short, the tone a little ragged, but Maul drew backwards out of Obi-Wan's 
grasp, rising to his feet and looking up. "We'll have to find a way back into the station's interior."

Obi-Wan remained unconvinced, but now certainly wasn't the time to discuss it; he logged it away 
for them to talk about later and looked around, frowning to himself. "I think we can follow this 
conduit to the wall, then cross at that junction--" he said, pointing to where the conduit joined with 
others, all running around the column's perimeter, "--until we can find a maintenance hatch."

"Indeed," Plo said, rising to his feet himself. "Lead on, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan cast one more glance to Maul, trying hard to look certain and reassuring both, then turned 
and started leading them to the junction against the wall.
Interlude: The Permanence of Memory

Chapter Notes

I thought about holding this until later, even though it takes place at the same time as the Juma 9 mission, but my Best Fiend advised me to post it. So, here it is. It's pretty heavy stuff.

Elten hadn't been given olfactory sensors; their original engineer had not felt those necessary for a combat training droid. Nonetheless, the smoky air required them to make minute adjustments to their photoreceptors to pick out the filthy white and blue of Commander Tano's lekku and the sounds of troopers coughing made it clear how terrible the air quality was.

Commander Tano had been deployed from the Resolute to one of the pockets of fighting left on Ryloth's surface, where entrenched Separatist forces left over from Wat Tambor's occupation had managed to hold on. Seemingly on a whim, she had grabbed Elten on the way to the hangar, steps hurried and confident; her emotional state didn't seem happy, but she had seemed excited and Elten, as they had been charged with, went as her companion instead of her instructor. Elten was aware she'd had a rough time on her away mission with General Skywalker, though she had yet to say anything more about it.

No one had expected the droid contingent to self-destruct their bunker so spectacularly. Separatist forces tended to hold on to the last droid; suicide bombing was not their normal tactic.

Elten finally spotted her, running a swift scan to confirm in the space of three microseconds, and carefully picked their way over there.

Commander Tano was holding the body of one of her troops, the comparatively large clone sprawled partially in her lap with half of his face blackened, his head burned to skull in some spots, and she was rocking him back and forth lightly with her thin arms wrapped around him. Casual observation would not reveal that she was trembling, but Elten was not a casual observer.

She startled when Elten appeared next to her; their cushioned and padded feet were nigh on soundless, thanks to Lieutenant Maul's engineering, and Elten marked the moment in their memory banks with an internal memo to work with their Commander to come up with some auditory signal to prevent such future startles.

She looked up at them, face streaked with blood not her own and with ash. "He didn't even have a name yet, El," she said, voice quivering. There was a long moment, and new tears cut new tracks in the grime on her face to join the ones already there. "What was he doing here? What are any of us doing here?"

Elten had no possible answer to that; they had not been programmed to have an opinion on the Republic's forces or their choices in officers. A quick scan showed that this trooper was the only one of Commander Tano's killed, though there were several more injured. Nonetheless, she was not; at least, she was not physically. Elten knew that Commander Tano had lost men before, but did not know how she had reacted to those losses then.

Only how she was now.
"I can help you carry him," Elten offered, crouching in front of their Commander and the lost clone.

Commander Tano looked back at them, then down at the dead trooper; she briefly cradled the back of his head, seemingly unconcerned about the damage, looking at his face and then holding him closer before nodding. Her tears had dotted clean spots on the part of his face not burned.

Elten reached out and gathered the troop up with all due care; even if it did not matter to the troop, it mattered to their Commander and therefore it mattered to Elten.

She picked herself up and started for where the medics were taking care of their wounded, each step looking both more heavy and more determined.

Elten tilted their head down at the boy in their arms, taking him in with a dozen photoreceptors -- unless Elten was memory-wiped, the nameless boy would be remembered -- and then followed.
Chapter Notes

If you're curious about little Boba's fate in this universe, you can find that right on over here. Sorry for the delay, been having a hard time writing lately, and thanks for bearing with me. <3

Tango threaded his fighter between chunks of Seppie ship debris and blasted back into formation with the rest of his temporary, impromptu squad with a whoop, both hands wrapped around the stick and face hurting for the width of his grin.

"Ten!" one of the squad yelled.

"Hell, I have thirteen!" another shot back.

Tango worked his jaw and then just added, "--yeah, I've got seventeen. Anyone beat that?"

"Kriffin' black ops show-off." Jagger -- who Tango got the name of since they jumped into adjacent ships -- shot back, before peeling off from the squad and taking aim at a few of the boarding shuttles that managed to escape the first two sweeps.

"You'll catch up, don't worry." Tango peeled off with him, just to cover his rear.

Even though this fighter was a generation newer than the ones Tango had trained in, it took him less than ten seconds to adjust. Now, as they danced outside with the swarms upon swarms of droid ships, he could feel the fighter almost like an extension of himself; the freedom of flight made his arms feel like air, made the rest of his body nearly fade into the superstructure of the ship.

The frigate out there had launched everything it had; as usual, with the Seppies, they tried to make up for their lack of precision with sheer numbers. It was a worryingly solid tactic, on the ground or in the air, but Tango still liked their odds.

Until the second frigate appeared, appearing soundlessly next to the first one, a giant looming cargo-carrier for yet more droids.

"--you've got to be kidding me," he said, before slamming his stick over and rolling his fighter out of the way, just as the second ship started launching shuttles and fighters and the other pilots started cursing.

He maybe liked their odds a little less, now. But just a little.

The more droids he shot, the less Rancor felt excited about it.
It wasn't that the droids posed no threats; the B-1s were barely competent, but the B-2s were more serious. But the party that had joined Commander Cody was efficient; Cody led them with the practiced ease of a born and raised leader, and Shiv fell right into that role by helping to coordinate, so it wasn't nearly the challenge Rancor had been expecting. Yeah, there were a lot of droids, but it was pretty clear the troops were up to holding them off.

Just for the sake of not being distracted in the middle of a fire fight, their comms were set to coordinate just with the group closest to them; set to scan for proximity and automatically switch frequencies as needed to keep them in communication with themselves and with any troops that they came across. Shiv and Cody were also listening to station traffic, and even though he hadn't spoken, Rancor was comforted to see Maul's name on his HUD as still being on the Blackbirds' frequency, knowing that their Lieu was listening in even as he and the Jedi headed for the reactor room.

Though, in retrospect, Rancor did wonder why the Jedi hadn't split up, with Maul, so each group could have a Force user present.

The wounded they came across, they sent back to Tally's location. Now, they were just coming up on the deflector control room when they ran across brothers pinned behind a stack of crates from both sides.

"Clear 'em out," Cody ordered, drawing the fire of the group of battle droids away from the men, though not all of them.

The entire hallway was littered with cargo; Rancor dodged behind another stack of crates even as one of the troops said, "Kriff, are we glad to see you guys!"

"If I can get in there, I was working on upgrading the system when we were overrun," another troop said, "I can help you get it back online in a hurry."

"Oh, yeah?" Brody asked, ducking behind cover with Rancor and peeking over the top of the crates to take shots at another droid. "What's your name?"

"Switch!"

"I'm Brody, nice to meet you. I'll be giving you a hand."

Rancor smiled some to himself even as he shot the arm off of a B-2, at the confident way Brody just declared that. And he was still smiling when Cody said, "You heard the man, let's get him in there. Rancor, Brody, Husker, concentrate all your fire; Shiv, you're with me. The rest of you, watch our tails."

Rancor knew not all battles were going to feel this light, but he was grateful that this one did.

I should be with them.

The thought came unbidden; not like a lament, but like a statement fully-formed and certain, like a truth that had been lurking around the edges of his mind and had been waiting for him arrive close enough so that it could present itself.
It was, like most things had been now for months, caught in the tangled speeder wreck of Maul's mind; caught in the new threads woven throughout the tattered remnants of older ones, and throughout the fabric that made up him, even as he was still trying to figure out who he was. Or, for that matter, what he was really for. But listening to the Blackbirds coordinating with Cody and station ops as they made for the deflector control room, bantering or planning, made something in Maul's bones itch; made some voice ask, in his mind, *Why am I not alongside them?*

He could feel the weight of Obi-Wan's worry whenever they brushed past one another. Could feel the way Obi-Wan was watching extra closely for Maul to slip or fall again, as they climbed or jumped or crawled their way to the reactor room, using power conduits or broken lift shafts to see them there.

Maul doggedly refused to acknowledge it, not because he *liked* being worried over, but because he didn't want to satisfy Plo Koon's curiosity or give him reasons for more by bringing it out into the open discussing it. He knew it wholly unlikely that Obi-Wan was going to just let his falling go, especially because before Zigoola, he could have easily landed himself even in these circumstances, but now wasn't the time to get into it.

The other thing, he realized, as he closed his eyes and grit his teeth to grab hold of the Force as well as he could as he tried, almost futilely, to keep up with the two Jedi--

The other thing was that Obi-Wan didn't *need* him the way he had at Christophsis.

Obi-Wan needed someone to hold him and care for him now, too. But he no longer needed someone to fill the gap a new war and a new role had left him, in his ability and inclination to defend his own life; he no longer needed a shadow with a more finely-honed sense of danger to jump between him and bomb blasts. He again wore that ridiculous imitation of armor despite Maul's objections, but he didn't-- didn't need Maul there to guard his back, so much as just guard his *sanity*. Obi-Wan would doubtless still throw himself into trouble, he couldn't seem to resist, but nowadays he seemed to understand the risks of doing so.

If anything, Maul's presence was putting Obi-Wan in more danger, right now. Not less.

That little revelation landed at the same time as his hand nearly slipped off the rung he'd managed to catch after a leap from the broken conduit; above, laying on his front, Koon reached down and just grabbed his forearm with both hands and helped haul him up to the platform the rungs had been leading to.

Maul barely managed to keep from glaring, feeling increasingly helpless. But internally, the tangle got worse.

"Are you listening to your squad?" Koon asked, seemingly conversationally, though Maul didn't trust that tone any more than he trusted the Jedi Council in general.

"Yes," Maul answered, curtly, as he got to his feet and resolutely ignored the eighth worried look Obi-Wan had given him in the last twenty minutes alone. "It's not distracting," he added, more carefully, when the notion occurred that Koon could be looking for a reason why he was struggling to keep up with them. Or, worse, looking for some manner of weakness in his ability to command. "If anything, the opposite."

"I often enjoy listening to my pilots, even when I'm not with them and can do nothing but listen," Koon agreed, taking the lead again; they were getting close to the access hatch into the reactor room, small enough to typically be used by the Separatists maintenance droids. "They have unique voices, despite being of one genetic template."
Maul had no desire to engage in conversation with the Jedi, mouth pressed into a line as he knelt next to the access panel into the hatch, prying it off with a vibroblade he'd stuck in the sheath in his boot. Given that the droids currently held the reactor room, the door wasn't going to open without intervention. "Yes," he just said, hoping that his single-word answer would be enough to cut the conversation off without crossing the lines to rudeness.

Obi-Wan had been mostly silent, through this. Now, he spoke up; his tone was upbeat, though Maul knew only by a force of will, rather than sincerity. "Interacting with them, it sometimes amazes me that they all share a genetic code with Jango."

Maul bristled and before he meant to, he asked with just as false a tone, "Whatever happened to his young son, anyway? The one who witnessed Windu beheading his father."

The silence that fell there was so uncomfortable that Maul instantly regretted his own question; he accidentally shocked himself on an exposed wire and hissed, and tried to redouble his focus on the task before him, rather than the thoroughly awful quiet he had just provoked.

Surprisingly, it was Koon who answered, "Most of the Council doesn't know. However, I'm not one of them; he is being cared for by his brothers and by someone who I trust implicitly to watch out for his best interests. He's a very angry little boy, but I believe he'll learn to manage it with time."

Maul finally got the door to open, fingertips still stinging from the shock, but he was knocked somewhat off balance by Plo Koon offering that; Maul had not been thinking about the boy's current state, so much as he was the rank hypocrisy he often found the Jedi capable of, but that this Jedi actually had an answer to that question surprised him.

He eyed Koon, but the Jedi didn't say anything more; instead, Koon got down on all fours to crawl into the access tunnel. Maul closed his eyes for a moment while the Kel Dor vanished from view, then made himself look at Obi-Wan. "I'm sorry. That wasn't very fair of me."

Obi-Wan still looked a little hurt, though there was truth again in his voice when he said, "It's all right," and -- since Koon was not able to watch -- leaned over to kiss Maul on the cheek lightly. "It's not entirely unfair. I didn't know Jango beyond our meeting and fight; I shouldn't make too many assumptions about what kind of man he was, or what might have led him there in the first place."

The strange temptation to argue contrary to that was pointless, but there anyway; Maul frowned to himself as he shook his head, brushing a more awkward hand across Obi-Wan's back in a second, silent apology before following Koon into the tunnel. Arguing as devil's advocate was something Tally was more apt to do; arguing simply for the challenge of it. It wasn't something Maul typically thought to do himself.

Somewhere in the tangle, Maul wondered at himself for the impulse; if it wasn't just another symptom of whatever it was that had him wanting to be alongside his squad, instead of alongside the man he shared a bed and a life with. If it wasn't some attempt to put distance between them, though he knew he didn't want that; at least, not personally, even if professionally.

He shook himself out of the thoughts a second time; the second door opened without needing intervention, and Koon crawled out, lightsaber igniting before he was even up on his feet to deflect blaster fire. Maul doubled his speed to get out there himself, and--

Whoever designed this station had gone quite overboard on the defense measures. The columns from the center reactor, directing power throughout the station, were guarded by revolving energy shields, the sorts of which were guaranteed to burn a person if they were hit.
And there were no walkways here.

Maul moved down, opposite Koon, and deflected the blaster fire from the droids guarding the room, many of them hovering threats; they looked somewhat like interrogation droids if much larger. They were bulbous and intimidating, but instead of being armed with the implements of torture, they were armed with blasters.

Taking them down was one thing. Trying to leap between platforms in order to reach the override that the droids were guarding--

Obi-Wan was apparently thinking the same; when he came out of the tunnel, covered by Koon and Maul on either side, and stood, he only said, "Oh wonderful."

Blasting through the doors to deflector control was--

Frankly, it was a lot of fun.

Shiv had been keeping in contact with Tally, between advances; none of the wounded who came into his little impromptu medbay had been seriously hurt, and the Seppies must have sent their most pathetic lot of droids, because no one had been killed yet, either. Outside, flying like hornets around the lumbering frigates, their pilots were knocking down most of the boarding shuttles before they could reach the station, and none of them had died yet, either. For once, it seemed like luck or fortune was on their side.

The troops streamed through the doors, peeling off left and right with the ease of common basic training, aiming at the droids who were holding the deflector control room and listening to their shrieking panic, annoyingly loud even through their buckets. Bringing up the rear was Switch -- a soft-shell, wearing just a basic flack jacket and a light-weight helmet -- and Shiv was pleased at how well Rancor was doing.

It didn't take them long to mop it up; just because he knew Maul was listening, he tapped the panel on his arm to keep his next words on the Blackbirds' frequency. "Hey, Lieu, we've got deflector control secured; Brody and Switch are moving to get those back online and beefed up."

The voice that came back was definitely not Maul's.

"--get it off GET IT OFF GET ERROR ERROR--"

Shiv blinked widely behind his visor, at the grating metallic voice screeching over the open comm line.

"--sn't built to-- bzt! --be ridden by zabraks!"

"Uh. Lieu?"

"One moment, Shiv." There was the sound of a droid screeching on the other end, then it abruptly stopped and Maul's voice cut back in, "Sorry, I was handling-- something. You were saying?"

"We have deflector control back under our control." Shiv squinted as if he could somehow peer
down several decks and see what the hell was happening down there. "What are you doing?"

"Procuring myself a ride." A beat. "Generals Kenobi and Koon said to tell you and Cody to move down and retake or secure the cargo decks, as that's likely where they're going to concentrate now that we have them on the run."

Shiv snorted. "Yes, sir. Have fun, I guess."

"I'm emphatically not, but--" There was a grunt, then Maul finished, "--I have it in hand. Good hunting."

"You too." Shiv was just shaking his head to himself, unable to fight down the grin that was pulling the corners of his lips up as he relayed their latest orders to Cody.

Outside, Tango grinned in a decidedly feral manner when he saw the deflectors snap back on, surrounding the station in a flickering blue glow, and the small droid ship that smacked into it explode.

That grin only got wider when the brand new Venator-class jumped onto the scene.

"Good news, station ops! Backup's arrived!"

"Oh, thank everything for that," Obi-Wan said, mostly to himself, when station ops relayed Tango's message; truthfully, though, he only half heard it because most of his attention was focused on what Maul was doing.

Taking down the droids defending the reactor room was easy enough; none of them were shielded. A few well-placed deflections were enough to knock them out of the air, thus clearing the room and hopefully allowing them to get up to where the more stationary droids were guarding the emergency override. It was simple--

All the way up until Maul launched himself off of the platform and landed on one of the cylindrical droids guarding the room, one of the few they had not yet sent falling as smoking scrap, sending it careening wildly around the vast room shrieking in its grating voice as it tried to dislodge its new rider. So far as Obi-Wan could tell, it was not a Force-assisted leap, either; Maul simply threw himself off of the platform in one well-timed jump and now was standing on top of the droid, holding onto wires he'd torn out of the pried open access panel of the thing like reins.

Obi-Wan wasn't sure whether to be more impressed or more terrified. Both of those were vying for space in his mind, as he stood gaping at Maul, who was apparently getting a feel for his new-- steed? transportation? even as he calmly talked to Shiv through his headset.

"He certainly has a flare for the dramatic, doesn't he?" Plo asked, voice humming with amusement,
as the last droid not being rodeo'd by a zabrak fell with a disconsolate whine down into the depths of the reactor's pit from a blast deflected off of his blade.

Obi-Wan nodded back absently, then managed to close his mouth with a click. He had not been sure how they were going to traverse the platforms if Maul couldn't jump with them, relying on the Force to make up for what muscle or cybernetics couldn't, but apparently Maul had been thinking ahead of him in that regard. "I suppose we, ah-- had best get moving, or else he's going to have them rendered to scrap before we get up there."

He didn't feel his own light-hearted tone, no. But it was too late to change anything about this. His mind was still running frantically trying to figure out what was wrong, and why Maul wasn't using the Force as Obi-Wan knew well he was capable of, but there wasn't any time now to do anything about it anyway.

"Indeed," Plo just said, before backing up and taking a well-timed leap into the void, channeling the Force as a platform, and landing up on the next branching platform.

Uneasy and worried, Obi-Wan took a breath and followed.
It seemed to be going perfectly well, until – of course – it wasn’t.

“Just be sure you recover it,” Dooku’s voice said, over the open comm line at the center console of the communications room, sounding about as disgruntled as ever. Obi-Wan took a moment as he stood, staring at the back of the large, hulking figure leaning over the panel, and tried to remember any moment his own master had ever mentioned Dooku not being somehow dour and repressive.

None came to mind quickly. Not that he had much time to contemplate it.

“You needn’t worry, Count,” the large figure said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have guests.”

Obi-Wan couldn’t resist saying, “It’s about time you noticed; your manners are atrocious.”

The Skakoan turned. “You’re earlier than I expected,” he said, with some mean joviality making into his synthesized voice. Truthfully, Obi-Wan wasn’t terribly surprised by the species of their attacker; Wat Tambor had made a disaster of Ryloth, and likely whoever this was had been involved in some manner or another. "No matter; I’ve gotten most of what I’ve come here for." A beat. "Where is the third Jedi?” he asked.

Obi-Wan had a brief moment of amusement at Maul being called a Jedi, then a brief moment of panic because wasn’t Maul right behind them a minute ago? But he knew better than to turn back and show his surprise at his darling’s sudden disappearance, so he just said, blithely, “Damned if I know; it’s not as if I have a leash on him.”

“Who are you?” Plo asked, hand hovering over the hilt of his lightsaber.

The Skakoan laughed, a juttering noise through the synthesizer as he made to walk past them. “I thought you Jedi knew everything.”

Both Jedi drew their blades, igniting them; Plo said, “In the name of the Republic, you’re under arrest.”

When it made the Skakoan laugh even harder, holding up a remote detonator and saying, “Take one more step, Jedi,” Obi-Wan reflected that they definitely could have handled all of that more gracefully. And when he and Plo drew back slightly, uncertain as to what the remote was linked to and how bad it could be if it was activated, there was a notably slump in the Skakoan’s posture as he complained, “Well, you’re no fun.”

And then he hit the button.
Not terribly long before the Skakoan declared the Jedi to be no fun, Smarty started noting the patterns of movement from the droids and was quickly figuring out that not all was as it seemed.

He had been holding the hangar deck with a slew of other troops and covering Rabbit, who brought back brothers who had called for help and deposited them with Tally before bolting off to the next clone in distress. His speed, even in these conditions, was so notable that even troops who didn't know him commented on how fast he was, and Smarty had enough room in his mind to be proud of his little brother for it. Whatever shakiness Rabbit had felt on Bravo-984 seemed to have melted away, leaving behind a very fast, very dedicated troop; he didn't hardly pause to catch his breath before making into the station again, blaster at the ready and armor singed somewhat, to help someone else.

Smarty was listening in to station ops because someone needed to help coordinate the hangar deck, and he just happened to be the guy best suited to keeping track of multiple positions and groups. He had his blaster up, but most of his attention was on the radio and his HUD, and he was as surprised as anyone else when not only the other Blackbirds, but also the other station troops, started answering to him as if he was the CO of the deck.

A lot of the paths through the station were cut off. Smarty had the station's maps up, and a datapad he'd grabbed from the Nest resting on a crate next to him, and he was keeping a running map of which ways were clear and functional and which had to be bypassed, as well as where the droids were being reported, that he pinged out to every trooper wearing a bucket in the station every time it was updated.

That was why he started noticing that things weren't adding up.

He took a few seconds to confirm it, then got on the radio to station ops and made sure to have Maul tied into the transmission, "I don't think they're trying to take the station back," he said, hurriedly. "Their pattern of movement through the station's all wrong."

"What do you think it is?" Maul asked back immediately.

Smarty eyed the map. "I can't say for sure, Lieu, but deflector control and the reactor override look like distractions; like where they're going because that's where we expect them to."

"Their pattern of movement through the station's all wrong."

"We're already heading--"

All of the rest of the comm signals flickered off and the words *signals jammed* replaced them.

Smarty cursed to himself, then switched to speaker in order to reach the guys around him. "Guys, we've got trouble. Prepare for incoming and station evac."

"Comms are down," Cody said, grimly, switched over to speakers as they hunkered behind crates deep in the station, trying to take back the cargo decks.
"One of mine thinks they're trying to isolate the communications room." Shiv was scowling as he rested his blaster on the top of the crate and shot bolts at the droids who were darting back and forth. "He doesn't think they're trying to take the station back."

The implications of that statement were pretty wide-ranging, and none of them were good. "You mean we're been sent on a wild goose chase, Sergeant," Cody stated, rather than asked, now sounding grimly amused instead of just grim in general. "We're way too far down to get up there ourselves, so let's finish clearing this place as ordered, then we can move on. Hopefully, someone closer will get our radios working again."

Someone closer, in this case, were the three Force users, two of whom were on foot, and one of whom was astride a repurposed droid.

Maul had mostly cleared the override control platform, deftly avoiding the blaster fire from the droids stationed there and the truly ridiculous energy barriers that rotated around it. Mostly, that had just involved distracting the droids and allowing said barriers to do the work; even he had stopped as a lone B-1 ran ahead of the red screen of energy wailing about the injustice of it all, while he was standing on its larger and more bulbous cousin with his head cocked over to the side, the sheer absurdity of the entire situation enough to render him baffled and speechless.

Obi-Wan eventually ended that droid's rather pathetic laps around the column. It was while they were shutting down the energy barriers and securing the override against any further interference that Obi-Wan and Plo Koon were discussing contacting Skywalker to see if he had anyone available to provide air support; when they realized that they couldn't access the long-distance communications from there, they made plans to head for the communications room, a few decks above.

By then, Maul had gotten a fairly good feel for his 'ride'; he had the connections in hand for its gyros and propulsion, the mechanical means by which the electronics were activated, and he'd torn out the wires to its speaker just to shut it up; for now, it served as his likely reluctant steed and when they made for the communications room, he just kept the droid so that he could have an easier time navigating the obstacles than he had before.

(The number of times Plo Koon and Obi-Wan glanced back at him had him smirking to himself, as he hovered his ride behind them soundlessly, like a senator in a pod. Later, he was going to have to call Bail and tell him about it, because Bail would laugh until he was red.)

He used the droid to go up the broken lift shaft, while the Jedi both pushed off the walls, leaping from one to the other and back, relying on momentum and the Force; he didn't particular care for how that made him feel, watching their grace and speed and physical performance, but the internal frustration over his own inability to really do the same was long familiar and easily pushed aside for the moment.

It was when they just reached the right deck, though, that he heard the chirp that told him he was being actively tied into a frequency and Smarty was updating them on the situation.

Then the static.

"Someone's cut off station ops and has jammed our comms; Smarty thinks that they aren't looking to
retake the base, but here for some other purpose," he reported to the Jedi, shoving down the spike of worry that flared up at being out of contact with his squad; he wouldn't do them any good if he lost focus, especially since it was likely that they were about to confront the reason behind all of this. "Whoever it is has control of communications."

Koon made a thoughtful noise through his vocabulator, then said, "This station is equipped with the strongest sensor array that the CIS has engineered; that was the reason the Council wanted it taken in the first place. Could that be the primary objective?"

"That sounds right." Obi-Wan huffed in and out, catching his breath, then started jogging down the corridor, Koon on his heels. "Let's get in there and see if we can't put a stop to all of this."

Maul went to follow, then stopped, watching for a moment as they kept going. Then he looked up, taking in the maintenance infrastructure above, and grinned.

“Well, you’re no fun,” the Skakoan said, then pushed the button.

The explosions rocked the decking; Plo immediately set his stance wider, anxiety flushing his skin hotter as he finished putting the whole thing together: This Skakoan had been here to use the station's strong sensors to find something, perhaps on Ryloth, probably abandoned there by Wat Tambor when the Republic had started taking the world back from the droid army.

Not that any of that was more important than the issue currently presented: Even with comms down, the station’s klaxons blared to life and the lights went from cool blue to red and gold, a visual indicator of the seriousness of the situation. And the Skakoan was still laughing as he used thrusters in the boots of his containment suit to take off; he took a moment to give them a jaunty salute, hovering in mid-air--

--when something large, black and bulbous came crashing out of the conduit above, smashing down on his relatively unprotected head, knocking him to the ground and to his knees.

It was quickly followed by something more fleet and with red highlights, illuminated brightly by the glowing gold blade of a saber, which promptly landed right behind the stunned Skakoan in a crouch; two flicks of the blade and both of the Skakoan's hulking shoulder-mounted blasters were sliced away.

Maul stood straight again, sharp hunter's teeth bared in a triumphant manner. "To steal a line-- hello there."

Beside Plo, Obi-Wan breathed out, "Oh Force," but it didn't sound like exasperation.

Unfortunately for all three of them, the Skakoan -- his head having been the only part of him not protected by the containment suit -- fell forward, unconscious from the blow the falling droid had given him.

As dire as the situation was, even Plo could not resist chuckling when Maul frowned at the unconscious enemy and toed him with a boot and a, "Hmph."
"I'll unjam our communications," Plo said, jogging past the Skakoan and Maul, offering a consoling pat on the shoulder on his way past the zabrak to do just that. "We'll need to order an evacuation and hopefully help will get here quickly."

(He was too busy doing that to see Obi-Wan grab Maul for a fast but fierce kiss, before the two of them went to finish disabling the Skakoan’s many suit-based weapons and his ability to escape via thrusters so that he could be secured. He also didn't hear Obi-Wan ask, still lip to lip, "Now who's the reprobate?" or Maul answer, after stealing a quick kiss back, "Still you.")

Comms came back up just in time for General Kenobi to order on all frequencies, "Abandon station! Repeat, abandon station! All fighters in the air, cover the escape pods and get them aboard any Republic ship as quickly as you can."

Raze had been helping hold the deck, but once Smarty had realized what was going on and told him and everyone, he had turned his attention mostly to helping Tally get the wounded onto the Nest, because the droids had stopped coming at the hangar not long after Smarty told them that the station wasn't the ultimate objective. The worst injury was a bad blaster burn, a gut wound, but the brother who had been hit was stable, though he needed a real medbay and surgery soon if he was going to stay that way. He was the first one they got aboard, then they turned to the rest, picking the ones hurt worse first.

"Raze, we've got a problem," Smarty said, as Raze helped another brother onto their ship, setting him down in one of their seats. In an unused cargo space, Tally was minding the one with the gut wound, setting up an impromptu IV stand and using anchors on the solid parts of the antigrav stretcher to secure it for lift off.

"What's up?" Raze asked, running back down the gangway to find Smarty, who had set himself up a miniature command center in the middle of a bunch of crates.

Smarty didn't take his bucket off, but he tapped into the datapad, and a moment later, the station map sprung up on Raze's HUD. "The explosions cut Commander Cody and Shiv and them off from getting out; I need someone to go blast open this passage," he said, and the hallway that had been blocked by debris -- thankfully unbreached to the vacuum of space -- highlighted yellow on the map, "so they can even get to the escape pods. And there's another squad pinned down here," another area highlighted, "that you can free on the way. Then just hop in with them and we'll meet you outside."

Raze never went anywhere without a variety of explosives. Including on a supposedly easy jaunt playing escort to a Republic station.

"Sounds like my kind of mission," he said, grinning broadly and slapping Smarty on the back of an armored shoulder, pulling his blaster around to have in front of him as he took off at a run.
They hadn't really had time to debrief properly after Bravo-984; the best that they had managed was an impromptu caf-chat in Briefing Room 3, right before they were tapped to play escort to Juma-9. All the Blackbirds were pretty frayed yet; aside their ex-shinies, they had been in war long enough to know all about rapid deployments and a lack of down-time between them, but a couple days on Corellia and a decent day's rest after didn't make up for the brutal slough through the icy mountains, and Husker was feeling it now, as he tried to help the others in their group clear debris in order to to minimize any flying shrapnel from the broken superstructure for when Raze got there to blow a hole open for them.

Whatever blow was dealt to Juma-9 wasn't immediately fatal, but there was no telling how long the ailing superstructure was gonna hold. Castle had said that the station might hold together, if crippled, but the engineer had made it damn clear that was the best case scenario and that they oughta expect the worst.

There were no droids left, though, so all Husk had was muscle and time to think, which led him back to the day before, and their briefing room caf-chat. Word had passed between 'em like a rippling wave that their caf maker was still there and that there was a decent selection of pods (Husk suspected Maul was the one who brought the box in on behalf of the sender, because several of the pods bore the name of an Alderaanian company specializing in roasting coffee beans), and there wasn't a trooper in the Grand Army that would turn down that kind of opportunity, let alone the Blackbirds.

Having now met Bail Organa, seeing the way the man so quickly treated all of them as peers, instead of property, and Husker appreciated all over again the box of caf pods set on their counter. Organa would have had to have sent them before the mission to Big Murder Mountain for them to have been there like that, which meant he had sent them without even knowing the men who he had sent them to, if not out of love for them, then out of love for their lieutenant and care for them by proxy.

Watching Rabbit and Rancor pawin' through the box ooh-ing and ah-ing over the different flavors had made Husker feel good. Their excitement to try some berry or chocolate flavored caf was infectious, too; before long, the rest of the squad had filtered in and was doing the same. Even Husk picked out a sweet vanilla flavor to brew up.

The conversation had meandered; just a bunch of clones, then eventually Maul too, all lounging in their chairs around the table. Somehow, though, they got onto the topic of other campaigns and the losses there, maybe because of what Shiv had been talking about before they got back to the Negotiator.

"I didn't really get along great with my batchmates, most of 'em," Tally had said, shaking his head. "I keep in touch with a few, though."

"Ours were all good. I wanna write 'em a letter, but--" Rabbit's face twisted, and he pushed his mug further away. "--you know. General Krell's company. I, uh-- I don't know how many..." he said, then trailed off.

The entire table had fallen quiet there, and Husker -- who was sitting beside Rabbit on one side, while Rancor was on the other -- just reached over to rub the kid's back. But it was Shiv who spoke, looking at Rabbit with old hurt shining in his eyes and said, "I wish--" Then he stopped, and thought about it, and then took a breath and continued, "I wish the Order would think about that kind of thing when they, uh-- when they decide what's considered acceptable losses. I understand objectives, but..."

"There are no acceptable losses."
The entire table had looked at Maul -- the only one of them who bothered to drink tea when there was a perfectly good box of interesting caf to choose from -- and he looked back at them, taking them in each in turn. They all knew his status to the Order; honestly, it wasn't something Husk ever lost sight of, that their L-T was a prisoner and that he had no more rights outside this army than they did, but Maul rarely openly spoke out against said Order, even if he never censored the squad when they did.

"Not here," Maul said, quietly but with weight. "Not out there. Not ever."

The part that scared Husk was that he was sure Maul meant that.

"Where you at, Lieu?" he asked now, after flinging aside another piece of debris, just to make damned sure that his CO was also abandoning the station like they had been ordered to.

"Currently dragging a very heavy, unconscious Skakoan to the nearest escape pod."

Shiv cut in there, apparently thinking the same thing Husk was, "We've got Raze coming to get us out of this jam. You are planning on getting in the escape pod with the unconscious Skakoan, right?"

Maul huffed loud enough to carry over the radio. "Yes, that's my intention, but only after Raze has you freed and the rest of you are off the station."

Somewhere in the background, they could hear General Kenobi protesting that; there was a brief moment where the radio went silent, presumably muted, and Shiv and Husk exchanged a look despite buckets. From somewhere else, Rabbit got on the radio, "We're just lifting off with the Nest now; the hangar's been cleared and all personnel evacuated."

Maul got back on the line, apparently having won his argument, "Good work. Shiv, signal me the moment your party is free of the station."

Shiv didn't bother to hide his exasperated sigh, though as ever, there was a note of affection in it. "Yes, sir. Then you signal me the second you are, too."

"I will."

"Hey, I heard somebody say they needed a way out?" Raze broke in, a bright grin evident in his voice. "Stand back, guys, get behind some cover and I'll have you out of there in a flash... and a bang."

The Skakoan was just regaining consciousness when they arrived at one of the few undamaged escape pods left on this level.

Despite all training, however, Plo's mind was elsewhere, at least in part; even at this distance, he could sense some pang of pain off of the child he had brought to the Temple years ago, though training and experience was enough to distinguish that it was an emotional hurt, rather than a physical one. As he helped drag the Skakoan, he tried to send back warmth and reassurance; at least, to project it in Ahsoka's direction, so she might feel less alone in it; tried to reach out to her as she had done for him after the Malevolence disaster.
"I don't suppose you're interested in sharing a name," Obi-Wan was saying, forcing Plo back into the moment and the immediate. "Or what you were doing here?"

"How many of your clones have died in my explosions?" the Skakoan asked back, voice a little slurred, though he was quite trussed up and the thrusters in his boots disabled.

"None, thus far," Maul said, giving a particularly hard jerk on the Skakoan's arm. "Most have been evacuated and as soon as my squad is clear, I intend to have my slicer dig through the scanner's logs remotely to find out what you were after."

"No matter." The Skakoan laughed. "If you think that your pathetic Republic forces can hold me, you're sorely mistaken."

"I think I liked you better unconscious." Obi-Wan dropped the Skakoan outside of the escape pod, then looked up at Maul. "I don't suppose you have another droid you'd like to drop on his head?"

"I'd drop the entire droid army on his head, but my boot would do in a pinch," Maul answered, resting said boot on the Skakoan's head, right where it had been hit, and causing the prisoner to make a warbling sound as he squirmed, bound and helpless.

"Gentlemen," Plo interrupted, gravely. "Let Intelligence deal with him." He paused, then continued diplomatically, "Though, if he keeps this up, feel free to disable his vocabulator until they have him."

Maul took his boot off of the Skakoan's head, though it seemed to be the last thing he wanted to do. Still, Plo had been duly impressed with the former Sith thus far; with his obvious concern for his troops, and with his quick, if rather dramatic, tactics. A far cry from the cornered, viciously defiant being he had been; it made Plo feel justified in the way he had voted all that time ago, and also more recently.

Perhaps something to bring up, after the prisoner was secure on his new ship.

There was a moment where the light blinked on Maul's headset and he listened to whatever was being said, then relayed, "Cody's party is free and making for the pods."

The Skakoan made a disgruntled noise at that, but didn't speak another word yet. Obi-Wan grabbed his arm anew and started dragging his disabled, containment-suited body into the pod. "Best get him aboard, then." When Obi-Wan caught Maul stiffening in place, he huffed and rolled his eyes. "We won't leave until you give the word, d--" he started, and then cut himself off, complexion darkening.

Plo wondered what word was going to follow (a curse?), but Maul just cleared his throat and grabbed the other arm to help drag their prisoner aboard.

Half the pods were damaged, and those that weren't were gone.

Cody took the lead once Raze had the way cleared for them; when they finally got to some pods still there and useable, he shoved half of their collected group into the first one, which left just him and the Blackbirds and Switch for the last one.

They were piled into it and buckled in fast when-- it refused to launch. On the panel next to the
hatch, a warning flashed red that the remote controls for the docking clamps were disabled.

"You have got to be kidding me," Brody said, making to unbuckle, half under his breath. Castle was just about to do the same, too; Shiv opened his mouth to admonish them to just pick one guy to see if they could jury-rig the connection when their soft-shell escort decided to play hero.

"I can fix it," Switch said, already out the hatch, having been the last one in and having not been buckled there yet. "Just need to use the manual override," he added, hoisting his blaster and turning back to face them with a wan grin Shiv had seen far too many times on troopers about to sacrifice themselves--

--only to get a face full of Raze, who flung his bucket back into the pod to chase after the technician.

Every one of them jumped when he bellowed, "Like hell you are! You get your ass into that pod, soft-shell!"

Even Cody, who'd taken his bucket off to take control of the pod's thrusters, had turned in the pilot's seat and was staring with his mouth hanging open. Shiv-- well, at least his bucket was on to hide the fact that his jaw was also dropped.

"Someone needs to blow the controls--" Switch stammered.

Raze literally grabbed him by his flack jacket and shoved him back into the pod. "Sit down, I'll get it."

"Raze--" Shiv started.

Raze shot a look into the pod, then deliberately reached up and took out one earring, then the other. Switch was staring at him wide-eyed, until Brody reached out and snagged the tech by his arm and jerked him down into the seat. "He's got it, sit down and try not to find some other reason to sacrifice your own life, for frip's sake."

Raze muttered as he squished his plastic-explosive earring, breaking the pretty sparkling shell and exposing the explosive compound under it, and then he activated the tiny detonator in the other one; he moved out of sight and was gone for exactly two seconds, then dove into the pod and slammed the hatch closed just before the pod released, the small explosion enough to trick the docking control into opening the clamps.

"Knew those would come in handy sometime," he said, splaying his arms out as the pod rolled away from the station, its gravity systems struggling to compensate for the wash left from all the energy trails from the battle that was winding down.

Then he pointed up at Switch from the floor and said, "There are no acceptable losses."

Shiv was grinning so hard that his face hurt when he reported on their frequency, "All alive, well and departed, Lieu."

He was looking forward to seeing what Maul's expression was later when he heard about that, but for now, he was grateful for the relieved reply which came back, "Right behind you, Blackbirds."
Brody cocked his head to the side and eyed the footage of his general and his lieutenant sucking face from four different cam angles, behind the back of a Jedi Council member, and then glanced around quickly before scrubbing it out of Juma 9's databanks.

The Nest had picked up their escape pod; Tango whined the entire time over the radio telling Rabbit not to scratch the courier's paint, even as he himself provided cover for them in his borrowed fighter. Somehow, despite not being Tango, Rabbit managed a successful retrieval, hooking docking port to docking port with the escape pod. As they had disembarked, Maul had called over the radio and asked Brody to slice into Juma 9's systems remotely and see if he could access the scanner logs and see what the Skakoan prisoner had been looking for. For expediency's sake, Brody sliced the surveillance first so he could pin down a timestamp, and that was how he ended up getting an eyeful of General Kenobi and Maul having a steamy little tongue-wrestle in plain view of the cameras.

As the last scrap of video data depicting that disappeared into a disk corruption error, Brody thought, Poor Tango, and then promptly put it out of his mind as he worked on slicing the scanner's logs.

After he found out what the Skakoan had been scanning for and where, he forwarded the information to General Koon's new ship, where Maul and the Jedi had been brought aboard with their prisoner, as the two Seppie frigates (devoid now of fighters and battered from the battle) jumped away into hyperspace. Then he went back through the footage again; he made a copy of Maul's droid-riding shenanigans, made a copy of the incredibly badass drop on the Skakoan, deleted a few more strategic chunks of footage and wondered if he could win some credits off of Tally by somehow making this new revelation into a bet.

It would be nice, after all, if he could afford to hire a legitimate advertising service to run the Viable ad that he was only a couple of days away from completing.

Kul Teska was the name of their very unhappy prisoner; once they had him aboard ship, and Plo was able to contact one of the Intelligence units out there, it didn't take him very long to be identified. Then, immediately after that, they finally managed to get into communication with Anakin Skywalker, who had been holding Cad Bane prisoner on Ryloth after managing to capture him; apparently, this was enough to seriously anger Teska, because Bane had stolen a prototype part for a weapon from him, which Skywalker had already confiscated before Bane escaped. Teska's entire point of bringing two frigates and to have CIS forces go on the offensive on Ryloth seemed to be so he could access Juma 9's sensors and find out where Bane had ended up with it, only to be thwarted.
While listening to Teska rant and monologue, Plo had made sure to record the information for Intelligence, hoping that the more arrogant of the villains never lost the habit of talking too much, even if having to listen to it made the bases of his tusks ache.

After that, he finally took a moment to center himself anew, greeting the new men who would be under his command as they headed back for the hangar deck.

There had been twenty-three losses over all in the conflict, and none of them on Juma 9; nine from the 212th, the rest 501st, including one trooper that had been under Ahsoka's command on Ryloth. When he heard that, his prior sense of her suffering came back to mind.

His own mistakes had led to far more deaths than justifiable; the Malevolence remained a dark specter just behind of his shoulder. As old as he was, it was a weight he was capable of bearing while still walking in the light, but Ahsoka was still so terribly, achingly young for such burdens. Plo had brought up the question of what would happen to the padawans while their masters were deployed as military officers at the beginning of this conflict, and had protested when the answer was that every Jedi -- even those still training -- was needed. Their numbers were not so great that they could afford to keep the padawans in the Temple, hoping that they would learn piecemeal, or wait until after the war to finish their apprenticeships; the padawans would go with their masters, out onto the battlefield, and would command troops.

As with most things, the Council was split over that decision. And none of them were easy with it, regardless of vote.

Plo believed in duty, however; he accepted the responsibility of leadership when the decision was made for the Jedi to act as the primary pool for the Republic's military officers, but he also made certain to back any Jedi who refused to fight on the front lines, of which there were a few. His own former padawan, Issa Mar, had opted to join the war effort in an intelligence role instead, and Plo would be dishonest if he tried to claim that he didn't prefer that for her. He wished that Ahsoka could have gone the same route.

The dark was obscuring, and they had been losing their way in it especially of late; able to step back and see things with a longer view, Plo could also see just how long this had been going on.

He decided that before he left the area, he was going to contact Ahsoka and check on her. That he was going to take time to meet and greet every new clone under his command that he could between now and their next destination, as well.

For now, he went to see Obi-Wan and Maul off; their pilot had joined them, and the courier was in the holding pattern for landing on the deck to pick them up. While the pilot -- Tango -- was talking animatedly with Maul, Plo stepped over to Obi-Wan. "I intend to hold here long enough for the engineers to assess whether Juma 9 can be salvaged. We have enough capacity to care for the troops who were supposed to be stationed there, including yours, until we know."

Obi-Wan nodded, though his expression had gotten pensive between when they left the station and now. "With Ryloth mostly back under control, we'll doubtless be pushed elsewhere."

"Still, it was good working with you again," Plo continued, folding his hands into the sleeves of his robe. "And likewise good to see your undeniably unique lieutenant in action."

Obi-Wan's shoulders stiffened a little, though he didn't look or sound angry as he said, "Maul's proven himself a number of times, but especially of late. Shaak Ti also wants an assessment of the Blackbirds; I'm debating on whether to allow it or not."
The defensiveness that Plo was detecting was ultimately unsurprising. Aside Vokara Che, Obi-Wan had been the one with the most contact with the ex-Sith; after those troubling early days of Maul's captivity, Obi-Wan had been steadfast in his advocacy for Maul. Plo, having known Qui-Gon and considered him a friend, wasn't sure what his old friend would have thought of this, but for he himself, he was-- grateful, in a way, that something good had come out of all of it, even if the loss to the Order had been undeniable. "I think she would be very fair," he pointed out, watching the zabrak steer his pilot out of the way of a group of troops leaving the deck, all without interrupting said pilot's talking. "Many on the Council still view him as a liability; the only way to challenge that is by showing them otherwise."

"I don't know if I agree with that," Obi-Wan said, arms crossed. "But you raise an interesting point."

"Does he know of my own voting record?"

It was a touchy question to ask, Plo knew, for a number of reasons; Obi-Wan's clear wariness over it radiated off of him and made Plo feel regretful, that one of their finest generals -- and, indeed, one of their best Jedi -- felt so divorced from the leadership of the Order. Nor could he entirely blame Obi-Wan for feeling that way; when the Council had to debate who to fill Depa's seat with, given her comatose state, Obi-Wan had been one of the candidates. And it was specifically his steadfast advocacy for Maul which had him passed over, though the vote had been close and Grandmaster Yoda had pushed strongly for Obi-Wan to be given the seat.

Obi-Wan was likely expecting some manner of belligerence over having shared that information with Maul. Because clearly he had, given his long silence, though after a few moments his chin inclined and he confirmed it, "Yes, he knows who voted and how."

"If it helps, Obi-Wan-- I don't regret any of mine," Plo said, reaching out and patting Obi-Wan on the shoulder before walking past him to go and talk to Maul.

The reappearance of the Sith, after a thousand years of silence, had shaken the Order to its foundations.

All of that had been brought to bear on Maul, immediately after his capture. As the only possible resource for information about what their ancient enemy was planning, he was given no quarter beyond what Vokara Che could demand; even then, her demands were only heeded when his very life was in danger. In the initial weeks, his wounds kept him in that precarious place; first came the emergency measures to keep him alive, then to stabilize him and deal with the ensuing infection that ravaged his broken form, then to add a permanent life-support cuff to what was left of his body to compensate for the organs he no longer had once he was strong enough for the surgery, taking over for the exterior machinery that had been doing the job before. There had been no talk then of granting him mobility via cybernetic replacements for his hips and legs; once he was no longer in immediate danger, he was given the full attention of the Council, almost to the exclusion of everything else.

He was questioned, to no avail. Telepathically probed at, likewise to no avail, even when it was the Order's strongest and best trained telepaths attempting it. Even for his age and injuries, he was so steadfast in his refusal to bend or break that days became weeks, and weeks became months, and the more time that passed, the more intense the attempts. He made no effort to attack the guards or
Vokara Che, but he refused to cooperate even with the most basic of requests. The only person who could provoke him into speaking was young Obi-Wan, who the Council was also concerned was treading too close to the dark.

In the end, it wasn't the Council that broke Maul's mental shielding. They were only there to see if anything useful could be found in the wreckage after the other Sith, undeniably the master, had found a way to do catastrophic damage from a distance.

But it was certainly the Council of the time that broke Maul's will to survive. Plo had no doubts about that.

Plo had been against using mental probing and sleep deprivation as an interrogation method from the start; he, Yaddle, Ki-Adi-Mundi, Adi and Depa had all refused to participate in it, citing their discomfort with it. But when he heard that Maul had finally been broken and had immediately tried to end his own life, he was saddened, but not particularly surprised. To have held on that long was a feat of endurance; to have finally reached the end of it could only be devastating. When he heard the details, the sadness grew more pronounced.

Even with gaps in his memory, it was clear that Maul had been raised and trained as a weapon. If there were any grand plans, he would not have likely been privy to the details. For Plo, and some of the others, the ends had not justified the means.

Now, nearly eleven years after, the same person stood on Plo's hangar deck; a commissioned officer, fighting on their side, alongside their men and alongside the Jedi. Plo could understand why many of the Council, and indeed many of the Jedi, were uncomfortable with Maul's existence, let alone with his participation; he was a moral quandary embodied in flesh and cybernetics. A question about the space between light and dark, and during a time when the Order was already struggling to see the former for the overwhelming presence of the latter.

"I wanted to personally thank you for your service," he said, once Maul had finished talking with Tango, who had moved off with a wary glance to meet the courier due to land any moment.

Maul's posture was stiff; much like Obi-Wan, his chin raised, and exactly like Obi-Wan, he crossed his arms defensively. "General," he just answered, not really an acceptance or a refusal, but at least an acknowledgment.

Plo wasn't going to speak ill of the other Council members; he did not think their decisions, then or more recently, were made with any malice in mind. Nor, though, could he blame Maul for viewing him with such clear suspicion. "I understand your discomfort, speaking to me," Plo added, folding his own hands behind his back to appear less intimidating and more open. "But I wanted to also tell you that I consider my votes, regarding you, to have been the correct ones and that I don't believe that will change."

Maul somehow managed to stiffen even more in place; his voice was tense, if controlled, when he said, "I'm still a prisoner. Your prisoner. My opinions on your voting record are inconsequential."

It reminded Plo of Maul's defiant stance in the Council's chambers, when his parole was being debated. His biting criticism. Strangely, that display of spirit pleased Plo. "It matters to me, but I can appreciate your unwillingness to discuss it. Still, if you ever wish to, I'm willing to listen. And if you ever want to cross sabers in a friendly spar, I would be honored."

That apparently took the zabrak aback some; he drew his head back, one shoulder twitching the same direction. Then his jaw worked and he wrestled with himself, shifting his weight slightly before squaring up again, even if his arms remained crossed. "I'm not the swordsman I once was, but I
admired you then, General. For your prowess and skill. You struck me as an honorable opponent.”

Plo absorbed that, and didn't take the barb personally. "But no longer?"

Those arms didn't uncross, but Maul didn't look away, either. "Did you ever speak out against it, while they were at me? I know how you voted. That you refused to participate. But did you ever speak out against it?"

There was only one honest answer to that, so Plo gave it: "No. After the initial vote on interrogation, I recused myself citing my discomfort with the methods, but I didn't speak out against it while it was happening."

"Then you already have your answer."

Ultimately, it was the undertone of disappointment in Maul's voice as he said that which hit home. And when the zabrak turned and walked away, making for the direction where his courier was due to land, Plo let a slow breath out through his mask.

He had a great deal to meditate on, once he had time to do it.

Obi-Wan had a lot to think about, and yet more he and Maul had to talk about, but it had to wait until they were on the Negotiator.

He had stayed back while Maul and Plo talked, then said goodbye to the other Jedi before following his darling to where the Nest had landed. Tally had transferred the wounded to the waiting medics aboard, rattling off rapid fire the condition and vitals of the one hurt worst, and then disappeared back onboard the courier. Raze flew off the ramp and tackled Maul, which made Obi-Wan's eyes go wide, as Maul had to play catch and stay on his feet; Tango, walking with them, just shrugged and said, "He does that all the time."

It was another piece of the picture he had been trying to build now since the return from Bravo-984. Not an unwelcome one, but heavy: The realization that there was an entire part of Maul's life that he was no longer an active part of. That the squad was building rituals and languages all their own, and he had no rightful place sharing those things.

The bittersweetness of it lingered until they were back aboard their own ship. Ryloth was back under control, Mace and Kit Fisto having arrived from another completed campaign to mop up, which left Obi-Wan free for the battlegroup’s next assignment. To his relief, that was to one of their supply worlds; a chance to resupply his fleet and give his men a brief rest.

And perhaps, too, a chance to breathe long enough for him and Maul to figure out where they now stood.

Once back aboard the Negotiator, Maul went with his squad to their briefing room, likely so they could go over their performance; Obi-Wan went to the bridge to get on the comms and piece together everything that had happened in the chaos spread out between Ryloth and Juma 9.

Now, four hours and a buzzing headache later, they were back in their quarters and doing the very last thing Obi-Wan wanted to be doing.
Arguing.

"If I would have known, we could have started looking into how to fix it!" he said, trying and failing to keep a level tone. But at the heart of it, he felt-- not betrayed, never that, but a little wounded, that Maul had been struggling with the Force since Zigoola and had not once brought it up to him, even obliquely. "We could have at least discussed it!"

"I didn't even realize it was that serious." Maul was standing, unsurprisingly, as he watched Obi-Wan from his spot nearly to the bulkhead, as if he felt he had to have something solid to protect his back. "And if you would have known, what would we have done? Meditated on it? I've tried that."

A thousand nightmare scenarios were crossing Obi-Wan's mind, even as he was trying to reason with his other-half. "I could have--" he started, then paused, dropping his head over his own folded arms.

He would have axed the training mission, very likely. He might not have assembled the squad, or if he did, he would have found some way to lighten their mission parameters. He would have done that to protect both Maul and them, because a large part of the original argument to the Council about letting Maul out of the Temple to join the war effort had been based on his Force sensitivity and his ability to use it on the battlefield to their advantage. And if that connection was so unreliable that Maul's life was in danger like it had been on the station--

The terrible thought occurred that Obi-Wan could easily end the argument and everything else, if he cast Maul as a liability rather than an asset in relation to the Blackbirds. Then, instantly after, the more terrible realization came that Obi-Wan was even capable of thinking that; that some part of him was capable of viewing this as an exercise in tactics instead of as something which needed handled with love, and not violence, even the subtle and undermining kind of violence.

We were never meant for this, he thought, closing his eyes and swallowing down his horror before making himself look up again.

"I'm managing it. I can compensate for the unreliability and I have," Maul said, and Obi-Wan's chest squeezed at the tremble across Maul's shoulders and the note of questioning in his tone as he finished, "I'm worth more than just my ability to use the Force."

And it was a truth; hell's teeth, it was a truth that Obi-Wan would have cried from the top of a mountain. In any other moment, Maul saying that would have had him beaming and soaring internally; that his darling would assign himself any worth without somehow citing himself as being a useful tool.

But in that moment, Obi-Wan almost couldn't believe how close he had come to taking a contrary position to it.

"You are," he agreed, his own voice trembling more than he liked. "By every possible measure. So--let's map it. What you know for sure about it, and maybe we can figure out the best way to navigate around it."

Maul gave back a steady looking nod, but that didn't change the fact that he spent the next half hour or so shaking like a leaf in Obi-Wan's arms, before they could even get down to the discussion.

Somehow it didn't come as a surprise when, after that, he asked Obi-Wan to let the Blackbirds deploy afield for missions, away from the bulk of the 212th.

Or, that when all of their words were spent, they slept the rest of the night with their limbs tangled
together as they held onto one another with everything in them.

"Point of order!" Brody smacked the briefing room table, theatrically. "Let the lieutenant have the floor."

In spite of how he was feeling, that made Maul huff in amusement. Their morning briefings tended to be more like free-for-alls than anything else; had been since the first one, really, which had been the most formal of them. After that, they became a time to convey information, yes, but also to joke around, or to banter, or to debate, or just to drink caf or tea and watch the squad descend upon any non-issued foodstuff that might have made it into the briefing room. To anyone outside, the chaos probably seemed a terrible breach of protocol, but Maul enjoyed these times; it was during them that he had first gotten to know his squad, and now, post Bravo-984, it felt--

He wasn't sure; didn't know the word for it, but it reminded him of Alderaan towards the end of their convalescence there, post-Zigoola, where sharing meals with Bail and Queen Breha was much like this. Where the people gathered were not there because they had to be, but because they wished to be.

"Do you want me to start with the good news or the confessions?" Maul asked, resting his elbows on the table and folding his hands, taking in the squad; he was anxious, but managing it -- it felt like everything in his life right now was down to managing or compensating -- and the way all of the Blackbirds perked up when the word 'confessions' hit the air made him smile and shake his head to himself, firmly tamping down his nervousness.

"Oooh, that's a tough call," Shiv ribbed right back, leaning back in his seat as he was often wont to do when he was courting mischief, eying Maul with a tongue-in-cheek grin. "Either of those coming from you is bound to be entertaining."

Maul snorted. "Don't be so sure on that."

"I'm intrigued either way," Tally said, to the enthusiastic nods of everyone around the table. "But hell, start with the good news."

"The Nest is ours, permanently."

Tango jumped up from the table and punched the air, and no one at said table was shocked as he hollered, "Yes!!"

"--and, within reason, we get to customize it. Reason, in this case, meaning whatever we can requisition within budget and salvage otherwise. From here, we're headed to Radnor for resupply; the 332nd will be there, and General Kenobi intends to source us our next field assignment from their general. But while we're there, we're authorized for R&R on days one and two. After that, the 501st will be there, but we'll likely be on our next assignment by then."

Husker hrrmphed and Smarty chimed in with, "Radnor's one of the only planets in this area that hasn't been skirmishing, thanks to their weapons development projects and the bio-plague from a few years back that escaped from one of their labs. The world's been cleared, some have migrated back to it, but I guess no one wants to go and find out if there's still some pockets of it waiting to escape again, not even the Seppies."
"Is there anything you don't know?" Tally asked, though he was grinning.

"Plenty," Smarty said back, with a sharp smile. "But since this entire area is a CIS hotbed or slaver territory, I did my research."

"Droids don't get the plague," Husker pointed out.

"No, but their officers can. I wouldn't want to risk it, either," Tally gave a cheerful shrug. "I hope they did their decon right, then. Biologically engineered plagues sound like a great vacation souvenir."

Maul had more knowledge of the situation than any of them, for once; Obi-Wan (and Skywalker) had been deployed there when it had happened, some six years back, and Bail had been instrumental in getting relief and aid sent without a lengthy Senate debate. He remembered Obi-Wan's visits after it; it was just before Iloh, actually, and thus Maul had some mental and emotional context for the events in play.

Mostly, the remaining inhabitants of the world were still entirely friendly towards the Jedi, and given the nature of the war out here, were willing to act as a supply depot and waystation for the Republic's forces, where many other worlds were either hostile or didn't want to get involved directly.

"Oh! Ocean world!" Misty had been reading from a datapad, apparently having been curious enough to do his own research. "Well, mostly. Either way, I win."

"From here, we'll be treated as largely independent, but General Shaak Ti has requested an assessment of the squad in the near future," Maul continued; he wasn't happy about that in the least, but he knew some of his squad had a rapport with the Jedi, and ultimately, the only one who could stand between them and said assessment was Obi-Wan, who would if asked, but who Maul didn't want to ask.

Husker's face brightened at that, while Tally's dimmed. A few of the others had similar reactions. "She'll give us a good review," Husk said, with certainty. "She's a good ally to have in our corner."

Tally's mouth went into a line, but he kept quiet.

"The time hasn't been set for it yet, due to current troop graduation levels, but doubtless we'll know sooner than later." Maul unfolded his hands and scrubbed a palm down his face, aware that he had their attention anew, hiding behind his hand for a moment. "As to the confessions..." he started, then faltered for a moment, the anxiety he'd managed to get a hold on early rearing back up hard enough that it caught his breath short. He made himself take a deeper one, then let it out carefully, even if he couldn't make himself open his eyes yet. "The mission to Zigoola, prior to the squad's assembly left me-- unreliable."

"Unreliable?" Shiv asked, disbelief in his tone, after a long beat.

Maul finally managed to make himself look back at the squad, bracing for disappointment or worse, though he kept his voice even. "My ability to use the Force was damaged there. I didn't realize it was quite so bad as it turned out to be until we were on Bravo-984. There was another long beat where he wrestled with himself, half a dozen urges -- all of them ultimately boiling down to fleeing or freezing -- firing down his arms, which had him folding his hands on the table again, just to resist that. "If I was able to harness it as I had before Zigoola, I could have caught you," he said, a rough note creeping into his voice as he looked at Shiv. "I could have avoided the zipline for all of you, likely. I could have-- I could have probably handled the cargo more efficiently. I could have also handled the sensor towers more efficiently."
The Blackbirds were all quiet, as they looked back at him. The only one he could make eye contact with was Shiv, and that was so he could say, "I'm sorry, Shiv."

Shiv stared back, squinting; Maul would not have thought to blame his sergeant if he launched into an attack about it, though he didn't think it likely. The thought of losing Shiv's respect to silence was somehow worse anyway.

"Frankly, Lieu: Kriff that," Shiv said, after a few moments. "Are you seriously apologizing to me for not being able to do what none of the rest of us can do anyway?" He shook his head, emphatically, then took his own breath and said, more calmly, "Sir, connection to the Force or not, you sure as hell weren't what anyone can call unreliable."

"Shiv's right," Raze said, just as certainly. "I mean, I get you being worried about it and all, 'cause the Jedi go jump around like spiced-up hares and pick up giant things by gesturing dramatically, but Lieu-- none of us can do that, and anyway, that's not what being a leader's about."

Maul wasn't sure what to say to that; the entire squad agreed immediately, and enthusiastically. Tally looked a little worried, but he was just as loud and enthusiastic as the rest of them. Maul tried to think of how he could explain that an unreliable Force connection made him a particular liability to the squad, and said, "Nonetheless, I realize it was one of my selling points--"

"--selling points?" Tally interrupted, incredulously. "Okay, first, you're not a kriffin' commodity, you're our lieutenant, and second of all-- Raze and Shiv are right. Speaking for myself, I'm worried about it, but that's medical and doesn't have a thing to do with your ability to contribute. You said it yourself, our first briefing; you know stealth, you know how to kill pretty much everything, you know how to do what we've been tapped to do, and sir, that counts too."

It was getting steadily harder to-- to think through all of the threads Maul had painstakingly assembled before coming to this briefing. He thought, objectively, that even one more point against him would be enough for any sane group of people to backpedal from supporting him quickly, and he held up a hand asking for no interruptions before carefully trying to order his thoughts past the tight feeling in his chest, "There's-- a lot. I'm a prisoner. I'm walking on cybernetics that can be compromised by a weapon commonly used by the Grand Army. My ability to compensate for my weaknesses is further damaged by an unreliable ability to use the Force. I'm not-- I'm not--" He gave a sharp gesture at his head, then made himself fold his hands again by some feat of will. "What I'm saying is, I want--" A beat, and he swallowed. "--I want to continue as your lieutenant. But I-- I don't want to be a liability, either. Nor do I want there to be any-- any illusions, as to what I can or can't do."

I don't want to let you down.

Every word of it hurt to say. Even feeling the sharp ache, Maul wondered at how that was possible. The fact that he was not even finished confessing liabilities reminded him of what drowning felt like.

"Can we talk now?" Shiv asked, calmly; when Maul managed a nod, he said, "Obviously, the only way we can do this part of things is by vote. So, Blackbirds, vote: Do we keep our lieu?"

"Damn straight we do," Raze said, immediately. "Look, sir, if you can cope with me never being to briefings on time, or having a completely understandable but maybe kinda extreme desire to blow things up, or thinking a thousand things at once, I sure as hell can cope with you just being you, whether you can lift boulders with your mind or not."

"Seconded." Castle rapped his knuckles light on the table. "We've already proven ourselves with you. Twice over -- three times, if we count our espionage against Skywalker -- and that's more'n
most of our brothers get a chance for. I don't want another CO."

"Thirteenth," Brody threw out. "Lieu, I'm a-- mostly-former cult member, currently only semi-legal slicer who might be married but doesn't know for sure, I'm definitely not gonna get hung up on any of your issues, especially 'cause you've never been hung up on mine."

"Fourteenth." Smarty sounded as if he was smiling. "Give up the only squad and CO that never tells me to shut up when I compulsively spew information? Hell no."

"Fifteenth, this is the most swimming I've gotten to do since leaving Kamino," Misty added. "And now that I'm done being shallow -- ha ha -- I kind of like being able to vote on things. I like coming in here and feeling like we're all brothers instead of barely one step up from droids."

"Sixteenth," Rabbit said. "I mean-- you gave me cookies in the middle of an arctic nightmare, I'm pretty sure that alone makes you a keeper, Lieu. Never mind that whole badass lightsaber thing you do."

"Seventeenth." Husker's voice was quieter, but it was steady. "I made my choice on Big Murder Mountain, Lieu; you're it and nothin' you've said here is even close to enough to change it."

"Eighteenth," Tango said, firmly. "Where you go, I go."

"Nineteenth? Is that even a word? But nineteenth. I mean-- we're voting on this, sir, and we wouldn't be doing that if not for you," Rancor said.

"Tenth." Like Husker, Tally's voice was quieter. "You're a prisoner, and we're an army of cloned, bought, owned men, but we're here and we're already pretty good and only going to get better. There's nothing about you that makes you worth giving up."

"And obviously I'm keeping you," Shiv finished, straight-forwardly. "Like that wasn't a foregone conclusion. So, vote's been cast, unanimously we're keeping our lieutenant, and I move we all vote to make that permanent, from here to the end of the road, so we have ammo to remind him if he tries to talk us out of it again. Up and down, aye or nay?"

All eleven voices overlapped with, "Aye!"

It was, by far, more than Maul could cope with. Part of his mind scrambled to find points of argument, but mostly, he was just overwhelmed; uncertain connection to the Force or no, he could feel the loyalty and sincerity in their words, could feel the warmth of it, and could feel the same echo from his own hearts, this attachment he didn't see coming and now wanted, with aching desperation, to hold onto.

The breath he dragged in there trembled, and he rested his face in his hands, but he said, "If you change your minds after what I say next--"

"Oh, for frip's sake!" Tally broke in, but his voice was filled with undeniable affection.

"--I won't blame you," Maul continued, a shaky smile tugging the corners of his mouth for the interruption, as he tried to gather his nerve for the rest of this and keep the panic under even tenuous control.

Shiv just said, quietly, "You've got this," and Maul didn't doubt for a moment that Shiv knew what was coming.

Maul managed a nod, then said, "General Kenobi and I are in a relationship -- a romantic relationship -- and have been for years."
There was a very long several moments of silence; it was Smarty who broke it, sounding stunned.

"Oh, shit, I did not see that one coming."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, you will get a chance to see the fallout from how that briefing ended. <3
Flying the Coop

Chapter Summary

But Very Slowly and With Several Distractions Along the Way

Chapter Notes

Pretty slice-of-life, multiple-POV piece, hopefully satisfying regardless. <3

"--remember, you too can try Viable for a free two week trial, and it's only 99 point 99 credits per month after!"

Maul paused inside of the doorway of their briefing room and stared at Brody, who was currently speaking with Anakin Skywalker's voice, a datapad in hand that he was clearly using to record said voice. Maul blinked once or twice, then his head went over to the side, as he tried to come up to speed on what exactly his slicer was doing.

Brody paused and blinked back at him, though he didn't seem the least bit embarrassed.

"Do I want to know?" Maul asked, brow furrowing.

Brody gave him a toothy grin, broad and beaming. The effect was triply unsettling for the fact he was still using Skywalker's voice when he said, "Probably not, Lieu."

Maul gave a slow nod, then turned to leave again; he was only going to grab a few more of their supplies to transfer to the Nest, but that could wait. "Carry on."

"With gusto, Lieu," Brody replied, cheerfully.

Maul was still shaking his head when the door closed behind him. Doubtless he would find out eventually.

Brody watched his CO leave; Maul wasn't the only one shaking his head, though Brody was doing so with that grin still plastered on his face. But having what amounted to tacit approval for this venture made it even more fun, and even though it had been a lot of work, it had already been a blast, especially as it started coming together.

The fully-rendered holo-model of General Skywalker had required a lot of time staring at the man; Brody had duplicated his visage perfectly, had spent a solid hour zoomed in on his cybernetic arm in order to accurately recreate the glove and anchorpoints, had color-matched his usual clothing -- kriff,
did he ever even change clothes? -- and made sure to lay the right textures on the fabric. He had watched recordings and tweaked so that Skywalker's lip and jaw movements would line up with the recorded dialogue in a natural manner, and then he'd hauled out Shiv's Little Buddy -- the voice emulator droid that they had not yet reprogrammed from their original 'fact finding' mission -- and swallowed it down with a shudder just to record said dialogue.

Striking the right mix between boyish and sheepish-yet-confident took some practice this morning, but now-- Brody had it down. Skywalker was going to have one hell of a time protesting his innocence; sure, eventually he might be able to, but not before this ad looped from one end of the vast HoloNet to the other.

"So, don't leave your lightsaber under-powered, make the call today!" he finished, then rattled off the comm code for Viable.

Shame he wasn't going to get a cut of the profits this illicit ad campaign generated, but sometimes, one just had to perform solely for the arts.

(He hoped that Tango would get a kick out of it; his poor brother had looked gutted when he left the briefing room earlier.)

Setting the Nest up for long term use was going to take awhile, but the Blackbirds already had a good start on it and she was highly customizable by intentional design. The ship's design was older, and most pilots actually hated the BR-23, but she was fast and did have the best set of deflectors available. Her firepower wasn't really good, and she didn't like sharp maneuvering, but she had plenty of space and was well-made in terms of her primary purpose, which was troop movements. And in this case, her unpopularity helped, because no one was going to care too much if someone requisitioned a mass-produced ship for a single squad if it was the kind of ship no one liked to fly.

Tango knew that he'd be a laughing stock of the air corps if he admitted he liked the BR-23, because she was unwieldy in landing and atmospheric flying, but where other pilots would just see a headache, he saw her potential. And he already had a good feel for her controls, even in really adverse conditions.

And working on her was distracting him from the gods-awful misery trying to eat a hole through the middle of him.

He wasn't sure what was the worst part of it all: The fact that Maul was in a relationship, and with who, or the way the rest of the Blackbirds were all so sympathetic to he himself. It felt a lot like kripping pity, the way they kept patting his back or asking if he was okay, and he hated it. He loved them for caring, but he hated it. It made him feel like he had been left out of some important conversation and now everyone was referencing it and he didn't know what they were talking about, even though everyone -- except Shiv and Tally and Brody -- had been just as shocked by the confession as he was.

Right now, he was sitting on the Nest's deck, centered between the cockpit and the rear loading ramp with her schematics pulled up in holographic form so they could plan. Tally wanted a med-bay installed, and while getting all of that gear was going to take awhile, Tango was already planning on where to put it. The Nest was equipped with repulsors, so he had to make sure whatever they did, the
weight would be balanced out correctly, but he and Castle were both up for that.

At least, that was what Tango was trying to do.

"General Kenobi cut him in half," he said, when he felt Tally looking at him for the millionth time in the past half-hour. He looked up himself, taking in the medic's look of quiet sympathy, and bristled. "You can't tell me there's anything healthy about that relationship."

Tally raised his eyebrows. "I can tell you that General Kenobi regrets doing that. And I can tell you that they've been together for a long time. And that Maul trusts him and loves him and I get the distinct impression that the general had to earn that."

Tango felt something sour curdling in his mouth and throat and guts. "Yeah, except what choices did Maul have? He's a kriffing prisoner, Tally."

"Yeah." Tally shook his head. "I've got my own misgivings, but none of those are because I think either of them wants to hurt the other."

"I don't like it." Tango dropped the stylus he had been using, interfaced with the holo-projector, and tried to stop his lip from curling up, though only to partial success. "The lieu deserves better'n someone who cut him down like a-- like a piece of livestock."

There was a long moment there where Tally regarded him, then the medic sat back, bracing his hands on the decking behind him. "I think it's up to Maul to decide if Kenobi's good enough for him. Not us. I mean, I get where you're coming from in worrying, but Tango--" There was a beat, and Tango's skin prickled nervously before Tally finished, "--Tango, he was never yours. I know you feel hurt and disillusioned, but he wasn't yours to lose."

Tango felt a flush burn through him, some mix of shame and anger, at having that pointed out to him. "Like I didn't frippin' know that. Don't lecture me, brother."

"I'm not trying to." Tally frowned, then his mouth twitched. "I'm sorry I came across like I was. I just-- I hate seeing you hurting like this."

That hit pretty hard; unlike all the back patting and the implied poor Tango he was getting from everyone, Tally was so-- so damned sincere, and Tango felt his eyes burn and his own mouth quiver before he rested his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands, tears scalding hot behind his eyelids. He tried to say something -- didn't even know what -- but couldn't figure out the words or how to force them past the ache in his throat.

He heard a shuffle, and then felt Tally's arms around him, and as angry and frustrated and sore and sad as he was, he wrapped his arms around Tally's middle and pressed his face into his brother's shoulder and cried his badly cracked heart out.

Honestly, Rabbit was kind of afraid to even board the Nest right now. She was Tango's baby, for one; Tango just got some subjectively bad news, for another. And, really, Rabbit was kind of trying to slot that particular brain bender into his understanding of the galaxy.

"Isn't that-- forbidden?" he asked, as he and Raze and his twin carried crates of supplies. There
weren’t actually many crates they could take from the Negotiator because she was running low on supplies, but they had a few and they also were allowed to cannibalize parts from ships that were damaged and due to be scrapped, of which there were a handful.

"As far as I can tell, romantic relationships in the Jedi aren’t allowed?” Raze asked back; he’d taken the news just like he seemed to take most news, letting it roll over him and then cheerfully moving on. To say Rabbit admired their demo expert might have been understating it. "So, it was a pretty big deal, the L-T telling us."

They were alone, something all three of them had checked as they walked, because no one wanted to spill to the rest of the ship what Maul had told them. It was only after they'd started discussing it, though, that Rabbit realized that they had done; that their caution had been automatic. It made him feel good, because that was how a black ops troop should be thinking. "How much trouble would they get into, you think?"

"More than any of us wants to consider."

Rancor had been quiet about it, though he was just as surprised. Rabbit thought for sure that his brother was doing the same thing he was; just taking it in and trying to work out what it meant for them. "Wonder if that's why we've been given the ship," Rancor said, thoughtfully.

"Favoritism?"

"Maybe. But maybe just so those two wouldn't be as close together," Raze answered, after a moment's thought.

Rabbit felt his face pulling into a frown. He'd never fallen in love; lust, a few times, sure. But not love. Even then, he knew that being away from someone you loved had to be pretty kriiffing awful, given the amount of pining literature and language there was in the galaxy. "I'd think it would be the opposite. I mean, if you love someone, you're supposed to want to spend all of your time together, right?" he asked.

Raze gave a shrug. "I don't know. But I guess if I was sleeping with someone, I'd probably not want to see how much danger they're in every day."

There was a long beat there, then Rancor asked, tentatively, "--if they're boinking, how do you suppose that works?"

Rabbit's face went hot and he hurried along the corridor with his crate, trying hard not to even think about that. Raze, though, seemed to take that the same unflappable way he had the news in the first place, bumping shoulders off of Rancor and answering, "Well, I guess they deal with it by nunya."

"Nunya?" Rabbit's brow furrowed, despite the heat on his face.

Raze grinned back. "Nunya damned business, brothers."

"Just when you think you've got it all figured out."

Castle and Husker were both climbing over the ships, both larger and smaller, that they were going
to cannibalize for the *Nest*. In terms of amenities, there wasn't much to be had, but in terms of spare parts or extras that could be converted to more interesting things, the scrap heap was a veritable gold mine.

Husk didn't have a whole lot in the way of opinions on most things higher up, but he had to admit, two of their commanding officers in a romantic tryst was a tough pill to swallow. The chain-of-command issues alone could make a troop break out into a sweat, and that didn't even touch on the *personal* issues that could come up.

The very last thing that Husker had expected to do today was discuss the romantic status of their general and lieutenant.

Castle grunted back at him as he crawled over a wrecked starfighter, inspecting it. "It's sloppy, but I don't think it's-- I dunno. They were together a long time before this, should they break it off just because the galaxy crumbled around them?" He shook his head, then, pulling up a piece of the ship's torn skin to look under it. "I don't really care that much, myself. Not my relationship, not my business."

Husker shook his head. "It's not that. But they shouldn't be workin' together directly like that. Too much can go wrong. 'Specially if they were already suckin' face on duty."

"I think that's why the Lieu's asked to have us cut loose. Put some distance between him and Kenobi."

"Me too. Still worries me, though." Husker palmed down his face. "General Skywalker ever finds out, and I don't even wanna contemplate the size of that disaster."

At that, Castle smirked, even with his face half-buried in the body of the starfighter. "We're doing a fine impression of a pair of gossips. Besides, if Brody gets his Viable ad done, Skywalker will have plenty else to worry about than who Kenobi's sleeping with."

Husker nodded at that. He didn't really want to think about it anymore, so he upnodded to the starfighter. "What are you lookin' at that for, anyway? That thing wouldn't have any crossover parts."

"Tango." Castle sat back on the starfighter's wing, looking over it, his smirk morphing into a grin. "I think I can probably salvage this one. Yeah, it's pretty beaten up and it's a Delta-6 and not a Delta-7 which is probably why it's on the scrap-heap, but no one's gonna give Tango a new starfighter at his grade. I might be able to give him this one, instead."

Husker wasn't really a mechanic; he could do repairs in the field, if they weren't too complicated, but he didn't get into it the way Castle did. He eyed the starfighter, with a broken landing strut and blaster burn marks and then just shrugged. "We'll have to come up with a way to dock her with the *Nest*."

Castle rested on his heels and tapped the side of his head, grinning even more, a rare bright look on his usually stoic, square face. "Already working out how."

"Hey, you figured out the syncing!"
Smarty had walked in to catch the very tail end of Brody's digital devilry, and the result was outstanding.

The holo advert was such that it could come up in full hologram form or broadcast on screen, depending on the receiver. In it, General Skywalker extolled the virtues of the little blue pill that would solve all human virility problems while swinging his lightsaber dramatically, deflecting fictional laser bolts. His voice and inflections were spot on; on the briefing room table, Shiv's Little Buddy (unrelated to Skywalker's little buddy, oh kriff, when Smarty heard that part he almost fell over laughing) was in standby mode.

"Yep," Brody said, such a wide grin on his face that it was almost deranged looking. He went back and added a public domain music track, a rousing (or arousing) military-style number, and then started adding the text with the comm codes and the brand name.

Smarty could sit down and quote, line and subsection, every single regulation and law that the Blackbirds had broken or would be breaking today, from Maul's confessions to their voting to Brody's planned counterstrike against Anakin Skywalker. And even though he had some misgivings about parts of that, he kind of loved that he could even do that. There were companies -- whole sections of the army -- that would get into trouble if they so much as took a part off of one of the droids they knocked down as a souvenir, and yet here were the Blackbirds, sowing chaos and getting away with it.

"Did you manage to find a way to run it legitimately?" he asked, nodding to the currently frozen hologram of Skywalker holding his lightsaber jutting up from his crotch in the most cheesy, blatantly phallic way Brody could render.

That dimmed Brody's grin some, and he shook his head. "Nah, it's gonna have to go viral on its own power." But he slapped the table lightly, making Shiv's Little Buddy hop in place, brightening right up again. "But I'm pretty damned sure it can. This is a bonafide work of art, brother. It'll catch."

Shiv was no artist, but he understood the squad's request for paint and went to see about filling it.

He was pretty sure that the armor-painting tradition had been passed down to them from their Mandalorian instructors; he knew, mostly from listening, that different colors symbolized different things in that culture, though he didn't really have any desire to study up on it and find out more. But he did know that the Blackbirds wanted a chance to paint their battlefield armor up; for most of them, it would be a new start, painting over the old marks of prior units. For Rabbit and Rancor, it would be the very first time they got to paint theirs.

Raze was a pretty good artist; Smarty, too, knew how to draw. Shiv didn't figure he'd paint anything elaborate on his, but he knew he was going to update his colors.

Unsurprisingly, the squad all concurred that red, black and gold were the ones they were most after, though Smarty asked for a variety of whatever was available.

There wasn't much left on the Negotiator to be had; most of it was an orange-gold color, because that was the 212th's color. He went from one quartermaster to another flight mechanic to another deck sergeant before he managed to get a full bottle of that.
But what he did manage to source was black paint. A whole kriffin’ barrel of it.

"I think I’m gonna coordinate with Smarty on some kind of maritime design," Misty was saying, as he helped Shiv haul the barrel to the hangar so it could be loaded onto the Nest. Finding the right kind of applicator to blanket paint armor black -- which was unorthodox, yeah, but weren't they already? -- was going to take some asking around, but if worse came to worst, they could probably do it with sponges and brushes.

"Yeah?" Shiv asked back, as he chewed on where he could find someone willing to part with an airbrush applicator.

"Yeah." Misty shrugged, then his tone went more pensive. "Hey, how long have you known about-- you know."

Shiv hadn’t been too surprised by the room's reactions. Tango’s face had gone bloodless when Maul came clean with them, and a lot of jaws had hit the briefing room table, but after everything everyone had been through together, there hadn't been any anger or anything. Or, if there was, it wasn't at Maul, so much as it was circumstances. Shiv knew well just how much flack could come at them if it became common knowledge, but he trusted the squad to keep it amongst themselves, even if it was pretty clear that General Kenobi was more of a danger in terms of giving away the secret. Not that Shiv could entirely blame him for being overcome with a desire to kiss Maul after that drop on Teska; hell, Shiv didn't even have a thing for their Lieu and he might have kissed Maul for that, for saving them some protracted battle with a jumped up, over-armored Skakoan with an ego. But it was still kind of a dumb thing to do on camera.

"Just since we got back from Bravo-984," he finally answered, shaking his head. "Never suspected it before that, really; just thought they were friends."

"You suppose that's why we got the Nest?"

Shiv cast a flat glance over. "I think we're a squad of black ops clones and we'll need to be able to get where we have to go. And sometimes that'll mean being away from our fleet for a long time, so I think it made sense to give us the courier. 'Specially if we're gonna be living aboard her a lot."

Misty seemed to chew on this, then he finally nodded. "I hope no one else finds out."

"Long as we're careful, they won't find it out from us, anyway." Shiv pointed ahead with his chin to the doors for the hangar. "Let's go load this up."

Watching the finalization of their not-quite exodus from the Negotiator was a strange, bittersweet moment for Tally, as the big ship came out of hyperspace to cruise into the Radnor system.

Attached to the top of the Nest was a wrecked Delta-6 starfighter; Castle had just secured her with quick-set emergency docking clamps, leaving behind the original small, two-man-in-a-tin-can shuttle that had been there before, which was still in good enough shape for someone else to make use of. Inside the ship was almost everything that the squad had, including their cold assault armor from Bravo-984 and the scraps of the whiteout tents they had used there.

Tally had grabbed all of his own gear and requisitioned as many medical supplies as he could talk the
head of the department into giving them, which wasn't anything as good as being equipped with a fully-loaded medbay, but it was probably enough for him to do his job and keep everyone alive and healthy. And he knew they were going to get more on Radnor, because resupply was the whole point of the battlegroup stopping there, so at least there was that.

He had scoped out the rear quarter of the Nest for his area; it was closer to the engines than he normally would have preferred, but it was also closest to their loading ramp, so getting someone back onboard in a hurry was a lot easier. Then it was just a matter of scavenging everything he could possibly get his hands on in order to improve upon it. First up being a table, maybe with an overhead imager. They'd need a damned 'bot, too; Tally was able to handle a lot of things himself, but he was still only one man and unless he trained up one of the others, he'd need more hands in the case of multiple injuries or other emergencies.

That left the other rear quarter for cargo and for one small room to be partitioned off as a guest room or a recovery room, or maybe if one of them wanted some privacy, unless Maul claimed it as his own. Though Tally didn't think that likely; their lieutenant hadn't once yet shown himself the type to stand on his rank as a reason to gain more privilege than the rest of them.

The forward quarters of the ship, in that case, were going to be living space. Bunk space. Kitchenette. A briefing area, doubling as a dining area. It sounded like it was going to be a lot of fun working it out, especially since they had some genuinely handy people aboard who could fabricate, and Castle especially who could work out loads and balancing.

The bittersweetness of it came with leaving Briefing Room 3. Their caf maker, of course, came with them, as well as every other thing they'd brought in there. For now, their caf maker was set on a cargo shelf, until they could work out a kitchenette; Maul had brought what looked like a lot of tea and caf pods, and a handful of other things, including a colorful quilted blanket that apparently was given to him (and Kenobi) by the Organas as a present. For now, all of that stayed in the someday-cargo-section; the room, with all their gear, and their clothes from Corellia, made Tally feel kind of hopeful and kind of sad, all at the same time.

They had started their time as a squad on the Negotiator, and had friends outside the Blackbirds; leaving their room and their battlegroup to range afield was equal parts exciting and frightening, even for him.

"Ready to go?" Tango asked, still sounding subdued and kind of miserable; he didn't notice the worried looks everyone -- including Maul -- gave him, or at least he pretended not to.

"Ready as can be," Shiv answered, already buckled in. Tally foresaw seating arrangements changing, too, when they reconfigured the interior, but for now, they were still using the bench-harnessed safety seats.

Tango didn't say anything else, up in the cockpit. Tally still felt bad about upsetting him earlier, but he hoped a little time down planetside would help and maybe they could score some booze and get their pilot drunk, though they'd probably be smart to keep him away from others if they did so.

The ride to Radnor was short. Once they had clearance for take-off, they were the first ship to cross into atmosphere and the first one to be directed to landing; the Blackbirds idly chatted with one another was they gently bumped down, and then everyone was making for the back gangway, which lowered on a button push--

--to the chipper face of a kriffing Core-world holo-journalist, whose likewise chipper voice hit them at the same time as the warm, humid air of Radnor did.
She was just starting, "And now, finally, the brave soldiers from the Outer Rim Campaign have--" when Maul snapped a hand out and raised their gangway pretty much right in her face, as the entire squad stiffened up in shock.
“There’s elite— and then there’s us,” Misty said, as they mustered near the supply tent in order to get their rations, voice rather subdued.

Dodging the media had mostly just been a question of waiting until more interesting people appeared. Thus, it was unwittingly the 332nd Light Infantry Battalion (all special operations and, so far as Maul could tell, not a single regular trooper among them) who had drawn the fire by coming down in their own air-to-surface ship. In the metaphorical sense, anyway. Their general had made himself scarce quickly, but some of the troopers wearing his colors had seemed to like the attention of the human female reporter; after she was thoroughly engaged with them, Maul and the Blackbirds slipped off of the Nest and were soon lost amongst the now-arriving 212th clones. It was after they had disembarked that he had found out that the media was there for some manner of-- ’puff piece’ Smarty had called it; a public relations stunt meant to show the GAR in a positive light.

Included in that was a planned celebration, paid for by a number of politicians pooling their resources, which included catering of all things.

Perhaps the worlds of the Core didn’t care to see how uniform and unpleasant the regular rations were, for their army of bought and owned men.

Though, cynical as the whole thing seemed from this side of it, even to Maul, he hadn't had any issue giving the Blackbirds permission to partake in said celebration later. It was playing to the lie, but he wasn't about to tell them they couldn’t go and enjoy whatever fare was on offer. In the meantime, he worked on inventory with Shiv and the Negotiator’s quartermaster, staying out of the reporter’s line of sight.

At least, that was what he had been doing until Misty spoke up.

Maul turned around from where he had been going over the first six crates they had been allotted, following Misty’s line of sight to where there looked to be a group of 332nd clones surrounding the reporter. One of them had stripped off his upper armor and his undershirt and was showing off his toned body; another two were having an intense sparring session, which definitely had her attention despite the posturing of the first. Many of them had customized armor; compared to the Blackbirds standing there in black undersuits, they did seem rather soldierly. There were commando helmets everywhere, too.

Still, he didn’t see anything particularly special about them outside of the adornments, aside the one who was notably larger than the others. Maul didn't have the same eye of a clone assessing other clones, but he didn't think they had anything on his squad.

“Kind of makes us look like the dregs at the bottom of the barrel,” Tango agreed, arms crossed, not bitterly so much as resigned; he had been in a particularly dour mood since their briefing and Maul was looking for an opportunity to get the pilot alone to see if he could figure out what to do about it.
The idea that something he said could have upset Tango so badly made his bones itch to figure it out and fix it, even if it was in just in offering to listen to any grievances.

“Come on, that’s not helpful,” Shiv said, not looking up from where he was counting out ration bars. "I'm sure they're plenty good, but we're no joke ourselves."

Misty frowned. “We’re not trying to be down, it’s just—”

“We’re not that. Half the GAR probably does think we’re a joke. Those are commandos and we’re just—” Tango shrugged, mouth twisted.

It wasn’t too often that his squad of odds, ends and eccentricities showed signs of poor confidence so overtly, at least recently; he wondered what was provoking it, though it might have just been the proximity to the special forces troops and their own inclinations to compare themselves.

It bothered Maul, not because he didn’t think his Blackbirds capable, but because he did. Because he knew them. They were baselines, but they were unique. Undeniably clever. Different, but in ways that made them particularly well suited for the black ops work they had done and were going to be doing more of.

“Raze,” Maul said, “stop caressing the explosives and come here.”

Raze started guiltily from his minor love affair with the cases of frag grenades set to go to the 332nd, then came over, chewing his lip. “Yeah, Lieu?”

“Go pick a fight. Politely. With the big one.” Maul nodded back over his shoulder to the commando unit. “Just sparring, no injuries,” he added, when Tally gave him a Look, because when it came to physical training, Maul was in charge, but when it came to health and welfare, Tally was the one who gave the orders and Maul knew better than to cross that line in the sand.

Raze blinked, looking at the big trooper, and then blew out a breath and nodded before heading over there, something in his expression both eager and nervous.

Maul didn’t even watch him go negotiate; he already knew what the outcome to that would be. But he did grin to himself, grateful for the mental reprieve from everything else going on, as he wrote Shiv's murmured number into the datapad with a stylus.

The fight was over in six moves; there hadn’t even been time for the clones to gather and circle it properly. One of the 332nd clones was kind enough to 'shield' the reporter with an arm tucked around her, and there were enough spectators to cheer or roar, but mostly, no one even had time to gather enough air to do that. Maul turned back just in time to watch the match itself, arms folded across his chest, Shiv right beside him, even though he already knew what was going to happen.

It was probably for the better that there hadn’t been time for bets to go flying; a lot of people would have lost out.

Raze’s face had gone in an instant from the open, earnest and eager look he usually wore to something still and calm, and through the Force, Maul could sense the shift in his chaotic demo expert’s signature. The moment where Raze fell into the centered focus required for teräs käsi, where
he shed all extraneous thought and became that alignment of body, mind and spirit.

Raze had excelled in teräskäsi, as Maul had thought he might; he had progressed well past even Shiv in learning. Even though their lessons had been interrupted repeatedly by the training mission, then Juma 9, Maul had been training Raze ahead of the others and Raze had become his primary sparring partner in hand-to-hand because of it. Sometimes those extra lessons lasted only ten minutes, just enough time for a quick demonstration of something new; sometimes they lasted longer, a more serious block of instruction. Either way, though, Raze soaked it in so quickly and thoroughly that Maul was absolutely sure that Raze would master the discipline in perhaps half the amount of time it had taken Maul.

Needless to say, Maul was proud of him.

Raze bowed politely, feet together and hands at his sides, and then fell into the opening rider’s stance and blocked the first well-aimed swing thrown his way before moving right in to counter. Murmurs ran through those who had gathered, and admittedly, the big commando was no slack himself, clearly an expert in all the usual forms of hand-to-hand.

But Raze moved like water around him, quick and fluid and graceful, face never once betraying his thoughts and Force signature like a calm, glass-smooth lake, fathomless and reflective at once. Within six moves, the big trooper was pinned to the ground; Raze had a knee in his back and his arm cranked at an angle that would become a dislocation with a slight application of weight. Just that quickly. By then, the general of the 332nd had come back to watch, though from the periphery.

Maul didn’t bother to check the Jedi’s expression, though, just waited for his demo expert to bow and return, before turning back to his own work.

“In the entire Grand Army, there’s only one squad being trained in teräskäsi,” he said, ticking off another mark on the datapad. “Even if they asked, I would train no others in it. There’s a difference between knowing you’re elite and actually being so.” He gestured with his stylus. “Anyway, I know I wouldn’t trade you.” A beat, and he made sure to eye Misty and Tango. “Any of you.”

Though, he didn’t really want to know what message the commandos took away from it when Raze threw arms around him and planted an enthusiastic kiss on his cheek, making him scrunch his nose up and then grin and shake his head once he was let go of.

"It's a flavor saver competition," Shiv whispered in Maul's ear, as they stood back waiting for Obi-Wan and the other Jedi to finish on the comm connection to the High Council; they had both been requested right after Raze's little demonstration, so they had turned inventory over to the others and reported. Upon entering the tent, Maul had been bristling a little bit on hearing Yoda's voice, until Shiv broke into it with that observation.

Maul had never heard that term before, and his brow knit as he tried to figure out what it was referring to. "What do you mean?" he asked, similarly quietly, turning his head a bit without taking his eyes off of the two generals there, and the fuzzy hologram of some of the Council clustered together.

Shiv gave a little snort, though there was nothing mean about his tone. "The beards. You could stash
half a buffet in those."

Obi-Wan did tend to eschew trimming his, though he didn't let it grow long so much as he let it get bushy. Occasionally he made the time to crop it back closer to his skin, but he hadn't recently. The other Jedi's beard, by comparison, was even longer and fuller, reaching down towards his chest. Maul rubbed over his own mouth, not because he was admiring his own marble smooth skin, but because he was trying to rub the smirk off of his face to only partial success.

Aside the beard and equally bushy hair, the Jedi seemed to eschew the robes of the Order; instead, he was dressed in fatigues and adorned with accessories that appeared to be sourced from multiple cultures. He looked human, though not very old -- early twenties, perhaps. Given that he was likely going to be the source of at least some of their assignments, Maul looked him over in open assessment, not bothering to hide that he was doing so. When the Jedi glanced over, he eyed Maul back for a moment, then lifted one shoulder in a relaxed shrug, before going back to discussing troop movements with the Council members.

"Obi-Wan says that it keeps his face warm," Maul whispered aside to Shiv, after returning the Jedi's shrug with a similar quirk of his own brows. "I hadn't considered it in terms of food-storage."

Though, now he was going to have quite a time not doing so.

The Jedi wrapped up their comm call, then Obi-Wan's eyes brightened when he spotted them waiting, though he managed to keep some manner of decorum in place as he introduced, "Lieutenant Maul, Sergeant Shiv, this is General Croft of the 332nd."

Shiv slipped right into formality as he nodded to the new Jedi. "General. Well met."

"General," Maul echoed, politely.

Croft nodded back to them, picking up a datapad and a data crystal from the table. "Lieutenant, Sergeant. General Kenobi asked me if I had any missions that fell within the parameters for the squad; it turns out that I do. 'Specially given that you just tangled with the Techno Union's psycho-nerd at Juma 9.' He offered over the two objects. "GalTech Droidworks has a foundry due to become fully operational within three weeks time, round-about; our recon suggests that they were building maintenance droids until recently, but that they've expanded and the new lines they're adding seem to be for the mass production of the latest series of droidekas. Their parent company is a part of the Techno Union, but there're also some interesting breadcrumbs out there that the funding for expansion might actually be coming from inside of the Republic."

It did sound like the exact type of objective that the Blackbirds had been assembled to tackle. Maul took the datapad and crystal, handing the latter over to Shiv while flicking the former on to look over the brief. No doubt Smarty would be able to dig out even more, too, once it was handed over to him. "Primary and secondary objectives?" he asked, scanning the information before looking back up at Croft.

"Primarily, take the place down. Their location's good enough to supply half of the Seppie forces in the Outer Rim with droidekas if we don't stop 'em from bringing the foundry online, and for once, they don't know that we know it's there in the first place. But if you can, get into the main offices first and see if you can track down any kinda evidence that might lead us back to whoever's holding their purse strings," Croft answered, resting his hands on the table and leaning on them. "We have a captured CIS transponder code that ain't been red-flagged yet that can get you through their space and into the atmosphere; beyond that, their scanning is all automated, and so as long as no one actually sees you land, you shouldn't have any problem putting your courier down outside of the perimeter and going overland to the objective."
Whoever had done the recon on the mission had done a good job of it; there were photos, a decent contour map and a listing of distances. Key buildings were labelled, some with certainty, some tagged 'possible.'

Obi-Wan had been quiet the whole time, but Maul could feel him watching. In a way, Maul was relieved they were getting their assignment from someone else; the chances of them being thrown easy work went down considerably. He looked over it for another moment, then looked up at Croft again. "We'll take it."

The best part of getting down to Radnor early was getting the inventory done and then being cut loose to whatever mischief suited them.

Maul had handed Smarty the information for their next assignment; their Lieu had made it clear that he was supposed to take the night off to relax and enjoy himself, but Smarty still ended up carrying the datapad around going over it, cross referencing through Radnor's HoloNet connection and the GAR's databases to put together an even more comprehensive picture of what it would entail. So far, it did look like a good assignment; something they were absolutely capable of. Considering Misty's and Tango's dip into self-doubt earlier, Smarty thought that was definitely a bonus; they could use a victory of their own in the field, really.

It was that which reminded him that he owed Commander Half-Pint a 'thank you'; there was a chance that they'd miss the 501st, given timing, so Smarty went aboard the Nest to call her, walking past where Raze was laying out various pots, bottles and buckets of paint in color order, along with brushes, using an open space just off the main center aisle to do his thing.

When Tano showed up in holo form-- kriff, did she look rough. She looked clean, but there was a devastation in her eyes that reminded Smarty of some of his brothers, when they'd just seen too much too quickly and hadn't really made it back to the world yet. "Hey, Commander," Smarty said, taking the girl in. "You okay?"

Tano rubbed at her cheek; even through holo, the jerkiness in the motion showed. "I-- yeah, I'm-- I'm okay. Whatcha need, Smarty?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to thank you for the help." Smarty had no way of knowing if she was alone, so he kept it vague. "It made a big difference."

That seemed to bring her around a little; a weak but real smile crossed her mouth. "I heard about it right before we got here. I mean, to Ryloth." She glanced around, then smiled just a fraction more. "I heard you guys were amazing. My Master's been mad as a rit-hornet since he found out you trounced us."

Smarty felt himself smirking at that; just as he was saying, "I'll let the lieutenant know, I'm sure he'll appreciate hearing that," Raze came up to stand with him.

"Hey, Half-Pint," Raze said, grinning, though after a longer look at her face, he frowned instead. "What happened?"

Tano offered him a smile back until the second part. Then she looked down. "A suicide bombing. Or-- I guess droidicide. They blew their own bunker just as we were cracking into it, and one of my--"
"my new transfers--"

Her voice broke before she could finish and she shook her head, heaving out a shuddery breath. After a long moment of quiet, Raze asked, "You're not alone, right?"

She shook her head again, lekku swaying. "No. Master Plo already called me, and I've got Elten. We'll be at Radnor in a couple days, too."

"Shame we'll probably be gone by then, I owe you a hug," Smarty said, heart aching some for the girl and for the troop she lost. "General Croft gave us an assignment."

"--did you say Croft?" she asked, blinking in surprise. Then something a little more lively came into her expression; she still looked rough, but at least she looked engaged. "Between Maridun and Ryloth, I haven't been able to keep up on anything outside. The 332nd is there?"

"Yeah, Raze here went and picked a fight with one of them." Smarty tipped his head over. "Not a real fight," he added, hastily.

"Big commando named Drop," Raze supplied, shrugging. "I won. Six moves, it was great."

"Teräs käsi?"

"Yeah." Raze grinned. "He took it okay. I mean, he looked like he had swallowed a whole thundercloud, but he didn't try to turn it into a real fight."

Ahsoka huffed a little laugh, then she shook her head and smiled again. "Want another little mission, before you guys take off?" she asked, looking up at them again, taking them in; her smile was still frayed, but the affection on her face was genuine. "I'll make it worth your time."

"Oh?" Smarty asked back, perking up. "We happen to need an insider over there for the next while to, uh-- record and observe... what d'you have in mind, Commander?"

It disappointed Husk some that they might miss a chance to run into the 501st; he had some things he wanted to discuss with General Skywalker, and that wasn't the kind of conversation one held over a comm connection.

Still, mingling with the lot of commandos from the 332nd was an interesting experience; some of 'em were elitists, but a number of 'em were decent guys without a block of duracrete on their shoulders. Unlike a couple of the Blackbirds, Husker didn't feel any particular need to measure himself up against them; he knew how well he was trained, he didn't need to go prove it to anyone, and doubtless that helped him get on okay with them. He figured that a couple missions would probably get his squadmates into the same mindset, too.

He also mingled a bit with more of the 212th, who were coming down in waves so that the Negotiator and the rest of the group, despite having docking capabilities, could patrol above Radnor, given most worlds in this area of the galaxy were hostile in one way or another. But finally, he went back to where half of the Blackbirds were clustered in the shade thrown by the Nest, painting their armor. And not just them; a handful of others were there, too, borrowing paint or entreating Raze to customize theirs.
Husker eyed the pile of trinkets, treats and souvenirs sitting around the demo expert. There was a packet of instant noodles. A finger-length sized chocolate bar. A handful of coins from worlds that minted their own currency still. A resin rock with pretty wildflowers forever preserved in it. A piece of flatbread with what looked like some kind of sugar glazing. A few other odds and ends.

None of it was really worth much, but it warmed Husk up inside, how it showcased the creativity or interests of brothers he probably hadn't even met yet. "You got your own little black market goin', kid?" he asked, joking, as he pointedly took in the pile, then the breastplate that Raze was painting an orange and green and gold prairie-scene on, rolling grasslands under a pale sky, for one of the 332nd troops.

Raze was stripped down to his black undersuit pants, flecks and dashes of paint adorning his skin. He grinned up at Husk. "Nah, I don't ask for anything, they just bring it," he said, then bent his head back to his task, shrugging. "I'll probably share all of it anyway."

Husk stood for a bit, just watching Raze painting; kriff, the kid was really good, too. He wasn't doing a lot of close detail work or anything, but he was making the scene come to life anyway, mixing paints and creating the impression of distance, even just painting on a scuffed-up chestplate.

Down the way, Smarty was sitting with three or four others; Brody was with him, as were a couple of the 212th and one of the 332nd's, and all of them were working on a wildly colorful set of armor that had been coated in black. Shiv had already apparently finished his; aside his sergeant's stripes on the pauldron, he just put a gold V done like feathers on his breastplate, the same marking that the blackbird they were named for had, and had left it leaning there to dry.

It seemed like a sweet kind of community project, so Husker shrugged and went to get his own armor so that he could join them.

It turned into the perfect time to do this.

So, Brody did.

He'd managed to overhear the reporter talking to General Croft about how she was so very much looking forward to meeting General Skywalker; he had just finished painting his armor (nothing elaborate, just some slicer code and some color, and some tick marks) when he caught a snippet of that conversation drifting their way, which immediately had him sitting up straighter and listening in unabashedly from where he had been lounging under the Nest's shadow.

Apparently, the reporter's primary reason for coming out here had been to get an interview of The Hero Without Fear, as the press had dubbed him, and she had been disappointed that he was still two days out. Croft seemed to handle that with a grain of salt, though he was working some kind of charm, because the woman did finally give him the time of day and her full attention as the conversation continued. This resulted in Croft donning Jedi robes for-- some purpose or another, but Brody had more important things to think about than a Jedi's wardrobe choices.

The fact that the reporter had decided that she was going to stick around in order to interview Skywalker was the real icing on this cake. By then, Brody's gift to the galaxy would have had ample opportunity to propagate.
Brody had gotten up, got dressed in his Corellian vacation gear, and had gone to deploy it.

First, he got Maul's permission to go with a group tour. Then, once he did, he managed get a good, reliable network connection while in Radnor's Twin Cities; it was while the other troops were wandering through the streets that Brody sliced into their local servers and used them to access the outside HoloNet with his trusty datapad. Then he transmitted the Viable ad through ten different encrypted proxies he had tested at the same time he was scrubbing Juma 9 of the Maul and Kenobi Makeout Footage, having used the station's powerful transmitters and receivers to do so; he'd already had those proxies set up for certain uses before he'd even come up with the Viable ad, so it was a quick and easy thing to make sure they were online and waiting for him.

From there, it transferred itself to the vast sub-legal advertising algorithms that plagued the citizens of the Galaxy, be they Sepratist or Republic or just some random neutral freighter captain. And from those, it was set loose upon the HoloNet, finding its way into messaging services and porn sectors; finding its way into forums, and popping up on any device that made the mistake of searching for Anakin Skywalker's name.

Brody didn't follow after that; one set of encrypted packets was a lot harder to find the origins of than a tracer ping. But he smiled and smiled as he walked with the other troops, imagining the journey his piece of artwork was taking, and didn't care when everyone gave him a little more space and eyed him in worry or wariness.

(Within a single hour, Crest was staring wide-eyed at his own datapad, while Timber and Taxi crowded around him. All three were silent, as their General's confident-yet-boyish-yet-sheepish voice extolled the virtues of that little blue pill that would solve all issues of virility in human males.

After the ad was finished, Taxi swatted Crest on the arm. "I told you to stay away from that furry lekku sector! Kriff, how'm I supposed to even look at him now without hearing him talk about his 'little buddy'?!!"

They weren't the first, nor the last, to ask that question.)

Unaware of the chaos his slicer was unleashing, the day wore on rather quietly for Maul.

He stayed scarce, aside to check in with his squad; the rest of the time, he kept to himself. Despite being friendly to Republic forces, Radnor apparently didn't want large groups of troops moving between their twin cities or jamming their beaches, which meant the clones were released in groups of twenty-five at a time and thus, only a couple hundred of the troops were off doing their own thing at any given point. He gave Misty, Rabbit and Rancor permission to go with a group heading to the beach; he gave Smarty, Tango and Brody permission to go with a couple of groups heading into the cities. The rest seemed content enough just to stay around their landing and staging area, a broad and grassy valley surrounded by rainforest, and enjoy the day off while waiting for the food to be served up come evening.
Officers weren't included in the movement restrictions, but Maul didn't go to either the beach or into the city, despite having the freedom to. He had no urge to swim -- the metal legs precluded any enjoyment of being in the water -- and he didn't really care to go explore otherwise. Obi-Wan had gone to track down friends he'd made six years back and asked Maul to go along, but such social ventures sounded more like torment to him than any kind of pleasant outing.

As such, he found himself a quiet place on the periphery of the valley, not terribly far from their courier, and rested in the grass. Above, a reddish-gold star lit the world in colors Maul tended to associate with the evening haze on various worlds; the susurrus of movement from troops and transports and nature mingled together. When he laid back in the grass, it was tall enough that it blocked his view of everything but it and sky, and the edges of the overhanging trees. It was close to peaceful, a decent place to rest, and so that was what he tried to do.

Except, his mind wouldn't stop, no matter how much he wished it would.

Everything of late reminded him, in no small way, of the time between the massacre at Orsis and the time immediately after that; of the chaos and motion, too rapid-fire to even quite grasp, let alone hang onto.

Imprisonment had been much like his early childhood on Mustafar; long periods of emptiness and boredom, a sort of forced apathy broken by his Master's or Deenine's random and unexpected tests. Not that the Jedi tested him after they were done with him, except once, but that same sensation that there was nothing else but to stare at the walls or exercise or learn whatever it was he was told to learn. At least in latter case, he had Obi-Wan to break up the monotony, either bringing lunch or later on taking him elsewhere, so the unexpected became pleasant, though occasionally still cause for anxiety.

But this was like Orsis. And a few points both leading up to it, and after it. Where everything happened so quickly and dramatically that there was no time to really sit down and figure out what it all meant, if it meant anything; there was only time to accept it and survive it and move on. Whenever Maul took time to think on it -- or when his own mind conspired against his desire not to -- he started to realize that all of his former master's biggest lessons had been born of chaos and pain, and of Maul's reactions to those things, which mostly consisted of survival by whatever means necessary.

That had been most of Maul's method of coping back then: Survive, and keep moving. But now, while he was able to do the same to some degree, he was left afterwards not feeling numb, exactly, but-- worn thin. Sere, and more transparent for it.

He remembered, after killing Kilindi, that something in him went quiet with her last breath; that as he laid her lifeless body on the ground, having killed her quickly and cleanly, some part of him that had been crying out against it went silent. The time after that was numb. He was moved to Coruscant, and he tried to find hope or enthusiasm in that, though he largely failed. It was not until months had passed that he started to feel like he was in his skin again, and then thanks to a whim born of either loneliness or youthful stupidity, he was given a thorough lesson teaching him that even his skin was not really his, ultimately. Everything of Maul was his Master's, to forge or to break or to use.

It wasn't often he reflected back on any of it. He wondered what it said about him that he was doing so now.

None of this was anything the same, in terms of events. A year ago, he was a prisoner in a cell, allowed out for exercise or lunch or the occasional rare mission with Obi-Wan. Now, he was as free as he'd ever been, but he didn't feel like it.
When he was not worrying about his flickering Force sensitivity, he was worrying about his ability
to guard the lives in his care; when he was not worrying about those things, he was worrying about
the Council and crossing them and what it could cost him and his squad if he did; if not that, then the
hesitation he still wasn’t sure he felt in his cybernetics on Bravo-984 and what that could mean in
both short and long terms; if not that, then another thing or another, or yet another. And, finally, his
internal frustration that he couldn’t seem to just set those aside or bury them; he could focus through a
mission, but the moment that he could breathe again, they all came back and harder.

The sun had moved a little by the time he made it back out of his own mind; turned inward as deeply
as he had been -- and no closer to solving any of those things -- he hadn’t really felt the passage of
time.

But what he did feel was frayed. He sat up for a moment, automatically checking in the direction of
the Nest; clustered in the shadows of the courier, some of his squad was there, and he did have his
comm on him in case he needed to go and find the others, or in case they needed help. In other parts
of the valley, troops moved supplies; several were playing an impromptu game of bolo-ball, and
many others were sprawled out on the ground sleeping, sometimes in a pile and sometimes
individually.

He probably could have done something useful; gone and seen if their next allotment of supplies had
been granted yet, gone and seen if there was any kind of work he could do on the courier to make it
more long-term living friendly. But the sun was shining down, warm against exposed skin, and the
grass smelled sweet and earthy both, and for the moment everyone was safe.

After a few more minutes of wrestling with himself and a long, unsteady breath out, Maul finally
took the many examples of the many troops and laid back down, shifting to his side and crooking his
arm back under his head as a pillow, in the grassy hollow he’d made for himself.

He dozed there until evening, when the staged festivities started and the sun was under the edge of
the horizon.
"Has your little buddy been feeling down lately? Do you find it hard -- or not hard! -- to get excited by the things that you used to? Well, human males of the galaxy, have I got a solution for you!"

Rex stared at the datapad that Crest had shamefacedly handed to him, mouth hanging open, as his general leaned forward in a conspiring manner, taking the audience into his confidence in a way that was meant to foster a brotherly intimacy and apparently to sell a lot of virility enhancement pills.

"What," he demanded, flatly, "the frip is this."

"I'm Anakin Skywalker, General of the Grand Army of the Republic, and let me tell you guys, there's nothing like a war to get your blood pumping and your heart racing. But what happens when all the heart-hammering excitement of your life doesn't pan out to actual results after the fighting is over?"

Ahsoka's hand flew up to her mouth as she stood between Echo and Fives, both of whom were staring jaw-dropped at a holo advertisement that Jesse was projecting above his gauntlet, having apparently heard about it from someone else. Her master's voice, as he jutted his hips out in an obscene manner, issued forth from the projection: "What happens when your lightsaber is just -- umph! -- too underpowered to do what you need it to do?"

Ahsoka shuddered, the hand that was covering her mouth now covering her eyes; in a moment, she put together exactly why Smarty and Raze had asked for the favor they did, and wished she'd given them a much, much larger mission than she actually had in compensation for observing (and possibly recording) the reactions to this.

"Thankfully, you don't have to suffer those questions about your impotency any longer! The makers of Viable have you covered, brave men of the galaxy; with a single dose before your engagement, you'll be fully powered on, hot and ready to go!"

Skywalker ignited his saber and started deflecting blaster bolts; more disturbing than that, he did so with his hips still thrusting out every other shift of his blade in a provocative rhythm. Background music, a rousing military fanfare, started playing in time with it.

"What," Mace Windu asked, after getting red-flagged priority messages from no less than three dozen people containing the same link and opening it, "the hell is this?"
"The best part of this offer is that you can try it before you buy it! You can pop the pill, pop your little buddy out and thrill your lucky partner or partners without a credit-chip number or any long-term commitment."

Padmé watched the captioned advertisement run on her datapad's screen with the volume mercifully muted. The image of her husband flourished his lightsaber, having fended off the supposed attack he had been under, in order to continue selling a dubious medical solution to erectile dysfunction. Which Padmé knew personally and for a fact that he had no trouble with.

_Anakin, we need to have a talk_, she thought, before carefully excusing herself from the state dinner she was attending, face burning under the layers of makeup.

"Viable's been shown to be effective in 94% of all human males, ages eighteen to ninety-six; remember to check with your doctor to see if your heart is healthy enough for sexual activity. And while you're at it, scope out our sector reviews: the results are outstanding and human males who use it report longer, fuller and more satisfying erections and longer, fuller and more satisfying experiences!"

Skywalker's hips started thrusting against air again as he bragged, timing the words to the beat, _"I should know, my last encounter lasted four-- kripping-- hours!"

Hondo Ohnaka drew his head backwards, then gestured for a datapad. The message he sent Skywalker via various sub-legal relays was simple: _If you required help in that department, my friend, you need only have asked! We shared an important experience together! I could have arranged many ways to help you with your little buddy._

"Remember, you too can try Viable for a free two week trial, and it's only 99 point 99 credits per month after!"

Anakin stared up at his own face and listened to his own voice as the military-themed music faded, looking up to where his hologram was projected above the war room table, so stunned that he couldn't even move to turn it off.

His guts slid into his boots slowly, as his holographic twin held his lightsaber at crotch level and declared, _"So, don't leave your lightsaber underpowered, make the call today!"

The image froze like that with the words and comm code on brazen display, and General Anakin Skywalker -- now unwittingly the spokesman for Viable -- had the good sense to shiver as his comm started beeping very urgently for his attention.
I make no apologies for my love of writing 'camping' fluff, clone sociology, wanton pranking or drunken zabrans. Thanks to shadowmaat and B_Radley, as ever; the former for the support and the latter for letting me play with the delightfully hairy Jedi. XD

Next chapter will be the agonizingly long-anticipated confrontation with Anakin over Bravo-984; however, I am going to go crash with shadowmaat there for vacation, so posting might not happen on any recognizable schedule.

Brody hadn't been entirely clueless as to how far and how fast the ad would spread.

The buffet set up by the companies and politicians who wanted to make the GAR look good was pretty expansive; two dozen tables, with more in reserve, catered by droids. There was also a lot of product placement going on; companies who provided food, booze or supplies so that they could show their support for the troops. All in all, it was a hell of a con, but no one was going to turn down free food, and Brody already foresaw one or several of the Blackbirds making off with handfuls of the plastic utensils and napkins to stock the Nest with, and he wouldn't have been surprised if they also made off with whole trays of leftovers after everyone had been served. If, of course, the others didn't beat them to it.

It was while he was standing in line with his many and varied brothers from the 212th and the 332nd waiting for dinner that he got to listen in on some of the reactions to the Viable ad, and all the while, he just smirked to himself. He had no desire to claim responsibility, outside of his squad, but the sheer pleasure of listening couldn't be understated.

"--supposedly going to get royalties for it--"

"--says that the media should vet their sources more carefully--"

"--his kriffin' little buddy, can you believe that?"

The thing about growing up on Kamino was-- there wasn't much to talk about. Or, at least, there wasn't much interesting to talk about. Anything that even sniffed of intrigue was immediately batted around between the cadets, sometimes like the most absurd comm-game ever to take place, where the beginning of the rumor didn't resemble the end. Other times, it was deadly accurate. Any which way, though, growing up in that kind of environment meant two things which Brody thought would ensure the success of Anakin Skywalker's reputation undergoing a makeover: First, the clones would find it quickly, because holo-porn consumption was definitely a reality for many of them, and second, they would spread the ad like wildfire, thus convincing the algorithms that ran advertisements on the HoloNet that the ad was a hot topic and should be propagated far and wide.

The holo-porn thing, Brody thought, probably traced back to puberty on Kamino. Despite being cold bastards, the Kaminoans had no hangups about human sexuality and thus, all clones of a certain age were given sexual education courses. Those were dry and unpleasant, mostly focused on biology, but the upshot was that cadets who had 'needs' or 'urges' could use a holo simulator to get their rocks off as needed, because the biological reality was that many of them were going to be interested in sex, but had no outlet beyond themselves and (or so Brody had heard) their brothers. Thus, the
simulators. Nothing like the real thing, but it wasn't like they knew what the real thing was all about at that point.

A lot more went into that. Rumor had it that if a cadet used the simulator too much, they were considered defective and therefore up for reconditioning or decommissioning. Like every single other thing about their lives -- from food consumption to sleep cycles -- there was an acceptable average they were allowed to be interested in sex and participate in sexual activity with very regular, non-kinky hologram simulation programs, the kinds of which were just the basics, only meant for one purpose. Needless to say, Brody couldn't even begin to perform in those kinds of conditions.

Reactions to the simulators varied by platoon; some platoons viewed using them as shameful and not something to discuss or even use (reinforced by intense peer pressure), while others viewed it openly and with no shame whatsoever. And he'd heard that the practice had fallen out of favor not long after he was out anyway, which explained guys like Tango and their ex-shinies, who didn't seem to have any experience beyond their own hands.

Brody's platoon had been somewhere in between; they didn't talk about it, but they mostly all used it. After the first handful of times, though, Brody lost even an academic interest in the plain simulations -- the canned dialogue, the spine-crawlingly uniform way each one happened -- and managed to slice into the personal terminal of one of their instructors without getting caught, which led to a period of some much more interesting simulations, though he was on punishment detail at that point for something unrelated and couldn't find out himself.

When the instructor did figure out who was behind the slicing, that was when he quietly shunted Brody into the tech route. He also so happened to make sure that he had some fascinating stuff on his terminal to share, though when he did curate the collection, it became a lot more 'age appropriate'. Gone were the hardcore kinks; in its place were storylines meant to develop naturally and simulated partners who actually required some form of interaction before putting out. In retrospect, Brody's admiration for that instructor was very high. Not all of his brothers liked the more in-depth stuff, but some of them really did, and he was one of them.

(And he would never admit it, at least not outside his squad, but his favorite sim -- the one he spent months playing out -- was a fantasy simulation involving a very buxom politician and a lot of questing on the side, traipsing through a fictional world collecting pieces to the puzzle that would allow the politician to reclaim her country; he would earn his privileges and use his simulator time for that, and they didn't even have romantic relations until two months into the sim, and when they did, it all felt so real that it kind of messed him up when the storyline ended. He mighta fallen in love with a computer sim, of all things; after that, every other experience he had was in the flesh and with the paid professionals.)

All digression aside, it was the perfect sociological brew to release his bomb into. One of their most admired generals apparently had erectile dysfunction, and now, everyone would know that.

Brody had no illusions that Skywalker wouldn't be able to prove his innocence and clear his name eventually. Viable would certainly disavow knowledge of the ad. The Council would probably come to his aid, maybe even the Chancellor.

But everyone would remember the sound of his voice talking about his underpowered lightsaber, and damn, that was exactly what Brody wanted.

He was still listening in to the reactions -- and whooo boy were there a lot of those -- when Maul appeared next to him. No doubt the lieutenant had been catching pieces of the rumors, and since he had caught Brody in the act of actually making the ad, he certainly had to have no doubts about who had set it loose upon the HoloNet. There was a bit of a worried, disturbed look on his face, and
Brody leaned over, slinging a careful arm around the zabrak's shoulders just to murmur, "Don't worry, no one can trace it. Even if they managed to find their way through all my relays, they'd see its point of origin as in the twin cities. But they won't."

Maul had stiffened for only a moment at the arm around his shoulders, likely in surprise, but then relaxed again. "How much do I want to know about this?"

"I'm gonna say probably as little as possible, and not to worry about it." Making Maul worry had definitely not been on the list of things Brody had wanted to accomplish with this, which was why he added, "He has it comin' after Big Murder Mountain, Lieu. And the way I see it is if they're busy focusing on this trash fire, then they won't be focusing on us."

Maul was quiet for a long moment, taking that in, then the corner of his mouth went up in a lopsided little smile as he shook his head. "In that case, good work."

Brody had a genuinely happy glow in his chest; he even straightened his shoulders some as Maul slipped away.

Husker, on the other hand, had no urge to listen in to the reactions or view the ad himself.

He understood why Brody did it, though he thought it was a little like bringing a very large, Raze-approved bomb to a blaster fight. He got why Brody was mad enough to go to such effort, and despite his own affection for General Skywalker, he wasn't gonna to get pissed off because Brody decided on a creative method of wreaking revenge. But that didn't mean he wanted to go reveling in it, either; it was done, General Skywalker was probably birthing an entire rescue center's worth of tooka kits and Husk was just as happy not to think about it.

Instead, he thought about the food; he was one of the first in line more by luck than anything else, having been chatting close to the tables with some of the ARC's from the 332nd and a few of the other baselines from the 212th, and thus had found himself in the debatably enviable position of being served early. That meant getting a good tray (two, actually) and definitely getting his hands on some very interesting alcohol, but it also meant ducking his head to the reporter and the cameras, mostly to hide the scar on his throat.

He managed to avoid the worst of that, though, then using good ole fashioned detective work -- which consisted of finding the quietest place left in the valley -- he tracked down his current CO.

Maul had found himself a spot back by the treeline; in the low light of a scattering of stars and two moons, one tiny and distant, all of his colors were faded to grayscale and he blended in pretty good in the faint shadows cast by the trees, that natural camo of his doing him a good stead. His brow furrowed when Husker managed to lower himself down; he didn't seem put out by the company, though. "Husker."

"Lieu." Husk rested his tray on his knee and set the two bottles in the grass, then offered the second tray over. "Figured you wouldn't wanna tackle that circus."

Maul took it, looking down at it for a moment before saying, "Thank you. I had thought I would just go at the end of the night."
Husker snorted at that. "The second one of those catering droids turns its back, whole catering trays are gonna start goin' missing from those tables. 'Specially with this many special ops types around."

That made Maul chuckle, as he got to unwrapping the utensils. "How many of those trays are going to find their way onto the courier, do you suppose?"

"I'd say five, maybe six, but don't go wagerin' on it." Husk waited a beat, then grinned a little. "Might end up bein' more."

Maul just huffed at that, sitting crosslegged with his food balanced on the makeshift table of his lap as he got to work on it. Husk didn't figure he was the picky type, so he'd just grabbed a bit of everything that didn't smell too weird.

Maul also wasn't gloating about the ad; somehow, that didn't actually surprise Husker too much. It didn't take any kind of Smarty-level genius to figure out that Maul's sense of humor wasn't really tied to popular culture; besides that, Husk figured probably he just wanted to get past Bravo-984, which put them in accord. It had finally started to settle into history for Husk, and that was definitely a relief.

They ate in silence for awhile, listening to the merriment of the troops whooping it up over dinner. After they were finished eating, Husker cracked open the bottles and offered one over; the sweet and spiced -- and alcohol sharp -- scent of the booze drifting up from the bottle's neck warmed him up almost before he even took a sip.

Maul, on the other hand, eyed the bottle in hand with bemused intrigue. "Rather strong for a dinner, isn't it?"

Husk eyed his own bottle, squinting in the low light to read the numbers. "Yeah, but that's probably so they wouldn't have to provide as much. Want me to go track down somethin' you can cut it with?"

"No." Maul shook his head and tried a careful sip, then made a bit of a face at it before apparently deciding he liked it enough for a longer draw. "Metabolic efficiency being what it is, I'm not terribly worried about getting drunk."

Oh? Husk thought, smiling some. He wasn't in any hurry to go prove the opposite, but he highly doubted the same could be said for the rest of the squad, absent maybe Tally. Still, he just nodded in response. "Well, then, bottom's up, I guess." He offered the neck of his bottle as a toast, and after a moment of puzzling over it, Maul clinked his own bottle against it gingerly.

"Is it always like this?" Maul asked, once the ritual was out of the way.

"Like what?"

"--not busy, that's not the right word." Maul tipped his head, looking over the revelry afield. "Relentless, I suppose. Is it always this relentless?"

Husker looked over, brow furrowed. "The war?"

"Yes."

"Yeah." No point to pulling that punch. Husk had been around for a long time for a clone, but once war had broken out and he was assigned, the longest 'down time' he'd had was during the Blackbirds' initial training period. And even that wasn't technically any kind of R&R, though it was low key enough to feel like it. It had certainly done him some good like a vacation might, though; the steady schedule and steady place, the lack of being under fire constantly. Before that, even with the
501st, he woke up most mornings with a tension headache, and fell asleep most nights with a sore back, and that had disappeared after a couple weeks with the 212th.

Now, though, it was back to the grind again; constant motion and a stolen day or two between missions. Husker didn't really think to complain much about it; he knew it was going to wear them down, he just hoped that they managed to build something strong enough that it could take that wearing and remain intact. He thought they probably had; all the right ingredients, all the right amount of care, though he'd also likely be the first to say that even those things never measured up to a guarantee.

He thought he could get a sense of why Maul was asking, so after gathering his thoughts, he added, "You get used to it. Wears you out some, after awhile, but it might not be so bad for us, not bein' on the front lines as much."

"I've lived similar periods before." It was a statement of fact with no defensiveness attached. Maul picked some at the label of his bottle, though he was working on drinking it about apace with Husker. "Survived them, anyway. It doesn't leave much room for thought, does it?"

Husker took in the zabrak's expression; Maul didn't seem angry or bitter, just contemplative maybe. He had to think himself before saying, "Not really. You just kinda gotta keep moving forward and hoping that eventually you'll be able to sort it out, or that it just won't matter any more."

It felt unkind to say it; Husk hadn't forgotten his initial assessment months ago, when the Blackbirds were all new to each other. Their lieutenant had come across as damaged even back then, though contained; not the chaotic kind of disaster, but-- walking wounded, maybe. Now, knowing him, it was the same except instead of it being Husker's assessment, it was fact. Whatever wars Maul fought before this one, for whatever side, they'd left their marks.

"Having a good squad helps," Husker said, trying to reassure. "I mean, you can't beat Shiv as a right hand. Can't really beat Tally as a medic, sharp-tongued as he is. You got a good group, Lieu. We won't let you down."

"I'm not worried about you letting me down," Maul answered, glancing over with a knitted brow before turning back to picking at the bottle's label. "I'm worried about the opposite." A beat. "Mind, I'm not looking for reassurance to the contrary. But it weighs, nonetheless."

That silenced Husk for a bit, as he absorbed it. He picked his next words carefully. "I think the fact it weighs what it does means you won't, sir. For what it's worth. Not an officer in this whole organization that's perfect or doesn't make mistakes, but--"

It was a fine line to walk, between his own innate loyalty and observed truth. Husk wrestled with himself for a moment longer, then finished, "But there ain't all that many that worry about letting *us* down. That counts for something."

He didn't know if the words made much difference, but it got a little half-smile, anyway. Husker reached over and gave Maul a pat on the back, then they just went back to drinking in silence.

Husker's words were good ones. Maul didn't know quite how to fully accept them, but he appreciated them; appreciated, too, that the most experienced soldier under his command was willing
Maul's ability to chew things over in his mind didn't survive the night, however.

It wasn't that he had been aiming to get drunk; on Ilo, the sensation had not been pleasant enough for him to ever feel like chasing it down again, though it hadn't been bad. He had a very serious dislike for altered states of consciousness when he was young, largely because he'd been drugged enough times to view any kind of chemical impairment with a great deal of suspicion. When Obi-Wan had put the bottle of rum on the table, it was more impulse than Maul had let on that had him agree to share it; a sideways desire to buck his own past and a certain degree of intrigue and curiosity, though he wasn't sure if it was to see for himself what drinking was like, or if he was more curious to see what Obi-Wan would be like and knew that would require him to partake himself.

Since then, he hadn't turned down alcohol when it was offered -- the wine from Bail's vineyard was particularly good, actually -- but he didn't seek it out himself.

What Maul had not anticipated was how much of it he was going to end up being handed. It didn't help that this particular alcohol -- Chandrilan Apple Pie -- actually tasted good; by the time he was on the third bottle, he stopped noticing the burn of it and mostly just tasted the nuanced sweetness, the layered impression of spices and fruit.

Though he did start to seriously wonder why it was named pie when there was no pie involved whatsoever. There was even a picture of a pie on the front label, right above the numbers for the alcohol content of the bottle, and it was starting to offend Maul, the fact that there was a picture of a pie on a bottle of booze which, obviously, contained no dough whatsoever. "It seems disingenuous," he said to Tally, when his medic had asked why he was frowning. "It's a liquid, not a solid, therefore it cannot possibly be pie."

Tally was chewing on a grin. "I think it's just a reference to the flavor, sir."

"Oh." That made more sense. Maul thought about it a bit longer, then frowned anew. "I don't taste any dough, though. Isn't that a requirement for pie?"

At that, Tally just shrugged in an exaggerated manner, as if literally shrugging it off. "Yeast is involved with both, I think? I guess it counts by technicality."

It seemed that every time the bottle Maul had in hand was mostly empty, another appeared in its place, delivered by one of his Blackbirds and by the time Maul started to suspect anything about it, the alcohol had already kicked in and a fair bit harder than that rum on Ilo had. That had left him feeling a little loose and unsteady; this, by contrast, felt like he'd been caught in a malfunctioning centrifuge. There was also the fact that it vastly overwhelmed the water reclamation systems in his cybernetics, which led to draining the literal pipes, and having to figure out how to do that in a portable toilet the size of a small closet with one hand braced on the wall.

Now, after-- he wasn't sure how many bottles, Maul was not thinking about the ingredients or anything but maybe getting horizontal, though he was also absolutely certain he wanted to make sure his squad was safe and not off getting into any kind of trouble. He was also mildly but genuinely concerned that if he tried to walk anywhere, he might not be able to. Or, at least, not upright. If his legs wanted to work at all; they could get unreliable if he was impaired enough and now he was definitely impaired enough.
A flash of beard and robes in his peripheral (also unreliable) vision was a relief, and Maul pressed his shoulder over against Obi-Wan's, thinking that the Jedi was probably back from all of his socializing--

--except, it wasn't Obi-Wan.

General Taliesin Croft looked back at him, mouth hanging open; at least, Maul thought it seemed to be hanging open, it was hard to tell with all of that hair around it.

They stared at one another for a long moment, blinking, then Maul made to stop leaning and achieve a vertical orientation, but one of his feet refused to move and the next thing he knew, the Jedi was holding him up and he was practically face-planted in the beard, fingers curled into Croft's robes and the empty bottle he had been holding lost between his stumble and his being caught.

Somewhere in Maul's alcohol-soaked mind, he thought this was probably terribly awkward, but he wasn't sure enough to say that.

Croft didn't drop him, though, just asked with a kind of amused tone, "You okay, lieutenant?"

Maul went to say that he was fine, except he would very much like to go lay down, but instead, he looked up into the Jedi's green eyes and asked, very carefully and seriously, "How do you keep food out of all of that hair when you eat?"

"'Scuse us, general," Shiv's voice broke in, also amused, and Maul found himself pried off of the Jedi; he reeled a little bit, but Shiv got under his arm on one side, and Tally appeared on the other. "Sorry about that, we'll handle this."

Croft huffed a laugh. "Uh-- not a problem."

Maul went to ask again, perhaps with more elaboration, but by then, Shiv and Tally were steering him away. Or dragging him. He couldn't be sure, he couldn't feel his legs, and he might have worried about that more, but he had his Blackbirds and they wouldn't let him fall, he was sure, and so instead he leaned his spinning head over and not-whispered, "Flavor saver," to Shiv, before breaking down into uncontrollable laughter.

He was still giggling helplessly when they gave up trying to get him to walk and Shiv just picked him up. Though, he didn't remember any of the rest of the trip after.

"Well, that was frippin' adorable," Tally said, as he got into the lockers and dragged out a number of blankets not already in use. Rabbit and Rancor were already asleep cuddled together in a small nest of them in the courier's hallway, making sure their ship lived up to her name. Shiv could also smell food from the direction of their current storage room, which suggested someone or several someones had poached them leftovers.

He stood with his passed-out Lieu up in his arms like a bride who'd had too much at the wedding reception, though he wasn't put out by it. Mostly 'cause he agreed with Tally; that actually was really frippin' adorable. Frankly, he wouldn't have been surprised if anyone told him that Maul had never in his life giggled before this. "Hope he doesn't get mean when he's hung-over, though."
"We'll find out tomorrow." Tally started making up a bed of blankets and bedroll, though well off to the side by the wall. "I'll keep an eye on him; I probably should've given a cut-off on the number of bottles, but I got distracted watching Croft trying to get laid and then the aftermath of that."

Shiv leaned against the wall while Tally worked; Maul wasn't that heavy, anyway, and Shiv didn't want to just put him down on the decking. "Who was he trying to get laid by?"

"The reporter. She managed to talk him into putting on all the Official Jedi Robes for a photo shoot, on the promise she'd help him take 'em back off again later." Tally finished making up a bed, then helped Shiv get Maul into it. Their lieutenant didn't so much as twitch as he was settled down, nor when Tally rested a hand across his brow and thumb-stroked the diamond in the center of it in a moment of affection. "In the meantime, I do believe some mischief is brewing with Smarty and Raze. They haven't touched the booze tonight, and I heard them planning something with paint."

Shiv rose to his feet again; the back loading ramp was open to allow the cooler night air in, along with the occasional random insect. Idly, he looked out into the night; many of their brothers were still merry-making out there, many of them also drunk, though things had quieted down considerably compared to earlier. "Now to decide if I wanna do anything about it," he pondered; he had only had one bottle, and nursed that one all night, mostly because he had been in on getting Maul trashed and had figured if they were going to take their CO out of commission, then someone ought to be sober enough to take charge. "Well, it wouldn't be fair to let Brody get away with setting off an intergalactic incident just to stop the others from whatever prank they're up to." Tally smirked, standing himself once he had probably reassured himself that Maul was relatively okay. "So, I figured I'd volunteer to help instead."

He had a point. Shiv pressed his mouth into a line and then conceded it with a shrug and a nod. "Okay, let's do that."

The plan was simple: Dip the end of General Croft’s gigantic beard into the paint. It was a thick, neon green, slow-drying variety, so hopefully by the time the burly, hairy Jedi woke up, it would still be wet and the Blackbirds could observe the response from a safe distance. If possible, they were to get footage and send the footage on to Commander Half-Pint.

Apparently, Croft had been a helper in the creches for a time of Clawmouse Clan, and that both he and Tano had been taken to Shili by General Ti to learn the Hunt at the same time, thus making them hunt-siblings. It also meant that Ahsoka liked to pull pranks on her hunt-brother. Smarty figured that was more than a fair thing to ask for, given she was stuck detailing as much of the Viable fallout as possible. He still hoped there was enough overlap between the Blackbirds leaving and the 501st arriving to give the girl a hug -- she looked like she needed it -- but even if he couldn't, he and Raze sure intended to do their best to fulfill her request.

It started as being his and Raze's plan, but before long, several of the others got involved. Rabbit and Rancor were passed out, Husker was off hanging out with a few of the soldiers it turned out he knew before his assignment to the 501st, Shiv and Tally had been left out of the initial planning for strategic reasons, but Tango was there. It made Smarty feel better, their pilot getting involved; he had been so down since finding out about Maul and Kenobi that seeing some spark come back to him
was a relief.

He, Smarty, Raze and Brody were all huddled together in a quiet cluster, wearing nothing but their blacks, though Raze did have on his utility belt from his armor, freshly painted black. “Whatever you do, don’t get caught,” Tango warned, seriously, in a hushed whisper.

Raze nodded back just as seriously, eyes wide, as he stowed the large bottle of paint into his belt pack.

Castle was already in position; he had gotten in with a group of Croft’s commandos earlier in the evening and now was pretending to be passed out amongst them, conveniently located where he could watch General Croft’s tent. According to his tapped out coded transmission earlier, the reporter was still in there with Croft, but at least the squeaking and moaning had died down. Now it was just waiting for his ‘go’ signal.

"If you do get caught," Shiv murmured, startling the hell out of all of them, having appeared from behind the tent, "make sure you create enough chaos to get away." He eyed them, then smirked, dark amber eyes narrowing in mischief. "I've got Tally deployed with a holo-cam to catch the aftermath."

Smarty started grinning at that; beside him, Raze was outright beaming. And they were still smiling just that broadly when Castle gave them the go-ahead.

Raze’s lessons in teräs käsi served him well.

Out of all of his brothers in his squad, he found an odd harmony with the precise martial art; an almost meditative state where he could feel the edges of world around him almost like lines of energy, even in the dark. He was good enough that Maul took extra time to teach him ahead of the others, because he took to it so well, and he was proud of that. And he liked sparring with his Lieu, too; Maul was a really good teacher, way more patient than some of the instructors had been on Kamino with him. Whenever Raze would get distracted, Maul would just redirect him and teach him how to actually redirect himself, and Raze started really feeling the discipline as he got better at doing that. Between that and the medication Tally came up with for him -- a quarter of a stim-tab in the mornings, weirdly it didn't leave him feeling buzzed, just more focused, even being a stimulant -- and Raze thought he was probably starting to really hit his stride in a lot of ways.

Even excited as he was now, he was able to keep his heart rate and breathing even, his body seemingly divorced from his mind; in truth, the excitement was just channeled, focused, lending everything the sense of being crystalline in its clarity. It wasn’t something Raze knew how to describe, but it was a great feeling, one he got better and better at sinking himself into the more he practiced it.

He crept more like a fluid shadow than a man through the other part of their encampment. He knew there were plenty of clones left awake, even if most of ’em were drunk, but all he really had to worry about was getting past all those commandos.

And by some minor miracle, in addition to skill, he did.

General Croft was snoring quietly on his sleeping pad; the reporter was sprawled naked against him, her formerly stiff and very rigidly styled hair rendered into an absolute disaster sticking out in every
direction. Raze almost felt bad, because he did like the Jedi and he didn't have anything against the reporter, but—well, what was the point in being covert ops if you couldn’t have fun? Half-Pint needed something to help her feel better, and Raze was glad to take up that call.

In fact, just on the off-chance that he couldn’t do the dip, he’d created a paint bomb and brought that along, too. He figured that any paint splattering was better than none, so if he couldn’t do one, he’d definitely find a way to do the other.

Now, he did as Maul had taught him, focusing everything that he was on becoming part of the background noise of the Force; even if Raze couldn’t feel it like a Force sensitive, he could almost taste the moment he succeeded, like something sweet and cool in his mouth. That should render him invisible to the general's Force senses; at least, it should long enough for Raze to do what he needed to do.

Gingerly, he took the paint out and uncapped it. It was the same neon green that Ahsoka had bombed them with on their training run ages ago, which Raze thought was probably unofficially her color. And he figured probably Croft knew it was her color, too, which was likely the point.

For all of Raze’s efforts, the dip was the simple part. He gingerly gathered the post-coital Jedi’s beard into a gentle brush shape and then lowered it into the wide necked bottle, minding not to get his own hands wet so he couldn't be traced by it later. He managed to get about half of the bottom in there, then pulled it back out, gooey and dripping, before letting it settle back on Croft's chest. Then, he recapped the bottle and beat a very hasty retreat.

But it was when he turned and slipped back out that complications happened.

So much of his focus was back on the Jedi that he ran right into Drop’s giant chest. Even as Raze squeaked, the big commando grabbed him by his upper arms and literally lifted him off of his feet, though he wasn't actually hurting Raze any. “What did you just do, you little—”

Raze gaped, but then he moved; lightning fast, he snatched the paint bomb off of his belt, arming it with a flick of his finger and—unable to do more than bend his elbow with his arms pinned—flung it straight up.

Well trained as he was, Drop reacted to something beeping and flashing by dropping Raze and moving to neutralize the threat.

Raze wasted no time darting away, and he heard General Croft ask what was happening a split second before he heard the small pop and the wet sound of yet more neon paint hitting everything in the vicinity.

He ran past where Tally was stationed with a holo-cam and all the way back to the Nest, as Brody, Smarty, Tango and Castle all fell in and ran with him, and he didn't stop laughing once the entire way there.

(Later that night, only Tally was awake when Kenobi crept aboard the Nest to be with Maul; instead of speaking, he just helped the Kenobi resituate the zabrak in one of the unused cargo areas of the courier and then slipped back out again when Kenobi laid down beside him.)
Redemption Like Rain

Chapter Notes

I am posting this from shadowmaat's living room. <3 Thanks for taking me in and putting up with my coughing, Best Fiend.

It rained the next day.

The sound of it beating on the ground outside and against the courier was soothing; with it came the breeze and that musty smell of clean dampness, flowing in with the occasional wet scatter from the open back gangway. Outside, he could hear it pattering down on the beaten grass; inside, it afforded everyone some much needed air flow.

Obi-Wan loved it. He could get lost in it, in the simplicity of it, at least for a little while. Not long enough, but then, nothing ever was.

He had come back and some strategic questioning of a green-painted Croft had led to him finding out Maul had gotten beyond drunk. Obi-Wan rather regretted missing that; he remembered how charmingly frank and relatively open a well-medicated Maul had been on Alderaan, and he wondered if it translated the same to alcohol. Still, he had quietly slipped aboard the courier; Tally had been the only one awake by then, laying in the aisle on a bedroll, reading from a datapad.

Ever since Tally had held him to task over their relationship, Obi-Wan had felt somehow--diminished. Or, perhaps not diminished, but as if Tally was measuring him far more carefully now than he had been when Obi-Wan was only his general and not also in a relationship with his lieutenant. It was a strange feeling; to be sheepish at coming to see if Maul was all right, and perhaps in want of some company, and to see Tally as something of a gatekeeper. He was so young; Jango's face had filled out and hardened with age, stocky square lines, but Tally's face was still more narrow, his features still more delicate, unlined despite the worried furrow that would appear between his eyebrows from time to time. The same cheekbones, the same cut of his chin as Jango had, but there was a softness there yet, a boyish look made no less so by the loose curls Tally was growing out, his shaved cross long-since gone.

Obi-Wan struggled not to see all of the troops that way. To try to look past how young they were, and how short their lives had been so far. And how cut-short those lives often became, and sometimes under his own orders. He tried to protect them as much as he could, but the losses still happened, and he still struggled with them.

Tally hadn't barred him from the courier, though; just helped him steal Maul off into the not-yet repurposed cargo hold at the back that would become a medical bay with enough time and equipment -- Obi-Wan was working on that part -- and then left behind a bucket and water. Obi-Wan debated with himself for a full twenty seconds about whether or not to stay; in some measure of angry defiance, he laid down there and rested an arm over his darling's sleeping -- or drunkenly unconscious -- body and decided to hell with it. The Blackbirds all knew about them now, even if Obi-Wan's spine had frozen when Maul decided to tell them; he was officially on leave, so unless a crisis happened, he could spend part of that leave hidden on the Nest with Maul.

The 501st was on their way.
Anakin was on his way.

The *Resolute*'s group had managed to finish early, with the backup that had come to Ryloth, and they were going to be here before day's end. Add to that the advertisement going around and the fallout from that, add to that the Blackbirds in proximity with Anakin, and Obi-Wan wanted to find a dark hole to hide in.

He figured that the advertisement was likely a case of someone clever building a highly rendered 3-D map and perhaps using footage of Anakin from before to come up with the dialogue. It was probably within the vein of unscrupulous marketing; the company the ad was for rapidly disavowed knowledge of it, but the chaos was still spreading out as the company's stocks had gone up dramatically. Obi-Wan had fielded several Council calls while he was trying to visit friends in the city before getting so disgusted -- of course Anakin didn't make the ad! -- that he turned his comm off altogether and had it redirect to messaging.

Now, in the dim morning light that managed to filter in, to the sound of rain, he just tried to-- exist, for awhile. To just be for awhile.

*You would probably either laugh at me or lecture me, about now,* he thought in the direction of his old master. Qui-Gon had always been admonishing him to keep his focus in the present. Obi-Wan had always resisted it, irritated by being told to do something which had not come naturally to him at all. Now, he sought it out whenever he could, especially when it came to his time with Maul.

He huffed at himself and unwound his arm from Maul, who had shifted to his side at some point during the night, and instead traced Maul's midnight-black mask; he could feel the impression of unsettled dreams and pain, and figured he was going to probably spend at least part of the day dealing with his hung-over darling. And, in truth, Obi-Wan could think of few things he would rather do and all of those involved Maul anyway, albeit sober and bright-eyed.

*I'll miss you,* he thought, fingertips following lines even more familiar to him than his own; he lamented that there was not a stronger word for it, too.

He wondered if Anakin felt this way about Padmé; felt the keen blade of separation. The longing that ached. He knew that he must have; as angry as he was with Anakin over the Blackbirds' training mission, he could imagine how hard it had to be for them. And how hard it was going to get for him and Maul, as the war sent them in different, if perhaps parallel, directions.

For once, Obi-Wan felt that Maul would handle it better than *he* would, and that was a strange and bittersweet thought to have.

Speaking of the zabrak; Maul surfaced from his drunken stupor with a quiet groan, and Obi-Wan winced in sympathy. If Maul was making any noise of pain, then it had to be bad. "Good morning, darling," he murmured, keeping his voice pitched low so as not to make the headache worse.

"Never again," Maul answered, one clumsy hand finding Obi-Wan's undertunic to clutch as he squeezed his eyes closed tighter. His voice was a little slurred, though likely more from sleep than from any lingering drunkenness. "Never."

It made Obi-Wan smile, anyway, even if he was still grimacing in empathy for Maul's plight.

He also wondered if Anakin or Padmé had ever held the bucket for the other after a night's indulgence, which was what he spent the next twenty minutes doing for Maul.
Tally didn't exactly sleep in, but he didn't wake too early, either. He'd set his alarm for about six hours after laying down, which wasn't enough time, but he thought he'd get a chance to catch up when they disembarked, and besides that, he wanted to keep an eye on his lieutenant. While he'd been in on getting Maul tanked, curious about what kind of drunk their L-T made, he really hadn't planned on Maul getting too smashed to even walk. So, figuring it was partly his own inattention and lack of setting a limit, he wanted to make sure he was up to help mitigate.

Though, apparently General Kenobi was already in the process of it.

It seemed that every time Tally observed them together it became easier to see why they were. He had known Obi-Wan Kenobi as General; a kind if harried man who seemed unprepared for war, but who was quick enough and sharp enough to learn fast. A good officer, though closed off. Tally had never seen the softer, more vulnerable side of the man until he started seeing him in context with Maul; around the zabrak, Kenobi's face wore less stress. He smiled more freely. His expressions were easier to read. Tally had known they were friends, but finding out they were lovers made a lot of sense in retrospect.

He still did have his misgivings, like he'd told Tango, but it was getting harder to hold onto them. Slipping into that side hold, with its open door, and finding Kenobi using a damp rag to mop Maul's face and neck off-- he didn't see a general there. Just a man, taking care of someone he so obviously adored.

And who loved Maul enough to clean out the bucket, too. No small thing to do for your other-half.

"Sorry, General," Tally said, quietly, going and sitting crosslegged behind Maul's back, mostly so he could talk with Kenobi without making the man crane his neck. "We were planning on getting him tanked, just not quite that tanked."

Kenobi huffed a little, but a smile tugged his lips and showed at the corners of his eyes. "I'm rather sorry I missed it. He's entertaining when he's less-than-sober; what tact he has goes out the viewport."

"He asked Croft how he kept food out of his beard when he ate." Tally grinned a little. "And apparently Shiv had planted a seed earlier in the day by calling beards 'flavor savers' and Maul cracked up about that before he passed out."

Kenobi smiled more broadly at that, shaking his head against his makeshift pillow of robes. "Well, he's already declared 'never again', but we'll see if that holds."

It probably could; Maul sure wasn't lacking in will power. Tally wasn't really surprised by that declaration, either. "Guess so," he just said, reaching out and running nails up and down Maul's back, even though it seemed Maul was taking the smartest route possible and sleeping off the night before. He wrestled with himself for a few moments there, then finally said, "I don't like this assessment business with General Ti, sir. We're already a squad, Maul's already our C-O. I don't see why we need to go and prove ourselves to yet another person." Especially someone neck-deep in everything Kamino, he added, in his mind.

Kenobi set the damp rag aside next to the bowl of water he'd put in reach before looking back at Tally; there was a certain sympathy in his eyes that almost made Tally uncomfortable, like maybe the Jedi was looking through him. "When Master Plo brought it up to me, I told him I didn't like it either.
But Maul needs allies. And I know Shaak Ti; next to Plo, I don't think there's anyone on the Council more willing to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"She's complicit in slave trading, General." The words were out before Tally could even think to stop himself. "I get it, we aren't being killed for any deviation from the norm anymore like we were before, but she's right there in the thick of it."

"I know." Kenobi's simple agreement caught Tally off-guard. "Tally, I know. So does she, I'm absolutely sure of it."

Tally wasn't buying it. He remembered when brothers disappeared. He hadn't even figured it out until he was nine or so, but once he did, he panicked every single damned time a brother went missing and no one knew where, because he knew they were being 'decommissioned' and it took everything he had not to become one of them. He couldn't begin to fathom how a Jedi could walk into that situation and understand and just-- what, go along with it? "How can you know that?"

"She sent me you."

Tally sat back a little, eyes narrowing suspiciously. "What?"

Kenobi looked back at him steadily, though the hand he was using to stroke Maul's forearm never stopped, fingers playing along markings. "She knows how-- how ugly this whole situation is. She stays there so that she can try to control it to some degree. So, she sent me you. Specifically, intentionally, with a note that you were angry and hurt and needed a general who wouldn't hold it against you."

"No." Something bottomed out in Tally's gut, and he had to fight the sudden urge to just-- jump up and get away from this. He didn't even know why, but it sent a jolt through him, something awful and panicky, the thought that General Ti had somehow known. He didn't hate her, but he sure didn't like her; didn't like any of them on Kamino, not their instructors, not their overseers.

And he hated the Kaminoans.

"Yes." Kenobi seemed to take it in stride, just looking at him with that same sympathy that it almost burned to be on the other end of. "She said you were one of the finest medics she'd ever seen. And that you had come close before her arrival to-- to being killed despite that," Kenobi stumbled over that part, "--and that she knew I would do my best to take care of you. So, I quite gladly accepted your assignment to the 212th. And when the time came, I assigned you before all of the others to the Blackbirds because I knew that you would protect him," he said, nodding to Maul, "but also, that he would protect you. From everyone, even the Jedi. Perhaps even especially from the Jedi."

It was almost more than Tally could take in; his throat felt tight, some mix between lingering anger and a grief he couldn't even understand, let alone disarm, and he stared back at the Jedi for a long moment before pushing up to his feet, being careful not to jostle Maul in the process, so he could get the hell out of there and get some air.

He was still crying his eyes out in the rain, anger and confusion and grief and a thousand other things, when Shiv came out and sat down next to him on the loading ramp to put an arm around him.
"Any better?"

Obi-Wan's quiet voice didn't cause the headache to flare up any worse, at least. Maul made a noncommittal noise back; he felt wretched enough that there was no measuring the degrees of it. Beyond the headache, his stomach was sore and uneasy, and his skin alternately felt too hot or too cool, or sometimes both. The half of his body that he still had ached.

It reminded him strongly of waking up on the couch in Bail's family's summer home, and Queen Breha minding him after his shielding shattered and he ended up once again exposed to the Force far beyond what he had been built to take. The difference being that this time, he did it to himself.

Just in case he had not made it clear the first time he woke, he said, "I'm never doing that again."

"It's not so bad in moderation," Obi-Wan answered, though Maul could hear him smiling some. He might have gotten offended by that, but he knew it wasn't in any meanness. "Still, I've been there before, so I can appreciate your swearing it off right now."

Maul got his hand up and rubbed at his face, unsurprised by its shaking, and didn't even try to open his eyes yet. Still, even feeling like he'd been poisoned -- he supposed technically he had been -- he could sense some of Obi-Wan's unease and anxiety, especially at this proximity. "What's bothering you?" he asked, tucking his arm back around himself and shivering a little, though pleasantly, for the cool breeze brushing past him.

"Anakin's going to be here this evening." Obi-Wan heaved a breath out; it skated past the top of Maul's head. "And I think as soon as you're well enough, you should go see to your medic."

Word of Skywalker being around didn't bother Maul as much as he might have expected it would; he had no desire to go and put himself in proximity of the so-called Chosen One, and it was easy enough to avoid that. The second part was what got him to pry his eyes open, though that did him no favors. "What's wrong with Tally?"

"I told him some things that upset him." Obi-Wan reached up and stroked his fingers down Maul's cheek, light, and it took a bit of willpower for Maul not to close his eyes to it. "It hadn't been my intention, but I don't think my checking on him would go over well now."

Obi-Wan was likely as not right about that, though Maul did think that was something that would change with time. He gave a slight nod, then made to get up; his stomach protested, though it was too empty to go into open rebellion at least. "All right."

"--I hadn't meant now," Obi-Wan said, wincing; still, he got up himself and got an arm around Maul, steadying him. "He might scalp me if you get up just to fall over."

"I know, but still." Obi-Wan nonetheless leaned his head into Maul's hand, and the gesture made something in Maul's chest tweak hard. "Take it easy for me, darling."

Maul had no desire to argue, so he just nodded and made his way out of the hold, quite gingerly. It only took him a few seconds to spot Tally; his medic was sitting on the loading ramp with Shiv, the latter's arm around the former, heads bent close together. He stood and watched them for a moment;
deeper into the Nest, the rest of his squad was still in varied states of sprawled out asleep, probably trying to catch up on their rest while they could.

Between that and the rain it was-- something that could only really be called peaceful.

Maul huffed a little breath at himself, then shook his head -- and regretted it -- before picking his way down to the other two, lowering himself to the deck slowly. Both Shiv and Tally were wet from the rain; now, they were sitting far enough back as to be out of it and Maul put himself down opposite Shiv, on Tally's other side, and rubbed over his face again.

Of course, once he was there, he had no idea what to say. Thankfully, Shiv seemed to have that in hand, because he didn't even wait until Maul was done settling to say, "See, Tally, I told you he wouldn't drop dead."

The utterly casual way Shiv declared that made Maul snort despite himself, and Tally echoed him precisely. "Don't be so sure," Maul said back, dropping his hand and eying his sergeant blearily. "I'm certainly considering it right now."

"If you did, I'd give you a sparkling eulogy. 'Our brave lieutenant; he survived being cut in half and several months of war, but he finally met a foe he couldn't take: Chadrilan Apple Pie. After bravely battling the bottle -- and another and another and several more -- he succumbed to it, though he waited until he was properly hung-over before doing so. Remember kids, don't drink alcohol.'" Shiv held his free hand over his heart. "His last words were, and I quote, 'Flavor saver.'"

Laughing was definitely not helping his head, and yet, completely outwith any ability to comprehend why, that was what Maul did. Even if it did make him have to lean over his own knees and clutch his skull, fingers splayed between horns. "Those would not be my last words," he said, eyes closed tight again. "My last words would be, 'My sergeant is incorrigible and should be brought up on charges. Don't let him get away with this.'"

"There you go," Shiv said, voice gone warm and affectionate. "Now you're getting it."

Maul went to shake his head again, thought better of it, then took a few slow, deep breaths to try to settle his stomach before looking up; both of them were looking at him, though Tally's expression was that scrutiny Maul had long since come to recognize as assessment. "Are you all right?" Maul asked, pointedly, taking his medic in just the same; Tally also looked rough, though Maul was certain it had nothing to do with the alcohol. His eyes were red rimmed and his still-wet hair was hanging in chaotic curls down across his brow, almost to the point of getting in his eyes.

"I'm fine," Tally said, gaze flicking away for a moment, before he made himself look back again. "You, on the other hand--"

"You don't seem fine. And besides, Obi-Wan told me you weren't fine," Maul answered, raising his brows.

Tally's face hardened some and his jaw knotted, and for a moment it looked like he wanted to get angry. Behind him, Shiv's face turned softer by contrast and he took his arm off of Tally's shoulders just to rub at his back.

Apparently, though, that simple thing was enough to drain the medic's ire. After a deep breath, Tally shook his head, sighing out. "I'll be fine. I don't really want to talk about it, but I'll be okay." A beat. "Thanks, though. I mean, for asking."

Maul didn't like that answer, but after a moment of his own, he nodded back. He couldn't -- and
wouldn’t -- force any conversation about it; hopefully, Tally would either sort it or at least be willing to talk about it later, if he did need to. "All right."

"You'd better not even try to tell me that you're fine, though," Tally said, dropping his chin even as he reached out to catch Maul's, using that grip to turn his head a little, more into the gray light, just to peer at him. "You look Big Murder Mountain bad."

Maul tolerated it with a little huff; Tally wasn't rough about it, anyway, and after a few seconds, let go again. "My head hurts, my stomach is upset, but I'm all right enough. Or, as Shiv said, not about to 'drop dead'."

"Your liver can probably take it if you want something for it now." Tally wrapped his arms back around his own midsection. "That and sleeping it off are my professional recommendations."

"We still have loading to do. And I'd rather get it done before Skywalker's battlegroup gets here."

"Uh, excuse me," Shiv raised his hand and his eyebrows at the same time, smirking. "I think you forgot that you have a squad of eleven people here more than willing to see it finished."

“And you forgot that I don’t care for being coddled,” Maul said back, archly.

Shiv cocked his head at that, and his expression shifted from some manner of smug to something considerably softer. “Lieu, it’s not coddling. None of us are in bad shape. This ship’s gonna be our home, too, so it’s not like we’re doing you a special favor. So, sleep off your adventure into falling-down-drunkenness and let us do our thing. We’ll get it done and make sure to stay out of Skywalker’s vicinity.”

“Seconded.” Tally raised a hand. “Which means you’re outvoted, so shoo, go back and cuddle with your boyfriend some more and I’ll bring you something for your head. Besides, trying to haul crates will just prolong your recovery, trust me.”

Maul didn’t really like the idea of just— lounging all day, no matter how wretched he felt. He pressed his mouth into a line, but when both of them just kept looking at him expectantly, he finally capitulated.

Though he was still boggling over the term *boyfriend*, its definition and applications and how bizarre it seemed when applied to him and Obi-Wan, when he went to go lay back down.

The rest of the day wore on quietly.

Tally gave Maul something to make the headache bearable and something else to help with the queasiness, and after that and some water, he ended up falling back to sleep and staying there. The rain hadn’t abated, and so the Blackbirds stripped to their shorts and boots and carried their cargo that way, what didn’t need a grav sled; Obi-Wan helped, though he kept his clothes on.

They finished not long before the first shore party from the 501st was due to land.

Now, Obi-Wan counted the minutes, sitting over a mug of tea with his hair drying and his still-damp robes clinging to his skin uncomfortably. Even then, he couldn’t seem to make himself get up to go
and get changed, too on tenterhooks even for that.

He knew that Anakin was bound to be tired, and in a foul mood besides; the advertisement that had taken the galaxy's underbelly by storm would ruin anyone's week, and that was on top of what had happened on Ryloth and on Maridun before that. It was a great deal of stress for anyone to be under, let alone such a young man, and Obi-Wan would be lying if he tried to claim that he wasn't tempted to put this discussion off. To give his former apprentice a chance to rest and recover, a chance to center himself.

His first instinct, even now, was to shield the boy from disapproval. To protect him as much as he could be protected; to be the one in Anakin's corner, as he had made a commitment to be when he decided that he wanted to be Anakin's master. Not just to fulfill Qui-Gon's request, but to do right by the child they had taken from his mother, the one that was viewed with awe or suspicion or both by so many.

Except--

Except this time, he couldn't. If he let it go this time, and tried to chalk it up to somehow being a mutual antagonism, he would be doing wrong by Maul. And by the Blackbirds. The training scenario they had gone through had never been weighted fairly; their espionage and everything that they had done based on it was based on the fact that they were going into a situation that was designed to humiliate them and that they refused to give into it.

And all of that was Anakin's doing. Right down to a droid popper, thrown without warning.

Right now, Obi-Wan was set up in a command tent, since he knew it was the first place Anakin would stop. The Blackbirds had not yet taken off, but aside Husker, he had not set eyes on any of them in quite awhile. He couldn't blame them for making themselves scarce; he didn't like to think about how angry they really had to be, right now, at Anakin.

He forced his eyes off of the table-top chronometer and onto his cup of tea, but that did nothing for the anxiety chewing a hole through his midsection.

He didn't have to wait long.

Anakin looked exhausted when he came in; there were dark splotches under his eyes, and his face was still paler than usual, likely as much from that exhaustion as from the wounds he had suffered priorly. But he smiled when he saw Obi-Wan, and that made Obi-Wan’s heart sink even as he tried to smile back.

“Am I glad to see you,” Anakin said, coming forward and reaching out, then pausing. “Why’re you all wet, though, Master?”

“I was helping load supplies.” Obi-Wan swallowed down, reaching out himself to squeeze his former padawan’s upper arms. “It’s-- I’m glad to see you in one piece, too.”

He didn’t know if it was apology. Or if it was unadorned truth. Only that it felt sour on his tongue, and that even as he prepared to stand up against a wrong, he felt like there was no way to come out of any of this clean.

Anakin was perceptive, too; he eyed Obi-Wan once over as if looking for injury, brows drawn in worry as he asked, “What’s wrong, Master?”

“I wanted to talk to you about the training mission you designed for the Blackbirds,” Obi-Wan said, trying to strike a tone between sternness and openness. He wanted Anakin to hear him, but he also
wanted to give Anakin a chance to explain himself.

The moment the words ‘training mission’ were out of Obi-Wan’s mouth, though, Anakin’s expression closed off. “I don’t know what there is to talk about. My detachment lost, there were only minor injuries according to the reports. And I don’t know if you’ve heard, Master, but I’ve got a lot on my tray right now.”

“I did read the reports.” Obi-Wan worked his jaw, trying to figure out how to even do this. “Anakin, that scenario wasn’t remotely fair. If not for some foresight and unorthodox thinking, they wouldn’t have stood a chance even if they had done everything correctly. The point was supposed to be training, a chance for them to work out their internal dynamics. Not for them to be crushed.”

“They’re supposed to be an elite black ops squad, aren’t they?” Anakin shot back, eyes narrowing. “The fact that they beat it proves it wasn’t unbeatable.”

Obi-Wan could feel a twist between defeat and frustration bubbling up. “They’re new. They weren’t supposed to be elite yet, they were supposed to be in training.” He took in a slow breath, then finally just got to the point. “I think you let your feelings about Maul get in the way, when you designed that mission. Regardless of what the Blackbirds are supposed to be.”

“My feelings about that-- that murderer are the right ones!” Anakin snapped, voice raising, gaze boring into Obi-Wan. “You’re too blind to see it, Master, but he’s dangerous. And you not only ignored the fact he’s a darkside assassin, but then you gave him command of troops?! Your own master’s murderer, and you put him in charge of living, breathing men! It’s not my feelings you should be looking at, it’s yours!”

Obi-Wan could feel his mouth fall open, each word cutting deeper. The look in Anakin’s eyes, burning anger and betrayal, left him feeling sick and off-balanced and wrong. He gaped, scrambling in his mind to just-- find some kind of-- of response--

“I know you think he’s-- redeemable or something, but he’s not, what he did can’t be forgiven or forgotten,” Anakin went on, tone growing more confident; like a predator smelling blood. “It’s not too late to fix this. I’ll even take the squad into the 501st--”

”No.”

It was a thunderhead of a word.

Obi-Wan was almost as surprised it came out of his own mouth as Anakin seemed to be.

“Master--” Anakin started, a little less loudly.

“No,” Obi-Wan repeated, drawing his shoulders up and picking his chin up at the same time. “No, you don’t get to say that to me. Because, unlike you, I’ve bothered to get to know Maul. All of those long days at the Temple while you were in remedial education? I was visiting him. Every day, Anakin, that I was in that Temple and could get there, I did, for years. I know exactly where he came from, what he endured and how he managed to pick up the pieces after I cut him down, and I have not once felt unsafe with him at my back, not while he went on missions with me before this war, and certainly not since!”

He could see the words landing like daggers. But Obi-Wan was done trying to shelter Anakin from these basic truths. He softened his tone, but he didn’t back down, not even as Anakin revved up for another go; he just held up his hand, drawing on his years of experience and the years which he spent raising this young man to hold the floor.
“To address your points,” Obi-Wan said, calmly, “I don’t think he’s redeemable. I think he’s long-since redeemed. And I’ve long-since forgiven him for Theed. For Qui-Gon.”

The change that came over Anakin’s face at that was almost terrifying to behold; his mouth twisted into a snarl and he opened his mouth yet again to speak. Obi-Wan jolted internally, though he kept that from displaying on his face.

Anakin had his moments throughout boyhood, where he’d show such frightening things. But it had been awhile. He was larger than life; his feelings filled every empty space, even the ones where peace and quiet should have been left alone, demanding without even meaning to to be the center of attention. He never seemed aware of it, but oh, Obi-Wan never quite forgot it.

Now, after a moment of twisted rage, Anakin managed to force it back off of his face again. Instead, it burned and roiled in the Force between them.

But Obi-Wan gave him no quarter, stepping closer and squaring up even more. “No. I’m not doing this with you. I was the one whose Master was cut down, and I have also been the one who has bothered to see that Maul was every bit as much victim as he was killer. I have known him and I’ve been close to him now for over a decade! You don’t get to discount my experiences during Theed or after, not in relation to Qui-Gon or to Maul, simply because you don’t like what you’re hearing.”

Anakin was still sneering, though he tried to strike a placating tone as he said, “Master, your perspective-- you’re too close--”

“No.” Obi-Wan cut him off again, showing his own teeth in a brief flash, in a manner he could have only picked up from Maul. It certainly startled Anakin into snapping his mouth closed, head jerking back a little in shock. “I don’t distrust him. I don’t question his loyalty, not to me or to his Blackbirds. I’m not the one trapped behind the perspective of an angry and frightened nine-year-old, Anakin, you are. But you’re not nine anymore. And he is my officer, that is his squad, he leads them and he leads them well, and you will either treat him as a fellow officer in this army or you’ll leave him alone entirely, but you will never again target him for devastation, physical or psychological, because I won’t stand for it. Hate him all you like, but stay away from him. And if you want us to remain on speaking terms, then you won’t cross that line again.”

It was hard to read the expression on Anakin’s face; whether it was rage or pain or some echo of that little boy who needed Obi-Wan’s steady love and patience finding out that it wasn’t infinite.

It hurt to see it, any which way. But Obi-Wan didn’t back down; he stayed only a moment more, staring Anakin down, then turned and walked out of the command tent, back out into the rain.

It almost felt clean.

Husk knew that they were supposed to stay away from General Skywalker and the 501st.

He just didn’t plan on listening to it.

He had helped the rest of his brothers haul supplies and start really organizing their courier; they scored rations and that, yeah, but also some other supplies, like decent bedrolls and bedding, in addition to the hoarded bedding they’d been using before. They had new basic mess kits and some
other odds and ends, and best of all, a newly clean-shaven General Croft had slipped ‘em word on a wrecked medical frigate that was being towed under escort back to Republic space for salvage; her hyperdrive was ruined beyond repair, and he gave them the right codes to transfer to the escorts so they could go aboard and cannibalize her for anything useful, once they were done with GalTech.

Things were going pretty good, in Husk’s opinion. The ship. The squad. They even managed to convince Maul to spend the day resting, which Husker thought was probably a winning battle in what was gonna be an ongoing war on top of the war they were already in. They had food from the night before, they had some trinkets they traded, their armor was painted and it finally felt like Bravo-984 was processed and behind them--

Almost.

Husker had one more thing to do in that regard; while the Blackbirds were doing a final round of inventory and checks, while Tango was doing a full walk-around of the Nest and Smarty was compiling a briefing for after they were underway, he slipped off into the night.

Tally spotted him and they just looked at one another for a moment; then, the medic’s mouth quirked up in a sad half-smile, and he turned back to his own work, leaving Husker to do what he needed to do.

Seeing Anakin Skywalker sitting like the weight of a planet or ten was resting on his shoulders didn’t make Husker feel good. And when he looked up at Husker, a miserable look crossed his face, which made it even worse.

Husk wasn’t there to beat him up. He just stepped over and sat down beside the general, resting his elbows on his knees and folding his hands between ‘em, and he didn’t doubt for a second that his former CO knew exactly why he was there.

General Skywalker confirmed it, after a few minutes of familiar, if aching, silence. “I never intended for any of you clones to get hurt, Husk,” he said, voice exhausted and thick. “I’m-- I was trying to stop that from happening in the first place.”

The damning thing was, Husk believed that in part. He didn’t think it was all that (he thought Skywalker probably did mean for Maul to walk away damaged), but he did believe it was part of what factored into his former general’s plans.

And he thought that his own presence amongst the Blackbirds had something to do with it, too.

“When you aim at him, sir,” Husker said, carefully, gently, “you’re aimin’ at us, too. We’re in that blast radius, General, just the same.”

That seemed to hit Skywalker in the guts, given the way his mouth tightened and the way his eyes slid closed. He swallowed hard, but he didn’t say anything, and Husker still loved the hell right out of him and he knew, in that moment, that he probably always would.

And that he was allowed to.

“Is he-- good? To you,” Skywalker asked; there was a bitter twist to his lips, as if he had to force the words out, but the tone was a genuine question. Not mocking.

Husker didn’t have to hesitate. “Yeah, he is. Has been from the start, too. Kinda green still, relies on Shiv a lot to show him the way, but he cares a hell of a lot.”

Skywalker didn’t say anything right away, just nodded, leaning his head backwards and heaving out
a shuddery breath. “Alpha said the same thing,” he finally replied, voice coarse. “Take care of yourself anyway, Husk. You-- your squad won’t have any trouble out of me.”

“Thank you, sir,” Husker said; he didn’t think General Skywalker was going to forget his grudge, but as long as he set his aim where in belonged -- on the enemy -- then that was the important part. “I gotta go, we’re gonna disembark shortly. But you take care of yourself, too, yeah?”

“I’m working on it.” Skywalker gave a bitter, tired smirk. “My new publicity hasn’t been doing me any favors, but we’ll get it sorted out eventually. Safe flying and happy hunting.”

“Same to you,” Husker said, reaching over and giving his former general’s forearm -- the flesh and blood one -- a squeeze before he got up and left.

Now, there was only forward.

The engines were warming up when Obi-Wan snuck aboard the Nest; Maul was up again, finally, holding onto a cup of caf and reading from one of the datapads, probably catching up on the latest mission specs, and Obi-Wan stood for a moment just to watch, as the Blackbirds bustled around.

When Maul spotted him and got up, they ducked into the back cargo hold they had been sleeping in earlier; in the dim lights, with the dying sound of the rain and the hum and whine of the courier’s engines coming online for flight, Obi-Wan felt equal parts longing and anticipation, almost like hope.

“I will miss you,” Obi-Wan said, reaching up and taking Maul’s face in both hands; the day of rest had done his darling some fair amount of good. He looked better, and he felt better through the Force, too; ready, and warm, and almost even content. “I’ll see you at the assessment; be safe, darling.”

“I will be.” Maul reached up and held onto his forearms, not pushing him away but holding on, and leaned his face more into one of Obi-Wan’s hands. “Try to sleep when you can. And stay safe yourself.”

“Take-off in ten, any last minute gasps of outside air better be over and done in three!” Shiv called, from the corridor on the other side of the bulkhead.

“Guess that’s my cue,” Obi-Wan said, smiling and leaning in to steal a lingering kiss. “I love you, and I’ll see you soon,” he finished, letting go reluctantly and stepping back.

“I love you too,” Maul answered, and this time without hesitation, before seeing Obi-Wan out and off the loading ramp and then turning back to his squad inside as the ramp raised behind him.

Obi-Wan watched through the rain until the Nest’s running lights were long gone, then went back to his own command.

Just like Husker, he knew now there was only forward.
Dear Flanker (IV)

Dear Flanker,

Mag is dead.

My whole former platoon is dead.

I don't know what to say. I meant to come back to the Nest and tell you how the GalTech mission went, but then our L-T got the message from Kenobi; the 212th and the 501st had been sent to Orto Plutonia after Radnor because our outpost there had gone dark. They arrived and everyone was dead. Kenobi knew I'd originally been slated to go there, so he sent a message to Maul, so Maul could tell me personally, I guess maybe that was a good thing? I think?

Everyone. All of them. The whole platoon. The guys I stayed with when you were transferred. I was gonna be there, Flanker. I was gonna be there, if I hadn't been pulled for the Blackbirds. I was gonna be there with them. I was with them when I found out about you, I was with them when I found out I was alone, they tried to help even when I didn't want it

What do I do?

We were doing good. The Blackbirds. GalTech was painless. We worked like this wasn't our first real, independent black ops mission, like we'd done this a thousand times. We did really well, we all did, we did good, why

I'm okay. I'm okay.

I mean, this is what happens, right? We're soldiers. Dying is part of that. It wasn't even droids, Flanker, it wasn't even in any kind of a real fight, it was a kriffing territory dispute with the indigenous sentients that supposedly didn't exist when Glid Station was put there. The Seppies had put down their own base and attacked the indigenous population and our people were apparently
just collateral. Just collateral, they didn't even do anything except test gear and try not to freeze and they were slaughtered.

I don't know details. Except, they all died. They all died.

I don't

We did good on Shifrin, we took that foundry down, we got everything and sent it along to the 332nd's cyber-intelligence unit, we blew the entire thing sky high and we didn't kill any civilians when we did it. I took Raze, Castle, Husker and Rancor; Maul took the others, Brody and Smarty stayed with the Nest to handle coordination and intelligence transfer. We set the charges for the power generation station and the foundations, while Maul and the others broke into the offices. No one got caught. First time the droids knew we were there was when everything blew up. We made sure to be there during the night cycle when the civvie contractors weren't, just so we wouldn't hurt them. I was really proud of us, Flanker. We went in and got out clean. Mission accomplished. Everything fit and worked, no one got hurt, I was so proud

Mag was the one who told me you were dead. I knew those guys. I was one of those guys.

How am I still here?
"The thing was," Tango said, "is that Etah wasn't looking to be saved. Or redeemed, or forgiven. There was no thought in his mind of somehow earning redemption for his crimes; when he went to ground, he did so only because he felt he had nowhere else he could go. Isolated from his own kind, left to the dark thoughts in his mind, he didn't have the luxury of self-deception any more. And, really, he didn't want to deceive himself anymore, either.

"Instead, he lived in that between state. It wasn't really living, so much as existing. He had avoided the punishment of his elders, those few left, but that did nothing to save him from the punishment he levied on himself.

"In all of that, there can't be any doubt that it was Adao who saved his life."

Work on the courier was well underway.

The wrecked medical frigate, being towed for salvage, had already been stripped of several things. Whole computer banks had been taken, as well as nav consoles and other highly valuable items; a number of her medical supplies were also gone, but enough of the equipment itself remained to make use of it. She was an undeniable boon, not only for the sake of installing a medical bay for Tally aboard the Nest, but also for the entire squad. Maul made a mental note to thank Croft when he next saw the Jedi; he hadn't really gotten the chance to do so on Radnor.

Now, he followed the others as they hauled salvage back to the Nest; thankfully, for all parties, the frigate's hangar deck was intact and she had enough charge in her generators to maintain her life support and forcefields, though the air was a little thin and certainly cold. Aboard the Nest, a few of the other Blackbirds were moving things around and prepping areas that were going to require actual construction work; when Maul had left, Shiv had been there doing that, and Tango was telling a story to him and Smarty, and on popular demand, recording it for the rest of the squad as well so that they could listen to it later.

"So wait, you want us to store our food in the same refrigeration unit that probably has housed who knows how many bodily fluids from who knows how many people?" Brody asked, as he jumped in to help Castle painstakingly haul the large refrigerator back to the Nest, having caught them on the way back for another load. The grav sled could barely handle the weight of said refrigerator, so a good deal of muscle was also involved with the transfer; Castle gave Brody a grateful look when the slicer started helping.

Behind them, Tally was carrying a box of medical instruments that had been left behind because they needed serviced or repaired. He was still debating on the FX-3 droid who had been abandoned deactivated; Maul had left it up to the medic whether he wanted said droid. Now, Tally said, "I'm sure it's been sterilized, but if it'll make you feel better, I'll do it again."

"As long as you don't plan on sticking any body parts or anything in it. That'd be a hell of a way to ruin a midnight snack."

"Balance being what it is," Castle grunted, throwing his weight into pulling the unit along as Brody
pushed, "he'll have a smaller unit in the medbay for anything gory."

"Thank everything for that. Last thing I want is to grab myself some three eyeball salad with a side of brain fillets or something."

Tally eyed Brody's back at that, looking irritated. "What the hell would I be doing with any of those things?"

"You got me," Brody answered, somehow managing to shrug despite the physical effort. "I wouldn't put a little mad science past you."

The bantering was normal, but there was a pall over it, as there was over everything else. A sense of weight and uneasiness. Still, it was no mystery why.

Maul had never had to inform anyone of a death before, let alone inform someone of forty of them. He knew it wasn't standard procedure for notifications like that to go out, and that Obi-Wan had chosen to send him word of what had happened to the platoon that had been on Orto Plutonia -- Shiv's former platoon -- because Obi-Wan had cared enough to make sure Shiv heard it from someone he was closer to, instead of via briefs or mission updates.

Maul didn't know if he had done it right. No one had taught him how. Ultimately, he had just come out with it straight; his tone was gentle, but it was even and matter-of-fact.

Shiv had only blinked at him. Physically, he gave no real outward reaction; after a few long beats, he had just said, "Thanks for telling me," and then turned back to stowing his gear from their mission.

Outwardly, he gave no sign. But Maul could feel the blow hit; could feel the shock and then the stunned numbness, and his fingers had itched with the desire to do something. He didn't know what. With a physical wound, he would apply pressure to the bleeding; with a bone he would splint the broken part, but what could he do here? He didn't know the right words, didn't know how to help, and it ate at him.

(Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he could find a kernel of irritation for the fact that his Force sensitivity wanted to work now, instead of when he needed a physical boost; now, when he could feel the pain bleeding off of his sergeant. The anger and the hurt and the raw guilt and grief. Just like he could feel the concern radiating off of the rest of the Blackbirds, even though they kept bantering and moving forward.)

Shiv had thrown himself into work, just as everyone else had. No one avoided him, but he took steps to avoid the others. Maul had tried to ask Tally what they could do, but even Tally didn't know; his only suggestion was to respect Shiv's silence on the matter and to be available if the sergeant wanted to break it. Even Raze seemed to be taking that advice.

Now, preoccupied by it all, Maul dragged the grav-sled full of bunk mattresses back towards the hangar deck and kept trying to figure out how to fix things.

Maybe someone else would have some ideas, someone not raised from birth -- or decanting -- to fight.
"Etah may have gone to ground, but it was really only a matter of time before his superiors caught up to him. He must have known that, somewhere, but even a Diathim's heart could be blinded by narrow-mindedness; even he, immortal and war-scarred as he was, could convince himself that he could hide in the clay and walk the ground, the realm between the red hot below and the icy blue above, and find some answer to it all.

"And he thought, even if he couldn't find an answer, perhaps he could find courage enough to end it. To remove himself from the whole equation.

"Adao, though-- Adao kept coming back. Once he had overcome his anger, he realized just how lost Etah actually was. How terribly broken he was. It was hard to want revenge on someone who was already living in misery; hard to want to add to the suffering. What would be the point? he wondered. He could find no answer beyond self-satisfaction, and so, he held his tongue and held it, and the longer he did, the less his own desire for retribution seemed to matter. He found himself listening to the Diathim talk; found himself offering reasons for Etah to keep moving, to keep being.

"'There's still work to be done,' Adao pushed, trying to draw his opposite out. 'You told me you admired what I did, you believed in our cause. You can't just abandon it now.'

"But Etah wasn't having any of it. 'Everything I've touched, I've destroyed. My family. My people. Our alliance. I'm tired, Adao; the only end I can see now is oblivion. And I would be, I think, grateful for it. I just don't yet have the courage to see it through myself.'

"Adao was shocked, at hearing that. That his former enemy, turned ally, turned-- he wasn't even sure, could see no other option but a permanent ending. Maelbi revered survival, among their own kind. He had never known one to consider taking their own life, and those words shook him to his fiery core.

"It was a moment that could have gone several ways. He could have blasted the Diathim for his fatalism. For giving up. He could have retreated there, and let things happen as they would. He could have gotten angry -- and some part of him did -- at the thought.

"But it was two words which stalled his anger showing; that kept him on the ground, instead of retreating beneath it, to the fire and motion and life below. 'I'm tired.' Etah had said, and Adao understood. More than he wanted to admit, he understood. So, he looked at the Diathim, ash and clay and brilliance showing through the thin cracks of his facade, and thought about this once enemy and his rise to glory, and his equally steep fall and realized that he didn't want to imagine Etah gone from the universe. He realized that he didn't want to see that light snuffed out.

"So, instead of all of the things he could have done, he said, 'I won't help you die. But I will be here with you, whenever I can be. I will walk these barren shores with you, and if duty calls me away, then I will return to find you.'

"What he didn’t say, but what hung in the air between them, was ‘Please be here for me to find.’"

"All I can really tell you is to be there. And be kind," Queen Breha said; even in holographic form, the jewels adorning her elaborately braided hair sparkled and it was clear she was either attending court or at some other official function. When Maul had realized he'd interrupted whatever it was, he
had apologized; Queen Breha just waited for him to trail off, eying him with banked amusement, and then told him he was on the 'short list' of people allowed to interrupt because if he was calling her for advice, then it was likely serious enough to warrant her attention.

Maul was less sure on that, but after he explained the situation -- and expected her to rescind her offer to accept his calls -- she told her assistant to make sure she had ten minutes more free to talk to him. Then, face serious and mouth bowed, she asked for the full accounting of what Obi-Wan had told him.

Maul wasn't strong on politics; even acting as an officer in the GAR had not given him any more insight on the political machinations of the galaxy. But Queen Breha seemed to grasp the situation even just on his bare-bones facts and offhandedly said she'd talk with Bail about it later. Then she had given him that advice, in terms of how to handle Shiv's loss.

"It doesn't seem like much," Maul said, after a long moment of thinking about her words. Around him, the bridge of the medical frigate was cold and barren, silent; it felt a little like a tomb, and it made Maul wonder how many people had died here. Still, he hadn't wanted to call from the Nest, and so he had fired up the comm panel here so that he wouldn't risk being overheard, and made sure to use the private encryption key that the Organas had handed him and Obi-Wan to secure the link.

"It's everything, Maul," she answered, shaking her head with a sad half-smile. "I mean, I get where you're stumbling over it. You're thinking like Bail, you want to go and throw yourself at the problem because it's hurting someone you care about, and you're probably thinking that if you can just find the right combination of words and actions, you'll be able to stop it from hurting him. But-- that doesn't really apply to loss. It doesn't really apply to grief. You can't give him back his lost brothers. You can just be there, so he can see that even if he feels devastated, he's not alone."

Being compared to Bail Organa was no insult; Maul thought Bail and Obi-Wan tended to be more alike, but put in that perspective, he could see exactly what Queen Breha meant about him falling into that line of thought that had gotten Bail into trouble in the past. And, too, he could appreciate why Bail tended to.

It was awful, feeling helpless like this.

"Thank you," he finally said, appreciating the advice even if it left him no closer to a solution that might not exist in the first place.

"You're welcome." She pressed her mouth into a rueful line again. "Be safe, and if you can, update me later on how all of you are."

"I will." Maul signed off with her, then took a deep breath and let it out.

The cloud of steam from it lingered a moment, then dissipated; he wondered, as he looked at his reflection in the now-blank comm panel, who it really was looking back at him.

"And so, Adao persisted.

"He had a kingdom to run, but he kept returning to Etah's side. Often, there weren't any words passed between them; they just walked together, Etah leaving behind ashy feathers to dissipate in the
wind, Adao's hot footprints cracking stone underfoot. They walked the shores side-by-side, and
when they did talk, it wasn't always about survival, or philosophy, or their common and uncommon
history. Sometimes they spoke of the mortals who walked the realm between theirs, with their fragile,
short lives.

"Sometimes, they even started to grasp the future.

"'They're brilliant, but so fleeting,' Etah said, one day, as the wind and rain lashed them, as it ran over
his heavy clay shell and dripped off of his ragged feathers. 'They burrow into the earth, but never so
deep as to reach your realm; they turn their eyes skyward, but can't get high enough to touch ours.
Yet still, they look.'"

Adao had been brought up in a realm which viewed mortals as little more than pawns in a war, but
through Etah's eyes, he started to see them differently. 'They don't live long enough to reach,' he
rumbled, but despite the words, it wasn't an insult.

"'All the more beautiful that they try anyway.'

"It was strange to hear his former enemy speak so wistfully about mortals. It made Adao wonder if
Etah didn't envy their ability to die easily, as well as strive beyond their scope. But he didn't say that.
To hear anything that wasn't despair from Etah was, he thought, a step in the right direction. It was
enough to give Adao hope."

The GalTech mission had been simple; it wasn't lightweight, but it suited the squad perfectly.
Everything happened exactly as it was supposed to; everyone performed exactly as they had been
trained to, including Maul. He hadn't realized how much he had needed an uncomplicated victory
until they were all back safely aboard the Nest and gone, leaving behind a destroyed foundry with no
civilian casualties and no injuries on their side. Before they had even taken off, Brody had sent the
information ransacked from the office computers to the 332nd so that Croft's men could break it open
and use it as needed.

It was an undeniable success. Maul wished that they could have held onto it longer than they got to.

He hadn't known where the 212th would be deployed after their furlough on Radnor; the trip from
there to Shiffrin had been just shy of three days in hyperspace, accounting for tricky navigation, and
for security reasons, the Blackbirds had maintained radio silence until after the mission was
successful. The mission itself had taken another two; one for recon, double-checking the previous
intelligence, and then one to make it happen.

It had been a good week; there were some issues, like the lack of bunks, and a little bit of stir-
craziness amongst the Blackbirds given their lack of entertainment and amenities, and Tango had to
be pried out of the pilot's seat because he was reluctant to let anyone else fly the ship, but no one
fought. Mostly, they ate their leftovers and talked, and when they got bored with talking, they slept
or they helped Castle plan the courier's modification process, occasionally descending into flights of
fancy. Like a pool for Misty. Or a hot tub for everyone.

It was after breaking radio silence to send their report to Croft's people, that Obi-Wan had called and
told Maul about Orto Plutonia.
It was just after leaving Shifrin that Maul told Shiv.

Now, wandering back to help the others work on their courier, Queen Breha's words echoed in his mind; she was right, insofar as he couldn't replace Shiv's lost brothers. But that didn't take away his desire to do something. Their leftovers were long gone, so he couldn't offer any decent food to speak of, and General Ti's assessment had been scheduled to take place on Pastil, as she accompanied a new group of troops to drop off at the listening post there, which curtailed how much time there was to offer anything else.

"How much of this work can be done en route?" Maul asked Castle, who had finished installing the new refrigeration unit and was in the process of turning the back cargo hold into a medbay.

Castle paused a moment and pushed his welding goggles up to nest in his hair. "After this part, probably most of it," he said, shrugging. "Installing tables and bunks is mostly down to bolts, and they're all modular, so they're pretty easy. It's when you've gotta cut into things that you don't wanna be flying. What d'you got in mind, Lieu?"

Maul wasn't wholly sure; the thought had occurred, though, that maybe if they could steal some time, they could offer Shiv something. "I want to take him somewhere," he said, after a moment; he didn't need to clarify who he was talking about. "I don't know where, but somewhere he can-- I suppose rest. Or have space to think."

Castle looked confused, but not unwilling. "Well, as long as I get done with the cutting and welding, we can do the rest of this in hyperspace just fine."

"Thank you," Maul said, then went to go and see if he could figure out where they could go.

"Slowly -- over the course of months, the change of seasons -- it seemed Etah was less invested in finding an ending for himself. Adao was careful not to push, but he kept coming back; even after rumbles started in his own kingdom about his constant vanishing, he couldn't make himself stay away. He started resenting the weight of the crown he wore; when he was busy listening to the petitions of angry Maelbi, wanting to take the war to the Diathim now that Etah had so weakened them, he secretly harbored a longing to return to the shoreline and that realm where neither of them reigned. He turned down those petitions for more war, of course. The more time that he spent with his former enemy, the more he wondered what the point of all of it even was.

"But it was Etah who brought it up first. One day, as they huddled together in the late winter's bluster, Etah leaning against Adao's shoulder, they found themselves speaking of their respective legacies. Etah, of course, knew his already: Butcherer. Murderer. Traitor. Adao didn't try to protest any of that, though he did point out that Etah had been trying to help when they started. Then Adao asked, 'If you could have anything, putting aside your mistakes, what would it be?'

"Etah thought about it, then he said, 'I would settle, I think, for just-- feeling I have done all right. I don't know what peace looks like, I don't think I can anymore. But having done well. I think I would settle for that.'"

Rabbit broke in there, voice soft, before Tango could continue: "Adao could hear all of the things he wasn't saying. 'Uncertainty again,' he answered, carefully. 'Which of us can say what will happen?"
"But Etah shook his head," Misty added, as he scrubbed the deck where old shelving had been, smiling and not looking up to see Tango's jawdropped expression as he quoted the part of the story Tango had told them the last night they spent on Bravo-984. "And his great wings twitched before settling again. 'A different sort of peace,' he said. 'We are soldiers, allies who cleave together in the face of odds. What would we be if there was no war?'"

By now, Tango's eyes had welled up and he swallowed; he sounded unsteady as he said, "I wasn't even sure you guys were listening to that, let alone that you'd remember it."

Misty smiled even wider, shaking his head, but continued telling Tango's story. "'What are you asking? Whether there should be a balance of forces?' Adao asked."

It was Rabbit who answered, voice thick, "'If our species are to survive, it would have to be,' Etah said, but then he said something he wasn't sure he had ever put words to before. 'I mean-- what would our world look like if I no longer had to be a soldier, and you no longer wished to be king? It's impossible. And I can't even grasp it, not really..."

"'But I wonder sometimes.'"

Behind them, drilling bolt holes for the new bunks, Shiv paused for a moment before getting back to work.

Priority was set on finishing the welding and getting everything aboard; once that was done, Maul took Tally aside and asked if he still had the credit chip Bail had given him. Tally had seemed confused by the question, like Castle had been earlier, but he did still have the chip and dug it out of his locker without hesitation to hand over to Maul.

Through all of the work and planning, Shiv had been silent. He'd answer questions if asked directly, but his answers were short and his posture was so clearly and undeniably closed off that no one pushed any further than that; he only took breaks to drink water or eat a ration bar, then went back to it. It ached to see him like that; it ached to be close by him, too, feeling the-- the desolation surrounding him like a shield.

Maul had no idea if his plan would do any good. He had been with Obi-Wan when Obi-Wan had lost friends, fellow Jedi, but it had seemed that his company was wanted after that, even if he felt nothing about the losses himself. It had been enough that he cared for Obi-Wan, even if he didn't share the grief. By contrast, it seemed Shiv didn't want any kind of presence nearby, and that left Maul at quite a loss. He wasn't one to push; he couldn't see what good it would accomplish, trying to crack that containment field, trying to force some outward expression of that grief.

Still, he meant to do something, even if it was with no expectation that it would fix anything.

He quietly had Tango set course for Bothawui. Given the bunks were modular, it had taken only two hours to get them installed during the flight; once they were finished, Shiv had asked Tally for a couple sleep tabs and promptly put his back to the rest of the new bunkroom in his own chosen space to sleep.
"What are you up to?" Tally asked, as Maul helped him install the power station for the FX-3 that Tally had finally agreed to take with them, since they had a few hours before they could backtrack to Bothawui. The droid was currently shut down, and Maul wouldn't have been surprised if it stayed that way for a long time, but Tally seemed grudgingly willing to have it there in case his options were limited, though he said he planned on teaching the rest of the squad as much as he could about first aid and triage so he'd have extra flesh-and-blood hands if he needed them.

"I'm not even sure," Maul answered, honestly, because he wasn't. Decent food and more time planetside on some world not currently an active battlefield seemed ridiculously inadequate, but it was all he had. "I want--" he started, but then faltered, not sure how to explain it.

Tally just raised an eyebrow at him, waiting, but eventually Maul had to shake his head, going back to his wiring and frustrated with himself for not being able to just put all of it into words.

Some languages took longer to learn than others.

"It changed something, those words," Tango's voice said, issuing forth from the datapad that the Blackbirds were clustered around, while Tango himself piloted the courier. "Adao resisted them; he had been aiming for his crown for as long as he could remember. But they never left him; like a seed had been planted in barren ground, it took root and dug deep. He realized that even though he had never known Etah as anything but a soldier, he would not be sorry if his friend never had to go to war again.

"For himself, he kept splitting his time between his own realm and the mortal one, and longing for the latter whenever he was attending to the former. His constant leaving didn't go unnoticed. And Adao was hardly the only ambitious Maelbus.

"But when he had rebuilt his kingdom in his own image, it had been with grand ideas of making it more powerful than ever, but in reality, the same old fault lines still ground against one another and the same old prejudices burned in their deep, fathomless canyons. He had all of the power he rose to take, and yet, in the end, he still found himself powerless against those things that had persisted from before his memory and which resisted any of his attempts to change them during it."

Brody paused the recording for a moment, even though that provoked some dirty looks. "I think I should see if he'll record the first part of the story. I mean, the part he told when we were going through Big Murder Mountain."

"Why?" Rabbit asked; he was currently wrapped up in the colorful blanket that Maul had brought from the Negotiator, tucked into one of their newly salvaged padded chairs around their newly salvaged briefing table, which was across the corridor from the bunk room. It was late, deep into ship's night, and a few of the Blackbirds had already taken to their new bunks; those left were those who wanted to catch up on the story Tango had been telling.

Brody seemed to think about it for awhile, as they listened to their courier -- nearly now their new home -- while she ran through hyperspace on the Manda Merchant Route towards Kothlis, having left the merchant trading station that orbited Bothawui behind an hour ago. Then he said, "It's a good
story. I just think others should be able to hear it, too."

Tally, who had been on the edge of dozing before the story was paused, looking up from where his head had been bent over his crossed arms and eyed Brody before nodding. "I think so, too. If Tango agrees, I mean."

Brody gave a nod back, then unpause the playback.

"It could be little wonder that he found his hope somewhere else," Tango's voice said, "or embodied in someone else. For all of his ambition and planning, and for all of the things he couldn't change despite it, there was one thing he had managed to do. It was, in the grand scheme, a small thing. What was one life, compared to the eternity of their respective realms? What good could happen, from keeping one single Diathim from landing on his own sword? To keep one spark alight in a whole universe, when it might have gone out?

"Yet, when Etah said, after so many months of walking and talking, 'Some days, I still think of it. Of ending it. But-- not all days. Not even most days. Now, instead, I look forward to seeing you,' Adao knew that it was everything."

When they did finally turn in, after Rabbit went to harangue Tango into giving up the pilot's seat, no one was surprised to find Maul asleep with his back against the base of Shiv's bunk, sitting vigil. Tally just took the blanket Rabbit had borrowed, tossed it over their sleeping lieutenant, and left him be.

"--and in other news today, Senator Bail Organa, member of the Republic Senate's Security Committee, has just brought forth a rider, co-sponsored by Senator Riyo Chuchi of Pantora, to be attached to a bill authorizing an increase in budget for senate security forces. Should this rider survive a potential line-item veto by the Chancellor or the majority of the Senate, it will authorize intelligence units serving in the Grand Army to do a secondary assessment on all non-Republic military reconnaissance to ensure that all systems petitioning for a Grand Army base minimize any risks to Republic troops stationed there. Several senators are protesting that the measure is heavy-handed and unnecessary--"

"Why?" Shiv asked, at length, face inscrutable as he looked out across the plains.

The grasslands of the southern continent of Kothlis stretched out in the hazy daylight; the air was cooler than not, but the sunlight still felt warm. When the wind blew, it bent the tall stalks of grass in waves, rolling over and over like an ocean; gold flashed to pale, then righted back to gold again. The ground rolled similarly, gentle hills none too tall, and behind them, the courier with her low profile didn't look terribly out of place.

The rest of the Blackbirds were quiet as they dug into the supplies Maul had bought them using Bail's unmarked credit chip at the trading station; under other circumstances, they likely would have
been whooping about the fresh fruit and bread and high-end meal packs, about the assortment of caf pods and soda bottles and juice jugs, but not here. Not today. Instead, they moved quietly and spoke softly, their voices lost to the sound of the grass rustling in the wind.

"I can't give them back to you," Maul said, finally, feeling restless and uncomfortable. "I can't-- can't change the circumstances, or even understand the loss, but I can give you this. I can't give you them, but I can give you this."

Shiv's bottom lip twitched once and he worked his jaw. He didn't speak for a long time, but when he did, the bewildered pain bled into the words. "It wasn't even the enemy, Lieu. They just died because of bad recon. That's it. Forty men, because the Pantorans didn't do a thorough enough job scouting and the natives didn't know any better."

Maul knew that Shiv would have been there, if not for the Blackbirds. And if he had been, he likely would have been one of that forty. A body under the snow and ice, one more lost to a war he had been bred and raised for, but had never asked for.

Just the thought of it was enough to grab Maul by the throat and squeeze, but all he could say was, "I know."

Shiv didn't seem to need any more than that, though. He only nodded, eyes shining with unshed tears, and then said, "I'm-- gonna take a walk, I think. But I'll be back."

"I'll be here waiting," Maul answered.

And, he was.
This chapter of Blackbirds was mostly written by the delightful B_Radley (absent the part in the beginning), who worked hella hard on it. So, please head on over here to read about Shaak Ti's assessment of the squad, and leave feedback! And I'll see you over here next week (I hope) for the not-at-all-Halloween-themed episode(s) of Blackbirds. XD
"Well, the way I see it is this. Since somebody wrecked my carefully cultivated disguise," and there, General Croft paused for a long, theatrical moment as he stroked the beginnings of a beard that was decidedly less impressive than his previous, "that somebody is just gonna have to take my place on this particular mission."

Raze looked at the Jedi in his less-hairy hologram form, hovering above their briefing/dining table, and swallowed. "In all fairness, sir, I didn't know you'd have to shave it off."

Still, it didn't seem Croft was actually mad about it. Which was good, Raze didn't like it when people were angry with him. It had happened a lot when he was little; when the other cadets were learning their letters, he would be doodling spaceships on his datapad, and then he'd get in trouble. Or they would have to sit still and watch an instruction vid and he'd drift off into daydreams about more interesting things, and then get yelled at. There were a bunch of times when he had to go to the closest medbay and get scanned, but eventually they must have decided he wasn't bad enough to get decommissioned, so they just kept telling him to pay attention, stop fidgeting, stuff like that. And that did get easier as he got older, even if not as easy as it was these days.

Maul was listening in with arms crossed, and Raze knew if Croft actually did get mean, Maul would step in. But all Croft did was smirk, then shake his head with a chuckle. "Yeah, I figured. I know the brat that gave you that recipe. Still, point stands, gentlemen; y'all get to be my eyes, ears and hands this go-round."

Brody broke out into a coughing fit where the words 'depends on where you want us to put them' were clearly audible. Smarty promptly gave him a shove in the shoulder.

"What do you need, General?" Maul asked, raising his voice above the brief, not-serious scuffle that were clearly audible. Smarty promptly gave him a shove in the shoulder.

"A good, ole fashioned meeting with a spy, deep in Seppie territory. Classical black ops, might even be fun." Croft shrugged, then said, more seriously, "What you're pickin' up is a Separatist-engineered data crystal reader. The way theirs have been manufactured, we can't stick 'em in our consoles or they self-destruct. So, we need their tech to read the crystals we've captured. That's what you're after." A beat. "If you happen to pick me up a bottle of Sonarian Spirit Rum while you're there, though, I'll zero out what Raze there owes me for the beard and the hair," he added, with a tongue-in-cheek grin.

"With what currency?" Tally asked, skeptical, though not sharply so.

"Don't worry about that. I've got a package assembled for pickup; grab that from the supply depot, and it'll have CIS coded chips and everything else you'll probably need on this mission." Croft
leaned forward and punched something into the console. "Sending the mission specs now. Happy hunting, Blackbirds."

"Same to you, General," Shiv answered, before they signed off.

Smarty, now apparently done with scuffling with Brody, was already tapping into the transmitted mission brief. The glow had barely dissipated before he said, voice sounding almost gleeful, "Oh, shit, we're going to have to draw straws for who gets to go out on this one."

"Why?" Husker asked, eyebrows furrowing.

"Because it looks like it's going to be fun," Smarty said, sending the brief to the holo generator.

He was right, too.

"This is a terrible idea!" Tango declared, arms crossed, as he looked at the unopened crate in the middle of the Nest's main corridor. "Any planet named Darknell can only be cursed, and the Festival of the Flood? Really?!!"

It had been a long time since Tango got extra superstitious about something, but Raze wasn't surprised this was what set him off. Going into deep Separatist territory to a world with a history like Darknell's would set anyone off. And the name really was kinda foreboding. But for Raze's part, he wasn't worried and when Smarty went over the mission specs with them, he was actually excited to get in on it.

It called for three people; one to make contact, two to act as protection and an extraction team if the meeting went cross-eyed on 'em. Raze was already volunteered by General Croft, and Maul was almost automatically included, which left just one more person to pick for the ground team. The rest of 'em would stay on the Nest, which had received a slapdash 'distressed' paint job at the supply depot by the EVA maintenance 'bots in order to make her look older and weaker and more civilian than she was, much to Tango's dismay.

(Croft really had his shit together; Raze thought that they'd probably do good working with him, even if they were still technically Kenobi's troops.)

"According to the inventory, it contains 'appearance enhancement' and 'local costume' as well as some hardware and CIS credits," Smarty said, reading the datapad he'd used to scan the barcode with.

Tango wasn't ready to let it go, though. "Guys. Darknell. Dark. Knell. Dark as in dark, and knell as in the tolling of a kriffing funeral bell!!"

"We know, Tango. It's still a mission and we're still going to do it," Tally sighed, sounding kind of exasperated.

Raze got bored waiting to see what was in the crate; he just knelt and flipped the latches on the sides and opened it up. Inside were more boxes, each labelled in aurebesh. Just because no one told him he couldn't, he opened the first box of 'appearance enhancement' and found--
"OH! Makeup!"

"Eh?" That had Husker sidling over, eying the box Raze had opened.

Inside were pallets of makeup and facepaints and brushes to apply it with. A whole big assortment, too. Raze set that aside and opened the next one to find a big set of pencils in every color, some of 'em even glittry, and a box under that had nail polishes like the ones he'd used to make his earrings. And finally, in the last box, there were quick-wash bleaches and dyes, the dyes in all kinds of colors and a permanent one in basic black. "This is so cool," Raze breathed out, just looking at all the things he could craft a festival persona out of.

"I wanna go," Smarty said, immediately, as he knelt on the other side of the crate and started pulling out the 'costume' boxes.

"Me too," Rabbit and Rancor added in unison; they immediately fell into a round of 'jinx!' which neither of them won.

"I want no part of this," Tango said, sounding disgusted. "You guys are going to bring home a ghost or something, I just know it. I mean, the planet had a Sith running it once!"

At that, the entire group went silent and all eleven of them looked at Maul, who was leaning against one of the lockers looking amused. He raised a brow at Tango, chewing on a grin. "You were saying?"

"Uh--" Tango said, flushing red all the way to the roots of his hair. "--point made. But I still don't want to go."

He was the only one, it turned out, who didn't. Everyone else was varying degrees of interested in the prospect. But since they didn't have any straws, Maul just told everyone but Raze and Tango to pick a number and whoever got the closest to the one he was thinking of won.


"Rabbit," Maul said, having just been watching them as they tossed out numbers. "Rabbit's was closest."

Rabbit punched the air at that, making Raze grin. "Yes!"

"What number were you thinking of?" Tally asked their Lieu, looking kind of amused.

"Six hundred and twenty-one," Maul answered; eying over the supplies thoughtfully.

Smarty made a face, probably 'cause he didn't get to go, but he was reading the labels on the costumes and then started laughing. "Hey. There's a Sith Lord costume in here!" he said, pushing the other boxes out of the way so he could open that one. The whole group perked up at that and clustered around, as he opened it up. He started taking the clothes out, laying them out in the aisle--

--and Maul exploded. "That is not what a Sith Lord wears!"
It was a fairly long way to Darkknell -- days in hyperspace -- and it was a good chance to design a neat festival look. The Festival of the Flood supposedly was invented to honor the spirits of those killed in a huge flood that happened on Darkknell before the Ruusan Reformation, when the planet was under Sith control, but most people these days honestly thought that the Sith were halfway media invention and really, to Raze, it seemed like it was more just everyone taking the chance to dress up spooky and have fun. Which sounded great to him.

It felt like things had settled into more permanence after that assessment, too; after General Ti added her voice to the few others that decided they were capable of doing what they were supposed to. Raze didn't really get why everyone made such a big deal about it, except maybe because their Lieu used to fight for the other side, but he was glad they could just do what they were put together for. And honestly, he thought all of the worry was silly, 'cause Maul had all but crawled over broken glass to prove himself and it wasn't fair to make him keep proving it.

Speaking of the zabrak, Raze was having a ton of fun watching the squad trying to wheedle him into wearing the 'Sith Lord' costume. Because none of them had ever seen Maul explode in offense over something, so it was actually kind of hilarious, how stuck-up he was being about it. Raze was pretty sure they were poking him now just to see his reactions.

"It's not meant to be an accurate representation," Smarty said, passing by where Maul was going over their mission specs yet again. Raze thought Maul was probably kind of stir-crazy, because he'd read it five times already and had also taken panels off his legs twice to check them and play with the tensioners on his joints. "It's meant to be what popular culture thinks a Sith Lord should dress like," Smarty added.

"I am not wearing leather pants and a shirt made of nothing but chains!" Maul shot back, but Raze could hear the give in his voice. 'Cause frankly, when Maul planted his feet for real, there was none, there was no bend, but Raze could hear it there, which meant yeah, probably he would give in and wear it, though maybe with modifications.

"Well, maybe not the shirt," Tally said, sitting close by calibrating medical gear that he, Maul and Castle had already repaired mechanically and adding them to the few new ones they had picked up on Pastil. "But what's wrong with leather pants?"

"They're completely impractical in combat," Maul answered, actually setting his datapad aside to cross his arms, smoldering. "Especially tight ones."

The reason, Raze thought, that Maul was going to give in was the quiet sergeant sitting at the other end of the table. Because Maul's little explosive rant about the outfit had provoked the first smile off of Shiv that Raze had seen since he'd been told what happened on Orto Plutonia. And even though Raze wasn't sure either Shiv or Maul was aware of it, they were playing to one another. Maul would stubbornly refuse to be kitted up ("Like a smokin' hot tart," Tally had said, smirking), and Shiv would end up grinning a little and shaking his head, and Maul would notice it -- 'cause Maul had been watching Shiv a lot with that worried look in his eyes -- and then would kind of rant a little more about it, and then rinse and repeat. And each time the repeat came around, there was more and more of that tone, that one that said Maul was gonna fold.

In the meantime, Raze had assembled his own outfit and was testing out different kinds of makeup. He knew kinda the look he wanted, and he hoped Maul would help him with it, 'cause the Lieu's markings were really pretty and Raze thought he couldn't go too far wrong asking for something like them, maybe not exactly the same, but enough to match in theme, if not in species.
"You do know that the chain-- uh, shirt, I guess, is actually an anti-targeting array?" Smarty asked, as he made himself a cup of caf and then sprawled in another seat. "I mean, it wouldn't stop a marksman locking on, but it'd stop anyone with a blaster incorporating an auto-targeting laser."

Tally was shaking his head. "He can't wear that alone. And it probably would look kind of silly over a shirt."

"Why not?" Smarty frowned, face going more serious.

It was Maul who answered, on the quieter side, "Scars. They would be visible, and would probably ruin whatever, ah-- result that the shirt is supposed to have."

Raze never really forgot that their Lieu was half cybernetics -- even if he wanted to, Big Murder Mountain would have forever branded it into his awareness -- but he didn't really give it much thought in the day-to-day, either. Just 'cause Maul didn't seem to let it slow him down. But Raze hadn't really ever thought about what kind of scars a lightsaber would leave on a person, either, and when he started to, it made his chest hurt. "I can wear it," he volunteered, just because it seemed like a good idea and so he could think about something other than pain. "I mean, I don't think I'm very Sith Lordly, but it's all costume and pretend anyway."

"Lord Raze." Smarty grinned at that, and even better, so did Shiv.

"Every bit as legitimate as Lord Maul," Maul added, with a dry tone, though there was something in his voice Raze couldn't identify. "You're welcome to it, Raze, if that's what you want."

Raze stood up and struck a pose, nodding smartly, then went to go make sure he could actually fit into it.

So, that was how Raze got to be a Sith Lord.

The outfit fit, except the pants were tighter than he thought they would be. He had to shimmy pretty good to get into them, and they hugged his legs all the way down to his boots and kept trying to ride lower, but since he was going to be wearing a cloak anyway, it probably didn't matter too much if his ass-crack was showing. The chain-- kinda-shirt-thing was badass, once it was on.

All the while, teräs käsi lessons were still going on. There was a decent section of corridor where it was open enough to spar, and Maul was pretty serious about all of them learning. But sparring wasn't all that went into the discipline; nowadays, Maul would also teach them more about meditation and building a wall in their minds to keep telepaths out. It was all really metaphysical, but Raze was good at imagining things, so he got it pretty quick and then kept practicing it. Supposedly, after awhile, the wall would always be there and he wouldn't even need to think about it being there unless someone tried to get around it. He wasn't sure how they would test their new learning, but he was sure Maul would figure something out.

He was sitting to the side of the corridor sketching on a datapad -- not as good as physical stuff, like paints or even pens on whatever surface, but good enough -- after finishing up one of those sparring lessons, trying to work out an idea for makeup when Smarty looked over his shoulder. "Wow, that's pretty neat."
"Yeah?" Raze didn't think he pulled off the natural camo look as well as Maul did, but he still thought it was pretty cool anyway. And badass. Which went without saying. "Think it'd be okay? I mean, I know zabraks usually have meanings behind their tattoos, and I'm not a zabrak, but since those are markings instead..."

"You can ask Maul," Smarty said, with a shrug. "He'd be able to tell you if it's okay or not to wear marks like his."

Maul's hearing was good enough that he popped his head out of the briefing room slash kitchenette slash hangout area when he heard his name. "Did someone need something?"

"Raze wants to make sure he's not appropriating your culture," Smarty said, which made Raze blink, because he hadn't actually been thinking those words, but he supposed they kind of made sense.

Maul also blinked at that, one brow going way up. "--all right?"

Feeling a little like he had a spotlight on him, Raze got up and took his drawing over. "I wanted to do my costume makeup to kind of match you," he said, feeling sheepish saying it, even as he offered the datapad over for inspection.

Maul stepped out all the way and took it, tilting his head at it, a little grin tugging at the corners of his mouth at Raze's kind-of-self-portrait. Which actually made Raze blush some. "Ah-- I don't actually have a culture to-- to appropriate?" he answered, as he looked over the drawing. "Well, I suppose that the Nightbrothers have one, but I've never been a part of it. But why would you want to--?" he gestured towards his own face with his free hand.

"Well, I figured that clones are on the news, and our facial structures are really kind of similar across the board? But the black marks," Raze said, taking the datapad back and turning on the color layers instead of just the outline, and offering it back, "make it a lot harder to tell that I'm a clone unless someone's really familiar with us and up close. And I figured we could come up with something for Rabbit, too. So, we'd all match, and Rabbit and I wouldn't look too much like a couple Republic troopers in CIS space. And if we all match, people will probably think you're a regular, Iridonian zabrak in makeup, too."

Smarty looked like he was about to start asking a thousand questions, especially when Maul said Nightbrothers, but he held himself back. Maul just looked kind of bemused, but not in any angry way. "Speaking for myself, I don't mind," he said, looking over the drawing before handing the datapad back to Raze. "And breaking up the outline of your face is a good idea, too."

"I mean, if it's a family thing--"

Maul looked even more bemused, but now that Raze was thinking about it, he didn't want to do something offensive or wrong. But Maul shook his head, smiling some. "I wouldn't know. All I know for certain is that I've always had my markings, that no one's ever tried to-- read them or glean anything of them beyond my genetic origins and that even if it is somehow related to family, I'd say you qualify."

He disappeared back into the briefing room slash kitchenette slash hangout area (which they really needed to come up with a better name for) and Raze felt like his whole chest was glowing. "...oh."
Getting into CIS space wasn't that hard with the right transponder signals. Which they had, thanks to General Croft. The CIS automated a lot of their relays and buoys, and a clean transponder signal that wasn't red-listed was as good as gold, because it was hard to get hold of them, which was why the codes they did manage to get were reserved for the black ops, because if they used the trick too many times, then the Seppies might catch on and change things up. And the BR-23 had been around long enough for a lot of them to have been put into civilian use, so even the ship wouldn't raise eyebrows.

Raze had to admit, Darkknell did look kind of creepy. All of the planet's stars were dying, so even though there were three of them keeping the surface in a perpetual state of cool-but-not-cold, the lack of light meant that Darkknell, even in what passed for daylight, still seemed more like night.

It was Smarty, who could mimic accents okay thanks to his extensive study, who requested their clearance to land for the Festival. Supposedly, they were a legitimate cargo hauling business out of Akiva, and were there for trade and merry-making. Since there were a lot of people from the Outer Rim coming to Darkknell for the celebration, no one even thought twice about giving them permission to land. After Smarty was done haggling, he'd explained that Darkknell didn't really have any major strategic importance to anyone anyway, so that made it easier.

It was while they were in the holding pattern for landing that Raze got all his makeup on, which took longer because he had to do his whole chest, and helped Rabbit with his; it took about two hours. Rabbit and Maul were both just dressed in black, with long black coats and only a few highlights, which made them less flashy than Raze's kinda ostentatious garb, though Raze had managed to talk Maul into letting him add some sparkle to his face. And Castle even got a section of metal pipe left over from their refurbishing and had spent the last day polishing it up and adding doodads and a belthook, so Raze looked like he had a lightsaber on him. (Maul, on the other hand, had the real thing, though he'd split the staff into two and had both halves hooked on his belt towards the backs of his hips, where his coat would hide them.)

Any which way, it made Raze feel incredibly cool. He also had General Ti's practice knife in his boot and a blaster back under his cloak, so he was not only cool, but also lethal.

"If you have to leave the landing platform for any reason, make sure you stay covered up. And let us know." Maul tapped his ear, where he was wearing the ear-cuff radio that had originally been with the 'Sith Lord' outfit, a pretty gold thing with red fake gems inset into it. Raze and Rabbit both had bead radios, which didn't have the same range, so it made sense for the Lieu to have the stronger one, so he could relay stuff back and forth if needed.

"I'll be damned if I set foot off of this ship." Tango was even more keyed up since they landed, and muttered something about wishing he knew how to ward the Nest against ghosts and restless, pissed off spirits. " Literally."

"We will," Shiv said; he was still kind of subdued, but at the sight of the three of them all decked out in their costumes and makeup, his face had gone softer and he smiled, clearly amused by 'em. He'd also asked to take a holo of them, just for posterity, and everyone agreed. Raze took that as a good sign. "Be safe out there; if you need overwhelming firepower, let us know. We'll be there."

"We will." Maul rolled his shoulders in his long coat, looking a little reluctant to leave. Though, Raze thought that was probably more to do with him worrying about them than because he was worried about the mission. "We'll bring back dinner or something, if we can."

Tango's grumbling was cut off by Smarty and Rancor both calling requests out. Maul rolled his eyes, but he nodded back at those before turning to leave.

"Good hunting, guys. And have fun," Tally said, manning the ramp, which was currently decorated
The tapcaf where they were supposed to meet their contact was in the city. They'd gotten a taxi from the port and headed in, and Raze and Rabbit both riffed off of each other about fictional cargos they'd hauled and how they were brothers but this was the first time they'd come to Darkknell. The cabbie wasn't actually interested in 'em at all, and when everyone got out, it was easy to see why.

Everyone was dressed in that kind of ostentatious, Sithly garb. Black cloaks and gold chains everywhere. And fake lightsabers. At least, Raze thought they were probably fake. Maul took one look at the crowd and snorted, so full of scorn that Raze had to swallow down a giggle.

The only thing that set them apart was the makeup. More'n one person stopped to look at that, and Raze tipped his chin up in a properly Lordly manner. The streets were busy, and there were stalls selling things everywhere; the smell of roasted meat made his stomach rumble and he had to keep reminding himself that they were on a mission and if they pulled it off properly, then there would be time to sample the local cuisine.

It really was a spooky kind of atmosphere. Especially with the dim, almost twilight and the stalls of vendors selling things. Rabbit seemed awed by everything, and tripped once or twice over his own feet because he was busy staring wide-eyed at things. Maul just seemed kind of vaguely uncomfortable, and very serious, scanning the crowd constantly. Raze did the same, except he couldn't help but smile at people and especially kids when they stopped and looked up at his makeup and 'ooh'd' at it. Which probably wasn't very Sithly of him, but he liked when they smiled back.

It made him think, anyway. The kids were just kids, even though they were in Separatist space. Not big, hulking enemy droids, or angry people revolting against the Republic, or slimy rich people financing the droid army. Just-- normal children, of a variety of species, who were having fun in the spooky atmosphere. The fact that there were kids around and that the Festival was clearly family friendly took some of the edge off, too, because all the costuming and that would make it harder to see an ambush coming and if kids were around, it was maybe less likely to happen.

The tapcaf was bustling, when they got there, after weaving through crowds and occasionally tugging Rabbit away from a stall with some kind of food or souvenir.

"They should be in the back booth, next to the kitchen," Maul murmured, next to Raze's ear. Raze barely managed to resist the urge to turn around and just burrow against the zabrak, because he was so warm, and Raze was definitely not, but he nodded instead and started back there.

There were two booths, but one was occupied by a whole giant family of costumed people. The other one only had one person, so Raze made his way there and slid into the booth across from their contact, who looked up from his plate--

--except, he only glanced at Raze before he did a serious whiplash doubletake at Maul.
"Jagannath?!" he asked, pale green eyes gone wide.
Raze opened his mouth to say something, because that wasn't actually Maul's agreed-upon pseudonym for this mission, but before he did, he looked up at his Lieu, who-- was every bit as shocked. "Eogan," Maul said, kind of pole-axed. When Raze scooted over a little, Maul sank into the seat next to him.

"Oh, *kriff*," Eogan breathed out, kind of like he didn't know whether he wanted to laugh or cry. "I, uh-- wow."

"The cargo?" Maul asked, shaking off his surprise enough to get down to business. "We only have a six hour landing permit."

That wasn't true, but it was part of the signal to verify that they were who they claimed to be. Though Raze thought probably Eogan's and Maul's reactions to each other did that well enough. He thought there was a hell of a story behind that; Maul didn't talk much about his past except sometimes he'd tell a story, but he had never mentioned anyone named Eogan before. Or why he was being called Jagannath.

"Oh, uh. Yeah." Eogan shook his head and when he noticed Rabbit hovering and eying his plate, he pushed the plate across the table towards him. "It's a small shipment, but since you were already here for the Festival..." Even as Rabbit tore into his plate, he dropped his voice and leaned forward and said, "I might need your help, though--"

At exactly that moment, a hush fell over the entire tapcaf. Raze stiffened in his seat; Maul did the same. Rabbit stole one more fried strip of meat then turned to look. Eogan, on the other hand, seemed to shrink in his seat and hunch his head into the collar of his jacket.

And a mechanical voice said, "This establishment is temporarily sealed by CIS investigators. Please don't attempt to leave. Remain calm, and this will be over quickly. Have identification ready."

People started taking again, though more quietly, and Eogan finished with a wince and a whispered, "--I think I might have been followed."

Chapter End Notes

Anyone's who's read Lockdown will recognize Eogan (actually based on a real name and pronounced like Owen), but even if you haven't, this should still be readable. XD Happy Halloween. Shenanigans ahoy.
The Darkknell Data Crystal Caper, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Wherein Eogan comes clean about why he's there, he and Maul have a lot of complicated baggage to sort through, Raze continues to be adorable and Rabbit gets to show off his stuff. (Oh, and chaos ensues. Of course.)

Chapter Notes

Before we get into the second part of the episode; I've been trying pretty hard to post once a week on something of a self-imposed deadline and have been now for months. Did okay at it, too! But-- I'm finding it harder and harder to hold onto that. The past few weeks especially have been a struggle, both writing-wise and mental health wise. So, from here, I'm going to do away with said self-imposed deadline. I'll still try to be pretty regular about it, I know folks are reading this story and presumably mostly everyone is still enjoying it, but I can't make too many promises. Thanks for sticking with me. <3 You guys are the reason I haven't quit, even when the road gets harder, and I appreciate you so much.

"Kitchen?" Raze asked, grinning a little bit. Which Rabbit thought was maybe crazy, given circumstances, but he was too busy leaning over the booth and finishing the plate of really good sizzle-strips before they had to make a break for it, barely bothering to chew. The new guy, Eogan, gave him a bemused glance and he shrugged back, sheepishly.

"Yes. And no civilian casualties," Maul answered, pinning each of them with a look. "On my signal; Raze, take the lead, then Rabbit and Eogan, and I'll bring up the rear. Move fast and try to keep them from seeing your faces."

Raze nodded and got his hands on the hood of his cloak, preparing to flip it up; Eogan pulled the hood of his jacket up over his reddish hair.

Kriff. Rabbit pushed the sadly-not-empty plate away from himself, as they listened to the droids making their way between tables. He wasn't sure what they were gonna do if there were CIS droids in the kitchen, too, but he thought probably Raze's anti-targeting array would help.

"Every time I meet you, you're wrecking a kitchen first thing," Eogan grumbled, without explanation, though his already fair face looked even paler than it seemed to be naturally.

Maul huffed back at him, then surreptitiously but sharply pointed at the door. "On three. One-- two--"

"--three," Raze finished, before bolting out of the seat and for the kitchen door. Rabbit was right on his heels as the chaos started behind them; the sound of the droids clamoring for them to halt and remain seated, the sound of tables tipping over. It was quickly swallowed by the cacophony of the kitchen; staff jumped to the sides and cowered, and ahead of him, Raze grabbed a large stock pot to
fling at the droid guarding the back door.

A blaster shot went wide, digging a smoking furrow into the ceiling. "Halt!" the droid cried as the stock pot hit it in the head -- a souped up B-1 with some painted marks and added weapons -- and Rabbit snagged a serving tray to act as a shield, even as Raze managed to jink past it.

Rabbit just barreled right into it with his shield in hand, knocking it down and then kicking its head off, heart pounding and a grin stretching almost ear to ear.

A glance behind him showed Maul and Eogan holding the mostly-closed door; Eogan had a kitchen broom and was poking it through the sliding frame, while Maul was ripping into the door circuitry. When it slammed closed with a decisive thud, breaking the broom handle and locking the droids on the other side, he turned back shouting, "Go!"

That was all the more signal Rabbit needed; he darted out into the perpetual night with the other two on his heels, even as the sound of security sirens started going off.

"There's a subway entrance around the block," Eogan said, breathlessly. "Nasty-smelling place, but a lot less crowded for it."

He sure wasn't kidding about either part of that.

The subway system had probably never actually seen better days. Even trying to peer through the gloom and flickering lights and ignore the stench, Rabbit couldn't for the life of him see any evidence that there was any kind of shining glory in its past. There were only a handful of people down there, none of 'em dressed in costumes, and they didn't seem to care that there were four guys, three of whom glittered in some fashion, darting down the platform and sticking to the shadows.

When a train came shrieking down the line, just as dirty and ill-kempt as the station, the disinterested civilians boarded and no one got off, which left the platform empty when it went on again. From there, Maul took the lead, leaping down onto the tracks and deftly avoiding the electrical one, before turning back to help them down.

The ground between the track ties squelched in a way that made Rabbit's stomach turn, but he figured their Lieu had some idea of what he was doing. He did know Maul had been talking to the rest of the Blackbirds on their way here, because he'd turn and whisper into the collar mic that was paired with the earcuff radio even as they kept moving, but Maul hadn't yet relayed anything back to them, maybe because there just hadn't been time to yet. Though, he'd gone quiet since, probably cut off for being underground.

As bad as the lights were on the platform, though, it was nothing on the blackness of the tunnel.

"I'm glad Tango's not here," Rabbit whispered, and even that echoed, as he clung to Raze with one of his hands and led Eogan with the other. Listening to the distant shriek of a train that sounded ahead of them made him shudder once.

"Tell me about it," Raze whispered back.

"There's a maintenance access ahead, according to schematics; Brody's already sliced into the system
and gave me the code." Maul didn't whisper, but he still spoke especially softly. "He's also been listening in on the security channels; given what he's hearing, all of this is over a stolen ship, and not directly related to our mission."

Behind Rabbit, Eogan cleared his throat, but didn't offer any explanation. Even in the dark, feeling the oppressive, dank, stinky blackness pressing all around him, Rabbit had to roll his eyes.

At least until something ran over his foot in the dark, squeaking, before scurrying away. "--that was a rat. A rat just ran over my frippin' boot."

"You're in a subway, of course it was," Eogan whispered back to him, dismissively, which kinda made Rabbit want to toss him into the muck. "First time in a place like this?"

"Actually, yeah." Rabbit scowled some, as Raze stopped ahead of him. Even just holding hands, Rabbit could feel him shivering and winced a little bit in sympathy, trying to focus on that instead of rats or sewage or whatever other loathsome stuff was hanging around these tunnels. Then there was a dim light from a panel; Maul took a moment to look over it just as the shriek of a train sounded out again, making Rabbit jump half out of his skin. "Uh, Lieu--"

"Relax, it's just stopping at the platform ahead of us," Maul answered, as he punched in what looked like a code. As if he had all the time in the world. Rabbit swallowed and listened as the train left that station, and then the door opened just as the light started reflecting on the tunnel walls.

Maul shoved them in there one after another before darting in behind them, turning and palming the door closed again; everything rumbled around them like an earthquake in progress and the train squealed sharply before coming to a stop again at the platform they'd just left.

Once it was gone, all the was left was the sound of their breathing, until Maul ignited his saber, making all of them jump again. He pointed the blade at Eogan and glared in a manner Rabbit had never seen before; the gold light of the saber seeming to make the gold of his eyes glow just the same.

"Explain," he growled, and even though Rabbit's vision was still messed up, he watched Eogan almost visibly shrink, with his eyes glittering and his broad shoulders hunched.

Eogan swallowed nervously, still gripping Rabbit's hand in a death-grip, before asking with a thready tone, "Where should I start?"

Maul's glare melted into a deep, frustrated sigh out and the tip of his blade dropped. "The ship, Eogan. The ship. Why did you steal a ship?"

Eogan Truax -- now going by the name Red Artagan -- had known he was getting into some shit, playing undercover spy for a Republic he'd never been a part of, and he'd been about as prepared for that shit as one reasonably could be, given circumstances.

But what he hadn't expected was to be confronted with a ghost.

Leaving Cog Hive Seven as it disintegrated, onboard Jabba the Hutt's stolen star yacht, in the company of the Bando Gora's leader Komari Vosa and the former inmate he knew as Jagannath --
though Vosa had also called him *Maul* -- Eogan had been still trying to shake off the shock of the events of the past several weeks of his life. Not that his life had ever been *easy*, but losing his father to a blood infection contracted from a pulverized leg and getting swept into some kind of kriiffin' insane ballet between an arms dealer, the Bando Gora and whatever the hell Jagannath was had left him reeling and disoriented.

Looking back, he kind of wondered how he got out of it even passably sane.

The moment they had docked on Nar Shaddaa, Jagannath had disappeared without a word. Vosa, apparently having either taken pity on Eogan or maybe in honor of her truce with Jagannath, had given him enough platinum from Jabba the Hutt's onboard stock to feed himself and keep off the streets for a week, after Eogan had turned down her offer to have him join her blood cult.

He never saw her again; he overheard rumors she died not long later, fallen to a Mando bounty hunter, and that left him feeling even more lost. And conflicted.

Eogan hadn't realized how sheltered his life was, in some ways, until he was stuck fending for himself. They'd been on the fringes for so long that he was missing a ton of information about how to *just live*; how to get a roof over his head, food in his belly. His father had taught him how to fight and scrape, not how to handle the mundane aspects of building a life. Eogan ended up spending the first half of that first week curled up in the cheapest hostel he could afford, which somehow still managed to be less disgusting than the best parts of the Hive, alternately angry and miserable and confused.

He wasn't sure which voice drove him out again: His father, saying he was proud, or Jagannath, telling him he'd never be half the man Artagan Truax was.

He hated and revered them both in those moments. His father for dying and leaving him; Jagannath for *saving* him and then leaving him.

Then Eogan squared up and got grim and got busy with surviving.

Life after was odd jobs and cage fights; it was avoiding the slavers who commonly moved among the indigent with impunity and trying not to get trampled underfoot by the seething mass of beings who called Nar Shaddaa home, and then it was getting the hell out of there by signing on with a manager who treated him like a piece of meat to throw at whatever contender, but at least protected him.

He became Red Artagan. He never successfully used the Fifty-Two Fists again, but he won over three quarters of his matches. His manager took most of his prize money.

It was after a pretty bad concussion that an off-duty prison guard, who had seen him fight, told him to apply for a job where he worked. Thus, the once-prisoner became the guard; Eogan hadn't even *done* anything to land in Cog Hive Seven, but it had given him a pretty solid understanding of prison life and he'd taken that knowledge into his interview. He was hired on the spot. No one asked too many questions about his credentials, since it wasn't uncommon for humans born on Nar Shaddaa to have nothing to their lives but their names, and he claimed that as his origins.

He was out of Hutt Space and making the first legitimate paycheck of his life, and he successfully did that for years, to the point of even almost feeling like he'd made it. He didn't know *where* he'd made it to, but it was at least somewhere better than he had been.

And then-- this.
Jagannath, or Maul, or whatever his name was-- he didn't look much different, a little older and harder and leaner than before, but he'd lived in Eogan's (and Red's) mind as a ghost now for years. Confronted with that same visage again, Eogan didn't know whether or not he was supposed to be terrified out of his mind or relieved; didn't know whether he felt like a grown man who had managed to scrape together a life and survive, or like a sixteen-year-old whose whole understanding of the galaxy was down to listening to his old man and trying to live up to his legend.

He didn't know what to do with the fist of anger burning in his chest right now.

Though-- it seemed like Jagannath wasn't sure who the hell he was supposed to be, either. One second glowering dangerously in exactly the way Eogan remembered; in the next, looking plainly, normally exasperated. Like Eogan was still the sixteen-year-old.

Somehow, Eogan had ended up hanging onto the one kid's hand -- Rabbit's -- and when he realized he was clinging to it, he let go, mouth twisting bitterly. "The prison I was working for has been selling inmates as slave labor," he said, voice quivering in a manner that made self-loathing rise before he cleared his throat to steady it. "Not hardcases like the Hive, we're talking people convicted of fraud or petty stuff. About a year ago, when this war started, the Confederacy passed a law that prisoners could shorten their sentences by working them off. I didn't know about any of this, I didn't pay attention, but when they started taking inmates away, I got curious and asked around. Problem was-- it started out slow, but before long, there was a lot of turnover. More arrests than normal. More prisoners taken, and faster. More non-humans, too."

By now, Jagannath had lowered his blade properly and was watching Eogan; Eogan almost couldn't stand the weight of that unblinking gaze and glanced at the faces of the other two, half a thought crossing through his head about whether they were a cult or something, what with the same tattoos that Jagannath had.

--for that matter, why was the zabrak himself sparkling?

"Go on," Jagannath said, neutrally. "What does this have to do with a stolen ship?"

"I'm getting there," Eogan said back, clenching his fists at his sides. The one in the cloak, Raze, burrowed himself deeper into the fabric, and that was when Eogan realized Raze was shivering and closed his eyes, sighing out, getting on with it. "Wherever they were taking the prisoners," he said, picking up the pace, "they weren't heard from again. People I'd followed and kept an eye out for, just gone. And then I overheard the prison commandant-- they weren't just working and being cut free. They were dying too fast. That was why tougher species were being brought in, and why the turnover was so high and fast all of a sudden, and he was on the take, he was making a cut based on how long they managed to survive."

Rabbit crossed his arms, looking down at his feet; Raze edged closer to Jagannath, and it took Eogan off-guard with a few seconds, as Raze practically huddled up against the zabrak. And aside a brief moment of bemusement, the zabrak let him.

Feeling increasingly like he just got airlocked into hyperspace, Eogan shook himself out of it as well as he could. "So-- I called that stupid Republic comm code, you know, the one that they have plastered everywhere on the HoloNet seeking information and tips on CIS crimes, at least when you can get an encrypted connection? I told whoever it was that answered what I'd seen and overheard, I don't even know why, I just--" Unable to stand the scrutiny he was getting from Jagannath, he started pacing a few steps each way in the narrow tunnel. "You know, that doesn't matter. Anyway, they gave me another comm code, we played comm-tag, I gathered evidence, I took a bunch of risks
getting it to them, then they asked me if I could get the data crystal reader."

"Do you have it?" Jagannath asked, brow furrowing.

"No, I just stole a frippin' ship and came here on a whim," Eogan snapped back. He stopped pacing and sighed out, then. "The crystal reader was the easy part. The prison, at least before they started selling the inmates, had a machine shop for small equipment repair. The console I took it from had been abandoned when we lost all the people who could have fixed it. I was just waiting for the right time to get it into Republic hands, I had furlough coming up anyway. My contact had promised me they were going to do something about the prisoner situation, and the crystal reader would help. Everything seemed good, and then--"

Then.

Eogan bared his teeth at himself, scrubbing at his eyes to try to ward off the burn in them. "They brought in a group of wookiee kids. I mean-- clearly children. No translator or anything, but I could hear them crying. I don't-- have a ship. I've never saved enough to buy anything big like that, I ride the damned bus to work. I couldn't just-- so I took the damned data crystal reader and I stole the first ship I came across and I got in touch with my contact, and here I am talking to a bloody ghost and who knows where the frip those kids are now, but I figured if I could just--" He dragged in a desperate breath. "--get this here fast enough--"

He couldn't go any further than that.

His father had, as he got older and was training harder, told him that every tear he shed would be paid for with a drop of blood.

Eogan wished that he was the one who'd paid the price for the ones he cried now.

And he never wanted to punch a red-skinned bastard as much as he did when Jagannath didn't say anything; just stood by, silent and implacable, waiting out the bitter tears even as one of the other two -- Eogan didn't know which right then -- fell to tentatively rubbing his back.

"Why do I get the feeling a fight's brewing?" Rabbit whispered aside to Raze, as they followed Maul through the tunnels so they could get back to the surface and get back in contact with the Nest. Maul led with his saber, and Rabbit and Raze took up the rear, and between them and their Lieu was a guy that Rabbit, for the life of him, couldn't figure out.

Eogan had pulled himself back together after a harsh several minutes of tears, then wiped his face off and grimly first took his jacket off, then his sweatshirt, which he handed off to Raze without a word. Given Raze had just been petting Eogan's back, Rabbit thought the gesture was pretty sweet; Raze had pulled it on and shuddered in relief. Then Maul asked a couple more questions about where the reader was (in the room Eogan had rented before meeting them) and about where the stolen ship had been parked (a good distance away from the Nest), and then told them to follow him. Which, of course, they did.

Raze had been watching the interpersonal dynamics, which Rabbit thought he was uncannily good at, and he shook his head and whispered back, "I don't think it is. I mean, not a fist fight. Maybe an argument."
Rabbit didn't quite know what to make of his Lieu's demeanor through all this, either; it was like meeting Eogan had shaken the foundation under his feet and he wasn't sure where he was standing anymore. At least, that was how it looked to Rabbit. "There's gotta be a hell of a story there."

"Yeah." Raze gave an emphatic nod, eyes pinned on them ahead. "I hope we get to hear it, too."

"I've told you part of it." Maul's voice bounced against the walls and back to them, but he didn't sound mad or anything. "On Bravo-984."

"Was that the one with the Chadran mob and the deathspine varactyl?" Raze asked back, raising his voice a little and grinning some in Rabbit's peripheral vision.

"Brody was the one who had problems with the mob; I only had one Chadra-fan to deal with. Coyle."

Eogan snorted at that. "I didn't see the varactyl wrestling, but I heard about it. Watched all of your matches, though."

Rabbit and Raze exchanged a glance, waiting to hear what Maul would say. But in the end, he didn't say anything; didn't add to the conversation or go more into it, and even though Rabbit wasn't as quick as Raze on the uptake, he could see the way Eogan's shoulders fell, backlit by the golden glow ahead of them.

They didn't go much further before Maul stopped them and pointed up at the street access shaft, with the inset rungs in the wall leading up to it. "They'll doubtless have spread out their patrols by now. But we should still be outside of that range here. I'm going to go up to street level and see; stay here until I signal."

"Yessir," Rabbit and Raze chorused; Eogan just grunted, after shooting them a confused, frustrated look.

It was a long climb; Maul handed his saber off to Raze -- "Don't touch anything with it." -- and then grabbed the rungs and started up, leaving them down below.

Once he was out of sight, Raze bit his lip and moved back a little, just gently waving the saber in the air, before breaking into a broad, beaming grin and saying, "This is so kriffin' cool, I can feel it all through my arm!"

Through all of this, Eogan had been watching them; he crossed his arms over his jacket, looking at them askance. Rabbit wasn't sure how he felt about that look, though more and more, he was tipping towards sympathy. Especially since the guy had thrown his whole life away trying to help some kids. He was obviously wound up and didn't seem to be doing too well, but even though he had edges like sandpaper, Rabbit was starting to like him anyway. "Just who are you?" he asked, after a moment.

Raze was still just playing with the saber, though he was taking care not to let the blade get near anything or anyone. "I'm Raze. Demolitions specialist, 212th Attack Battalion, Blackbirds Squad. And that's Rabbit; he's not officially specialized, but he's one of the fastest runners in the whole Grand Army." There was a long beat, then Raze lowered the blade and gave Eogan a-- kind of soft look. "And he--" he nodded up towards the tunnel Maul had climbed up, "is Second Lieutenant Maul, our commanding officer."

Eogan's mouth twisted in a look like pain, and then he huffed a laugh that sounded a lot more like suffering than humor. "Komari Vosa called him Maul. Didn't expect his real name to be even weirder than his fake one."
"We still don't know if he's a noun or a verb," Raze said, shrugging a little, still kind of smiling. "Then again, most of us don't know. I mean, Shiv is definitely a verb, Rabbit is definitely a noun, Rancor is too, Castle is, but Tally and Tango and me... and I think Misty is an adjective? And Husker? And Smarty? Brody's a noun. I don't know, grammar wasn't one of my strong marks."

"Raze is definitely a verb," Rabbit cut in, grinning. "He proves it all the time, too."

Eogan looked troubled, though a flicker of a smile crossed his mouth at what Rabbit said. "I didn't know who the hell he was then. I still don't."

Raze tilted his head at that, then said, "Once we're somewhere secure, ask. I mean-- we've never met anyone who knew him before. I mean, except General Kenobi, obviously. But I mean-- you're really before."

"What does any of that mean?" Eogan asked, but he didn't get a chance to for an answer.

"The street's clear; Brody and Smarty are listening in to the police band, but they've declared no take-offs or landings before the city's been searched," Maul said, before he'd even finished climbing down to their level. He looked kind of grim, which definitely was bad news, and pinned Eogan with an unhappy look. "They found your ship and they have security footage of you, so your face is currently all over the broadcast booths."

Eogan's eyes slid closed and his face flushed, visible even in the light of the saber. "I can give you the door card to my room. If they haven't found it yet. You can pick up the data crystal reader and get back to your ship, and I can-- I guess lay low until this blows over."

The air was tense; Rabbit watched between the two, as a long moment of silence fell over them.

Then Maul blew a breath out of his nose. "No, we're not leaving you here. Raze-- give him your cloak. I don't suppose you brought your makeup along?"

Raze immediately started unclasping the cloak, which looked kind of silly over the big gray sweatshirt anyway, and then traded Eogan for his jacket with a rueful shake of his head. "Sorry, Lieu. Not enough pockets."

"Well, we'll make do. Just follow me."

Without another word, Maul turned back and started climbing again. Still flushed, Eogan followed.

The streets were eerie, in the parts of the city not taken by the celebration. On some of the old buildings, flood marks from over a thousand years before had discolored the stone, and the distant sound of continued revelry and droid patrols echoed off of them. People weren't flooding away from the festival areas, so apparently things hadn't ramped up too far yet, but it was still tense moving from one area to another. Still, with Eogan's face being projected at every public comm holo, they didn't have any real choice in staying hidden if they wanted to stay together.

Eogan directed them towards the place he'd rented; it wasn't anything fancy, but he said that at least it had a lock on the door.
Raze was happy enough just to follow their Lieu; he trusted Maul implicitly to lead them the most stealthy way to it, which meant Raze could think about other things. Like that Tally probably was a verb. And that Eogan was probably a pretty nice guy, at heart, because even though he was angry and confused, he still noticed things and cared. And that Maul had no idea how to relate to him, too.

He was still working it all over in his head -- and maybe about how he'd have painted Eogan's face if he'd had makeup on them, and also he was a little sad they probably wouldn't be able to bring dinner back to the squad -- when they stopped in an alleyway, the smell of trash making all of them wrinkle their noses as a group.

"It's around the corner, down towards the end of the block," Eogan whispered.

"I can go." Raze wasn't too surprised that Rabbit volunteered; he'd been getting bolder and bolder as time went on, and Raze was proud of him.

Maul took a peek around the corner, mouth in a line, and then looked back at them. "It seems quiet enough. No patrols... yet."

Eogan pulled out the door card from his pants pocket and offered it over, looking no less serious. "It's in the black bag. I didn't take the whole console, just the reader and the hard disk with its software."

"You want me to grab anything else?" Rabbit asked back, pocketing the card in his black coat before running his hand back over his glittering, red-frosted hair, flaking some off like snow.

"Uh." Eogan blinked, sliding a glance to Maul before sort-of-awkwardly shrugging. "If it's okay, my regular bag. I didn't-- I didn't pack much, I just grabbed my duffle from work when I bolted."

"Shouldn't be a problem." Rabbit edged over to glance around Maul's shoulder, who had gone back to watching.

"Be careful," Maul said, aside, quietly. "If it's in doubt, abandon the objective and get out of there. If you can't come back out the front, then go to the emergency exit. And if you can't get back to us, then bolt for the Nest. Remember, they aren't looking for you."

Rabbit nodded gamely; he didn't even look a little nervous. He shot a quick look to Eogan and smiled some. "If I ever get the chance? Search and rescue. That'll be my specialty," he said, before ducking around the corner and the zabrak on said corner, heading down towards the hotel, leaving them to wait.

Of course, given their luck, the patrol showed up not even five minutes after Rabbit had walked into the building.

Maul had spent the entire mission now dragging his mind back on task, over and over. It seemed far too easy to fall into a tangle of anxiety and frustration and old memories on being confronted with an adult Eogan; to lose focus on the task at hand and potentially cause this entire mission to fail completely. He could feel the boy's-- the man's simmering resentment, and he could also feel echoes of old admiration. Having either of those aimed at him made Maul feel off-balanced, and it took more than he liked to keep his focus on the present, where it necessarily had to be in order for them to
achieve their objective.

Ironically, this was much harder now than it had been when he was twenty-one on that mission to Cog Hive Seven.

Brody and Smarty had both been having fun slicing into Darkknell's various data systems; from the local HoloNet node, Brody had gotten into essentially the entire planet's government networks, including infrastructure and police. Brody did the work getting in, while Smarty had been interpreting the results. Maul was more than grateful for it, because even as the others were following him, Brody and Smarty were relaying where to go, the safest way to get there and the safest way back out.

All of that, though, came to a screeching crash when the unexpected patrol pulled up and waited until after they were at the door to radio in. Likely because they didn't actually think it was going to lead to anything and therefore wasn't urgent.

"Rabbit, can you hear me?" Maul asked quietly, into his mic, scrambling to calculate whether Rabbit's little bead radio would be able to receive from most of a block away.

There was a hiss, then Rabbit's crackly whisper back, "Barely, Lieu."

"Trouble. A patrol's just arrived."

"Fire department's network says the fire exit's out the back," Brody broke in, having already gotten that information when he'd been told where they were heading. "But it's triggered to ring alarms through the whole building, and I can't crack that alarm system without a lot more time. Tell him to hide in a lounge or something until Smarty's done double-checking Plan C."

Maul ground his teeth together for a moment, ignoring his first instinct, which was to just go and rescue Rabbit by force. Rabbit's frequency was priority right now, so Maul just relayed that instead and then turned back to lean against the wall, clenching his fists.

Even now, inaction didn't sit well.

Eogan was pacing again; in the dim light, a handful of old scars showed on his face. Maul didn't recognize any of them, though. The Hutt's star-yacht had been well-equipped, including with bacta; else, Maul would have ended up with far more trouble from his own right shoulder. It made sense that Eogan would have taken care of the cuts that the clawbirds had left on him when he had the chance, too, so the scars he currently wore were likely gained in the meantime.

"I'll turn myself in, if I have to," Eogan said, catching that scrutiny, though his gaze flicked away again.

"You won't have to. Brody's a wizard, he even said so himself," Raze pointed out, as he bounced in place on his toes, an incongruous portrait of sparkling Nightbrother-inspired makeup and working class clothes over leather pants.

As if on cue, Brody's voice jumped back into Maul's ear again. "About half of those old holo projectors are still functional, Smarty thinks 'cause they were inset into decorative stonework and old statues and they just never bothered to cut power under 'em." A note of rather unnerving glee crept into the slicer's voice. "They're pretty old and almost all of 'em are showing faults in their projection matrix. The effect would be-- unsettled. Just to put it very mildly."

"Unsettling enough to cause a riot?" Maul asked back, holding the gem-button to broadcast on that frequency, momentarily ignoring the wide-eyed looks the other two gave him.
"Oh. Oh, yeah." Brody actually gave a little giggle, sending Maul's brows shooting up. "Smarty's getting ready. Give us maybe two minutes and then we'll unleash chaos."

"Copy," Maul said back, before letting go of the button to return to Rabbit's. "Rabbit, lay low for two minutes, then head for the Nest. Use the fire exit."

"Copy, Lieu." Rabbit sounded calm, and absolutely despite himself, that made Maul smile some.

Eogan was back to looking at him as if he'd morphed into a completely different lifeform, but Maul couldn't take time to deal with-- frankly, any of it. Instead, he took a breath, pointing and then leading them back down the alleyway so that they could skirt the main road the patrol vehicle was parked on. "Back when this planet was under Sith control, apparently the so-called Sith Lord in charge liked to project very large holograms of himself over the entire city," he explained, quietly, as he nudged them along. "Several meters tall. Some were disabled, but according to Brody and Smarty, about half of them are still operational, having been left in place due to being inset into cultural artifacts from Darkknell's past. Supposedly, the effect of them coming online again will be highly unsettling. We're hoping unsettling enough to set off a panic and make our escape in the ensuing chaos."

"--oh, kriff," Raze said after a moment, sounding somewhere between admiring and worried. "Yeah, that'll do it. But there were a lot of kids there, Lieu, what if they get hurt?"

Maul hadn't honestly thought of that, and blinked once to himself as they reached the next cross street. "I-- I'm not sure. There were a large number of law enforcement droids and personnel, however, so I imagine even a stampede won't end up catastrophic." Still, now that it had been pointed out to him, Maul went right back to Brody's frequency. "Brody, Raze brought up the number of children at the Festival--"

"Can't help that, Lieu, but if it helps, given what I'm seein' on the city surveillance, there are a lot of ways out of the main crowd, so it won't be a funnel situation."

"Brody says there are numerous exits. That'll have to be enough." Maul stopped them and peeked around the corner; all was quiet.

Until it really wasn't.

The mad cackle echoed across the entire city.

It blared into being in wildly distorted unison; from some speakers, it sounded like a low, warbled crackle. From others, like a high pitched screech.

Unsettling was absolutely an understatement.

With it came the similarly distorted holograms of a dozen-meter high-- something. It wavered and split sideways from defective holo projectors in some cases and compressed and rolled in others; it raised its body up and descended from mad cackle to an equally disturbing growl, then it started flailing around.

Following that came the screams, as the entire Festival of the Flood went from campy spookiness to
genuinely terrifying.

In all of that, no one was paying attention to a fire-door alarm in a small hotel, as partiers and families alike started running for their very lives, many of them heading for the space port to get their ships and leave in a hurry; as vendors abandoned their stalls and business owners cringed down shaking behind counters; as law enforcement and investigators alike tried to figure out what the hell was happening.

Rabbit was covered head-to-toe in goosebumps, but with both bags, he took off in the direction of the Nest and firmly kept himself from looking at any of the abominations currently blanketing the city in a ghostly blue glow.

A block away, Eogan and Raze were literally clinging to one another, and Maul was truly shocked at how hard and fast his own hearts were beating as they all three stared, gaping and wide-eyed, at one of the giant, distorted images glowing and waving menacingly, taller than many of the buildings.

At least until Maul squinted, then asked, "Is that Smarty, wearing my blanket?"

(Later, he would find out that yes, actually, it was.)

The majority of the Festival was already trampled when they arrived there, having to cut across it to get back to the Nest quickly. All the while, those holograms were still at it; now, chanting some kind of awful, deranged gibberish, like some kind of arcane spellwork dredged from the pits of depravity.

Once he got over his startle, Raze couldn't stop laughing. It was so krieffing— outlandish and wild, that it was hard to believe it was their own squad provoking it. This was chaos down to an artform, and he highly approved. And it helped when he saw there were no ambulance lights or bodies or hurt people, though he did see some people clinging to the non-droid police officers. No kids left in the area, though; he bet that they were long gone with their families.

"Get back to the Nest, both of you, I'll be right behind you," Maul said, just as they were about to follow the last running people down the expressway towards the port. The sounds of the droids calling for order and for people to not panic and that the malfunction was being looked into, overlapped eerily with the sound of Smarty chanting and warbling as he ghosted all over the city with his creepy-ass hologram army. "Tell Tango to set the Nest for a rapid-fire takeoff."

"Wait, where are you going?" Eogan asked, darting a look between Raze and the Lieu.

Maul huffed and pointed in the direction of the port. "I told my squad that I'd bring back dinner. Now go."

Raze snickered and grabbed Eogan by an arm, turning to run with him, trusting that Maul would grab whatever he was gonna grab and get back safe. With all of the noise and chaos, one party-dressed zabrak wasn't going to raise any brows.

Though, Raze did pause at a trampled stall and grab a bunch of plastiform, light-up toy lightsabers before bolting off with Eogan into the perpetual night.

In the distance, ships were lighting up the sky as they took off, ignoring the port closure with
abandon in their attempt to get away from what would, over the years, morph into an honest-to-
everything, bonafide legend to add to Darkknell's already spooky history.

Within twenty-five minutes, the Nest was just one of many, with all aboard and accounted for, plus
one and mission accomplished.
This chapter went a bunch of places I didn't expect it to. So, I shall fling it out there after wrestling with it for almost two weeks and hope it does what it's supposed to. <3

"--authorities are sayin' it was a malicious prank by mean-hearted slicers. Minor injuries, worst was a broken arm, but there was a lot of property damage, and a lot of theft and looting. At least, goin' by media reports." Croft shook his head, tsking at them as they ate their stolen barbecue bantha skewers and noodles around the briefing room table without remorse. Several of them also had Raze's purloined toy lightsabers next to their trays, too. "They recovered the stolen ship, but your boy there is now declared a fugitive in CIS space. Apparently, he stole a prison commandant's ship when he made his break for it."

All twelve Blackbirds looked at Eogan, who had only been picking at his dinner, as he scowled. "Excuse me, General, but I'm pretty sure I'm older than you. And I'm no one's boy."

Maul wondered if that was a veiled shot at him. He kept his expression firmly in neutral regardless, wanting no part of the argument.

Croft raised an eyebrow, but then shrugged. "Fine. But you're still a fugitive. I appreciate why you did it, though. And what you gave up to." He gestured off-holo at something someone said, then looked back at them. "It's up to you where you wanna go from here. We're not gonna leave you hanging in the wind with your trousers down, so if you want resettled in the Republic, we'll make it happen."

Eogan looked sullen; even with the background 'noise' of the squad, his resentment felt like an aimed spear. "Unless these guys plan on airlocking me, I'd like some time to think about it."

"Uh--"

"Why would we do that?" Tally asked, brows furrowing; Maul was not the least bit surprised at the curious scrutiny that his medic had been showing Eogan ever since the man had stepped onto the Nest.

Eogan didn't seem to have an answer to that; he flushed and then just shook his head, tucking his chin down.

Croft looked just as much at a loss. Then he shook it off himself. "Anyway. Movin' on. Got an assignment for you obvious adults at Llanic; scuzzy place, but I need recon on the Separatist cells we know are hiding there. Don't know how long it'll take you; could be days, could be weeks. We know they're there, just not how many or how openly they're operating. Stop off at the orbital station at Naboo, they'll take custody of the crystal reader and refuel you and take the cover off your Delta-6. And let me know when sunshine there figures out what he wants to do." There was a beat. "I don't suppose you got that rum I asked for?"

Maul reached down beside his chair and picked up the bottle, plunking it down on the table in range of the holo-cam, and smirked.
Croft barked a laugh. "You pay for that bottle, Lieutenant?"

Maul repeated the action, and plunked a second bottle next to it, raising his brows, smirking more broadly.

"What he's saying, General, is 'don't ask questions you don't really want to know the answers to,'" Brody cut in, as the rest of the Blackbirds started snickering.

Croft shook his head, laughing. "Fair enough. Drop those with the crystal reader, I'll get 'em eventually. Raze, you're off the hook." He gave them an upnod. "Happy hunting, Blackbirds. I'll have what little recon we've got assembled for you by the time you get to Naboo."

Once he had signed off, Smarty eyed Maul speculatively. "I don't suppose you managed to score another one...?"

"There are two more bottles in the cargo hold." Maul had no intentions of going anywhere near it himself, especially after Radnor, but he wasn't about to police his squad over it. It had been a relatively easy thing to grab those from a stall he had noted on the way to the tapcaf to meet Eogan, then double back and grab the abandoned trays of food, then head with all appropriate haste for the Nest.

Which just left Eogan himself to deal with.

The (considerably more mild) chaos of a rapid takeoff, then fleeing back for Republic space, had precluded any real discussion beyond a quick introduction. The Blackbirds, absent Rabbit and Raze, all eyed the unexpected new addition with curiosity and they kept darting looks at Maul in question, but Maul had-- no clue, how to explain who Eogan was. Instead, he made sure to hand out dinner and then call Croft, hoping that the minutiae of reporting and eating would forestall any discussion until he could put his thoughts together.

Except, he hadn't been able to.

What could he say? I barely knew him when he was a boy, and we both survived the destruction of Cog Hive Seven. It was factual, but it seemed a poor explanation. It was true; he had barely known Eogan, aside as just another chess piece on an overcrowded, chaotic board. The boy had largely been a means to an end, and his survival had been as much down to his father's care and his own nerve as it had been Maul's doing.

But he did save Maul's life. As Maul had saved his. Did that make a connection?

"--wait, you mean there was a rodent down there and the Lieu didn't stop for a snack?"

Shiv's voice jolted Maul out of his thoughts and back into the conversation; he blinked a few times, trying to catch up. Though, the sight of the wicked, tongue-in-cheek grin on his sergeant's face warmed his hearts; the brightness of it like a storm breaking to sunlight. "What?" Maul asked, glancing around the table.

Rabbit rolled his eyes; his food was already gone and it looked like Eogan had given him the rest of his own tray. "I was just mentioning the rat that ran over my boot in the subway."

Maul groaned before he even had time to intend to and sank down deeper into his seat, passing his palm over his face. Shiv apparently took that as bait, though, because the smug amusement in his voice increased. "I guess it was crunch time and not crunch time," he said, which was so awful that Maul had to groan a second time, even as most of the rest of the table started laughing.
"There's a joke here I'm not getting," Eogan said; his tone was hesitant.

"Early training mission. We'd only been a squad for like-- a month and a half, I think," Tango said; of all of them, he'd been eying Eogan especially warily, but apparently couldn't resist telling the story. Much to Maul's chagrin. "The Lieu asked Commander Tano -- who's what, fifteen? And a togruta -- to help us out. So, she stalked us and ended up making us look bad. The world we were on, though, was covered in these small furry rodents. After she was done stunning or paint-bombing us, she celebrated by grabbing one up and bit the thing in half, ate her half, and then she offered the Lieu the other half with this really challenging look. And he ate the thing. Right there, raw, on the spot. All so he wouldn't lose face to someone about half his age."

"Of course, then he spent the next ten minutes brushing his teeth," Tally added, sounding thoroughly amused.

"I should have handed it back, because I'll never hear the end of this." Maul couldn't remember the last time his face had actually gone hot; the fact that it was now was a little unnerving. Though he didn't want to put a damper on the squad's good humor just because he was embarrassed.

Eogan sounded more confused than amused as he asked, "How does a fifteen-year-old outrank any of you?"

It quieted the entire table. Husker broke the silence after a long, uncomfortable moment, and Maul managed to take his hands off of his face in order to watch, now feeling uneasy on top of embarrassed. "She's a Jedi," Husker said, eying Eogan. "All Jedi are officers."

Eogan eyed Husker back, then slid a glance sideways towards Maul. "Including you?"

"I'm not a Jedi." It was startling, how quickly the atmosphere had shifted. Maul rolled his shoulders a little, trying to redirect the discomfort into motion. "Nor have I ever been."

Eogan didn't seem any less confused, but then he blinked and squinted. "Wait, half your age? How old are you?"

Maul could almost literally see the edges of the hole he was about to step into, but with the weight of his squad's scrutiny on them right now, he couldn't see any way of avoiding it without getting up and leaving. "Probably thirty-three by now. I'm not sure."

"--you would have been--" Eogan's voice trailed off, then he stood, mouth hanging open; without even meaning to, Maul sat up more rigidly, fighting down the instinct to get to his feet himself. "Are you kriifing kidding me?" Eogan asked, incredulous. "All your lecturing, 'Everything here is a test, boy', and there, he did a passable imitation of Maul's voice and accent, which just made the embarrassment worse, "and you were only twenty-one?"

By now, all of the Blackbirds were sitting just as rigidly as Maul was; Tango was glaring, as was Rancor, and Raze looked quietly sympathetic, whereas the rest just looked very alert. As if they were bracing for a fight.

Maul didn't know whether to be touched over that or deeply conflicted about it; that, on top of the fire burning under his skin on his face and neck, was more than he could really bear. And even though it made him feel unforgivably pathetic and cowardly, he got carefully to his feet, making sure to keep his posture non-threatening. "I'm going to go set our course," he said, quietly but mercifully steadily, skating eye contact and sidestepping Eogan.

He heard Tango mutter, on his way out, "I knew we were gonna pick up a mean ghost if we stopped
there, I just didn't expect it to be in the flesh."

Not much intimidated Eogan, these days. But having the undivided attention of a squad of clone troopers was enough to do it. And after Maul slipped out, that attention turned decidedly hard. The one who muttered was giving him a death glare, and being called *mean* took him off-guard and made him feel stung, face flushing hot yet again.

The one named Shiv just quietly broke things up in Maul's wake; told them to get settled down and show their guest to his room. Eogan was shown back there, a room inside a cargo hold, by a troop with loose curls. His bag was already there, sitting on the bed that was made up with what was presumably army-issue bedding, and he sat down beside it and tried to figure out what the hell just happened.

Any of it. All of it. From frippin' *Maul* to a whole squad of tube-grown men, to whatever that general meant, to--

"Kriff," Eogan whispered coarsely, to himself, burying his face in his hands.

He hadn't known they were clones when he met them on Darkknell. The makeup Rabbit and Raze had been wearing had made 'em both look really different, and weirdly enough, it hadn't even occurred to Eogan that his contacts might be some of the very troopers that made up some of the worst of the CIS propaganda floating around. Sure, he thought they were related, probably brothers, but finding out that they were *clones*--

According to all the propaganda -- and there was a *lot* of it -- the GAR's clones were all shaved, uniform troopers with hard, chiseled features. Sometimes the propaganda was kind of a twisted, sideways sympathetic, pointing out that all these identical men were grown and modified to be little better than droids and how the CIS was better for using *actual* droids instead of carbon-copied men. But often, it was vicious instead; stories of clone troopers, blank-faced and soulless, known by their numbers alone, slaughtering civilians for a heavy-handed, power-hungry and corrupt Republic that was demanding that the Confederacy give up their rights and freedoms.

But none of this group looked soulless. Or acted it.

And they were so kriffin' *young*. Eogan was twenty-eight and even after all he lived, he wasn't so arrogant as to think that made him some wise authority on shit, but a few of those clones looked like they had to be a whole decade younger than he was himself. Only a couple years older than he'd been in the Hive. And they all had kind of-- things, about them. Different things. Different hair styles. Variations on the color of their eyes. Shiv had slightly darker skin than the other clones and the lightest colored eyes. A couple looked really chiseled, but others looked softer. One of 'em had stubble and wild hair sprouting like an overgrown hedge. Even their voices had variations, different inflections or quirks.

They didn't look or act anything like the propaganda portrayed, and that opened up a dozen holes for Eogan to fall into. Because he might not have bought into the hard party line or anything, but he also hadn't really tried to wonder how it actually was, and now, being confronted with it--

Had he really defected over enslaved prisoners in the Confederacy just to walk into the exact same
damned situation in the Republic?

And what the hell did Maul have to do with it?

Hiding in the cockpit didn't help Maul feel any better over it all, but at least by being there, he had removed one source of tension from the rest of the group. He knew it was only a matter of time until Tango came and reclaimed his chair, but every time he thought to get up and just-- face up to all of this, he ended up unable to move. And that, too, only added more shame into the already nauseating stew of it he found himself basking in.

He didn't feel guilty about leaving Eogan on Nar Shaddaa. Taking him would have certainly led to his death; Maul had still been trying desperately to prove that his own life was worth enough to his Master to be allowed to continue breathing. Eogan would have been killed, and likely painfully, and Maul's own position would have been even more precarious. If he had given any hint of attachment to anything that was not the Sith grand plan, it couldn't have ended up well, not for either of them. Komari Vosa served a purpose, though Maul had been prepared to kill her, too; letting his Master know he had also saved some random, orphaned sixteen-year-old boy because honor dictated it would have been catastrophic.

He didn't feel guilty, then or now, but somehow that still didn't make him happy. Or relieve the sensation of some still-living ball of rodents in what was left of his guts, eating him.

Almost as bad was looking back on his own twenty-one year old self and hating what he saw there. His own fool-headed hubris, the same hubris that later let Obi-Wan come out of that pit and cut him down. He didn’t care about the Hive or its occupants, really; they were, almost on the whole, loathsome. The Blirrs, Radique, the gangs. Artagan Truax had been something different, in all of that; a man who loved his son, enough to flee a lifelong commitment to the Bando Gora by saving Radique and then getting caught in the gears of a heartless galaxy. And his own attempts for better ended up with his slow and painful death.

Yet, the boy had lived. And now he was on their ship, a simmering and confused mess of resentment.

And Maul had no idea how to fix that. Or even navigate it. Or if he should even try.

He might have stayed in that seat all night, feeling paralyzed to the point of not moving his hands from the edge of the console, as if somehow he was holding himself together by that alone, if not for Tango. The pilot clearing his throat quietly was enough to break the freeze, and Maul made himself get up so they could shuffle around one another.

Just as he was about to push himself out the door, Tango reached out and caught his hand, sounding subdued and miserable, radiating some of the same. "Lieu-- I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said any of that back there."

"It's all right." Maul's hand twitched, but after a moment of looking at Tango's unhappy expression, he gave a light squeeze back in attempted reassurance before taking his hand back. "You didn't do anything wrong. This is just a-- complicated situation."

It seemed that helped, though Maul didn't know what to make of the sharper expression that
displaced the unhappiness. "Well, if you need backup..." Tango said, mouth twisting a little bitterly. "You have it."

"I know." He just didn't know if he needed it.

Or if it was deserved.

With as measured a breath out as he could manage, Maul crossed back into the main body of the courier. There was no sign of Eogan; to his right, most of the squad was in their bunks, though not all of them were asleep; the lights were dimmed in the bunk room, though a few had their inset lamps on, visible through the half-closed door. Raze was just coming out of the fresher, newly cleaned of makeup, wearing only a towel, and took the clothes he had borrowed from Eogan back to the 'guest room' set inside of the main cargo hold.

Maul knew that his own relief for the quiet was more of his somewhat cowardly unwillingness to just face this, but he couldn't deny feeling it. He slipped into the briefing room-slash-kitchen-slash-communal area, moving to go and put a pot of water on for tea; if nothing else, something gingery would settle his stomach. And given that the Blackbirds almost on the whole preferred caf -- though Smarty was working his way through sampling every kind Maul had brought from his and Obi-Wan's common stock -- there was plenty to choose from.

It was strange, how making tea made him miss Obi-Wan; unfair of him to feel, he thought, given he'd been the one who asked for the Blackbirds to be given their space.

"Make me one, too?" Shiv asked; despite having heard his footfalls a moment before he spoke, Maul jumped anyway, then closed his eyes and ground his teeth at himself.

Still, that wasn't Shiv's fault, so then he nodded and pulled two mugs down from the padded holders in the cupboard. "Any preferences?"

"Whatever you're having is fine."

Shiv came over and leaned against the counter, and after Maul had everything set up, he turned and joined his sergeant there as he waited for the kettle to whistle, crossing his arms and firmly shoving down the seemingly-compulsive urge to work over his face with one hand or both. It was starting to creep into his awareness just how much he'd been doing that of late, and he wasn't sure what it said about him, or meant.

They leaned together in silence for a long moment, then Shiv asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

The immediate answer was, of course, no. Maul almost said it, too; it wasn't the very last thing he wanted to do in the galaxy -- right now, that was talking to Eogan -- but it was close to the top of the list. "I don't really know what to say about it," he eventually answered, after several long beats, weariness creeping into the anxiety that had been pervasive for the past few hours, enough that he closed his eyes to it.

"I don't know, either." Shiv shrugged, then shuffled over until their shoulders were pressed together. "And I mean, I'm not really good at that kind of thing myself, so I can't say much. I'm just entertaining myself trying to imagine what kind of lecture a twenty-one year old you could give."

"It was all nonsense." The bite of shame was less than it was before, but Maul was fairly sure that was down to it being Shiv poking him. He didn't open his eyes, just tried to swallow it down and push it far enough away that it wouldn't keep clawing into him. "I was there for a mission, I was--very sure of myself, and looking back, unforgivably stupid."
He meant those words, but the long silence he got back for them had him doubling back over them, a half-hearted scramble to figure out what had provoked it.

"Actually, I was thinking you probably terrified everyone," Shiv finally said, pressing over a little tighter. "I mean, first time I laid eyes on you, you scared me," he added, and the sound of his grin was somehow perfectly evident in his voice. "Of course, then you opened your mouth and ruined it with that pretty, poncy Core accent of yours, but marks on your glower, Lieu."

"I didn't say much while I was there because of that supposed accent." Maul forgot himself and ended up rubbing at his eyes and brow, then recrossed his arms.

"No surprise, they might have had you calling matches or something from a broadcast booth."

"I doubt it. I was too valuable to them as a fighter."

"Too bad, you could have injected some class into the place." Shiv shifted away and moved when the kettle started making noise, and Maul reached out to stop him just so he could turn around and make the tea himself.

"A full overhaul couldn't have accomplished that," he said, as he flexed his hands before measuring out tea into the decorative metal strainers he'd brought along. Still, discussing the Hive seemed less--fraught, when it came to the actual place and conditions. "It was poorly constructed and disgusting in nearly every way a place can be."

"Real vacation spot. And you were there to pick up a nuke?"

Maul went to answer, then stopped himself. His mission parameters had been clear enough, albeit convoluted to actually accomplish. Broker a weapon's deal, essentially, between two factions. But even at the time, he'd had no real grasp on why he had been sent there to do that. It didn't help that there were parts of his memory damaged even there; he knew he had conferred with his Master, but all that had been left intact from that was a feeling of pressure and shame and expectation and anxiety, and not any further information. He knew it had something to do with further destabilization of the Outer Rim.

But his actual purpose and how it fit into everything else was largely nonexistent. As it almost always was, then.

"I don't know why I was there," he finally said, when it had already been quiet for too long. In his chest, anxiety warred with that old feeling of exhaustion; shame with a certain worn-out resignation at how pointless so much of it had proven to be. "Not really."

Shiv accepted the mug of tea that was handed to him, then shrugged. But his tone was gentle, as he said, "Well, Lieu, we've got time. Sixteen hours to Naboo's orbital platform, then a couple days to Llanic. Might as well tell the story, and maybe something will click."

If it had been anyone else in the galaxy asking, with the exception of Bail Organa, Maul might have hedged. The temptation was there; after a handful of hours of reviewing his own behavior, the idea of trying to go over it again sounded little better than torture.

But it wasn't anyone else in the galaxy asking. It was Shiv. So, with a mug of tea and an omnipresent feeling of dread, Maul tried to tell it.

He didn't quite make it to the end.
There was a fine line to walk, between giving someone space to work things out on their own and intervening. Tally was pretty good at walking it usually, but it wasn't anything for him to acknowledge that he waited longer than he should have this time.

"He was primed for it," he said, shaking his head; Shiv was sitting in the lone chair in the newly finished medbay on the Nest, arms crossed, still looking quietly spooked, and the last thing Tally wanted -- or that anyone needed -- was both of the guys in official charge of the squad chewing themselves up in self-doubt. Maul was likely doing that more than enough for everyone, all by himself. "You didn't cause it."

Darkknell, as a mission, had been lowkey enough that Tally had spent the time sequestered on the Nest working on projects -- including Castle's project to shield their lieutenant's cybernetics -- and Tally thought probably everything would have gone smoothly, except for Maul picking up a ghost. Unlike Tango, he didn't think Eogan was a particularly mean ghost; he had a block of duracrete on his shoulder over something, but mostly he just seemed really kniffin' confused.

But the way his presence threw Maul was undeniable.

"I was the one asking for the story," Shiv said, though he spoke it as fact instead of defensively, which was a good sign.

"Okay, and?" Tally asked back, pinning him with a glance, then went back to programming the small chips in the new set of dog tags that Castle had fabricated for Maul to wear, since he didn't have a barcode like the troops did, which was coded to service history and a medical file. "If you want to go that route, I've been watching this holodrama playing out since Eogan stepped aboard and I didn't say anything, even though I should have. Beating yourself up for it's kind of pointless."

Even though Tally had only witnessed Maul losing touch with reality once -- the aftermath of that droid popper on Big Murder Mountain -- he was well aware that it wasn't just a one-off thing. Che's notes and files mentioned it happening before; early on frequently, but even occasionally as recently as post-Christophsis. Of course, since she was a Jedi, she didn't actually define it, but since Tally believed in science over mystical Force stuff, he knew what it was because he'd seen brothers suffer the same.

Flashbacks weren't anything new; so long as people could be traumatized, those things were going to happen.

"He just--" Shiv uncrossed his arms to gesture. "He was there, then he wasn't. I wasn't sure what to do."

"Just what you did. Came and got me, and then talked really calmly." Tally finally finished the programming and turned back to lean on the counter. "And you didn't treat it like a big deal, so your instincts were right on."

There was a long pause there while Shiv worked it over. And Tally just let him, as he sorted through his own thoughts, including about how Shiv was handling things himself after Orto Plutonia. This was, by far, the most open engagement the sergeant had shown since finding out; Tally wished it was less fraught, but he was heartened to see it. He wasn't surprised that Shiv had defaulted to the right steps; even if it did spook him some when Maul checked out and spent a good ten minutes in a silent panic (this time staying frozen in place, instead of scrambling to escape, though the several
hundred meter stare and the hard trembling was the same), he didn't go panicking himself.

“Is it a big deal, though?” Shiv finally asked, quietly, looking back up and meeting Tally’s gaze.

"Depends on how you're asking." Tally shrugged. "If you're asking if he's gonna melt down on the battlefield or in the middle of a mission? I highly doubt it. He's wired to respond in a crisis, it's after the crisis that he struggles. If you're asking whether it says something about his stability-- yeah, but I don't think he's any danger to us, only maybe to himself. I would have done everything so far differently if I thought otherwise. Are you asking why it happened?"

"Kind of." Shiv crossed his arms again, though less tightly this time, and finally leaned back properly in his borrowed chair. "And what I can do to help, for frip's sake."

Tally had been working on all of this for as long as he'd been assigned to the Blackbirds, so he at least felt like he had some explanation. And oddly, he was kind of glad Shiv was asking, because so far, Tally had been largely just working all of this over by himself; part loyalty to Maul and confidentiality concerns, but also partly because he still felt like he was playing well above his paygrade. Not that he got paid, but still.

However, since Shiv was confronted with it and was Maul's right hand--

"He's traumatized." Tally tilted his head, not bothering to dress it up any. "He was long before he became ours. Hell, if I had a guess -- since he's in no hurry to give details -- I'd say he probably has been most of his life. Maybe all of it."

Shiv squinted some, then snorted. "And this is news? I knew that."

Tally almost ended up laughing at him, not because he thought Shiv wasn't getting it-- but because of course Shiv knew. Because Shiv was the one who seemed to know exactly how to poke Maul and when; how to make him laugh, or when to stand at his shoulder in silent support. "Okay, so this isn't news. But I mean, I'm talking about psychiatry here, specifically. Or, I guess, neuroscience. But if you want the specifics of why now, and why it wasn't your fault -- and bearing in mind that I'm just going on observation and guesswork?" Tally started ticking off fingers. "He was just put through yet another assessment, this time by a Jedi Council member, a week ago. He doesn't have General Kenobi close by, which is probably a good thing on balance, but has its bad points; I mean, Maul didn't get this far out of the hole all on his own steam, you can bet Kenobi was there to help him climb. Now, we've picked up a guy who knew him and has a grudge from the distant past, we're all on one relatively small ship with no real room to retreat and we're stopping at Naboo, where he got cut in half, reminding him of yet another bad thing that happened."

"Sounds like a lot, when you put it like that." Shiv dropped his chin for a moment there, then shook his head, breathing out. Then he looked up again; the spooked look was gone, replaced with the quiet determination that Tally thought made the man one hell of a good leader, and a hell of a good brother. "And what can I do to help?"

That was an easy answer, in all of this. Tally regarded him fondly, grinning some, and just gave it to him without adornment: "Be you."

Be you.
It was a lot for Shiv to work over.

He went back and cleaned the mugs, emptied the tea pot and put things away, just kind of ticking the thoughts over in his mind. After the weeks of trying to figure out his place in the galaxy where he'd lost his whole former platoon, he still wasn't always sure who he even was. Every time he felt like he'd finally managed to figure it all out, something else happened. He grew up half of a pair. And then he had to try to work out who he was without Flanker in the galaxy to define himself off of. Then he nearly fell to his death during a training mission and had to face up to what it meant to keep living. Then Mag and Orto Plutonia.

Now-- he still wasn't sure, at least in the existential sense of the word.

But he wasn't alone in that, either. Clearly.

He did know a few things, though: They couldn't afford for the Nest to feel like a trap. Not for any of them, including their unwitting and equally lost guest. And that unless something changed for the better, the tension was going to keep building. And, finally, that he himself was for sure good at one thing: Building bridges and coordinating diverse, sometimes damaged people in trying circumstances.

Unsurprisingly, Eogan was still awake when Shiv chimed the door; he looked tired and wary and stressed when he opened it, but he just stepped back in silent invitation and plunked his rear back down on the bed in the otherwise relatively barren room. His black duffel was open, but he hadn't put anything away in the former equipment drawers they'd salvaged from the frigate.

Shiv offered over the bundle in hand. "Figured you probably didn't have anything to sleep in," he said, half-smiling and shrugging, "and we're pretty close to the same size, so you can borrow a set of my sleep clothes."

Eogan eyed the bundle like it might bite him, but then he reached up and took it and drew it back, kind of tucking it against his belly. Shiv wasn't entirely sure how to read the look in his eyes; it looked a lot like devastation. Or loneliness. Or the intersection where those two things met.

"Thanks," he said, broad shoulders hunching a little bit.

"Wanna talk about it?" Shiv asked, gesturing to an open spot on the bed and hoping like hell that this attempt to open a discussion went better than the last one did.

Eogan snorted, but he pushed the duffel further out of the way, which Shiv took as permission to have a seat. "I wouldn't even know where to start," he said, mouth twisting bitterly. Then he scrubbed a hand back through his red hair, sending it into disarray. "I'm sorry I screwed things up here," he added, after a moment, dropping his hand and closing his eyes with a miserable huff out. "Maybe that's a good place to start."

"I don't think you screwed things up." Which, even as he said it, Shiv realized was the truth. Yeah, Eogan was unexpected and he shook things up, but that wasn't the same thing as screwing them up. "I mean, you threw Maul off-stride some, but just speaking from experience, he'd rather have you here safe than left behind on Darkknell, even if it does shake things up."

That apparently hit a nerve; Eogan's jaw knotted, an old scar along the line of it catching the light. "He didn't get to the part of the story where he left me on Nar Shaddaa," he said, voice tight.

Somehow, Shiv wasn't that shocked that Eogan had been eavesdropping. "How much of that did you catch?" he asked, careful to keep his tone conversational instead of angry or threatening.
"Everything, until it got quiet." Eogan set aside the bundled sleep clothes and rested his elbows on his knees, then his face in his hands. "I was gonna go and-- I don't know. Ask questions. Or-- I don't even know now. And I heard you two talking and I stopped and stayed outside. And then-- I came back here." There was a long beat there, then he sighed out, shakily. "Do you know how kriffed up it is to want answers I'm not gonna get? 'Cause he didn't know what the hell was going on, either. And-- all these years, I figured there had to be some kind of-- I don't know, some purpose to it all. Closure, maybe. Or whatever it is when you feel like your life's your own finally, you know?"

Shiv was sort of unprepared for how much that made his throat ache. He breathed it off, letting it percolate for a few moments. "I don't. I mean-- none of us do. Not us clones, not our lieutenant. We're all kind of just doing the best we can."

"Yeah." Eogan didn't take his face out of his hands; when Shiv's hand landed light on his back, his shoulders trembled, but he didn't pull away.

"Listen," Shiv said, after a moment of letting Eogan breathe. "I don't have it all figured myself, but I know that those guys out there don't actually want anything bad to happen to you. And Maul might not know how the hell to talk to you, but he wouldn't have left you on Darkknell, whatever he might have done back twelve years ago. And you're right, I don't know what happened in full back then, but I'm pretty sure--" He paused, just sorting out how he wanted to keep going, then said, "He's been our CO for months. He's not really good at being open, but he shows us how much he gives a damn all the time, from saving me from an almost fatal fall to letting Raze tackle-hug him every time we have a win. And I can't-- I don't think, for even a second, that it's somehow a new thing, that ability to care. I'm not saying you have to forgive whatever happened back then, or anything, but maybe remember that when you guys do finally manage to talk."

Eogan didn't say anything right away, breath a little ragged; when he dropped his hands, though, he looked exhausted and a little teary, but maybe not so lost. "Yeah."

"And for frip's sake, make yourself at home," Shiv jerked his chin towards the drawers. "We didn't steal those from a medical frigate just for them to stay empty. You'll be here at least a few days, might as well settle in. I'll see you at breakfast."

"You will?" Eogan asked, a hint of amusement appearing on his otherwise kind of haggard face. "What, are you in charge or something?"

It was clearly a joke, and Shiv flashed a grin back. "Something, anyway." He brushed his hand over Eogan's back one more time, then got to his feet. "It'll be okay. Things will be better tomorrow."

He didn't know if Eogan believed him, but he left the guy in a little better shape, anyway.

Which just left him one more person to work on a bridge with, even if it was already built and only needed some gentle maintenance.

"I'm sorry for earlier."

It wasn't the first time that Maul had apologized over it; in fact, within moments of being back from wherever he'd gone in his head, he'd managed to say *I'm sorry* through rattling teeth, which had made Shiv more than a little concerned. Now, getting the same thing again--
Once Shiv had gotten done with Eogan, he'd retrieved the dog tags so he could deliver 'em and check in on Maul. They were pretty neat on close inspection; brushed silver with black letters carved into them, bearing Maul's name, and 212 for their battalion, and his rank bars. The edges were lined in black rubber to prevent cuts, and Raze was the one who donated the chain for them, one of his 'black market' acquisitions from when he was painting armor on Radnor, so they were a collaborative effort all around.

Then there was trying to coax a zabrak awake who'd been drugged to the gills on anti-anxiety medication, which took a bit of time, but it wasn't like Shiv had anywhere else he wanted to be. So, he just sat on the edge of Maul's bunk and rubbed over his shoulder until Maul finally made it back to some semblance of awareness.

Now, this second apology just made him really, incredibly kriffin' sad. "I just spent weeks disengaged, Lieu, caught up in my own head. I'm not sure how you having a rough day requires an apology."

"That's not the same," Maul said, with the same careful enunciation that he seemed to default to when he was impaired in some way. His mouth went into a straight line, though it didn't really seem like anger. Maybe more of that really unfair standard he seemed to apply to himself.

"Okay, and if our positions today had been reversed, would you want me to apologize?" Shiv asked, raising his eyebrows, mostly because he already knew the answer to it.

"No." Said answer was pretty quick, given circumstances; of course, the look Maul gave him suggested that he was both aghast at the thought and also that he had no idea whatsoever how to look into that mirror and apply it to himself. Something to work on, Shiv just thought, and shook his head. "Then why would I want an apology?"

It probably wasn't too fair to push right now, when Maul was having a hell of a time just keeping his eyes open; still, Maul didn't try to argue that, which Shiv would take as a victory, though he turned his face back into his pillow, breaking eye contact. That one, Shiv had a feeling, was going to take a long time to detangle.

But-- they had time. Shiv was here to the end of the road, wherever that ended up being.

"Anyway, I wanted to deliver your present, courtesy of Castle, Tally and Raze," he said, moving on smoothly, laying the dog tags on the edge of the pillow. "And to tell you that I'm here. And that things will be better tomorrow. And that if you even try to accuse me of coddling you, I'm going to wake Raze up and insist he cuddle you until his unrelenting positivity somehow rubs off on you." A beat. "Actually, that's not a half-bad idea--"

"Shiv, please," Maul interrupted, but damned if the corner of his mouth hadn't crept up.

"Well, you're the one who called me incorrigible. Have to live up to that reputation somehow." Shiv smiled back, shaking his head again and then leaning way over, pressing his brow to Maul's temple; something tweaked sharp and sweet in his heart when Maul got a hand into his hair to hold on back. "It'll be okay," he said, softly. "I'll be me, you be you, and we'll be okay."

The only answer was that grip tightening for a moment, but that was more than good enough.
The next morning -- or what passed for ship's morning -- was a corner turned.

Eogan had to force himself out of his borrowed room, wearing borrowed clothes, and he could barely make himself look up when he found himself a seat at the table. But when he did manage to, he found mostly that the squad of clones moved around him like he belonged there, like he wasn't some toxic element that had found its way into their sanctuary. The pilot was still giving him the evil eye, but-- no one else.

On the way past him to his own chair, Rabbit dropped off a mealpack that smelled pretty decent and then ruffled his hair, and Eogan was so surprised by it that he blinked after the man for a moment. And Raze dropped into the seat next to his and leaned over, whispering, "Wait until you try that green jelly; it looks scary, but it tastes amazing. Like-- minty, but really sweet."

"Eogan. Caf or tea?" Shiv asked, from the counter, where he was making an assembly line of mugs.

"--caf, please," Eogan managed to answer, huffing a breath out. "Uh-- cream and sugar if you have it?"

"All right, got it."

Of course, that was when Maul walked in; whatever had happened to him the night before, he seemed okay now, though he looked kind of tired and maybe still rattled. He expertly caught the mug that Shiv slid down the counter to him with a, "Heads up, Lieu," before glancing over the squad as if checking them over, until his gaze landed on Eogan.

And for a moment, Eogan was sixteen and looking at a ghost; looking at twelve years of unanswered questions and hero worship and resentment.

Then the moment passed and he smiled a little, in some weird mix of relief and rueful apology.

"I'll tell you what I can, after breakfast," Maul said, after a slow breath out. "I don't know if I can give you what you want, but I can try to give you what answers I have."

Eogan's throat was tight, but he meant it when he said back, "That'll be good."
"Time!" Brody sang out, though he didn't actually look up from his datapad to do it.

Eogan rolled his eyes, blowing out a breath. Initially, the frustration was a real thing; being cut off at regular intervals in the discussion left him feeling like he was being thrown off-track. Now, mostly, he could see the point of it. Taking a break from the long discussion -- which was sometimes agonizingly painful, and sometimes downright funny -- gave everyone a chance to breathe and recenter themselves.

It was Smarty who came up with the rules. Somehow, despite Eogan thinking it would probably just be him and Maul talking, the entire squad ended up involved. Rabbit and Tango (who had mostly stopped death-glaring, but not entirely) would switch off places in the pilot's seat in order to participate, and there was a reasonably steady flow of questions, answers, caf, tea, sometimes snacks, occasional pokes with fake toy lightsabers, a rare descent into banter and a sort of organized chaos to the whole thing. And this was their third day of it; Naboo was long behind them, they weren't too far from Llanic, discussion was limited to mornings only, the time between breakfast and lunch. After lunch, the squad did their own thing, and sometime in the afternoon were given lessons in a martial art called teräs käsi. Eogan had watched for all of ten minutes before he asked to be included, and then he was set aside with Raze as a private tutor, and--

Honestly? He had a great time. Raze was a pretty good teacher. And listening in to the main group, despite some of them clearly being irritated by going through with it, showed just how good Maul was at the same.

Evenings were spent relaxing, or trying to. Reading, or fooling around with fake lightsaber spars, or playing games of cards, or talking, or whatever else everyone did. Shiv, Smarty, Brody and Maul usually gravitated together, and he heard them discussing what they were going to do with Llanic. For Eogan's part, he found himself kind of drawn into Rabbit's orbit, though the suspicion that Rancor viewed him with made him wary about being there.

Then, the next day, it would all start again.

So far, Eogan had learned that:

1.) The Sith still existed.

Before now, they had been the scary 'monster in the closet' kind of lore that had been used to frighten children. Even Artagan had told stories about them, though now, upon serious reflection, Eogan had figured out a lot of those were drawn from his time in the Bando Gora, given their nature. But Eogan had never really suspected them to be anything more than twisted, ancient lore that had lost all relevance; finding out otherwise led to the next revelation.

2.) Maul had been a Sith apprentice. Also, a complete tool in all senses of the word.

Which, Maul pretty much outright stated. He skimmed over a lot of the details, but everything he didn't skim over was enough to paint a portrait that even he might not have intended to be painted. What more surprised Eogan was how much the squad didn't know. Whenever Maul detailed some piece of his history, they were all absolutely silent, watching him, and that kind of scrutiny was
probably a lot to take, which kept Maul's answers short. Still, from what Eogan could glean, he had been raised from infancy to be what he had tried to present himself as being on Cog Hive Seven; a brutal killing machine, unquestioningly loyal and obedient. Which seemed to both be anathesis of what a Sith Lord was supposed to be (given what they were suspected of doing with this entire kriffing war) and also to what Maul actually had been. Which was--

3.) Just as frippin' lost and confused as Eogan had been back then. And just as desperately searching for meaning.

For Eogan, that meaning had been making his father proud. In becoming a fighter, in mastering the Fifty-Two Fists. For Maul, it had been in proving his worth and loyalty and obedience in the hopes that he would be given a real purpose, some sign that he was a part of the greater plan and not just cannon fodder. Now, Eogan-as-an-adult could see what his sixteen-year-old counterpart hadn't: His own father had really just been a scrabbling, desperate man who had taken a gambit that was ill-thought out and based on fear, not to save himself, but to save his son. Not some larger-than-life mastermind who plotted it all, but a frightened father.

Somehow, in those moments where reality set in, he felt closer to that old man than he had since he had died.

It was the first measuring of the depth from which his father loved him. And it was the realization of just how much he had inherited from the man, not just in terms of physical fighting skills, but in terms of-- everything. Across a generation, the same kinds of heartfelt, debatably foolish responses to things, be it running from the Bando Gora or defecting from the CIS.

He'd been the one to cut off the discussion that time; had excused himself from the table and vanished back to his room, where he sat and cried his kriffin' heart out, love and defiance in equal measures. It might have been the first time he tried to ignore his father's well-intentioned but ultimately lousy dictates about crying, too.

When he came back for lunch, no one pushed him, but Raze brought him his food and Rabbit ruffled through his hair again, and it seemed like almost everyone found a reason to pat his back or shoulder, and if nothing else brought home how isolated he'd been pretty much since his father had died (and maybe before), it was how all that physical affection felt both agonizing and good at once.

(Maul kept his physical distance, but his squad tended to do the same thing to him, too; Eogan wondered if he found it as mixed. Either way, he seemed pretty used to it, especially from Raze, Tally and Shiv.)

Anyway, the break between one morning and the next led to another revelation which he confirmed when discussion resumed:

4.) No kriffin' way was Eogan supposed to live through that.

He wasn't Maul's target. He was a nobody teenager, as worthless as the rest of the inmate genpop, given notability only because his father had useful information. But despite all bluster -- because Maul was a tool, in all senses of the word -- Maul had put forth a genuine effort to keep him alive. And given everything Eogan had learned priorly, there was no way that Maul's training should have accounted for that. In fact, the opposite was true. Eogan was a potential witness to an emergent Sith, who had witnessed him wielding a lightsaber and not only hadn't Maul killed Eogan, Maul had helped him get off of the Hive and had made no moves to slaughter him afterwards, and--

That one had nearly taken Eogan off his feet. Because he had spent the last twelve years viewing Jagannath as being some kind of extraordinary force of nature, something to revile and worship at
once. As someone who had come to the Hive on his own power, all talk of 'masters' aside, and who had agency and made a choice to save Eogan only to capriciously abandon him days later, and without a word.

And-- the reality was that Maul was just a deluded twenty-one year old with the social skills of a wounded rancor who had no choice about being there, whatever his physical fighting skills, and had saved Eogan because--

5.) Maul had admired Artagan Truax, and Artagan's sense of honor and love for his son. And in his own mixed-up way, he cared enough to do something about what he saw as a wrong, because he also believed in honor. And that some part of him had resonated with that devotion -- a parent, trying to save his child -- enough to act on it, as much as he screwed up sense of everything would allow.

Maul didn't actually say that, in so many words; he mentioned Artagan's "prowess" and courage and loyalty to Eogan. But after all that talking, even Eogan could read between the lines.

The stupid twenty-one year old had saved the equally stupid teenager because Shiv was right: Whatever he was intended to be, however twisted out of true it was, Maul had cared.

That wasn't to say it was easy for Eogan to let go of twelve years of misconceptions; of built-up resentment and hero worship, in equal measures. But as much as some part of him wanted to hold onto it -- wanted to cry out, "Why didn't you stay with me," and "How hard has my life been because you dropped like a bomb into it" -- he could pretty much feel his whole galaxy-view realigning around all of the new information.

Now, they were basically done with the Hive and Eogan had talked about what he had done after that, on Nar Shaddaa. After three days and hours of discussion -- Sith history and theories about the war took a chunk of time, especially with the Blackbirds asking questions -- Cog Hive Seven could be put to bed. And Brody had just called for a break, a short interval to let them think about other things or process the things they'd already talked about. Eogan didn't so much feel the urge to flinch away, now; all the big pieces between them were on the table. He'd explained his resentment, which Maul just nodded back at; he also tried to explain his new understanding of why Maul had just ditched him, and something inside of himself righted when he found the grace to forgive it, if silently.

What Eogan didn't expect that morning was to find out that he was the only free man on that courier heading for Llanic.

Or how incredibly pissed off that fact left him.

"Wait, what?"

Maul had spent more time than he ever wanted to talking about things he had no desire to talk about, so Eogan's reaction to the fact he was still a prisoner took him aback; of all the things that had come up, he hadn't expected that to be any particular revelation. His brow wavered as he took in the somewhat shocked look on the man's face; the topic had drifted from Eogan's days as a prison guard and his process of defecting to how Maul had ended up an officer in the GAR, and even though Maul had no intention of going into details, he saw no issue with revealing his current status.

Which was why he repeated, a bit cautiously, "I'm a prisoner of the Order. Since my choices were to
either sit and rot in a cell or make some use of myself, I asked for parole."

Eogan didn't seem comforted by that. He sank back into his seat, gaping, before looking around at the members of the squad also there. "And the rest of you?" he asked, after a moment, fair skin flushed.

Unsurprisingly, it was Tally who answered, with his characteristic bluntness: "He's an extra-legal prisoner and we're property. If you're asking about what kinds of rights we have."

"Slaves," Eogan said, apparently feeling just as blunt.

"Hey, I wouldn't go that far," Husker piped up; he'd been spending most of the time over the past few days listening, aside from the occasional pointed question, but that was enough to prompt him into speaking. "We're purpose-raised, trained soldiers."

Tally's mouth thinned. "Husk, that's no less banthashit than the last time we had this discussion."

Maul didn't expect a fight to break out over it; Husker and Tally remained on opposite sides of that debate, but they had never crossed the line towards meanness.

Husker snorted right back at the medic. "You got your opinions, I got mine. We don't know what the Republic's gonna do after the war, but I doubt they're gonna kick us into a hole or anything and cover it up. We're too prominent. And we've got some people speakin' up for us."

"Not the majority. A few Jedi. Senator Organa." Tally crossed his arms, sinking back into his seat. "You're right, we don't know, but Husk-- you can't think they're just gonna hand us all the backpay we would have earned and hand us Republic citizenship and tell us, 'thanks, guys, have a good -- drastically shortened -- life!'"

"Why not?"

Eogan was watching this, a look of quiet horror on his face. Just for his own sake, Maul had been shielding fairly strongly the past few days; he'd gotten into the habit of not doing so quite so much when it was just him and the Blackbirds, because it was both useful and comforting to have some sense of how they were feeling, but the high emotional stakes of the conversations of late got Maul back into the habit of blocking all of that out quickly. Still, he didn't need to 'read' the room to see that look of horror was genuine, as Tally and Husker argued back and forth.

"Who would gain by it?" Tally swept a hand out. "No one. No one would gain by having a bunch of clone soldiers, raised from birth, released on a society they'd never technically been a part of." He paused a moment, then continued, "I'll tell you what I think will happen: Even if we win, which is no ways a guarantee, we're going to be held as a standing army to prevent this kind of thing ever happening again. If we're lucky, we'll be deployed on rescue missions or natural disasters. And then they'll let us age and die off, and then wash their hands of the whole thing."

"Frame it as a good thing," Brody added in, casually. "Play up our ability to help the civvies, maybe come up with a showpiece company or division with the best bases and food to photoshoot, just to make sure the average citizen doesn't feel guilty."

"What good is that kinda thinkin' doin' either of you?" Husker asked back, looking between them as if he couldn't fathom where they were deriving their ideas from. "You can't tell me you think every Jedi leading us thinks we're just disposable and won't speak up for us at the end of the war."

"For every Shaak Ti -- and I'll believe she's actually serious about helping us when someone gives me evidence of the clones she's gotten to freedom instead of onto a battlefield -- there's a Pong
"Krell," Tally said, sharply.

Both Rabbit and Rancor shuddered in their seats at that name, though they had mostly also been quiet but for questions. Husker worked his jaw, eyes glittering, then got up from the table and rolled his shoulders. "I'm takin' a break," he said, though he made sure to brush his hand over the tops of Rabbit's and Rancor's heads as he passed them, and give Tally's a gentle nudge.

Tally rolled with it -- the gesture was a common bit of body-language through the squad, a sign of affection -- and then looked after him before resting his face in his hands and breathing out a shaky breath.

Eogan had been watching all of this, looking more and more stricken as it went on, and now when he spoke, there was a broken note in his voice: "These are all war crimes. The CIS is committing war crimes and so is the Republic."

"It's not a crime if the ruling class makes it legal," Tally said, from behind his hands, bitterly.

Of all the people Eogan might have expected to show up at his temporary door, Maul was the last one.

It wasn't as if Eogan hadn't already had some idea of the situation with the clones. He knew they were grown for the war. He knew they didn't actually get a choice about serving. But hearing the word *property* had brought it all together, slammed it home like a hard jab right to the teeth; in a way, they were even less protected, at least legally, than the prisoners that Eogan had defected over. He knew what was happening in the CIS with prisoners was against the Confederacy's laws; the Republic, though, apparently outright sanctioned this slavery. There was no contingency for clones too hurt to serve; no retirement into the civilian world. What happened to them? Were they just sent back out until they were killed off?

Or worse?

And then the thing about their drastically shortened lives--

Hearing the anger and pain in Tally's voice had been agonizing, to the point where Eogan couldn't deal with it anymore and slipped out again.

He almost expected Raze or maybe Shiv to come and check on him; when the door chimed, it didn't actually surprise him.

Who was behind it did.

Maul offered out a mug of some kind of tea, looking both rueful and wary at once. "Are you all right?" he asked, which almost made Eogan laugh, 'cause no, he really kripping *wasn't*, but compared to the guys on this ship, his problems seemed minuscule.

Still, he took the tea, even though he set it aside on the drawers, before stepping back to sit on the bed and leave the invitation to come in open. He tried to say he was fine, but ended up with, "I don't know how to answer that."
Maul didn't come in and sit like Shiv would have, but he leaned his shoulder against the door frame, crossing his arms now that he didn't have the mug to hold anymore. He didn't seem to know what to say; he opened his mouth to try, then just shook his head, seemingly to himself. "I don't know what to tell you, either."

Eogan had spent more time in the past few days crying than he had in years, and he was kind of sick of it now. But no amount of internal self-censure stopped his eyes from burning, his vision from blurring, as he looked up at his former hero and whispered, "Why don't you run? Why don't you take them and run?"

That seemed to hit home; Maul closed his eyes and his jaw knotted, and for several heartbeats, he didn't say anything. When he finally did speak, after Eogan had been two seconds from apologizing for who-even-knew-what, he sounded exhausted and kind of miserable. "I can't. I can't run. But as to my squad: If they wanted to, I'd get them out and as far out of reach as possible."

It didn't take Eogan but a breath to see the problem with-- kriff, all of that. If the squad went AWOL without their CO, where would the blame fall? And what possible appeal could Maul ever make? "Why can't you?" he asked, swiping the tears out of the way, hating the way it came out as a plea, but unable to keep it from being such.

"Several reasons." Maul shifted his weight mostly onto one foot, leaning more heavily, just to rest the side of his head against the door's frame, and didn't open his eyes. "I suppose I could technically. But it would hurt someone I--" A beat, then he knotted his jaw again. "It would hurt someone I love. He would understand, he would forgive it, he might even encourage it, but it would come down on him in the end, given how hard he's fought for me to have even this much freedom. And then, if I did manage to get away, I'm tracked anywhere in the Republic. I could take this courier and the Blackbirds and get a good head start, doubtless. We're fairly independent, and it would take the Jedi Council time to realize we had disappeared. There's certainly enough talent on this ship to make a go of it, but landing in the CIS would be suicide, as would landing anywhere in the Republic be, which narrows our options for everything, from supplies to employment to currency. Bounty hunters would be after us; Jedi might even be after us. And even if, somehow, we managed to overcome all of that, I don't know how long I would last out there. Until I can find some other way, this is all I have for any of us."

It was pretty clear Eogan wasn't bringing up anything new; clear that Maul had probably been thinking about this for a long time. Eogan tried to grapple with it; not only with all of the things that had been discussed the past few days, but all of the things being discussed now, and it seemed so big that it felt like some kind of looming monster, more terrifying than those ridiculous holograms on Darkknell, ready to swallow the whole damned galaxy.

"You beat everything the Hive threw at you," Eogan said, bewildered and heartsick. "And then some. How could anything stop you?"

There was such a long stretch of silence there that it felt like time had hit pause.

Then Maul asked, almost gently, "Do you really want to know the answer to that?"

(Even if, later, Eogan would have been given a do-over, he would have answered the same way. But that didn't soften the blow any.)
"I think he's just overwrought, so you can stop looking like you set some tooka kits on fire," Tally said, dryly; he still seemed ragged around the edges himself, but the words were clearly meant in good humor. "He's had a really rough week, but I think he'll be okay."

Maul had no real idea how to handle Eogan's reaction to his own cybernetics, nor the fact that they were essentially booby-trapped to keep him in compliance; he'd pulled up a pant leg and shown the metal, and had given a matter-of-fact explanation of the security measures contained within them, and while he hadn't failed to notice how pale Eogan's face got as he went on, he hadn't honestly expected Eogan to shatter at that.

With Obi-Wan, Maul would have wrapped around him -- and had in the past -- and held him through it, reassuring. But he didn't know if that was something he was supposed to do with people who weren't Obi-Wan. Or if it would be welcomed. With the Blackbirds, they tended to ask for affection or reassurance in their own way; it was a little easier to figure out how and when to touch them. But with Eogan, he didn't have the first clue. And the force of the breakdown had, frankly, sent him into a mild panic of his own, so he went to get Tally.

(Later, he'd realize he and Shiv apparently shared the same impulses about such things.)

Tally had no issue figuring out the right thing to do; he just wrapped one arm, then the other, around the wretchedly sobbing man and spoke softly to him. Much like Maul did with Obi-Wan. Noted, Maul thought, then, but he still wasn't sure exactly what he was noting, only that it was important.

Once the force of that was under some kind of tenuous control, Eogan had all but sobbed himself to sleep; Tally just tucked him in and sat on the edge of the bed and stroked through his hair. Before he'd crashed into oblivion, he'd managed a choked, "I'm okay," and Tally had snorted back at him and said, "You're the second most touch-starved person I've ever met, so hush," and kept on petting.

Eogan didn't even attempt an argument.

That had been about ten minutes ago. Tally didn't seem in any hurry to get up; Maul wondered if he was also working things over in his own mind. "I hadn't meant to upset him," Maul said, shaking his head.

"I know." Tally finally stopped petting, then got up. He eyed Maul, then shook his head back. "Lieu, I know that. But the situation -- the whole kriffing situation, all of it -- is upsetting. That's not your fault, that's just what it is."

Maul didn't care for that answer, but he got out of the way and headed back out of the cargo hold to let Tally past him, then followed the medic out and across the corridor to the medbay. "Should I have not told him?"

"He asked, you gave him a chance to back out, he wanted to know anyway." Tally headed over to where he was working on some other equipment on the counter, leaving Maul to stand awkwardly, wanting to fidget and also wanting not to fidget.

"That's not an answer." Admittedly, Maul was less than sure he wanted one, right now.

Tally's shoulders slumped and he breathed out, dropping his head for a moment, before turning and putting his back to the counter. "Okay, frankly? The last thing I want to do right now is hand you any kind of ammunition to beat yourself up with." When Maul went to protest that he had no intentions of it, he didn't even get a word out before Tally's hand shot up, shutting him back up.
"Don't tell me you won't. I'm not doin' this with you, Lieu. All I'm gonna say about it is that you didn't do anything wrong. He's overwrought, not broken. Some sleep and time to process, he'll probably be fine. There's no starmap I can give you here," he added, imploring. "He cares. You care. It's real and honest, and if you're waiting for me to condemn you on that over timing, delivery or anything else, I'm not frippin' doing it."

Maul had no idea how to respond to that; it just slammed into the usual speeder-wreck tangle of his mind, and he stood silently waiting for-- something, he didn't know what, feeling nervous and uncertain about what any of that meant.

He could feel Tally watching him, and right now it felt like a brand against his skin.

"I would get you out," Maul said, more abruptly than he meant to, flexing his hands at his sides. "If you and the others wanted to desert. I would cover your tracks."

That obviously wasn't what Tally thought he was going to say; his eyes went wide and his mouth fell open. Unable to bear more than a second of that look, Maul turned on his toe to leave; fleeing, even if he wasn't sure where to.

(Shiv took one look at his L-T in the corridor and smoothly intercepted; they were only a few hours from landing on Llanic, and he, Smarty and Brody had some additional ideas to the ones they'd been working out in the evenings. Since mission specs were a hell of a lot easier for everyone to deal with, emotionally, Shiv just redirected Maul to their common area with an arm across his shoulders and a request to go over the new ideas with them and offer some insight of his own. It wasn't the smoothest transition in the galaxy, he could literally see Maul struggle to switch tracks from whatever one he'd just been barreling along, but after Maul huffed and nodded, Shiv gave the back of his neck a reassuring squeeze and followed along so they could finish preliminary work on their mission.)

(Later that night, after they were landed and preparing for the next day's adventures, Shiv cornered a guilt-quiet Tally, plunked a chair from the common room down across from the one in the medbay, sat down and leaned back and said, "Okay, so let's talk psychiatry and neuroscience," and couldn't help but grin at the surprised, then amused look he got back.)

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't planning on writing out Shiv's and Tally's discussion here, or anything, just suggest it happened offscreen. Mostly because Tally goes on and on. But if people are interested in it, let me know and I can maybe try to write it for Between the rock and a compromise.
That Good Ole Llanic Snag, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Kind of like that Good Ole Ragtime Jazz, but with more kidnapping and such.

Chapter Notes

I'm not dead, I promise! It's been a rough several weeks, mental health wise, then the whole tumblr meltdown, and the holidays. But I'm still here, still at it. <3 Credit for Starshines as the GFFA Starbucks goes to shadowmaat.

"Okay, so tell me, who's this-- Prawn Krell?"

Brody almost snorted the fancy caf-drink up his nose, when Eogan laid that one on him. He set his cup aside and coughed into his sleeve before descending into helpless laughter, all the while unwittingly attracting the curious glances of everyone around them, all of whom were probably wondering what could possibly be funny about anything on Llanic.

Right now, they were sitting in a quasi-reputable Starshines, one of the few franchises that was brave enough to try to open places on Llanic, which had been a shadowport for as long as anyone could remember. The only other one willing to take their chances was Biscuit Baron; Brody had gotten one look at the local one, its sad state and the number of spice addicts chowing down on biscuits outside and decided the cafshop might be the better option for their objective. Which was, essentially, to look like nobody of import, because nobody of import wanted to look like they were while on Llanic.

After a few more coughs (and stray giggles), Brody shook his head, dropping his voice again. "Not Prawn Krell. Pong Krell. He's a Jedi general famous for two things: his ability to achieve almost any objective and win almost any battle, and his extraordinarily high body count as he does it."

Eogan was watching his face, eyes pinched some as he took that in. "You mean, high body count on your side."

The urge to laugh bled away, and Brody scratched his beard before nodding. "Yeah. I mean, my brothers. But since he's so effective, they just keep sending him more and more clones, usually younger and younger. Rabbit and Rancor woulda gone to him, if not for General Kenobi."

"This is so kriffed," Eogan muttered. He'd been absorbing everything he'd been told since ending up with the Blackbirds, taking it all in and sometimes struggling like hell with it, but Brody liked the guy. He was rough around the edges, but in that, he was in good company.

And he was perfectly comfortable on Llanic, unlike a lot of the Blackbirds; his experiences on Nar Shaddaa and then moving around other shadowports before settling made him a pretty invaluable ally to have right now. He seemed to know which streets to avoid just on a glance, and how to sidestep people who might try to mug or pickpocket him. Brody was no slack in the 'debatable places' department, but Eogan had a lot more experience than he did just by function of age and
practice, and even as he was using his datapad and a receiver to start studying the HoloNet traffic patterns, he was picking up Eogan's tricks and body language.

"Yeah, I know. I don't get myself in a twist about it as much as Tally does, but--" Brody shrugged to himself, took an absent sip of his drink, then finished, "You can't be cut loose on the HoloNet and not get a pretty clear picture of just how messed up our situation is."

"Is there anyone doing anything about it?"

"A few people. One for sure; Senator Organa of Alderaan. He's tight with the Lieu." Brody watched a network spike curiously, then slid his fingers over the surface of the pad, backtracking where it was coming from. "Think we might have a bite, here."

Eogan didn't know much about a slicer's work, but he made a hell of a spotter. Without even needing asked, he got to his feet, broad shoulders bunching under his newly cleaned jacket. "Oh yeah? Let's go see what's goin' on, then."

Tackling Llanic was largely a case of casting their net wide, then narrowing in on their potential targets for surveillance. It meant some of the Blackbirds going incognito -- as incognito as they could, given they all shared about the same face -- and some of them working with local law enforcement. Brody had grown out a beard and with a little help from Raze and his makeup kit, had taken off with Eogan to see if he could find anything interesting. Husker and Castle, both looking the most like actual clone troopers, had gone to the oh-so-creatively named Port City Police Department to act as liaisons; Smarty, despite wanting to go with Brody, went with them because he was the one best capable of scanning through a large number of files to see if there were any patterns in arrests that would give them clues. Not that they expected much luck there.

The biggest thing of note about Llanic was the amount of spice that flowed through it. It was ostensibly a Republic world, mostly by virtue of location, but in reality, it functioned more as a lawless Outer Rim hub than anything else. Every lowlife organization in the galaxy had some stake in the shadowport, from the Hutts, to the CIS, to the Republic's more shady side. Black Sun supposedly had a presence. The Pykes. More small-time smugglers than you could shake a baton at. The fact it hadn't been cleaned up despite past attempts meant that they weren't likely to be the first to have a hand in.

"The police are probably corrupt," Maul had said, at their final briefing before dispersal. "They'll cooperate on the surface, but I wouldn't count on them helping if things go sideways on us, or offering us much in the way of useful intelligence. Remember, we're only here for recon; if you find any CIS operations or ones that look connected to CIS operations, observe, then note them and move along. Don't engage, don't draw attention to yourselves."

Their appearances and proclivities were taken into account when doling out assignments. Raze's tendency to be bubbly, cheerful and definitely not suitable for solo covert-ops of this nature had him paired with Tally, who was shrewd enough for both of them. They were headed for the barely functioning addiction clinics, the few good samaritans on this planet who actually were trying to do the right thing. Misty and Tango rented a swoop bike and headed out of the city and into the rural areas, to see if they could find out anything from the farmers and fishermen, who tended to keep to themselves.
Rabbit and Rancor, much to their chagrin, were tapped to stay with the courier. Not only to protect the ship, but to act as backup if it became necessary. Though they were promised field time after the initial scoping was done.

That left Shiv and Maul, and really, Shiv was fine with that arrangement. He did a quick bleach-and-dye on the tips of his hair, and let Raze play around with his makeup and something he found on the HoloNet called *contouring*; between that and his naturally darker skin and change of clothes, he probably looked civilian enough to pass, unless someone was well-familiar with clone troopers. And, honestly, he knew from Smarty that humans kind of all blurred together to non-humans, and that helped, too.

It was a sunny day, bright enough that he wore sunshades out, and while he wasn't sure what exactly they were looking for, he had his eyes open for anything that appeared out of the ordinary.

"Where are we headed, anyway?" he asked, aside.

Maul was walking with purpose; dressed in the long black coat he'd worn on Darkknell and sporting his own mirrored sunshades, he looked like he was the exact kind of trouble Llanic was used to having. He cocked his head over towards Shiv, a grin cutting across his face. "The nearest bar, of course."

Shiv probably shoulda figured that out on his own, but he rolled his eyes and gave the zabrak a light shove in the shoulder, making him hop-step. "If you think I'm carrying you to bed this time—"

"Perish the thought," Maul said, with a sniff.

He was still smiling, though, and that was enough to keep Shiv grinning.

"Moving target," Brody said, as they paused for a moment outside of a battered high-rise of apartments. He was scowling at his datapad, looking a little more interesting to potential passersby than he should have, but Eogan was keeping an eye out. It was broad daylight, and even for as lawless as Llanic was, most of the exciting things tended to happen after dark even here.

"Do you know what it is?" Eogan asked, glancing up and down the alley. There were a few ramshackle structures built of trash, the likes of which homeless sheltered in, but no one was in them. A glance up showed windows either closed or boarded over. Even then, they kept their voices down.

"A broadcast." Brody looked up himself, frowning. "Encrypted, large packets. But whoever's sending it is on the move, according to satellite relay."

This was all over Eogan's head. His grasp of the HoloNet went so far as looking stuff up, like the comm codes for local delivery joints, and no further. Or maybe catching the news, sometimes. When he could stand to watch. That Brody was able to tap into satellites and track large transmissions via the HoloNet was more like wizardry to him than science. But, since he had already explained how much of a layman he was about such things, he just nodded and kept an eye out while Brody did his thing.

It was by luck alone that both of them were peering skyward when a fleet figure leapt from the top of one building to another over their heads, long head-tresses flowing behind them. Eogan blinked, as
the shadow overhead was there and gone, just that fast, carrying something, then exchanged a wide-
eyed look with Brody.

"--I did see that, right?" Brody asked, before looking down at his datapad again.

"Yeah, definitely."

Brody tapped something or another into the datapad and then grinned, slow and sharp. "I think we've found our broadcaster, then. At least until they shut down."

"I thought the point was to blend in," Shiv said, resting his chin on his palm, though he kept his voice low so that it wouldn't travel beyond the space of their table.

Maul looked at the third-of-a-meter tall cocktail sitting in front of him with such an expression of dismay that it was all Shiv could do not to start giggling uncontrollably. Layered in the colors of a sunset, it had swizzle-stick streamers poked out of the top, which was layered with some kind of fruit. It smelled pretty good, but it was probably the last thing Shiv had expected his lieutenant to order. And it was eye-catching, too.

Not that Maul himself wasn't a bit so already; he didn't get as many glances as he seemed to among more civilized company, but he still got more of them than Shiv did.

"At least I ordered it non-alcoholic," Maul answered, giving an experimental poke to one of the streamers. "How am I supposed to even drink it with all of that in the way?"

Shiv reached out and started plucking the streamers out, laying them on the table in a row, and smirked all the while. Even though that earned him a light kick under the table to the shin. "Smart as you are, and you couldn't figure that out?"

Maul huffed, though he gamely pulled the tall glass over to himself and sat up straighter so he could peer down at it. Then, delicately, he picked up one of the swizzle-sticks and got down to the very serious business of trying to spear one of the floating pieces of fruit, which had Shiv cover his mouth and finally give into the laughter he had barely been holding back.

"I'm glad I'm the primary source of your entertainment. I knew there was some reason I'd been given this rank," Maul said, dryly, as he finally got a piece and eyed it before biting into it.

"If we're awarding rank on entertainment value, you oughta be a general." Shiv rubbed at his mouth, shaking his head.

The bar they had stopped in was just about the same as any other dive. Dark corners, a kitchen that probably produced delicious but greasy food and that would never pass a health inspection. Some unidentified grit underfoot and the occasional sticky patch. Here or there, small groups of people who were clearly smugglers -- or wanna-be smugglers -- congregated, almost all of them young and ill-kempt.

Despite their back and forth banter, he and Maul were working; both had an ear bead in and disposable mini-receivers deployed, dropped like small stones (and looking like them) as they each went to the bar or to the 'fresher. Beyond listening to those, the audio was also being recorded in case
they missed something the first time. There were a couple young, shady looking guys who'd ducked out not long after they came in, but otherwise, it was pretty quiet in there.

Thus far, though, aside some speculation about what kind of zabrak Maul actually was, there had been nothing of note to listen to. All the major talk was about spice; namely, how to acquire loads of it to smuggle for a paycheck. Shiv kept having to bite back a snort at some of the schemes; most of those probably-not-yet-smugglers were likely here every day, trying to do the same thing over and over, and picking up piecemeal labor in the meantime.

Given how overrun Llanic was with spice and addicts thereof, there was at least work to be had. If they got stuck here any length of time, Shiv wasn't above picking up an under-the-table job for credits.

"Where do you wanna go after this?" Shiv asked, watching his lieutenant working his way through spearing fruit out of the way. His own beer was watery and weak, not even enough to buzz him, which meant he had no trouble nursing it along.

"Another bar. Perhaps a livelier one." Maul half-shrugged, then tried a sip of his drink. "It's rather early for the sort of crowd we'd be interested in, though."

Shiv quirked his eyebrows back. "Hopefully the beer's better quality, at least."

It didn't take them long to lose the trail.

Brody all but seethed in frustration as he sat in the back booth of a cruddy little Biscuit Baron (not the same one as the first one), as the sky outside edged towards evening. He'd found a quiet, out-of-the-way spot to check in with the rest of the squad; Rabbit and Rancor were bored and blunt about it. Tango and Misty hadn't found anything of interest yet but were going to rent a room in the farming village they'd stopped in. Tally and Raze somehow ended up conscripted into taking care of spice addicts; no surprise there. Maul and Shiv were barhopping -- lucky kriffers -- and apparently Husk, Smarty and Castle were passing time drinking sludgy caf at a precinct, going through old arrest records.

Brody and Eogan were hunting ghosts.

The broadcast had ended, then nothing. No network spikes of that size. Somewhere around the fourteenth city block, Brody had finally stopped wandering in disgust.

Now he was sitting with a value-tray of food that looked like it had past its best-by date several cycles ago, watching the datapad hungrily while Eogan worked through his similarly debatable food.

The beauty of encryption was that the right kind was unbreakable. Most people didn't actually use the right kind; they used various forms of standardized encryption, because they didn't understand their own systems enough to come up with better. And there was a point to standardization, namely in speed, but it meant that anyone with enough time and energy could eventually break it. Brody was pretty damned good at it, if he did say so himself; there was a reason he had back doors to network relays all over the kriffin' galaxy.

But whoever he was tracking right now clearly did know what they were doing. Or, at least, knew
Theories flew in Brody's mind; some kind of spy network, maybe? Or some major financial transactions through the underworld to the CIS? It could be none of those, of course, but that much traffic had to account for something big. It had come maybe a dozen packets from hitting the override switch on Llanic's hub before cutting off, so someone knew exactly how much to send and when. Just because Brody needed to know, he'd gone into said hub himself and found when the rollover would happen that would allow the next big transfer to go through, which was probably why his blue-milk biscuits were busy congealing in front of him.

Maybe they'd be treated to a repeat performance.

"What if they don't start doing-- whatever thing they were doing again?" Eogan asked, pushing his empty value-tray away from himself and pulling Brody's over.

Since Brody was obviously not eating them, he ignored it. "I guess we go back to slicing into individual connections in the hopes something interesting crosses our path."

"Hm."

Of course, that was when the transfer started again. Brody's spine jerked straight, fingers flying across the datapad, and then once it was most of the way through triangulating the signal, he jumped out of his seat, grabbed Eogan's arm and yanked him towards the door. "It's on, let's go!"

Eogan made a protesting noise, but he came out behind Brody, as they shoved their way out of the door into the deepening shadows--

--and right into the muzzle of a blaster.

A nautolan with ocre skin and blue rings on his arms and headtresses flashed a grin at them. "If you two'll hand your weapons over to my buddies there--"

Eogan turned and tried to belt the closest one, clipping the human male in the head a split-second before Brody realized that it was one of his kriffin' brothers and tried to tell him to stand down, only to get stun-bolted in the chest twice, double-tapped out like a soldier.

Brody held his hands out to his sides, datapad still in one, swallowing as poor Eogan crumbled to the ground next to him. Aside the clone on one side, there was a heavily scarred togruta on the other, and all three were holding blasters.

"It'll be fine, brother," the clone said, jerking his chin towards the nautolan. "Wish your buddy wouldn't have punched first and asked questions after, but we can't take chances, so hand over the weapons."

Brody twitched his head to the side, then pulled the small, streamlined blaster he'd been carrying out of its holster, under his jacket, offering it over to the other clone.

The fourth bar was finally interesting.
Maul and Shiv managed to get in before the rush, and just like before, deployed their receivers. Unlike the other bars, this one wasn't inhabited by bottom-level laborers or those who wanted to make a career in smuggling, but didn't really know how to go about it. Slightly more upscale, it required more deftness (and some small use of the Force) to cover the main room with enough small receivers to do some good.

After that, they got a table and dinner in one of the back booths and made small talk -- not Maul's favorite thing, but Shiv was easy to talk with compared to most -- while listening and recording.

Business interests seemed to frequent the bar; there was a doorman who let people in and out, based on identification -- which, of course, they had -- or based on their appearance. Several female servers moved around, dressed in a limited amount of cloth; the bartender was a falleen who didn't smile. At various tables, people congregated, most of them dressed somewhat above the street rabble, though none of them ostentatiously.

This was where the real smuggling happened.

Maul and Shiv both went unremarked, unlike in other bars. Maul was aware of the occasional lingering glance, though whatever they saw when he returned the look was enough to make them look away again, but no one was speculating about him openly.

It seemed, for the most part, to be spice moving through. Businessmen discussed it openly, including the payoffs to the local law enforcement, as if they had nothing to concern themselves with. Their business was largely indiscriminate; it didn't matter who they sold and bought product from, so long as it was good and could be paid for with untracked currency, like platinum or gold. Many of them were complaining about the situation on Ryloth and the latest Republic victories there, and how that had slowed down production and sales. Others, about slaves and the lack thereof.

"Called it on the law enforcement angle," Shiv murmured, barely above a whisper, as he set his fork down, leaving behind nothing on his plate but a bone from the steak he'd ordered.

Maul had been working over his dinner more slowly, most of his attention occupied with the various conversations. This time, he had been relying on his own hearing over that of the receivers, though they were recording. "Croft mentioned it, but it made sense, given Llanic's history."

"Yeah. Feels like we're looking for a micron in a minefield, frankly."

"We've got as long as we need, though. It's only the first day."

Shiv scoffed, then rested his elbows on the table and scrubbed at his face with both hands. "Meaning, we might need to integrate here before we'll get anything solid?"

Maul watched him for a moment, then went back to his plate. "It's possible. The thought doesn't agree with you?"

"Not really." Shiv ran his hands back over his artfully spiked hair, then folded his arms. "I mean-- I guess it's not bad. Just feel a little out of my depth."

"You're not." Maul set his own fork down, shaking his head. "Operations like these are often more a function of patience than anything else. Once you get used to it, you'll be all right."

"Hope so."

It made sense that Shiv would feel restless over the situation; when Maul was much younger, missions like this one would have had him all but climbing the walls. Patience had not been a part of
his repertoire, and he had preferred to take things and get them done as quickly as possible, even if occasionally that meant risking failure. One such failure had ended up with him choked to the edge of consciousness enough times that by the time it was over, he had forgotten what breathing felt like.

That was also his last failure of that type, though he had not learned the value of patience then, so much as he had learned the value of avoiding a repeat at all costs.

He didn't want to stay on Llanic any more than Shiv did, but he was prepared to make a go of it; come up with a mid-to-long term plan and see it through, making sure the Blackbirds could become enough a part of the world to pick up information. Croft had seen to it that they were outfitted with both credits and more hard currency, and they were given rein to use it however they needed to in order to achieve their objective -- including paying off the already paid off law enforcement if need be -- and there were certainly members of the squad that Maul thought would be able to handle the interpersonal interactions that would be necessary in such a case. Brody and Eogan were both experienced in this manner of environment; Maul was capable of using his own highly specialized experience as leverage, too. The rest would learn what they didn't know, if given a chance.

Still, for Shiv -- who was at his finest coordinating in the untamed wilds of whatever world, be it arid or icy or drenched -- this whole thing probably felt stifling.

(If Maul thought too long about it, he'd agree.)

"We'll manage it," he concluded, despite having fallen quiet. "If nothing else, we'll be eating well, if we find enough places like this to cater."

"The key to all our hearts." Shiv snorted, though his mouth pulled into a grin. "Manipulative, Jagannath."

"Morale being what it is--" Maul said, but then a burst of static in his ear shut him up.

The bead he was wearing was set to put the Blackbirds abroad on priority. It was Rancor's worried voice that cut in now, "Lieu, Sarge, everyone's checked in but Brody and Eogan. I followed protocol, even tried their private comms, and no answer."

Shiv's face darkened and he made a slow show of getting up from their booth, like they'd just finished their meal, while Maul turned his head to whisper into his collar mic, "How long ago?"

"Eight minutes and counting." Rancor sounded, unsurprisingly, anxious.

"All right, we're on our way. Their last reported location?"

"Biscuit Baron on Thrush Avenue, at 65th."

Maul resisted the urge to nod and got up himself, glancing to Shiv to confirm he got that. After getting a glance and a barely perceptible nod back, he headed for the door and slipped past the doorman, out into the dark, neon-stained night.

They only made it five meters down the walk when something came out of the darkness and landed on them.

Maul had just enough time to think, incredulously, Is that a net--?, before catching a glimpse a jittery figure in the gloom; he made a grab for the vibroblade he'd armed himself with, but then there was an explosion of light and pain in his head and then nothing.
That Good Ole Llanic Snag, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Brody learns more about his situation, the Blackbirds come together for a rescue and Maul and Shiv are in trouble. (Though, their kidnappers may find themselves in more.)

“Look, if you’re just doing this to be edgy and cool, I’ve got more’n enough of that with my brothers and CO,” Brody tried, eyes closed because he was tired of straining them against the burlap bag over his head. “Is this drama really necessary?”

“Yep,” the nautolan answered, tossing the word out with dismissive casualness.

Brody had spent the past two kriffin’ hours blindfolded. Eogan had made it back to awareness about an hour ago, groaning and then puking his guts up, which meant they dragged him off somewhere else. Brody hadn’t liked that and regardless of his new headgear, he’d tried to put up a fight, hollering and squirming and kicking even with the cuffs he was wearing, but then the hand of his unknown brother had pushed him down in some chair. "They’re just taking him to our medic, relax.”

No word since then, though, which wasn’t helping Brody feel any better.

It didn’t seem like anyone was out to hurt them, or even really intimidate them, despite all this; if that were the case, Brody expected he would have maybe been thrown into some dank, ugly cell, or strapped to a chair with a bare lightbar above him, or something like that. Instead, even with the burlap over his face, he could smell brewing caf and hear the movements of people – three or four – and occasional quiet snippets of conversation.

"What if I have to take a leak?" he asked, as much to get an answer as anything else.

"I think you can hold it a bit longer," the nautolan said, laconically.

Brody sighed out; he didn’t actually have to go, and that was the very oldest trick in the very oldest holodrama, but it was worth a shot. "Okay, but this is kriffin’ stupid. Clearly you’re holding all the cards right now, so why the hell am I still trussed up like a root ball in transit?"

"'Cause GAR barcodes have changed since your brother's batch, so it’s taking me time to break it down and update our information. But I’ve almost got it. Then we can talk."

--frip. Brody didn’t like the sound of that. Despite his confidence in his own ability to wiggle, worm or wrestle his way out of tight spots – he was the only clone in the Blackbirds who’d been in the Crimson Corridor! – someone being able to crack the information on his barcode and presumably use it to access his service file made his spine freeze.

Something about his posture must have shown that, too; a hand landed between his neck and shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze, and even though Brody didn’t mean to, he flinched.

No one said anything for several moments more, as Brody tried to relax his shoulders and breathe. But he still flinched again when the bag came off of his head, and it took his eyes a few seconds to adjust to even the dim lighting of the room.
In front of him, the nautolan was sitting backwards on a chair, arms crossed on the backrest, looking at him with-- something. Compassion. Or pity. Or-- Brody didn't even know, but the expression in those eyes, black but for a faint reflective blue deep inside of them, made him want to squirm. "CT-115-1337; currently attached to the 212th Attack Battalion. Ostensibly just a techie, but everyone with half a brain knows that means 'slicer'. Name: Brody." A beat. "Isn't that the sportscaster for the Rastar Rancors?"

Brody swallowed, shoulders trembling despite every single attempt he made to keep them from doing so. "Am I being interrogated? I mean, you already know name, rank, serial number, so if we're gonna get into the torture part of this, just-- kriffing get on with it."

The nautolan's brow pinched and his headtresses twitched. "Ohhhh-kay. Uh, no. No, torture's not an option here. But hi, my name's Jak." He rested his chin on his folded arms and then smiled. "Welcome to Radio Anarchy. Or, at least, a hub of it."

In a completely different place (and a completely different set of circumstances), Shiv woke up a lot like Eogan did, though obviously, he wasn't aware of the parallel.

The big difference was the lack of a burlap sack, and the addition of very warm hands on his face, though the gut-churning queasiness was similar enough. He gasped a few breaths, then swallowed against the sour-cotton taste in his mouth, and forced his eyes open to find his lieutenant peering down at him with what could only be described as intense concern. Kinda made Shiv wonder at how bad the situation was, though he also had just enough space in his mind to allow for the fact that Maul tended to worry with a frequency that was roughly akin to the number of rainy days on Kamino.

"Breathe slower," Maul said, and it was there that Shiv realized both of them were wearing nylasteel zip-ties on their wrists, a slapdash cuffing job that was crude (and uncomfortable) but effective.

His skin felt hot and cold at once; clammy, too. By comparison, the dry heat of Maul's was comforting as hell, so Shiv didn't even think twice before resting his face more into one of those hands and ignoring the nylasteel loop hovering centimeters above his chin, just to do as he was told. "What the frip," he said, after a few more moments of breathing slower and getting his stomach to settle enough to chance his voice. His throat felt raw and sharp, and the words scraped against the inside of it coming out.

"Stun Baton to the neck." Maul's nose wrinkled briefly in disgust. "Effective, but crude. As most of this seems to be. You'll feel it for awhile, but you should be all right in the end."

"If we can figure out what the hell's going on." Shiv closed his eyes, trying to listen; he couldn't hear anything, though, beyond the white noise of an air conditioning system. "And who the hell did this."

"Slavers, from what little I caught. I only woke up myself about ten minutes ago."

That made Shiv twist his face into a sour expression. He fought with his stomach for a moment more, gathering his voice again; seemingly absent, Maul's thumb ticked against his temple, and that was helping quite a bit, enough that he could ask, "What the frip would slavers want with us?"

When Maul's only answer was silence, Shiv forced his eyes open a second time; he couldn't really
read the expression on the zabrak's face, but it made his already uneasy stomach drop as Maul finally said, "As soon as I can clear my head enough, I'll try to get us out of here."

Maul wasn't the only one planning; back aboard the Nest, a team of very serious and determined Blackbirds were also working on it.

Both parties had now been missing for two hours, give or take. Misty and Tango were flying back to the city on their rented bike, and everyone else had come back to the courier as fast as they could in the hopes that between the lot of them, they could come up with a plan to find their missing people. Castle, Smarty and Husker had gone from the police precinct to their last known locations; aside from two crushed radios left on the ground where Shiv and Maul had gone missing from and some drag marks, there was no sign of either party. The bouncer at the tavern hadn't seen anything -- which Castle thought was totally banthashit -- and the staff at the Biscuit Baron likewise claimed ignorance.

At that point, rallying the Blackbirds and coming up with a definite plan of action seemed wiser than wandering around hoping to stumble across clues, so Castle had called for all of them to meet back at the Nest.

"Obviously, the key is finding the witnesses. That bouncer, to start. The staff of the Biscuit Baron," Smarty said, hands braced on the table as they grimly stared at the red markers indicating the last known positions of Brody, Eogan, Maul and Shiv. "There's nothing to say these things are related, but if they are, that's-- a lot scarier. That means people know we're here as a group."

When they landed on Llanic, only Smarty, Castle and Husker had announced themselves as official. As far as the police knew, there were only three on-duty clones on the planet, because given their corruption, it had made sense to keep the rest of the squad incognito. Everyone else had gone out pretending to be other people, as well as they could given their genetic codes, because without access to reliable intelligence infrastructure, they were going to have to build their own, and no one was going to talk to a bunch of armored GAR troops. Castle had made a command decision to keep the police out of it, because there was every good chance said police were in on whatever was going down, and had instead taken charge of the squad himself.

"How are we supposed to do that?" Rancor asked, pacing back and forth around the back of the room, tense and edgy. Rabbit, for his part, looked kind of stricken; Castle wondered if he maybe didn't have a kind of thing for Eogan, though he wasn't sure enough to speculate beyond that idle curiosity.

"Systemically," Tally answered, grimly; he had one arm tucked around his ribs and the other bent up, thumb ticking at his own bottom lip as he thought and stared at the map. "These people we're dealing with are Llanic natives, mostly. They see this kind of shit all of the time. They don't volunteer information, so we either bribe them into giving it or we scare them into giving it, because we're not going to appeal to their better natures."

Raze scowled at that, puffing up some. "Hey, Tally, we're not thugs. Don't tell me you want us to go bully some poor waitress--"

"Raze, we can probably bribe the waitress, but I doubt even you could soften the bouncer up by
"We don't know--"

"Raze." Castle didn't raise his voice, but it was enough to cut the demo-expert off. Raze shut his mouth, bottom lip twitching once, then crossed his arms and started pacing himself, clearly ready to burst into action. Castle blew a slow breath out, then went on, "I agree with Tally. We're not going to get what we need by asking politely for it. So, who wants to go shake down a tavern and a bouncer, and who wants to go try to butter up some poor-ass fast food workers for credits."

"I'm in for the tavern." Rancor stopped pacing and straightened up. Rabbit stared at him for a moment, but didn't give an answer himself yet.

"Biscuit Baron," Raze said, curtly. Smarty raised his hand at that, too.

"Tavern," Husker threw in, raising his hand, back where he was leaning against the counter and eyeballling the map critically.

Everyone was watching Tally, including Castle. Despite his fiery personality, he didn't seem to be a fan of violence; on the other hand, he was shockingly smooth at disarming people. He glanced at the others, rubbing his thumb against his lip some more, than snorted. "Biscuit Baron, but I'm gonna rent a swoop bike so I can get to the tavern in a hurry if I need to," he finally answered, dropping his hands.

"I'm goin' to the tavern. No bead radios, Blackbirds; wear your gauntlets under your sleeves, pair it with a cuff. Take a backup comm, too. Try not to blow our cover, but if you do, we'll worry about it after our people are safe back home. I'll get on the horn with Tango and Misty and tell them to hold here when they arrive for backup, if we need it. Rabbit, which one do you want?"

Rabbit looked at them all for a moment, then just said, "Tavern," and didn't seem to notice when his twin slumped a little.

That was a pretty good balance, considering. At least, Castle thought so. He nodded. "Gear up. Tally, stay here a few, I have some questions."

The longer Brody listened--

The more he felt like a damned amateur.

Jak switched his cuffs from behind his back to the front and loosened them a notch, which was a relief, and gave him a cup of decent caf -- also a relief -- though it was pretty clear that Brody wasn't supposed to go getting up from his chair until he was told. Considering that he was still cuffed, he didn't see himself making bolt for it until he felt he had a real chance of getting anywhere. His yet-unnamed brother left for a few minutes, then came back and told him that Eogan was all right; that the stun bolts had hit him hard because of an old brain injury, but he'd be fine with some rest and Brody could go see for himself when they were done clearing him. Brody didn't know if he believed it, but honestly, he knew he was a lot more calm thanks to having a fellow clone there than he would have been otherwise.
Thus far, he had learned that Radio Anarchy took its name seriously; they weren't loyal to or affiliated with any government on any world, only to themselves. They viewed themselves as outside of it all and that they were, by their own definition, freedom fighters who mostly dealt in information and dispersal of, though they also apparently had their hand in freeing slaves.

"I have family on both sides of this war," Jak said, as he sat in front of Brody; occasionally, the pretty markings on his skin would flush brighter when he said something that seemed impassioned, and they were right now. "I have two cousins who volunteered for the CIS, working as officers, and I have a Jedi cousin, too, fighting for the Republic."

Brody tried to search his mind to see if any names came to mind, but he really only knew of General Fisto. "So, what, you just said 'kriff it all, I'll be an anarchist and screw all of you'"

"What are the other options? Align with Mandalore? They don't take non-humans in and adopt them anymore, and besides, they have their own problems. Most of the truly neutral worlds in this disaster are fighting for their very existence. And both the CIS and the Republic are corrupt to the core." Jak shrugged, colors settling again. "I don't worry about governments, I work to help people. Regardless of where or how they fall," he added, nodding up to the brother that stood next to Brody. "If that means feeding information to my cousins in the CIS, I do it. If that means slipping information to my Jedi cousin, I do it. If that means withholding information from both of them? I kriffing do it."

It was enough to make Brody fall quiet for a long moment, trying to absorb that.

When he realized his own kneejerk instinct was that Jak -- and the brother beside him -- were traitors, it chilled him down to his bones. That he -- he, who knew better than many just how kriffed up it all was, who considered himself an information pirate -- could come to that conclusion despite how fripped up everything in the galaxy was, was one of the most gut-jerking pieces of evidence there was, of just how deep the indoctrination of Kamino and the Republic went.

"I know," his brother said, softly, reaching out and petting down Brody's wild curls. "For me, it was-" He swallowed. "--it was Slick. He was my batcher. And, uh-- I know what he did. But his court-martial was a disaster. There was this little Mirialan healer -- a padawan, Offee? -- and she was there. She wanted to test him for Force interference, like he'd been coerced or telepathically influenced. Slick knew things were messed up, he'd gotten more and more bitter after Geonosis, but he never would have hurt us and he was acting more and more erratic after he was found out, not like him at all. She just wanted to do some brain scans and have him looked at by mind-healers, she brought it up to the tribunal, but they didn't do that. They just found him guilty, then they put him against a wall and shot him. Had brothers shoot him."

Brody wasn't the same kind of sensitive as Raze, but just hearing those words made his eyes sting and his throat tighten, and he instantly thought of Tally -- fierce and subversive -- and it was so-- so frippin' easy to see how something along those lines could have happened to him. He couldn't ever picture Tally taking up arms against his brothers, but being framed for it? Or Force-coerced into erratic behavior, then given a rushed tribunal and shot?

The extra-legal status of all of them, in that moment, felt like a noose.

"I won't turn on my brothers," Brody said, after a moment, bringing his arms up to rub his wet eyes against the sleeve of his forearm, spilling a little caf on his knee in the process.

"Oh frip, that's not what we're askin' for," the clone said. He went back to petting again, sighing out heavily. "Look, Jak was the one who brought you here. I mean, not you specifically, but who do you think fed those tidbits to your special ops people? Special ops clones tend to be a bit more free-thinking than the rank-and-file and we were hoping to arrange a meeting with one of you. Then Jak
caught you tracing his broadcast and got a good look at you and figured you'd probably be the one."

Brody swallowed again, looking at the nautolan anew. "You're Force sensitive."

It was half-guess, half-deduction. It also turned out to be accurate.

Jak smiled at that, sadly. "Jedi cousin. I wasn't strong enough to follow her, though. And I was older when they tested our enclave, so she went and I stayed." He blew out a slow breath. "I tied the ribbons on her ahwey the morning she left with the watchman. She was only one and a half, I doubt she even remembers me, but I remember they talked a long time about taking me. But I guess my age and lower sensitivity kept me from going, too."

Brody felt like he was caught in a centrifuge, taking all of this in; paranoia had him wondering if Jak could coerce him like somebody had maybe coerced Slick. The realization that the Blackbirds were led here purposefully by a completely unrelated organization had him wondering at how deep this could go and how bad it could go. He wondered if Croft knew about the set-up, but it didn't seem like Radio Anarchy was big on revealing themselves to anyone but very specific people at very specific times.

"So-- what do you want with me?" he finally asked, because there was no point in dithering about it.

Jak's smile went more real and cheerful. "Depends on what you agree with, Brody. If you don't agree to anything, we just give you the information you're here on Llanic for and you go on your way after you confirm it with your brothers. Believe me, we know this planet and all of the myriad crap that goes on here; this is one of our longest-term hubs. The CIS operations here are all harmful for everyone, including the locals, so we don't have any issue with them being taken out, though we hope with the right kind of intelligence, the GAR will opt for precision over some kinda of banthashit carpetbombing. And you-- you could destroy that for us, now, if you wanted to, but I have a feeling you won't want to." His shoulders went up in a little bouncy shrug. "Force, or just intuition. If you do agree with anything beyond that? Infinite possibilities."

Brody took that in for a moment, then gave a slow nod. "I'll listen, but two things: Can I check on Eogan, and can you take these cuffs off?"

Given another block of time -- a half-hour or so -- and Shiv managed to put his aching head together enough to help Maul go over every inch of their confines.

It was a bare room, apparently purpose built for this business; the only point of egress was a single door with a slot to look through, currently closed. It was triple reinforced and the lock was heavy; there was no access on this side of it to its internal components. The other thing was a vent that was blowing down into the room; Maul said he could smell the traces of some manner of knock-out gas clinging to the wall or grating, 'cause apparently it was pretty astringent to his nose, though the traces were old.

Through some exceptionally uncomfortable maneuvering, taking full advantage of the Lieu's cybernetic legs, Shiv managed to get up on Maul's shoulders and with both hands up, he could almost reach the grate. But no matter how much he stretched, or how Maul braced his hands on the wall to push up on the balls of his cybernetic feet, he was still a few centimeters too short.
Inspection revealed that it was welded in place anyway. Thick ropes of durasteel welding that even both of them wouldn't be able to break, even if they hung off of it with their full weight combined.

At least not manually.

"What about the--?" Shiv asked, gesturing like he was using the Force to lift something, after they ended up in an ungainly sprawl on the ground for his thoroughly graceless dismount. The spot where they'd hit him with the stun stick was sore as hell, throbbing angrily now; Maul had a similar burn on his neck, though less visible for his black skin.

Aside little bead radio deployments here, the last time Shiv could remember Maul using the Force was on Juma-9, though he hadn't been witness to it himself. And not once since Maul had confessed to being unable to reliably, in any manner larger than those tiny radios. But Shiv didn't honestly know if that was because Maul actually was unable or if he was unwilling, or a combination of those two things. It reminded him of some of his brothers after a bad training exercise on Kamino; spooked away from something that had caused them pain or anxiety, and unwilling to approach it again, though on Kamino they were usually bullied into doing so anyway, since the alternative was decommissioning or reconditioning.

"If it can be used to send gas into the room, then being up there--" Maul cut himself off, though, eying the grate. After a long minute or so of studying it, he shook his head again and then eyed the door. "Someone's coming."

Shiv didn't know if they were being monitored, though it was a good assumption to make. Hence why he hadn't actually said anything about the Force. Most people wouldn't assume that from the outset, anyway, given the relative rarity of Force sensitives, let alone trained ones. He turned back to face the door himself, rolling his shoulders and not even bothering to try not to glare.

The little viewing door slid open and a pair of eyes looked in, nested in wrinkles. Those eyes squinted and flicked over Shiv, but then the disembodied gaze landed on Maul. "I'll be damned," a rough, older voice said.

"I told you, Pops!" someone outside the door said; Shiv thought it sounded vaguely familiar. "I told you we got a Nightbrother!"

The other voice was more jittery and younger-sounding. Beside Shiv, Maul's shoulders somehow managed to straighten even more -- no mean feat, he was already standing stiff as a board -- and when the low, soft, inhuman growl rumbling from somewhere in the zabrak's throat hit Shiv's ears, the hair on the back of his neck actually stood on end. Marks for intimidation, Lieu, he thought, and oddly, it made him feel proud more than anything else.

"Two problems, you dolts. You got half a Nightbrother, and he's a godsdamned military officer," the voice said, before the eyes pulled back and the little eye slit slammed closed.

Despite that, their voices were still audible, though muffled now. Without even signalling each other, Maul and Shiv edged closer to the door, listening intently.

"What, that necklace thing? He's got a tracker implanted somewhere, we caught it on scan, why would anyone be tracking him if he's a military officer?"

"Don't know, but that's a Grand Army rank on those dog tags." The eye slit slid opened again and those eyes peered through again. Shiv had a sudden flash urge to shove his fingers like spears right into them, though obviously, for the moment, he refrained. "Still, last time I saw a Nightbrother musta been thirty years ago, and he was already old and used up. Dunno what half of one would be
worth, though. They're only really good for two things, and most people don't want 'em for fighting."

Shiv tried to ignore his own disgust; the urge to speak up and taunt their captors was rising steadily with the urge to poke some eyes out, but doing that might interrupt their speculation.

"Yeah, but if they really are that rare, half of one's still gotta be worth somethin', right? And I mean, he's young, right? Not a line on his face, and he's still got a pretty mouth."

The air was starting to feel like a thunderstorm; Shiv didn't know if it was for how they were feeling, or because Maul was drawing on the Force, but the air started feeling charged and heavy, and that low growl got a fraction louder, broken only by the intake of air. Later, he would think about the implications of whatever had been done to them when they were still unconscious; later, now wasn't the time to feel slimy and violated.

"That other one's a clone." The older man said, after flicking another glance at Shiv. "Prettiest one I've ever seen--" Shiv could hear Maul's teeth grind against each other there. "--but worth a lot more to Confederacy Intelligence than he would be anywhere else."

That was when the door started creaking.

Next to Shiv, there was a sharp snap. When he shot a look over, startled himself, those nylasteel binders Maul had been wearing were on the floor and his eyes were glowing. Not the impression of a glow, not a reflection of the door slot or the inset grated lightbars, but burning yellow with some internal light.

"What the--?" the man asked, stepping backwards, sounding confused, as something in the door hinges snapped next.

Another pair of eyes glanced in and went, "Oh f-- gas 'em, Pops, he's doing something!"

The slot slammed closed, and then Maul bared his teeth, hand snapping up and the cover to said slot peeled free in a terrible shriek as something else creaked and groaned inside of the door, before flying off to the side to hit the wall with a clatter and a gesture.

Shiv didn't want to risk breaking into Maul's focus, but the hiss from the vent was sharper and when he took a breath, it started burning in his nose and lungs, and he brought up his own bound arms on instinct to try to stuff his mouth and nose against the fabric and buy himself a few seconds of breathing room.

"Lieu, the vent--" he tried, but his head was already spinning and his knees went and he was only distantly aware of his own body hitting the floor.
That Good Ole Llanic Snag, Part 3

Chapter Summary

Interrogations, slavers, cops and robbers, oh my. Castle tries his hand at grilling a witness, Brody falls in love with someone else's tech setup, Maul and Shiv are still in trouble -- boy, are they -- and everything falls apart and comes together at once.

Chapter Notes

If you celebrate Christmas, Merry Christmas! If not, Happy Holidays! Content warnings for disturbing content in the first section; footage of an animal killed by awful means. Also, for violence and death and whump. And the Force being interpreted as an eldritch abomination. Sorry. <3

The bouncer was watching the vial like someone would watch a viper. Castle had never been trained in interrogation; in fact, none of them had, except maybe their Lieutenant. Castle was trained to build bridges and repair equipment and coordinate blowing things up; trying to wring information out of reticent hardcases wasn't part of his resume, and most of the time, they were facing droids anyway. Given most of the B-1s were neurotic, 'interrogation' of them was usually more a comedy than a drama playing out.

Add into it that Castle wasn't the quickest on the whole micro-expression thing, and he had to rely on acting skills he didn't actually have.

Husker had sniped the bouncer with a stun bolt from the top of a building when the bouncer had escorted some people out of the tavern, nailing the big, rough-looking human right in the neck. Rabbit and Rancor had been waiting around either corner and had started moving before Husk had even taken the shot; the bouncer hadn't even had time to hit the ground before the duo had grabbed his unconscious body and dragged him to one of the swoop bikes Castle had rented and was waiting on.

There was some flak from it; the bouncer, unlike Shiv and Maul, was a local and well-known, and even as they hit the accelerators on their bikes and Husker disappeared from his perch, some very angry people flooded out of the tavern. But by then, they were already gone, flying back to the Nest by circuitous route in order to throw off any potential followers, back to where Tango and Misty were waiting anxiously. As they flew, Tally and his group checked in from Biscuit Baron where they were working on getting information from the waitstaff.

Now, they had a very big and angry bouncer trussed up thoroughly in the chair in the cargo hold, which was the creepiest and least-descript room on the Nest (not that that was saying much) and Castle was relying on his looks and to some degree his naturally level personality to make it seem like they were about to infect the guy with a horrible case of fatal hemorrhagic fever.

"Scouting party found that on Dagobah," Husker said, leaning against some shelving, looking cool
as can be. "They didn't make it back alive, but the medic isolated the virus. He's supposedly workin' on a vaccine, but these things take time."

It was all banthashit, but even Castle had to try hard to keep a straight face. Husker's broken voice delivering that made it sound even more menacing. "Yeah," he agreed, flipping the vial up and then catching it, not failing to notice the flinch the bouncer gave. "I remember that. Hey, you, show him what happened when they exposed an akk dog to it," he said, nodding to Rancor.

Rancor's face had taken on a shiny look, and he was clearly struggling, but given how incredibly kriffin' young he and Rabbit looked, that was actually more useful than not in this situation.

The thing was, someone had stumbled across a hemorrhagic fever scouting, but it was before the war. And the vaccine was already developed. But the lab recordings were still available to researchers, and since Tally had a back door account -- courtesy of Bail Organa -- to the U of A's student resources database, the Blackbirds were able to pull up the footage of the test as it had happened in the field, somewhere deep in the Outer Rim, conducted by a planetary militia. Castle might not have known how to interrogate a prisoner, but Tally knew how to get into peoples' heads, and while their medic was a soft heart, he was the one who'd come up with this idea.

The recording was every bit as awful as it needed to be, too. Tested in a field lab on a feral dog by scientists, the poor critter only lasted about ten agonizing minutes after being jabbed with it.

The bouncer's face was also shiny at the end, nervous sweat. Rabbit and Rancor both had to leave, and Castle was kinda relieved that Raze wasn't here, because he had a feeling Raze would have broken down into helpless tears at seeing the animal suffer. Even he was upset by it, though like Husk, his face never wavered.

"So, about the zabrak and human being jumped: Feel like filling us in on that, before we decide to fill you up with this?" he asked, as the very graphic holo flickered off, holding up the vial that looked enough like the one on the recording to pass without close inspection.

Turned out the guy wasn't all too invested in protecting some washed up smugglers, in the end.

"Shiv, you have to stay awake."

The slightly hoarse whisper in his ear was emphatic; stirred the hair around it, making him shiver a little bit. He thought he'd heard that a few times already, it sounded familiar, but he kept losing it to the cold fog that rolled over his mind no matter how hard he tried to push back against it. His neck was sore, and his lungs hurt and his stomach kept trying to eject the steak he'd eaten earlier, and he opened his mouth to respond, but warm fingertips against his lips stopped him and something hot and wet dripped on his neck.

"Don't talk, just stay with me."

It was hard, though. Everything felt wrong; his body too heavy and his brain too light. It felt like it would be easier to let go, to sleep away the discomfort.

Still, even as he kept pulling in slow breaths, unable to even open his eyes, his mind managed to categorize what pieces it retained between his blackouts.
They were gassed; it had stopped Maul from finishing the door (and anyone unfortunate enough behind it) and distantly, Shiv could remember him coughing. But somehow, either due to the Force or that zabrak durability, Maul had managed to cling to awareness, which was definitely not something Shiv could claim. How the hell Shiv ended up almost against the wall that the door was on, though down a couple meters, was lost somewhere in there; how he ended up with Maul pretty much laying on him was likewise lost. In the really hazy moments, Shiv made the same mental note over and over again to talk to someone about some extra pair of leggings or something because the metal knee digging into his leg was really uncomfortable.

Another drip, way too hot to be water. Shiv had his head together enough now to whisper, though, so he did: "You're bleeding."

"So you've told me. Three times now. It's fine, just stay awake."

_Trying to, Lieu, Shiv thought, dizzily._

They could only catch snippets of conversation from their position, but even kriffed up good, Shiv knew that their captors couldn't see them or hear them; hell, Maul was practically eating his ear, and Shiv sometimes missed a word for how quietly he was whispering.

"We're on a ship and they've just fired up pre-launch. They think we're unconscious, but aren't certain of that. They have infrared in here, but no video, that's why we're not moving."

Shiv also thought he'd probably been told _that_ before too, but at least this time, he felt like he could probably retain it. "Plan?"

"Play dead," Maul answered. "When they open the door, deal with them."

Sounded good to Shiv, except the part where he didn't think he stood a chance in hell of getting up, let alone fighting. But instead of trying to plot any further, he tried to just recover.

Somewhere from the fog, a vague memory bubbled up of some conversation snippet he'd caught; their captors discussing taking Maul somewhere to have that tracker disabled. That the room they were in would block it being pinged until they did. There was something about that which Shiv thought was probably pretty terrifying, because Maul had shivered when they'd said it, which was probably why it stuck in Shiv's mind in the first place, 'cause he'd been paying especially close attention to that kinda thing since that whole thing when his Lieu had checked out on him while telling a story.

Now, just a little clearer-minded, he finally realized the implications: That tracker was embedded in Maul's cybernetics. And if they tried to crack those open, the kill-switch--

This time, it was Shiv's turn to give a little shudder.

"This is fantastic."

The 'operations center' of Radio Anarchy on Llanic was the most mismatched, slapdash tech set-up Brody had ever set his eyes on, but damn, it was beautiful.
Built between narrow brick walls, half a dozen recycled consoles from all over the place -- old tech, or newer salvaged CIS or Republic Navy tech -- fed into a multitude of holo-displays. Battered chairs patched by tape and with hand-stuffed cushions could roll on casters between them. At the center, a microphone and recording studio was set up, presumably the heart of this hub of Radio Anarchy and the place where Jak made the magic happen.

It appealed to every bit of pirate in Brody; the sight of it actually made his heart beat faster. The possibilities of it. Even just on this first look, he could see the amount of information that was coming in at any given time, probably through relays and proxies a lot like his own homebrew slicing setup, and given what Jak told him about the organization's infrastructure--

"Kriff," he whispered, just staring in awe.

Jak had such a wide grin on his face that it looked like it had to ache. "Yeah, I thought you might be the kind to like this. We're not big, but we're everywhere, boots on the ground. We actually predate this war business by two decades, though this has stepped us up about fifty thousand levels. When I started new with the first operation on Glee Anselm, we were mostly just counter-pirating the slave trade, but this war--"

Unsurprisingly, the slave trade was dominated by the humans, the hutts and the zygerrians. There were a few others involved in it, but as species went, those were the ones who controlled the flow of flesh from place to place. Hutts were the most notorious, but humans were, by far, the most prolific.

"Any cells on Nar Shaddaa?" Eogan asked; his voice was rough, and when Brody had checked on him initially, he had looked dazed and groggy, but definitely not fighty. The older Togruta, scarred from montrals on down, had apparently managed to reassure him that he was in safe hands, though the anti-nausea medication probably left him kind of dopey too.

"One, but only two people. We're not a big operation, like I said. We have a handful of people in a whole lot of places, but any more than that would get unwieldy real fast, for the kind of work we do."

Brody gestured to one of the seats, and Jak practically pushed him into it, guiding him by the shoulders and with a bright laugh that made Brody want to giggle. Something about the nautolan's intense pride and enthusiasm for what he was part of was infectious. He let his eyes flow over the information, his own mind cataloguing it almost automatically; there weren't troop movements on screen (Jak had probably locked those down before letting him in here), but there were shipping manifests for slavers and spice smugglers alike, and other manifests and routes for different kinds of contraband.

Stolen medical supplies. Pirated food supplies. Most of those were from planets like Serenno and the CIS; Radio Anarchy didn't apparently run or coordinate many operations in the Core, though Brody did see Coruscant flash up a few times, and Naboo once or twice. There was a listing of HoloNet relays they had back doors into, and another for proxies and servers.

"We use a lot of digital dead drops and we have a lot of informers," Jak said, sitting next to Brody at another terminal. Behind them, Eogan dropped into a third chair, groaning a little bit; Brody half heard his brother -- Sal, was his name -- offer him some cold water or a cup of tea for his stomach, but mostly he watched with hungry eyes as Jak keyed up another list. "The actual organization, our members, are vetted like you wouldn't believe. But we work a lot with people on the streets. We direct help to them, they direct information back to us. Sal's not the only clone we've managed to save, for example; there was another one who had been wounded and we got him out and settled with a sponsor family waaaaaay out in the Outer Rim. We try to help your brothers when we can get them, because kriff, they're part of the slave trade too. And having good, reliable informants all over
the place helps. Sometimes we get bad information, but that's pretty rare. You'd be surprised how many people help, when they can do it without destroying their own lives. That's why we use the dead drops."

The list of dead drops came up; some set to high priority, some to lower. There was a trust ranking assigned to each one, too. All of them were through proxies like the ones Brody used, but so frippin' many.

"Militias, militaries, governments?" he asked, watching as one of them flickered from a dimmed green to a bright green, showing new information had been added.

"Yep." Jak wiggled his head-- his ahwey -- in what was pretty clearly delight. "We work with anyone, as long as it's to help people. Even the police. Llanic's police are useless for law enforcement, but they've always been. Sometimes you get a good one who comes in and tries to clean it up, but this place might as well be lawless and they usually either transfer out or end up fired. But they're not useless for keeping-- I guess the rough kind of down-home justice. Notice that we've got so much crime it's endemic, but there's no shooting in the streets? Our police are the ones who, I guess, keep the peace. And we feed them information to help them do that. They don't give us anything, they're equal opportunity assholes, but they also don't try to interfere or track us down."

"This is frippin' insane," Brody murmured, as he took in all of it. He actually wiped over his beard to make sure he wasn't drooling, for frip's sake. His heart was just hammering from the excitement of even knowing something like this existed. "What-- what do you think I would-- I mean, beyond being here for you to deal with CIS here, what--?"

Jak turned to look at him, tilting his head, those wide dark eyes gleaming. "Just what I said, Brody. Whatever you want. I can set you up a dead drop of your own, and if you see something you think we can do to help-- a hurt brother, a mission of mercy for civilians, whatever -- you can drop us the information. Once you've done that enough and your dead drop climbs the trust rankings, we can set up other things for you, too." His face took on a more serious look. "We don't want you to do anything you don't want to do, or anything that'll put your brothers in danger. That's-- definitely not what we're all about. You don't have to give us troop positions or movements or anything. Just what you think is something we can do that you can't. I mean-- we can't do everything. We're only one group, even with a very big net. But we're doing pretty good work so far, and the more we take in, the more we can send out."

For some reason, of all the things Brody could think of -- brothers who might want to desert, people like Eogan who couldn't likely integrate into the Republic, but were on the run from the CIS -- the first one that came to mind was Tango's story. Etah, and Adao.

He was kinda surprised and embarrassed when his eyes welled up again, but he didn't flinch this time when Jak's hand landed on his shoulder, light as a feather. "Could you tell our stories?"

Jak looked shocked by that, but-- not bad shocked. "We're not really that kind of radio, but-- actually, that's a pretty amazing idea, and if you get us stories, we can try to find a way to get the galaxy to hear them."

Brody nodded, staring at the indicators for the dead drops. "I think that's a good place to start."
Tally had radioed in that they didn't have any luck with names, but an exceptionally scarred, aged twi'lek waitress had finally told them that Brody and Eogan were safe with another clone and that it'd be over her cold, dead body before she'd give up the people who'd snatched them, though she was more than willing to walk off with their credits in the meantime. According to Tally, he did believe her, and since he was a good judge of character, Castle believed him. And apparently, Raze had charmed her enough to get a free sweet-biscuit, which-- wasn't a surprise.

Castle was kind of proud he had something to report back: The bouncer said that the Durags -- a pair of ne'er-do-well spice smugglers, family originally from Corellia, who worked odd-jobs between runs, which had dried up after a lot of them kept getting intercepted -- were the ones who snatched Shiv and Maul. From there, Castle was left trying to make some choices, because the police weren't likely to offer any real help.

"What was the name of that Corellian cop Shiv was getting it with?" he asked, pacing around while Tango held a blaster on the still-trussed up bouncer in the closed up cargo hold, until they could re-stun him and drop his body off somewhere away from the ship. "Think she'd help?"

"Wasn't it Dani?" Misty asked back, pacing the opposite lap from Castle, though about a thousand times more jittery.

"Last name, brother," Castle said, giving him a gentle push in the shoulder as they passed each other. "Just 'Dani' ain't gonna get us a comm code."

"Knowin' Shiv, I'll bet he's got it stored in his datapad." Husker was pretty relaxed, compared to them. Well, not relaxed, but not edgy. Just methodical and cool-headed; why he let Castle take charge was a mystery, because he was clearly the coolest head in the room. "Let's go check there."

It seemed an awful personal thing to get their hands on, but it was a good idea. Castle headed for their bunk room with Husker right behind him and got into Shiv's shelving, pulling the datapad off it and hoping like hell it wasn't locked, 'cause they didn't have Brody to unlock it. But luckily for them, it wasn't; when Castle woke the screen up, there was a half-finished letter on it to--

Ah, kriff. To Shiv's dead batcher.

Castle couldn't help but see a few of their names, but he just saved the letter and swiped it off screen to get to the directory, a little ache in his throat at the idea his sergeant was still writing letters to a brother long-since ash or Kaminoan science experiment, depending on how his body was dealt with. He shook it off, though, and started scrolling through folders; pictures of the squad, pictures of prior units, note-taking for missions marked 'closed', and--

There was one for Dani. He opened it to find that stunner of a zeltron looking back from over Shiv's shoulder, lit in morning light, smiling. And Shiv himself, ruffled and disheveled and also smiling at the datapad camera, looking happy and relaxed.

Even as Castle scrolled down and found her comm code, he was smiling himself a little, happy for 'em. "Got it," he said, turning and heading for their briefing room so they could use the cockpit-interfaced comm center there.

She showed up only two beeps in once the call had been routed through the Nest's communication array, appearing above the table in half-form, wearing a beret, in uniform. "This is Constable Faygan," she said, a brisk but questioning note in her voice.

"Uh-- hello, Constable." Kriff. Castle wished he had come up with his lines before he called. "Don't know if you remember the rest of us, those guys you helped arrest after that bar brawl on Corellia?
Went off with our Sergeant the next night?” he said, and then winced at himself. *Smooth, Castle. Real kriffin' smooth.*

Faygan's mouth opened, then closed, and then a distinctly mischievous kind of amusement -- real distinct, even in holo form -- took over her face. "*Yeah, I remember. For several reasons. Can I help you, gentlemen?*"

"Someone took Shiv and our L-T. Snatched 'em outside a tavern they were runnin' surveillance on," Husk broke in, saving Castle from the incredibly deep pit filled with his own awkwardness. "Named the Durags, supposedly from Corellia originally? We're on Llanic, and they've been missing about three and a half hours now. Police here are corrupt."

Faygan's face shifted from amusement to deadly seriousness, and something about her eyes and color seemed to change, even in the washed out light projected above the table. She opened her mouth to answer, but then Rabbit burst into the room.

"*Brody's on the line! He and Eogan are okay!"* he said, breathless and excited, though he pulled up short when he saw the projection above the table. "*Uh--*"

Castle went over and took the kid's gauntlet and interfaced it with the projector; on one side, Faygan was apparently tapping into a computer system, face grim, while on the other, Brody's face popped up. Though the second he saw their expressions, his excitement faded. *"What happened?"* he asked, looking between Castle, Husk and Rabbit.

"You ain't the only ones who went missing; someone -- smugglers -- snatched Shiv and Maul around the same time, so we've been trying to find all of you. We got Constable Faygan on the other line lookin' up the guys who supposedly did it. We got a bouncer trussed up in the hold and half our guys out at Biscuit Baron, but they're on their way back."

Brody gaped a moment, then snapped a look off-holo before looking back. *"What are the names of the smugglers, do you know? Maybe we can help."

*"Slavers,"* Faygan interrupted. *"They're slavers. We have a few old warrants here out for a Dash Durag, age sixty-seven. No other names on record, but no one's picked him up in forty years or so, so there might be more of them now operating under that name."

"Could be his kids," Castle said, even as Brody was conferring with someone else. Castle figured that they all were going to have a lot to talk about when this was over.

Someone handed Brody something, someone with markings on their arms, and then Brody was reading, *"Two sons, Dab and Hap. Early thirties. Their slaving operation was taken apart about ten years ago by a private militia of twi'lek ex-slaves with strategic intelligence, and they turned to spice. Most of their business has dried up, though, thanks to, uh-- my current contacts."

*"Hello, intel,"* Faygan murmured, typing that into a screen on her side.

"Okay, so how to we get Shiv and Maul back?" Castle asked, feeling like he'd just been cut out like a middle manager given the downsizing boot.

Someone off to Brody's side said something again and Brody nodded back before looking back at Castle. *"They have a ship berthed in port, we're checking its status now."

Where the hell Brody was getting this was a giant question-mark, but Castle didn't figure they had time to worry about that just now. Especially if the intel was good and they could get their lost command team back in one piece. He drummed his fingers against his own crossed arm waiting.
Brody sounded kind of sick, though, when he turned back to them and said, "They just took off four minutes ago."

"Frippin' hell," Husker snarled, which made Rabbit and the others who'd gathered jump in surprise. "Castle--"

"Right. Husk, call Tally, Raze, Smarty, tell 'em to hold position; Rancor, tell Tango to go get those engines online and you guard our prisoner," Castle said, briskly, though he took a moment to look back to Faygan's hologram. "Constable, thanks for the help."

Everyone leapt into action; Husker moved to make the call to Tally, while Rabbit and Rancor both bolted out, as Rancor went back to do as he was told. Even in all this, Castle felt a little moment of pride for how fast they moved.

Faygan looked worried and pissed off. Given she was all the way on Corellia, there was nothing more she could do right now. "If you catch them, I'll come and handle the extradition myself. And-- have Shiv call, when you get him."

"Will do." Castle broke the comm connection to her and then turned his attention to Brody. "You stay on the line and keep feeding us anything relevant. Shipboard weapons, if your mystery contacts have it, defenses, whatever else."

"Copy, Castle. We're compiling it now."

The launch of the ship ended up forcing them into action without a plan. The crashing of the ship, on the other hand--

Rather than coming in to re-secure them, the slavers had apparently just decided to flood the room with gas again -- probably remotely, since Shiv couldn't hear their voices anymore -- right after takeoff. Since he still hadn't even finished shaking off the first round, there was no way he was gonna be conscious long once he got a whiff of it, though Maul had positioned them at the very furthest point from the vent that he could.

But then Maul was off him in a flash and dragging him up; Shiv reeled, head spinning, but his lieutenant didn't even give him time to find his feet before dragging him over to the slot he'd ripped the slider off of. The handling was hard and fast, but it wasn't mean, and Shiv pressed his face against the slot and sucked the air into his lungs even as that hiss from the vent grew louder.

"When I say, get back and hold your breath as long as you can," Maul said, right up next to him, voice still hoarse. He also sounded some mix between genuinely pissed off and inconvenienced, and even though shit was hitting the fan, Shiv could find space to be amused by that.

"Yessir," he answered back, his own voice little better than a rasp, ducking a look through the slot to the empty beyond, before getting more air; it was definitely clearing his head, which was when he realized how much of that gas had been lingering in the room while they waited and played dead.

"All right, one-- two--"

On three, Shiv pulled the deepest breath in that he knew he could hold and fell back and to the side,
That door never stood a chance.

One second, Maul was stepping back; the next, his eyes went bright again and his teeth flashed white even in the dim lighting, and he didn't even growl this time, but threw his hands out at the door, which shrieked and cracked and then flew off and down the corridor beyond with a deafening rolling slam that almost had Shiv covering his ears. The sound hadn't finished ringing in his ears when the alarms sounded and Maul was grabbing him by his arm and dragging him out into the clearer air.

"Cockpit?" Shiv asked, gasping somewhat and pressing a shoulder to the wall; he was still having some balance issues, but at least he could think now. Even as he asked, he scanned around like Maul was doing, looking for something that could be used as a weapon, though there was nothing obvious to hand.

"You stay behind me," Maul ordered back, a tone Shiv couldn't frankly remember him ever taking before, terse and uncompromising.

Given his hands were still tied together and breaking that without the Force was a no-go, and given how much it was already biting into his wrists, coupled with his unsteadiness, Shiv didn't even try to argue. He just nodded as sharply as his still-dizzy head would allow and then followed his L-T as Maul stalked down the corridor, either following the Force or just common sense, occasionally turning back to check over his shoulder.

Didn't actually take them long to get there, all given. Unfortunately, their captors were already on the move.

The cockpit door slid open and Shiv barely had time to duck behind a utility panel, pressing himself hard back against the bulkhead as a blaster bolt dinged off of the edge of it. He shot a look at Maul--

--who didn't even bother ducking for cover.

Instead, sharp canines bared and a newly menacing growl rumbling out of him, Maul held out a hand and there was an awful choking noise. When Shiv peeked around the corner, one of the jittery young slavers was hovering in mid-air, clawing at whatever invisible thing was holding him up by his throat and Maul was advancing on him towards the cockpit looking downright murderous.

The blaster the slaver had clattered to the floor, and the old man in the cockpit was hollering; Shiv moved to go retrieve it, arm himself despite his bound -- and now bleeding -- wrists, and he was almost there when something got him by his throat, dragging him back, elbow against his windpipe.

In all the chaos and with his reeling senses, he hadn't caught that the other one had come up behind them.

"You let him go," the quivering voice next to his ear said, as the other young slaver gave him a jerk backwards, making him newly dizzy; the round muzzle of a blaster pressed hard up against his temple, forcing his head over to the side. "You let my brother go!"

Even through his swimming vision, Shiv could see Maul turn half back; the zabrak's chin went up a fraction and he pinned those burning gold eyes on the one who had Shiv by the throat, and later, Shiv would reflect back in some awe that this wasn't actually the most terrifying thing he would see today. Because it kriffing should have been.

The answer was like a roll of thunder, soft but deadly, a warning of lightning ahead: "You let mine go."
The arm around Shiv's throat trembled harder. Something wet and warm soaked into his trousers at
the back of his thigh.

It would have been a failed stand-off -- and Shiv would have had no doubts who would have lost --
if not for what happened next.

"Lieu, look out," he gasped, catching a glance behind the hovering and twitching body and his L-T,
as the old man's blurry form came at Maul with something long and lethal-looking; at the exact
moment he got that out of his mouth, he ducked and rolled his shoulder and elbow back, twisting and
slamming that elbow into the gut of the guy who had been choking him. There was the sound of a
howl and violent crash in the cockpit then, and Shiv hit his knee before scrambling to get behind the
half-stunned and gasping slaver on the floor.

He didn't think. He didn't think.

He looped his bound wrists around the guy's throat, intending to choke him out or incapacitate him,
and the sharp edges of the binders that were digging cuts into his wrists--

A spray of red flew out and the guy collapsed almost instantly, gurgling, his own weight finishing
the job those binders had started, and Shiv frantically tried to get them off or away, disbelief and
horror hitting him even as something exploded in the cockpit and the ship yawed sharply.

It threw him practically head over heels; he landed in the door of the cockpit in time to hear the old
man shriek, rage and pain, "You soulless-- kriffin'-- monsters!"

It was the last thing the old man said, before there was a choking gurgle, an echo of the one Shiv had
just heard a few moments before. Something else shorted in the cockpit and the whole ship
shuddered violently.

They were crashing.

Shiv's head rang; he found himself staring at his bloodied hands as he lay there, as much stunned by
the fall as anything else, unable to tell what of that blood was his and what had belonged to the
slaver. The ship pitched and he could feel the heat starting to build up in the cockpit as it fell through
atmosphere, having not cleared it before-- before whatever had happened. Whatever had blown up or
broken to send them into a death spiral.

"Escape pod?" he asked, distantly, latching onto training in his disorientation.

"Too late," Maul answered, voice rough but level. "If there even is one."

Shiv pulled himself further into the cockpit against the fluctuating gravity, dazed and trembling;
looked at the fire starting to shroud the cockpit viewports and the body laying over the blackened
console and the exploded rifle on the ground and he wanted to-- it couldn't end like this, could it?
With them just burning up or crashing into the ground if they didn't burn first.

What would happen to the Blackbirds if it did?

He dragged his gaze up to Maul, and found Maul looking back at him.

It was an expression of almost helpless frustration; still anger, burning bright, but also a kind of back-
against-the-wall desperation. But even as Shiv watched, that look resolved into determination, then
Maul looked back ahead and stretched out his hands, grabbing the edge of the blackened panel in
front of him; he closed his eyes and his knuckles paled, the muscles in his arms tightening and
bunching, like he could pull the ship out of its nose-dive by that alone.
"Brace yourself."

It was only a whisper, but somehow, Shiv heard it anyway. He managed a nod and grabbed a chair to pull himself up and as he moved, his arm brushed against Maul's and

he is
he is
he is
there's too much
the ground gives and

Someone is keening.

"Don't let me go."

"it's too much it's too much it's too much"

everything burns and

"--there's a rabbit on my arm--"

"don't let me go please don't let me go please don't"

he flails out and someone catches him and

Shiv can feel the flames and he opens his eyes and he's standing on the bed of a river, and the water winds around him, swirls in ghostlight and he is burning, every cell is burning and he is aware of being everywhere and nowhere and there's so much there's too much there's too much and somewhere in some other world he keens and burns and burns and burns and

"Something's happening," Maul whispers; stands on the bed of a river with glowing gold eyes, luminescent and
Shiv is standing with his brothers in formation but he can't move his head to look around or his arms and nothing feels right or belongs to him and all the backs in front of him are and he can see his lieutenant and his general on the ridge and

"Something's wrong--"

Shiv begs, in his mind, *don't let me go*

They stand on the bed of a river and the nose of the ship, shrouded in flame, comes up and up and up stands on the bed of a river and looks terrified even as he burns bright like a star. "The stars have all burned out," Maul says; "The stars have all burned out and the moon is wrong."

And Shiv burn and for one terrible, horrible instant, he catches a glance of everything of all of it and just how tiny he is they are they are so small just pinpoints of light in a river of it and the river moves without acknowledging them at all too much too big too merciless except for one single current.

"Don't let me go," he begs, and he is hanging off of a cliff but for one anchor point.

"Stay with me," Maul whispers back, everywhere, in his ears, in his head, and in those last seconds before the darkness comes, the only thing Shiv is aware of is *love* and *fire*. 
I can't see.

The thought was broken as it cracked through the disorientation; came only in pieces.

Opening his eyes didn't help. It was dark; pitch dark, at first, until slowly the light of the moon through the shattered viewports of the cockpit filtered into his perception, and the smell of salt and smoke. Dim flames flickered around the cockpit. Something in his leg hurt, and in his wrists, and his mind kept trying to skitter off back into darkness, unwilling to face whatever had happened, terrified by something he couldn't even comprehend, let alone process.

It was the sound of water that finally made it all come into focus.

We're sinking, Shiv thought, half delirious; the inside of his skull felt scorched black, rough.

It was a thought without urgency, until he realized he was alone.

"Lieu?" he asked, the sound of his own voice far away and hoarse to the point of a rasp, as he tried to swing his head around. Everything spun and then righted, and the sound of rushing, roaring water drowned him out. He waited until his vision settled, then finally pinpointed the crumpled shape of his C-O, laying in a messy heap of limbs.

Something about the sight kicked Shiv into moving and he made to get up from where he was pinned against one of the chairs, when the ship gave a deep, dying groan and a lurch, the cockpit swinging even more vertical.

That was enough to fire off any adrenaline he had left; Maul started sliding towards where the water was roiling up to meet them, and Shiv threw himself out of where he was pinned, crying out when his leg was wrenched free of the chair tangled around it. It was around there that he realized his wrists had come undone; the link between them broken. "Lieu! Maul!" he yelled, but Maul didn't so much as twitch or groan.

Shiv dove, feet first, and caught Maul's shirt briefly, lost it, then just grabbed the zabrak under the chin, wincing and cussing as he dragged his lieutenant back upwards with a clawed grip of desperation, enough to get under his arms, trying to ignore how lifeless that deadweight form was. "C'mon, you, c'mon," he muttered, pulling and wrestling with Maul's weight and finally getting an arm hooked around his chest, casting up with his now free hand to grab the chair he'd just abandoned, kicking with both feet against the sloped decking to keep from going down; from both of them going down.

The water was roiling; deep inside the superstructure, something gave with a horrific, watery shriek. The cockpit viewport. It was the only way out.

"C'mon, c'mon," Shiv gritted through his teeth, dragging and pulling, shoving his foot against a warped up deckplate. The world felt too cold now; everything felt too cold now. Tears ran
unchecked down his face.

The bodies of the slavers slid from the floor and panel, then were swallowed by the water below; one of them brushed past Shiv's bare arm.

He didn't feel the cuts on his hands as he shoved up hard and caught the broken panel, drawing on pure desperate strength to haul himself and seventy-five kilos of unconscious zabrak across it, sharp edges raking his skin and cutting into his clothes. The frame of the viewport was also warped; the transparisteel barrier wrecked, and Shiv managed to find a handhold that didn't slice fingers off before he was kicking and pulling and scrambling with all he had left to get them out onto the nose.

They were surrounded by water and Shiv hauled Maul closer, panic grabbing his throat at the way Maul's head lolled, frantically looking around for anything -- anything -- floating, even as the nose was sinking closer to the water; there was no way he was going to be able to hold them both up, not when the suction of this kriffing ship pulled them down, there was no way he was going to be able to keep them from going under--

--a light strafed across Shiv's back, spraying light around him, and he swung a desperate and ill-advised look back at it. But just before it left spots in his vision, searing his eyes, he recognized the large shape behind it and when the sound of engines, familiar and comforting, hit his ears, he choked on a sob.

It was the Nest.
Chapter Summary

Rancor gets drafted as medic's assistant, Misty gets to show off his skills, Shiv has a lot to try to cope with, Husker meets a lost brother, Tally does his thing and everyone lives to see the dawn.

Chapter Notes

This is an unrepentant 7292 words of H/C -- heavy on the C -- and tangled feelings and I probably unleashed my id a little bit in terms of caretaking. But for some good news, I do believe I can return to something like a weekly schedule, so next Friday I hope to post the very long anticipated Canon v. Fanon. <3 Hope to see you here, and there, and thanks for all the continued encouragement and love. (And to B_Radley and shadowmaat for being my constant companions during the writing process itself.)

"Hey, Rancor, cover his eyes."

Shiv seemed to rouse out of his dazed stare, mumbling, "I'm not a shiny, I'm not gonna faint at some blood."

Rancor did as he was told, despite his sergeant's protest, while Tally held Shiv's forearm down to the table and Castle got ready with some metal snips to cut the nylasteel band off; he knew Shiv probably wasn't feeling it, 'cause Tally had injected a local anesthetic -- on top of already giving Shiv more general painkillers -- but he understood why Tally ordered it.

"You've been through enough, Shiv," Tally just said, tone gentle, but there was no doubting who was in charge right now. "Don't go looking for any more things you don't want to remember."

Shiv grunted, but he didn't try to pull his head out of the way; Rancor stood straddling his thigh opposite of the side they were working on and just focused on his task, which was to be Tally's assistant, while most of the rest of the squad finished picking up the pieces after two separate kidnappings of four separate people. Out in the corridor, Misty and his twin were stowing the inflatable and the rescue gear, having showered and dried off from their rescue swim, and Tally had come aboard the Nest once they landed back in the city in a whirlwind of worry and orders to triage their L-T and sergeant, and somehow this was still less stressful than the past several hours had been.

There was the sound of the snips working; Rancor didn't look himself, just leaned his head down on an impulse and pressed his nose into his sergeant's grimy, salt-water damp hair when Shiv trembled once in place, and tried to put it all together himself.
Just shy an hour before, Misty had already gotten the waterjets from Bravo-984 -- long since sent back to them, recharged, serviced and waiting -- and then the emergency inflatable from its spot by the back ramp, and then he peeled out of his clothes in what had to be record time, stripping to shorts. "You as fast swimming as you are running?" he asked Rabbit.

Rabbit blinked once in surprise and then nodded. "I'm pretty good."

"Okay, strip off. Water temperature's comfortable according to sensors. If we need to do any swimming to get those two, we'll be okay."

They had tracked the ship from a tracker that had been planted on it at some prior point by Brody's mystery contacts; while the Nest hadn't been in range to see the crash, Tango -- in a feat of flight mathematics that impressed the hell out of Rancor and everyone else -- had not only figured out that the crash was happening, but had already navigated the Nest to reach the site of it.

They couldn't risk going directly over it, given how fast the ship was sinking once they caught sight of it, because the repulsors would kick up enough wake to potentially overwhelm Shiv, who was huddled with Maul on the nose of the wreck.

Once they were there, Castle relieved Rancor in watching their disgruntled prisoner, presumably handing command off to Misty, since this had just become a water rescue.

Misty was busy anchoring the waterjets to the newly inflated inflatable, rigging them on opposite sides as a homebrew set of outboard motors, tying them swiftly with what looked like some kind of complicated-as-hell sailors' knots. "Rancor, get the harnesses out that we used on Big Murder Mountain, we'll use the winch to get everyone back up again; hey, Husk, tell Tango to get us as low as he can to the water."

Husker grunted an agreement and radioed up to Tango in the cockpit, even as Misty hit the override on the ramp in order to open it flight, and Rancor bolted to their lockers to get into the one with the mountaineering gear. They were pretty squared away, as a unit, and it didn't take him but a minute to get the harnesses out, going over them quickly to double-check that there were no tears in the straps or unsound parts, and then took 'em back to hang on a hook by the winch to wait.

By then, his twin and Misty were both stripped down to just shorts and gauntlets -- thankfully waterproofed -- and Misty radioed Tango himself, "Keep the search light over us, but not on us directly."

Frankly, the way Misty was ready to go deploy on a water rescue impressed the hell out of Rancor; where before, he had been pacing nervously trying to figure out how to get their people back, now he was not only on the ball, but took charge like he'd always been the one giving orders. Now, he flashed a grin at Rabbit as he pushed the inflatable out on the ramp; outside, the weather was calm, though the noise from the repulsors and engines made it seem like it wasn't. "Hop in, this'll be the funnest part of your night."

Rabbit's eyes went saucer wide, but then he got into the inflatable and grabbed the ropes ringing the perimeter while Misty hopped in beside him and said, "Hey, Rancor, drop the ramp another fifteen degrees."

Rancor's jaw dropped when he realized they were not only about to be dumped out of the ship, but were asking to be. Since he wasn't in the position to refuse, though, he did as he was told and cringed as the inflatable slid right out of the Nest and towards the water about seven or eight meters
Serious as the situation was, both their laughing whoops of triumph floated back up.

After that, the actual rescue didn't take long. He watched as the inflatable bounced over there, over the wake created by the Nest's repulsors, and watched as the tiny figures out there moved, and then as they headed back from the nearly vanished shadow of the hulk that had been sinking. Rancor had retracted the ramp completely, leaving the open hatch, and once they were back, he laid on his belly on the floor using the winch's remote; their L-T was the first one up, and Rancor had to make sure he didn't get smacked into the Nest by guiding the cable. Once Maul was up, Husk was hauling him deeper into the ship, quickly unhooking the harness and tossing it back to Rancor, who tossed it down to the others with the cable attached.

Behind him, Husker was muttering something about wishing Tally was there, and something else about needing lessons on how to take a zabrak's pulse; when Rancor chanced a glance back, his heart did a lap around at the sight of blood and saltwater starting to stain the ship's floor.

"He's okay, right?" he asked, trying to swallow down the pitched, tight note in his voice enough to sound calm.

"Breathing, anyway. I think his hearts are both beating. Awfully cold, though, considerin'. Sooner we get everyone back aboard and pick Tally up, the better."

Husker did sound calm, but there was a real thread of concern in that tone, too. Rancor clung to the steadiness of that voice, even as he worried himself.

Shiv was next up. He was at least conscious enough to help keep himself from bashing into the ship, but when Rancor helped haul him in, he couldn't help his own gasp at the sight of his sergeant. Neither he nor Maul were wearing the long coats they had left the ship with earlier, and his arms were scratched up pretty bad, but his wrists were bleeding freely and it looked like some kind of metal had embedded itself in his flesh.

Husk must have already moved Maul off to the side, because he took Shiv off of Rancor's hands, manhandling the clearly dazed sergeant and unhooking the harness with a few expert motions before handing it off to Rancor. "Kriff, Sarge, quite a night, huh?"

Shiv didn't answer, which was somehow even more frightening than his appearance. Rancor swallowed hard as he tossed the harness back down again, presumably for his twin, and right then, he couldn't wait to wrap his arms around Rabbit.

Everything felt right, for the few moments that he did, even if that did leave him wet with seawater.

"All right, Shiv. I'm gonna wrap these up and then you're gonna go get a shower."

Tally's voice pulled Rancor back to the moment; he still had his hand wrapped around Shiv's eyes, and took a glance at Shiv's arms before letting go. They did look a lot better; the bloody nylasteel bands were set aside and Tally had thrown some stitches in where the cuts were particularly deep before wrapping them in bacta gel dressings. Now he was bandaging them secure with white gauze.
and had a couple adhesive shower covers off to the side.

Shiv blinked hard a few times once he could see again, and looked dully at his own arms, then swung a look at where Maul was on the table. "How's he?" he asked, voice still rough.

"I'm still working that out, but he's stable." Tally finished tying off one bandage and moved to the other, hands quick. "I'm waiting for Kenobi to get back to me. I've got him, Shiv, I won't let anything happen to him. If you're still on your feet after a shower and getting the rest of these dings fixed, you can stay and watch over him."

Tally had prioritized Maul once he was aboard, since Shiv was at least awake and semi-oriented, and even before he'd finished his preliminary assessment (and cussed a few times doing that), he had reassured Husk -- who was about to go drop their newly stunned prisoner off with Brody's contacts - - that he'd read the situation right, at least so far as Maul's hearts were both beating the right rhythm, if on the very slow side, and that Husk had done the right thing in not trying to warm him up or wake him up. That quick praise and reassurance landed well; even Rancor kinda smiled when Husk made some kind of grumbly acknowledgment and actually turned a bit red.

Then his twin volunteered to go, and his own smile had fallen away, unsure about how he was supposed to feel about it.

He didn't know if anyone else in the squad had twigged to it yet -- hell, he didn't even know if Rabbit had -- but his twin was falling for Eogan Truax. And Rancor-- Rancor didn't even start to know how to deal with that. He didn't even understand why.

As such, he was kind of grateful that Tally had conscripted him into acting as medical assistant. He didn't understand half the terminology Tally kept a running chatter up about, but he did have to snort when Tally said he was adding a new number to his whiteboard: "Lieu, this is the third shirt I've had to slice off of your unconscious body. If we reach five, you're going to use your fancy Alderaanian connection to have us a catered dinner."

There was something sweet about the way Tally talked at Maul, here or there; it was all worry, Rancor could hear it despite the quick competency, but even as Tally handled Maul like he would any other unconscious patient, with that kind of brusque efficiency, the tone was kind. Even if Maul couldn't hear it. Then, once Tally had Maul hooked up to every monitor they had available and had scrutinized the hell out of them, he'd turned to Shiv and got to work.

Now, Shiv was starting to come back to himself some; he'd been mostly quiet, but he experimentally flexed his hand, a fumbling kind of gesture given the local anesthetic and said, "The crash. The slavers are dead."

Rancor bit back the urge to say, Good. It was true, but he didn't think saying it would be the kind thing for Shiv right now. "You told Rabbit that when he was rescuing you."

"Did I?" Shiv tried to reach up and rub at his face, but Rancor put a hand on his arm to keep him from it.

"Yeah." Tally got a hand under his chin, gentle, and used his other to push Shiv's hair back off his brow, inspecting his face and eyes, now that he was done wrapping the other wrist. "You told me you didn't hit your head, too."

Shiv just submitted to the handling; there was a kinda glassy look about his eyes, but it did seem to be getting better now. "I didn't. I mean, I don't think I did. They gassed us, and then the-- and Maul--"
"Did he hit his? 'Cause I can't make heads or tails of half of his readings right now. He's missing a couple horns, and his intracranial pressure's higher than it should be, but the imager's not showing any bleeds or actual brain damage."

"He landed a crashing ship with the Force and kept us from dying," Shiv shuddered once at that, and didn't catch the way Tally's eyes went wider and then his whole face darkened. "I'm really cold, can I get a blanket?"

"Shower first, brother." Tally leaned in and pressed a kiss centered on his brow, just a moment of unguarded affection, and then let him go, quickly picking up the shower covers and covering Shiv's bandaged wrists with 'em. "Rancor, go in with him."

Shiv's left leg was bruised from knee almost to ankle; Tally had used the handheld imager to make sure no bones had been broken, but even though none had been, it was going to be painful as hell when or if the painkillers wore off. And even with those, Shiv wasn't likely to be too steady on his feet. Rancor nodded once, getting hands under the sergeant's elbows and helping him up, then out to the fresher, a slow and limping journey.

(They made it just fine; Shiv tried to claim he was okay, Rancor ignored the obvious banthshit, indulging in some one-sided banter about the pointlessness of shyness when you were basically the same model. It was when Rancor was washing Shiv's hair for him, though, that something in Shiv cracked and he tried to curl around himself, even standing precariously, broken down into sobs.

Rancor had been a twin all his life and knew what to do; he pulled Shiv in close, hand on the back of his soapy head, chin over his shoulder and held him there. "I'm okay," Shiv tried to say; "Don't tell anyone, okay?" immediately followed, and Rancor just worked the soap back out of his hair and said, "I won't, I promise," while the water sluiced away the blood and salt.)

"He's alive and stable," was the first thing Tally said, when Kenobi's fear-drawn face appeared on the holo in the medbay, unable and unwilling to hold the Jedi in suspense. He knew that sending a high priority message right to the general probably was pretty kriffin' terrifying; that Kenobi had probably thought the very worst when he got it. "Not okay, but stable."

"I know he's not dead," Kenobi answered, though despite the words, the tone wasn't snappish. He breathed hard; behind him, Tally could hear the sound of heavy cannon fire filtering through the comm connection. "What happened?"

"It's a long story that involves kidnapping, slavers and a ship crashing. I'm sure eventually Maul will tell it himself, but right now, what I need to know is what the frip to do with him," Tally answered, trying to keep his voice from getting too strident. "According to what little we could get off of Shiv, he landed that damn ship with the Force and he's been out cold -- literally cold -- for about two hours now. If his ICP had been even a fraction higher, I would have booked it to a damn hospital. It's coming down steadily now, but..."
If anything really hammered home the absolute, desperate vulnerability of Maul's entire situation, it was that the most logical course -- calling the Jedi Temple and conferring with Vokara Che -- was the option of last resort. Tally would have, regardless, if those readings had been any more dire. But despite the scary numbers, Maul was breathing on his own and the unnerving, unanswered-for hypothermia was actually for the better right now; a hospital wouldn't likely do anything but maintain that status, if they were smartly conservative about it.

And if anything really hammered home just how much Tally had left to learn, it was this.

Kenobi's eyes slid closed and he just murmured, sounding wrecked, "Oh, darling." Even as antsy as Tally was feeling, the emotion of it -- the love and worry and heartsickness -- jerked on him. Kenobi drew a deep breath, then said, "Bearing in mind that I'm not a medic, but that sounds like the situation after the mission to Zigoola. He was out when I found him lying in the rubble of a Sith Temple and he'd been down for over a full day by that point. When the medics picked us up, he was still running a bit colder than normal; they kept him sedated, though Master Che gave them clearance to warm him back up fairly quickly, once they were able to get a connection to ask her. It- - it seemed to take him a few weeks to recover, though we know now that he hadn't quite. If it's the same, and it sounds like it-- call Bail or Breha and get in touch with their royal medical staff. The only thing you can do right now is keep him from accessing the Force, and as much rest and quiet as possible."

Despite Kenobi not being a medic, that was all pretty useful information. Tally cursed internally, yet again, this banthashit space mysticism business -- he knew the Force was real, he'd seen it used, he knew it was innate, but the way it was shrouded in mystery and not science drove him absolutely bonkers -- but having some kind of angle helped. "Is there any case precedent I can look into here?"

"No. Aside Zigoola. Whatever is attached to his medical file and whatever the doctors on Alderaan recorded. They had a medication protocol to-- block off his connection to the Force mostly, for lack of a better way to put it. It gave him time to at least heal some." Kenobi glanced over his shoulder, then looked back at Tally. "If it helps, think of it as-- as lifting something in desperation well beyond your usual capability. What you strain to its breaking point needs time to heal."

"Yeah." Tally blew out his own breath. "All right. I'll have him call when he's capable of calling."

"Thank you." Kenobi scrubbed at his eyes -- he looked haggard and exhausted even beyond his anxiety -- and then reached out to his own comm panel. "Take care, Tally; be safe."

"Yessir." Tally cut the connection from his end and stood for a moment, listening to the steady, slow beeps of the heart(s)-monitor before putting in a call to Alderaan next.

Meanwhile, on his mission to drop off a bouncer and meet up with their people, leaving his command team in the capable hands of their medic with some real measure of relief, Husker was shocked as hell when it was Sal who greeted them. They stood and stared for long moments, and then Husk -- not knowing until the last second whether he was going to hug the other clone or slug him in the mouth -- opened his arms and they both huffed their shock and wonder at finding each other here, after one had deserted and the other had never even thought to, holding on tight.

Husk remembered the dead-eyed look after Slick had been-- and Sal had been his batcher--
Husk and Sal hadn't been desperately close. But that didn't matter, in the end; they'd both worn the same blue.

Meanwhile, off to the side, a nautolan with yellowish skin and blue rings on it was dumping the unconscious bouncer into a wooden crate. When everyone looked at him, he flashed a bright, wide grin. "He'll make it back home safe eventually, but first, he'll be cargo bound for Nar Shaddaa."

"Can we go get Eogan?" Raze asked; Husk had snatched the demo expert the moment he went to follow Tally, not because he thought Raze couldn't deal with seeing their L-T and sergeant banged up, but because he just didn't want to put that on the kid if it could be prevented. Since Rabbit had also wanted to go, that worked out well; Rancor had already been snatched by Tally to work in the medbay, but Husk knew on observation that Rancor would be able to cope with that role okay.

"Yeah, give us a minute," the nautolan answered.

"We have a lot to talk about," Husker said, as Brody snickered and helped the nautolan stow the 'cargo' with like crates, eying the slicer before turning back to the other former 501st clone.

"Yeah," Sal said, eyes sad and happy at once. "We do."

Aside whatever Force weirdness there was, Maul had less *physical* damage than Shiv, at least in terms of open wounds. Even as Tally got to work on cleaning him off and dealing with the less-vicious cuts on his wrists, Castle got down to business repairing one of the panels on his shin, which had gotten a pretty nasty gouge and dent in it.

"It's cosmetic, mostly," Castle said, when he caught Tally watching with some anxiety, waiting for some kind of trap to spring closed. "Figured you could deal with the flesh and I'll fix the metal."

"Every time I look at those, I think about--" Tally started, then stopped and shook his head, turning his attention back to his own work, irrigating Maul's wrist and deftly avoiding the hep-locked IV access he'd put in the zabrak's forearm, but wasn't using yet. Both Maul and Shiv had managed to avoid cutting into tendons, thank everything.

"Yeah." Castle delicately finished cutting away the ragged part and took the sheet of alumipatch, a brighter silver metal than the gunmetal blue-gray of the original cybernetics, and started measuring it, having already tapped out the dent with a hammer as much as he could. "The knees and ankles are all adjustable, though. He can do his own tension adjustments without setting off any booby-traps. It's up higher you gotta worry."

"I really-- really kriffin' hate that we have to even discuss the possibility that we can kill our own lieutenant by doing some damned repairs," Tally answered, after a moment, mouth twisting bitterly as he finished cleaning one wrist and then started applying the same kind of bacta gel dressing to it he had used on Shiv.

"I know."

Luckily for all involved, the doctor on Alderaan had been able to transfer Maul's records from his visit there, under the authority of Queen Breha. Even luckier was that the medication protocol was one Tally could fulfill without a visit to a supply depot; he had all of the medications used onboard
already. Compounding them was no problem, and for that matter, Tally could already see where he could actually do a more accurate job than was done originally on dosing and then step-down, because he already had a pretty solid idea of what it took thanks to experience.

It made him feel a little better about his own expertise, anyway. And it helped that it was incredibly hard to actually OD a zabrak; to actually overdose one to the point of critical danger, even a hybrid like Maul -- who did require less medication than a full-blooded zabrak to reach the right serum levels -- meant either the grossest of negligence or genuine malice. It was the same thing that made them very resistant to addiction, though not so much that Tally still wasn't careful about what he prescribed and how often. And the same thing that meant they usually ended up way under medicated when they needed it, unless someone was paying attention and knew that was likely.

Being a medic meant access only to either acute meds, or medication by prescription from a fully qualified doctor. And acute medications were usually hard-hitters and ran the risk of addiction; he knew more'n a few medics who self-medicated using them, and even though he could understand all too well how that happened, it was still a pain in the ass, especially as so many of his brothers -- and hell, Maul himself if he was willing -- would benefit from having long-term psychiatric medication, the kind formulated to build up and sustain.

Tally had a bad feeling that working around only having access to the bluntest of instruments was going to get harder as time went on.

"Oh no, no shivering yet, Lieu," he muttered, when the monitor beeped that Maul was starting to, albeit too subtle to detect by sight. "Not until your head's depressurized some more," he added, ticking over medication before just grabbing the meperidine and loading up the right dose and pressing the hypo against the side of the zabrak's neck, though away from where he'd been burned by something.

"Why not?" Castle asked, glancing up from where he was laser-cutting a new piece at the end of the table. "He's cold. And it feels like a tomb in here right now."

"Intracranial pressure." Tally watched the monitor, resisting the urge to rub at his eyes -- he was only starting to feel how damn tired he was -- and when he was satisfied that shivering reflex was knocked back down again, he moved onto the next task, which was cleaning off all of the dried blood and treating the minor injuries. "Uh-- what happens when you over-pressurize hydraulic lines in an engine?"

"They crack or explode." Castle went back to work, though he scrunched his nose up in distaste. "Don't tell me you think his head's gonna explode, that's--"

"No, no." Tally almost grinned, though, just because-- wow, that was kriffing gruesome, but if he painted it like a cartoon in his mind, it was almost kinda funny. "Skulls are much harder than brains are. High pressure won't damage his hard head, but it could damage what's inside of it. Being hypothermic decreases the pressure; shivering might warm him up, but it would also increase the pressure, too. On the other hand, the sign that he was starting to shiver means the different parts of his brain are starting to try to talk to one another again."

Castle nodded for that, then started fitting the new piece to Maul's leg, pausing here or there to grind and shape it to fit the missing part. "Explain it to an engineer, I can smell you wanting to."

Tally did like talking, especially when he was working, though he had learned to curb the habit on Kamino. Some of his brothers had loved it, because he seemed to have a knack for explaining things they were struggling with in a way for them to get, but some hadn't. And the instructors definitely hated it. But since Castle asked...
"Okay. So, unconsciousness isn't exactly like-- a shut down, so much. It's not like powering down a computer. It's more like-- taking the network connections offline and powering down different applications into standby. Some are still running: he's breathing, his hearts are beating. Different parts are working, just not working together. The part of his brain that's aware of the receptors for cold -- at least so far as his skin -- and his own internal thermostat weren't talking to one another before. So, now that they're starting to, that's a good sign."

Castle seemed to chew that over, brow working. "That why we don't get up and shoot clankers when we're asleep but dreaming about it?"

"That's exactly why. The part of our brain that's connected to thinking about doing it isn't, at that moment, networked to the part that's capable of putting it to action." Tally worked carefully on getting at the dried blood on Maul's face, from where he'd apparently had a hell of a nose bleed -- not that big a surprise, all given -- and was careful not to get any water up his nose. "Unconsciousness itself is a continuum. Sleep and unconsciousness are usually considered different things, but some of the same processes work through both."

"So, if those connections are starting to work again, that means they weren't blown out permanently?"

"Right." Tally blew out a breath and kept painstakingly scrubbing, occasionally glancing up at the monitors. "I'll let him warm up soon. I just want those readings as close to baseline as I can get them, then we can see if reversing the hypothermia is safe."

Castle nodded, then gestured with his mini-welder as he got ready to finish his repair. "Watch your eyes, brother."

"Your girlfriend, Constable Faygan, helped us figure out who snatched you," Castle told Shiv, as he headed out the door. "Told her I'd have you call when we got you back, so whenever you're up for it give her a comm?"

Shiv had come back, newly cleaned and patched up, looking both fragile and sideways adorable wrapped in Maul's colorful blanket. Passing it around the squad had somehow become something of a tradition; an odd one, but Maul never grudged them snatching it off of his bunk. Tally even had borrowed it once; the soft, aged fabric was kind of a surprise, and it smelled good, a warm scent woodsy and sweet that never seemed to fade, though it gained nuance from the natural scents of those who wrapped up in it. When asked, Maul had said there were panels inside of its batting that had dried flowers and herbs in them; that it was one of a dozen passed down from generation to generation in the Organa family, repaired as needed, and that he had no idea why Bail and Breha had gifted it to him and Obi-Wan.

*Because they love you, obviously,* was what Tally had thought, but hadn't said. Still, it was a hell of a gift. And, in its own way, so was Maul allowing them to grab it whenever they wanted to wrap up in it.

Shiv looked at Castle for a long moment, then nodded. "Yeah. I will." He rocked a little at the light clap Castle gave him on the shoulder before heading out, then looked at Tally.
Tally gave him a once-over visually, then gestured him over to the chair. "No strain or weight bearing on those wrists, okay? At least for a couple days."

Shiv only nodded, casting a look over Maul, taking in the new repair on his leg and then the rest of him. He didn't sit down, though, just stood there looking kind of like he had no idea what he was supposed to be doing, but wanting to do something.

Tally had already chased Rancor off to bed after Rancor was done helping Shiv and handling all the smaller knicks and cuts while sitting in the briefing room; Brody and crew had checked in and were all safe, and honestly, no one was in the condition to question that or debate it. He said they'd come back in the morning. Tally had too much to worry about to really debate about it. There was a lot coming that was going to need dealt with, and if ever there was a time to pick their battles, it was now.

"Wanna talk about it?" he asked, careful to leave it an open question.

Shiv shook his head, tugging that blanket closer around his own shoulders. But then he said, "I killed someone. One of the slavers."

That made Tally's eyebrows draw together. It wasn't that it surprised him; he knew the slavers were dead, though he had assumed that either the crash or Maul had done the actual killing, but something about Shiv's tone was off. "We're soldiers, Shiv. I know most of the time we're supposed to just be dealing with clankers, but--"

"I hadn't meant to kill him." That seemed to wake Shiv up a bit; he looked at Tally, eyes shadowed and tired. "I just wanted to-- stop him, incapacitate him, and I accidentally cut his throat with those kriffin' binders."

Tally wasn't any kind of fan of killing and death, but he couldn't really bring himself around to the idea that a dead slaver, who hurt his brother and his CO, was any great loss to the galaxy. Still, it was clearly rattling Shiv; it didn't take a genius to figure out that was probably because it wasn't intentional. "He wouldn't have survived Maul even if you hadn't, brother. And I'm pretty sure you're not telling me the whole story, but you didn't get those wounds from friendlies."

Shiv went to reply, then just shook his head, eyes closing. The set of his shoulders made something awful and sharp rake across Tally's heart.

"I think you need to go lay down," Tally said, breathing it off. "You're not in any kind of condition to handle an existential crisis right now, okay?"

That got a little scoff, the hint of humor helping ease the raking worry Tally felt, but Shiv shook his head again. "I'm not leaving Maul."

"He's not alone." Tally glanced at the monitors again; he'd turned the heat back up, though he was going slow with warming Maul up, just so he could keep watching the process. But he thought probably the zabrak was out of the woods, anyway; enough that he'd started a slow infusion of saline and electrolytes to fix the imbalances, enough to add a sedative to the medication, and enough that he'd finally been able to relax a fraction himself. "I said I'd take care of him, and I will."

"I know. But I'm not leaving him."

There was probably something going unsaid -- to go with all the other things going unsaid -- but even though Tally could have pulled rank in any number of ways on his sergeant, he didn't want to. Even in this condition, there was no doubt Shiv had his reasons and that they were very likely good
ones. Tally looked down at Maul, ticking it over, then looked back up at Shiv. "Okay, so what things need to be in place for you to be willing to crawl into a bunk?"

Shiv looked off, clearly ticking it over as well as he was capable of. "The last thing he'd remember is-- is us crashing. And he wouldn't know Brody and Eogan are safe and okay. And I don't want him to wake up without me there to tell him otherwise. Or-- or alone, I don't want him to be alone, I know what you said, but-- not like that."

The actual likelihood that Maul was gonna make it back to the waking world anytime soon on his own was pretty much zilch; Tally had no intentions of letting him. At least until he was sure that everything was as handled as it could be. But Shiv did have a point; that was a hell of a thing to have stewing in the subconscious and sometimes, compromising was the only answer.

He palmed over his face, then said, "I can bring him up; won't be for more than a minute or two, the antagonist for the sedative's really short acting and he'll still probably be disoriented and groggy, but if you think you can reassure him and yourself with it, then I will."

That seemed to lift Shiv up a little. "It won't hurt?"

"Nope. Works on a different mechanism than the painkillers he's loaded up with." Tally wouldn't have even suggested it, if that weren't the case. The second he'd realized just how kriffin' stoic about pain Maul could be was the exact same second he had decided he'd minimize it as much as safely possible, and thus far, he'd done a pretty damned good job of that. "So, he should retain the memory."

"Okay. We'll start there." Shiv came closer, while Tally picked up the hypo he had marked for it -- something he always had on hand when sedating someone, regardless of who -- and hooked his index finger over the horn at Maul's crown with his other hand, just to deter him trying to pick his head up if he was so inclined.

It took about half a minute to really filter in and start working; Maul's heartbeats picked up a little, and he pulled in a deeper breath, eyelids fluttering.

Tally brushed knuckles light against his cheek, smiling some even as Shiv wrapped his fingers around the zabrak's, keeping his voice soft. "Hey, Lieu. You're okay; you know where you are?"

It took another few seconds, but then Maul answered, murmuring in a drifty but perfectly intelligible manner, "Alderaan." Another breath. "Bail's river."

Well, that obviously wasn't the right answer, but it was at least a reasonable one considering the parallels of events. "Not quite. Try again, okay?"

Maul finally managed to get his eyes open, brow furrowing a little; his eyes were wildly bloodshot, and he probably couldn't see straight, but he did indeed try again. "The Nest." That seemed to spark something and his gaze sharpened a fraction. "Shiv?"

"Right here." Shiv leaned over to put himself in Maul's sightline. "Wanted to tell you that you did it, I'm safe, and that Brody and Eogan are safe too. Everyone is."

"And all right?"

"Getting there." Shiv gave a little tug on Maul's hand, and Maul gripped back. "Just wanted to let you know that."

Maul's eyes drifted closed again; he hummed back an affirmative, gone back more distant. "S'cold,"
he said, more of a mumble now.

"We'll fix that. Go back to sleep for awhile," Tally answered, still keeping his voice soft, brushing his fingertips over the fading furrow in the zabrak's brow. "You'll wake up warm."

He hadn't expected an argument and didn't get one; Maul just slid back out of awareness, gentle as could be, and his breathing and hearts slowed back down again. Even without meaning to, Tally breathed out long and slow himself; apparently, those two weren't the only ones who had needed some kind of reassurance. He didn't doubt that it was going to take awhile to pick up the pieces, but knowing that Maul still had his mind intact was a hell of a relief.

He thought for a few moments while it was quiet, looking at those monitors again, then said to Shiv, "Okay. You go get him some pants and socks, and I'll work out the tech, then you're both going to go sleep in a proper bunk."

Shiv blinked out of whatever he was thinking, still absently rubbing his thumb against the backs of Maul's fingers, but then a hint of a smile crossed his mouth. "Doctor's orders?"

Tally scoffed at that, but he grinned back, unbidden and real. "Don't push it, smartass, just follow 'em."

Getting an unconscious zabrak half-dressed again wasn't easy, but no one needed to tell either of them that Maul was touchy about those cybernetics being visible; modesty might not be any issue, but mental health was. Then Tally had gotten a wrist monitor on his left arm, a bit up from its optimal position to avoid bandages, but still capable of reading and providing some telemetry; he said he had been planning on springing that one on Maul at some point, because he was eternally frustrated by not having a vitals readout on his HUD like he did for his brothers, so now was as good a time as any to use it. From there, he'd just tucked the IV solution bag under the shoulder strap of his own rarely-worn fatigue jacket and hoisted Maul up and followed Shiv out.

It was pretty much a foregone conclusion that Shiv was gonna double up with Maul; he just grabbed his own datapad and did. He didn't want to be alone, and he didn't want Maul to be alone, and if he stood any chance of sleeping restfully himself, it wasn't going to be solo.

Once they were both situated, covered in a warming blanket over Maul's quilt, Shiv waited until Tally had left -- they were the only ones still awake on the Nest -- and then opened a comm up, though he set it to send right to Dani's message box.

"Uh-- hi, Dani," he said, holding up the datapad, ignoring the vague soreness in his wrists. "I wanted to thank you for helping, that was really kind of you. And-- I'm sorry this is a message, instead of live, I'm--" Not really okay. "--pretty beat, not really up for talking right now. But I appreciate what you did, and that you wanted me to call, and I wanted to let you know I'm safe. And you stay safe, too, okay? Thanks again."

It was awkward and he felt like a heel, but he could barely hold a thought in his head; he didn't want to presume on her, whatever Castle thought they were to each other, but he did want to reassure her he was at least safe. He tried to press a smile for her, then sent the message and flicked his datapad into standby mode before putting it up on the shelf next to Maul's, over their heads, and turned the
inset lights of the bunk off.

In the now dim quiet, he closed his eyes and matched his breathing to Maul's, and tried to let go long enough to drift away from all of it; the blood and the killing and the pain and the Force and all of it. Even with all of it, though, his mind kept circling back to two things.

Love and fire.

His temples were still damp from tears when he finally fell asleep.

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Tally was the last man standing; he cleaned up his medbay and kept his bucket close at hand, set to alert him if that wrist monitor picked up anything worrisome. By the time he was finished, exhaustion had weighed his shoulders down and his back ached; his eyes were stinging from it. Outside, Llanic had breached daylight, leaving the seemingly endless night behind for a new day.

He still ended up doing one more thing. When he made it back to the bunk room, an hour or so after settling his sergeant and L-T, he stopped and just cocked his head at them; somehow Maul had found enough brain power to shift to his side -- he was an unrepentant side-sleeper -- and Shiv was curled up to his back, arm over him.

It was enough for Tally to retrieve his own personal datapad and snap a picture, and then, on something of an exhausted whim he sent it via encrypted connection to General Kenobi's comm, marked 'personal', lingering for a moment on what he wanted to attach to it.

Finally, he settled on the text, "Missing a couple horns, kind of brain-baked, but here safe." A beat, and then he added, "And loved."

He was almost asleep himself, bucket next to his head, when the reply came back.

It was just a brief snippet: Kenobi, hand on his chest and an aching, grateful look on his face and the words, *Thank you.*

Despite it all, it was enough that Tally drifted off in peace.
Canon v. Fanon

Chapter Summary

The Blackbirds get a break -- albeit a short one -- while they try to recover from the various infodumps and kidnappings; Maul finds himself in a cutlery situation, Brody brings home a particularly interesting tidbit unrelated to their current adventures, Rabbit wrestles with his feelings over Eogan and Tango wrestles with his own feelings. (And, after a fashion, wins.)

Chapter Notes

This has been in the works forever as a tiny subplot. Literally, almost to the beginning of my writing of Blackbirds. However, this chapter jumped a little all over the place, and the subplots got a bit more tender than I expected, and hopefully everyone will forgive me my inelegant but hopefully fun delivery. (Don't worry, next week I'll tackle the much larger issues.)

Retrieved from the JGFA, posted 4.2 weeks ago at 22.15:

The bombs just kept falling! In the distance, Myca could hear the horrible grinding noise of the droids coming closer and closer, but her leg was trapped and her custom blaster was too far away to shoot the rocks off of it. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, a single tear tracking through the dirt on her face to roll down and fall off of her chin. She didn't want to die, but if she was going to, she could at least die bravely.

But then, even as she started to accept what was going to happen to her when the droids reached her, the pressure on her leg was gone. The rocks hovered before being flung away, and when she looked up, her savior was standing there with his hand held out to her.

Her breath caught in her throat. His broad shoulders blocked out the unforgiving sun, as he towered over her, looking calm and concerned. Myca slowly reached up...

TBC

He didn't surface all at once.

It came in pieces, instead; different, fleeting moments like air bubbles. The only constant was the heaviness; the sense of being held down, but with none of the panic that would normally accompany such a thing. It was warm -- Important, he thought, a word shot through with a feeling of faith
rewarded -- and there was a settled familiarity to it. Maybe a scent or several; maybe just an impression.

It wasn't the first long drift Maul had known in his life, but it was the most comfortable. There was no sense of urgency to it; no despair, either. It felt as if he had earned it; or, at least, that he wasn't stealing it. It reminded him of pieces of time on Alderaan, filtered in on the familiar scent of the blanket he had brought from there, by way of the Negotiator. The only element missing was Obi-Wan. The familiar weight of Obi-Wan's head on his shoulder, or the sound of a single human heartbeat under his own ear.

*I miss you,* Maul thought. He had no sense whatsoever of the Force right now, was self-contained and whole as he could be in that state, but he aimed the thought automatically in the Jedi's direction anyway.

Probably the most notable thing was the utter *lack* of pain. He felt a bit stiff, when he could check in with his body, but no pain. Not the electrical shooting that occasionally hit his right hand, or the sometimes soreness in his right shoulder. Not the constant companion ache around where what was left of his spine met his cybernetics, something he was so used to that he never honestly acknowledged it anymore, and only did now that it *wasn't* there.

Still, everything was weighed down. It took him a long time to get his eyes open, and when he did, he found himself in his own bunk. There was an arm over him and the press of a heavy body up against his back; the feeling of air softly huffing across the back of his neck.

"Raze...?" he managed to ask, mouth feeling clumsy enough that he was mindful of his articulation.

The arm over him gave a squeeze and the breath against his neck picked up a fraction, but Raze's voice came from *above.*

The demo expert's spiky-haired head leaned over from his bunk, and he beamed at Maul from upside down. "Nope, not me this time, Lieu."

Maul peered at him for a moment, squinting, not even able to really lift his head to do it, then shifted his head just enough to look down; aside the various gauze and paraphernalia on his own arms, the brown one over him was likewise taped here or there and wrapped at the wrist. He wet his lips, mind no where up to processing speed, and then asked, carefully, *"Is this a cutlery situation?"

"Hn?" Shiv asked, arm tightening a little, as he was apparently not quite awake himself.

"He's asking if he's the little spoon, in Maul-speak," Tally said, from somewhere adjacent, sounding humored.

"Yeah, looks like it," Shiv mumbled back.

Maul had some questions -- at least, he thought he probably *should* have questions -- but the heaviness was already layering back over him, and he didn't even manage to get his mouth open again before he drifted back off.

(He also didn’t manage to find out that he now had a fanbase, however wildly inaccurate their view of him turned out to be.)
Most of the Blackbirds had returned come morning, as they'd said they would.

Castle had slept like the dead, taking Brody and Husk at their word that they were safe out there. He hadn't realized how beat he was until his head hit his pillow; he was out in less than a minute. Now, sometime late morning, he drifted awake just in time to catch Tally playing Maul-interpreter and then took a minute and rolled over from his back to his side, blinking into the softly lit bunkroom. Raze was just pulling himself back up to his own bunk from where he'd been hanging upside down to talk to Maul and Shiv, both of whom had apparently fallen back to sleep in the short span of time between when Castle woke and bothered to look; Rabbit and Rancor were both curled up around one another in Rancor's bunk, still asleep.

"Feel as run over as I do?" Tally asked; his hair was loose and there was a shadowed cast to his eyes, but he looked like he was in good humor anyway.

"By a whole herd of kybucks," Castle answered, turning yet again to lay face down for a moment. His back ached a little bit; he hadn't realized how tense he had gotten the day before, until it was all over and done. "Everyone home?"

"Yeah, except Husk and Eogan."

"What time is it, anyway?"

"Just coming up on noon, local."

That wasn't enough sleep, but they had work to do. Castle winced as he rolled out of his bunk and to his feet; a shower and a cup of caf, and he'd probably feel alive enough to start dealing with it. "I'm gonna get a shower and then come back and rouse the troops, see if we can't put together a plan of action."

"Not those two," Tally said, which almost made Castle chuckle. It wasn't a real heated comment or anything, but he wasn't surprised Tally clarified it.

He shook his head at the medic, smiling. "Nope. Far as all this is concerned, they're doin' their duty as we speak."

(That didn't stop Shiv from getting up when he heard everyone else doing so, but at least Maul was too far gone to follow.)
Waking up really was slow business, after the night they'd had.

Smarty had spent a chunk of it with Tally and Raze at a Biscuit Baron, then another chunk of it waiting for the Nest to land back in port. Once they were back aboard, Tally had immediately gone to do his thing, Husker had grabbed Raze and Rabbit to head back out to rendezvous with Brody, and once Smarty was sure that everyone was as okay as they could be, he'd gone and crashed in his bunk, knowing that they were going to be expected to be on the ball all too soon.

Castle had roused him ten minutes before, and Smarty had just given him the ole one-fingered salute before stuffing his face in his pillow and groaning. Still, there was no sense in putting it off, so he rolled out of his bunk with an even more elaborate groan and staggered his way to the common room across the hall to make caf.

Now, he half-listened as Brody was hushedly talking about tracking the fallout from his Viable ad, and how via that, he had stumbled across something interesting. When Shiv came in, looking a little like he’d been in a prize fight, Smarty made him a cup of caf and was polite enough to ignore it when he and Tally were bumping heads over it.

Apparently Shiv won that round; he took his caf and his usual seat at the table.

“--I mean, it’s obviously not accurate, I don’t think it’s gonna cause any more trouble than the other stories do for the Jedi. This sector's pretty buried under a lot of other noise, anyway.”

Smarty blinked at that, then swung his head over. Brody was sitting with Raze, who was leaning over his shoulder looking far too awake and cheerful, holding onto his datapad. Tally had drifted over there himself and now looked intently absorbed and surprised.

Nothing in the whole kriffin’ galaxy could grab Smarty like curiosity could, and he moved down a few chairs to take a look himself, Rabbit right behind him.

One quick scan of the screen dropped his jaw. Brody smirked and handed the datapad over to Tally, who dropped into the chair with it, never once looking away from the screen, his expression melting from shock to an almost devilish amusement.

“What are you even reading?” Castle asked, sitting down at the table next to Shiv, eying them as they clustered together.

“Something Brody downloaded off of the HoloNet,” Tally answered, half-absently, while Raze gave a little giggle.

“Don’t look at me, I refuse to read any more of it.” Brody held his hands up, as if washing them of
The whole incident.

“Read what?” Tango asked, leaning against the bulkhead beside the door, half-awake.

Tally cleared his throat and Smarty caught the way he turned a little red, but then -- dropping his voice a hair deeper -- he read aloud: “He reached out and pulled the battered beauty from the rubble, then held her in his arms as she wavered unsteadily. As she peered up at him with her vivid violet eyes, he asked in a soft, cultured voice, ‘Are you all right?’”

“Hey, they got that part right!” Raze said, enthusiastically.

“She had never seen a more beautiful zabrak. His bare, red and black skin was warm as he held her in his arms--”

Shiv spit his caf halfway across the briefing room table.

How this happened was this:

University of Coruscant student Mycaylah Fallash loved Anakin Skywalker. In her first year away from home, attending school and living in the packed student housing development adjacent to the tall campus tower, she would readily claim that it was only her love of the Jedi General that got her through the stress of moving and making new friendships and trying to survive on a shoestring budget her parents had put her on because they were unhappy about her choice of schools. (They didn’t like the multispecies, multicultural nature of the U of C, and would have much preferred her go into a human oriented higher education facility. She was pretty sure the only reason they even gave her a pittance was because to not do so would mean looking really bad to all their rich, arrogant friends.) She had loaded up on classes -- way too many, in retrospect -- so she couldn’t even get a part time job to make up the difference.

She still would claim that eating cup noodles for a whole month was absolutely worth the credits she spent on Anakin’s Heroes of the Republic special holo from Biscuit Baron, bought on iPort from someone who lived in the region where it had been available. Her own region had Yoda and Yoda only, and if she wanted to have Anakin’s, she had to pay through the nose.

But she did it. She ate cup noodles for a month, and that holo sat in a place of honor, right beside the custom Anakin plushie her roommate had sewn her, by hand, for her name day.

She absorbed every bit of knowledge she could about him. She rewatched every interview, every piece of footage, that came up until she had them memorized. There wasn’t a ton out there -- everyone seemed to swoon over General Kenobi most of all -- but there was more than enough for her to love him. She maybe kind of obsessed a little bit, but it kept her sane.

And so, knowing that the Jedi were celibate and that someone as amazing as Anakin wouldn’t give her the time a day even if they weren’t, Mycaylah wrote stories.

Stumbling across the Jedi General Fiction Archive had also been life-saving. She couldn’t count on both hands the number of times where she was overwhelmed to the point of tears, trying to keep up with her classes and stumble her way through learning how to live in a very large, very different universe than the one she had come from. How many times she felt so lonely and hopeless and
stupid and useless, pulling in a bad mark, or having to talk to her parents and listen to them disapproving of her.

But on the JGFA sector, it wasn’t like that at all. Before finding it, she had just wrote stupid little stories to keep herself from drowning in despair, but once she discovered that other people also wrote stories--

She found a place. A people. Her first hesitant upload was a short self-insert, and she’d chewed her nails to ruins when she posted it, fingertip hovering over ‘delete’ on her datapad for a whole ten minutes.

She only got one comment, but it made her so happy that she cried. The good kind of crying.

*This is so sweet, I love it!*

She thanked the person. She joined the forums and started tentatively talking to people. She joined the chat groups. She wrote more stories, and every time got a little more attention, almost all of it positive, and when life was too much-- when life was too hard and she kind of wanted to quit everything, it was those friendships and those stories that kept her going.

Except-- then Viable happened.

Half the forums thought the ad was amazing. The other half -- Mycaylah’s usual half -- was devastated.

She always thought of Anakin as-- incorruptible. Beautiful. Maybe even kind of shy, even though he hid it well. Seeing him jutting his hips out like that, talking like that, broke her heart. There was a lot of denial, a lot of anger. She cried for a good hour straight -- not the good kind -- and tried to put that playback out of her mind.

She was relieved when the company itself apologized and disclaimed responsibility for it, and when Anakin released a statement that someone had stolen his visage to produce this awful parody, but it still kind of messed her up.

Still, she finally queued up the special interest piece that the reporter for C-PAN was supposed to do on Anakin, hoping to forget about all that unpleasantness, even though it was a few days old now. Sitting on her bed, arms around her Anakin plushie, she watched as the reporter talked to some troopers -- they were so brave! -- and even filmed them wrestling with each other -- kind of hot, honestly -- and then went to talk to a Jedi.

Except, he wasn’t Anakin. And they couldn’t seem to even keep his face in focus! A voice-over apologized for the footage, claiming it was interference from military equipment, even though the only person out of focus was the Jedi. The only thing she could make out was, like-- beard. Lots of beard. Which-- ick.

As she waited for Anakin, though, a flash of something colorful caught her eyes, amidst all of the handsome brown-skinned troopers.

Mycaylah blinked and used her remote to pause and then rewind back to that brief flash. Then she paused it again and zoomed in, and because all these recordings were so high definition, she got a really good look.

*Oh*, she thought, taking in the three second clip of the red-and-black zabrak, who was talking to one of the troopers; taking in the lightsaber hanging on his belt, and the symmetry of what had to be tattoos and the barest glimpse of his gold eyes as he caught on that the reporter was there and then
turned and disappeared into the crowd. Oh, she thought, heart pounding.

There was nothing anywhere on the HoloNet about him, no other footage -- she spent days after looking -- but when she pointed him out on the forums from that single little clip, she wasn’t the only one who thought he was beautiful. Speculation ran rampant. Intrigue.

Her parents were total xenophobes, which just made Mycaylah even more fascinated.

So, she did what she always did: She wrote stories. And thus, their mystery Jedi gained a name and about a dozen friends or lovers in the fictional realm, and even after only weeks, they had their own subforum and so many stories yet to tell.

She never knew that one of those troopers who had been around the zabrak, a slicer named Brody, would stumble across them via his reading of their threads complaining about the Viable ad in a number of weeks.

Or that another one of them would someday join them there.

Back aboard the Nest, that exact number of weeks later, Tango was failing to cope.

That this was the first time in the squad's history that a briefing had fallen apart didn't help. Castle called them to order, once Shiv's caf had been cleaned up and once they were done boggling over the idea that Maul somehow managed to gain a fan-following, and had them go around the table and report. That had gone okay; Brody had taken the floor and had explained all about Radio Anarchy. There had been a discussion that followed about what to do about the information they'd been given, whether the anarchists could be trusted, whether or not this was all an elaborate set-up; that had taken about an hour, as everyone spoke up with their views.

The final consensus was to verify everything for themselves, which would probably take weeks, and which almost no one was looking forward to.

But when poor Castle started working out assignments -- since Shiv was apparently allowed to sit at the table, but not allowed to engage because he was still recovering -- the amount of guff that he got back actually put him on his back foot. Even Tango -- who didn't want to go out into Llanic and stake out businesses today either -- felt kind of bad for the startled and almost hurt look on the engineer's face.

"Hey. Knock that off," Shiv broke in, eying all of them, looking disappointed. It silenced the table instantly. "If you have a grievance, then bring it up the right way."

The way his hand trembled when he pointed, the stark white gauze on his wrist, made Tango's heart hurt.

"I'm sorry, Castle," Tally said, immediately, resting his elbows on the table and rubbing at his face. He was echoed by the rest of the squad quickly, too. "Just-- speaking for me, twelve hours ago we were dragging our command team out of the water and I was up until past-dawn putting them back together. I'm exhausted."

"Same," Rabbit added, quietly. "And I-- I don't think my head's gonna be in the game the way it
should be, if we try to get out there today. Tomorrow, yeah. But not today."

Castle nodded at that, still looking a little stung, but not quite so badly. "So, if I come up with an assignment list today to start working on tomorrow, would that work?"

"I'm game for today, but I probably shouldn't be," Brody said, shrugging. "I mean, I'm riding the high of getting all this information right now. But verification's something we can take our time on. I vote we take the rest of today and tonight and try to rest, then get to work tomorrow."

One by one, the Blackbirds spoke up and added their voices to the chorus. After everyone present had spoken, Castle had told them to go ahead and rest and recover for the rest of the day, and that he'd give them their assignments tomorrow. Half of them went back to their bunks; the rest started digging around for food.

Tango went back to the cockpit, mind reeling some. Even if they weren't in the air, even though Rabbit usually took a shift, it was Tango's spot, where he felt most comfortable, where he felt most centered and in control of things.

The past couple months had been spent doing a lot of self-reflecting and even more pining. His engagement with his brothers had dropped somewhat, not because he didn't love them or anything, but because he was having a hard time sorting out his own feelings. Between that and their actual duties, there hadn't been much room left for socialization or fun. He knew it was worrying some of them; Raze usually cuddled on him at least once a day, and Tally had asked after him, and even Shiv had hugged him a week ago out of nowhere, but Tango had reassured them he was okay, he just had a lot on his mind. Some of it was down to adjusting to the shifting and changing dynamics of the squad, and his own place in it, but some of it was because he hadn't really gotten over his crush on their CO, too.

It was a fact that Maul was spoken-for, in terms of being in what was clearly a monogamous, long-term relationship with kriffing Kenobi.

It was also a fact that Tango still loved him, and knowing about Kenobi hadn't changed that.

Now that the briefing had broken up, the whole realization that there were perfect strangers out there writing stories about his lieutenant came slamming back into him like a freighter gone wild, and Tango's face flushed hot. Even he didn't know if it was anger or embarrassment. Or some awful mix of both. He sat staring out into the afternoon daylight of Llanic from their landing platform and tried to put it out of mind, but it kept prickling anyway.

It wasn't hard to find the sector when he finally broke down to take a look himself; Brody had given them enough information to navigate to it himself. Seeing the names of various Jedi in story headers left him boggling; someone had even written some story about a romance between Grandmaster Yoda and Count Dooku, of all things. Some of the stories seemed to be earnest and serious, while others were parodies. It made Tango meanly happy that Kenobi was paired up with everyone but Maul, from various original characters to every public figure there was.

By comparison-- the Lieu's section was tiny. Only about a dozen stories. And filed under a made up name that Tango hadn't heard before.

The most popular one was the one Brody had dug up and downloaded, with a bunch of comments and something called karma, depicted as little pulsing stars. There was a link to a discussion forum; digging there revealed the author and someone called LiterallyHorny discussing said made up name. Apparently, LiterallyHorny was an Iridonian zabrak; even as hot under the collar as Tango felt, he couldn't help but snicker at the name.
He opened each discussion thread like it was a bomb. When he finished reading all of those, sometimes snorting in derision and annoyance, sometimes reluctantly nodding along, he sat for a long while just trying to absorb all of this.

That there were storytellers out there who told stories about someone he knew personally and loved. That they gathered and discussed and tried to research zabrak naming conventions and tried to guess how far down the 'tattoos' went, and tried invent a backstory for him, all so they could write those stories.

Tango stared at the screen, heart thumping hard, then opened up the first one.

He ended up reading the rest of the day and almost-commenting no less than ten thousand times.

Anonymous:

While Tango was busy eating himself alive about his unrequited love, Rabbit-- was doing a lot of the same thing.

Rabbit had kissed Eogan, when they reunited the day before. It had been a bold impulse of a move, brought on by the high stress of the rescue and his own relief that Eogan was okay, built up on the growing crush Rabbit had been nursing (sometimes reluctantly) from Darkknell.

And it hadn't gone the way Rabbit had expected it to.

Eogan was nice about it. He didn't throw Rabbit off or anything, but while Raze and Husker and Brody all stared at them, he'd kind of just pushed Rabbit back to arms' length and stuttered that he was flattered and everything, but he didn't think of Rabbit that way and he'd said he was honestly kind of a mess right now and didn't think he was suitable for a relationship.

It was mortifying.

Thankfully for Rabbit, no one poked him or teased him or mocked him about it. His face was flaming and he felt like a total idiot, but no one else treated him like that, and Eogan had even given him a (still awkward) hug before he came back to the Nest. But that didn't help him feeling like he deserved to be buried ten meters underground with a gravemarker denoting that he actually really was a total kriffin' idiot.

He didn't tell his twin what was wrong, even though Rancor -- looking so tired when Rabbit came in that he could barely keep his eyes open -- had asked, just crawled into his brother's bunk and curled up with him, feeling confused and off-balanced and wrong.

To his relief and shame both, no one brought it up after getting in, either. He could feel his brother watching him as they moved through the day, bouncing between the common room, the 'fresher and
the bunk room, but he was scared stupid of trying to explain and so, he didn't. He just kept his head down and tried to get through.

But by the time evening came, Husker still wasn't back (though he'd radioed in that he was safe and gathering intel), no one was up for games of distraction, Shiv was back to sleeping (in his own bunk this time, though it didn't look like he was peaceful about it), Maul was still out like a light, and Rabbit couldn't really keep it all bottled up anymore.

Tango was the only other clone he knew of that ended up falling for someone unavailable, so he made his way up to the cockpit, taking in the pilot and his absorption into the datapad before sitting in the co-pilot's seat. When Tango gave him a look, datapad hugged back against his chest, Rabbit felt even worse.

It must have shown on his face, though, because Tango's expression softened from wariness to something more welcoming. "Keyed up, co-pilot?" he asked.

Rabbit flushed for about the eighty-sixth time in the last standard day, but being called co-pilot did make him smile for a moment, before it fell off his face. "I-- uh. I kissed Eogan," he said, rubbing at the back of his head, skating eye contact. "And he didn't-- I mean, he was *nice* about it, but he told me he didn't-- didn't like me that way."

Kriff, that was a lot harder to say than he thought it'd be.

Tango seemed to understand, though; his own face went redder, visible even in Rabbit's peripheral vision. "Oh," he said, quietly.

"I feel like an idiot." Rabbit stopped rubbing at his head and crossed his arms, looking out of the cockpit viewport into the evening twilight, the city lights beyond, resisting the urge to sink into the seat's cushions. "I mean-- I barely even know him, I just-- I just--"

"You're not." Tango turned his datapad's screen off and set it between himself and the arm-rest of his chair. "I mean-- I get why you feel like that, but you're not an idiot. He's the first eligible person you've been exposed to long enough to get interested in like that, little brother. And hey, he's kind of handsome."

Rabbit felt his eyes burn and blew a sharp breath out of his nose. He wondered if that was the case when it came to Tango's crush on Maul. "Yeah. I just-- I-- there's all these feelings, and what the hell do I do with 'em?"

When he did chance a proper look over, Tango was watching him with definite sympathy. Not the pitying kind, but the understanding kind. Then the pilot looked away and drew in a nervous-sounding breath. "Distance will help, probably. I, uh-- I don't really *get* that, because-- because Maul's always right here, he's hard to get distance from. But Eogan's not gonna be with us forever. And I guess maybe when he's not right here anymore, you'll be able to sort out what you feel for him? If it's something solid, or if it's just because he was the first good thing that was eligible to be your good thing."

Despite kind of tripping over himself, Tango was good with words; his tone was sweet, but not sugary or anything. Just-- kind. Commiserating. Even in the rush of a new romantic interest, Rabbit knew how he felt about Eogan didn't burn anything as bright as what Tango felt towards Maul, but there was a kind of sense to his advice.

It didn't take away the embarrassment or the ache, but it did help.
"What if I still feel like this even after some distance?" Rabbit asked, kind of dreading the idea, no matter how romantic it might have seemed only a day ago.

Tango's mouth quirked up into a sad little smile, at that. "You learn to live with it," he said, and then something almost like peace settled across his features. "And eventually, you even learn not to regret it, even if it's never returned the same way."

Rabbit took that -- and a long hug -- with him, when he left the cockpit to go and curl up with his brother; he wasn't looking forward to whispering the story to his twin in the nonexistent space between them, but at least he now felt like he could.

Posted on the JGFAS forums, 1.3 weeks ago, at 21.29

MycaBlue: I don't know how I would have gotten through this year without this sector. I know this is getting super personal, but those times when I just wanted to quit or when I couldn't stop crying because it was all so hard, I think this was the only thing keeping me sane. That I could come here and read and get lost in all your imaginations. Or where I could share my own. I mean, we can't really change the whole galaxy, but we can tell stories and share them and keep each others' spirits up? And that counts too.

MycaBlue: Anyway, I wanted to tell you all how grateful I am for you. For sharing your stories with me, and for reading mine, and for all the inadvisably late nights we've stayed up talking about things. (And especially LiterallyHorny for helping me name our handsome general, until we get a canon one, ha!) But seriously, thank you all. I love you.

Rabbit had slipped out, and left Tango to think it all over, eyes closed and head back against the backrest.

He wondered, a little, if Rabbit realized how much of his advice was him sorting out something for himself, maybe even for the first time.

He'd already drawn his own conclusion about the facts: Maul was spoken for. Tango still loved him.

The important difference was that Tango realized that he didn't regret it. Even though it would never -- could never -- come to anything, he didn't regret that love.

It was with that realization that Tango went back to read all of those forum threads again. And when he did this time, it was with the much softer eye of a storyteller, instead of a jealous, jilted not-boyfriend.

He found himself back at MycaBlue's appreciation thread to her readers and he just paused there and looked at the words; instead of feeling the rush of hot, possessive anger and offense he did the first time, he felt how much he got it. Because MycaBlue, university student, wasn't any older than he
was (at least in terms of physical growth), and since she was just as lost and confused as he sometimes felt, she threw her heart into impossible loves and wove stories where she could write a happy ending, and the longer Tango thought about it, the more painful and beautiful that actually seemed.

Of course, there were a ton of inaccuracies and some of the sillier (and smuttier) threads and stories made him roll his eyes and squirm, but they weren't doing any harm. Tango thought about correcting some of their military terminology or offering to edit for them or something, but it wasn't long before he came across another idea.

He started typing in a new file.

_The slavers never saw it coming..._
Chapter Summary

Everyone's got things to process, everyone's got things to assess or re-assess. So, that's what they do.

Chapter Notes

I was going to make this another twelve-POV chapter, but it got long enough that I decided to split it into two. <3 It's not very exciting, it's almost all character driven, but with purpose. Thanks to shadowmaat and B_Radley, as ever, for the encouragement and beta.

Husker

It seemed, with the unexpected addition of Radio Anarchy to the list of 'tentative allies', Llanic might have opened up to them in ways that it likely wouldn't have without quite a long-term stay. Husk was reserving judgment as yet, but he could already see where having them as allies of some type might cut down the time they were needed there.

Husker was the only clone not back on the Nest by the end of the day. Brody had gone back and so had Rabbit and Raze, though the former of them more reluctantly, once the sun was up and shining, on Husk's quiet orders. Something had gone down between Rabbit and Eogan, when they were reunited, but Husk didn't think it was so much his business anyway. Eogan had also stayed with the nautilan -- Jak, no given last name -- and with the few other members who made up the cell of anarchists, including Sal.

The squad's consensus had been that they needed a day of rest; Husk had called in and Castle and Tally had updated him. After letting Tally crawl back into his bunk for some well-deserved and badly needed sleep, Castle and Husk talked a bit longer, discussing a plan of action. Jak had handed over all of Radio Anarchy's intel on CIS operations on the planet, but damned if Husk was just gonna take him at his word, so the idea was that they were going to have to confirm all of it for themselves, which was going to take a couple of weeks (if they were lucky) and rotations of stakeouts and minor operations.

Husker was a bit tired out himself, after all this excitement, so after he and Castle agreed to meet again come nightfall and start going over things with Smarty's help, he crashed for several hours in Sal's flat -- attached to the ops center for the anarchists -- and slept so deep and hard that he didn't shift once before coming back awake, only to find Sal waiting with blue milk biscuits from Biscuit Baron and a massive cup of caf from Starshines.

"Frippin' room service. You got anything else goin' for you, vod?" Husker asked, gruffly, sitting against the headboard.

"Don't give me shit, Husk, I'm the delivery boy," Sal just shot back, setting the carry-out tray down
for him on the nightstand with the caf, before turning to get his own food and join him sitting on the bed. "And you ain't offerin' a tip."

Husker snorted back, but he still stretched in place and winced at the cracking of his back before picking the caf up. "I could probably dig out some credits for you, if it means that much to you."

Sal scoffed at him, sitting cross-legged and digging into his very, very late breakfast. "How long you been with this group?"

"That a round-about way askin' how the guys in the 501st are doin'?"

"Yeah. I don't want to know more'n the minimum about whatever operation you're involved with right now." Sal gestured with his fork, looking kind of tired, kind of haunted. "The last thing I wanna be accused of is trying to undermine the Republic or some other banthashit."

Husker eyed him at that, face pulling into a scowl, but when Sal just turned his gaze down to his biscuits, his irritation faded.

Husk hadn't been present for Slick's trial; hadn't followed it, either, for a lot of reasons. But it was impossible to escape it entirely, the rumors and information passing between brothers. He remembered, at the time, thinking that the guilty verdict was entirely proper. He never really let himself think about the punishment, the firing squad made up of men who shared his and Slick's face because it wasn't his right to question how their superiors decided to handle crimes like treason and collaboration with the enemy.

But it probably said something -- Husk didn't know what at the time, nor did he like how it was making him feel to think about it now -- that he had been really damned relieved that General Skywalker hadn't been one of the three judges, and had asked for leniency where Slick was concerned.

It also said something that he was sitting here, with a deserter, and the thought of handing Sal over to their leadership wasn't even on the table.

"Tell you what. How about you tell me your story?" Husker said, after a long moment of looking at his brother; a long moment of imagining the loneliness of what it was to be a part of an army of clones, what it was to be surrounded by brothers, only to strike out through fear or anger or desperation into a world where you would always be the odd one out, where you were ill-prepared socially and culturally and in every other way. "I can't promise I won't have my own views on it, but I can promise to listen before I form 'em. Then we can talk about everything else."

Sal looked wary, but also kind of relieved. He sat for whole minutes, and Husk just let him, his fork unmoving; when he finally did speak, there was already a cracked note in his voice as he said, "I didn't want to leave. I just couldn't stay."

It wasn't long before the tears followed.

Shiv

He jolted awake feeling the still-sticky blood on his hands, and every cell of his body exploding in
fire, only to have something hard and mildly pointed knock into his skull. Shiv's eyes snapped open and he sucked in a sharp, deep breath, staring at the ceiling of his own bunk and trembling once from head to toe before the waking world really started to filter in, and he could leave behind the sensation of being consumed by something pitiless and incomprehensible.

"Feel like talking about it, yet?" Tally asked; when Shiv turned his head to see there the medic was, he nearly poked himself in the cheek with a nearby horn and had to shift sideways a bit to take in the fact that Maul had his head on the bunk next to Shiv's.

He worked his mouth, jaw sore, and had a scattered thought about whether he had been clenching his teeth all night before finally asking, "--what?" A glance at the wall-chron told him it was late morning, which meant probably his squad was already out there working without him.

"Simple question, brother. Do you want to talk about it?"

Tally was sitting on his own bunk across the room, which was pretty much directly across from Shiv's, datapad in one hand and a cup of caf in the other. Though he wasn't, for the moment, paying attention to either of those things. Shiv didn't feel remotely ready to deal with that kind of scrutiny and changed the subject as something of a challenge, pointing at Maul -- who was arms and head on Shiv's bunk, but the rest of him somehow sitting stable next to it on the floor -- and asking, "You didn't chase him back to bed?"

A little grin cut across Tally's face, then became a broader one before softening. "I'm saving my energy for future battles. Besides, if something was worrying him enough to drive him to watch over you despite being drugged out of his spiky gourd, then what good is it trying to ignore it? Not like this is the first time he's sat vigil for you."

That took Shiv aback a little; he propped his head -- carefully, his wrists were pretty sore, though itchy-healing-sore instead of tearing-fire-sore -- on his hand and he squinted a little. "Really?"

"Yep. After what happened on Orto Plutonia."

Shiv didn't quite know how to feel about that; all at once, it made him feel-- valued, but also transparent. Uncomfortably so.

When he realized how kriffin' hypocritical that thought was, he groaned to himself quietly and went to shake Maul awake; he wondered why the zabrak hadn't just crawled in with him, but even after only half a second's thought, he knew the answer was that same really, ridiculously unfair double-standard making itself known again. But he paused before his hand made contact and he plucked at the silver chain around Maul's neck. "Did you guys make him another set of dog tags?"

Tally had gone back to reading, though apparently he had no intentions of quitting babysitting them, as he hadn't made a move to get up. "No, they were in his pants pocket."

Shiv snorted aloud at that, then started jostling Maul, hard enough to hopefully wake him up, not so hard as to seem threatening. "Hey, Lieu, c'mon. I don't wanna know what you're doing to your back right now."

It took about a full minute, plus a lot more shaking and nudging and light knuckling, to get a response. And even that was just a sort of rough-noted, questioning hum, but Shiv took advantage of it anyway, asking, "So, you left behind two horns on that crashing ship, but managed to find and take back your dog tags in the-- what, eight seconds that I wasn't able to see you?"

"They were a gift," Maul said back, muzzily, apparently unable to make the big leap to opening his
"You're impossible." Despite the words, there was no denying the affection in them. Shiv gave a little tug to one of Maul's arms, though he didn't miss the way Tally shot him a warning look and didn't try to pull harder. "C'mon, get up here, my neck hurts just looking at you."

To Maul's credit, he made something of an attempt to pull himself up, but it was pretty clear that either his cybernetics weren't answering his medication-soaked brain, or he just didn't have the energy; before Shiv could get himself into trouble by helping and putting stress on his own wrists, Tally was there and just levered their lieutenant up into the bunk. Shiv moved back enough to give him room and even though he hadn't been planning on staying in his bunk himself, he still pulled the covers up over them both and rolled his eyes a little when Tally threw the quilt over top those. "Better?" he asked, freeing one arm from the pile of blankets to drape it over Maul again.

Maul never answered him; his breathing had gone back slow and he'd apparently lost his tenuous connection to the waking world. Shiv idly wondered when and how he'd gotten a t-shirt back on, but figured probably Tally had something to do with it.

Kind as the distraction was, though, now that things were settled again and Shiv was properly awake, all the weight of the past couple days came back down. He could feel Tally's presence in the bunk room like a pulsar on the scanners, and he knew the medic was waiting to prod at him again; Shiv thought about faking sleep himself just to avoid it, even if that was an admittedly childish thing to do.

Dani had called him back almost immediately, though he hadn't been able to listen to the message until the prior morning, hours after it had been sent. It was, unsurprisingly, kind; she looked relieved and like she wanted to reach out and hold him, and she had told him she was glad he was safe and that she was willing to -- that she wanted to -- listen, when he was up for talking, and it was a message suffused with affection and sweetness and almost enough to make Shiv want to hide his face and just not come out, not because it didn't feel good, but because it oddly hurt at the same time.

He didn't feel worthy of that kind of unconditional regard. Not right now.

His sitting in on the briefing -- after knocking heads with Tally and swearing he was just listening, that Castle was in charge right now, please leave him the frip alone -- was partly to distract from that feeling, and all the while, his mind kept reeling around the churning maelstrom of everything. The ship, the crash, the dead slaver he'd killed, the Force. All of it too big; all of it too much to see at once, or even in more than pieces. The rest of the day was spent dozing uneasily in his own bunk, feeling foolish and pathetic for wanting to crawl over Maul and bunk up with his L-T, like some kind of comfort object.

One night was one thing; Maul wasn't Flanker, though, and letting himself fall back into the habit of grounding against the breathing and warmth of someone else was only gonna lead to Shiv having a re-broken heart.

Now, in the present moment, the realization that he was already bracing for the day he was gonna be left alone again made something sharp dig into his throat and chest.

"I keep-- I keep thinking I've got it figured out, and it keeps-- and it turns out that I don't," he finally said, sliding his other arm under the pillow and (wittingly or un) using Maul as a shield so he couldn't see Tally, and so Tally couldn't see him.

"Which part?" Tally asked back, after a moment, curiously.
"Everything," he answered, and hated how raw and small that word sounded. "All of it," he added, no better.

Tally didn't say anything right away, though Shiv knew him well enough to know it wasn't in judgment. When he did, though, his tone was matter-of-fact and gentle at once, "Maybe instead of trying to look at all of it, you can try looking at a piece at a time. Just one piece, no wandering thoughts about how it's tied to all the other pieces. Sometimes everything is too much, brother-mine, so maybe just bite off what you can chew for awhile without choking on it."

"I don't even know where to start."

"I know. It's like telling someone not to look at the tiger-striped bantha in the herd of regular." Tally's affection and worry was contained in his voice. "But once you do, it won't seem so impossible."

Castle

This leadership business was daunting.

Castle didn't grudge it, though. He'd taken charge of small units before, he'd taken the lead of the Blackbirds when his specialty called for it, and most of the time, it went smoothly. This time, it hadn't, but he thought he could understand some of where he went wrong the day before. It still stung a little bit, being barked at by his brothers, but they all were quick to say they were sorry for the delivery of the rebuke and he really could see their points. He was pretty tired after all of it himself, though his mind was still working, analyzing, taking it apart and putting it back together like one would a structure.

"Feels like a buddy-cop holocomedy, sittin' here," Husker said, with a grin, sitting next to him in the rented landspeeder.

They were parked on the top of a public parking deck; the sunlight filtered through the shaded windows, and both of them were drinking black caf and had a scattering of Biscuit Baron containers on the dash. Across from them was an office building containing suspected CIS-based business holdings, operating under a fake name and funneling goods and services between CIS territories and the Republic. Castle and Husk were sitting on a stakeout to confirm it, mostly by taking snapshots of all personnel so Croft could run them through the Republic's databases. The building was shielded against audio pickup recording, but not from visual observation; even the windows were clear, not tinted.

It was the most boring job in the known galaxy, but Castle was kind of enjoying it. "I think we're just missing the madcap chase scene."

"Give it time." Husk shrugged, offering a salute with his Starshines cup before taking a long sip. "We're here for at least a couple weeks, anything can happen."

Castle chuckled back, tapping the side of his cup against Husk's and following suit. "Nah, I hope it's all this boring. I've had all the Llanic excitement I could ever want already."

"Tell me about it."
It had been a little bit selfish for Castle to choose Husk as his stakeout partner; he and Husk got along well and intuitively, and even though Husk could probably be placed anywhere, with any of the other Blackbirds, Castle wanted someone just as capable of 'hurry up and wait' as he was next to him. This was, even as boring as it was, the biggest potential operation on Jak's list of alleged CIS contacts and Castle couldn't imagine one of the younger clones sitting in a speeder with him day in and day out recording and observing without them going stir crazy.

"What d'you think of this whole business? Jak, Sal. Radio Anarchy," he asked, after another sip of caf and companionable quiet. "Not tactically, but personally."

Husk glanced over at him, then tilted his head as he watched the building across the way, thoughtfully. "I think the nautolan kid's an idiot. He's smart, has a big heart, but he's got some idealistic notion that he can change the galaxy and that somehow, people'll realize they don't need laws or governments and they'll just be nice to each other. Still, his operation's no joke, he's got enough other big-hearted idiots workin' for him to be a player. I dunno how well he'll be able to sustain that operation, 'cause I think right now they went from some kinda vigilante outfit to heavy intelligence work, and that's no small leap. But for now? Yeah. I think his intel is probably mostly accurate and he's in it for exactly all the reasons he said he is. And they'll be a useful asset if they can hold it together, though I wouldn't count on them bein' more Republic loyal. They'll play whatever side accomplishes their goals, including ours; long as we keep that in mind, we'll do okay with 'em."

Husk usually didn't talk much, and Castle knew why; bacta might have healed his throat enough to use, but talking still ached after awhile. So, he didn't push for more while Husk fell quiet and worked on his caf, giving his voice a little rest, and chewed on the words. Castle was way better at deconstructing a ship or a structure than figuring out the motivations of people; he got better at it over time, but he still knew his own strengths.

"Sal..." Husker looked down into his cup for a moment, swirling the caf like he would a whiskey, then worked his jaw. It almost surprised Castle, the way his voice went rougher in what sounded like emotion, instead of old damage. "Radio Anarchy might be populated by big-hearted idiots, but they did him good. He was on the run for a couple months, nearly got killed about a dozen times stowin' away on cargo ships or hiding in cities, couldn't eat or sleep enough. They caught wind of a loose clone and managed to intercept him, and he bolted from them, too. Said he was about skin and bones by then, and he didn't make it far. Ended up collapsing at the feet of one of their field ops. He said he woke up in a warm bed, all medically patched up and not cuffed up or bein' pushed up against a wall to be shot, and then spent the rest of that day either sleepin' or cryin' his heart out. They fed him up, got him in good clothes and offered to set him up with a job or a sponsor family, whatever he wanted. By then, he wanted to stay and help them."

Castle tended to keep himself out of the internal debate among the Blackbirds when it came to deserting and deserters in general, though his opinions usually aligned more with Husker's. Tally was clear on his position; he was an unswerving advocate for any clone getting out that wanted to get out. Most of the younger clones were, if not always openly, on his side of that debate. Misty was a toss-up, but if Castle was pressed to it, he'd venture he and Husker were probably the only two who thought bolting from the Army was a bad move, whatever the reasons.

He wasn't so invested, though, that he thought there was always cowardice involved. He wasn't close with any of his own batchers, but he knew how close some could get. Shiv was still writing dead letters. Rabbit and Rancor were still, even as they grew up in some different directions, tangled around one another. The amount of pain Sal had to feel, when Slick was shot, wasn't lost even on Castle.

"How d'you feel about that?" Castle finally asked, pausing to take a holo shot of another person who
passed by the building's windows and add it to the collection of not-yet-mug-shots they were gathering for upload to Croft tonight.

Husker was quiet for several more moments, then only said, "I don't know yet, brother. But unless we get into some high speed chases, I got plenty of time to think about it."

Rancor

"This is so frippin' boring," Rancor muttered, under his breath, as he sat with Brody and Rabbit in a dingy bar.

They weren't even allowed to drink, just order food, and even Rabbit had taken one look at what was coming out of the kitchen and decided he didn't want it. And when that happened, it had to be bad, Rabbit would eat almost anything without a second thought and as much of it as possible and never gain so much as a half-kilo in the effort.

"Yeah, but the location's where we need to be," Brody answered back, tucked into the corner of the booth they were occupying, where he was busy slicing into the business next door to get into their accounts. It was late, the grungy little 'employment placement office' was closed, but this was the third place they'd stopped at and they hadn't eaten since lunch hours before, and Rancor was irritated with it. They weren't doing anything, him and Rabbit, Brody was doing all the work and they were left just to be observers and backup.

They had kitted up good when they left the Nest, all painted up with some temporary spray-in hair coloring, wearing clothes they had picked up at a Pass-It-On charity donation store just after waking up. Rancor thought probably the ones he was wearing had belonged to spice addicts, given the number of secret pockets sewn into the lining of the rough-fabric jacket. Still, the clothes and dye and makeup had the intended effect; they still all looked similar, but maybe more like brothers or cousins than full-on clones.

Not that anyone in this bar probably cared. The bartender looked like he was living in another reality, making drinks mechanically like a droid when asked, and spending the rest of the time staring off into space. The people who drifted in and out weren't much more engaged. One woman, a human with long, blond hair that hadn't seen a brush in who knew how long was holding a conversation with thin air. Whenever Rancor bothered listening, apparently she was in deep discussion with someone named Fae about ley-lines. It was interesting, kind of like a holodrama, and he was getting more invested as time went on.

At least, when he wasn't thinking about what his brother had whispered to him in their bunk last night.

Rabbit was a lot more subdued today, but it was a thoughtful kind and not an avoidance kind. Rancor knew all his brother's tells; knew what every tick of a brow, every quirk of a lip meant. He hadn't know why Rabbit had been avoiding talking to him, but he knew Rabbit had been and he knew it had something to do with that whole Eogan thing. He was actually really relieved to find out, but also-- mixed, too, in some ways.

He wanted to go punch Eogan for turning his brother down. He also wanted to go hug Eogan for
turning his brother down. He wondered if he'd done something wrong himself, if he wasn't enough of an emotional support, so Rabbit went looking for it from someone else. He wondered if this meant that he was gonna go fall in love with some random person, and understand all those feelings. He almost wanted to, because he didn't like feeling out of step with his twin, but no one had really caught his eye and it seemed like a waste of time. He also hoped that this was the last time Rabbit fell in love with someone because Rancor didn't want to really share his twin, even if he was self-aware enough to know they were going to grow into different people and have different interests.

But home was his twin, and he didn't want that to change.

Anyway, between Fae and the blond and his own thoughts, he was still bored as hell sitting here, and starving besides.

"How come Tango doesn't have to take a turn?" he asked, then winced internally for the whining nature of it.

"Because someone needs to be ready to do an emergency pickup with the Nest," Brody answered, seeming perfectly happy just sitting there doing his technical wizardry. "Live and learn, little brother. But if it makes you feel better, I'll be done downloading this stuff in about ten minutes to crosscheck it with Radio Anarchy's intel, then we can go try to find something decent to eat."

Small consolation -- they were going to be doing stuff like this for weeks probably -- but Rancor would take it. "Deal."

Maybe some food would make his twin smile again.

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**Tango**

The sun was setting on Llanic when he hit 'post' and then had to leave the cockpit and his datapad in it so he wouldn't panic-delete the story he just-- chucked out onto the Holonet. Where people could see it. It was just a short, action-adventure piece loosely based on the rescue they had performed, and there wasn't any-- any romance in it (yet), but Tango's heart was still trying to force its way out of his chest, so he figured he ought to get away from all of it for long enough to calm back down.

(That didn't actually calm him back down. Oh, kriff, what had he just done.)

By then, his brothers were filtering back in while others were preparing to go back out. Misty and Smarty and Raze had come back in the middle afternoon to grab some sleep, since their targets kept odd hours and they were going to be out all night. Husker and Castle returned from their stakeout and were compiling the data to be sent on to Croft; on the table were folded boxes of noodles and vegetable stir-fry that smelled pretty good, though Tango's stomach was too busy coiling itself into knots to think about eating right now.

"Hey, guys," he said, and winced internally when his voice cracked.

"Hey, kid," Husk answered back, giving him a curious look, though thankfully he didn't ask questions. "Feel like helping with some data analysis over dinner?"

Tango had populated his story with-- kind of with his brothers, and of course, his L-T. Except he
used the fandom's name and rank there, because it made it easier to keep the things all separate in his head, and he'd changed the names of the clones in the story. But Husker's counterpart was called Rasp and was just as smart and experienced as his real life counterpart, and Tango flushed so hot that he felt like he was going to faint when he realized it all over again.

"Frip, Tango, you okay?" Castle asked, expression shifting from casual to worried in about a second. "Only a few of those boxes are spicy," he added, more uncertainly.

Tango gnawed on his lip and dropped into one of the chairs, nodding automatically. "I can help, I just-- I'm kind of-- I dunno. I'm okay."

"Something's eating you. 'Sides you eating yourself," Husker said, pointing to the lip Tango had been chewing on.

There was two ways this could go, really. Tango could continue to write surreptitiously -- because he could already see the hole he was falling into swiftly -- and never clue them in. Or, he could fess up and tell them and get their approval or disapproval, and adjust accordingly. He took a few quick breaths, trying to gather his nerve, and then said, "I uh-- I kind of wrote a story," and cringed, waiting for an explosion.

"Okay?" Castle asked, brows furrowing. "You're a storyteller, that's kinda what you do."

"--on the HoloNet. On that sector about the Jedi," Tango cringed even harder. "Not about us, but kind of about a fictionalized version of us and a-- a mission a little like this one, but without the same details?"

He was met with identical looks of confusion. Then Husker said, "Sounds neat. I don't like reading, but as long as you're not publishin' Republic secrets or somethin', have fun."

"You wrote?" Raze's voice coming into the room made Tango about jump out of his skin. "Can I read it?" he asked, looking brightly interested and excited.

"I wanna read it too," Smarty added, weaving around Raze to make his way to the caf maker, though he snatched one of the boxes of food off of the table to take with him. "You're a great storyteller, Tango."

Tango had another little mini-panic attack at the idea of his brothers reading it, but he nodded after a moment, face still flaming. "It's on that JGFA sector," he said, barely above a whisper.

"I know what I'm gonna do tonight," Raze said, rolling his shoulders in his second-third-or-fourth-hand clothes, beaming. "When I'm not paying attention to the target," he added seriously -- too seriously -- when Misty, newly arrived, pinned him with a look. "And watching our backs."

Misty rolled his eyes and went to join Smarty.

The rest of the squad filtered in, absent Shiv and Maul; little by little, Tango fed them pieces of the story. When his stomach finally settled enough and excitement began to filter in where the queasiness abated, he ate dinner and then flapped his hands and ran back to the cockpit when Brody actually looked up his story.

It took awhile to get up the courage, but then he finally opened his datapad to read the notifications.

*Received from MycaBlue, at 18.22: Oh stars, a new author! Wow, you're really good and I loved how you described the troopers, they all seem so real and funny and awesome! I was biting my nails the whole way through! Welcome to the JGFA, StarDancer!*
Maul

It was dark, but for the faint diffuse light of the heavily dimmed ceiling panels of the bunk room; Maul wasn't sure what time (or even day) it was, though he knew it was night, some deep natural instinct managing to work past the chemical haze. He couldn't hold onto a thought for longer than ten seconds to save his life; every thought was in fragments, pieces that slipped his grip when he could even reach for them, but somehow in all of that, there remained a shard of worry, sharp-edged and named.

At some point, Tally had woken him up and made him drink something that might have been citrus three times removed and well-tortured before being loaded with sugar and salt, and at some other point Maul had tried to figure out how he had gotten to Shiv's bunk and how to get back to his own, but had ended up on the floor again, sitting in a sprawl. There was another missing block of time where he'd probably just slept there like that, then that ended with Shiv coming back from food and showering to find him there and -- muttering something about not telling Tally -- bodily dragging him back into the bunk.

Time was a nebulous concept and consciousness was a dicey prospect, but the worry was still there, like a piece of glass cutting into his hand that he couldn't let go of.

Maybe that was why and how he drifted back to the surface again when he felt the shudder beside him. He remembered Shiv slinging an arm over him however long ago that was, but that was no longer the case. Instead, Shiv was curled up with his fists in his hair, occasionally shaking hard enough to feel the motion transfer through the bunk's mattress. Maul didn't have the first clue whether it was a nightmare or if Shiv was awake, but he knew he had to do something about it.

One of the last genuinely clear memories he had before the crash -- crystalline in its clarity and tempered in the furnace of purpose -- was the sight of that fool slaver holding a blaster to Shiv's temple, demanding Maul let his brother go. Maul's answer was not one he gave any thought to, it was so instinctive: _You let mine go_. He was ready and able to kill on the basis of it, and it alone; regardless of circumstance, regardless of result.

Regardless of everything.

He had never had a brother, or anyone he thought of as a brother, in his life. Still, the answer was immediate and burned every bit as hot as the Force would only minutes later.

Now, half out of his head, he tried to figure out the correct course of action; between the memory of Tally holding a sobbing Eogan and all of the times he had sheltered Obi-Wan, he found what he thought was another answer. He just shifted closer and put his arm over Shiv and got close enough to rest his chin on the top of the man's head, a shield or a shelter, and if he were any more awake, he might have panicked himself back out of it when Shiv stiffened up in surprise.

But then Shiv was holding on back, muffling the tears he'd been apparently been fighting before that somewhere between the pillow and Maul's chest.
Maybe this is what I'm for, Maul thought, clinging to the fraying edges of awareness, but finally able to let the glass go.
Farther Along, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Over the course of many days, Tally does a lot of 'stubborn stoic' handling, Shiv makes some real progress on recovery, Misty gets credit, Raze gets to play beta-reader, Rabbit gets a glimpse of a bright future, Brody gets a glance at his own, and the Blackbirds put Llanic behind their heels. And Maul unwittingly shows just how far he's walked forward, too.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tally

*I didn't save enough energy,* Tally thought, despairingly, sweeping his curls back and resisting the urge to clutch his hair and seethe.

Several days had seen *most* of the Blackbirds settle comfortably into the routine of surveillance and fact-checking, moving with coordinated ease through assignments and having no trouble. Part of that was that Radio Anarchy's on-planet informers had cleared a *lot* of issues up for them; now, the wait-staff at Biscuit Baron talked with them openly and gave them a few boxes of the food that would have been thrown out periodically, what didn't go to the spice addiction clinics that Tally would like the chance to get back to and help out with. They rented their land-speeders and swoops from a small business guy who had set up shop with the anarchists' help, and got a discount. Even the Pass-It-On staff seemed to be in their corner now, showing them clothes that would fit them and putting aside extras, and keeping some of the nicer ones back especially.

They were starting to accumulate *actual clothes*, even if it was all second-or-more-hand, in their wardrobes and drawers. Like real people did.

It appealed like hell, to Tally, the work that the nautolan's people were doing. He didn't buy into anarchy as a political or social policy, but the genuine good-heartedness of the effort clearly reaped *and* shared rewards. There was a whole other side to Llanic they might not have even seen, had they just carried forth without making contact with Radio Anarchy; for all of the criminals and smugglers and bad operators, there were plenty of people who were scraping by, making a living, supporting one another quietly. A trade union without the formal declaration. Solidarity. He *kriffin' loved* that, and once he was done wrestling with his command team, he wanted to go volunteer in the addiction clinics; not only was the practical experience a good tool for learning, but he could give back to the people who needed it.

He just had to get *them* handled, first.

Surprisingly, it was Shiv who was the problem-child in this case. Or, maybe not surprisingly; Tally had been stepping down -- very slowly and carefully -- the medication cocktail Maul was loaded up with, but Maul was only now getting restless and his restlessness was pretty easy to parse out the reasons for. Shiv, on the other hand--

He was downright antsy. He kept opening his mouth to take briefings over from Castle and Smarty,
and it wasn't doing good things for the squad, because Shiv was their sergeant, a role he was usually good at. And more, he'd probably still be good at it, even in this shape, but he wasn't allowing himself anything definable as recovery, mentally speaking. Every once in awhile, Tally would catch him re-listening to the message from his maybe-girlfriend, or pacing around and working his hands back through his hair -- dyed back to its basic black -- but Shiv still wasn't opening up about what had him knotted up beyond what he'd already admitted to, and Tally didn't want him trying to work when he was carrying too much.

The only person who seemed to have figured out a way inside of that bubble was their L-T, and Tally didn't think for half a second that Maul was equipped to shoulder that alone even when clear-minded, let alone now.

"I'm kriffin' fine," Shiv said, now, standing in Tally's medbay and showing his healed wrists, now only left with faint scars that would eventually fade to nothing. Even the bruises had faded to mostly a faint yellowing, except on his leg where he still carried a little limp and which still looked like Raze had gotten creative with paints. "Look, Tally, I know what you want, I know you want me to sit down and unburden my soul or whatever, but did it ever occur to you maybe we all deal with things different ways?"

And therein lie the problem. "Do you hear how confrontational you're being right now?" Tally asked back, keeping his tone level, though he couldn't entirely keep the imploring note out of it.

The damning part was, it seemed like Shiv did, because a guilty flash crossed his face and he folded his arms, dropping his gaze. But the stubborn set of his shoulders didn't exactly convince Tally that realizing it translated to being reasonable about it. "I'm not broken."

"No. You're not broken, you're not hopeless. But you're also not okay yet, either." Tally watched him, as he paced another lap, heart aching some. "Shiv-- you don't have to talk. I know I push for it, because sometimes talking helps, but if you really don't think it will? Then don't. But what you're trying to do, jumping into work-- that's not coping, it's avoiding, and I don't think this is a situation you can avoid."

The look on Shiv's face was a clearly defined why the hell not? But at least he didn't say it. "You can't tell me that just stewing in this is doing me any good."

"Not always. But there's a middle-ground between stewing in pain and jumping back into work to avoid it entirely."

There was a decent tactical nuke option here, and Tally intended to use it, but he didn't want to just maneuver his brother into recovering based on it. Shiv finally stopped pacing -- Tally wondered if he'd picked that up from Maul -- and then blew a long breath out. "I don't know what you're expecting, brother."

"Work out? Practice your teräs käsi meditations? Do data analysis here within reason, and let Castle, Husk and Smarty handle the op itself?" Tally raised his eyebrows. "They're doing a good job, Shiv. A really kriffin' good one. Don't take that away from 'em."

That landed hard and Shiv's mouth went into a straight line, something like hurt in his eyes, which made Tally wince internally. "That's not what I'm trying to do."

Tally held his hands up immediately. "I know, I should have said that better. I'm sorry." They both breathed for a moment, then he said, "Call your girl, chat about other things if you'd rather? Even Maul's been comming with Kenobi when they can, you can't tell me he's ahead of you in the 'be less of a banthashit stoic' department."
"I don't know what I am to her," Shiv said back, though a little grin had tugged the corners of his lips at that last part, before it fell away again. "Zeltrons are almost never exclusive, and-- I know she cares, I'm not interested in anything exclusive, I just don't want to-- I dunno, try to present myself as some kind of priority."

There was a hook and a trap there, which deserved springing without remorse. Tally nodded back at that, then just asked, "Don't you think it oughta be her call, on what her priorities are?"

Shiv's answer was immediate, but fangless: "You smug asshole."

It broke the tension in the air, and they stared at each other for a moment before giggling, then laughing for real; it was really only then that Tally started to think that Shiv actually would come out of the other side of this okay. The laughter had the edge of hysteria in it; of being as much release valve as genuine humor, but it rolled between them until they were both hunched over clutching their ribs.

Tally rubbed the tears out of his eyes, and caught his breath, then went in for the kill, tone gentling, "The other reason I want you to take it easy is because if you do, then Maul is more likely to. And given what conferring I've done with his other-half, part of the reason he never quite recovered after the last time he almost killed himself using the Force like that was just that they only had fifteen days of rest and then it was back to the war grind. This isn't the same kind of situation, we can't all just go on a vacation until he's healed or whatever, but what we can do is keep things as calm and stress-free as circumstances allow."

He'd known before he even brought this topic up again that if there was any way to rein Shiv in, it would be by pointing that out. He'd just not wanted that to be the only cause and point.

Shiv finally sat down in the chair, falling back into it and then re-crossing his arms, though not so tightly this time, shoulders falling a little from their wound-up state. "Because he's always switched onto 'high alert' by default."

Tally grinned some. "Psychiatry and neuroscience. Yeah, and while the tranks I have him on right now will keep that less likely for awhile yet, there's still gonna come a time fairly soon when he's back off them. I mean, only Maul is going to actually be able to sort out his head, but we can make it easier for him by showing that things are handled, calm and not something to be anxious about."

Wartime was never a guarantee of calmness. Everyone knew that. But it was a good goal to aim for, Tally thought, at least internally speaking.

(Later, when he would look back on that goal -- its surety, its innocence -- he would sit with his fists in his hair and cry his damned heart out.)

Shiv blew another breath out, this time with some actual joking exasperation, and relaxed fully into that chair. "All right. Fine. I'll call Dani and chat about unrelated things and I'll do some light data analysis and--" He scrubbed over his face with a hand. "--and I'll-- work on things. Just-- don't push me on the how, okay?"

"Fair enough," Tally agreed, his own shoulders relaxing properly. "If you need me, I'm here."

"I know." Shiv gave him a smile, tired and genuine both, then got up and knocked shoulders with him on the way towards the door.

And didn't pull away when Tally just hugged him tight instead.
Misty

Whatever magic trick Tally had pulled off, in terms of settling the atmosphere on the Nest, Misty was grateful as all hell for it.

He thought he'd been doing a pretty good job, leading Raze and Smarty out into Llanic. It wasn't his specialty, and he was actually really, deeply bored with the covert operations thing -- despite now being on a covert ops squad! -- but he still took it seriously. And he wasn't bad at it. Even keeping Raze on-task wasn't too hard, even if all three of them found the whole thing tedious.

They were the overnight crew, spending most of their time observing targets who were nocturnal by nature. The flip in schedules hit him a little hard, he felt space-lagged for the first few days, but now that he was used to it, it wasn't so bad. The Blackbirds, absent Maul, Shiv, Tally and Tango, were all deployed through the large part of the day, into early evening, and those four were all pretty quiet, so sleeping during the daytime wasn't an exercise in frustration. Draw the privacy screen on the bunk, put in some earbuds -- his were set to rolling ocean sounds -- and sleep. Wake up, get ready, go back out into the night.

"We should only need to do this two more nights, if all goes according to plan," he said, making himself a cup of caf. At the briefing table, Raze was tearing into the latest delivery of day-old pastries from Biscuit Baron and reading Tango's latest story. Smarty was going over their route and plan. Shiv was actually calm and not eying all of them; he was sitting and going through the data to collate it for Croft; a couple seats down, Maul had apparently fallen asleep at the table and someone had thrown his blanket over him. He'd been up and around more the past few days, but spacey and prone to knocking out wherever he happened to be sitting.

"Good, I'm about ready to see this place off our back hatch," Shiv said, before sipping on some kind of sweet-smelling tea. "Hey-- Misty?"

"Yeah, Sarge?" Misty asked, managing to keep the wariness out of his voice; Shiv hadn't been mean lately, but kind of erratic and on-edge, and even though he seemed to be doing better today, Misty didn't know exactly what to expect.

"You've been doing great." Shiv glanced up, offering a smile somewhere between sheepish and encouraging. "These reports you're bringing back are solid."

"Yeah, Sarge?" Misty asked, managing to keep the wariness out of his voice; Shiv hadn't been mean lately, but kind of erratic and on-edge, and even though he seemed to be doing better today, Misty didn't know exactly what to expect.

"You've been doing great." Shiv glanced up, offering a smile somewhere between sheepish and encouraging. "These reports you're bringing back are solid."

Despite himself, Misty blushed, though he shrugged awkwardly. "Well, it's not as exciting as a water rescue or anything, but the way I see it, the better and quicker we do this, the more likely I get a day's pass to the beach."

Smarty snickered there. "Like you even need to ask for a pass here."

"Right?" Raze asked, without looking up from the datapad. He paused to type something into it, then saved it and moved on. "Long as we get done and don't get pulled somewhere else the second we are, you know we'll get as much time off as we can get away with."

That was truth; despite all jokes about how he liked it here because he could swim on occasion, there actually were detachments to water worlds where he could be swimming all of the time. But not recreationally, not like this, where he was given the freedom to just enjoy it and have fun. Even if it meant waiting to get there, he kind of knew he would. That Maul would give them any time he
could. That his brothers wouldn't complain if Misty kept begging to go to places where he could go into the water. Hell, that half or more of them would join him when he did.

"That rescue was brilliant, too," Shiv added, pulling Misty back out of his thoughts. "Thank you. I don't think I got a chance to say that yet."

"It's what I was trained for, in part." Misty shrugged again, even though his face was hot and his stomach did a little flip at the memory of it. It was an undeniable triumph, and the rescue wasn't sullied by the state he found them in, but how much could have gone wrong wasn't lost on him, either. He tossed Shiv a little smile, then. "Thanks. I mean-- you're welcome. And, uh-- Rabbit was amazing, I do think that he ought to be given formalized SAR training next time a course comes around."

"Seconded," Smarty said, holding up the hand with a cup of caf in it and not looking up from his datapad.

"Thirded," Raze added, glancing up with a beaming grin.

Specializing was usually done before deployment, but there were plenty of times when unspecialized infantry troops proved to be talented in a particular way and caught notice for it. Their leadership, Jedi or Republic, could put troops forward for additional training in those cases. Given that Rabbit and Rancor had come to them right off of Basic graduation, it made perfect sense to Misty that they be given a chance to get what the rest of them had gotten before being kicked out to the battlefield. He didn't think Maul had the authority to nominate for it, but he bet General Kenobi or General Croft would be willing to write up the recommendation; even if it meant Rabbit might be away from them for a month or so, he'd come back more confident and with an extra skillset that could benefit the whole squad.

"I'll ask him if he wants to, and then coordinate with sleepy-head over there to ask Kenobi and Croft to put in the rec if he agrees," Shiv said, readily.

Misty nodded and breathed out; finally, things felt like they were back on track again. "All right, Raze, put your editing away and let's go."

Raze

Raze wasn't actually editing Tango's stuff. He was just reading it checking for plot holes and consistency, because grammar and sentence structure and all that wasn't something he was very good at, but he was definitely Tango's biggest fan -- so far, anyway, it looked like there were gonna be others on the JGFA, which was awesome -- so it made him doubly happy. He could make Tango feel good and catch things Tango might not have, and he also got to read the newest thing before it went out, before anyone else did.

Tango had been writing up a storm, once his first one-shot was well-received. Mostly they were short pieces, just one a day, and Raze was loving it. Tango got so excited by it, and it was fun reading about their fictional counterparts. Or things they did together that were then obliquely repainted for mass consumption. The latest story was based on their camping trip with Commander Half-Pint, though she wasn't a character in it -- "She's just a kid, I don't want people focusing on her
in real life," Tango had said -- and even *Raze* was downright shocked that Tango had written out that kiss with Maul.

Except, it was Tanner -- who was clearly Tango -- and Khameir, who was the fictionalized version of Maul.

Raze hadn't been awake to witness it the first time around, and he didn't have any interest in kissing anyone himself, but the way Tango wrote out the moment was-- kind of beautiful. Kind of heartbreaking, too, in a way. Tanner's joy and nervousness and the way his heart was beating so hard, and how hot his face and ears were. Khameir was a lot more smooth than Raze could ever picture Maul being about it, but it still was a really touching homage to the real-life event, and the way Tango had set it up, it seemed to have the opening for more that real-life didn't.

It also seemed like Tango had been brewing his crush long before that kiss, too, if Tanner's narrative was anything to go by.

He could see why Tango was nervous about posting it, because that was awfully personal and most of the other members of the JGFA's forum identified female, though there were a couple who preferred they/them and a few more who went by *zelzir*, and they mostly seemed to prefer Khameir with a female companion. But they were all such nice, supportive people that Raze thought Tango would be just fine posting his stuff and said so in a note, before it was time to go out with Misty.

After a night of tailing a rodian smuggler who was suspected of possibly (but not certainly) running weapons -- instead of just unlabeled foodstuffs and clothes like he seemed to be -- they came back the next morning and the first thing Raze did was check the JGFA. There were a couple surprised comments on the piece Tango wrote, but no bad ones, and a few of the comments were really positive, too.

"If we're not careful, Tango's gonna be a minor celebrity before he knows it," Brody commented, chin rested on Raze's shoulder; Brody was just getting ready to go out with Rabbit and Rancor, and Raze had just walked back in with Misty and Smarty, all three of them kind of glad that they hadn't found anything interesting.

"Have you been reading 'em?" Raze asked, leaning his head back and over just to nuzzle it against Brody's; the slicer's overgrown curls caught in his own sharply gelled spikes, but it still felt nice.

Brody snorted and ground his chin against the top of Raze's shoulder, but not meanly, just nuzzling back kinda. "Nah. But I'm proud of him anyway. If any one of us ever-- gets remembered after everything by the people out there as who we are and not what the news says we are? I'll bet it's Tango."

That made something hurt in Raze's chest a little, but-- kind of warmed him, at the same time. He smiled as he scrolled through the feedback. "I think so, too."

*Tally (yes, again)*

True enough, settling Shiv took the worst edges off of Maul; it seemed once their sergeant was no longer someone to worry about -- though how the hell Maul could even manage to worry when he could barely stay awake was both incredible and troubling -- the zabrak got less edgy himself. Tally
could still catch him in moments when he was wrestling around with invisible factors (Tally would guess 'usefulness' and 'self-perception of a lack thereof'), but it wasn't nearly as bad as he expected. And one thing Maul didn't do was tell Tally to knock off the medication; even though Tally had been stepping it down slow and steady, he had kind of expected being questioned at length and fought over it, and that hadn't happened. Aside asking what he was on and for how long he'd be on it, Maul hadn't put up any fuss about it.

Tally didn't know, in this case, if that was a sign of trust or if it was that old conditioning, but for now it was better to let sleeping dogs lie.

The next few days passed uneventfully, anyway. He caught Maul dead asleep with an open comm connection to Kenobi; Maul with his head down on the briefing table, and Kenobi just sitting there working from a datapad on the other side, occasionally talking at his sleeping boyfriend, as if somehow the mere fact that the connection was open was reason enough to keep it so. Of course, Tally ribbed the general about it, but honestly--

Honestly, it warmed him. The love in that. The ridiculousness of it.

It was enough that he felt safe asking to go out and work in the addiction clinics, anyway. So, he spent a shift a day doing that; even though he only had field medic's credentials, his help was quickly accepted and he was put to work. Most of his patients were humans, but there were a handful of other species, and it wasn't long before Tally was picking up new skills. The challenge felt kriffin' good, even if the situation was largely desolation with little, rare sparks of hope. So many of the stories he heard, as he administered medication meant to cut down on withdrawal, as he ran IVs, as he treated minor injuries, as he helped work out issues of malnutrition, was of people turning to spice as a way to self-medicate against despair and then getting trapped in the cycle of addiction.

He didn't judge them. He couldn't; for every thrill seeker who'd gotten in over their heads, there were ten more who were just hurting and couldn't get any help. He didn't let himself hold out a ton of hope for their futures, he knew most of them would relapse again and again until either they could make traction on recovery or until their addiction killed them, but he could treat them kindly in the now and that might be the difference between the two.

It was after a day of that, while he was sitting against the lockers reading -- because the others were in the briefing room playing a second-hand adventure hologame Brody had picked up from Radio Anarchy and had the doors closed since they were frippin' loud -- that he got to see some of his work inside of the squad bear out.

Maul was up at least half the day now, sometimes more, and Shiv had wheedled him into doing some teräs käsi work; Maul grumbled about the number of times he ended up down on the mat, his reflexes dulled, but he was obligingly willing to run through spars. Now, though, they were sitting and stretching together, and Tally was neck-deep in studying the brain chemistry of addiction in weequays, so he only occasionally was listening in. There had been some bantering and teaching both while they were sparring, and both of those made him smile.

But when Shiv said, quietly, though not pitched towards 'privately', "I didn't mean to kill that guy," Tally started paying more attention.

"If you hadn't, I would have," Maul answered, which was no surprise; his tone was sort of more question than statement, though. "What about it's bothering you?"

Shiv went quiet for long moments; Tally couldn't really see his expression from his vantage, but he could imagine it well enough. The tightening of his mouth and jaw, those gold-brown eyes going downcast. Then he huffed out, and said, "It was careless, Lieu. I screwed up. It's not-- not that he's
dead, it's that I didn't mean to make him dead."

There were a lot of ways that this could go; Tally almost cringed, half expecting Maul to founder there. Not because their lieutenant was anything like insensitive to their feelings -- he'd long proven he wasn't -- but because Maul viewed life and death so-- so casually, in a lot of ways. Outside of his attachments, he didn't care, really. He was brutally pragmatic, but what Shiv needed right now wasn't pragmatism; Tally knew, he'd already tried that himself.

"You're nothing like careless," Maul finally said, after another long period of silence. "Would that have happened if you weren't wounded, disoriented and in the middle of a firefight?"

"I--" Shiv started, then stopped himself, then tried again, "I don't know. I wasn't thinking."

"Were you even capable of thinking clearly?"

"I-- I don't--" Shiv blew a breath out, sounding frustrated. "No, I guess not?"

Maul made a considered noise, then said, "So, the situation was thus: You were sick, hurt, disoriented and had just had a slaver try to strangle you. Somehow, despite all of that, you warned me before the other slaver could shoot me with a disruptor rifle point-blank, then had to escape in the split-second between when I acted on that and the one that had you might have blown your head off. You tried to do so non-lethally, even then." A beat. "What about any of that is careless?"

"He's dead, all because I didn't think about the binders and that they would be sharp enough to cut his throat!"

Tally gave up pretending not to be eavesdropping and watched openly, as the two of them were locked in a staring contest. Hell, his own heart had started pounding at that, which was why the look of near-panic in Shiv's eyes didn't surprise him any. *C'mon, Lieu,* he thought, almost desperately. *You can do this.*

Maul regarded Shiv, then just asked, "If I was the one coming to you with this, what would you tell me?"

Tally actually bit his own knuckles to keep from squeaking at that; even as he could see it dawning on Shiv, he kind of wanted to whoop in triumph. Or relief.

Shiv just stared and then huffed a breath out hard, almost a sob, and one he'd probably been holding since the night on that ship. "That's not even frippin' fair."

"A feeling I'm well-familiar with," Maul answered, dryly, then added more gently, "You're not careless. It was an impossible situation and you did the best you could with it."

Shiv was scrubbing at his face, knees drawn up some, but he nodded slowly and breathed out a deeper, more settled breath. He still sounded a little choked when he said, "I hope you're satisfied, you probably just made our eavesdropper happy."

"He really did, yeah," Tally chimed in, grinning so broadly his cheeks hurt.

Maul cast a glance down to Tally, a sort of tentative grin tugging at the corners of his mouth, then quirked his brow at Shiv. "Insufferably so."

Shiv crinkled his nose back and reached out, grabbing Maul by a horn and jostling his head, and somehow that turned into a scuffle -- the first time Tally had ever actually seen their lieutenant outright, openly *play* like that -- which then also turned into the first time, so far as he knew, that
anyone had ever discovered Maul had ticklish spots high on his ribs and thus, the first time anyone'd probably ever heard him shriek, and the second time anyone had heard him giggle.

By the time Maul and Shiv were in a breathless tangle of limbs on the workout mat, both of them still huffing the occasional laugh, the rest of the Blackbirds had poked their heads out of the briefing room and were staring wide-eyed, once again putting Tally in mind of some kind of prairie rodent family.

Perfect, he just thought, heart warm and at ease.

Smarty

Brody was the one in love with Radio Anarchy, but Smarty wasn't too far behind.

He didn't have the same kind of wide-eyed optimism about the group that Brody did, admittedly; anarchy as a philosophy was hopelessly naive and didn't really account well for the worst natures of people. The group attempting to practice it right now seemed to have genuinely good intentions -- all of their intel so far, absent one rodian smuggler, had turned out to be on point and accurate -- but the larger any group became, the less likely anarchy could bear out without ugliness creeping in.

Still, until then, they were clearly set up well with the small number of true believers that they had. Their somewhat vigilante approach to helping others and to justice was charming and useful both.

"I think Eogan's gonna stay with them," Brody said, after they had stopped and visited; Smarty had a chance to meet Sal for the first time, and they had been gifted some kind of bean-filled, formless chairs that were going to go great in their bunk room. Four of them, in the trunk of the landspeeder. Smarty had already been looking into getting a couple more spare chairs for the Nest; another for Tally's medbay, a few more to store in case they needed them for the common room. Part of that was because of Eogan. But having some casual lounging arrangements besides their bunks sounded appealing.

"He does seem to be getting into it," he answered, after a moment thinking about it. Smarty hadn't gotten close to the man, but he liked him, and he knew Rabbit liked him a lot. "I hope Rabbit's okay with that."

"I think he will be. I hope Maul's okay with that, too."

Eogan had come back to the Nest a few times; Smarty knew that he and Maul had talked a bit more, and it always seemed to be kind instead of confrontational. Smarty didn't figure that they'd keep the red-headed brawler permanently, he knew how unlikely that was, but he wouldn't have been too shocked if Maul would have been willing to find a way if that was what Eogan ultimately wanted. For what little time the man had been with them, he'd been integrated decently with the group, and Smarty wouldn't have minded 'adopting' him.

It just didn't seem that was the way it was going to go. And that was okay, too. Jak's group had taken him in without hesitation, and Eogan had spent most of his time with them pretty much from landing here.

"What about you?" Smarty asked, glancing over as Brody did the driving. "I don't think I've ever
seen you so-- I don't know. Optimistic about something. Are you going to be okay when we leave?"

Brody shot a glance back, with a sweet little smile, then went back to paying attention to the road. "I love what they're doing, and I guess if I ever got the chance to muster out or wanted to desert, I'd find my way back here. I mean, Llanic's not bad once you're a part of it; it's scuzzy, but-- wild, frontier scuzzy, and-- and the good things that they're doing, you can see the good. It's not like going out on a battlefield, playing support or gathering intel for something you're never going to see pan out, it's real and immediate." He paused a moment, mixed emotion on his face, then just said, "But I'm where I belong, with you guys."

Smarty smiled at that one; he wasn't surprised by the answer, but it still felt good to hear it. Brody was kind of his de facto partner on most ops, the way they worked tandem together to coordinate the squad; knowing his brother was glad to stay with them and not harboring any 'should have beens' was a relief. "How much longer you think, before we're done?"

"Two days, maybe three. No more." Brody's face did fall a bit there, but then he grinned again suddenly. "Then I guess we'll see what other adventures we'll be getting into."

(It was another moment to look back on and reflect on; Smarty would wish they'd never left Llanic.)

Rabbit

"I've heard word that you're interested in search and rescue specialization," General Kenobi said, and kriff, even knowing that the Jedi and their lieu were a thing and knowing that Kenobi was a kind and fair guy, having his full attention was pretty intense. Rabbit tugged under the collar of the turtle-neck he was wearing absently, feeling like he was on the hot plate. "What made you decide on that?"

Rabbit chewed his lip, then forced himself to fold his hands on the briefing room table. Off to the side, Maul was sitting there, just watching between them quietly; Rabbit was grateful for that. He knew if he started drowning himself, the Lieu would throw him a line. "I like helping people, sir. Uh-- pulling Eogan off of Darkknell and retrieving the console. And on Juma 9? When I was bringing the wounded troopers back to Tally? And I, uh, I also helped with the water rescue of Lieutenant Maul and Sergeant Shiv, too, and I liked doing it. I mean-- not that they had to be rescued, but-- but doing the rescuing?"

Kenobi's face was already soft, but seemed to become softer still at that. "Relax, Rabbit. I was just curious about your reasoning, you don't need to sell yourself to me." He tilted his head; even in blue-hologram form, his eyes seemed especially so. "You realize that you'll be parted from the Blackbirds for a month while you're training?" He didn't need to add how intense that training would be; Rabbit had already looked it up.

The being-away part was scary; Rabbit felt ready, but he also didn't like the idea of being away from them that long. He bit his lip again and glanced over at Maul, who just looked back at him steadily, something reassuring about his expression. Be honest, Maul mouthed to him, and then Rabbit nodded and looked back up. "I don't like the idea of being away, and-- and I kind of worry that I won't fit right when I come back. But I think that what I bring back from the extra training will be a benefit to the squad, sir. And the GAR."
“I have a feeling you won’t have any trouble falling right back into place.” Kenobi chuckled, shaking his head. “Croft’s currently out of contact on assignment -- in fact, I have to have a word with your lieutenant when we’re done talking about that -- but I’ve already written up the order for training. The next SAR-AIT platoon is scheduled about four weeks from now. A position in its yours, unless you change your mind in the meantime. Shall I put the order in?”

Rabbit almost broke out into a sweat at that. He’d come a long way on confidence, but it was still a big leap. But he took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, sir. Please."

Kenobi made a jokingly theatrical presentation of jabbing a button on the console he was doubtless sitting at, then gave him a broad grin, eyes crinkling. "Done. Good luck, Rabbit. If something changes, let me know."

"Thank you, sir." Rabbit bobbed his head, getting up and fidgeting before shooting both the general and the lieutenant another grin and slipping out of the briefing room.

His brother was on the other side; Rabbit closed the door behind him as he heard General Kenobi start talking to Maul about something going on with the Wolf Pack, and looked at the stormy-emotional expression in Rancor’s eyes, and then wrapped arms around him and whispered in his ear, "Don't be mad at me."

Rancor squeezed him so hard he almost felt his ribs creak and whispered back, shakily, "Never."

**Tally (for the third time!)**

"We can probably wrap this up by tomorrow if we bust ass tonight and our targets all cooperate,” Shiv said, resting on the heels of his hands on the briefing table, looking and sounding serious. With his hair slicked back to its usual immaculate state and his neatly-cut civvies, he looked every bit as put together -- properly together -- as he needed to. "Then, we can take off in about eight hours."

"It's all come up credible so far," Maul added; Tally had caught the tail end of his and Kenobi’s brainstorming -- and Maul’s promise not to try to use the Force actively until he’s recovered more -- and despite still being kind of doped up, he sounded together too. "We shouldn't have any trouble finishing it."

Tally rubbed his mouth to hide his smile; Maul and Shiv were both shielding Radio Anarchy's part in this so far. He doubted that Maul would keep anything from Kenobi if directly asked, but right now, it made sense to protect their assets on Llanic. Especially if the GAR took exception to the anarchist cell. He figured that Maul might tell Kenobi eventually -- not wanting to take credit for the work of the group versus their verifying of -- but probably only after a direct conversation and extracting a promise to maintain silence about them.

Kenobi shot a glance at Tally, then. "And the injuries?" he asked, even though Maul and Shiv both groaned at him. Which made Kenobi’s mouth turn up in a smirk, though he didn't rise to the bait.

"Less than a day to Radnor, then four more to Teth. Given that timeframe, Maul should be up to speed by then. Shiv's good to go now, too." Tally didn't fail to notice the grateful glance both of them gave him at that, and resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "There's nothing that should preclude
"All right. Gregor should be comming you himself once he's done pulling his hair out over Croft. You're authorized to do whatever you need to do to move out in eight hours, and I'll comm General Koon and let him know that his pilots need to extract their target and get to the fallback point to transfer them to you, so you can hand them over to the 332nd at rendezvous." Kenobi glanced between all three of them, though his gaze lingered longer on Maul. "Be safe, Blackbirds. And good hunting, as ever."

"Same to you, General," Shiv handed back, before the connection broke.

Silence lingered for a moment, then Maul shook his head, though he didn't seem particularly displeased. "Misty will be disappointed."

"Nah. We'll just take him swimming after we're done mopping up everyone else's messes," Shiv said, leaning over and bumping his shoulder off of Maul's. "I think I'll take the Triple R Trio with me; Rabbit and Rancor both got stuck with shit details this time around. And Raze's particular chaos-making might come in handy."

Maul nodded back at that, then blew out a long breath before eying Tally. "Anything I should be bearing in mind?"

Tally was both surprised and touched by the question; he blinked a couple times, then shook his head. "No Force use. Or, I guess, no active Force use, since you can't really help the passive kind. I can't just cold-fowl your medication, unless you want a nasty rebound, but if you think it's going to hinder you too much, I can step it down a little faster. But frankly, I recommend you just go with the schedule I've got in mind."

Though, now, that was more for anxiety-control than it was for Force-dampening. There was a pretty notable difference between Maul-as-usual and Maul-properly-medicated; Tally wished he had more long-term options in that regard.

Maul watched him, and was clearly working it over in his mind, then nodded. "All right. As long as I can be sharp enough when I need to be."

Tally closed his eyes and smiled to himself. "Fair enough, Lieu."

Definitely trust, and not conditioning.

**Brody**

The hardest part of this mission, it turned out, was saying goodbye.

Brody wasn't too surprised by how attached he'd gotten to Radio Anarchy. He'd meant what he'd said when he told Smarty he wasn't in any hurry to leave the Blackbirds -- his brothers -- even for a life as a high end, vigilante anarchist slicer. But he'd grown to care a hell of a lot about them, and he'd grown to kind of love Llanic of all places; the common lives in the cracks of the world, the quiet network of decency on the edges of the city streets, the way they and Radio Anarchy supported each other.

Sal and Eogan came to see them off. Brody had already said his goodbyes -- and gotten a long hug --
from Jak. Raze had gotten an even longer one from Teyla, the twi'lek waitress who had all but adopted their demo expert and kept everyone in day-or-less-old food.

"I can't really picture settling down in some-- Republic-sanctioned life," Eogan said, his bag over his shoulder, his temporary room on the Nest cleared out. His voice was rough with emotion, as he looked at them. He looked to Maul, then. "You've got the comm code Jak assigned me; you ever need an impulsive, ex-CIS, ex-prisoner brawler, just call. I'll do everything I can to get there."

Brody was kind of surprised at how emotional Maul was looking over it all, too; he fidgeted a little with the box in hand, then held it out. "For-- for Nar Shaddaa. What I couldn't do then. And the same goes the other way; if you need us, and we can be there, call."

Eogan took it; Brody was pretty shameless about edging over to peek. Inside was some of the hard currency Croft had left them with, enough to last a little while, and a wide sampling of tea, with the ball to steep it with. And a piece of flimsy with Maul's private comm code.

It seemed pretty innocuous until Brody put together that the tea was really the only thing Maul had which he considered his enough and could afford to give.

Apparently, Eogan also figured that out quick, and dropped his head. When he looked up, his pale green eyes were wet and he didn't bother with a handshake, just grabbed the zabrak in a one-armed hug, box held out to the side where it wouldn't be crushed. After a moment looking vaguely -- though not desperately -- surprised, Maul hugged back, eyes closed tight.

That was when Husk and Sal came back in from where they'd stepped outside. Eogan got a cuddle from almost everyone, even Rabbit; Brody could hear him whisper that he was sorry, and hear Rabbit whisper back, "It's okay." Sal got a lot of Mando-style handshakes and a hug or two, and there were tears in his eyes when he did.

"Happy hunting, vode," Sal told them, stepping down the ramp with Eogan beside him.

Husker upnodded back, then cracked a little grin. "You too, Sal," he said, which sent more tears down the other clone's face.

Then they were gone, disappearing into Llanic's night.

"All right, let's get ready to go. Tango, get on pre-flight. Triple R Trio, with me, we've got an ass-saving adventure to discuss," Shiv said, breaking into the quiet left in their wake. Misty gave a theatrical groan and a grumble about wanting to go swimming, but it was clearly joking.

Maul was on his heels with, "The rest of us can talk after and over the next couple of days; our mission is further out, we're heading to Teth."

Brody looked out into the dark; the world he'd come to kind of love, the people on it he'd come to kind of love, and then hit the button to raise the ramp and leave it behind.

For now, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Next up Friday: Follow Shiv and the cutest Rs in the aRmy as they have a field trip! (Sorry, I couldn't resist. Don't hit me.)
Shiv and the Triple R Trio get to go to a party! (Of course, it's a lot less fun than the summary implies.)

This little field trip was written by the delightful B_Radley; read and comment on it here!
“Even if it’s only for two days, I’ll take it.”

Misty’s eyes were locked on the expanse of water in front of them; out beyond the reef, combers rolled in, and the sand in front of them was unmarked and quiet. The water coming in rolled up and back, darkening it before it paled again swiftly.

It had taken three weeks, in the end, to get them here; within that three weeks, there had been their retrieval of the Wolf Pack’s informant, Tango gaining the last two parts needed to make his Delta-6 flight-worthy and safe, a squad-wide case of the pan-galactic flu (which Shiv and party accidentally brought back from their mission to Nar Shaddaa), one mission to a separatist listening post that ended up with Maul falling through lake ice and frost-burning one of his hands, which upon completion led to some High Command intelligence regarding Felucia, and only now was Misty getting the chance to go swimming that he’d been promised.

Maul had not forgotten Misty’s desire to do so, and besides that, what downtime the squad had gotten thus far had all been snatched en route to another assignment, or when they were recovering from illness or injury. The last real break they’d had was on Radnor, in terms of actual leave to rest, and when Maul realized that and put together how long ago that really was, relatively speaking, he’d hoped for a chance to do something about it. Especially since that had only been a couple of days. Before that, it had been a similarly short period on Corellia.

So, when it turned out they had managed to dodge yet another assignment right on the heels of the last -- presumably because of what was going to happen with Felucia -- he had searched for the nearest world that had vacation rentals that could be acquired with clandestine credits won in games of chance either on the HoloNet (by Brody) or from the unsuspecting members of the Wolf Pack (by Tally), or pulled from the account attached to an unmarked credit chip (from Bail), or left over from their mission to Llanic (dispensed by Croft). Between those four sources, they had enough for two days here and that left them enough time to meet the Negotiator, which would hopefully be finished with the current engagement by then, and transfer Rabbit so that he could get to his AIT assignment on one of the fast transports dedicated to troop movements.

Omereth was one that had suffered for the war, in terms of economic losses; out beyond Hutt Space, not quite to the Centrality, it was a shining ocean world with a warm sun and a number of archipelagos, and were it anywhere else, it might have become the vacation destination that it attempted to boast itself as on the HoloNet. But since it had no strategic value -- even the HoloNet connections were at best spotty out here, at worst nonexistent -- it was left alone by both sides of the conflict. A handful of companies owned chains of islands; beyond them, there were some small colonies of people who had found their way there, subsisting on tropical vegetation, seafood and the rare shipment.

Omereth was not lacking in marine life, certainly; within minutes of settling the Nest down on the landing platform almost too small for it, a pod of some fairly large, leaping animals out at sea had made Misty gasp and abandon the ramp to run out to the beach and get a closer look. He had watched them until they were too small to see, even after the rest of the squad disembarked to walk to their rentals.

The resort wasn’t high end, the cabins were small and had no technology to speak of, not even a comm system, but it was within their budget and it was deserted aside from them.

All in all, the smell and feel of it reminded Maul very much of Iloh. There was considerably less
vegetation, and the island they were parked on was smaller than the one he and Obi-Wan had visited so long ago, but the smell of the sea and the hush of the water rolling in was just the same.

Now, Misty was already stripped down to his swim shorts from Corellia and bouncing up on the balls of his feet, eyes locked on the water. "This is going to feel so good."

"Count me out," Brody joked, stretching with his arms over his head, a datapad in one hand. "I make it a point to be the biggest predator of any food chain I step into for recreation."

"Am I the only one who bothered to change on the Nest?" Misty asked, frowning and looking around for the rest of the Blackbirds, who had all disappeared into their cabins.

Raze was the one who answered that; he barreled seemingly out of nowhere, stark naked, running into the water with a wild battle cry. He was followed in rapid succession by Rabbit and Rancor, both of whom echoed their ‘commander’ as they streaked – literally – into the lagoon.

In less rapid succession, the rest followed; Shiv, Tally, Husker, Castle, even Smarty. Though they, at least, had worn their trunks.

"Guess so," Misty said, laughing. He was just about to head in when he noticed Tango hanging back in the doorway of the cabin in his shorts, chewing on his bottom lip, then went over and talked to the pilot; Maul didn’t hear what they said, but after a moment, whatever Misty had told Tango was apparently enough to unstick his feet, though he was still blushing furiously. Something about research for a story.

Misty shrugged, when Maul looked at him in query, on the way towards the water. “He’s shy. Kind of.”

Maul shrugged back; he didn’t know what Tango could by shy about, since three of his brothers were naked and the others were similarly attired to him, but it was good of Misty to talk him through it.

He had no desire to go into the water himself; after Tango finally joined his brothers, he looked around and caught sight of a ragged but servicable hammock hanging in a limited little stand of trees, right about the same time Brody did.

They eyed each other, both of them tensing, and then like an invisible shot was fired, they both bolted for the hammock, trying to race one another to it. The slipping sand made it a precarious race, but it ended up being a tie anyway, and then they were scuffling for it.

(It was a strange, new thing, to scuffle for the fun of it; to not take openings to score hits because pain wasn’t the point of it and would, in fact, destroy said point completely.)

In the end, Maul threw the not-fight, and when Brody crowed triumphantly and got into his hammock with his datapad, Maul just grinned tongue-in-cheek, got up, dusted himself off and found a tree to lean against himself, watching Misty free-diving and the rest of the Blackbirds swimming and playing in the water.

Regardless of everything else going on right now, either out in the galaxy or inside of his own head, the sight of them made Maul happy.

To the very end of his days, he would remember this as before; for all of the watershed moments of his life, for all of the things he survived, for all of the things which left marks on him for good or for ill, it would be this one that would always be known only as before.
And to the very end of them, he would be able to trace the internal scars that drew the lines between before and after.

In addition to seemingly ceaseless movement, the past several weeks had given Maul quite a bit to work over in his head.

It was no easy thing to do, even when things were calm. He had not forgotten his talk with Husker on Radnor, about the relentlessness of the war and everything that went into it, or the way it reminded him of his youth. There was no real time to genuinely contemplate things -- and Maul was not usually inclined to anyway -- only to survive them and move on, internalizing whatever lessons were required without examination. But even when things were calm and quiet, he didn't know where to start. Or, if there was a point to starting.

A few things were more present at the moment than others; he had started to hear the bearings in his right knee sometimes. With that came a hyper-awareness of the sound, to the point where he was listening for it in silent anticipation of hearing it again. At first, he hadn't even been sure he did hear it, it was so faint; he had looked around at the others, but no one else had noticed. Still, when it came a second time, something had turned to ice in the pit of him and he had started checking his accessible joints daily.

Sometimes more than once daily.

It had finally caught Castle's attention, his admittedly compulsive checks and adjustments, and Castle had discreetly asked if Maul would let him have a look; Maul hadn't answered right away, but eventually capitulated. And, all the while, he hoped the issue would resolve itself; being mechanically inclined, he knew better, but regardless, he hoped.

Still, Castle had done a fine job repairing the panel he had somehow gouged on Llanic; even though the metal was a bright silver, the join was seamless and smooth and he admired how well and quickly the engineer had executed the repair. And Castle was steady, too. He would not unduly panic if something was wrong.

The other thing pressing on his thoughts was a question Tally had asked him.

It was on the way to Teth; they had left Shiv and the 'Triple R Trio' on Radnor, which Maul was all right with -- relieved that Shiv seemed to be feeling better and more stable -- until it actually sunk in that the squad really was split, and that if something happened, he wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

"I wouldn't have cleared him if I didn't think he could handle it," Tally had said, bemused, as Maul paced restlessly around in front of where he was brewing tea and doing any stray dishes left over from the day. By that point, they were the only two still up, aside Husker taking a turn at the cockpit so Tango could get some sleep.

Maul hadn't had any answer to that; of course he knew Shiv was cleared and the other three were fine, but it still caused anxiety to start building again, which was its own manner of unpleasant. And anxiety was an old companion, one he knew well, one he never expected to be rid of, but after a week or so of feeling calm, if a bit slowed down, the resurgence of it made him feel queasy
nonetheless. So, he had just shaken his head and turned for another lap, not quite able to force it down or step away from it.

Tally didn't say anything for several minutes; Maul was about to ask his medic if he didn't have something better to do with his time than stare, when Tally had spoken again, "Hey, I have a question. And you don't even have to answer it, but I do kind of want you to think about it."

Maul had paused, and he knew he probably looked more wary than he meant to; openings like that could only lead to something uncomfortable. "What?" he asked back, keeping the tone from going sharp, though it still came out a bit more abrupt than he would have preferred.

Tally's expression was both soft and thoughtful. "When was the last time you weren't worried about something? Either right up front or stewing in the back of your mind? I mean, the last time you weren't worried when you were clear-headed, and not on some form of anti-anxiety medication; when you just didn't have anything to worry about."

What kind of question is that? Maul had thought, somewhat incredulously.

The problem was-- he didn't actually have an answer. Not right then. And not in the hours and days and weeks that followed. He kept returning to the question, even after Shiv and company were back, even after he was back off of the medication protocol Tally had kept him on; lying in his bunk, on the edge of sleep, he would try to skim through his memory and find some recent time when he wasn't fretting about something and wasn't inoculated against it by whatever medication.

When he finally did, it was further back than he expected it to be.

It was also the first time that he could remember in a very long time -- over a decade -- that he came perilously close to breaking down in tears that weren't provoked by overwhelming pain, because he was so unprepared for the sharp, knife-edged longing that accompanied the memory that went with it.

"Etah always knew that eventually, his past would catch him. It was like a shadow on his shoulder; as long as he was looking ahead, he could pretend it wasn't there and often did, but when he turned his head just so, it would be waiting in the corner of his eye. He didn't talk to Adao about it -- he didn't want to worry his friend -- but he lived with that understanding silently and waited for it to happen.

"Waited for the inevitable."

Most of the Blackbirds had come back in from the water as afternoon wore towards evening; Misty, of course, was still swimming and a couple of others were out so that he wouldn't be alone, but the majority of the squad was lounging around on beach towels or furniture taken from indoors and set up outside. All of them were listening to Tango with intense fascination, though Tango was apparently also recording the story into a datapad, presumably so that the ones swimming would be able to catch up with it later.

Maul had missed chunks of the story over time, but he still enjoyed listening to it. It was a distraction from his own thoughts, and it gave him something besides Castle's slapdash but impressively made grill to focus his attention on. He was a little boggled that he had been elected the 'grill chief' of this
adventure (Shiv had cited his soup-making abilities while they were ill as reason to nominate him and
the voting was over before Maul could get a word in edgewise), but it wasn't an unpleasant duty to
take.

Now, he was grilling well-marbled nerf steaks from the cargo Croft had transferred to them when
their men returned, a sly little surprise the Corellian Jedi had added to the wide collection of meal
packs in a separate frozen container, and listening to Tango weave a story together.

"Still, even though he was waiting, he wasn't ready when it actually happened. When the elders of
the Diathim appeared before his clay-streaked form on the shores of the great, wide sea, it almost
didn't even register with Etah at first.

"Their unshrouded, unhidden forms burned like an icy fire over those wind-swept rocks, blue and
white and nearly impossible to look at, even for him. Compared to his own heavy, earth-laden body
and the years which he inhabited it as he tried to find some path he could walk to purpose, they
almost seemed more like strangers to him than family. Compared to them, Etah was-- very small."

No one said a word; Rabbit leaned more into Rancor's side on the beach towel they were sitting on,
and Shiv had to tap Maul's arm to remind him to turn the steaks over.

"'Did you think that you would escape your crimes here? Hiding in the mud like a mere mortal?' the
Eldest asked, contemptuously, as the sick realization began to dawn over Etah, what was happening.
'Only cowards run, Etah.'"

At that, Husker dropped his head and rubbed over the back of his head, mouth in a line; despite
wincing, though, Tango didn't stop telling his story.

"The words stung; despite some part of Etah wanting to protest that he had ran in shame to remove
his own self from his people, to take away the stain he had left on them of blood and ash, he knew
there was a kernel of truth in the words, too. Even in his despair, even wishing for death, he had not
wanted to hand himself over to the revenge of the Diathim, who would certainly make him suffer
long and hard before dispatching him. And now, less inclined to view death as his only escape, he
started looking around for a way out of this, too.

"But even as he started backing up, his ragged wings flexing, he knew he could never outrun them.

"'I see your cowardice remains intact,' the Second Eldest said. 'But no matter.'

"The Third raised her hand, then; once, she had been Etah's favorite Eldest sister, a bright and joyful
singer left long ago in the broken memories of peace. Now, her hand glowing with power enough to
kill, she looked on him in open contempt. 'You have killed our brothers and sisters. Have brought
devastation to our realm, our home. You have been a traitor, collaborating with our enemies.

"'You have been judged, and found wanting.'"

Maul was distantly surprised at the chill that raced up what was left of his spine, at those words.
Despite the warm sun shining down and the smell of good food being cooked, despite being
surrounded by his squad, those words made him shiver.

The twins were watching Tango wide-eyed, huddled even closer together unselfconsciously. Even
Tally was staring at Tango, enthralled or horrified or both.

Tango swallowed and took a breath, but then pushed on: '"At least,' Etah thought, 'it will be quick."

"He didn't-- picture his whole life, in retrospect, in those moments facing his own ending. But
instead, he thought of before; of the once-joy of song. Of a time when they knew peace. Him, and his family. And as that light flared even brighter and his sister prepared to deliver the blow he had no hopes of avoiding, he thought too of his friend. He thought of Adao, dogged in his determination to see Etah live, maybe even in the hopes of living long enough to find that again.

"And he thought, 'I'm sorry.' He thought, 'I love you, I'm sorry.'"

There was a choked off noise from one of the Blackbirds. Even Maul didn't dare look up from the grill, completely unprepared for how Tango's words were affecting him.

Tango heaved another quivering breath. "None of them were prepared, though, for the ground splitting open. As if summoned by Etah's silent goodbye, Adao erupted from the ground in a roar, molten rock still sliding from his scales, and just as Etah's sister unleashed her might, he was there. With a fierce, selfless love no Maelbus had ever shown before, he was there, and the sound of her power striking his body echoed across the ground and the sea, as he took for himself the blow that was meant for Etah.

"The infuriated sounds of the Eldest of Elders didn't even register for Etah, as Adao's form crashed across the rocks before lying still, glittering scales of red and gold left in a trail on the ground, open wounds left in the wake. As the fires beneath Adao's skin flickered, and darkened beneath the cracks."

A couple of the others were openly crying now.

Maul didn't look up, but he was surprised by his own internal plea: Don't let it end like that.

"For as loud as the angry Diathim were," Tango went on, voice unsteady, "as they moved to finish what they started, even they were silenced when Etah keened. And in a flash of wings he had not used in years, in a flare of his own brilliant light, his clay covering shattered and he burned blue fire, bright, putting himself between his siblings and his friend and throwing every bit of power he had at them.

"It was a hopeless gesture, he knew. He was, after all, one lone Diathim; they were, after all, the most powerful of their kind.

"But what was one life? In realms defined by eternity, what was one life worth?

"When the darkness came, as he was blasted by fire and scoured by wind, for Etah, for that moment, the answer was everything."

"That's not the end, right?" Rabbit burst out with, voice choked, apparently not able to hold himself back from asking. When Maul was actually able to look up from the grill -- which he had not actually been seeing -- Rabbit wasn't the only one emotionally overwhelmed.

Tango jolted, startled, though there were tears in his eyes too. Then he shook his head -- bringing a hefty sigh of relief from everyone, even Maul -- and said, solemnly, "No. Just-- the end of the beginning. Not the end of them."

"Does it have a happy ending?" Rabbit asked, rather desperately.

Tango clearly didn't want to give away any more than he had, but he dropped his head and thought about it, then just answered, "It has a good ending, little brother. I promise. It has a good ending."
"It was our last mission before the war," Maul started, haltingly.

Dinner had been a rather quiet affair, as all of them thought about Tango's story and as Misty, Raze and Smarty caught up on it in their own cluster. Maul was not typically a fan of creative literature; had never seen much point to reading about things that had not happened or could not. But listening to a story told by someone he knew, even if it wasn't real, was a different thing. And clearly the rest of the squad felt the same way about it; where they would often debate the holos they occasionally watched together, he had never seen any of them get invested in those the same way they did Tango's story of Etah and Adao.

Even Maul could see some of the elements of their lives that Tango was drawing from, though he couldn't get as many of them as it seemed Rabbit and Tally and Raze could. He was more like Castle, taking things as they were offered out and following along without much deeper speculation.

Still, Etah's thoughts while facing death struck something in him deeply, and it rang like the bell against his own aching yearning for the last time he had not worried about anything, because there was nothing for him to worry about.

In retrospect, Maul thought that it had been enough. If not peace, then closest thing he had ever known.

Now, the Blackbirds fell quiet, where they had congregated drowsily, not yet ready to part company late into the night. Castle had spent a couple of hours doing what he could to overhaul the lower parts of Maul's legs with tools from the Nest; Maul had spent over an hour of that sleeping against Raze, having been chatted there by the demo expert and Raze's own meandering storytelling. Later, he had drifted back awake to Husker playing his guitar, and then teaching Rancor how to play it -- ("It hurts my fingers some." - "Practice, kiddo, it won't after awhile.") -- and still Tally's question and Etah's wistfulness lingered on Maul's mind, and gripped him by the base of his throat.

"It wasn't anything-- exciting," Maul said, contemplating the mug of tea Shiv had brought him a bit ago, unwilling to look up. Though he could feel their attention on him. "Some diplomatic mission where Obi-Wan had to smooth environmental issues out between the local population and outside business interests on a colony world. He managed to convince the Council to allow me out because of, ah-- supposed wild animals, dangerous mercenaries and a lack of security infrastructure." There, Maul found himself grinning, shaking his head. "Needless to say, he rather exaggerated the danger, and the Council was already dealing with the separatist rumblings by then anyway. And I'd been out often enough that they were comfortable with his grip on my leash, though-- of course, they didn't know that he had no such grip nor wanted it."

It was strange, talking to them about this. About his life before them, even if not very long before them. About his relationship with Obi-Wan. Still, it didn't feel wrong, so much as just very unfamiliar.

"He rented us a cottage, just inside the treeline to a forest, halfway up an incline and overlooking a valley below." Maul closed his eyes; he was surprised that he could picture it so perfectly, even over a year and a half later. "We had to walk down a path to get to the speeder he rented, then drive for a half-hour to get to the conference center. In the morning, the light would come over the top of the hill and--" he gestured with his free hand, "--go out over the valley, later every day as summer turned to autumn. After he was done negotiating, we would go walk the markets and buy dinner, and then go back to our rental; we would have dinner, he would do his reading, I would listen to him. On our
days off-- we would sleep in, or-- or do laundry or just walk together. Sometimes I would go climb trees." There was a long moment there while Maul wrestled with words, then he just said, "We were-- so very far from everything, everyone that could control us or-- or wound us. The Force was calm and bright, and we just-- were. There, together."

He could bring up the memory of evergreens; of Obi-Wan's hair turned fiery red-gold in the light of an autumn sun. Of bread, sweet and warm, broken between them as they walked with their dinner to get to their speeder and drive back to their cottage. Of waking up with Obi-Wan's beard rubbing against the back of his shoulder or the front of it; of fingers stroking over his head and brow, absently but never carelessly.

He shook his head again, then, and took a sip of his tea before finishing, glancing to Tally, "I never worried there. It was fifty-eight days, between when we arrived and when we left, and five each way in transit. And we worried about nothing, but being alive."

Tally looked back, eyes glittering in a manner that suggested that had tested his composure all over again. "Would you go back there, if you could?"

"In time? Or later, when all of this is over?" Maul asked back; the distinction was fairly important, he thought.

"In time."

He looked at his squad; in that moment he had an answer. And days from now, he no longer would; this, nor any.

And one day -- long after when this had become the before to an after -- he would find it again.

He took in Husk quietly sitting with his guitar listening; took in Rabbit and Rancor sitting again close on the lounge. Took in Raze at the other end of the couch asleep with his feet braced against Maul's leg, Tally at the kitchen table, Shiv sitting in one of the wicker chairs and the others sprawled out either listening or dozing on bedrolls, despite the fact that they had multiple cabins with beds they could sleep in, because it never occurred to any of them to part ways even to just go to sleep elsewhere.

Maul shook his head. "No. Not if it meant leaving you."

Before they disembarked, before the emergency transmission from Felucia, before-- Maul walked the beach keeping an eye on Misty, who had woken up entirely too early to go swimming again and needed a spotter, and it was while he was walking and looking at the bits of detritus that the sea had thrown to shore that he found something that caught his eye and plucked it out of the sand, turning it over in his fingers.

The shell was a spiral, pale pink and coral and a dusky violet on its insides; the sand had worn it in places, and there was a little hole in the top of it, but it was still a pretty color and Maul brushed the sand off of it as he looked at it in the morning light.

He had left his shells from Iloh on the Negotiator; he knew they were not really a talisman. That they were not really imbued with any protective properties. That they were merely a sentimental thing he
had taken from a bottle of rum, so many years ago.

But he had left them with Obi-Wan anyway, in some wistful hope that Obi-Wan would pick them up sometimes and remember to stay safe, and stay alive.

That he would remember that he was loved.

Now, Maul thought of them again as he stroked his fingers over this one, feeling the texture of it, the wear, the wholeness of it besides and wondered what stories it would someday tell.

He took it with him when he left.
Dear Flanker (V)

I can't

I keep thinking about the Force. What I saw. It was all light and there was so much of it, Flanker, it was so big and I felt like nothing in all that. Just a tiny bit of nothing, and then I keep thinking about what the Jedi say, that we're not ever really gone, we're still a part of that big impossible thing and I always kripping hated that.

I always hated that because if you were still there, why couldn't I feel you beside me anymore?

I hope you're still there, I hope they're right.

Take care of him for us, okay?
"Incoming!" Shiv bellowed, loud enough that it buzzed the receiver on Maul's headset.

Everyone hit the ground behind the ridge they were holding; when the explosives hit the ground behind them, beeping and blinking, Maul sucked in a breath, dug a hand into the jungle loam, snatched them with the Force and, wincing, lobbed the six that had made it through the foliage right back in the direction of the droids before they detonated.

The bombs didn't make it all the way back to the CIS army, but they exploded without hitting any of them, fire and shrapnel jetting over their heads and the blast bending and shredding the foliage.

"Those downed tree-things might slow 'em down, they're still behind the treeline," Husker reported, before the last echoes had even stopped. "Smarty, where's our frippin' air support?!

"Still hung up on the 501st and 212th!"

Maul pushed back up and peeked over the top of the ridge; the blackened foliage and smoke made it hard to see, but even for the sounds of chaos -- the running troopers, the coordination going on behind him -- he could hear the droids on the march. The droids were working their way through the mine field that had originally protected the perimeter of the base they were trying to evacuate, but for every scout that went down under the mines, there were several more behind it. Off to Maul's right, the two gunships that had brought them here took off with the first wave -- dozens of exhausted and sometimes critically wounded men, with Tally accompanying since the base's medics were dead -- their repulsors whining before engines kicked on in a roar.

Behind him were dozens more who had to not only hold onto this landing site long enough to wait for the rest of the gunships -- the ones sent to retrieve Kenobi, Skywalker, Tano and their men first -- but there was also another platoon's worth trapped in a bunker that had been fragged as the base scrambled to get to the evac point.

The captain and lieutenant in charge of the base and its detachment were dead; the second Maul stepped off that gunship to offer support, he was the ranking officer on the ground and instantly had to figure out how to keep nearly a hundred clones alive long enough to get out of here.
And they had only been here for six minutes.

If he'd had time to panic about that, he would have, but he didn't have time and the immediate crisis demanded his entire attention. "Hold your fire, save your power packs until we can see them," he ordered on the base's priority channel; he had his Blackbirds -- at least absent Tango and Tally -- with him, but he also had the base's clones and they had been fighting long enough to run down their ammunition and battery packs to the point where several of them were unarmed and had to be sent back to the evac point to wait and hope.

"Lieu!" Rabbit came up and landed next to him on the ridge. "Raze and I think we can get in there, get those men out of the bunker, and get back before our evac gets here."

"Their vultures fragged the hell outta the base, sir, but they moved off when we all scattered," another clone, one Maul didn't know the name of, added. "Last time we got comms with the guys there, they were still alive."

Maul didn't take his eyes off of the devastated forest ahead of them but for a moment, just long enough to look over at Rabbit; Raze landed just on the other side of Rabbit and nodded enthusiastically, even in his bucket, saying, "Right kind of explosives and I can bust 'em out."

"We can't leave them there," Rabbit added, urgently. "No such thing as 'acceptable losses,' right?"

"Right. Go. But be careful," Maul answered, and nodded to the third clone who'd spoken up. "You go with them. We'll hold the line."

Before

"It's come to light that the intelligence that had been retrieved about the situation on Felucia was planted," General Plo Koon had said, as he took in the group gathered around the war room table of his new Venator-class. "Given the urgency of the situation on the planet and our need to secure the Perlemian Trade Route, the decision had been made to advance on the basis of it without verification because it had become dire enough to take that chance, in the hopes we could end the skirmishing there and secure our foothold on both the world and the Trade Route. However, shortly after our assault began, an overwhelming CIS force jumped into orbit, destroyed our medical station in geosynchronous orbit, as well as its protection, which suggested we were lured into attacking when we did. Currently, Felucia is under blockade and our mission is to break the blockade and facilitate the retreat of our forces from the surface."

The Blackbirds had been relatively close, waiting for word from the Negotiator, when Plo Koon had contacted them and asked for their assistance. No other Republic forces were close enough to get there in time to save the men on the surface of Felucia, beyond him and his battlegroup; the Negotiator and Resolute and their attached vessels had been forced to jump away when it was clear they were outnumbered and outgunned, temporarily abandoning the entrenched ground forces to the hopes that they would be able to hold off the droid army and regroup for evac.

Most of their forces had been dedicated to the ground operation; those who could flee did, but they were down pilots and gunships both and had comparatively few to lend to the effort. Now, they
rallied around Koon's vessels as the retrieval operation was underway.

"There are eight different evacuation points that we have to account for," Yularen said, from his holographic projection. "Estimates of ten thousand troops still alive, the bulk of which are clustered with Skywalker, Kenobi and Tano. Between the Negotiator and our own ship, we only have fourteen gunships to lend to this effort, as well as any that survived on the ground and are waiting for an opening to escape, and we lost contact with them when the separatists started jamming our communications from orbit."

Koon made a considered noise. "Indeed. And your fighters, Admiral?"

"Sixteen."

Koon had his extended Wolf Pack; as he and Yularen ran the numbers together, it was clear enough that this was going to be desperate no matter what happened.

Maul had yet to speak up; he was eying the holo display showing Felucia, known enemy positions, known Republic positions and the ugly mess hovering around the world that represented the blockade. There was nearly no way to evacuate everyone with the numbers they had quickly and smoothly; one way or another, the atmospheric forces were going to be taxed to their limits merely holding the CIS forces at bay long enough to see any of it happen, and return trips for more were going to be impossible.

The Nest could transport more than a gunship, but she was incredibly ill-equipped for evac purposes in this scenario, which would call for tight maneuvering and more acrobatic vessels; she was best left where she was, for now, on Koon's hangar deck. But they had Tango's Delta-6, and Maul could practically feel Tango breathing on his shoulder, the only one besides Shiv who had been allowed to accompany him to the bridge. "You have one more; my pilot has a refurbished Delta-6," he said, finally breaking his silence.

Having everyone eye him was uncomfortable, but Koon seemed unsurprised. "Thank you, Lieutenant; I'd be glad to have him join the Wolf Pack as we fly escort and air support."

Tango hissed a yes and it almost made Maul smile.

The rest of the briefing was fast, and it accomplished its purpose but for one thing: Aside Tango, Maul had no idea why he and his squad had been called in for support in the endeavor. The briefing was ended and he was frowning as he went to return to the hangar deck and his squad, to help prep Tango's fighter, when Plo Koon's clawed hand on his shoulder stopped him.

He could feel the Jedi's concern and seriousness both, and it took a feat of will not to throw that hand off, though Maul couldn't help stiffening as he turned back, only barely not flashing his teeth as he said, "General."

Koon stepped back once he had Maul's attention. "Prioritization has been given to the 501st and 212th, Lieutenant, but the reason I've asked you here is because there is a base -- established before this latest engagement, one that had been part of the effort to hold Felucia -- where over two hundred men are. The base is considered low priority, unfortunately, by the Republic, but I don't intend to abandon the men there to the droid army. I was hoping that your squad would go in and provide support for the men there long enough for them to hold on and wait for the last gunships to take them off."

"How many gunships will I take with me?" Maul asked back, though he had a feeling he wasn't going to like the answer.
And he was right. Koon's voice sounded heavy as he said, "Two. But I intend to bring a wave from our retrieval of the 212th and 501st, as they're closest, and have the rest of the men fit themselves in anywhere there's an open space. I know this is much to ask, given the Republic's decision to deprioritize the base and the potential loss of life; you're within your right to refuse."

"Give me a few minutes, and I'll see how my squad votes," Maul said, then turned and walked out without waiting to be dismissed, tension gnawing on his bones like an akk and foreboding crowding his hearts.

He already knew how they would vote, but it was another moment where he needed to hear it from them.

"Doesn't balance General Koon's scales, but at least it's the right thing to do," Tally had said. "A step in the right direction."

And when they all unanimously voted to go on the rescue and retrieval of the base personnel, Maul agreed with it; he didn't have any attachment to the clones down there, but they wore the same faces of these men he loved and that was good enough.

It was also the very last moment of before; inevitability and a hundred choices -- his own, theirs, the enemy's, Tano's, the Republic's -- defined the after.

Now again

"We're not gonna be able to hold this," Shiv said, switched to the Blackbirds' channel; the words were calm, though tight from the effort he was expending physically, dual wielding DC-15S's and trying to keep Maul from holding the line single-handedly. "They're coming on a lot stronger, and we're going to lose this damned ridge and the evac point before anyone gets here."

"Where the hell is air support?!" Brody asked, even as he was laid out on the ridge and firing back at the advancing droids himself.

Smarty had been in charge of keeping an ear on all of the rest of the actions going on, given his ability to keep track of all of those things without getting tangled up. His answer was grim: "Tano's not retreating under orders. They're gonna have to get her before they can clear the way and get here."

Maul listened to all of that going on as he stood out in front of the ridge, using every trick he had access to in order to slow the army and keep their focus on him and not the troops; he switched back to the base's channel with a quick flick of a finger before returning to deflection, asking, "Base personnel, we need a secondary evac point. Recommendations?" There was an instant burst of chatter, and he cut them off to clarify, "Slow down. It needs to be close, it needs to be defensible, it needs to have a clearing large enough to land gunships," even as he deflected blaster bolts and Force shoved anything bigger than a B-1 back into the jungle. He could hear their tanks behind those, though, and there was no way he would be able to hold those back.

His head was already protesting, but the strength of the Living Force on Felucia, covered in so much
wildlife, offset that somewhat and that bought them a little time. And the droids had stopped lobbing explosives after the last set he'd sent right back to them, at least.

"The river, sir," one voice broke in, quickly. "Northeast of us, less than three klicks, only one from the base. On the other side, there's a clearing where we used to do some target practice. Most of the bridges to it are blown, but we had one left last time we ran a patrol, and we got one AT-TE that's outta ammo but still can move at the base's perimeter."

"We can use it to get people across," another one said, breathlessly.

"You get that AT-TE in the river and I can rig it to electrify the water after we're across," Castle added in. "Give us a last ditch perimeter."

It wasn't ideal, but it was what they had. Maul fell back a few steps, knocking another cluster of B-1s down, and ordered, "All right, that's what we do, then. Shiv, Husker, the rest of the fire line, hold here; everyone else, get to the river, get across. Smarty, update the Wolf Pack on our retreat. Raze, Rabbit, status?"

"Just about to blow them free, Lieu," Rabbit answered, though his voice was shot through with interference. "We've got this; we'll get to the river with the survivors. There's something in the wreckage interfering with comms, but we've shouted back and forth."

"Copy." The base was far enough away that Maul didn't hear Raze blow the bunker open to get the men out, but he felt something inside of him release in relief at Raze's triumphant report that they were coming out now. The sounds of men here running hard and getting further away from the enemy was another small victory, in all of this chaos.

At least, until the first CIS tanks came out of the trees, powering up their heavy blaster cannons now that there weren't trees in their way.

And until the vultures came flying in over and behind them, screaming overhead and firing on the ridge almost as an afterthought before heading in the direction of the base.

The semi-subterranean bunker had been good for its purpose; it had offered protection and shelter not only from enemy spies flying overhead, but from the jungles of Felucia itself, and the sometimes unfriendly wildlife that lived on the surface.

Now, though, it was a deathtrap.

Half a support building, formerly housing radio equipment, had come down on its main entry, and the entrance to the bunker itself was fragged to hell. Raze had to crawl over and under chunks of ferrocrete and through the twisted metal of girders and whatever else there was in order to set the charges that would blow a big enough hole to let the men out. Their other exits were covered in pieces of former camouflaged support buildings, and this was their only way out of being buried alive and left for dead.

Thank everything that they could hear Raze, Rabbit and Aran -- their escort -- shouting to them.

When the charges went off, everyone was clear of the blast radius; as Raze ducked and listened to
the hiss and clink of pieces of debris falling, he peeked around the chunk of ferrocrete he had been using as a shield against it and saw the first scuffed, armored arm reaching out. "Hang on, we're coming!" he called, as he jogged back over there and helped the brother out who had been trapped there; within a moment, Rabbit was on the other side and pulling, too.

That brother was shaking hard, but he managed, "We're mostly okay, but we got a few wounded down there--"

"Get to the river," Raze said back, steadying him for a second before nudging him in that direction, gesturing Aran to go with him to keep him moving. "We'll make sure to get everyone out, just move for the river."

One by one, they hauled the men out, dragging and pulling as fast as they could; when one of the wounded was passed up, Raze made sure to have a brother who was steady with them to help them. He counted as they went, too.

It was when they were down to the last one, with two more brothers hanging back to help that he heard the sound of explosive rounds not too far off and then Husker barked over the radio, sounding more frightened than Raze had ever heard him, "You have vultures incoming at the base, get under cover!"

Rabbit and the last wounded clone were half out of the hole; Raze and their brothers grabbed the wounded one and dragged Rabbit out, then he turned with the wounded clone to bolt for the closest chunk of rock he could hunker behind, counting seconds in his head, helping drag his moaning brother and never once feeling anything but determination.

He didn't make it before the ground erupted.

In the last seconds before the devastation reached them, knowing that they weren't going to get far enough, Raze dragged that brother around to in front of himself and made himself a living shield, squeezing his eyes closed and holding on tight as the world washed out white and then descended into unforgiving dark.

The world was on fire.

The vultures had set fire to the forest. The CIS's heavy cannons did the rest.

"C'mon, c'mon, get up! It's time to go!" Husker was hollering, his voice wavering in and out of perception like a bad transmission, dragging a stunned Rancor up and in the direction of the river. The others were running, too; the view sideways and cloudy.

Maul blinked at them slowly. The smoke cut across their figures and was blotting out the sky. Something was searing his arm and face; when he managed to shift his head to look, his sleeve was blackened and smoking and burned through to skin, glistening under it.

Then there was motion.

It snapped Maul back to something like coherence, Shiv hauling him up from where he'd been thrown by the shockwave of the incendiary rounds hitting the ground, and his head spun for a
moment. "The base," he said, or tried to, clutching onto Shiv's shoulder, ears ringing. The attack had knocked his headset off, and his balance felt wrong, though he was able to keep his feet as Shiv dragged him away from them and towards the fallback point.

"We have to get to the fallback. Gunships are finally on their way," Shiv ground out back, crackling through his bucket's speaker, not slowing their relentless pace into the jungle that was slowly but inevitably giving way to flame. "Ten minutes."

Behind them, the droid army marched on, firing ahead of them, the bolts smacking the trees around them until they were deeper into cover.

Maul's thoughts kept skipping, but even stumbling along broken ground, through bracken and undergrowth, they kept centering back on the base. On Rabbit and Raze. When it really hit, the realization, his thoughts clarified and he jerked himself out of Shiv's grip, stumbling again but managing to stay upright, the panic that had been held at bay before by the battle now coming back full-force. "The base. I have to go."

Shiv stopped for a bare moment, precious time they didn't have, as the scattered troopers ahead of them vanished through foliage on their way to the river. "Lieu--"

"Take charge of the evacuation, I'll meet you there," Maul shot back and turned to go; Shiv snatched him again and just as Maul was about to turn and growl, Shiv had his left gauntlet off and on Maul's forearm, snapping it closed over the unburnt sleeve of his fatigue jacket.

"Backup comm. Be k riffing careful," Shiv just said, voice rough, and then let him go in order to take off after the troops.

Maul wasted no time; he bolted off at an angle, towards where the base's survivors would likely be as they also retreated, pushing his mechanical legs as fast as they could take him and holding his gauntlet-clad forearm up in front of his face to protect himself from foliage, dragging in air that was too hot to breathe but having no choice but to breathe it anyway.

The canopy overhead smoldered; the whole forest, victim of overwhelming heat even in this humidity, was going up.

When he ran into them, a couple of them turned and held blasters on him before recognizing the rank patch on his collar. "Sir!"

"The clones who came after you, where are they? They're in black armor," Maul asked back, doubling over for a moment to grasp his knees and pant at the ground, trying to get enough air to clear his head, then standing straight again to scan the men moving in a line towards the fallback. "Keep moving, just tell me."

"Got one here," another said from further behind; Maul's hearts both hit the ground at the sight of Raze, hanging between two others, the side of his head covered in blood, no bucket in sight.

He forced himself back into motion and jogged back there, after gesturing the others to keep going; a quick check to confirm his demo expert was only wounded, not dead, and he resisted the urge to snatch him and run himself before he gestured them on. "Get to the river, move!"

One by one, the limping and battered white-clad figures faded out of the smoke, phantoms passing Maul by even as he jogged towards the abandoned base.

When the last one was gone, all that was left was the sound of crackling fire and vultures somewhere above it; when the last one was gone, there were no more ghosts coming out of the smoke.
Rabbit wasn't with them.

It didn't hurt.

Rabbit was kind of surprised; when the blast came and flung him through the air before he could get out of its way, he had braced for pain. He must have blacked out for a few seconds, though, because he only vaguely remembered the impact and then everything went sideways.

It didn't hurt, but he was cold. He tried to pick his head up to look and figure out what was happening, but everything below his neck just tingled distantly. Breathing felt-- wrong. Like he wasn't sure he was. Over his head, framed by devastation, smoke blotted out the heavy Felucian sky. He knew vultures were up above the smoke, but it didn't feel important. The heaviness in his chest felt moreso.

In all of that, he never thought for a moment that he would be left alone. It seemed inevitable, that one of the Blackbirds would come and pick him up, so he wasn't surprised to hear Maul's voice shouting for him, though the raw fear in that voice -- usually quiet and composed -- was enough to make him try to gather air enough to shout back. He wanted to say, *I'm here, just got knocked for a loop, can we go back to Corellia after this or something, somewhere warm maybe--?*

He couldn't get enough air, though.

That was when he started getting scared. Where was his bucket and radio--?

He tried again and could only manage a wet, breathy whimper that didn't sound like it belonged to him. *Lieu? I'm over here, don't leave me--*

There was a sound of clattering; of metal striking metal and a sharp, wounded note that wasn't his own, and he tried again to pick his head up, but-- nothing. Then Maul was there, and even though Rabbit's vision was a little blurry, he could see what a mess the zabrak's face was. "All right-- all right, I have to-- to get you out, you're--"

Maul's voice was shaking and filled with desperation, and he was moving in and out of Rabbit's sightline, clearing wreckage.

Rabbit tried again to get some air and managed a rasp of, "I can't--"

"You don't have to-- you shouldn't talk, I just-- I-- I have to get you out." Even though Maul's voice was breaking, Rabbit could kind of see him moving and something rocked his head a little bit; he could feel that, but suddenly, all he really wanted, more than anything, was his brother and to be held, because he was cold and the sky was getting darker--

Oh.

The realization sank in, surprisingly gentle; he felt the tears roll back to his temples at the same time, fear and understanding holding his throat. Oh.

"Did-- did--?" he tried to ask. *Did I get them out?*
"They're out," Maul said, or maybe didn't; Rabbit could hear it in his head as well as with his ears. Could feel the truth of it. "They're out, now I have to get you out, just-- just stay with me, all right? *Stay with me.*"

More than anything, Rabbit wanted to. He wanted his brother. He wanted to not be cold. But even as more tears blurred what was left of his vision, he knew.

_I don't think I can, Lieu, I'm sorry._

There was that wounded note that wasn't his again. And for a second or a lifetime, it was quiet.

Then there were warm hands on his face, cradling it, and Maul's thumbs stroking his cheekbones and smudging his tears, and when Rabbit managed to focus a little, Maul was there looking down at him, tears cutting through the soot and blood on his face. "What can I do for you?" he asked, aloud and whispering in Rabbit's skull.

_Don't forget me, okay?_ Rabbit thought desperately, since he couldn't speak. _Take care of my brother?_ he thought right after, breath hitching in his throat and somewhere in his broken chest.

Maul nodded, a jerky little motion. And then he leaned over and rested their brows together, and Rabbit closed his eyes, letting that chase the cold away.

_I love you. I'm proud of you._

The last things Rabbit felt were the tears that belonged to both of them, and the warmth of Maul's hands, and the truth.
I know this was a slow to come update. I had to fight for every single word of this chapter, and I have a feeling that might hold true for several more to come, so I don't know that I'll be as quick updating as I have been in the past. It might read a touch disjointed because so much is happening at once, though I think it'll smooth out more next chapter. But I wanted to thank everyone for the support; for your encouragement, especially after the last chapter. I thought for sure I was gonna get hated for that, and to find nothing but kindness was a huge relief.

I've almost quit a thousand times in the past two weeks alone, because writing this is so hard, and I can honestly say that it's only because I have you out there pulling for these guys and for me that I'm still here trying. So, thank you. This story wouldn't be here without you.

For all of them, before had ceased to exist with Rabbit's last breath.

Not forever; even for grief, there was a half-life. Eventually, looking back wouldn't cause that instinctive, internal flinch away; it would hurt, thinking of those memories, for a long time, once they become reachable again. Remembering that there was a time when they numbered twelve, a time when there wasn't an empty place in their collective universe. Remembering when they had some silent surety -- faith, of a sort -- that they would all make it through, if only they just loved each other enough and were careful enough.

Maybe, after a fashion, they would find something almost -- but not quite -- like that feeling again. That love and caution could make a difference, even if they couldn't prevent death. And that while it would hurt still, eventually they would be able to look and remember without flinching away.

But until then, there was no before. Nor, even, was there really an after. For all of them, there was only now.

Inescapable.

The comm button on the gauntlet was flashing urgently.

No one would ever ask what Maul was thinking, as he sat in the twisted metal and broken ferrocrete that Rabbit's body was laying on, but if they had asked, his answer would have been that he had not thought anything. That when the desperation to save Rabbit had given way to the inevitability, and when the inevitable happened, there was nothing left in its wake but for a profound silence, full to its edges, but soundless. That when Rabbit's last thoughts went from words to abstracts to that silence, so too did everything else.
For Rabbit, time had come to an end. For Maul, it had stopped there, as if the universe had narrowed down to this, and that this was too much for it to contain, so it ground to a halt and waited.

He didn't even know if he was breathing.

No one would ask him what brought him back, either, but it was a truth that his survival was only down to the two promises he made Rabbit and to Shiv and that gauntlet, snapped closed over his arm in a moment's love and haste.

It was the low scream of Tango's Delta-6 just above the smoke that finally broke through the silence; filtered in through the tiniest cracks. Enough for Maul to press the gauntlet's communications button, vision swimming from tears and smoke.

"--gotta answer me, please," Shiv's voice crackled; even for the interference shot through it, he was so clearly pleading. Part of this world still, and still moving, like time come unstuck.

Maul hit the transmit button; he was only aware there that he had been coughing, because the words scraped his throat when he said, numbly, "Rabbit's gone."

Other sounds were starting to filter in; the sounds of fighters engaging, drawing any vultures off. The sounds of gunships to the north. The roar and pop of the forest on fire to the edges of the base. Beyond the gauntlet, Rabbit's face was ashen and slack, over the shattered plastoid of his armor. A twisted spike of glistening red metal jutted up from his midsection; maybe the fatal injury. Maybe just part of what took him away.

"Lieu-- Maul, you have to listen to me," Shiv said, after a moment, voice tight almost to the point of choked. "You need to get back here. The gunships are landing in pairs, you need to get back here now, do you hear me?"

The idea of moving seemed impossible. It seemed like it would be easier to just lay down there with Rabbit, and-- stop. For now.

For awhile. For however long it took him to remember how to breathe.

"Please," Shiv begged, a staticky whisper.

It was with Rabbit's last thoughts -- requests -- echoing in his head and Shiv's present plea that Maul finally got up and, trembling, managed to pull Rabbit's broken body from the wreckage to take him back to his brothers.

No one would ever ask what Shiv was thinking, as he stared desperately through the smoke laying like a dark fog over the world, and that was probably for the better.

Before now, it was timing and strategy; it was ordering, nudging and sometimes shoving people into the gunships that landed two at a time. He got Husk, Rancor and a pretty badly hurt Raze into one; he got Misty and Smarty and Brody into the next wave. He didn't need to order Castle aboard, because Castle said he wouldn't leave until Maul and Rabbit were back with them and Shiv needed that support beside him anyway. The droids were having a hard time making it through the firestorm they had started, thankfully; the troops were mostly in their buckets and could breathe despite the
smoke, also thankfully; the world was burning down around them *anyway*, and they needed to get out of there.

He wasn't sure exactly when the realization that something catastrophic had happened started creeping in; maybe when Maul left him to go to the base. He knew when he first became aware of it, though; the sight of Raze, semi-conscious and bleeding and hanging between the shoulders of two other clones he didn't know. It was then that he started to think it was going to get worse, and might not get better after. He forced himself past it, coordinating the evacuation; once that was done, once all but he and Castle were in the air in terms of their own squad, and getting away from this nightmare, he started pleading down the radio, not knowing if anyone was on the other side who could hear him.

When Maul answered with only two words, all of Shiv's thoughts slammed to a halt.

They were down to the last two waves. They were down to the last two waves and Rabbit was dead.

He could feel the words strike him -- even over a bad comm connection they sounded desolate -- but the urgency of the situation was so high that he couldn't even start to process them. Instead, not knowing the situation out there and getting more desperate by the second, he managed to rally and begged with all his heart for Maul to get to the landing site, because he already knew he'd stay on the ground, even if that was suicidal, if Maul didn't get here before those last ships took off.

"Castle, if he's not back before the last two ships land--" he said, his own voice sounding thready in his ears, on their own channel.

"*He'll be back. But if not, then I guess we get an extended camping trip.*"

The engineer's voice sounded rough, though steady; he'd heard Maul's answer to Shiv's calling too. They were at the very edge of the landing site at the single remaining bridge to cross the river, alone, the whine of gunship repulsors and the shouts of their brothers behind them seeming almost to be in another world. Even knowing how kriffin' stupid it would be, to run into the smoke and try to find Maul, Shiv had to stop himself from doing so.

Another two gunships took off. A glance back, and there were only about a dozen clones left on the ground, including them.

When Shiv turned his gaze forward again, his own gauntlet pinged on his heads-up that it was nearby -- stupid feature in case they misplaced them in a pile of gauntlets that all looked the same, but useful right now -- and his heart jolted in his chest as he took a few more steps onto the bridge.

Of all of the things that came before and after, to Shiv the very portrait of devastation would always be the memory of Maul, fading out of the smoke burned and limping, carrying Rabbit's body back to them, with the only clean parts of his skin marked out by the path of tears.

It fixed in his mind like it was flash-frozen there, perfect and terrible to the last detail, until he heard himself make a sound and ran forward to help.

Everything had gone from bad to worse.
Even in a packed gunship, filled past capacity, everyone gave Castle as wide a berth as they could. As if the tragedy of the dead kid in his arms was somehow contagious; as if the act of bringing him aboard would doom them all to the same.

They didn't usually bring their dead home. Not like this.

"Let me have him, Lieu," he had said, calm and gentle as he knew how, even as the clones behind them had been shouting for them to come on and move. "We have to go."

Taking Rabbit off of Maul had been the worst moment of Castle's life thus far. Hearing, even through the cacophony, Rabbit's armor as the broken pieces of it shifted and ground together. Feeling his likewise broken body, too heavy and boneless to be alive. The look in their Lieu's eyes, like he had died a thousand times on his way back to them; the small, miserable noise Shiv made over their radio, no less wounded, when he got a real look at the damage to the both of them.

These were the things Castle took off of Felucia; not the near hundred clones they saved, though he didn't forget that part, but every sensory detail of the one they lost to do it, and what the cost was to those left to survive it.

He would wake up to it more times than he could count; would wake to feel that ghost-weight in his arms, as Maul handed Rabbit over, settling there. He would never know if that was worse than those times he would go looking over his shoulder for the same kid, alive and with them, if he could just turn his head back quick enough to catch sight of him.

There was a swift, semi-organized chaos to the retreat. Ships landed on the nearest Venator-class they could safely get to, regardless of where people were assigned. Even in this gunship, there was a mix between troops; armor, streaked in pale green or in blue or in gold, absent his and Shiv's and Rabbit's, coated black. Though it was against protocol, Shiv had taken his bucket off and handed it to whatever brother would hold it for him; one hand gripped the crash bar overhead, but his other arm was anchoring Maul, who had been dazed and shaking from the moment he came out of the smoke and hadn't made a sound yet, not even when turbulence rocked their gunship and someone knocked into his burned arm.

Castle could feel the moment they left atmosphere; could feel the jinking their ship had to do to avoid fire. Pressed back to the wall and with his feet braced against the bench seats they weren't using, he shifted his grip on Rabbit and tried not to look at the kid's face; the smears of blood and soot over ashen skin.

*Remember him running on Bravo-984 for us. Remember him sitting at the table, curled up in that quilt, listening to Tango's storytelling. Remember him diving into any food put in front of him. Remember him painted up for Darkknell.*

Behind his bucket, unseen, tears cut hot down Castle's face. He couldn't remember any of those things in that moment, though he was trying desperately to do so, a running litany in his mind as he tried to hold it all at bay just long enough to do their jobs.

*Don't remember him like this. Don't remember him like this.*

They were a tight knot of bodies in the larger mass of the triage area off the Resolute's hangar deck.
Every so often, the CIS cannons made it through the swarm of fighters protecting them and the ship shuddered, making everyone pause to brace themselves, but mostly they were too busy to worry about more than the immediate thing in front of them.

Tally was working on one of his own.

"Cracked his bucket like an egg," another trooper said, standing by, apparently having been one of the ones who was close by when the base took its second round of bombing by vultures. He shook his head, his own bucket under his arm, all of him soot-streaked, the plastoid armor bubbled in some places, though it had protected him from burns like it had protected Raze. "Then I think the next shockwave was what threw him into the rubble. But him and that other one, they got most of us out before that happened."

Raze had gotten more lucid, according to Husk, on the gunship; he'd mumbled something, then promptly threw up all over everyone in the vicinity. Tally's heart had given a hell of a jolt when Husker and Rancor helped him out; by then, Tally had been working nonstop from the moment they'd landed on Felucia to now, between triage and emergency medicine.

Every medic on the ship was in motion; Kix had fallen into step with Tally and between them, they'd already mostly gotten things sorted in their self-assigned area -- if not entirely handled -- by the time the gunship with Raze, Rancor and Husker landed.

Now, Raze was kind of disoriented, but they'd stopped the bleeding from his head and used the portable emergency imager to make sure he wasn't actively bleeding inside of his skull. The hangar deck of the Resolute and the triage area was chaos, but it was the kind of chaos that Tally was well-familiar with.

Gunships landed swiftly and precisely; troops came off of them the same way, training kicking in regardless of location. The wounded were pushed right into their hands; there, they worked on sorting out who needed diverted where. Tally had brought up two dozen men just ahead of the first wave, their two assigned gunships managing to dart through the fighters in orbit and the firing of ships' cannons in order to land in the closest safe hangar.

He'd already had his own gunship triaged; all of the men he'd brought up were sorted into who needed to immediately be sent to the medbay for a surgeon and who could be handled by medics. Once he was out, he went through the other gunship, though most of them were just suffering exhaustion; those, he sent off to the troop quarters to find a space, regardless of whether or not this was their usual ship.

It was pretty clear when the first ships beyond his started landing that the now-abandoned bases on Felucia had taken the worst brunt of this entire mess.

"All right, Raze, take a deep breath, big pinch coming," Tally said, before sliding the sixteen-gauge needle into Raze's newly bared elbow and then quickly advancing the catheter and flushing the line, hooking the pre-prepped saline and bacta bag up immediately. Raze winced a little -- Tally had a flash memory of Raze saying it was the scariest needle he'd ever seen on Bravo-984 -- but he didn't try to jerk his arm away from it. Tally slapped some tape on to secure it, as Kix finished divesting the demo expert of his armor, pulling the pieces off of his legs and setting them to the side in a pile with the rest of it.

"Observation?" Kix asked, once he was finished. "They're pretty packed down there, but that's a wicked concussion."

"Yeah," Tally answered, quickly jotting down the orders on a sticker and slapping it to Raze's
shoulder; stable, serious concussion, needs CT, observation, pain & nausea medication. He leaned over, then, looking Raze in the eyes. "They'll give you something for the headache and queasiness, little brother. Just try to stay still and quiet, okay?"

Raze blinked at him, looking glassy-eyed and afraid. "C'n I stay with you?"

"Not yet. Once we have the Nest back, we'll come get you." It was debatable how much of that Raze was understanding, but the bacta-heavy saline infusion would help; bacta could cross the blood-brain barrier and get to work on healing the damage, though it wasn't so simple as that in the long term. Tally brushed his gloved fingers over Raze's cheek, heart aching for the way Raze leaned into his hand. "Not long, just rest for now and wait for us."

Once he stepped back, he gestured over the two troopers he'd conscripted as orderlies to take Raze's stretcher to the medbay, just as the sound of the next gunships coming in broke into his awareness and he heaved a breath and got ready for the next round, stripping his gloves, sterilizing his hands, pulling a fresh pair on.

These were apparently the last gunships; before he even made it back out onto the hangar deck and down to where they were landing, Kix alongside him, the shipwide comm told everyone to secure for an immediate hyperspace jump. Overhead, the hangar doors were closing.

Later, Tally would think about that moment. The internal release, like a silent sigh of relief; if they were jumping away, that meant that this engagement was over. They would rendezvous at a pre-planned spot and get everyone back to their own ships; they would count their dead and count themselves lucky that there weren't more. He and the rest of the Blackbirds would get their courier back and then they would get their next assignment; Rabbit would head to his AIT assignment. Raze would need recovery time and probably some kind of therapy if his cognitive functioning was kriffed up by the brain injury, but life could get back to what passed for normal for them.

Later, Tally would realize that it had never once crossed his mind -- no matter how cynical he could be, no matter how many injuries he saw, no matter how many dead, no matter the reality of their lives -- that he would ever have to add one of their own to his whiteboard.

He wasn't aware he'd stopped moving -- frozen like a shiny -- until he heard Kix murmur, miserably, "Oh, no."

Tally knew what death looked like. But he couldn't grasp it; even seeing Rabbit's pallor, even seeing the angle of his head, he couldn't grasp it. He stared, looking from Rabbit to Castle who was holding him, like he was waiting for-- for something, an explanation or-- or reassurance, that what his eyes were telling him couldn't be real.

Worse than that was the sound from behind him. That short broken sound someone made when they were hit somewhere vital. Confirmation of his own senses. Tally trembled once, then turned to look.

Rancor.

Rancor's face was washed of color and his eyes had gone wide, making him look even younger than he was, and he was shaking his head in a slow, back-and-forth swing, as if he could deny the reality of this.

Even through his bucket's speaker, Castle's voice sounded wrecked as he said, "I'm sorry, kid. I'm so sorry."

Tally forced himself to take a step. He didn't know what he was moving to do, but he knew he had
to do something, even if it was just--

"Tally."

Shiv's voice stopped him; the timbre of it, hoarse and entreaty, and when Tally turned his head and took in the sight of Maul draped deadweight across Shiv's shoulders, he realized with a terrible jolt just how close he was to adding +2.

"Kix!" he shouted, before leaping back into motion, even as the sound of Rancor's increasingly frantic denials behind him ripped at his heart.

Rancor was keening.

It was a sound no one could mistake and no one could avoid; the pitched sound of unbearable suffering, broken only by the intake of air.

Husker had known that they were supposed to clear the deck and triage immediately, once they came aboard. That lingering like they had was against protocol, and for good reason. With this many bodies, many of them new to one another or in the wrong place, training was what they had to fall back on in order to keep things organized. It wasn't anywhere near his first rapid evac, after all.

But once they had Raze handed off to Tally and Kix, he and Rancor had lingered anyway, trying to stay unobtrusive in the hopes that they would be there to catch any of their squad that ended up on the Resolute with them.

What Husker would never know is that if things might have hurt less if they had followed protocol. If he and Rancor had gone to the troop quarters to wait. If they could have been delivered the news there, instead of seeing it for themselves; if that might have made it hit with less violence. If that tiny bit of distance from the cold, hard reality of their loss might have softened it any; if it was news delivered by someone else and not by their own eyes.

Even as he stared at Rancor, folded to the deck and rocking over his twin's body, he had the awful thought: We can't call them the Triple R Trio anymore, and promptly flinched away from it. Castle stood by, hands twitching at his sides, like he didn't know what to do with his arms now that he wasn't carrying Rabbit anymore; with his bucket off, it was hard to tell whether those were tears or trails of sweat, but probably the former, almost had to be the former.

The rest of the clones -- not theirs -- were clearly uncomfortable with this. Some lingered, but they held back, looking spooked.

They'd been trained to view their dead through the filters of duty and inevitability. To see them only as marching far away. Husk had even bought that for the longest time; long enough to not let himself get too attached, because eventually, the army that was marching far away would be larger than the living one they were a part of.

But he didn't look at Rabbit and think he was only marching far away. What he saw was a tragedy. What he saw was love, and loss.

There probably wasn't a one of them standing on that deck now who hadn't lost somebody, but still
they looked at Rancor keening for his twin and trying to breathe through what had to be the sensation of amputation without anesthetic as if he was somehow breaking protocol.

A few had started murmuring about it, about the display of grief; when Castle overheard them, he stiffened in place with his hands going still, face hardening.

Husker spoke, breaking into it, voice even more ragged than it usually was: "Rabbit was his batcher."

Batchmates had different rules, socially speaking. Had always. That wasn't the point -- any one of the Blackbirds woulda been on the floor holding Rabbit, he thought, if Rancor wasn't -- but he didn't want them looking at their surviving kid and seeing him in a bad light. Or worse, saying something horrible to him over it.

"Oh," one of them said; young guy, maybe only a bit older than the two kids on the floor, one of whom would never grow older. He kept his voice down, shuffling his feet a little. "Kriff, sorry, it's just--"

"Why can't we mourn?"

Shiv's voice cut through everything, raw and heartsick and angry; when the entire immediate vicinity fell quiet, absent Rancor -- who existed only in a world right now broken in two -- he looked between the clones gathered. "Why can't we mourn?" he asked again, pointed, having come back from where he had taken their L-T to triage. He reached up and slashed the heel of his palm across his cheek to rub away the tears. "Because the damn longnecks didn't want us to? Because what, we're bred to go out there and kriffin' die and we're not supposed to feel it? Or, if we do, we're supposed to go back to our bunks and muffle it into the sleeping pad so no one else can hear it? Screw that," he said, voice cracking. "We bleed, we lose, we suffer. We've got the right to mourn."

Husker dropped his head and looked at Rancor, who was sobbing so hard he was having a hard time getting enough air, though his rocking didn't cease; as if he could somehow comfort Rabbit even after Rabbit could no longer feel it, and himself at the same time. The simplicity of that, of this base and instinctive expression of grief and love, made his vision blur.

"Damned right we do," he thought, as his own tears finally started to fall.

It was nearly three hours after they jumped away from Felucia that they came out of hyperspace at the rendezvous and were able to communicate, back in certain safe space.

By then, the ships all had an accurate head-count. On the lists, troopers' numbers scrolled as the ships transmitted back and forth, grouped by where they were and where they should be. Green and yellow and orange and red. Some had additional notes attached to them.

_Alive._
_Alive - wounded._
_Missing._
_Killed in action._

Obi-Wan had four of the Blackbirds on the _Negotiator_, but hadn't had time to go track them down.
He hadn't expected them to even be in the area, let alone having been down on Felucia; still, despite
his heart giving an awful little jolt at the realization that Maul and his squad had been in the thick of
that mess, he was still relieved that the four he had were all showing green. Alive, and safe. Tango,
Misty, Brody and Smarty.

His time had been spent preparing an update for the Council and reviewing their own headcount. It
kept at bay his anger at Ahsoka, for not retreating when she was ordered to; she had gone very quiet
once they were back aboard and Obi-Wan knew he had to keep his head when it came time to talk to
her about it, especially given that she was likely to be hearing it from the Council as well. Anakin
and Rex were coordinating their own people who got stuck on the wrong ship; numbering their
survivors, and numbering their dead, pitching in to help Obi-Wan put together a picture of events that
they could add to Plo's in order to give an accurate accounting and start strategizing around the very
important Outer Rim trade route they'd just lost a vital chunk of.

When the list came, Obi-Wan had some of the men set to come up priority on his own access
account. Some of his, some of Anakin's, some others; he was in charge of far too many men to know
them all by name and sight, and he felt wretched at that fact often enough, but he still had those he
kept an eye out for.

Maul and his Blackbirds were, of course, among those. Maul and Raze were both coded yellow --
alive but injured.

The second to last number was coded red.

*CT-193-3106*

His hand was over his mouth before he had the thought to put it there.

*Rabbit.*

"Kriff," Cody said, softly, from where he was looking over Obi-Wan's shoulder at the datapad; the
heavy tone of a man who knew what it was like to lose and lose.

Obi-Wan rubbed at his mouth and beard, trying to control the burn in his eyes as he stood on the
bridge of his ship. It wouldn't do to break down in front of everyone, especially as they'd suffered
some of their own losses. "Will you--?" he started, voice catching. He knew that he had too much to
do and not enough time to do it, but he didn't want the Blackbirds he had here hearing this from
anyone else. He could at least go and inform them.

"I'll handle this while you go tell 'em, General," Cody answered back, before landing a light pat on
the back of Obi-Wan's shoulder, tentative and kind.

The *Negotiator* hadn't been their ship in a relatively long time, not since they took off in the *Nest*, but
it was still where the Blackbirds had started. When Obi-Wan found them, they were clustered in their
old briefing room, and he had to pause outside the door and close his eyes and tip his head back to
breathe, face still damp from the tears he'd shed on the way down here from the bridge.

He would have given anything in that moment to rewind time. To take all of them back to when they
inhabited their claimed room with their contraband and their audacious plans to ruin Anakin's
training mission; to take them all back and watch over them, as they bonded and bantered and started to love each other, just as he had wanted them to do when he had put them together.

He would go over it, and over it, and it would be a long time before he would get an answer he could live with. Whether he had been right to put them together. Or wrong. Or something between, which existed in the nebulous space where good intentions met hard reality. It would be a long time and he was only at the start of that journey, as he stood there and braced himself to tell these men that they had lost one of their own.

When he stepped in, he knew that they knew something was wrong.

They sat clustered together, their armor piled on the table; four of twelve men. Now, four of the eleven left. They sat clustered and clinging to one another, looking for all the galaxy like a group of boys and not grown soldiers; looking as heartbreakingly young as they actually were, in their fear.

Before Obi-Wan even opened his mouth, Misty's eyes had welled up. Tango went pale. Brody just looked afraid, pleading with his eyes for the next words to be something good.

It was Smarty who asked, his voice quivering and then cracking, "Who did we lose?"

As hard as Obi-Wan tried -- and he did, not wanting to intrude on their grief by displaying his own -- he couldn't stop his own tears from falling as he said, "Rabbit was killed in action. Raze and Maul are alive, though they were wounded; I don't know more yet. The rest of your squad is onboard the *Resolute*. I'll have you sent over there as soon as we can."

Somehow, *I'm sorry* didn't seem like it could be enough. As Tango said, with aching bewilderment, "But he's my co-pilot," and as Misty shattered, Obi-Wan didn't think that anything ever could be, but he said it anyway and then quietly excused himself to let them grieve.

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**He was right here.**

Rancor stared down at his empty arms. He couldn't quit rocking.

**He was right here.**

They took his twin away from him. To the morgue. He'd fought them, but Husker and Castle had held him back and they took his twin. They took his twin, and left with empty arms and howling silence, Rancor didn't know what happened next.

Now he sat in borrowed quarters against the wall, oblivious to his squadmates trying to comfort him, and rocked and rocked and rocked and tried to understand how he was supposed to keep breathing with half of him gone, as his mind tried to loop around the devastation and his heart tried to keep beating.

**He was right here.**
All We Have

Chapter Notes

I know, this took forever. It was-- difficult. It's probably still a little disjointed, but the next chapter should come much easier. A lot happens in here. Please mind the body horror, and also there are a lot of bitter moments of pain, though also I think the occasional moment of triumph, too. I promise, the ending is not the ending; you'll see what I mean when you get there. Thanks especially to shadowmaat for the hand-holding and B_Radley for the beta.

They were piecing together everything that had gone right, and everything that had gone wrong, and Ahsoka didn't know what to say.

She stood back amidst the group of officers and holograms on the Negotiator's bridge and nodded dutifully when she was addressed. Inside her head, she tried work out how to explain her contributions in a way that didn't bring any more ire down on her than her refusal to retreat already had.

After it had been clear they had been lured into a trap, she had genuinely believed she was gaining ground on dismantling it and thereby holding onto Felucia. Before they had even gone to the surface, both Master Obi-Wan and Skyguy had impressed upon her the sheer importance of them taking Felucia and securing it. They had been emphatic that losing Felucia would mean losing a chunk of the Perlemian Trade Route, and given how much fighting they did in the Outer Rim, they needed to hold that. That losing a staging point like Felucia would mean giving the Seppies a much easier route to take the fighting back into certain Republic territory.

Armed with the desperation of the situation and a healthy dose of pride and confidence in her men -- or so she thought, at the time -- she had gone on a drive against the droid army, taking her patrol up against the first batch she saw and taking heart when they started retreating from her fire. She'd been so caught up in that, she missed where the droid army was flanking her comparatively small group.

Now, she realized her mistake. She was proud she had not lost any of her men, and that only one more clone had died between when the retreat started and when they hypered away, but she had definitely been pinned down without realizing it.

And at least she wasn't the only one who had made a mistake. Both Master Obi-Wan and Anakin had decided to move forward on the intel stolen from a Seppie listening post without waiting for any kind of recon and confirmation on it. Ahsoka took some comfort in the fact that she wasn't the only one who screwed up; that by comparison, hers seemed almost small. And cost neither group she had been with any lives.

They had walked through the whole thing, from their initial assault on Felucia, to their realization it was a trap, to the evac, compiling all of it for a formal action report to be logged and studied. When she heard Master Plo bring up the Blackbirds, she shifted her focus away from her own explanations; she hadn't even known they had been in the area, let alone on Felucia.

"They succeeded in saving every troop still alive when they landed at Raptor Base," Master Plo said, voice heavy. "Air support was delayed and the vultures that had been harrying us broke formation;"
several returned to the base and opened fire on their perimeter and the base itself. Out of two hundred and fifteen troopers originally deployed at that base, they nonetheless saved ninety-four and lost one."

It took a few moments for Ahsoka to understand just what Master Plo had just said. If they saved every trooper at the base who was still alive to save, how could--

It hit her dead center in the chest and she felt her breath catch short around the hard thump of it, like her heart had jolted inside her chest and then stilled for a moment, stunned. A bird into a transparisteel window. Then it started beating again as her arms tingled and her vision narrowed; it was pounding hard when she turned her wide eyes to Master Obi-Wan and found him looking back at her with-- with-- complicated sorrow and-- and--

Later, she would look back and see it for what it was: Grief. Empathy. Even a bit of frustration. But in the moment, she thought it was also reproach. Anakin opened his mouth, but Ahsoka didn't hear it; instead, she heard her own voice, vibrating in her montrals like the thin cry of a hunting bird, asking, "Who did they lose?"

Oddly enough, Raze had never been stuck in a real medbay for any serious length of time before.

One would think that with his proclivities towards handling explosives and inventing new ways to blow things up, he would have ended up injured at some point. But aside the various times he'd been pulled for scanning during his time as a cadet, as they tried to figure out if his trouble focusing was enough reason to decommission or recondition him, he had never been hurt or necessitated a longer stay. Raze thought probably that was because he was really good at safety. Even if he wasn't good at paying attention in class to things, he was good at knowing instinctively how to avoid death, injury or maiming or whatever. It was all physics, in the end. How things explode, where, where the pieces go, the nature of fire, how to control it, how to sideslip a blaster bolt, and to Raze, it came so naturally that he didn't even think about it. So, he'd never been in a medbay for a long time before, not like this.

He really, really didn't like this. Sectioned off by a curtain, all the sterile white and blue and gray around him, he felt cold and uncomfortable and desperately lonely and worried. His head was foggy some, but clearer than it had been; his thoughts kept jumping around, more than usual, but he could deal with that, he just didn't like this whole being alone thing, not at all.

After Tally sent him on, he had done what he was told; stayed quiet. Didn't make trouble. His head was hurting so bad that moving seemed like it would be too much effort anyway, so when the serious-faced doctors or nurses or whoever did scans and that, he only answered questions when asked. And then they put some medication into his IV that made his stomach settle and something else that made the headache a little more tolerable, but both of them made him sleepy, so staying still was still pretty easy. Keeping his eyes closed helped with the way his vision went wonky sometimes, too.

Even in that half-drift, though, he was worried. Something didn't feel right. Tally woulda never left him alone in the medbay for hours if there wasn't something else demanding his attention. Rabbit had been with him at the base, and even though Raze's memories of the rescue of the base personnel were kinda fuzzy and disjointed, he still wondered if Rabbit was maybe hurt like he was and that
was why Tally wasn't here with him. Raze didn't think necessarily that it was that, 'cause Rabbit was so fast, there was no way he coulda been caught by the fragging of the base like Raze was, but maybe he was, maybe he got hurt and that was where Tally was right now.

Raze wasn't sure how much time had passed. Just that it seemed like a lot. Occasionally, a harried-looking nurse would check his monitors and that and log stuff into a datapad, but he wasn't sure how often that happened or how much time there was between visits, and the nurse didn't say anything to him. Maybe the nurse was tired; he was a natural-born, some tall human with floppy brown hair, and gray circles under his eyes.

Eventually, though, Raze opened his eyes -- he musta dozed off for awhile -- and found Tally sitting on the edge of his bed.

Instantly, he knew something was really, really wrong. Not just not-right, but deeply wrong.

Tally looked no less tired than the nurse had, and his eyes were rimmed red, and until he noticed Raze was awake, he was sitting with his shoulders hunched inwards self-protectively, making him look small. Though he quit doing that when he noticed, and sat up straighter, clearly trying and failing to force a smile. "How's your head feel?"

"Like someone cracked it," Raze said back, voice kinda raspy. He musta gotten some smoke in his lungs at some point. "What's wrong?" he asked, reaching out and wrapping a hand around Tally's wrist.

Tally's face screwed up briefly in pain, which made Raze's belly go incredibly cold. But then he moved and turned on the bed and linked his fingers through Raze's. "Rabbit-- Rabbit died at the base, Raze."

The words didn't seem anything like real, so Raze just said, plainly, "No." Not a lament, just-- a fact. Because no, that wasn't true. Rabbit was faster than him, anyway, so it couldn't be true.

Tally closed his eyes and his mouth tightened, quivered, then he said again, "He died at the base. Maul and Castle and Shiv brought-- brought his body back."

It still didn't make any sense, but Tally wasn't any kind of a liar, either. Raze tried to think through the fog of his concussed, pain-medicated brain and even as he refused to believe it -- Rabbit was faster than him -- he could feel his own eyes start burning and the way something in his mouth felt wrong, and the panicky tingle of fear in his arms and legs. "He can't be, he's too fast, that's why-- that's-- he can't be, what about Rancor?" he asked, in desperation. "He can't be. He's faster than me, and what about Rancor?"

Tally didn't answer, eyes still closed. Almost imperceptibly, his breath hitched, and then the tears spilled down his drawn face.

There was no denying that kind of truth.

The Resolute's natural-born medical staff seemed to have a rough ratio of two-thirds prick to one-third exhausted-but-decent.
Skywalker's CMO was firmly in the first camp.

Tally had known that telling Raze was going to be dicey. The most effective treatment for a bad concussion past IV bacta infusions was *rest* and a lot of it; it was letting the brain have a break from everything that it could take a break from, and to not do so increased the chances of long-term complications. But there was no hiding the gaping wound that had just been torn into their lives, either; no way to shield Raze from learning that, and Tally hadn't wanted Raze to hear it from someone who wasn't one of them. And since Shiv was -- genuinely valiantly -- trying to coordinate and do damage control to get their ship back to them and get them the hell out of here as fast as possible, and Castle was helping him, and Husker was just trying to help Rancor any way he could be helped, that duty had fallen to Tally.

Tally couldn't say he was grateful for the number of distractions he had, but he couldn't claim he was *ungrateful* for them, either.

Anyway, telling Raze had led to Raze shattering into tears, and when that spiked his monitors, the CMO ordered him sedated -- since it was already established that he wasn't going to bleed in his skull or his brain wouldn't swell any worse than it already had -- and since Tally had already clashed with the medical staff here over Maul, he hadn't been able to intervene. Luckily, Raze didn't even seem to notice; Tally got some looks for holding him and petting his back as he sobbed, then when he was asleep, laid him back out and tucked him in and then retreated before he could pick any fights about it.

Tally hadn't had a moment to breathe and process yet. Dragging Maul back out of the grip of death's jaws had taken every bit of focus he and Kix had. Tally almost wondered if any of the others realized how close that was, beyond Shiv, and figured that probably they had not and that he wasn't in any hurry to tell them, at least not yet. Not with everything else that was going wrong.

"He was on his feet until right before we disembarked, then he just buckled," Shiv had said, after they got him on the table; by then, Tally's entire body was re-flooded with adrenaline, because he hadn't even conceived of the idea that Maul could actually go pale -- even subtly for that thick skin -- let alone thought he'd ever see it happen. But instead of vivid red, what vaguely clean parts of his skin were visible looked washed out and *off*.

"He only has half the circulating blood volume he should and all of his most oxygen-hungry organs, so he doesn't have much to spare. He's in shock," he'd said, by way of explanation, as he and Kix got to work. "Scan his dog tags, Kix, it'll bring up his medical profile. Shiv, give us room to work."

That was the last bit of attention he had to give to Shiv, but he had a feeling keeping Maul alive would mean he was forgiven for the brusque dismissal.

Kix had been pretty kriffin' fantastic through the whole thing; he occasionally shot Tally a surprised look, because frankly, Maul should have been immediately sent on to the medbay and prioritized there, but Tally had enough gear to partially stabilize him in triage and time was of the essence, and so that's what he did. Got an oxygen mask on him and a wide-bore IV in his left arm, then went right to work cutting away what was left of his shirt and jacket, part of which had burned into his right arm. Nerve-blocked that arm, because even though Maul started to wake up when he had some oxygen and Tally had Kix slow-push enough kiletamine to knock a full-bodied human into next week, Tally didn't want any pain making it through even anesthesia.

And he didn't want to try to deal with the emotional and mental devastation until the physical devastation was under control, either.

By the time they were done debriding and disinfecting Maul's arm and the side of his head -- his arm
being the worst, especially around his elbow, for how deep those burns went -- quite a bit of time had passed and he still wasn't anything like what Tally would call 'hemodynamically stable', but he wasn't right on the edge of never anymore, and he needed bloodwork (despite having none to spare) and Tally still would have kept him in triage, except Kix called him out on it, albeit gently.

"We've done everything we can," he'd said, even as Tally was scrutinizing the projected vitals monitor desperately looking for what else could be done. "More than we're rated for, too." There was a short beat, then Kix said, "He needs a doctor, Tally."

The shot of bitterness Tally felt over that made his mouth twist, but he nodded and they executed the transfer themselves, and that was when he got into a fight with the Resolute's CMO.

"He should have been brought in right away," the man said, some guy probably in his normal-born forties, snappy. "He's an officer. We would have prioritized a bacta tank."

"That would have meant de-prioritizing someone else, 'cause last I checked, you're full up. And he wouldn't want that." Especially since all the available bacta tanks were occupied by wounded clones. Hell, the fact that Raze wasn't in a tank showed the curve of how badly wounded someone had to be to get into one; even the brief scan Tally had made of the list showed that all clones currently tanked were more critical, camping right on death's door. Tally felt pretty damn sure that Maul, right mind or no, wouldn't have wanted to be prioritized over them. "I'm his regular medic, no one's more familiar with his physiology; he just needs blood work, in-depth monitoring and further stabilization."

"Watch your mouth, medic," the doctor had said; Tally was ready to explode when a couple orderlies got in his way and made it clear that this would turn into a fight. "I'll determine what he needs.""Just don't kriff up the medication and dosage protocols I have listed on his file, doc," Tally snapped right back, before turning and leaving, Kix beside him.

"That-- was both brave and stupid," Kix had said, once they were out of earshot and Tally was strongly considering punching something or someone. "Sellers is an asshole, but he is the CMO. You know he's gonna write you up for that, right?"

"Screw him. Let him." Tally had rested the heels of his hands on the wall outside of the medbay, dropping his head and seething through his teeth, mostly so he wouldn't break his knuckles on it. "Let him come for me, let him frippin' try."

That had been a bit over an hour ago. Latest update from Shiv was that they had another one before the Nest would come get them. The act of moving men between ships and gunships back to their assigned vessel meant a lot of coordination, especially since the Blackbirds were on two separate ships and their own vessel on a third. Tango would have to take his Delta-6 and dock on Koon's ship, pick up the Nest, wait for either the other three to come over on one of Koon's ships or get into the Negotiator's holding pattern to pick them up, then move onto the Resolute. And in the meantime, that meant Tally had to secure release orders for Raze and Maul from someone who he'd already picked a fight with and maybe beg, borrow or outright steal enough medical supplies to handle them himself.

After Raze was back down, he went back to check on Maul only to find Maul had secured his own release, and not in any way approaching 'official'.

"Frip," Tally said, feeling exhausted, miserable and defeated, taking in the sight of an unconscious nurse draped across the end of the bed, a bunch of removed monitor tabs and the absence of his L-T, before slipping right back out again as quickly and quietly as he could to go find where Maul could
have vanished to in that condition before anyone could sound any alarms.

Maul's back was slammed against the door almost before said door finished closing, but he made no move to defend himself from the shattered young man who put him there, crying brokenly, "Why did you let him go? Why did you let him go?"

When Mag had told Shiv about Flanker, it had effectively felt like the end of his world.

Everything Shiv knew was colored by his twin; by their growing up together, by their distance when they were parted for assignments. All points were measured by where each of them was; Shiv's internal compass was always aligned to Flanker, regardless of what his hand-compass said. They lived by the certain knowledge that no matter what else happened in the galaxy, they still had each other, and so long as they did, they would be all right. The Republic could fall, the Seppies could win, but Shiv knew that as long as Flanker was alive -- even not right beside him -- he would be all right. And even though they didn't ever talk about things like that, he felt perfectly sure Flanker felt the same way.

The time after that had been spent desperate, or numb, or viciously angry, or passively suicidal, and somewhere under all of that was a fathomless grief, so deep there was no seeing light reflecting off of the bottom of it. He had no regard left for his own life; he was pretty sure that it was simply not wanting to cause anyone else's death that his own was delayed long enough for him to come out the other side.

And even then, he had realized he was still coming out the other side. That every time he thought he'd fully moved past it, something else would remind him that he hadn't, not yet.

Somehow, it was the sight of Rancor pinning their Lieu -- by any measure, Shiv's adopted brother in heart(s) if not in blood -- that gave him the final realization that he had been inching closer towards, especially more recently: There was no other side.

"Rancor, stop," he said, keeping his voice level, moving to pry Rancor off of Maul, who looked like he was on his feet only by willpower and not much else. The rest of them clustered there were too dazed -- even Castle, even Husk -- to move, and just stared at the scene in numb shock. "Rabbit volunteered to go."

"What did he even know?!" Rancor shot back; he let go of Maul, though he was still staring at the zabrak, and the bewildered misery and anger in his voice sounded like an echo of all those months ago, Shiv's own voice in his head crying why over and over again. "You said you'd keep us alive!"

It had been pretty inevitable that something like this was going to happen. Even as kriffed up as Shiv felt right now, though, even as much as he wanted to just let the whole thing roll over him -- the shock and pain and tears -- something in the core of him felt oddly settled for the first time in a long time.

Maybe even the first time since Flanker had died.

*I've lived through this before.*

Maul hadn't said anything yet; he was breathing hard as he stared at Rancor, and looking dazed,
though Shiv could see how quickly and awfully that accusation was going to take root and grow. Instead of answering that, or giving Maul a chance to answer it -- if he even could -- Shiv put himself between Rancor and Maul. "Rancor, stay here," he ordered, and didn't waste any time palming the door open and dragging Maul back out into the corridor.

He was just about to ask what the hell Maul was even doing out of the medbay -- because he obviously shouldn't have been -- when Maul said, soft and ragged, "I promised Rabbit I would take care of him."

It stopped Shiv cold; the words. The way Maul's voice broke at the end of them.

"He wasn't-- he was still alive when you found him?" Shiv managed to ask, thready and knocked breathless himself. He hadn't known that. He hadn't honestly even suspected it.

Maul gave the barest of nods, seemingly oblivious to the new tears that tracked down his face. "I tried to get him out, but--"

But. Shiv knew the rest: But it was too late. But Rabbit was hurt too badly. But you were with him when he died.

Everything in him wanted to curl around the pain in his gut and chest and scream through his teeth, as if that would somehow release the pressure. For Rabbit. For Rancor. For Maul. For himself and his squad and this entire broken army of his brothers, and Shiv ground his teeth together to keep himself from it, because even though he damn well knew they had a right to grieve this loss, he could feel -- like that kriffin' cliff face crumbling under his feet -- just how close the Blackbirds were to falling apart to shatter on the rocks below, and damned if he was going to let that happen.

"Don't you leave me," he said, unable to keep his voice from shaking, unable to keep the tears from burning his own eyes again. He caught Maul by the back of the neck and pressed their brows together; that close, he could feel that they were both trembling. "Don't you leave me, don't you leave me with all these pieces in my hands, don't you let it get into your head we're better off without you, you hear me? Stay with me."

He didn't know as he said it that Maul had begged the same of Rabbit; only that every time he himself had nearly been lost, in one way or another, it was always Maul who asked it of him. Hanging on a cliff or crashing in a ship. Or in nonverbal form; with every steadying hand and sheltering moment and quiet encouragement. The basic fact of it: I love you. Stay with me.

His own tears burned hot, too familiar, down his face. But then there was a long beat, then a faint nod back, felt instead of seen, and he could have sobbed for that alone, if not for the fact that they still had so many things left to pick up the pieces of.

"We have to get out of here," Maul whispered back, still breathing harder than normal, still trembling. "We have to get Rabbit and get out of here."

Shiv had no idea what they were going to do with Rabbit's body, but the moment Maul said it, he knew they had to do it. It was crazy and completely against any kind of protocol, but they had to. He briefly ground their brows together, then drew back, though he kept that hand on the back of Maul's neck for a moment; maybe comfort, maybe just support. "He-- he'd be in the morgue. The Nest will be here in less than an hour. We have to get Raze, too, he's in the medbay. Uh--" Kriff, it was so hard to think in terms of objectives right now. "Rabbit would-- would either be slated for the incinerators or to be sent back to Kamino."

"Kamino." Tally's voice broke in from just down the corridor. "So, they want to turn him into a
"It seemed Tally did, because his eyes went wide and he sucked in a wounded breath, then covered his mouth with his hand and breathed hard through his nose.

One more piece of damage to add to their running count.

Somehow, lost in the backwash of grief and the undertow threatening to drown them, they managed to pull together an operation.

Clones didn't have funeral rites. There was no ceremony; instead, they spoke words of remembrance and sorrow. The dead were left to rot on abandoned battlefields; when their bodies did come back, if they came back or never left in the first place, they were incinerated en masse, or sometimes one that was exceptional or different in some way was shoved into a stasis pod and sent back to Kamino to be studied.

It occurred to none of the Blackbirds, before Maul had said it, to retrieve Rabbit; that they had any right to claim the body of their brother, to see to it themselves. It was said that on permanent postings clones would sometimes bury their brothers, or build them a pyre, but through most of the GAR, the simple facts were that there were so many bodies that everyone -- even they -- became numb to the fate of those bodies. Keep moving, no time for grief, gotta keep soldiering on.

None of the Blackbirds knew what they would do, when they got Rabbit. Only that they wouldn't leave him; he wasn't left on Felucia, and he wouldn't be left on the Resolute, another empty number sent back to be picked apart on cold Kamino.

It had seemed to give Rancor something to cling to; he stopped taking his pain out on the rest of the squad, though he still stared mixed hope and anger and heartbreak at Maul. Shiv got it, even though he didn't want to: Maul was the only one in their chain of command that Rancor even could lash out at. The only one who wouldn't punish him for it. Bitterly, ironically, all the trust Maul had helped build between them was what made him the only 'safe' target.

By then, security was out looking for Maul and Tally both; troops and orderlies going door to door. The Blackbirds moved ahead of them; the Resolute, despite her different personnel, had the same exact layout as the Negotiator. Tally had gotten on a connection to Kix, who agreed to meet them in a maintenance corridor and who had been giving them recon.

"This'll keep you on your feet for maybe an hour, hour and a half, but Lieutenant--" Kix paused there, after loading the first of three vials into a hypo; he pressed his mouth into a rueful line, then finished, "You're borrowing and burning reserves you don't have, and you're going to end up paying for it later."

Maul only nodded in answer to that; Kix had also brought a shirt and a sling, which his still-numb,
synthskin-dressed right arm was in now to protect it from being bashed or bumped, since he couldn't feel it yet. Add in that limp -- Castle said it was a broken bearing housing that would probably hold until it could be repaired, but might not, after a quick check -- and the more Shiv was wondering just how bad the news was, especially with how grim Tally was looking. Not even touching on the legal issues they'd jumped into.

Whatever Kix shot Maul with had a pretty quick working time; even though he was still breathing hard, his expression cleared some and he looked sharper, more present. More openly devastated, too, though subtly; the cracked look in his eyes.

"All right. I've got the stasis pod number, so I'll slip Castle and Rancor in to get it," Kix said, recounting his part in the plan; Shiv hadn't gotten to know the other medic, but even if he hadn't decided he liked him on Bravo-984, that woulda been more than enough.

"The Nest will be here in less than a half-hour, with Brody, Smarty, Misty and Tango," Shiv added; he had informed them of their plans to grab Rabbit's stasis pod, and Brody had already used the Nest's console from where they were in a holding pattern in order to slice into the Resolute and secure the release code for it. "Husker, you get all our gear to the hangar so it can be aboard when we're ready to make a break for it."

"I'll get Raze," Tally said, arms folded across his re-donned chestplate. Even in all this, Shiv didn't miss the way his hands were shaking before he'd crossed 'em.

"Maul and I will play distraction," Shiv finished, well aware that it could land both of them in a court-martial, and that Tally might already be there himself. But since there was no formal channel to request Rabbit's body be given back to them, since there was no formal channel to challenge the policy, all they really had was--

--was themselves. And each other.

"Let's go," Maul said, the staff Shiv had grabbed on Felucia back on his belt in halves, before pushing the access door open with his good arm.

Nothing about this was a good idea.

Husker didn't get it. Didn't get why. Everything that made Rabbit who he was had already gone; there was nothing left there to protect. Just a body, just one notable enough to be sent back to Kamino instead of turned into ash, and every single one of their squad present was riskin' their very lives in this venture. What would be done to Tally if he got caught up in an investigation? He barely made it off Kamino with his life. What would happen to Maul, still a prisoner, provided he didn't kill himself trying to work in this condition? What would happen to Shiv, ready to throw away a sterling service record?

Husk didn't get it; he thought it was reckless and them letting their hearts get away from them, and damn the inevitable consequences.

But it never once occurred to him to stop them, or narc them out. He spoke up, gave his opinion, but the look of soulsickness on Rancor's face when he did made him queasy. Later, he thought. Later I'll explain, when this ain't so raw. He was pretty sure that his speaking out against it was why he was
relegated to getting their armor and other gear back to the Nest. That and maybe them shielding him from the repercussions, taking the worst of the risks onto themselves.

He did what they asked, though. Dragged all their gear out -- mostly down to Raze's armor, left in triage, and some of their blasters -- and that meant he was in position to see General Skywalker, Commander Tano and General Kenobi come aboard.

For a moment, he remembered his and Skywalker's last meeting.

"You-- your squad won't have any trouble out of me."

Let that be true, Husk begged in his mind, even as a plan formed to maybe save his squad before they could self-destruct.

He abandoned their gear temporarily, heart in his kriffin' throat and aching at the same time, and jogged down the deck towards where the general was already being swarmed by his troops, all of 'em grateful for his return.

General Skywalker looked tired and kinda drawn, especially for his young age, but he gave them smiles and knuckled their shoulders; Tano and Kenobi both hung back, looking their own kind of beaten, but Husk didn't go to them first. Instead, he put himself towards the back of the pack in Skywalker's eyeline.

When Skywalker saw him, his face fell briefly. He murmured, "Guys, let me through," and then, when the crowd parted, came up and put both hands on Husker's shoulders. "I heard about your squadmate, Husk. I'm sorry."

Behind him, Tano covered her mouth, her big blue eyes welled up. And honestly, even knowing how she screwed up down there, Husker didn't think for a second to blame her. Not at her age. But he didn't have time for that right now; he looked up at Skywalker and said, frank and raw, bleeding heart on display, "Sir, I need your help."

None of them were in any condition to actually execute a successful operation, even on a friendly ship. Things had gotten too out of hand for that.

Tally almost wished he would have put the brakes on it, when he and the rest of the Blackbirds -- and poor Kix -- ended up going into action. Because he knew they were fighting a losing battle before they'd even gone into it; he just didn't know what the hell else they could do. Go and politely ask for Rabbit's body? Rabbit, living or dead, was property of the Republic; the contract with Kamino meant that if they wanted his body back and it was available, it had to be sent back. He'd heard tell of bodies being 'lost' by medical personnel before, though those had only been rumors; he didn't know if they were wounded who deserted, or actual bodies being laid to rest by brothers. But that wasn't applicable to this situation regardless. Just leave him there? It was obvious that the majority of the Blackbirds couldn't and wouldn't.

It was one of the few times that he'd agreed whole-heartedly with Husker, and while he hated himself for it (not the agreeing, the fact of it in general), the risk to the squad was too high. Rabbit wasn't there anymore. And even if the idea of his body being sent back to Kamino to be taken apart and used to improve the 'product' was abhorrent, Tally had to worry about the still-living now, and
the still-living were biting off more than they could possibly chew.

But he hadn't said it; hadn't had the heart left to tell them that this was a fool's errand. He had only shaken his head, closing his eyes so he wouldn't have to see Rancor's heartbreak. And then, just like Husker, he went and did everything in his power to see their plan through with the minimum of devastation; to execute his part of it as quickly and quietly as he could.

Except Sellers was waiting.

Maul's and Shiv's idea of a distraction was something of a chase, and it might have even worked, if not for the fact that Sellers had been one step -- or several -- ahead of all of them. Wounded officers didn't usually just escape from the medbay, leaving behind a Force-stunned nurse. (*Note to self, Tally had thought, once Maul had explained what he did, kiletamine does not actually cut off access to the Force.*) They usually at least had the common courtesy to argue with their medical staff before pulling a get-away, if they could; while Tally thought Sellers was a full on asshole, he would have been furious himself if a patient in serious condition made an end-run around him like that. He was angry about it, actually, but he knew Maul and he had put forth far more effort in winning the zabrak's trust than he was willing to squander, even at the risk of Maul's life.

That hadn't stopped him extracting a promise to follow all medical orders the moment they were back aboard the *Nest*. Maul must have known how tenuous his own position on it was, because he didn't even try to haggle, just had nodded.

Kix could move freely, despite being guilty-by-association-to-Tally, and had managed to slip Rancor and Castle into the medbay easily enough, saying they had gotten some smoke inhalation, and then when no one was looking, he'd moved them through the doors to the morgue. Tally had put his bucket back on and slapped some medical tape over his pauldron to hide the Blackbirds emblem on it, hoping he wouldn't be recognized in his armor, and had slipped in and checked over patients in four beds before moving to Raze's, hopefully looking like he was just doing rounds.

Around the same time, though, they had apparently managed to corral Shiv and Maul; Tally heard the rattle of boots when they were walked in, and just as he was finishing hep-locking Raze's IV, securing it with tape and getting ready to pick him up, having forced the monitors into a diagnostic mode so they wouldn't screech, he heard Sellers say, "Good, get the one skulking over there, too."

Not wanting to potentially hurt a still-unconscious Raze, Tally had put him back down gently and then submitted to his 501st brothers cuffing his arms behind his back and dragging him out from behind the curtain. Shiv was similarly cuffed, though Maul wasn't. Tally shook his head, tiredly, when one of the security troops took his bucket off.

"I'm here for my men," Maul said; he had broken a sweat, but despite pretty much *everything* wrong with him right now, there was a note to his voice that made the hair on the back of Tally's neck stand on end. "Rabbit and Raze. Then we're leaving."

Sellers apparently didn't know what to do with that; what to do when faced with Maul, chin tipped up and poise somehow in place even with an arm in a sling and most of his weight on his right leg. "You haven't been released, Lieutenant, and if your troops are here, they haven't been either."

Props to the guy trying a more diplomatic tone in his clear shock. Tally waited for it to sink into Sellers' head that he didn't have to be diplomatic, but in all this awfulness, some part of him felt fiercely happy that Maul could intimidate the man into it, even in the short term.

"I am not asking to be released. I am telling you that I'm here for my troops." Maul's voice was still rough from the smoke inhalation, but it was perfectly calm; everyone -- literally everyone -- in the
vicinity had fallen quiet, so he didn't have to raise it any to be heard. "Tally, is Raze all right to leave?" he asked, not looking away from Sellers' face; not even blinking.

"Yes, sir. He only needs rest and bacta infusions from here." FUBAR as all this was, Tally answered crisply and formally.

"And Rabbit is in the morgue," Maul said, to Sellers.

"CT-193-3106," Shiv added, a sharp bite in the words. "If you need his number."

One of the clone medics that Tally didn't know the name of pulled it up on a datapad and murmured to Sellers. And apparently, that was what finally broke Sellers' shock at being confronted, because his face went hard. "That unit is slated for return to Kamino, and--"

"His name is Rabbit." There was a low rumble in Maul's voice; the entire group, poised in tableau, stiffened at the sound of it. "And I am not asking you, I am telling you: You will release him to us, as well as Raze."

"Like hell." Sellers was going steadily redder, and he gestured to the security forces fringing them. "Enough of this. Take those two to the brig--" he snapped, pointing to Shiv and Tally, "--and orderlies, restrain this one," he added, pointing at Maul.

There was a flash of movement in the corner of Tally's vision and he whipped his head over in time to see half the hilt of Maul's staff slap into his left palm, pulled from the belt of one of the security troops. His heart about stopped when the gold blade ignited and the entire contingent of security troopers fell back in a hurry, drawing their blasters.

If Maul cared about having about a dozen blaster muzzles pointed at him, it didn't show; from Tally's vantage, he could feel-- something, like a charge in the air. Like electricity; like the air before a lightning strike. It made his skin prickle, made all of his hair join that on the back of his neck in standing on end. He was about a second from speaking up, surrendering, anything to keep this from escalating any further, even if it ruined his squad's trust in him--

"Stand down!"

Anakin Skywalker's voice had an immediate effect on everyone but Maul; every troop there jerked their heads around and half of them instantly lowered their blasters.

Skywalker walked in, followed by Kenobi and the rest of the Blackbirds that had been on the Negotiator; the instant relief and grief on their faces was quickly taken over by the shock at the scene. Husker came behind all of them and stared apology at Tally through the crowd.

For Maul's part, he still hadn't moved to disengage. Sellers was frozen with his hands out to his sides. "General, this-- officer," and that sounded like quite an insult in that tone, "has acted completely in defiance of medical orders as well as protocol."

"Give him his men," Skywalker didn't come close to Maul, but stood parallel to him, jaw set in a grim line and eyes hard. "Both of them. Then they're leaving."

Sellers eyes bugged. "General Skywalker, this--"

"I'm not arguing this. Give the lieutenant his troops." Skywalker turned to the security forces, ordering, "Disengage and get out of here. Orderlies, belay any further orders in regards to the Blackbirds and get back to your own business."
For their part, they did, looking confused and uncomfortable in some part, but mostly relieved; Tally's hands were freed, and Shiv's, and Shiv was given back his deeces and the other half of Maul's saberstaff.

"That unit in the morgue--" Sellers started.

"His name--" Maul growled back, teeth flashing, but even he didn't get the last word.

"--is Rabbit," Skywalker finished. It was the first time Maul looked away from Sellers; he shot a startled look over at Skywalker. But despite looking like he wanted nothing more than to grab his own saber off his belt, Skywalker kept his hand resolutely, notably and openly away from it and finished, "You heard me, Doctor. I'm not debating, I'm telling you. And then you and I are going to have a little talk about future protocol when it comes to making unilateral decisions about another unit's officers when I'm unavailable for discussion about it. And I think it's time we discuss how bodies are handled, too, at least onboard this ship."

"Military code gives me that authority, and the Republic has already provided rules for how bodies are dealt with," Sellers said, mouth twisted. Even though it was clear he was outnumbered now, and outgunned.

"And your conscription ends in, I think, a month? Unless I have urgent need to keep you on," Skywalker answered, tone going deceptively casual.

If the Force were channeled through glaring, they would all be smoked by now. But Sellers just sneered back, then turned and gestured to the morgue. "Do as you will."

It was only then that Maul turned his saber off, then hung it back on his belt. By then, Kix stepped out of the morgue's doors and glanced at Tally with a subtle little nod.

"Castle and Rancor have Rabbit," Tally murmured. "I'm going to get Raze."

He was just turning away when he saw Skywalker scowl at Maul and say, almost under his breath, "Get off of my ship."

Even as he said it, though, he inclined his head in the barest of bows. The message was clear, outwith the tone: Respect, at least in this.

"Gladly," Maul handed right back, though he returned the gesture after a moment of clear surprise, before turning to limp out.

Tally went and put his bucket back on and picked Raze up to follow; in all of this heartbroken wreckage, somehow he was oddly proud. And really damned grateful for the feeling of Husker's hand on his shoulder as they walked out.

Maul had said nothing to him, when Obi-Wan had called him by rank in the medbay, wanting to get some kind of idea of what was going on.

Taking in the sight of his disheveled other-half had given Obi-Wan quite a jolt, as had finding out -- second-hand through Husker and in brief -- just how hurt Maul actually was under that dogged
determination. But there had been no time to contemplate anything, because apparently the Blackbirds were prepared to put themselves all in danger of being brought up on charges in order to get Rabbit's body. Obi-Wan didn't know if Anakin would have done anything had it not been Husker asking it of him; because it was Husker, though, Anakin had set his face and walked at a clip towards the medbay, long legs eating up real estate as he moved, forceful and intent.

After everything that had happened between Anakin and Maul, he was surprised by his own faith that Anakin would do the right thing, in regards to this. Even if it was the wrong thing, in terms of military decisions.

And Anakin did. And Obi-Wan was proud of him.

He followed after smoothing Sellers' ruffled feathers to some degree, using his diplomacy to explain how high stakes and stressful the battle had been for all of them, though he didn't know if it did any good. Still, he was quite prepared to intercept any reports Sellers' might have tried to make against the Blackbirds or his former padawan.

He didn't give it much time, though, because he wanted to talk to Maul before the Nest left the Resolute's hangar deck.

It was a decision he would look back on and regret, though eventually he would come to something like peace with it. But it would be a long time before then; before then, regret would reign.

Would it have changed things, had he waited until they could meet later? Or would it have only let things get worse?

Because Obi-Wan didn't even see it coming.

He arrived in time to see Kix hand Tally a crate packed with medical supplies -- bags of bacta, sealed boxes of medications, doubtless several other things -- and the moment where the two medics rested their brows together, looking almost identical in their harrowed exhaustion and mutual affection. He arrived in time to see Ahsoka move to go and talk to them, and Smarty stop her and hold gently onto her upper arms as she said, desperately, "I just want to--"

"I don't think now's the best time, Half-Pint," Smarty said, mouth trembling some.

Ahsoka nodded, face crumpling as she said back, "I am so, so sorry," the words cracking, her own tears flooding. "I'm so sorry," she said again, voice going sharper before she started sobbing.

Obi-Wan's eyes nearly welled again at that; through the Force, he could feel her grief and regret, and any lingering frustration he had over her refusal to retreat vanished there into forgiveness.

Force knew, he had his own part to own in all of this, including in her making the choices she had.

By then, Rabbit's stasis pod was in the Nest's cargo hold and Tango was up in the cockpit. Rancor was likely as not with his brother; Obi-Wan could sense him, too, his disbelief and misery, his anger and grief like a sharp edged obelisk, impossible to go around. He crept aboard feeling like an intruder; Maul was leaning against the bed in the medbay, and Obi-Wan didn't try to stop himself from moving over to him, and reaching out--

--only for Maul to pull away, unsteadily but firmly richting himself.

Obi-Wan froze and then asked, cautiously, "Darling?"

Maul just looked back at him, brow drawing up some. "You knew."
Even without any clarification, Obi-Wan grasped instantly that Maul wasn’t referring to him knowing about Felucia, or that Rabbit would die there, though he wasn’t sure exactly what Maul was saying. Only that it was an accusation, and a pointed one, though there was a note of aching bewilderment in it that made Obi-Wan’s throat thicken. "I-- I'm not sure what you mean."

Maul looked at him for another moment, then his gaze wandered some; he gave a half-shake of his head, then he said, "You put them all together, and then you put their lives into my hands. You just-- gave them to me. And you knew." He held out his left hand, fingers splayed, and looked down at it like he had literally been holding those lives, shaking his head again, voice breaking as he said, "And now I have to live with this."

It took a moment of mad scrambling on Obi-Wan's part to parse that out; all the while, he had to hold himself back from reaching out again, but finally he managed to piece together what Maul was trying to tell him.

When he did, his own battered heart cracked further.

You knew that I would love them.

It would take him a long time, to figure it all out. Whether he had been right, or wrong, or something in between that existed in the space where the best of intentions met hard reality. For now, though, he couldn’t; could only look at and own his part in all of this, whatever his intentions.

"I didn't know--" Obi-Wan felt his breath catch, but he made himself finish, "But I had hoped."

Maul was looking at him again, then he said, tight and miserable, as if the confirmation was betrayal itself, "I need to get away from you."

Obi-Wan could have -- wanted to -- ask if this meant Maul was leaving him. Or had stopped loving him. He wanted to explain himself, explain everything, justify, defend. He wanted to say that he had never intended for the Blackbirds to get so far out of his reach as to end up in a situation like this; that he had only meant the best when he assembled them and then sprung them on Maul--

He wanted to beg.

I love you, he thought instead, tears burning down his cheeks as he nodded back in response to that, unable to force words out. If there was any fixing this, it couldn't be now; if there was any reconciling it, it couldn't be here, like this.

So, he did the only thing he could; the only thing that would hold true to those words, and the one thing he had been so certain that he never would do.

He let Maul go.

As he stood well back and watched the Nest rise off of the deck and out of the hangar, he felt Ahsoka's tear-damp face press against his arm; instead of watching the courier vanish, Obi-Wan closed his eyes tight and put his arms around her, and let her cry into his chest and made no effort to wipe away his own tears.
Ripples and Meteors

Chapter Summary

Ahsoka confides in Elten, Anakin decides to make a change on the Resolute, Brody and Tango struggle in their own quiet ways and Shiv manages to hold everyone together long enough to set course for somewhere they’ll be safe to recover and grieve.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Elten's blue photoreceptors lit up when Ahsoka came into her cabin.

Thus far, Elten's life had been more exciting than they might have anticipated it being. They still acted as Commander Tano's advanced lightsaber instructor, a job they took considerable pride in, but also more and more as her companion. They were involved with her occasional practical jokes. They were her confidant close at hand. Her sounding board and support. Many of her friends were deployed afar; sometimes communication could be spotty. In those moments where no one else was available, Elten provided that support; in fact, more recently -- since Ryloth -- they thought perhaps they were not a last resort, but an important part of her support network.

When Ahsoka had beamed at them and then proceeded to paint markings similar to hers in blue and white on their chassis, Elten was-- pleased. When she explained to General Skywalker that she had 'commissioned' them from mechanically-inclined friends, thereby allowing them free movement on the Resolute and anywhere she decided to take them -- carefully shielding their actual builder's name, despite repeated requests by General Skywalker about who had made them -- she had been so happy she had dragged them all over the ship, introducing them to troopers.

No such happiness accompanied their commander right now, though.

She passed by them without a word, passing her hand down their arm in greeting as organics were often wont to do, then moved to the 'fresher, where she spent exactly nine point six minutes. When she emerged, she looked no better; clean of Felucia's grime, but her face remained drawn.

"Are you injured, Commander?" Elten asked, even though scans revealed nothing worse than bruises.

She shook her head and moved to sit on the edge of her bunk; her mouth quivered as it had on Ryloth, as she had cradled the body of her dead trooper, and she rubbed against it as if that would make it stop.

Elten didn't usually push, but they had also learned that sometimes she needed-- nudged to talk, when she was in pain, even if it was not the kind of pain that appeared on scanners. "Did you suffer many losses?"

Ahsoka shook her head again, and then tucked her arms around her midsection; when Elten saw her shiver, they picked up the folded blanket at the end of the bed and draped it around her shoulders. It seemed to be something of a breaking point, because she pulled the blanket tighter and hitched a breath. "I screwed up, El. And I got-- I got someone killed. And I don't know-- I don't think-- I don't
think there's any way to fix that," she said, voice tight and rising in tone towards the end as her composure started shattering.

Elten could instantly glean that this was not the same as someone being lost due to the inevitability of casualties in a combat theater; they were just about to ask for clarification when a whistle sounded and General Skywalker's voice came over the shipwide comm.

"Listen up, people. I have an important announcement to make."

Anakin Skywalker didn't think of the Jedi -- their pyres and solemn caskets -- as he chewed over the whole situation.

He thought of his mother.

Slaves in the desert had little more than a hole dug in sand that kept slipping back in; to dig a grave required sacrifice. Water to wet the sand. Rare boards of wood to brace the sides up. Muscle and effort and time, to dig deep enough to keep the scavengers at bay. The rich could afford whatever arrangements they wanted, but for the slaves of Tatooine, all they had were each other and a desire to lay their own to rest. Long before his own mother was put into the ground, Anakin had stood by as a small boy with the small cup of water he and his mother could afford to spare, wetting the sand with solemnity and a recognition that what they were doing -- even so minuscule in the grand scheme of things -- was important.

He hadn't thought, before now, about what kind of funeral rites the men under his command might have. Or, more accurately, _should_ have.

He knew the words of remembrance; knew them in Mando'a and Basic. But somehow, in nearly a year of command, he hadn't thought that there might be some desire, some need, for _more_.

Husker's plea to him on the hangar deck had only been to keep the rest of his squad from being brought up on charges; that they were acting recklessly, against protocol, but from their hearts. In Husk's dark eyes, shining with unshed tears, Anakin could see himself -- a boy with a cup of water -- and stolen, borrowed time to help lay to rest another slave.

When they dug the grave for his mother, he stood with the slaves who had come out; he poured the water in the sand and helped dig himself, and at the time he had been burning resentment. But in the many months since then, and in all that had changed, he realized how much he had needed the chance to see to it himself. Even if he was still angry -- at the Jedi, at Tatooine, at everything -- he didn't regret his part in seeing her careworn body to its final rest.

The Blackbirds had no water, so they put their lives on the line instead; the chance of charges being brought up on them, the chance of decommissioning or reconditioning, the chance that they would lose what little freedom they already had. All sacrifice. Even the kiffin' _Sith_ had seen what the Jedi didn't seem to. What Anakin hadn't thought to, before now; what he couldn't ignore, now that he had.

So, he got on the shipwide comm, once he had thought it all over.

Even if it was only a cup of water he had to give, it was important.
"Starting now, any trooper who wants a chance to mourn their fallen will be given that. I know that we've had to leave behind a lot of our dead on the battlefield, but if there is someone onboard the ship, in the morgue, who you want to visit to say goodbye to-- all you have to do is send a notice to your immediate commander and we'll make the time and space for you to do that. If you want to help prepare their bodies for cremation, you'll be allowed; if you want to bring them something to send them along with, gifts or small things to take with them as they go, you can. We can't offer burial as an option due to resources, but you'll be given a chance to mourn. To visit, to pray, to do whatever it is that helps you say goodbye.

"If you want to mourn someone who had to be left behind on the battlefield, you'll be given a chance to do that, too; anytime we come out of hyperspace, you'll be given a priority channel to inform batchmates, prior unit members, friends."

He paused there; he could feel, in the Force, in his heart, the weight of all of the living souls aboard the Resolute in that moment. Their surprise. Their sorrow. Their confusion.

From some, the tiniest sparks of hope.

"I'm sorry that it's taken us this long to get this right," he concluded. "Take care of your dead and yourselves however you need to. Skywalker out."

Now back aboard the Negotiator, Obi-Wan was still reeling; the shock of the whole situation hadn't hit him until he had left the Nest.

Before that, he had managed it; the grief was tempered by the necessities of duty, and while he certainly felt Rabbit's loss -- Rabbit, who would have left to join his SAR training unit in a day, who would be alive right now if not for the sake of ten minutes of air support, or Master Plo not asking for their assistance, or Obi-Wan seeing the trap for what it was, or all of them not encouraging Ahsoka to be so bold by citing the importance of Felucia -- he had long become hardened to these inevitable losses. He had lost troops, many times, even trying as hard as he could to keep them alive. He had felt Rabbit's loss, keenly, but only as a particularly sharp point of devastation amidst the background of grief that he already lived within.

He sat in his quarters as they were finishing up readying to return to the Core, the last ships transferring personnel in the landing pattern. The Council had ordered them back for both resupply and repairs; both battlegroups, the 501st and the 212th. He knew Ahsoka would have to face the Council; Rabbit wouldn't matter to them, only her refusal to retreat when told, and Obi-Wan -- and Anakin -- would have to explain their part in fostering that choice, even if it had proven to be the wrong one.

He sat in his quarters--

His. Not theirs. Even though some of Maul's clothes were still in the drawers. Even with a fine selection of their common stock of tea. Even with the small things still present that had made these quarters shared.

Even as Obi-Wan sat on the bed and rubbed his thumb against the shells from Iloh, wondering if Maul had intended to leave them; if, by leaving them, Maul had also left Obi-Wan.
The thought hurt so much he nearly screamed, before forcing himself to take a few slow, deep breaths. In. Out. Each one aching, but the pressure lifting a little, enough to control it.

Obi-Wan hadn't honestly considered, not really, what would happen if one of the Blackbirds died. Not when he assembled them. Not when he maneuvered Maul into leading them. Not even when they had faced danger over and over. Somehow, they had seemed untouchable in that regard; Obi-Wan had thought, not without worry, that if any of them ended up killed in action it would be his own darling, not because Maul was reckless, but because he had so little concern for his own life. The eternal paradox of Maul; his ability to stubbornly endure and survive even the worst physical and psychological insults, and his equal ability to throw himself into whatever cause he deemed his, heedless of the costs.

Leadership had given Obi-Wan some vague distance from his 212th, numbering hundreds; his command of the Third System Army, numbering hundreds of thousands. There was no way to get close to everyone. He cultivated the best relationships he could with them, but no matter what he did, the numbers eventually, inevitably, blurred together. The losses. He had known Rabbit's name and things about him, had cared for him, had even loved him in the way a distant, proud uncle might; even then, his main grief before now for Rabbit's loss was the pain the rest of the squad felt and would feel, being so closely knit.

He hadn't really considered what it would do to them, to lose someone, because he never thought they would. And now, they had.

"I need to get away from you."

Obi-Wan breathed again. In. Out. The pain a solid fist in his chest, squeezing his torn-up heart.

I love you, he thought again, teeth locked together around the heartbreak.

When he finally got it under control again, he assigned the squad leave; three weeks, the longest time he could get away with until the Senate passed the Military Leave Act that Bail had been slowly working through the awful grinding gears of the Republic's bureaucracy. At least that one, unlike anything giving the clones agency and rights, had a strong chance of passing since it was backed up by medical personnel to the highest chain of command and had managed to attract the attention of budget hawks who were able to grasp that it was cheaper to rest the men than replace them.

Then he sat for another several minutes, gathering his thoughts of all he had to do -- all he should do -- before comming Croft.

"Hello, Taliesin," he said; he had no choice but to leave a message, since Croft was listed as 'unavailable' at the moment. "I've attached the after-action report on Felucia to this message; due to what happened there, I'm going to assign the Blackbirds to your command for the time being. I don't intend for them to become enmeshed in the 332nd, but given events, I think some distance from the 212th will give them a chance to find their feet again." He paused there, rubbing over his beard, trying to look considerably more together than he felt. "I've given them fifteen days of leave; both Maul and Raze were injured in battle, and you'll have to discuss their duty-readiness with their medic Tally after their leave is up. They're coming back to the Core, so you should be able to rendezvous with them there."

He wished he knew how to tell Croft to be gentle with them; he knew Croft was a good man, who took care with the lives of his troops, but Obi-Wan didn't know him quite as well as Ahsoka or Shaak Ti did. Nonetheless, Obi-Wan had originally given Croft the opportunity to assign the Blackbirds because he was special operations, but also because he was known for being far more careful with his men than some others were. Obi-Wan had to hope that would hold.
"They lost Rabbit on Felucia. The squad managed to save ninety-four troopers that otherwise would have been abandoned -- Rabbit and Raze had saved thirty-two alone from being trapped under rubble in a bunker -- but Rabbit was killed in the effort due to a delay in air support. I'd appreciate it if you would bear that in mind when crafting any assignments in the immediate future. And-- I know you're close to Ahsoka; I imagine she could use a sympathetic ear right now."

He didn't know what else to say. He had some mild worry that Croft's affection for Ahsoka might lead to him putting pressure on the Blackbirds to absolve her of her part in their loss, but he thought likely the young man might find a balance there, between being a general of his own troops and all that came with measuring those losses, and being her friend.

"Thank you for taking care of them. I'll be in touch if you need any further input. Kenobi out."

Unaware of all of that -- of Skywalker's decision to change things at least on the Resolute, of Kenobi withdrawing from them -- Brody's first dead drop to Radio Anarchy wasn't intelligence on sentients-rights violations or pointing them in the direction of slaves needing rescued.

It was personal.

"Rabbit died this morning," he recorded, so it could go out before the Nest had clearance to go into hyperspace, sitting hunched in the 'fresher where no one could hear him say the words. They sounded dazed and distant even to him; words in static, half-unreal. The reality of the stasis pod in the cargo bay too much to look at yet. "Killed in action, on a rescue mission. I know-- I thought Eogan would want to know. To hear it from one of us. And that you might want to know, too, Jak. And Sal. Uh-- that's all." His hands shook around his datapad. "I don't know what else to say."

It would be six hours before Eogan Truax heard the message on Llanic. When a sorrowful Jak played it for him, he collapsed into a chair in disbelief; it was only weeks ago that the same kid had kissed him out of nowhere, and the sheer kriffin' awful of the whole thing wasn't lost on him in the least. For Rabbit, a bright, goofy kid who liked rescuing people. For the Blackbirds. Kriff, for Maul, because how much he loved them was clear; maybe even, after knowing Maul on Cog Hive Seven, more clear to Eogan than most.

He sent back a well-encrypted, multi- relayed message (with Jak's help) and even to him it didn't seem like enough, but it was what they had. He wasn't sure when they would get it, but he sent it anyway.

*I'm so sorry. If you need me -- or us -- we're here. We'll help in any way we can. He had paused there, then added, I'd tell you to be strong, stay tough, but that's banthashit, so just take care of yourselves as best you can, or find a way to us and we'll help take care of you as best we can. -- Eogan.*

"Frip," Sal had cussed, when he heard the message, before turning away to hide the tears of anger and frustration and grief; for another brother gone, one of thousands who died every single damned day.
Back in the moment, though, onboard the Nest in the cockpit, Tango was staring at the notifications blinking on his own datapad, where it was in the holder he'd installed for it so it would be in easy reach while he flew. He'd just uploaded a new story in the wee hours of morning -- fluffy stuff -- and before Plo Koon had called them in to help with Felucia, he'd been looking forward to seeing the responses to it. Something he wrote on Omereth; Khameir and Tanner, slipping off to neck on a beach while their unit was on leave, still in their early relationship and feeling their way through things.

It might as well have been a thousand years ago. It couldn't have been hours.

It all seemed so incredibly, kriffin' meaningless now. Stupid. Pointless. What the hell had even made him think something like telling stories mattered, when things like this happened? The empty chair next to him formed a black hole, sucking away any light or heat or sound; he still didn't move, because the stripping away of those things was justified.

Should he have broken off from the Wolf Pack and gone back to the base more quickly? The thought hadn't even occurred in that moment, but should he have? Would he have been able to keep them engaged? He would have been outnumbered, but could he have saved Rabbit?

Those questions only came in fragments, dull and dazed and sick-hearted. The notifications kept on blinking. He didn't have it in him to even try to read them; when he did pick up his datapad, he just typed into the 'Rough Day' thread on the forum: My brother was alive this morning. And now he's gone.

He wasn't sure why he did that. Maybe so that people wouldn't think he was ignoring them by not responding to their feedback. Even if things like stories seemed suddenly-- stupid, silly, pointless, he didn't want anyone to feel like they were being dismissed, or their time to share their thoughts wasn't appreciated. Tango just-- couldn't, right now.

Couldn't think. Couldn't stop feeling cold. Couldn't-- anything.

That chair next to him had been Rabbit's.

He swiped the notifications off the screen and shut the datapad down into stand-by and stared out into space instead, shivering occasionally from the cold that had to be more in his mind than in reality, the only warm thing the tears on his face before they cooled, too.

For Castle, much like Tango, all the urgency of the initial decision to help with Felucia, the battle, the retreat, the half-mad plan to get Rabbit's body back had fled into a kind of empty daze. Even for him, nothing looked the same; the Nest, which he had given sweat and expertise to turn into a home, no longer felt like one, and he didn't know how to make it do that. Instead, it felt like some shade off reality, like a surreal tomb instead of a comfortable space.

He was exhausted, but he didn't want to try to sleep. He helped Husker move the bed from the guest room to the medbay at Tally's request, unable to even make himself look at the stasis pod as he did, then he wandered back up to their common room, sitting at the table for awhile. He knew he was probably hungry and thirsty, but he couldn't really feel that, either.
He had no idea how long he sat there in the quiet; he was aware that it was a long time only when Husker collapsed across from him, and Shiv and Tally fell into their spots at the table. It was enough to spark awareness, anyway.

They were all stripped to their blacks; Castle only realized there that he had been sitting around in his full armor, still with Rabbit's blood crusted to spots. He stood up and took it off, dropping it beside his chair, then sinking down again.

It was only after another minute of breath-catching that Shiv said, "All right, we need to come up with a plan."

The idea of trying to think right now seemed more cruelty than practicality, but Castle knew that it was really necessity. They had a broken squad, two hurt people, a giant wound torn into them and the body of their little brother in the damned cargo hold. They couldn't sit here forever.

He was frankly surprised that he had any tears left, but just the mental recounting of that list made them well.

"We need to figure out what to do with Rabbit," Husker rasped, sounding beaten. He was sitting with his head back and eyes closed.

"We do." Shiv sounded pretty together by contrast, which Castle wondered at; of all of them, Castle thought he'd be a wreck right now, seeing another batcher lose their twin like he'd lost his, bringing up terrible memories. But instead of getting lost in that trauma, he'd been on the ball this whole time; not perfectly, and not perfectly rationally, but a reliable and effective presence. "We need to figure that out, and we need to make sure Maul and Raze are cared for, and we need to make sure Rancor has support. We have three weeks leave, we need a landing place, and after that, apparently Croft is going to be doing all our handling."

"I need to fix the Lieu's ankle," Castle said, after a moment, kicking his brain into gear. "With what I got here, though, it's gonna probably never be quite right again. I can fix that housing, but I don't have the materials or precision tools to return it to stock." He knew this wasn't gonna be popular, but he still had to say it, so he did: "Best bet for a proper repair that won't leave that joint unstable or stiff would be takin' him back to the Temple, where they can do a full repair and maintenance cycle based on the original blueprints."

"Hell no," Tally snapped back, bristling. "They're gonna take one look at him and remove him from command. And they wouldn't even be wrong to do that right now, but if we want a living lieutenant and not one shattered beyond recovery, giving him up to the Jedi is the last thing we want to do."

Castle knew better than to take that personally. He didn't want to stick Maul around the people who had literally booby-trapped his prosthesis against him, either. So, he just nodded back.

"I'm sorry," Tally said, after a moment, resting his face in his hands and looking whipped and exhausted. "I shouldn't have taken that tone, that's not fair."

"It's okay. I've gotten good at interpreting 'overwrought medic' since Llanic," Castle said back, heaving out a breath and managing about an eighth of a smile. "What I'm saying is that I don't have the right tools for the repair here. If we can find somewhere with precision machining equipment, I can do a much better job."

Tally nodded back at that, but it was Shiv who spoke next, looking at the medic not unkindly as he said, "How long are you planning on body-swerving the bad news?"
"Until I don't feel like screaming and grabbing a deece and committing multiple murders," Tally answered, clearly gritting his teeth from behind his hands. The raw sound of pain in his voice was impossible to ignore, and Castle glanced over at Shiv, who pressed his mouth into a rueful line.

"C'mon, brother. The sooner we know, the sooner we can figure out where the hell we can go," Shiv said, obviously bracing himself.

Tally didn't say anything right away, though, just sat still. Looked like he was gathering his thoughts, as well as he could. But finally, he started. "Raze is probably going to be okay and make a full recovery, even though this is all stressful as hell and the last thing he needs is stress. But provided he doesn't take any more blows to the head like that one, and stays on light duty for about four or five weeks -- after our three week leave is over -- he shouldn't suffer any permanent effects from it. The best thing we can do for him right now is just keep him quietly resting and comfortable; I've got Misty in there curled up with him in his bunk just so he's not alone."

That was a relief; Felucia had already done permanent, irrevocable damage to the Blackbirds. It didn't need to do any more.

But even Castle knew that the real monster lurking in the corner of the room was what their L-T was facing. Like Shiv, he braced himself, waiting to see what the verdict was there.

"Maul's never going to be able to recover to a pre-Felucia state," Tally said, bluntly, after another moment of collecting himself. "I'm not talking psychologically, either; I'm saying that between the burns, the shock, the smoke inhalation, the systemic inflammation, the metabolic changes provoked by the burns and how that compounds old damage from his being cut in half and who knows what abuse prior to that, and his decision to leave the Resolute's medbay and push himself through a rebellion, he did real, permanent damage to himself. Best case scenario -- and that's if nothing else happens to him and I can manage the after effects of this injury -- is that he makes it out of this with about forty percent of his kidney function and his hearts can heal over time. More realistically, we're looking at thirty to thirty-five percent and the likelihood of him needing mechanical replacements within the next few years, thanks to the amount of stress he's constantly under and the high possibility of him throwing himself headlong into dangerous situations."

Castle didn't know anatomy like he knew mechanics, but those were some pretty scary numbers anyway. Shiv, meanwhile, looked genuinely green around the gills, though after a few seconds, he nodded slowly. "What if he'd stayed in the medbay?"

"If he had, and there was a proper execution of transfer of care? Most of that would have been mitigated. Kix and I did a good job partially stabilizing him, and as shitty as the attitudes were on the Resolute, they were doing a good job medically with resuscitation." Tally's mouth quivered briefly, then went straight again. "Burns are kriffin' nasty. It's not just what they do to flesh, it's the whole body's reaction to them, and mitigating that is something you need to do quickly and steadily, because once you miss a mark, there's no going back to hit it later. And because he pulled an escape and then pushed on, he missed a bunch of them. And for him, thirty percent kidney function isn't as bad as it would be for you or me, because he only has half a body to filter, but it's still not good."

"That's a lot of bad," Husker said, speaking up for the first time in awhile, voice heavy.

"Yeah." Tally scrubbed at his face and then dropped his hands. "Even bacta, even the best medical care in the galaxy, isn't going to undo this. The best I can do is keep him as stable as possible until he recovers as much as he can, and that's frankly like me juggling seven or eight knives in the air every moment and trying not to drop any or cut my fingers off in the process."

"And burnin' yourself to ash to do it, Castle thought, though he didn't say it.
"You need backup. Castle needs precision equipment. We need a safe, stress-free landing place. We need to figure out how to see to Rabbit's body." Shiv tapped his finger on the table as he ticked those off. "We have three weeks."

"Where are we gonna go?" Castle asked. Because Radio Anarchy had some resources and a medic, but Llanic wasn't exactly a hub for high-end hospitals. Corellia had been nice as a vacation spot, but unless Shiv had his girlfriend pull a lot of strings--

"Alderaan." Tally folded his arms on the table. "If there's anyone in this galaxy right now who has both the power and the desire to help -- and protect -- Maul, and who has the power to hopefully help us too, it'll be Bail Organa."

Shiv nodded back at that. "I was gonna say, that would be the first, best choice we've got available to us."

Tango set the course for Alderaan when they told him to, and jumped them to hyperspace with a quick, cursory transmission to the Negotiator that informed them they were outbound Coreward.

Shiv and Tally had been the ones to put in that call to the Senator; Tally had access to Organa's private comm code and so they were able to get him on the line fairly quickly by marking the transmission urgent. By then, the day was winding to a close and they were not too far off from the first day they would have to face without Rabbit; a journey of four of them to Alderaan from their position in their immediate future.

"Yes, absolutely, come to Alderaan," Organa had said, after listening to everything they had to tell him. The worry on his face was clear; the grief and the love just as much so, even with the transmission occasionally fuzzing out due to distance. It was as they were talking that Shiv realized how it was that Maul had come to adore the man; the way Organa listened, intently and seriously, as if they were fully people -- not soldiers, not clones, but people against a wall and suffering -- made it obvious. The way he wore his heart on his sleeve for people he trusted. After the Jedi and everything else, it was no wonder that being looked at like he was a whole person and not just a label or a prisoner was enough to permanently win Maul's regard. It certainly would have won Shiv's, if Organa hadn't already had it.

Even Tally wasn't unaffected by it. He was frazzled -- understandably so -- by the delicate balancing act he had to perform in order to keep Maul on the road to recovery and not lose him off the sides of it, but something about Organa's demeanor seemed to settle him down a bit.

"I actually have a doctor I've been talking with that you can consult with when you get here," Organa said, after he'd told them to come to Alderaan, after Tally had rambled on about the medical hurdles Maul was facing over the next weeks and months. "Someone I think you'll like, and for that matter, someone who won't treat you like you're just a medic. I can't go into any more details, but there's a lot he can do to help. And you'll have the medical wing of the palace at your disposal, too."

Tally had nodded back and rested his hands on the table, dropping his head, voice rough. "Thank you, sir."
"Just Bail, Tally. I don't like it when friends call me senator or sir, and you're probably closer to family anyway." Bail pressed a thin smile. "Hang in there, get to Alderaan, and my wife and I will make sure all of you get a chance to rest and recover. And if you need help figuring out the best way to say goodbye to Rabbit, we-- we definitely know grief, we can help there, too."

They signed off with Organa-- Bail, and once they were in hyperspace, they just stood around the table. Breathing, or trying to.

They needed to tell Rancor the plan, so far, and try to encourage him to go and rest; to eat and care for himself. And they needed to try to take care of themselves, as well, as hard as that felt right now.

Still, Shiv took a moment and eyed his brother; Tally was still standing with his head bowed, a faint tremble across his shoulders. Holding himself up and together and he'd been doing that now since this whole nightmare had started.

"C'mere," Shiv said, though he didn't wait for Tally to actually listen to him; he just got an arm and then tugged Tally in for a hug, cradling the back of his head despite a half-muffled protest into his shoulder that quickly dissolved into sobs, the kind that came from so deep that there was no standing through them.

And when they ended up sitting on the floor, Shiv just held him there, too, nose in his hair and murmuring reassurances softly.

From there, Shiv just kept going.

He was tired like everyone else, he knew he was due a long breakdown at some point, but it didn't feel urgent. Instead, he drew strength from holding the squad, tattered as they were, together in some kind of shape. He chased each one to get a shower and change into clean clothes; he reached and touched in a way he hadn't done since before Flanker was gone. A shoulder-brush. A hair-pet. The only one he didn't approach yet was Rancor, and that was because he knew that Rancor wouldn't want touched or comforted right now; that only one set of arms would feel right, and those were the ones that would never close around him again. So, Shiv got sleep tabs for Brody and Misty and Smarty, all of whom were eating themselves alive with guilt that they hadn't been there on the Resolute; he set up a watch for people to take turns minding the autopilot so Tango would be able to get some sleep, and he took a couple of bean chairs out of the bunk room to the medbay so that Tally would have somewhere comfortable to rest, as soon as he could be convinced to.

Once everyone else was clean and he'd dashed through his own shower, he handed out some meal packs and pushed and prodded Tally into leaving Maul alone long enough to shower and eat, and steeled himself for talking with Rancor.

Rancor was sitting in the cargo hold with his back to the stasis pod that held his brother, face so haggard he looked twice his age. His armor was piled beside him, and he had his arms tucked around himself.

And Shiv got it. The silence; the forever of it. The way that was too much to bear. The way everything was going to be measured, now, against a fixed moment in time.

"You need to get a shower and something to eat," he said quietly, even though he was pretty sure
that Rancor wouldn't want a damn thing to do with either of those.

"No." The single word fell like lead, flat and heavy.

There wasn't much point in arguing with it, either. Shiv couldn't force him to take care of himself, and didn't think it would do any good if he tried; right now, it wasn't medically dangerous and the big thing Shiv worried about was the notion that Rancor could decide to follow his twin into whatever they had that passed for an afterlife, before he could walk too far down the road and away. He didn't think that was likely exactly, but he remembered how incredibly seductive that thought was, when his loss of Flanker was a fresh, new and bleeding wound, torn right through the center of his very soul.

"I remember, you know," he said, at length, working his jaw to try to keep the well of heartbreak under control before continuing. "Every-- step felt like I was betraying him. Everything was measured by it. 'This is the first day without him.' And, 'this is the first meal without him.' And-- how it felt like the whole galaxy stopped making sense and everything hurt, no matter how stupid or insignificant it was. Even on Bravo 984, I was thinking, 'I gotta tell Flanker--'

The words hit home; Rancor's shoulders shook and fresh tears ran down his face, though his expression was one of misery and anger. He didn't look over, but his mouth twisted into a snarl. "If you're gonna tell me to just keep going, that's what he'd want, kriff you."

"No." Mag, well-intentioned as he was, had used those words on Shiv. They were caring and kind, and they were also kriffin' horrible to hear when all he wanted was to scream, because even breathing hurt too much. "I won't tell you that. You just had your life torn in half, there's no banthashit platitude in the galaxy that fixes that. Just-- we love you. Try-- try not to forget that. I know it's not the same, but it's something."

"Leave me alone," Rancor said back, after a few heartbeats, choked. "Leave me the kriff alone."

Shiv took a slow breath, then nodded. "We're headed for Alderaan. We'll be there in four days. I'll be back to check on you in the morning."

Then he turned around and left, and leaned against the door after it closed again and tipped his head back and bared his teeth at the galaxy, a moment's expression of pain, before moving across the hallway to the medbay.

Maul was on the bed brought over from the guest room in the cargo hold, stripped down to sleep pants and with an elastic bandage around his metal ankle to keep it still and from being damaged worse, like it was a real flesh-and-blood joint. Aside that, he had the wrist monitor on and several other remote tabs stuck to his skin, a fresh IV and an O2 mask lying on his chest close to his face, though not on it; Shiv just stood for a long several moments looking at him, taking in the smoky-colored synth-skin covering his burned arm and the shine of bacta on the side of his head, and tried to calm the awful feeling in his gut that all the worst damage was invisible but real. And permanent.

As if Maul hadn't already taken enough beatings in his life.

"Antibiotics, saline, electrolytes. And I've got him on morphine," Tally said, standing next to Shiv and holding a cup of caf, voice still rough from earlier. "That nerve block wore off awhile ago and even though he didn't say anything, he was clearly hurting pretty bad."

Shiv nodded back at that, heart heavy, then asked something that had occurred to him when they were talking earlier. "Are you mad at him?"
Tally's mouth twisted into a frown, as he looked over the zabra k. "I was. Now I'm just worried sick about him." He shook his head, then. "It doesn't do any good to be mad at Maul. You don't get mad at meteors for burning themselves up in the atmosphere."

Shiv was about to ask what provoked that comparison, but after a few moments thought with his mouth hanging open on the edge of it, he realized how accurate that really was. It wasn't a condemnation. It was just the fact of living with and loving someone who had been raised to be a weapon and who hadn't yet learned, quite, how not to value themselves by that scale anymore.

"Can I stay here?" he asked, instead.

Tally looked over at that, something going soft in his eyes. "Yeah, of course."

It didn't take them long to shift Maul over to make room on the bed; even as they did, Shiv appreciated the thought behind Tally having the bed put against the wall, something for Maul to put his back against if he needed to feel safer, even if it made Tally's job a bit harder. The bed itself wasn't any bigger than their bunks were, but there was room enough for Shiv, and he crawled in next to Maul and pulled the blanket up over them both.

Tally dimmed the lights; even then, Shiv didn't know if he'd be able to fall asleep, but the last thing he felt on this -- the second most horrible, devastating day of his life -- was Tally kissing the side of his head and murmuring, "I'm proud of you, brother. Rest as well as you can."

_I love you, too_, he thought back, before letting his eyes fall closed.

Chapter End Notes

I linked it inline in the text, but if you didn't click on it, the ever lovely B_Radley wrote Croft's reaction to Kenobi's message. You can find that [here](#). Please consider leaving a comment there. <3 Thank you. (And thank you, B, for writing for me.)
Down by the Deadwood, Part 1

Chapter Summary

No one's in good shape, but landing on Alderaan is the first step back towards something like it.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for suicide ideation, and for Bail talking about Bre's last miscarriage.
<3 Thanks, shadowmaat, for the hand-holding through this, and for everyone being patient waiting for it.

The only thing that stopped him from swallowing a blaster bolt was that he had to take care of his brother for a little bit longer.

The only time Rancor left the cargo hold was to use the 'fresher; that, he did after making sure no one else was moving around that he would have to talk to. For four days, he sat witness to the silent stasis pod; his silent brother inside of it, cold and preserved, only a small window over his face showing him in there. They hadn't even cleaned the blood and soot away in the morgue. Even then, eyes closed, he looked like he could just be asleep.

Rancor thought about dying. He drifted into a half-sleep sometimes and woke up panting and shaking and reaching for a body that was right now encased in cold metal; reaching for the warm, familiar arms that he had known all his life and finding nothing there. He thought about dying and he tried to meditate, just in case Rabbit was lost in the Force, but all he could hear was the wild, circular nature of his own thoughts.

He went over it. He couldn't help it. He pictured the bombing of the base, and his brother dying painfully, and since no one had told him yet how it had happened, his mind threw at him every horror it could. The pain and the confusion.

Did you cry for me? he asked his twin, in his mind, sitting and gnawing his lip.

Did you think I was ignoring you when you did?

It wasn't just that, either. It was every other thing, too.

Why did I wish you'd never fall in love again?

Why did you think I'd be mad you wanted to go to that SAR training?

The worst: Is this my fault?

Shiv had come back and checked on him, and Rancor, stewing in the hot boil of misery and anger, snapped at him every time. He ignored the others who also came to try to talk, shutting them out, but he snapped at Shiv. It wasn't even that he meant to, but he couldn't stand the look in Shiv's eyes, that
understanding look. Every time. Patience and understanding. He came back and left food bars and bottles of water and tried to tell Rancor to at least lay down, to drink and eat and rest, and it was only when Rancor lashed out with the meanest thing he could think of that Shiv finally quit.

"Just because you replaced your twin doesn't mean I'm ready to leave mine behind!"

It was the first time that the look on Shiv's face wasn't patient or understanding. He looked like he'd been shot, recoiling a little in a flinch, and then he looked deeply sad, and then he left and didn't come back again.

Rancor was relieved to be alone. And then he was so ashamed he wanted to shoot himself all over again.

That was his four days, as exhaustion weighed more heavily and he sat, stinking and starving and only conceding to drink the water left; as he looped over it until his thoughts kept falling apart into fragments, and ignoring the rest of his brothers. That was his four days; going, *This is the first-- and Why? and What do I do without you?* Being unable to move, to let the stasis pod out of sight, because he could see Rabbit everywhere, all over this ship, all over them, and if he lost sight of the reality, he might forget and have to live through this suffering again and again.

It only ended, if one could call it that, not long before they were due to land on Alderaan.

"We lost him, too," Tally said, standing in the door. Out of the corner of Rancor's eye, he looked exhausted, but his tone was both quiet and pointed. "We loved him, too. I know it's not the same as being his batcher, Rancor, but that doesn't make it less real."

Rancor hadn't said anything to anyone aside from Shiv, but he had to bite his tongue, shoulders tensing. *I don't need a damned lecture.*

"I get why you're lashing out, but maybe you should think before you put any more scars on these people who loved him and who love you," Tally said, "just in case something happens to them before you get a chance to see those heal."

When the door slid closed behind him, Rancor bit his fist and screamed into it and didn't stop until he lost his voice and his knuckles were bloody.

Maul's four days were spent in fragments; four days, four years. Four lifetimes, maybe. He burned and froze and drifted; Hypori, the Temple. Felucia. Sometimes further; sometimes Mustafar, sometimes Orsis. Felucia, again; Rabbit next to him, staring at him with wide dark eyes, ash and blood.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," he tried to say, tried to reach over with the arm that wasn't cracking to pieces, thinking that if he could just reach out, he could reach back in time and bring Rabbit into the present with him and

He was floating in bacta, held immobile, time skipping like a stone across a lake; through the thick fluid, the sick, dazed jolt of seeing his truncated body over and over, new shock and horror each time, and
Hypori, a phantom sear in a leg he no longer had, infection ravaging his half-starved body, abandoned by his Master and

"This wasn't supposed to happen." It was a plea, and

"Maul, c'mon, come back."

Rabbit's face wavered; Shiv was looking back at him, frowning. The vertigo was too bad to keep his eyes open, though, so he closed them again and tried to remember where and when he was. "I have to get Rabbit," he mumbled, shivering against the pervasive chill that did nothing for the fact that he was burning alive.

"You did. We did." Shiv's voice was pitched soft; still, it was an anchor. A hand over the edge, holding on. "We'll be on Alderaan soon."

"No, in time, I have to get him," Maul insisted, because he thought he could if he could just grab hold next time he saw Rabbit there; then he could make things right again, he could fix time to before. "You have to let me go so I can get him."

"I can't, I'm sorry."

There was such a note of sorrow in Shiv's voice that it physically hurt to hear it; to exist in pain was nothing new, but not like this. Maul shook his head against the pillow; the scrape of his horns against the fabric seemed unbearably loud, and he tried to figure out what he needed to say to get Shiv to just-- just let him--

Let him what?

For a moment, some state almost like lucidity fell over him, long enough for him to open his eyes again; he was on the Nest in the medbay, and Shiv was with him, and Tally was close by. And Rabbit's body was in the cargo hold. He was cold and everything hurt, everything felt wrong.

And there was no going back in time to fix this.

Maul wasn't sure whether the feeling of hopeless, aching defeat was actually better than feverish, desperate delusion.

"I know," Shiv said, quietly, brushing fingers against his brow and face.

"I don't know what to do," Maul said back, trying to breathe through it, still feeling like he was drowning. Pathetic, the static-hiss said in his mind; also nothing new, but it had been a long time since he was so ready to agree with it. He had not kept them all alive, as he had said he would try to do (now, that declaration seemed to be unforgivable hubris), and he couldn't figure out how to take care of Rancor, as he had promised Rabbit, and he couldn't seem to force his body out of the weakness that had overtaken it; if he could do that, he could at least move. Even if he didn't know where, or why, or anything else.

What good was he, if he couldn't do any of that?

"Keep breathing." Shiv leaned over and pressed their brows together; his skin felt cool, though damp from sweat, the bite of the scent alive and sharp in the air, familiar. "Just that, right now. Keep breathing, even when you don't want to."

Of all of them, Shiv had to know; still, even something so simple as drawing air in, releasing it, seemed both too much and not enough. It accomplished nothing more than keeping him alive. And it
seemed somehow horribly unfair that Rabbit no longer could.

Maul tried to think of how to say that, but something washed from his arm to the rest of him and he fell back under the fog before he could come up with any of the words, and missed Tally saying they were two hours from landing.

Stepping off of the ramp onto the landing platform -- the royal landing platform, at the palace in Aldera -- into Alderaan in late spring, almost to summer, was like stepping into some sideways dimension. The uniform feel of real gravity underfoot. The smell of the air, like rain and wildflowers; like green, like life. Tally's knees trembled, though he couldn't tell if it was fatigue or relief or something else, something more nebulous.

They looked like refugees, compared to Bail and Breha Organa and the royal entourage. Clean, but diminished. None of the Blackbirds who came off the ramp had it in them to square their shoulders; all of them looked equally dazed and lost, from Husker to Tango, heedless of age and experience. Tally wished he had anything left in him to do something about it; to take care of his brothers, maybe even to take care of himself, but he honestly didn't.

He hadn't slept more than a handful of times over the past four days, and when he did, it was in two hour blocks -- at best -- and he had known he was going to pay for it later, but he didn't exactly have a bunch of choices. So, he drank caf and took stims and felt helpless and tried to help anyway. Some of that was making sure Raze was recovering (he was), but most of it was fighting a one-and-a-half handed battle to keep Maul something like stable (he only occasionally was), and sometimes Tally managed to eat and shower, though he wasn't sure how often. Almost all of his brainspace was dedicated to calculating odds and dosages and timing; in between those things, he spent time panicking about how unqualified he felt right now.

He'd been trained to triage. To do minor, emergency surgery. To buy people a little time so a real doctor could fix them later.

As badly as he wanted to be that real doctor, the past four days had shaken him up so much that he was nearly ready to give that dream up and retreat back to bacta and triage and letting someone else practice the real kind of medicine, wiping his hands of the whole business of healing and science beyond the rudimentary. That was how rattled his confidence had gotten.

The only good thing to be said about deep or extensive burns was that a body's response to it was fairly uniform for humans, zabraks and hybrids thereof, at least in terms of predictability. First came the crash -- the shock, the massive drop in cardiac output, the falling blood pressure, the struggle to get enough oxygen -- and that was often where people died. Tally was trained for that part; stalling the crash, be it on the field or in triage. Or, at least, slowing it down. And pain management, because leaving it unaddressed meant worse long-term outcomes.

But after the crash came the ricochet, and Tally definitely wasn't trained for that. The body didn't just compensate, it went into overdrive; resting metabolic rate spiked up, and it stayed up; that wouldn't resolve for months, likely. The inflammatory response went from local to systemic; sometimes because of an infection, but sometimes just because the insult was that severe. (Tally had done cultures, this wasn't sepsis, but the fact Maul had already survived that -- back at the Temple, when he was cut in half -- probably compounded the immune reaction further anyway; bodies remembered
their suffering.) All that could be done for the inflammatory response was supportive care, too; if he tried to bring that inflammation down with steroids, the only thing he had access to, he'd send Maul into a hyperglycemic state that he was already flirting with, thanks to his body both baking itself and eating itself in an attempt to maintain that higher metabolic rate. He was burning so hot thanks to that and fever that Tally was on seizure watch.

It made that meteor comment too apt, in too many ways.

And on top of that, the inflammation was further damaging his already damaged organs, but not as badly as a runaway hyperglycemic event would. Even with bacta in the IV infusion, there was only slowing down the damage, not stopping it. At least like this, his liver would probably recover, eventually; his hearts, though, would take longer, and his kidneys definitely wouldn't ever. Because when Kenobi cut him in half, and Maul didn't die of it, he sustained permanent damage to what he had left; this just built on that. What hadn't been critical before was serious, if not critical yet, now.

Tally hadn't been kidding when he said he was juggling knives. Now that they were all in the air, he had no idea how to stop doing it.

As the bright sun shone down on them, refugees on a landing platform, and dark clouds gathered over the mountains in sharp, beautiful contrast, he tried to get his head together enough to make a report. Even not knowing who he was supposed to report it to; was Bail in charge? He opened his mouth as he stopped in front of the worried-looking man, swaying on his feet some, overwrought and overwhelmed, but not wanting to fail either of the people in his care right now; the next thing he knew, he was leaning against a broad chest and a pair of arms were holding him up.

Bail's voice sounded over his head, "Hey, Doc, over here."

"I'm okay," Tally tried to say, as he struggled to get his knees to lock and keep his feet under him.

"I can feel how fast your heart's beating, Tally," Bail said, kind of dryly, though he was gentle as he readjusted his grip and used one hand to steady Tally's head while a pair of cool, dry fingers pressed under his jaw, taking his pulse. "It's okay, you can stand down now."

Those words broke something in his chest and even as Tally went to deny it -- "I can't, I have to-- and Maul--" -- his eyes were burning; when he closed them, they refused to open, and it was only around there that he realized how hard he was shaking.

"I'm guessing you kept his records current," another voice said, someone old enough to hear it in their voice. "We'll take care of him while you sleep off the stim overdose, son."

There was some moment of pique there, some temptation to snap back that Tally was no one's 'son' - - unless one counted the machine that injected his embryo into the tube where it grew into him -- but then a hypo hissed against the side of his neck and he had exactly three seconds to realize that it was an antagonist to all the stims and two more seconds to hear Husk say, rough and worried, "Here, I'll carry him," and then he was gone.

Tally wasn't the only one who thought that the Blackbirds looked like refugees.

Bail could say with absolute confidence that he knew what refugees looked like. Beyond Alderaan
opening their world to take in those they could -- as many as their economy and infrastructure would allow, and not always to the delight of some of the Elder houses -- he had been arguing for their resettlement on other Core worlds, trying to name and shame and push. Beyond his seat in the Senate, he'd been on his own missions of mercy and occasionally espionage, pushing the limits of his own world's pacifist stances more than once and walking a delicate tightrope to keep looking somewhat like a naive idealist while being on the Security Committee and working behind the scenes to try to put out the thousands of fires currently threatening to burn the Republic down.

Never mind several debatable legal maneuvers he was plotting and at least one genuinely illegal thing he had done recently.

Now, though, wasn't the time to dive back into the politics. Maul and his Blackbirds needed help, and Bail and Bre were in the position to do that.

Once Tally, Husk and several of the others were on their way, being shown to guest suites in the private wing of the palace that Bail and Breha called home, he, Bre and Frayus -- their family doctor and Bail's doctor from childhood -- headed up the ramp to get the rest of them.

"I wish I'd gotten to meet them before now," Bre murmured, as they picked their way through the quiet ship. Raze had been sleeping, Castle had said, and no one had thought to wake him up without Tally telling them they could, but since Tally was at the very end of his ragged rope and Raze wasn't in any danger, Bail figured that they could handle that while Frayus was getting Maul and Shiv.

"You'll love 'em," Bail said back, smiling despite the grimness of the entire affair.

Bre rolled her eyes, shaking her head with her own smile. "I already do, B. Maul's already sold me on them."

Bail conceded defeat with a shrug and a grin, as he slipped into the Blackbirds' bunk room. Raze was on one of the bottom bunks -- Maul's, specifically -- and sleeping under that quilt that Bail had given Maul when he and Obi-Wan had departed Alderaan not quite a year ago. Remembering the kid tackle-hugging him on Corellia filled Bail with something bittersweet; a wish that he could have protected all of them from this.

Instead, he managed to sit on the edge of the bunk without bashing his head on the one above it, reaching out and rubbing at Raze's shoulder. "Hey, Raze. Wake up?"

It took a few seconds, but then Raze did; he jumped a little, probably startled to see people he didn't expect to see, and the progression of emotion across his open face was almost heartbreaking. The surprise giving way to a kind of joy; the joy, giving way to a quiet devastation. "Did you hear about Rabbit?" he asked, mouth quivering, fingers bunching up the quilt.

"Yeah," Bail said, softly, reaching up and petting at Raze's messy, spiked hair. "That's why you're here, so we can help. Think you can walk? We've got a great bed for you, and our family doctor said that the fresh air will do you good, as long as you don't push too hard."

Raze looked between him and Bre, eyes welled up, then gave a little nod; when Bail helped him out of the bunk and steadied him, Raze looked down over his sleep clothes and sniffled, rubbing at his eyes. "I should get some real clothes on, shouldn't I?"

"I'd wait a little while and see how you feel after we get you settled in," Breha said, reaching out and petting down his arm, studying his downcast face with the look Bail knew well to be 'teacher assessing struggling student', maybe with a little bit of 'thwarted mother' thrown in. "Come on, dearest. I'll walk with you and show you. Most of your brothers are already there."
It seemed like Raze only then realized *who* Bre was, because his eyes went wide. "Oh *frip*--" He stopped and then blushed red, bringing some color to his otherwise washed-out face. "I mean-- fudge, or, uh, something-- you're Queen Breha?"

Bre's smile went from soft to broad, the smile that had nailed Bail's heart to a wall the first time they met. "Yeah. But you can call me Breha or Bre. And I probably know more swear-words than there are star systems, so don't bother censoring yourself around me out of some misplaced idea of noble decorum."

Raze was still blushing some, but it was heartening to see the little smile that tugged at his mouth. "Yes, ma'am."

Bre just shook her head, still smiling, and took his arm; Bail followed as they walked to the door, all the while preparing himself to see what was going on with Rancor and Maul.

"His medic did a fine job, considering what he was working with," Frayus said, without preamble, holding a datapad; Bail had been eating nails and spitting tacks for four days after hearing about Felucia, rearranging the hell out of his schedule, blowing off some appointments, rescheduling others, and working through the night a couple nights in order to get time away from Coruscant to be here when the Nest landed. And at least some of that time had been chewing on contingency plans with his poor doctor, who had taken it pretty well considering; Frayus had been the one to treat Maul after Zigoola, albeit then it was mostly under Vokara Che's orders. And was involved with Bail's plans to hopefully-- *deal* with Maul's extra-legal prisoner status, as well. "I want him in the medical wing for at least tonight, though," Frayus added.

Raze had stopped at that, looking worried and hopeful at once. "Will he be okay?"

"Hopefully, kid. We're going to do what we can, anyway." Frayus shoo'd him, though with a reassuring half-smile. "Go and see where you're sleeping, I'll be by to check on you later and I'll tell you more then."

Raze didn't look wholly satisfied with that answer, gnawing his bottom lip, but he gave a little nod and let Bre lead him outside into the sunlight. Once he was gone, Bail turned his attention fully to the doctor. "Tally said it was pretty bad. Is it?"

"Could be better, could be a lot worse." Frayus jerked his head back towards the door to the medbay. "I don't think there's any undoing the damage as things stand *now*, but our local quetarra player recommended some things that will probably get him properly stabilized."

Bail nodded back; he was just about to duck in there when Shiv stepped out, Maul up in his arms and apparently either asleep or unconscious. The sight jerked hard on Bail's heart, and with some effort he pressed a tight smile. "Want a stretcher?" he asked; their attendants outside had one, but something on Shiv's face suggested that it was better to ask than assume.

Sure enough, Shiv shook his head. "I've got him. I'll stay with him, I don't want him waking up and not knowing what's going on."

"I'll see if Bre will come spell you, then, as soon as Raze is settled." Bail hadn't really gotten to know Shiv, aside from that one meeting and second-hand letters or calls -- via Maul, who never had enough nice things to say about his team -- but he wasn't surprised by that. "You need some rest, too."

"I'm not leaving him," Shiv said again; even disheveled and clearly worn out, there was a resolute sound to it. Though, after a moment, he looked across the corridor at where Rancor was and
something in his expression went uncertain and almost even anxious. "Or-- okay, maybe--"

"I'll get Rancor and Rabbit," Bail answered, firmly, though he was careful to keep it on the gentle side of commanding. "It'll be all right, Shiv. I'll handle this, you just do what you need to do. Okay?"

"Don't be mad at him?" Seeing Shiv's defenses crumbling was painful, though Shiv was trying to keep his voice steady. "He's-- really angry. Lashing out. But-- but that's not-- he doesn't mean it--"

"I won't be." Bail shook his head. "I won't hurt him, I swear. Go on, let me take this off of your shoulders for awhile."

It was a rope to a drowning man; even then, it was clear Shiv was trying to work out whether he should grab it. But eventually he nodded, tentatively, and let Frayus nudge him for the ramp by a hand on the back of his shoulder, talking quietly to him, asking questions, hopefully providing the positive kind of distraction from his worry.

Now that Bail was the only one left, he stood there and breathed and dug down deep, eyes closed and heartsore but determined.

"It's been one thousand, one hundred and twenty-four days since my son died," Bail said, softly. "And one thousand, one hundred and twenty-two days since I stood with my wife while they lowered his tiny casket into the ground."

The boy in the cargo bay looked one step out from his own grave; filthy, blood crusted on his hands, his color off, his black bodysuit probably stiff with sweat and whatever else. He'd stared at Bail when Bail had come in; when Bail sat down across from him, he'd watched with glittering eyes and a look of warning on his face, curled around himself self-protectively, as if he could ward off a blow that had already come.

A far cry from Corellia; Bail, half-carrying Rancor to a lounger so he could rest off his hangover. Rubbing his back; bringing him ice water and a bucket. Watching Maul pick out shirts for him and Rabbit; similar styling, but individual. Making them all breakfast. Now, the same boy broken here in front of him.

And Rancor was a boy. In some sane galaxy, a teenager still; in years lived, somewhere still south of only ten. Too young by physical measure to even marry or drink on some worlds, too young chronologically for any of those things on any world, but apparently old enough to die for the Republic. He should have been testing his boundaries and going to university, not dodging blaster fire and sitting with his twin's body.

There were very few things Bail regretted as much as the Military Creation Act; he had never voted for or against it, the Chancellor's emergency powers prevented the vote from being called, but he regretted that he had even considered voting for it. He had thought, at the time, that raising an army would mean calling for volunteers, not buying and owning slaves. Not sending young men, artificially aged and indoctrinated from birth, into the awful gears of the whole damned mess. His horror at watching them march was partly for the dark road the Republic was going down, but partly because what choice did these people even have?

He couldn't fix it all, though he was trying. He was pushing for their freedom, their agency, with
every single Security Committee meeting.

He couldn't fix that disaster yet, but he could help here. And so, he tried.

"He was--" Bail held out a hand, looking down at it with tears burning in his eyes, "just big enough to hold in one of my hands. And I still remember what his body feels like there." The tears fell, unacknowledged. "Bre and I never got to name him, or hear his first cries. We never got to watch him grow up, or learn how to smile, or laugh. And for so long after it, I would think, 'today, my son would be--' I would think, 'today, my son might--' Pick your own event; he would be opening his nameday presents. He would be watching the Festival fireworks. He would be saying his first words. He would be.

Rancor didn't say anything, but he made a little pained noise, then curled his arms back to shield his head.

"I didn't cope well. I cut off people who loved me and wanted to help, including my wife, who was every bit as wounded -- or more -- than I was, and I took solace in alcohol and work. I spent hundreds of days burying myself in legislation and a bottle, because it felt like the only way I could keep breathing. There were people who would have helped me, but I couldn't even make myself ask for it. I felt-- bad. Shameful and tainted and horrible. Deserving of any misery I put myself through. We put him in the ground, but I couldn't-- couldn't really say goodbye." Bail rubbed his palm over his face, drawing in a shaking breath through his nose and letting silence hang there while he tried to get some control back, before finishing, "I'm not saying any of this to lecture you, Rancor. Frankly, that'd make me the worst kind of hypocrite. There's nothing I can say -- that any of us can say -- that will make this hurt you less, or make that voice counting days in your head go quiet. But however you-- however you end up facing this, no one else can face it for you. All we can do is help you, if you'll let us."

Rancor didn't answer him right away; he curled up even tighter, shaking in place and rocking slightly back and forth. Bail's arms itched with the need to wrap around the kid and hold him, but he didn't; didn't think Rancor was ready for that, not yet.

When Rancor finally did speak, there was no anger in his voice, just a raw, fathomless pain. "We-- we used to-- he was supposedly decanted two minutes before me, he used to poke me about it and-- he'd joke about being faster even out of the tube, you know? But he stopped doing it when-- when we were three and I came in last during a run and I was so-- so frippin' scared they'd call me defective and--" He dragged in a rough sounding breath and then seethed it out through his teeth, half a scream, before begging, "What do I do now? What do I do now?"

Bail gave up on any further effort to struggle with his composure. He just let the tears fall, as he stood up, offering his hand down and looking into Rancor's desperate, dark eyes. "Start here. Just here. You choose the way."

For a long moment, it didn't seem Rancor would take it; Bail knew, more than he could articulate, how impossible it had to feel. Because in some way, it meant letting go. That it meant Rancor taking the first steps to an acceptance he didn't want and didn't know if he could live with.

Today, my brother would have--

When his trembling fingers found Bail's, Bail helped him off the floor and then held him up while he sobbed, clutching to Bail's shirt by his nails and taking the first, hardest step towards saying goodbye.
Down by the Deadwood, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Bail and Breha Organa help Rancor with the steps to take care of his brother and start healing himself, Husker has a lot of things to process, Ahsoka makes a stand and Tally wakes up from his stim-overdose to a very intriguing mystery.

Chapter Notes

I know I promised more Tally, but it tonally didn't fit this chapter, so it'll be in the next one. <3 Thanks, shadowmaat, for the beta and cheerleading.

It was the most beautiful room Rancor had ever seen, and that Rabbit had ever been in.

Climbing up some three stories, two sides were walled with a stained glass mosaic; in the bright light of day, it crystallized the room, casting shards of rainbow across the walls and across the floor along the perimeter, reflecting off of the water cascading down on the other two sides but never encroaching on the center; gold sunlight streamed down from the ceiling to illuminate that, instead. The sound of falling water just made it seem even more beautiful.

Rancor had no idea how they made a room like this; according to Senator Organa, no matter where the sun was, or what the light source was, the colored patterns stayed along the walls and perimeter and the center was illuminated by ambient outdoor light. His first normal thought since his brother had died was, Castle would be fascinated by this.

It was so normal that it hurt.

He didn't really remember, exactly, how Senator Organa had managed to convince him to bring Rabbit into the palace. By then, he was a trembling mess and couldn't breathe because his nose was so stuffed up, and his heart hurt so much he wanted to claw through his own chest and get rid of it before it killed him. But when Rancor pulled the stasis pod on its anti-gravs into this room, he gasped at the play of light and color, at how warm and kind it felt in there.

"This is where our families come, to say goodbye. State funerals have a public viewing," Organa said, softly, just loud enough to reach over the sound of the running water, "but this is where we come to say goodbye privately. It's the highest point in the palace."

Rancor didn't know what to say; what he could say. He tipped his head back in the golden light, yet more tears cutting paths down his skin. The stasis pod looked-- wrong, here, bulky and industrial and awful, but he didn't know what to do about that. That, or anything. He had no idea what to do next, and what any of this meant; had never conceived of the thought that he would someday have to put his brother to rest, that he would ever have to live without him, and even now, Rancor wasn't so sure he wanted to.

But it was a beautiful place, so he asked, voice wrecked, "What happens next?"
Organa had been watching quietly, posture open; despite everything else going on, Rancor still somehow felt that he could find his way back into the man's arms without trouble and that was-- was comforting, in a way. And the way Organa was built so different from them made it easier, too; no potentially mistaken identity. No disorientation, confusion, reminder. "You have some choices to make," he said, tilting his head and regarding Rancor, eyes sad and gentle at once. "How you want him handled; how you want his body interred, how you want him memorialized."

It couldn’t have been the first time anyone said the word ‘body’ for his brother in front of him, but it was the first one that registered -- really registered -- with Rancor, and it hit him so hard in his chest that he started sobbing all over again, rocking where he stood and trying not to double over, and then he was crying his soul out against Bail Organa's chest again, and he thought too many things in too many fragments --

*His brother was a body now and*

*Rabbit would have-- and*

*Is this what fathers are supposed to do? and*

*I'm a soldier I shouldn't be--*

-- and he had no idea how long he spent there. How many thoughts crossed his mind. Just that it was too many, until he couldn’t hold onto another one.

When he could get enough air again, almost too exhausted to hold himself up, he said, choked, "I don't know any of that."

"We can help." Another voice broke into the quiet; Rancor pulled his face from Organa's shirt and looked at the diminutive-seeming woman who had joined them. Some part of him knew that this had to be Queen Breha, though she wasn't dressed like a queen; she wore no crown, just a golden-yellow tunic, fitted at the waist, and black trousers. Her husband wore the same color shirt, a button-down with dark splotches left on it from Rancor's face.

Rancor wasn’t sure if he was supposed to-- to bow or say something specific, but Queen Breha didn’t wait for him to; she just walked over and reached up and cradled his face between her hands, her own dark eyes shining with tears. "I'm so sorry about your brother, Rancor. I really wanted to meet him. I've heard so much about you, all of you."

Rancor wanted to say a bunch of things. He wanted to talk about how much it meant to him and Rabbit that Senator Organa had made them food and taken care of them on Corellia. About how good it had felt, back when things still felt good, to know that there were people out there who cared about them. And he wanted to talk about his brother and tell her all the things that crowded his mind and heart right now, about how kriffin' brave his twin had been.

But what he ended up saying was, "I don't know what to do," as the fresh, never-ending tears flowed down to gather in the space between her thumbs and forefingers, a dam against the constant well of grief.

"We're going to figure that out together," Queen Breha answered, rising up on her toes and pulling his head down to press a trembling kiss to his brow. "We'll help you take care of him."

Desperate for any direction and trying hard not to shatter to pieces all over again, Rancor could only nod.
Once Husker put Tally in bed, stripping off his boots and shirt and trousers, leaving him in his boxers and hopefully comfortable, he had no idea what to do.

The attendant who had seen them to their rooms stood by, quietly; the Blackbirds apparently all could have had their own rooms if they wanted them, and Tally had his own because he needed uninterrupted rest, but Husker didn't really like the idea of being isolated from the others like that. So, he'd followed along and found himself bunking up in a large room with Tango and Raze. There was only one bed, but it was a huge bed, easily enough to fit all three of them comfortably. They all three turned down the offer to have another couple beds brought in; even though two more coulda fit, it seemed pointless. They were used to making due, and nobody felt like tellin' Raze that he couldn't cuddle up to whoever he wanted. Which, he was right now, wrapped up around Tango's back.

There were still damp spots drying on their shared pillow from their tears.

Husker was still trying to process everything that had gone down on the *Resolute* and on Felucia before that, but none of it was fitting in his head like he wanted it to. He was damn proud of General Skywalker for coming to their rescue before Maul, Shiv and Tally could get themselves all the way into the hole they'd dug for themselves, and even though he hadn't agreed at the time with the action, he was proud of their command team, too. Because yeah, it was reckless and it coulda ruined them, but it was done in love and loyalty, and even if Husk thought the costs coulda been too high, he could never, ever think that those two qualities were somehow wrong.

Now that they had Rabbit's body, though, and had apparently gotten away without charges, he felt--completely kriiffin' lost. He wanted to help Rancor, but Rancor had rebuffed even him; Husk was more hurt by that than he'd thought he would be, though he couldn't blame the kid for it. He had voted against getting Rabbit back, and standing there in the cargo hold explaining why had been downright miserable, and it probably had been even worse for Rancor to hear it.

But Husk had always tried to watch over those two and Raze, just 'cause they were younger and didn't get the full ten or more years of training. Not being able to do that, do the watching over, he didn't know what he could do.

Even in the 501st, where he was closest knit to his brothers before this, they'd never done anything like this. And losses were a murmured remembrance, not an active period of mourning and grief.

Husk didn't know how to grieve. He knew Rabbit deserved it. He had cried himself to sleep every damn night since Felucia and he laid in his bunk listening to the others doing the same. He had taken a shift at the helm and had looked at the wretched expression on Tango's face every time they'd traded off.

But how were they supposed to actually do this? There was no training for it. No process of steps to follow. How were they supposed to do this?

Husker didn't know how long he was sitting there. Long enough for the sun to move down and cross the wall instead of the floor. He sat there just listening to the breathing of his two brothers on the bed, as they tried to escape their heartache in sleep; almost wished he could do the same, but his thoughts kept running in tired circles.

Despite the utter quiet, he almost missed the soft knock on the heavy wooden door into the room. It had to come a second time before he got up and went to open it.
Queen Breha was on the other side. She looked like she'd been crying, given her spiked eyelashes, and Husker took a step back and bowed to her, a gesture that seemed somehow fitting in conveying his respects. When she gave him the regal bow back with her head, Husk was kinda surprised how relieved he was to have his own offer acknowledged like that.

"Rancor wanted to know if you would come and help him," she said, softly, looking at him and then glancing at Raze and Tango in bed, a sad and warm smile crossing her lips. "We're working out how he wants to see Rabbit to his final rest and he wanted to know if you would help bathe, anoint and dress Rabbit's body so he can be visited while we make funeral arrangements." She paused a moment and tilted her head at him, regarding him, voice kind as she continued, "If you can't, it's all right. I know it's a lot to ask. My husband's going to help, too, so if you can't, Rancor's not alone in this."

Husker instantly worried that Rancor trying to take on such a task -- seeing the damage done to his twin, actually putting hands on him for the first time since he was newly dead -- would break the kid beyond any repair. But given what Queen Breha was sayin', Rancor apparently had decided on that, and not only that, had asked for Husker's help in it.

"If he wants me there, I'll be there," he said, roughly, squaring his shoulders. "I-- I've never done this kinda thing, though, ma'am. We don't-- we don't do this, in the GAR."

"We have before," Queen Breha answered, with the weight of experience, calm and certain. "We'll teach you."

The table in the middle of the room was no less beautiful than the room it was in; empty right now, but a thick cloth had been laid over it in black. It was a long stone tabletop on a likewise stone platform of carved natural scenes; of waterfalls and mountains and forests and rivers in relief. On a plinth at the head of it, there was a big silver bowl filled with water, cloths folded around the edge of it, and a couple of vials of oil, and around the base was a grated basin. Sitting next to it was the still sealed stasis pod, waiting to be opened so Rabbit could be laid out.

Even Husk gasped when he first stepped in, at the beauty of it all. The light and color and feeling of peace.

Queen Breha didn't come in again, but Senator Organa was already there, sleeves rolled up and clothing draped over his forearm in yellow-gold like he was wearing, and in white. The smile he gave Husker was kind and solemn, all at the same time, but he didn't say anything.

Husker felt edgy and anxious, despite the beauty of their surroundings; Rancor looked a mess, unchanged and dirty and heartbroken, but despite the wet trails on his face, the anger seemed to be gone, so Husker asked, "You sure about this, kiddo?"

Rancor's mouth quivered, but he nodded. "Yeah." He bit his bottom lip, hitching a breath, then asked, "Can you help?"

"Yeah, of course." Husker tried to swallow down his own tears, and gave up the futile effort almost immediately.

They didn't stop, either.
While they were washing Rabbit's body -- while Rancor was anointing it with tears before they even finished, while Husker cradled Rabbit's face and washed away Maul's blood from his cheek, while Bail walked them through it because he had done this before for his father and for his son -- Ahsoka Tano stood in front of the Jedi Council on Coruscant.

She stood while they told her what she already knew: That her disobeying orders had been wrong.

She stood while they admonished her as though she was preparing to mount a defense for herself.

She stood while both Masters Obi-Wan and Anakin explained their part in it; she nearly spoke up there, because while they had pushed pretty hard on how important Felucia was, and how critical it was to hold it, she had still chosen to do what she did heedless of their orders to retreat. But instead, she held silent, waiting. They could only answer for their part, and she would answer for hers.

Master Plo seemed to be the only one who could sense what was coming; when she looked at him, he gave the barest nod of his head. Ahsoka desperately needed that right now; she grasped the approval with both hands.

"What say you, Padawan Tano?" Yoda asked, resting his gnarled hands on the top of his stick and regarding her with solemn eyes.

For a split second, she thought about backing out. Or changing what she was going to say. She thought about what she was giving up, and how good it had felt sometimes to be looked at like she was important. Special. Chosen for more because she could access the Force and channel it. She thought about it, but she found that it seemed a small sacrifice to make, in light of everything. That after days of working out what she would do, this was the only thing that felt right.

"What I did was wrong. It showed poor judgment and it cost a good trooper his life. Had it not done that, I might have come here defensive and sure of myself, because there would have been no cost. But-- there was. And it's one I-- it's one I can't live with, as things stand. I guess you could say it was a wakeup call." Her voice was quiet, but the Council's chambers were silent; it carried. She didn't look at her master or his master, just took in the Council, both those there and those projected there. "It's not my first instance of poor judgment in terms of leading men in combat, either. I-- I know that you intend to treat this as a lesson, and I'll submit to whatever punishment you think I should, but--" On Alderaan, they dressed Rabbit in golden-yellow and white; in the colors of mourning, courage and peace.

On Coruscant, Ahsoka carried his name in her heart as she pushed on, to go with the others she had lost, some with names and some without.

"I also want a demotion." She tipped her chin up, ground her teeth together for a moment against the pain, then finished. "I want to be given an enlisted rank equivalent of my actual battlefield experience, and if I'm going to ever be called Commander again, then I want it to be something I've earned."

On Alderaan, they turned on the sterile field that would keep Rabbit suspended in state for visitation for another couple days, long enough for his squad to say goodbye themselves. And on Coruscant, Ahsoka Tano deflected every attempt to get her to reconsider, all so that his loss meant something
more than just *I'm sorry.*

The medical wing was a lot nicer than anything Husk had ever seen before. As much art as science, at least in terms of construction. (Echoing Rancor's thoughts, Husker thought Castle would probably get a kick out of it; last Husk had heard of the engineer, though, Castle had gotten some food and retreated to a single room to try to sleep.)

It was quiet; it was big enough to support probably two dozen or more people, but it only had one current occupant and a couple attendants, and Doc Frayus occupying his office, talking on the comm with someone.

It was night, though, maybe it was busier during the day; even though no natural light reached down here, the ambient lighting was dim and warm colored. He didn't have any trouble finding Maul and Shiv, both of whom were sleeping; Shiv in a couple chairs he'd turned into a bed and Maul was on the actual bed, illuminated by the soft glow of the holographic monitors that were tracking his vitals.

Husker didn't wake Shiv right away, though, just looked at them. Shiv had changed into fresh clothes at some point, though he hadn't bothered to comb his hair; Husk didn't wanna know what he was doing to his back sleeping like that. Maul looked about the same as he had on the *Nest* -- Husk had visited a couple times a day there, though he couldn't seem to do anything to help -- if quieter and not struggling so hard. Even just in a handful of days, he'd lost weight; the side of his head, where the burns had been least awful, was healed, but his arm was still dressed and there were narrow bacta lines running to the ports on the synthskin dressing.

"I'm gonna ask for a transfer," Rancor had said, once Rabbit was laid out proper; as hard as it had felt even for Husk, washing his body and preparing it, it had seemed to give Rancor something to perform the ritual. This final act of love and duty.

The words had knocked Husker speechless. And he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt such a sharp, actual panic curl in his guts.

Rancor must have seen it; he crossed his arms tight, but he didn't back down. His voice sounded choked, but he musta been out of tears or just taking a break between them, 'cause his eyes stayed dry. "I can't-- I can't. I can't be where he was, not if-- not if I want to keep breathing, I can't keep seeing him out of the corner of my eye or-- or look at all of you guys and try to see if he's behind your shoulder. I just-- kriffin' can't, Husk."

Thing was, Husker got it. It about ripped his already ruined heart out of his chest, but he got it. Rabbit was the latest on his list of names, a tender spot that was never gonna fade, but Husk had a list. Batchers. Brothers in the 501st. His response had always been to hold closer to the ones left, but for Rancor -- who'd kinda come into his own in this small, close-knit unit -- being around them had to be more painful than healing right now. Knowing he'd have to climb back aboard the *Nest* and see the empty bunk. To feel Rabbit's ghost in every piece of furniture, to see him in every section of the ship, to catch his fading scent.

He couldn't hug Rancor or wish him well, Rancor still didn't want a brother touching him, but he'd managed a nod back and then wandered around the palace for another hour, not seeing it, before coming down here.
Now, Husker looked at Maul and Shiv; Shiv, he thought, would be hurt badly by it, but he'd cope. It was Maul that Husker wondered over. 'Cause their Lieu would grant the request, he wouldn't fight it, but Husk couldn't fathom how he'd make it through after. Losing one on the battlefield, losing another to transfer.

This wasn't your fault, Lieu, he thought, the sorrow sitting like a stone in his heart. He was gonna say it aloud, when Maul was awake. Didn't know if their L-T would be able to believe it, but Husk was gonna say it, because for as many times as he'd gone over that battle on Felucia, he saw only a group of men and one half-zabrak doing the very best they could in an awful situation, saving lives that otherwise woulda been abandoned.

He already knew that wouldn't be enough to fix things. But it might provide a bulwark against the abyss yawning under all them.

Or arrest the fall already in progress.

He finally went over and knuckle-rubbed Shiv's shoulder; when Shiv woke with a start, he shot a look around disoriented, reaching for a dece he wasn't carrying before seeming to recognize where he was and huffing out a hard breath. "Kriff," he said, shuddering and falling back in the chair again. "Hey, Husk."

Husk crouched down, keeping his voice low. "Rancor's finally gone to get cleaned up, eat and sleep."

"Bail updated me." Shiv also spoke quietly; he scrubbed his eyes, then released a ragged sounding breath. "Thank you for helping him with that."

"Don't gotta thank me for that. Honestly, it was-- kind of a relief. Doin' somethin'. Wasn't near as bad as I thought it'd be; hard, but kinda-- peaceful, too." Husk blew out his own breath, feeling how tired he was, though his was more in his head than in his body. He thought about telling Shiv about Rancor's impending request, but decided it could wait until Shiv actually got some real rest, in a real bed. "I think you oughta let me take a shift here. Okay? Go, get some food and some sleep. Those beds upstairs are damn nice."

At once, Shiv looked like a hardened sergeant protecting a vulnerable brother (and he was), and like a stubborn younger brother (which he also was). "I don't want to leave Maul."

'I don't want to' wasn't the same thing as 'I'm not going to,' and Husker jumped on it. "I love him, too, Shiv. Let me take a turn."

It was, by far, the plainest Husk had ever spoken of of his own feelings for their Lieu, and it clearly nailed Shiv in the guts, given the look on his face; the stubborn look crumbling into something vulnerable and deeply sad and worried sick, all the things he had to be feeling after these past days and a thousand more.

"I won't leave him until you're back and fed and rested, or Tally's done sleepin' off his inadvisable use of stims." Husker stood back up again, not taking his eyes off of Shiv. "And if that's not enough, you know he'd chase you to bed if he could, too," he added, tipping his head over to indicate Maul.

It was still obviously hard, but after a few moments of breathing, Shiv got up; he leaned over and rested his brow to Maul's lightly, then whispered something to the zabrak, then stood again.

Before he managed to slip by, though, Husker wrapped both arms around him. And then held him, as the careful containment crumbled and Shiv cried into his shoulder; Husk just tucked his head over
against Shiv's and squeezed through every shudder, and took his own comfort in this act of love and
duty, too.

Tally had no idea how long he was out, or even what woke him up, but then a voice broke quietly
into the ether.

"When I was a resident at Coruscant Med, I walked around for weeks at a time with a stim patch on
one side of my neck, and an anti-inflammatory analgesic combo patch on the other side. One didn't
cancel the other out nearly as well as I wanted it to, but then again, it kept me on my feet until I could
find a few hours and a closet to pass out in."

The hand pressed to his brow was hot and dry like Maul's usually was, then it was gone; the voice
was all wrong, though, and Tally sat up sharply, startled and disoriented, just in time to feel the bomb
go off behind his eyes. He groaned and leaned over his own knees, swallowing down against the
awful nausea that accompanied the sudden move, pressing both hands against his own clammy
forehead as counter-pressure.

"–kriff," he croaked, mouth tasting nasty and the pain only barely receding enough for him to force
his eyes open.

Mercifully, it was either night or someone had drawn blackout shades. He was in the biggest bed he
had ever been in – even including the big one in that rental on Corellia – and the floor lamps on
either side of the bed were dimmed to a soft, golden glow. A bedroom, not an infirmary. Small
mercies, Tally supposed.

The voice's (and hand's) owner was sinking back down in a chair next to the bed, eying Tally with a
look like amusement. Zabrak, though not like Maul; his skin was brown, a shade lighter than Tally's,
and he had black hair braided back from where it started behind his forehorns, though those looked
both longer and better kept than Maul's did, curving deeper back. A darker pattern of markings (or
tattoos) radiated back across his cheekbones and one curved down from there to frame his jawline on
either side. No mask, though. He was older than Maul, though Tally couldn't guess by how much; he
didn't look anywhere near old, anyway.

If Tally were in less pain (and less startled), he might have made friendly. Instead, he just asked back,
annoyed, "So, where's my pain-patch, then?"

The zabrak smiled back and pointed to the nightstand, where a tall glass of water and a couple of
pills sat. "No patches available, sorry. You'll just have to handle your hangover the old fashioned
way."

"Aren't you a kiffin' agent of mercy." Tally felt like he'd been gargling gravel and sounded it, as he
picked up the pills and water and knocked them back, wincing as it sent his headache back to its
initial level. A few more sips of water, and he asked, "You the doctor Bail said I was gonna consult
with?"

He expected some kind of repartee, but the zabrak's eyes went down in a distinctly rueful expression.
Then he shook his head without looking up. "Former doctor. I-- lost my accreditation. Viceroy
Organa was being kind."
Even with his head screaming at him, Tally narrowed his eyes at that. Though the way the skin around the zabrak's horns darkened fascinated him briefly, even in this state. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Long story." The zabrak waited until he took a few more sips of water and then looked up and offered his hand, somehow looking more rueful. "Zan Yant. Professional quetarra player, for the Aldera Symphony Orchestra. Former surgeon."

Tally looked at his hand – his long, lean fingers, graceful-seeming even in still offer, easy to see how they'd work well for surgery – then shook it, feeling wary but making an effort to keep it out of his voice. "Tally. Medic. Before you tell me the long story–" There, Yant's brows went up in surprise, which quickly morphed into amusement. "–where and how is my lieutenant?"

"Stable. Sleeping," Yant answered, a smile still on his mouth. "Just sleeping, not sedated. I made some suggestions, Frayus implemented them, his inflammation markers are coming down fairly steadily now. He's down in the sub-basement's medical wing." Then Yant raised just one brow and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, something sharpening in his expression, though it didn't seem to be in a mean way. "I'll tell you my story if you'll tell me yours. Because you're not doing a simple medic's work, or even a senior's medic's work, and I was a Captain in the Grand Army – conscripted – so I know that you weren't trained to pull off the feats you have."

There were about a thousand ways this could go really right, or really wrong. Even with the headache still throbbing through his forehead, though, Tally's curiosity was wholly piqued. "Deal."
Down by the Deadwood, Part 3

Chapter Summary

Shiv visits Rabbit, Tally grills Zan and starts to look to the future, the Blackbirds gather again to discuss what comes next and Misty gives his own goodbye.

Chapter Notes

I slow-roasted and carved canon and Legends to work out where -- and how very far back -- the evolutionary branch off was for Dathomirian versus Iridonian zabraks, and there will maybe be more about that down the road. <3 Happy Revenge of the Fifth.

Shiv almost expected Flanker to be juxtaposed with Rabbit; expected to see his twin lying on the table, just because the image of Flanker had never been too far behind his own eyes.

He was used to seeing and feeling his brother's ghost. Early on, feeling more alone than he could bear and wanting to die before he could get used to it, he hadn't felt Flanker with him. But after Shiv started writing his letters, the pieces came back; the way the facets of them were cut so as to be themselves and still part of one another. The remembered and imagined conversations; the weight of a body he had grown up beside. The roguish way Flanker could half-grin, cocksure and mischievous; Shiv saw a more timid echo of it in Maul's crooked grin, and his own mischief poking Maul was the angled cuts where he'd once rested against Flanker. A complementary pair, dovetailed. Carved out to fit each others' space. Still rough-hewn in the newness, him and Maul, but still a chosen fit.

He hadn't had any choice about Flanker, but Shiv knew he would have kept his brother even if he had.

Even after losing him. Even after almost losing himself. Because the love he felt for Flanker was so much more vital than the pain of losing him was unbearable, and after the past several days, Shiv was finally able to grasp that. And that he didn't want to spend the rest of his life keeping everyone else further away just to avoid possibly facing that pain again.

He had a choice this time, and he'd made it; even though Rancor's words had hurt him terribly, Shiv knew that he wasn't replacing his twin, but finally healing from Flanker's loss. That the only way out was through. That there was no other side, only the integration into his life of both the love and the forever of the loss. His letter to Flanker, asking him to take care of Rabbit, had been written in the heartstruck grief after Rancor laid into him, but then Shiv had returned to Maul and curled around both the zabrak and his own wound, breathing through it. Flanker was gone, but Maul still needed him. The Blackbirds still needed him.

In the quiet of now, Flanker's ghost wasn't here keeping him company, which left only Shiv and the softness of the wee hours of morning. Husk had told him to go to bed, and he would, but first he came here to Rabbit to see, even if he didn't know what he was looking for. His own chest was still ragged from his tears, but it had been cathartic to shed them, and now, Shiv mostly just felt very tired.
and sore, but determined.

In the night, Rabbit's body was lit in cool blue from the moon; his hands were folded on his still chest. He looked surprisingly peaceful; Shiv had seen enough bodies (and had created one himself), so he knew what death looked like, and it was never actually peaceful, despite all platitudes. That Rabbit looked peaceful didn't fit with his own experience.

It didn't look like a lie, though. Even with eyes and mouth closed, probably with some kinda glue, even with his skin the wrong color, Rabbit's body looked peaceful in some honest way. As if, by being stripped of his armor and washed and dressed and given a beautiful place to wait, he was also given leave to rest and did. As if, by saving thirty-two men alongside Raze, he had already decided that he had fulfilled his purpose and could now go and wait to see what came next.

It hurt like all hell to lay eyes on him, and yet, Shiv couldn't regret it.

"I don't know any of what comes next," he said, voice only loud enough to make it over the sounds of water falling and falling, cascading down the center of two walls, and looked at Rabbit resting there, waiting. His mouth quivered, and it took him a few breaths, but then Shiv leaned over and pressed a kiss to Rabbit's brow -- the buzz of the sterility field against his lips would be a sensation he would never forget, but not in a bad way -- and finished, "But I know I love you. That we love you. Thank you. For-- for being. And for being one of us. For being my brother."

He was still brushing the tears away when he found his room and fell into bed as the first of the morning twilight started coming through the windows, and he set the palace system to wake him in four hours so that he could get to the hard but wanted work of putting all of them back together again.

The air was still a little chilly as the city shook off night and headed into daylight, but despite not being dressed for it, Tally didn't really feel cold. It was crisp, a bit humid, and it clung to his skin in a way that suggested it would get hot later, but the reality of it, the sharpness of it, was a welcome reprieve from the desperate heartache of the past week. He latched onto it with both hands, needing the break, and spent that time grilling the hell out of Zan Yant, instead.

"Mountain medicine?" he asked, incredulously. "Surgeon trained in the best medical schools in the galaxy and you used mountain medicine?"

Dawn was breaking over Aldera in pastel blues and golds; somehow, they had ended up out in the Royal Gardens surrounding the palace, pacing the tended paths and surrounded by the late spring flowers. Before the pre-dawn glow had even come into the sky, Zan had taken him to an early-opening caf-and-tea shop called Turn Another Leaf on the boulevard that led to said palace, and had bought him a cup of herbal tea (citing that caffeine was the last thing he needed after his stim-overdosing) and the conversation hadn't paused but for that.

Now, Zan wagged a finger, grinning sheepishly. "I didn't use mountain medicine, Frayus did. I just had it two-day shipped from my family on Talus and explained it to him once he asked me what I would suggest; we keep a stock there, imported from Iridonia. I figured that your lieutenant probably hadn't been exposed to it, and he wouldn't have built up any tolerance to it, so it might do what it was originally used for."
The first thing they had done was circle each other in conversation, revealing bits and pieces back and forth. Zan had apparently been a surgeon on Drongar, assigned to an RMSU, a pilot program that was quickly discontinued when the cost of maintaining the mobile surgical units and provisioning them became higher than just letting clone medics do what they could in the hopes of the wounded eventually making it to a medical center.

Because, in the cold calculus of war, it turned out it was cheaper to let badly wounded clones die and be replaced than maintain dedicated on-planet facilities to keeping them alive.

Before that had happened, though, he'd had his hands inside the bodies of hundreds of Tally's brothers, while the GAR tried to protect the very expensive 'medical miracle' called bota. Tally remembered some talk about it; it had been a cure-all, until a retrovirus introduced by someone -- no one even knew which side or if it was an outside group, everyone disclaimed responsibility -- had altered its genetic structure, making it permanently unusable and nothing more than a prolific weed. Having no monetary investment to protect anymore, both sides abandoned Drongar.

"Someone reported me for using it on patients, back when it still worked -- troops and natural born soldiers -- and it turned into a mess," had been Zan's explanation, when it was still dark and they'd only just gotten started, and while that wasn't enough to win Tally's trust fully, his estimation of the zabrak went up several fold anyway. Because bota was so expensive and coveted that of course it was for the rich and powerful civilians and not the people dying and bleeding to protect it; that Zan went against that (and paid for it) definitely was enough to catch Tally's attention and tentative admiration. "I come from a wealthy, powerful family; they would have made an example of me if I hadn't. Still, I was disgraced; I escaped criminal charges of treason and theft, but I was thrown out of the army and stripped of my accreditation in the civilian sector. I had to pay back my wages, lousy as those were." He had shaken his head there, heaving out a heavy-sounding sigh. "I'm good enough with a quetarra to live well, but--"

"Do you miss it?" Tally had asked, pointedly.

"I didn't think I would, but yeah." Zan had held out his hands, fingers splayed, looking down at them. "At first, I was just relieved to get away without a criminal record, and to get away from the blood and gore and misery of the front lines, but-- yeah, I miss it. Not war, but being a doctor. Medicine. Surgery."

In between all but interrogating Zan, Tally revealed little bits and pieces of how he knew what he did; it wasn't until they had been talking for awhile that he realized Zan was letting him get away with not ponying up an equal amount of information, and while that made him wary, he was kind of grateful for it, too.

Now, most of Zan's history was out in the open and the talk had turned to current medicine; in this case, a mountain flower native to Iridonia called rasash, which was ground into a powder and taken as a drink. Worth asking after, too, because it was the first time Tally had ever had a doctor and a zabrak to prod for information and there was only so far that medical texts could take him.

"How'd you know that it would work on a hybrid?" he asked, plunking himself down to sit on a bench and finishing the dregs of his herbal tea; he'd gotten rid of the headache, but he could still feel his own exhaustion.

"I didn't, but even if it didn't work, it wouldn't have hurt him any. Humans occasionally gain a taste for it; it doesn't have any medicinal effect on them, though." Zan shrugged and lowered himself down to sit at the other end of the bench. "It was known to work on inflammation in zabraks long before we kept records of those things, old clan remedies. Over the past tens of thousands of years, it became a common thing in most family pantries; everyone stocks it, drinks it, and it doesn't really do
anything for anyone these days because it's so commonplace everyone's built up a tolerance. It's
tradition, it tastes good and reminds them of home or family. But since he was isolated, I thought he
probably hadn't been exposed to it and that it was worth a try as the most gentle way to get his
immune response under control."

Tally had stolen Zan's datapad, which was networked to the palace's medical wing, and had called
up Maul's stats. And they were improved; it wasn't a cure-all, he was still a mess, but he was a mess
whose status was under control and who was actually resting properly for the time being. Natural
slow-wave sleep, something Maul desperately needed. "How'd you know he was isolated?" Tally
asked, bluntly.

Zan's usual reaction to his prodding, especially when it was sharper, seemed to be either amusement
or sheepishness. Now, he sucked a breath in through his teeth and rolled his shoulders in the warm
morning light, the skin around his horns darkening again. "That's another long story. Are you sure
you want it now? You look like you should probably go back to bed for awhile."

"I'm sure." Tally smiled, just a hint of sharpness in it. "Because I might just be a medic--" And there,
Zan snorted at him. "--and you might just be a quetarra player now, but let's not pretend there's no
deep reason why you're here to 'consult' with."

"I can't go into that part," Zan answered, raising his brows again. "Not yet. That, you'll have to take
up with Viceroy Organa."

"I intend to."

"As to the rest--" The zabrak took a deep breath and let it out, then leaned back against the bench
and tipped his head back, sprawling there. "He reached out to me after I was back on Talus for a
little while, feeling wretched. He invited me to meet him. Then he proceeded to grill me to within a
centimeter of my life. You've talked with him-- he's a gentleman, but he's sharp when he wants to be.
He had apparently been vetting me before I even knew his name, and he asked me enough questions
to make it clear that he knew a lot more about me than any public records might show. Then, just as I
was feeling like I was either being recruited as a spy or about to be buried in an unmarked grave, he
offered me a place in Aldera here, and an audition with the Orchestra."

Tally chewed on that for a few moments. Long enough to feel a little shiver in his spine; a thrill of
fear. Or maybe hope. Or maybe some tangled up combination of the two, a hint of something much
bigger than expected on the horizon.

"And just in case you ever need to know, I'm working on Maul's situation too."

Tally knew his brain wasn't up to speed right now, but he was starting to get the sense of just how far
Organa had been going since he'd told Tally that on Corellia. He had thought the man was trying to
find some legal loophole, but now -- presented with a compassionate, principled, disgraced zabrak
surgeon who had apparently been maneuvered into this, if kindly -- he was starting to suspect that it
was a hell of a lot more direct action in nature. "He wants to know if those cybernetics can be
-cracked without killing Maul in the process, doesn't he?"

Zan reached over and swatted him on a shoulder. "Come on, don't push. I'm sure he'll bring it to you
before long. He made it incredibly clear how much he respects you and how nothing gets done
without your involvement."

Tally's eyes wanted to close without his permission (again), but his eyebrows went all the way up at
that. And completely outwith himself, he felt a sharp rush of affection for the Senator from Alderaan.
His crush had died on Corellia, but the respect he had for Organa hadn't, and now here was another
reminder of why: For Bail's faith in him, for the fact the man was working on exactly what he had said he would, but--

But also, for loving Maul that much.

For the first time since before Felucia, Tally could almost feel hope again. The loss of Rabbit still was digging a hole in his heart, but he felt a little like he could breathe past it easier than he had been.

"So, wait. How does that translate to you knowing Maul was isolated?" he asked, trying to stuff down a yawn and failing.

"If I try to tell it, you're gonna fall asleep before I even get halfway through." Zan's voice was amused again, as he looked over, his grin making his tattoos -- Tally had asked, they were ink and not markings like Maul's -- turn into an almost starburst pattern. "I had to turn detective, but I'll admit, it was a nice distraction from everything else going on in my life."

"Try anyway," Tally answered; there were worse places in the galaxy to fall asleep than on a bench next to a palace on a sunny day, after all. And he was loathe to give up the conversation; both for the distraction from grief, but also for the knowledge he could pick up and maybe use to help get them all through this. And the longer they talked, the more it became apparent that Zan was easy company; Tally could use easy company right about now.

Zan groaned, good-naturedly, "The Viceroy warned me you'd be relentless." Then he rolled his neck, cracking it with a little wince, and said more seriously, "There's no record of a colony of zabraks on Dathomir. Not in Iridonia's historical archives. We were an early space-faring species, and we sent out sleeper ships seeking to colonize, but there's no mention of Dathomir at all, beyond the usual modern briefs and travel advisories." A beat. "I suppose I should go back further, though. When Organa started introducing me to the real reason he wanted me close by, he dropped mention of a military officer -- a zabrak-hybrid he considered family. I didn't think anything of it, zabraks and hybrids thereof aren't even a little uncommon, so I was confused, right? I made all those polite noises of interest -- I was frankly still in a pretty bad headspace -- and then Organa mentioned that he was from Dathomir."

Tally didn't usually hang on every word for anyone, but it'd be a lie to pretend he wasn't here. "People move around all the time, though, so that couldn't have grabbed you."

"You're right, it didn't." Zan grinned again, more broadly. "He asked me whether my tattoos were markings. That got my attention properly. I told him no, zabraks wore tattoos, we build on our families' themes as we get older and add lines as we pass milestones. Then he showed me a picture of your lieutenant and asked me what I thought about those markings, if they told me anything. But--it wasn't the markings that dropped my jaw, impressive as those are, it was his skin. Do you know when the last time anyone saw a red-skinned zabrak was?"

That had Tally's interest piqued even further and he sat a little straighter on the bench, watching Zan with narrowed eyes. "Not a clue, but you're gonna tell me, I'm sure."

Zan laughed at that. "Cave paintings. Literal archaeology. Cave paintings, that was the last time anyone in the modern era had seen a zabrak with his coloration. I remembered them from my primary school days, no kidding. And guess what else those paintings of ancient zabraks had, when I looked them up again?" He didn't wait for Tally's answer, though, before plowing on, gesturing now in his excitement towards his own face. "Markings. Long before we had bodymod devices like we do now, long before anyone could have laid down ink like that, over the eyes, long before even our needlework was that good. They had masks, Tally. Dark masks around their eyes and a lot stronger markings on their skin, too. Historians speculated that they were just makeup, but after
seeing that picture of your lieutenant--"

The enthusiasm was almost infectious; enough that it kept a grin on Tally's mouth. He had tried, to no avail, to find out more information about Dathomirian zabraks early on, but when that failed, he'd had to turn to modern Iridonian and Iridonian-human hybrids in order to build the medical profile he had.

It had never occurred to him to look deep into ancient history.

"You're calling my L-T a throw-back?" he asked, amused for a moment, though ready to get offended on Maul's behalf if need be.

"Oh, no. He's alive and fairly young, he's obviously not a cave painting." Zan waved that off. "But anyway, by now, I was thoroughly intrigued. I didn't care too much about history before, frankly. Never have. I know historical medical practices because you can't just rely on bacta or droids for everything, but Iridonian cultural history? What did I care, I was from Talus and had already spent my entire life trying to escape stereotypes about zabraks. But once I got that mystery maneuvered into my hands, I'd go to practice and concerts during the days and evenings, and then spend half the night up researching."

It sounded a bit like they were kindred spirits in that regard; Tally could lose himself for hours in medical texts, especially. Tracking down a lead on a potential differential diagnosis. Putting together pieces of a hundred studies to build a complex but navigable picture of a disease process. Researching the latest in emergency medical procedures. Building an incredibly detailed medical file for Maul, on top of Che's original work. His datapads on the Nest were filled with flow charts and notes he had taken himself; when he came up with a good universal one for clones, one he knew could be verified, he sent it on to Kix. And Kix was getting good at adding his own notes from the battlefield and sending back revisions, since Tally wasn't out there the same way anymore; between the two of them, they had streamlined a few different triage practices.

It was just getting anyone higher up to listen to them. Because they weren't qualified to analyze blood work, despite the analyzer in most medical units being capable of spitting out the numbers, including a limited capacity built into the battlefield FX-3s. Because they weren't qualified to recommend 'best practices', even though they were the ones expected to actually use them.

Because they were clones. Bought and owned men.

"Tally?"

Zan's voice broke into his thoughts and Tally blinked out of them; he had been staring at a patch of purple flowers, apparently. "Yeah, sorry. You've definitely got my attention, I just--"

"You're tired." Zan looked at him, a look of compassion and clear assessment rolled into one. "You just spent four days doctoring, running on stims and caf and nerve. I get it; I did tell you that I remember my own residency. And I was a combat surgeon recently enough that I still feel tired sometimes. I'll be glad to keep talking to you, but I think you should try to rest, too."

"I'm not a resident," Tally said, mouth going into a line.

"You're doing the work of one," Zan said back, without missing a beat, face set in the most serious expression than Tally had seen on him since they had started talking. "A highly specialized one, maybe, but you're the real deal. Don't sell yourself short. And as one former resident to one who's just getting started, go lay down for a few hours. I haven't got practice for awhile, we're between seasons, I'll bring you some breakfast and we'll keep going later."
There was still so much to go over. So much he could learn from this guy, and that it seemed Zan was willing to teach him. But being told he was the real deal by someone who wasn't a fellow clone and who actually was a doctor hit him in the chest and he stood up, mouth trembling for a moment before he managed a gruff, "Thanks. I'll see you later," and headed off to the entrance to the palace before anyone could see how hard -- good, aching, mixed, all of it -- that those words had landed.

Shiv only drifted awake once in his self-allotted four hours and that was when Tally crawled into bed behind him and cuddled up to his back, wrapping around him and squeezing and sounding overwrought and ragged as he said, "Don't give me any crap about the current cutlery situation."

Somehow, that got a little huff of a laugh out of Shiv, but he didn't say anything; he just got his arm over Tally's and squeezed it close to his own chest and thought it was probably a damn good sign for Tally's mental health that he came looking for it.

"His name is Rabbit."

It wasn't the 212th where the whispering started; it was the 501st. The orderlies and security troopers who had witnessed the showdown in the medbay. The natural-borns, including Sellers, just did their best to forget the entire thing, embarrassed by it and already dealing with their own issues. But for the clones who witnessed it, it took root quietly. There were arguments about it; some guys thought that it was kriffin' crazy and disrespectful, while others thought it was one of the bravest things they'd ever seen an officer do. The opinions ran the whole gamut.

And when they discussed it in the mess, in the barracks, the words spread quickly and so, too, did the roots.

Either way, the troops were discussing it. Sometimes nonstop, even after lights out. Four days in hyperspace certainly left them time to do it.

One thing everyone knew, as the story spread, was Rabbit's name. Even when they didn't know Maul's, didn't have the first clue who the Blackbirds were, everyone knew Rabbit's. And, while occasionally distorted, everyone knew that a squad of troops, led by a wounded red-and-black zabrak, had gone for Rabbit's body and left with it; that a lightsaber had been drawn, and that not long after, General Skywalker had given the 501st all a chance to actually say goodbye to their dead brothers. That they could go visit bodies in the morgue; that they could request time to get together with squadmates or whoever and discuss their dead, whenever it was possible.

Crest and Taxi became super popular, having actually met the Blackbirds. Kix kept his head down, but he was listening, too.

A lot of the clones didn't get the point. Like Husker, they struggled to grasp what good it did; bodies were bodies. Everything that made a brother unique was already gone, and what was left was just flesh and bone, inert. They lived on only in the hearts and memories of those left behind to keep
marching. There was discussion and arguing about that, too; about what the point even was.

But some did latch on. In the dark, after lights out, Rabbit's name passed between them, but his wasn't the only one. One by one, other clones brought out the names of their dead to share; not as a murmured remembrance, but as a pointed reminder of their very existence. That they were individuals, that they mattered.

"His name was Rash."

"His name was Copper."

"Her name was Shy."

"He was still a shiny, but we called him Two-Nine."

"His name was Hevy."

And as the story was told -- as Aran and the men who had been rescued from Felucia added to it, recounting what had happened at the base -- one name circled first the 501st, then once they were back at Coruscant, the 212th, then the Open Circle Fleet, and would eventually spread through the GAR as a whole.

"His name was Rabbit."

As legacies went, it wasn't a bad one; it might not have been one Rabbit would have thought to choose, but he probably would not have been displeased with it. They didn't know that he fell temporarily in love with a red-headed brawler who now lived on Llanic, or that he was Tango's co-pilot, or that he was going to go into search-and-rescue. They didn't know that he had graduated from cadet with his batcher and then spent the rest of his time in a squad where the underlying bedrock was founded on the concept that there are no acceptable losses, where his voice was given weight, where he could vote.

But they knew his name and they knew he saved a platoon's worth of men, and if there was anything like immortality for clones, it was this.

On Alderaan, though, unaware of the legacy spreading outwards in concentric circles, the Blackbirds gathered. Husker was still down in the medical wing with Maul, and Rancor was no where to be seen, but the rest of them came together for a late breakfast in a good-sized dining hall, though it was still in the upper floors of the palace where the public didn't visit. In the late morning light, the sun banded down through the floor-to-ceiling windows, broken only occasionally by the white, fluffy clouds drifting over it. Below, their view was of a river falling into a lake, the city worked around and into the natural landscape.

"Big on natural light around these parts," Castle said, as he sat down at the table, feeling like he he might break something 'cause it was all so finely made. Like both Husker and Rancor had thought, the architecture fascinated him; unlike any time before Felucia, he felt too exhausted and heartsore to really analyze and appreciate it. He hoped that got better as the time passed, though he wasn't so sure it would.

Still, the sight of a fairly huge breakfast in warming trays didn't make him nauseous, and Castle figured that was a good sign.

Smarty had been incredibly subdued lately (they all had), but he still said, as he stood by the windows and pointed, "That's the Triplehorn River, Sunset Falls and Aldera Lake. I guess if I had a view this good, I'd want a lot of windows too."
"It's beautiful." Misty looked out at it; his arms were crossed tight, but his tone was sincere. "I like oceans best, but it's a gorgeous river system."

Smarty nodded back, taking a deep breath and letting it out slow and a little shivery. "They're huge on environmentalism here. Have been since their civil war, but they weren't too bad about it even before that."

It was almost soothing to listen to them having a normal conversation. All these months together, Castle had gotten used to the squad talking their way through things, turning to each other for discussion or comfort. By contrast, the time since Rabbit's death had been almost dead air; Rancor's misery, Maul's lousy physical condition, Raze struggling with both the concussion and his own mind, all those had muted them. They had spent four days barely saying anything to each other, all caught up in their own heartache, except when it came time to pilot or pick their way through mealpacks. All sense of routine had fallen apart.

Their absences were still felt, and keenly, but listening to Smarty and Misty talk was soothing, even after Castle tuned out of what they were discussing and was just listening to their voices.

"You know, you can go out later and see it up close," Shiv said; when Castle looked back, he and Tally were just coming in, cleaned up and looking-- maybe not okay, but functional. Together. Shiv gestured to the two by the window, then pointed at the table. "Come on, come sit down and eat," he added, smiling a little bit.

"Who ever thought you'd need to tell one or more of us to do that," Brody said, already at the table, setting his datapad down. He palmed over his unshaven face; sounded kind of sore, but not angry. Just like he was filled with the same ache everyone else was.

"I know, right?" Shiv gave Tally a little shove towards an empty chair and ducked the light swat at his head Tally tried to give him back, and it was the first time Castle had smiled in what felt like forever. Then Shiv went over and stroked his fingers over Raze's hair; Raze had sat down, but had just been looking off into the light with his whole demeanor heavy with sorrow. "Hey, Raze. How's the head?"

Raze gave back a little shrug, awkward looking. "Doesn't hurt anymore. Doc Frayus says I don't have to get any more bacta infusions, just-- no impacts and no running and no sparring for awhile."

"How about what's going on inside the head?" Shiv asked, after nodding at that.

Raze's face crumpled a little there and he folded his hands under the table in his lap, jaw tight before he said, "I miss the other two Rs. And, uh-- I dunno. I, uh..." He shook his head, then, and heaved out a breath. "I'll be okay, I know I gotta pull it together."

"You really don't, Raze." Tally rested his elbows on the table and looked across at the demo expert; everyone else had fallen quiet and was watching, too. "We're on leave and you're allowed to grieve and feel fripped up. No one's expecting you -- or any of us -- to get it together right now."

"We don't know how," Brody broke in, a bitter kinda note in his voice. Castle nodded along with that, agreeing with it; he didn't have the first damn clue how to do that. When he'd lost brothers in the past, they'd just-- pressed on. Like Husker, he knew the Remembrance and recited in his head every night, but that was it. Just words, in the privacy of his own thoughts. Not that those kept him from looking for Rabbit, or feeling the invisible weight across his arms.

"You do know how," Shiv said, giving Raze a kiss on the top of the head before sitting down himself, looking around the table at all of them. "There's no-- krippin' procedure for that part. The
mournning part. There's no set of steps you have to take. The Organas can walk us through the actual funeral process, but grieving? You're already doing it."

"Yeah, but where do we go from here?" Tango asked; like all of them, he'd been quiet, though he looked kinda haunted, too. "I get that grief is its own thing, independent of-- of steps to take, but--funerals. And-- what after that?" A beat. "Are we broken? Is there any way to even come back from this?"

That was a hell of a question and even Castle sucked in a breath at it. It was Tally who spoke up, though, brow pinched, "I don't think we're broken. Hurting, yeah. Kriffed up. Missing a chunk of our soul and bleeding. But we're still here, as a squad, and still together. So, yeah, I think we can come back from this. I'm just-- not sure of how myself."

That had to be a hard thing for Tally to admit to. Castle didn't think this was the end of them; more accurately, he knew he didn't want it to be. "What would happen to us if we were disbanded, anyway? We'd all be divvied up to different units," he said.

"And half or more of us would be dead by this time next year," Brody added, bluntly. "We could go AWOL."

"I think that's something we don't discuss without the others," Shiv said, folding his arms on the table.

"Maul said he'd get us out, if we wanted out." Tally dropped his voice to say it, and then pressed his mouth into a line when the entire table looked at him, some in shock, some completely unsurprised. "But it would cost him. His freedom, maybe even his life. He didn't tell me that, that's just common sense; his squad goes missing without him, and he's the one who'll take the fire. If we ever do decide to bolt, I don't think we should do it without him."

"I don't think we should bolt at all," Castle said, feeling a shiver down his spine at the idea. "Husk wouldn't. I-- I wouldn't. I wouldn't stop any of you, but--"

Shiv reached over and squeezed his forearm. "Relax, Castle. We're not going anywhere right now. We're just trying to figure out what next, okay?"

"Besides, until Maul's been freed from his booby-trapped cybernetics, taking him would be a death sentence for him," Tally added. "I'm not against going AWOL, but we really do need to bide our time on that."

"We do more good here," Raze added, surprising everyone by speaking up, even though his voice was a mumble. He poked at his still mostly-full plate, not looking up. "We go AWOL, we don't get to rescue any more brothers. Or-- or gain intel for the Republic. I know that we're just-- just--" A beat, then he blew a frustrated-sounding breath out, gesturing at his head. Kinda like their Lieu did, come to think of it; kinda like a mental health warning. Raze took a couple more breaths, then finished more clearly and calmly, "I know we're buying into what they want us to do, but nothing's stopping us from doing our own thing at the same time, right? We go and do the black ops. We go do search-and-rescue. We maybe keep our ears open for brothers who want out and send them to Radio Anarchy. We maybe keep our eyes out for slavers and-- and other bad things that need to be noticed and sent to someone who can make them public or act on 'em."

Across the table, Brody's face softened noticeably and a sad smile crossed his mouth when Raze pointed at him as he cited Radio Anarchy.

"I like that," Misty said, heaving out his own breath. "I'm not-- against going AWOL, but we can do
good here. We have assets that a lot of our brothers don't. We have our L-T, we have the Organas behind us, we have contact with Radio Anarchy, we have our own ship and more independence. We can do a lot of good by staying and working towards our own goals while serving the Republic's.

Shiv nodded, but he still said, "This is still something that's probably better discussed when we're all together again. In the meantime, we have ten days on Alderaan. Bail's gonna take Rancor out today once he's up to pick out a site for Rabbit; Rancor wants him buried, not cremated. And, uh-- that gives us time to go visit Rabbit before he's buried, without maybe upsetting Rancor. Tomorrow, Bail has to go back to Coruscant, so we'll hold the-- the funeral in the late morning, probably. He's gonna be voting on the Military Leave Act and he says it looks like it's gonna go through."

There was something deeply-- satisfying, in a way, about having a briefing over breakfast. Like normalcy. The awful empty spots where Rancor and Rabbit were supposed to sit were there, and notable, but the determination Shiv brought to the table made it feel like those spots were bearable. Castle missed having Husk and Maul there, too, but not in the same way.

"I've got to talk with him before he jets back to Coruscant," Tally said, moving to pour himself some caf from a carafe. He chewed his lip, then, a surprising bit of nervousness to see on his particular face. "I think he's got a plan, right now, about how to help Maul. He hasn't brought it to me yet, I think because we kinda showed up unexpectedly, but I do want to see what he's got in the works before he leaves."

Shiv squinted at that, curiously, but he didn't press for more. Just started finally loading up his own plate with breakfast. "After the funeral, we're free to do whatever we want. Queen Breha told me that the staff is more than willing to help, so-- if anyone wants to go exploring, they can. And Bail's putting together credit chips for each of us, too. I know-- I know none of us feel good right now, but don't let that stop you from going out and doing things you want."

Castle wasn't sure where he'd go, but then again, he was still ticking over what Tally had said. There was really only one way to help Maul now: Upgrade his cybernetics. Get rid of the security features. Speaking of which... "I need to get to a machine shop, I gotta fix that bearing housing before he goes walkin' around too much."

"He'll probably be up today, but I doubt he's gonna be up for much wandering," Tally answered. "Tomorrow might be different."

"So-- that's the plan?" Tango asked, looking down at his own rather sparse plate. "Bury Rabbit and take leave. Then what?"

"We'll know more about that later." Shiv pressed a tight smile. "One step at a time, right now."

The coral was cool under his fingers, and Misty turned it over and over between them; it was just a piece he had found on one of his earliest dives off of Kamino, a pretty thing the color of sunrise clouds, and sometimes when he was stressed out, he would just hold it and fiddle with it in his bunk after lights out. He hadn't had to do that in a long time, but he remembered back when he did.

When he was still just a little past shiny himself.

They all went to visit Rabbit, some of them together -- Tango and Raze -- and some of them
individually. Misty was the last one, mostly because he was kind of frightened that he'd look at Rabbit and never be able to erase the image of him dead from his mind again. Because he hadn't seen it; hadn't seen him on the *Resolute's* hangar deck. Or as more than a hazy image through a tiny window in a stasis pod. And what he would see here, he knew he would always remember.

But finally he went, taking his shard of coral with him, worn smooth by sand and fingers.

It wasn't anywhere as bad as he expected it to be. Rabbit didn't look alive, but he didn't look horrible or mangled or-- or--

He just looked like Misty's brother. Fellow rescue-swimmer, albeit in training. The former shiny he got to see earn his scratches. Not alive, but still Rabbit.

He already had one gift: Under his folded hands, Raze's squirrel tail from their little outing with Tano. Misty added another one; even though the field buzzed against his fingers, he slipped the coral shard under Rabbit's hand, so Rabbit could take it with him. A ghost of dives never taken.

"I woulda loved to have gone diving with you," Misty said, speaking quietly, even though there was no one to hear. "I woulda shown you so many things. But, uhm-- since I can't, I want you to-- to take that with you, okay? Good sailing, little brother," he added, choking a little on the words. "I love you."

Those three words echoed.

From Maul on Felucia to Misty on Alderaan, every one of the Blackbirds had said it, and every one of them had meant it.

If Rabbit could have chosen a legacy, it would have been that one and was.
Chapter Summary

Tally gets an interesting history lesson from Zan, tries to grill Bail, spends a bit of time with Shiv and then gets to see what Bail has been working on.

"We're all required to be carnivores. We're just not all exclusive carnivores," Zan said, as he opened the box of pastries and nudged it across the table to Tally, but only after he pulled one out himself. Along with the box of pastries, he'd brought Tally a container with eggs, bacon and something called a shalah, which looked a lot like potato, but more buttery and rich. And more tea.

Tally never would have suspected that he would have breakfast sitting on a palace balcony, overlooking a city, when he was a cadet. Or even a year ago. There was a privacy screen that kept electronic surveillance from afar from seeing them, but it didn't change their view out any, and it was so grand and majestic that it frankly boggled him.

He had eaten lightly with the squad because he didn't want to disappoint Zan by ignoring any offerings he was bringing, so he tried to put down his breakfast as quick as he could politely so he could get back to questioning, partly because he didn't want to zone out again just taking in the view.

Now, he nodded back at that information; he had read something like that early on, but since Maul was an omnivore -- even with the higher protein and calcium requirements, he didn't require meat to synthesize the necessary nutrients, he had the ability to himself, presumably a gift of his hybridization -- Tally hadn't pursued anything more about it. "What seems to be the distinction?"

"Where you come from on Iridonia. Or, rather, where your ancestors spent most of their time." Zan worked on nibbling around the edges of his pastry. "Ours were apparently plains-dwellers; we lived in the grasslands and were the first to stop being nomadic, as we learned agriculture and animal husbandry. Over time, we seem to have developed some ability to digest starches and carbohydrates." He shrugged, then. "Longer guts, more options. Then, as clans started settling, and taking mates from different areas became more and more common, those genes spread. I imagine eventually that our species will move from being classified as obligate carnivores to facultative carnivores. I have to mind what I eat -- this'll probably be the only carbs I have today -- but I can have them occasionally, at least. Made surviving my residency easier, anyway."

If anyone might have asked Tally before the past day whether he was interested in Iridonian history - or the history of the zabrak species -- he probably would have replied that his interest only extended as far as making sure he could take care of his L-T, medically or otherwise. Now, that definitely wasn't the case.

What he wasn't entirely sure of, though, was how much of that new interest was down to genuine curiosity and how much of it was because Zan was fascinating to talk to. And what that even meant.

He nodded again, then finished his tray of food before pushing it out of the way and grabbing one of those pastries himself, after a quick sip of tea. "Okay, so let's go back to cave paintings."

Zan grinned and shook his head, but it seemed to be in his thus-far typically good-humored way. "Right. Okay, so after that, I started talking to a fiologist friend of mine I'd met while I was in pre-
med. She didn't have anything for me -- she studied later history -- but she put me onto some of her colleagues, who were more around the time I was looking at. First they told me that my mystery zabrak was probably just someone who went to the extreme on body-modding, right? But I insisted that no, his skin actually really was red. I think they still thought I was giving them shit, and I wish I could have sent that picture to them, but Organa was pretty serious about not letting that leak anywhere, though he didn't tell me why for quite awhile."

Tally was instantly in agreement with that; Maul had enough crosshairs on him, and add in his position in black ops, it was best for him to remain an unknown. "I'm with him there, though. Last thing Maul needs is that kind of focused attention."

Zan looked like he reluctantly concurred, if the vaguely rueful expression was any indicator. "I know. I wouldn't dream of crossing Organa, anyway; he's kind, but I'd hate to be on his bad side. And I'd probably be genuinely afraid if I got on his wife's."

"She's pretty fond of our Lieu, too." Tally smiled some; he hadn't gotten a chance to talk with her, yet, but he was looking forward to it. "Anyway--"

"Yeah, sorry, I keep getting off track." Zan picked at his pastry a bit more, then tore a piece off, ate it, and continued once he was done swallowing, "After them razzing me about falling for someone's body-modding, though, they finally did actually give me some useful information: Back in our early spacefaring days -- before hyperspace travel, when we were still using primitive rockets to get off of the surface of Iridonia, when our sleeper ships were made in orbit quite primitively and then launched out into the great vastness of the galaxy with little more than some astronav speculation to go on from our satellite telescopes and subspace transmissions from other species -- there were still red zabraks walking around. No markings by then, but their skin was that vivid red your lieutenant's is.

"A lot of our history's been lost over time, partly thanks to poor management of it, partly because of war or disaster, but there is factual record of the mountain clans -- part of a formal state, the boundaries still there to this day, though now it's just an administrative district -- where zabraks were typically red, or orange, or yellow, or some variation along those lines. They usually had smaller horns than we did on the plains, though more of them, no regular body or head hair, and were known for being particularly hearty. Which, they would have had to have been; even now, it's hard living in the mountain regions of Iridonia."

"One of those places where the less fortunate end up?" Tally asked, raising a brow. "Or one of those places where they were less fortunate because of where they were from?"

It wasn't a barb, exactly, but Zan still winced a little like it was. "Mostly the latter. They remained nomadic longest, then there was diaspora thanks to Iridonia's changing political alignments and ambitions, plus the increasingly likely chance they lost a fair number of people to a colonization attempt that ended up on Dathomir and even further out. But even now, there aren't many economic resources to exploit there, comparatively, and so there's not as much investment in education or modernization. That wasn't always the case; back when Iridonia had a stronger warrior tradition in the hand-to-hand methods, it's said that our best fighters were all from mountain clans. They were celebrated for that. But now, it's all ceremonial; how good you are with a zhaboka isn't the distinction it was even a thousand years ago."

It sounded like the same thing as most places; it also didn't surprise Tally too much. He didn't know if Zan knew that Nightbrothers were born slaves, but it sounded like even Maul's forebearers had ended up marginalized and disadvantaged.

Just to avoid boring holes through poor Zan's face with his own gaze, Tally picked up his datapad
and started searching for information about current mountain clans of Iridonia, curious to see if he could recognize any commonalities. "Is there any record of sleeper ships left?"

"Most of them, actually." When Tally glanced up, surprised, Zan smiled. "All the ones that left Iridonia, including what region they drew their populations from. Dates are a little fuzzier, but people at least kept a record of the ships themselves, tens of thousands of years ago. We were quite territorial, apparently, back then; there wasn't a lot of mingling. Three ships, each with roughly four thousand people, left carrying mountain clan zabraks over a period of about a hundred years, to go with the dozens of others from across Iridonia, across the centuries. Of those three, one was listed as certainly lost. Two more are speculated to have eventually become the Elomin."

"The one that ended up on Dathomir was the lost one?" Tally scrubbed his face at that, shuddering a little bit. "Crashed, you think?"

Zan nodded, more solemnly. "Very likely. Or damaged and forced to put down on the closest habitable world. It supposedly hadn't originally been headed for Dathomir, or even close to it, but I'd say preponderance of evidence suggests that it ended up there anyway."

"The evidence being Maul."

"Yeah." Zan pulled in a breath and dropped what was left of the pastry, shaking his head. "Him and the other Nightbrothers."

Tally pressed his mouth into a line at that. "I was wondering if you knew who they were. I don't know anything more than what he's told us -- and he doesn't know much because he wasn't raised there, he was kidnapped or stolen or sold as an infant or a toddler -- but I know they're slaves. A slaver tried to snatch Maul on Llanic, just on having looked at him. Even with him being half-cybernetic, he was apparently worth enough to risk -- and ultimately lose -- their lives on."

That sent Zan's eyebrows up, but then he frowned, again rueful. "It's a lot harder to find out information about them. Bail told me who they were, but no matter how hard I poked for information on Iridonia, no one would say anything. I would have thought they would insist on -- something. I don't know, maybe a rescue, but..." There, Zan trailed off and shook his head again. "Dead end."

There was a whole pit there that Tally could probably fall in, if he let himself. It wasn't a surprise that most of the population didn't know who a Nightbrother was. Especially if they were isolated for a long period of time. But that the Iridonian planetary government didn't was a lot less likely. "Why?"

"That, I don't know for sure." Zan took a sip of tea, then looked out over the city, shining in the early afternoon sun. "Even our more regular diaspora typically keeps in some contact with our homeworld; I don't, but my parents do. And the Iridonian government usually is willing to support the colonies, even when they belong to other civilized worlds, if need be. They're even tentatively interested in building bridges with the Elomin, even though scientists are still split on whether they were originally our lost zabraks. Why they would ignore a colony of obvious zabraks being held as slaves-- I don't know."

"What's their stance on hybrids?"

Zan sighed, shaking his head. "Mixed. Unfortunately. Most hybrids find life on Iridonia itself rather-- awful, so unless they can pass as full zabrak, they usually live elsewhere. It's not so bad in the colonies; Talus doesn't have any prejudices, at least. None of the kids I grew up with cared who was a hybrid or not, we just had fun."

That probably could be it; if the population of zabraks on Dathomir had been hybridized that far.
"Maul's a fifty-fifty hybrid, so there had to be at least one full-blooded zabrak left, though." Still, even as Tally said it, he realized that it wouldn't have been enough; even dozens or hundreds might not have been enough for Iridonia to declare war and expend resources to rescue their lost colony. And the Nightbrothers were rare enough now that there probably weren't too many full-blooded zabraks left to renew the population and save them from extinction.

That train of thought left him incredibly kriffin' sad. Enough that Zan could apparently see it on his face, because his own was a solemn sort of sympathetic as he said, "Yeah."

Tally nodded, then shook his head, then turned his attention back to his datapad. Most of the images he swiped through showed a people who could be related to his lieutenant; distantly, but there were some commonalities. A lot of them had the same honey-gold eyes Maul did. Their skin was brown, sometimes black, but the undertones in light were red or gold and notable enough. Those with the darkest skin tattooed in gold; those with lighter skin had theirs in black or dark brown, and those tattoos were more reminiscent of Maul's markings, sharper and heavier.

They were an objectively beautiful people, too, well-proportioned seemingly as a rule and athletic looking. Probably a lot how Maul would look in peak health and with his full body, build wise.

"Kriff," Tally just said, then, setting the datapad down.

He hadn't lost sight of Maul, obviously; mostly, though, he had been worrying over Maul's physical state. Now, though, the realization that he still had to address Maul's mental state came back around, something like a hypersonic boomerang. Because there was no easy answer to that; Maul had been too wounded and disoriented to really process any of what had happened, up to and including losing Rabbit. Unlike the rest of the Blackbirds, who at least had days to slowly grapple with the wounds that Felucia left on them, he hadn't been able to, and so those wounds were still fresh.

Tally was glad he was sleeping -- cycling through different stages of sleep, now, so he'd probably wake up in a few hours -- because it would mean a clearer mind and maybe less devastation. But when it came to Maul, it was only ever going to be measuring degrees of it. He was always struggling. It was just figuring out how hard and what could be done to mitigate that as much as possible.

Zan had been watching him with curiosity and worry as he thought. When Tally finally made eye contact again, Zan asked, "That bad?"

It made the corner of Tally's mouth go up; less mirth than just appreciation that Zan did notice it. "How much did Bail tell you about him? I mean-- not logistically, not-- species or profession, but Maul himself?"

Zan seemed to grasp instantly where Tally was going with that. He folded his arms on the table and said, carefully, "I imagine he left out the details. But he told me some things. Why?"

"Because I don't discuss Maul's head without his permission." Even though Tally almost desperately did want to; who else, but a doctor and a zabrak, could give him someone to at least discuss things with? He shook his head, then, looking out over Aldera. "People have been riding roughshod over his autonomy all his life -- literally -- and I've spent this entire time trying to give him that back. Just-- the right to say no to things he doesn't like or want. Even if that meant, this time, letting him cause himself real physical damage; I mean, I was well within my right to pull rank on him. And I almost wish I had, because he really could have killed himself doing what he did. But every time I try to imagine what it'd be like to lose the trust I've earned by doing that, it makes me sick."

Zan appeared to consider that, looking down at the tabletop with a thoughtful sort of frown. Then he
said, "I've been told that he's pragmatic. Very guarded. Capable of doing the hard things, and often unflinchingly. Awkward, socially, but not necessarily in any bad way; just unpracticed." The frown fell away, then, and was replaced by a hint of a smile. "I've also been told that he's rather guileless. I believe the exact words were 'artlessly but effortlessly charming.' Earnest. Brave. A natural teacher."

The words 'artlessly but effortlessly charming' weren't ones Tally had ever thought to ascribe to Maul, but they instantly were identifiable truth. A facet Bail had seen in him that it wouldn't have occurred to Tally to describe. It made him smile for real. "That's all dead on. One of our guys -- Raze -- is neurodivergent and early on, really distractible. Maul's always been really good at teaching him anyway. Gentle, I guess." He huffed there, just thinking, then added, "Come to think of it, he's always been gentle with all of us. I'm the only one he's pushed back against, and even then, he's never mean about it. And given all his prior experience with medical people, I think that push-back is probably a good thing on balance."

"Even now?" Zan asked, rather frankly, raising his eyebrows.

"Even now." Tally finally finished his pastry, then answered more elaborately, "You don't learn how to make good choices by having none."

"Well said." Zan did grin at that, crinkling his tattoos again and the corners of his eyes, before finishing a little more heavily, "One thing that Bail said has haunted me since: He said that Maul's too young to be so tired. I think there's probably a lot to that statement I don't know, but I've thought about it a lot since he said it."

It was another observation that hit Tally, though this time with a sort of aching empathy. Because it was something he'd thought before in pieces, but abstractly. And Bail had distilled it down to its essentials.

"Can I pester you more later? I need to go see if the senator's available for a chat anyway," Tally asked, standing up.

"It's not pestering, I've been enjoying it. But yeah, of course." Zan stood himself and picked up the datapad Tally had commandeered and not given back, pulling up a memo. "Here's my comm code and address; I don't live too far from here. Comm or stop by, whichever's convenient. I'll be in this evening."

*I might just,* Tally thought, nodding and taking the datapad back, but all he said was, "Thanks."

Even on Alderaan, Bail Organa was a busy man. He gave as much of his attention to the Blackbirds as he could, though; when Tally found him, he was talking to Smarty and Brody both, and both of them looked lightened somehow just being in his presence. It gave Tally a chance to stand back and observe.

Easy to remember when he'd wanted to jump the man. In the bright hallway windows, Bail's skin was golden-brown and his still-black hair shone. He was still wearing mourning colors, but Tally had a hard time imagining any color would look bad on him. He glanced at Tally in warm greeting, but then turned his focus back to the other two he was talking to, giving them his full attention in a way that Tally knew from experience clones didn't often get, and even more rarely positively.
He really was handsome, and beyond that kind, but by now, Tally-- frankly looked up to him too much to want to bed him.

Tally didn't want to examine too closely whatever it was in him that stopped seeing people as potential sex-partners when he knew them well enough to respect them to this level. He wasn't ever abusive or nasty to his one-night stands, but he'd never thought for even a second of looking beyond the lay and developing anything with them. And it seemed the moment that a personal relationship might develop beyond the rack, he stopped being interested sexually.

The thought disturbed him, though, even without him wanting to examine it, enough that he failed to notice that Bail had finished talking to the other two until Brody knocked shoulders with him on the way past. "Your turn," he said, almost even an echo of upbeat.

"Yeah, thanks," Tally said back, giving him a quick little grin, before looking back at Bail. They waited a respectful moment for the other two to get out of earshot, sizing each other up, though Bail seemed to do so more playfully than Tally was used to getting.

"Come to ask me the hard questions?" Bail asked, then, raising his eyebrows and the corner of his mouth going up.

"Got it in one." Tally stepped over and somehow they ended up walking, pacing the wide, curved corridor. "I want to know what your plan is. Because you've clearly got one."

"Been talking to Zan?" Bail asked back; it made Tally snort, because he was absolutely sure Bail not only knew he had been, but how much he had been. It felt like it had been a lot longer than a half-day since he'd met the ex-doctor.

"C'mon, don't play with me." Tally crossed his arms, mouth going into a line. He wasn't angry, but he didn't want to banter right now.

"Fair enough." Bail reached over and ghosted a hand over his back, a natural, casual gesture of affection and apology. "I do want to go into it with you -- in fact, I was planning to within the month probably -- but you guys got here before I had a chance to really clean up and compile it. Or, wait for my brilliant nephew to. And I'm leaving with Rancor in about twenty minutes to go find a site in a memory park for Rabbit, so I don't really have time to answer questions about it. But if you want the information as it stands--?"

There was something about the way Bail asked that open question that gave Tally pause. Not in a bad way, but in the way where he instantly felt-- young. Maybe in over his head, again. He paused their walking and looked up at the man. "I do want it."

"Okay." Just like that, Bail agreed, but his eyes were serious. "I'll upload it to your datapad. But Tally, I want you to really think about whether you want to dive headfirst into this right now, all right? Because it's a lot. That's one of the reasons I wanted to wait longer: I didn't want you -- or Maul -- trying to contemplate this kind of thing while under high stress. Felucia kinda messed that up good, though."

"Maul's always under stress." It felt like he was speaking the obvious, but Tally still said it anyway.

"I know." Something went softer in Bail's expression. "But this is different." Still, he took out his own datapad and directly networked it to the one Tally had, uploading the information. Considering how long it took, even with data transfer standards, and Tally felt that same nervous thrill as before run through him. That it really was big.
"Why do you love him so much?" he asked, suddenly, looking up as the datapad dinged that the transfer was complete.

"He's worthy of it." Bail didn't even blink, he answered so plainly and easily. "But if you're asking why, personally, I consider him family?"


Bail took a breath, then put a hand on the back of his shoulder to steer him, albeit gently, into walking again. And when he did speak, his tone was careful, "I was in bad shape after-- after our last miscarriage. The fifth, and the worst, and the one that would mean killing my wife if we tried again. And I fell apart. I managed to convince myself that everyone around me could see me for the obvious fraud I was. That I was-- selfish and ignorant. That any love they claimed for me was-- was them being too kind, or too loyal, or just-- you know. That I wasn't worthy of it. They didn't see me that way, but I hated myself, Tally. Like-- all the way into my soul, I did. I drank myself to sleep, I tried to buy back what-- what I thought I lost by turning workaholic at the same time I was turning alcoholic. Like maybe I could balance the scales and not-- not kriffin' despise the man I saw looking back at me through a mirror. So, then came Zigoola. The Separatist bombing, I got to ride with the Chancellor and Padmé and see the aftermath, and then when my intelligence network contacted me with information about a possible Sith attack in the future I was ready to throw myself into taking it apart. It was Obi-Wan who came to see me; when he came back, he brought Maul."

Tally didn't know much about that mission, absent what injuries had been suffered on it. But what was really squeezing him by the guts was the utterly *frank* way Bail talked about his mental health spiral. The tone of it. Like-- acceptance, like understanding. "Frip," he muttered, eyes stinging some, even though he didn't know why.

It resonated, nonetheless.

Bail squeezed his shoulder, but kept walking and talking, "Anyway, he and I hit it off quick and easy. Obi-Wan was sharp -- I get why now when I didn't in the beginning -- but Maul just sort of treated me as matter-of-fact. He didn't think I couldn't do what I'd volunteered to do, even if I was really rushing headlong into a death trap. Or that I was just a politician with delusions of grandeur. We talked on the Starfarer, fought together before we even crashed. And Zigoola was a nightmare, but we talked there too, and even though that planet was absolute hell on him and Obi-Wan, he didn't ever let me feel like I was useless or hopeless. Later on he told me that I'd saved them. I think we all saved each other, but-- that meant a lot."

Tally didn't know what to say to that, but he nodded, scrubbing at his eyes and breathing off the spike of emotion.

"Anyway, after that we came back here, and I fell back into that bad cycle again. I didn't even mean to, but I guess I'd been beating myself up for so long a time that it's easy to fall back into the ruts." Bail shook his head. "And Maul just-- was there. He'd sit and listen to me. He didn't try to fix it or anything, he'd just take a bottle out of my hand and walk me to bed. He'd walk with me outside and listen to me ramble. He never tried any 'tough love' or any of that crap. And through it all, no matter what I said or how many times I couldn't seem to break out of the ruts, he never stopped looking at me like-- like--" Bail gestured. "Like I was worth something."

Tally scoffed. "Like he adores you."

That made Bail smile, expression soft, the same adoration reflected there just as bright as daylight in a mirror. "Yeah." He took a breath, then continued, "Anyway, it's pretty hard to hate yourself when
someone you didn't even know a month earlier can see the good in you and no matter how many times you tell them the bad, they just keep looking at you like you're someone worthy of loving, someone good. Like there's nothing you can do that will get them to stop seeing that. And it made me realize that-- that I could never go down the road that it would take for him to stop seeing me like that. And that was the first shard of light in the darkness, because I couldn't hold onto that, that I wasn't even capable of going down a road that would ruin that faith and trust. And that opened my eyes to the other people in my life I'd pulled away from, even Bre. It wasn't easy, but I started talking to my wife again, I started seeing a therapist. I didn't want to let Maul down, either, and after awhile, I could detangle enough of the misery to see the path out and I took it and I could stop feeling like I let myself and everyone else down, too."

Kriff, that was a lot. It seemed so innocuous to listen to; the idea that just being there and believing in someone was enough to shine a light into their darkness. But there wasn't a hint of deception in Organa's voice; nor was it overly sweet and syrupy. He said it all like it was a fact, and for him, it clearly was.

"As to that," Bail said, gesturing to the datapad. "It's not a guarantee. But-- it's a chance. A choice. A-- lot bigger one than I wanted to spring on Maul when he's got too much on his shoulders, but you're the one who lives with him every day, so I can't think of anyone I'd trust more than you and Shiv to know when and how to bring it up to him."

As much as Tally wanted to open it right away, it sounded like he'd need to brace even himself here. He nodded and stopped walking as they reached the end of the corridor, and looked at Bail again. "Thank you."

Bail nodded back, then tilted his head and smiled. "You know, he adores you, too. All of you. It sings in every letter he sends me, how much."

After a moment, Tally managed a nod back. He probably didn't manage to hide how overwrought and overwhelmed by those words he was, but the remembered weight of Bail's hand on his shoulder still felt like a wind at his back as he headed downstairs.

Tally had been up to see Rabbit right after breakfast, before meeting Zan; he wasn't as overcome as he thought his brothers probably were. He almost wished he could be, but instead -- murmuring apologies the entire time -- he had searched over his little brother's body looking at his injuries now like he hadn't been able to before. Feeling where his neck was broken, the rocky feeling of broken vertebrae under skin. Seeing where he'd been impaled; it looked like a jagged wound that had sliced his liver in a way that meant he woulda bled out pretty quickly, even though he hadn't been moved before he died.

Tally straightened Rabbit's burial clothes again, re-engaged the sterile field.

What Tally concluded there, after just standing with his guts in his shoes and his heart in his throat, was that Rabbit would have needed immediate surgery and would have likely died on the table quickly, even if they'd had a mobile surgical unit right next to where he landed and got him in there immediately. Scans on his body probably could have shown more detail, but ultimately, even just what Tally could observe by sight told the story well enough. The neck injury was severe enough that it probably had kept Rabbit from feeling any of the pain of where he was impaled, at least. He
would have fallen into shock fast. Probably he had felt cold and, thanks to the intrusion, struggling to breathe.

And Maul was there at the end. To the end.

Tally had whispered his love and goodbye to Rabbit, and then turned back to what he could do to save the living, even with the loss a constant, quiet companion.

Now he was back downstairs again; Shiv was again at his 'post', which was at Maul's side. Maul had apparently been awake enough to move; he was curled up on his side, the one that hadn't gotten burned, like he was protecting himself. He looked better in terms of color, but Tally was worried about how much weight he had lost already. Especially since there was a chance it would get worse.

"He drifted awake a bit ago, but I managed to convince him to sleep some more. He's pretty burned out," Shiv said, voice pitched quiet. He seemed kind of thoughtful, kind of sad; both. More. "Rancor wants a transfer. Husk warned me."

Oh frip, Tally thought, the jolt of surprise and ache he felt at that almost instantly transforming into another stone in his chest. "Does Maul know yet?"

Shiv shook his head, mouth tightening. "Not yet. I figure I'll see how he is when he's awake and not too groggy, then go from there."

Tally sank down in the chair Shiv had previously been using as a leg rest, nodding back at that. "I'm not sure what to do. Except be here."

"That's enough." Shiv managed a bit of a smile there. "I mean, I know it won't feel like it is for us, because nothing about this is gonna be easy, but--" He shrugged. "Maul loves us. That'll keep him breathing, and we can help him figure out how to pick up the pieces from there. I don't think it'll be anything less than kriffin' hard and awful and aching, but I know we can keep him from drowning. And I know that if we can do that, he can find the way back out again."

Tally was a little less sure on that part. Not that Maul loved them; he knew that. Even before Bail reaffirmed it, Tally knew that. Maul wasn't very effusive or open with it, but it really did show in action all the time, and in all the places that mattered. It was a fact for a long time now.

But he was less convinced than Shiv that it would be enough to keep Maul from falling so deep he wouldn't be able to see any way out. Because it was already on record that something had once broken him badly enough to see death as the only escape; that he had spent years after it with every sign of severe depression and it was only the Jedi habit to ignore mental illness in lieu of Force weirdness that kept him from being properly diagnosed with it and treated for it.

That even now, he was diagnosable as traumatized -- seriously, currently-affected-by-it traumatized -- and the only reason Tally wasn't willing to ask for Frayus to write a diagnosis was because the Jedi still held power over Maul, and Tally still firmly believed that having them put him back in a cell would be the end of him.

I hope this plan of yours is good, Bail, he thought. It would almost have to be, for Bail to have gone the lengths he had.

Shiv was watching him, and the plain certainty in his eyes was easy to want to latch onto. Tally wanted to think it was naive -- the belief that someone who had gone through the hell Maul had and had just taken a terrible blow, while already shaky in the mental health department, wouldn't despair so badly that dying became an option again -- but then he thought again about what Bail had said.
About how much that plain love and faith had meant to him, when he was at his lowest and maybe passively, if not actively, suicidal.

Love and faith hadn't been enough to save Rabbit on the battlefield, where the enemy couldn't feel either and didn't care that they did, but it might be enough to save Maul off of it.

"One thing at a time," Tally said, echoing Shiv's words from earlier. Triage, again, if a different sort. "When he wakes up, we'll make sure he's properly oriented and try to get him to eat, and maybe start explaining what he's up against medically. Make sure he gets a chance to spend time with Bail before he leaves, and see Rabbit before we put him in the ground. And then we'll worry about Rancor's transfer and the next steps. And if it looks like it's too much, we'll just back up the steps again until he's got 'em. And keep reminding him we're here. And that he's loved. And that-- kriffin' Felucia wasn't on him."

"Think of that all by yourself?" Shiv asked, a hint of a grin on his mouth, one eyebrow arching.

"Smartass," Tally shot back, a grin gracing his own.

Tally slipped away, but only for about a half-hour.

It was enough time to dig into what Bail's plan was, but it only took Tally about five minutes to see the broad strokes and then he was sitting down hard on a bench outside in the garden, jaw metaphorically on the floor.

No one could hear it, but he still said it, and he would never be able to tell anyone whether it was in fear or awe or an exponential melding of the two, enough to leave him literally breathless.

"Oh shit."
Chapter Summary

Rancor and Bail go looking for where Rabbit should be interred, while the Blackbirds try to pull it together and while Maul tries to come to grips with any and all of it.

Chapter Notes

I know, it's been a long time. I'm sorry. The early summer was a very rough time, emotionally; I got some non-critical but bad news that kinda broke my heart, left me in depression, and then my self-confidence went tanking with it. I'm not sure how this chapter is, it might read a bit rough, but I wanted to put it out there and hopefully get back on the horse. Thank you, everyone; believe me, it's your unending encouragement and support that have kept me afloat. I appreciate the hell out of you. P.S. - I know I said I'd reveal the plan, re: Maul in this one, but it didn't make it in. Sorry about that.

"It doesn't look like a graveyard," Rancor said, just loud enough to be heard over the ambient background noise. The top on the landspeeder was down, as they cruised along a road through woodland; still, they were driving slowly enough that there wasn't much wind. Around them, trees of various kinds and heights stood, some in clusters, some more spaced out, sunlight banding down between them and dancing across the sparse grasses and undergrowth anytime a breeze stirred. At the base of each was what looked like a rock, but Bail had said those were actually memory stones; that some had carvings in them, while others had a holographic projector embedded, each devoted to the person that the tree stood above.

"A lot changed after the civil war," Bail answered, as he handled the driving. "Some families still keep tombs and catacombs, but mostly everyone these days would rather either be cremated or be put in a memory park. Though, my wife's family and my own keep our dead on our estates."

It all sort of floated over Rancor's head; the idea of burial, of estates. Of families, even. He understood brotherhood, but the concept of parents and children, of cousins and aunts and uncles, was beyond him; he had no frame of reference for that. Even when he was small, the only real nurturing he got was from older brothers or agemates.

"Do we even belong here?" he asked, the question slipping out without him meaning to voice it, caught on a current of exhaustion and some bewilderment.

"On Alderaan? Why wouldn't you?" Bail asked back, glancing over with furrowed brows.

Rancor tried to think of why they wouldn't, but it wouldn't form up in his head. Everything was a mess. A contained one, right now, but a mess. "I don't know. We were made on Kamino, but we're not Kaminoan. We came from a Mandalorian, but he wasn't legally a Mandalorian anymore. What does that make any of us?"

"Hard question." If there was one thing -- there were several, but if he only had to pick one -- that
Rancor really appreciated about Bail Organa, it was that the man didn't flinch away or try to cover things over with pretty words. "The only real answer you've got is what you all make for yourselves. And what you're willing to accept from us, if you want it. But if there's somewhere else -- if you don't want your brother here, then I'll try my hardest to help you get him where you do want him."

Rabbit had never seen Alderaan while alive, but Rancor was sure, more sure than he was of anything, that his brother would have loved it here. He would have wanted to go wander around Aldera and try restaurants and maybe go to concerts or whatever else natural born people did for fun. He would have wanted to be with his twin and go and fill up on experiences, like he had every other time they'd managed to stop somewhere with freedom to move. Rancor never thought of himself as stodgy or anything, but Rabbit was always the one who liked to surge ahead; he would have here, too.

In a way, he did.

Rancor was shocked to find that he was all cried out for the moment. Instead, he shook his head and watched the land move by them, as the spaces between trees became wider. "Here's good. I can come and visit him, right? And I know -- I know that he'll-- he'll be safe here."

A well-off Core world, rich in history and in value. No one would challenge that.

"Yeah, he will be." There was a beat, then Bail said, "We're getting closer to the edge of this park. If you don't see a spot here, there's another one that's on the other side of the river."

As oddly peaceful as it was, just driving like they had all the time in the galaxy, there wasn't much time left for Bail to be with them for this. And Rancor wanted Bail there. He thought it was probably stupid, and he knew Bail was just being kind, but it was nice to pretend that they had -- if not a father, than the closest thing Rancor had ever known to one.

In the more open spaces, the birds flitted between trees. When Rancor spotted the brown shapes browsing through the grass, he sat up straighter. And as they passed, a few rabbits stood on their back legs, ears up and pointed forward, alert.

It was almost too cliché, but it made Rancor smile just a little bit -- a miracle, if there was one -- as he remembered his brother complaining about not wanting to be named after something cute.

He pointed. "There. That's a good spot."

"It feels like we're about to step off a cliff."

"Or we're already on the way down."

The comments were neutral in tone; more thought spoken aloud than lamentation. Several of them were out on one of the palace balconies, just trying to wrap their minds around everything. To Shiv's left, Tally and Castle were both discussing their position on the precipice (or already falling from it), and to Shiv's right, Husker was just quietly looking out over the city as it bustled along. Three of them had been chased out of the medbay by Frayus and Tally had left of his own accord once he was done talking with Maul; the only one left was Raze, who wouldn't be budged.
Shiv himself was chewing over about a million things, from a tearful comm from Dani that had said she was on her way -- Corellia and Alderaan were close enough together to make that a relatively quick trip -- to what to do about Maul. He might have pushed harder to stay, but something about the blank, mechanical way Maul had been acting when he woke up spooked Shiv enough to take the doctor's orders and leave for a bit, to let Maul re-orient himself and maybe sort through his own thoughts some.

It was all exhausting, this multitasking and worrying, but Shiv kept working it over in his head anyway.

"If anyone can bring us to a soft landing, we can," Husker said, resting his forearms on the railing and shaking his head.

"I know," Castle answered, immediately. "I mean-- it *feels* like we're hurtling outta control, but--"

"It's more about *change* than crash," Tally continued. He shook his head, too. "No matter what happens, things -- big things -- have changed and are going to continue to, and we have to be able to cope with it. Adapt. Overcome."

By now, word of Rancor wanting to transfer had made its way around the whole squad, absent Maul, and just standing on a palace balcony with the royal family of Alderaan at their back was enough to make that sense of change a reality. Because even though they had known that the Organas cared about them -- because they loved Maul -- it had never actually occurred to anyone to lean on that support until they were back against the wall. And if they hadn't had it in place, the current outcome for all of them could be much worse.

The Blackbirds had gotten used to relying largely on themselves, even counting their various allies; one of the quieter realizations Shiv had taken off of Felucia was that they *couldn't* become so insular without potentially sacrificing their lives for it. That even as well-balanced as they were, even as hard as it was to trust in the good intentions of people outside of their little group, they would have probably ended up shattered if they hadn't had the Organas to retreat to. People who could protect them long enough for them to recover.

It was a much larger revelation than it appeared to be on the surface, and he was still trying to grapple with it. That even for all their skill and talent, even for all their work, they were still vulnerable to forces well beyond their control. Not just bodily, either, they'd always known that; more, in every respect. Emotionally. Mentally. It was such a big thing that Shiv had to stop and step back from it, because he couldn't look at it in full without feeling tiny and helpless.

It was when Shiv had started grappling with his own vulnerability there that he started grasping some piece of what Maul was going through. Because if vulnerability to circumstance was hard for Shiv -- and kriff, was it -- then it had to be a hell of a lot harder for Maul. The Blackbirds might have gotten insular, and some of them were just by nature, but Maul didn't even know -- even now -- how *not* to be. Didn't know how to share the weight. He'd never had a twin beside him. The only connections he had to people before them were to the Jedi who cut him in two and, more recently, to Bail and Breha Organa.

Maul wouldn't have thought to call them for help with this. Not for himself. Not even when he desperately needed it. He'd call Bail for help getting them out of jail, but he wouldn't have called for this.

That was such a chilling realization to come to that Shiv gave a little shudder, even in the bright, warm light of day. Maul might have thought to for *them*, but it was just as likely that he would have tried to fix things himself, and then drowned himself in the effort quickly.
"That bad?" Husker asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

They had been talking while Shiv had been thinking, and the reminder that he was not grappling with this solo almost made him grin. He scrubbed over his face and went back to leaning on the railing. "Trying to figure out our next steps."

"He ain't the first brother I've known in that kinda trouble," Husker said back, and Shiv probably should've been surprised that Husk knew who he was worrying over, but he wasn't. "And he's stuck with just about the same official options we are: Decommissioning or reconditioning. 'Cept, his fate would be imprisonment. But I don't see much difference in the long run there, outcome wise."

The other two had fallen quiet, and Tally's mouth had gone straight-line again. "I'll take on the entire Order to the very last breath in my body before I'll let 'em have Maul."

"We know," Husk answered, with a grin cutting across his face. "Like the rest of us wouldn't? Like the Organas wouldn't? What we need is unofficial options, here. 'Cause we're not gonna be on Alderaan for as long as the Lieu needs. Then we're gonna be under Croft's direction, and while he seems pretty straight up, none of us know him like we do Kenobi."

"Kenobi wouldn't have assigned us to Croft's command if he hadn't been sure it would keep Maul safe," Shiv said; of that, he was certain.

"I think Croft would keep bein' fair with us, but that doesn't mean he isn't capable of letting things leak back to the Council." Castle tapped his fingers on the railing. "He doesn't have a relationship to hide and protect."

Shiv was less sure on that; he had an inkling that Croft had his own shady dealings going on. His continued connection to Corellia; Corellia's supposed isolation was awfully permeable, especially around the Jedi's circles, breaking the spirit of their 'meditative solitude' if not doing so legally. And his thing with Dani. Croft's connection to Shaak Ti was a little less reassuring, admittedly, but Dani was also involved with Ti. Ti had been fair with them during their assessment, she'd even seemed to be kind to Maul, but that wasn't the same thing as being willing to cover for an officer who was mentally wrecked and not likely to improve anytime soon. And she was on the very Council they needed to shield Maul from.

What the hell have I gotten myself into? he wondered, though not without affection. Still, it made those comments about the cliff they were on the edge of (or hurtling down the face of) seem all too apt.

"He needs time," Shiv said, heaving out a deep breath. "How do we buy him time?"

Husker grunted in agreement, then answered, "Same way we would for any of our brothers out there. Fill in the gaps, collaborate, work together to keep us movin' towards our soft landing and protect Maul at the same time. And we're capable of doin' that because of our Lieu. He's been trainin' us to think for ourselves from the moment he stepped into that briefing room, to work together without a lotta input and without him lording over us, so we can improvise and get creative; I can't think of anything more apt in the damn galaxy than usin' those skills to keep him safe now, when he can't protect himself."

There was a long moment of quiet, then Tally huffed. "Well said."

"We can all get together tomorrow and start putting real plans in place, I think," Shiv added. Before then, they had to bury Rabbit -- Bail had commed that they'd found a spot and that the funeral was going to go on as planned the following morning -- and he had to figure out how to approach Dani,
who was due to land on Alderaan before that time. "In the meantime, let everyone know what the plan for the rest of today is."

It was a lot, still, but-- well, they did have each other. They did have support. And it was time to really start making use of it.

The other three nodded, but even as Castle and Husk headed off, heads bent together as they talked, Tally lingered with a pensive look on his face. Earlier, he'd come back from going outside to check on something, and the expression he'd worn then had been one of shock. But there hadn't been any real chance to ask why before. "Heavy thoughts?" Shiv asked, as something as a prompt.

"I think the Organas have a way to save Maul from the Jedi Council," Tally answered, without preamble, though the tentative note in his voice was a little worrying. "I don't mean-- just this, Shiv. I mean forever. I think they have a way to give him his freedom."

Shiv blinked, shocked. "--what?"

Tally held up the datapad he'd been carrying around, looking him in the eyes. "What Bail's been working on. I'm still trying to get my head around it, but-- I think they came up with an answer. It's a long shot, it's dangerous, it involves us and a lot of things have to happen, in the right order, for it to come together for even a chance of success." A beat, and then he knotted his jaw for a moment and finished, "But the thing scaring me silly is-- I don't know if Maul's capable of taking a chance like this right now. And I don't know if he'll get any opportunity to take it later."

Shiv was meeting with Dani in a couple of hours, and he knew that it wasn't probably a good idea to get this into his head before he met her. Especially since he wasn't wholly sure that her affection for him would preempt her loyalties and attachments to Croft and Ti enough to keep Maul safe, not yet; he knew how she felt was real, and true, but not necessarily that it would extend from him to his chosen brother.

He also hated, in that moment, that he'd stepped into some river where the currents were so many that he couldn't just take it on faith that she would be a safe bet. Because they did need support. Because they couldn't do all of this alone, not if they wanted to make it out as intact as they could be. Because he did trust her with his body, even as much as he could with his heart, but still didn't know if he trusted her with his brothers.

"Tomorrow morning," he said; he tried to press a smile for Tally, though only to partial success. "I hate to leave you stewing for the night, but if I know now--"

"Your not-girlfiend might find out? You can't tell me you've got a loose tongue," Tally said back, though it was with a hint of a smirk.

Shiv tapped the side of his head, after snorting at the double entendre. "I want to keep everything as honest as I can get it, with her and with us. If there's nothing there to hide right now, I'd feel better."

Tally nodded at that, then rubbed his hand back over his hair. "At least I can talk to Zan about it. It's something he's already in on."

"Zan?" Shiv asked, and even with every damn thing on his shoulders, his mouth started pulling into a wicked grin at the casual, familiar way Tally just namedropped his new friend.

"Don't you even kriffin' start," Tally shot back, shoulder bumping him on his way past to head inside.

Still, he was grinning a touch even as he did. And that was good enough for Shiv, for now.
Waking up had been anti-climactic.

The universe still existed. The galaxy still existed. Somehow, Maul had almost expected it not to; even though he had been briefly awake here or there, the past several days, little of it had stuck in time or context. Only Rabbit; only the loss of. Somehow, he had expected the devastation to radiate out from Felucia and obliterate everything, no matter how illogical that expectation was.

It felt galaxy-ending. It felt like it should have been galaxy-ending.

Everyone seemed pleased to see him awake and oriented again; Maul did his best to stumble through information dumps and reassurances, and little of it stuck. His arm would heal. His face, which had only taken scattered second-degree burns and mostly first-degree, already had. Some of his organs would; not all. He was one step closer to losing more of his organic body, if his cybernetics didn't short at the wrong time and kill him. He listened to all of that, but he didn't really care, beyond a sort of numb acceptance.

He would have given his very life to keep Rabbit in the galaxy. And that would have hurt less than this did.

He listened to Tally and Frayus -- both of whom were being gentle with him -- and then put it all back out of mind, mechanically nodding or shaking his head to acknowledge what he was expected to. He couldn't ignore Shiv's knowing look the same way, so while he waited to find out what they intended to feed him, he closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to see it, even if he could still feel it; turned his focus inward, falling back into patterns that had kept him breathing in the past, no matter how little he wanted to.

*Count your losses.*

The instinct predated Maul's memory. Before he had been old enough to form the permanent kind, he had learned to assess himself and the situation he was in, to the best of his abilities, anytime he was unaware for some length of time. To take stock; to figure out what was broken. Then, once he had, the next command would follow: *Get up.* Sometimes it was his own voice; sometimes Deenie's, sometimes his Master's. *Get up.* No matter how broken, *get up.*

A thousand awakenings; here, broken ribs. A broken arm. Here, the sulfur and ash, poisoned air, the choking heat of Mustafar. Here, strange witches in red. Here, wilderness and his shadow-master. He didn't remember his Master's face or voice, but he remembered the taste of his Master's blood; of sinking his long, sharp canines into pale skin and feeling the salt and iron wash across his tongue; remembered spitting that blood back at the man in contempt, because if Maul was going to die there, then he would not do so meekly. One small triumph. He would lose it again in short order; find it again, years later, but in that moment it had been *his.*

*I am not yours.*

A thousand awakenings; here, gasping for air, throat bruised, a stone floor; here, limbs twitching, electricity sparking through nerve endings. Here, broken in two; a silver-metal access tunnel on Naboo, just a disoriented flash; here, the same, but floating in bacta. Sometimes through the thick fluid, blue or off-white; *Che, Kenobi,* his mind recounted now, in recognition. Then, only the loss
and shock of it, over and over, forgotten each time to fever or drugs or denial, remembered again on waking.

_Count your losses._

The sharp cutting points of his canines; intact, until he took them to his own forearms. Waking up after, too weak to open his eyes; still, he felt the tips with his tongue, now dulled so they could not so easily cut into flesh, his own or anyone else's. No fury left in him; no anger for it, for the Jedi taking them, it just _was_. Another loss, only one of every. Legs, guts, the natural defenses he'd always had; teeth and horns, now dulled and mind no better. He did not count the gunmetal legs as a gain, so much as acknowledgment that there was no reclaiming what was there before the cut.

It was the only time in his life when he did not measure a loss, then tell himself to get up. He had instead been driven to it.

Here, now, he had chased Rabbit all the way to Alderaan. Only then did he stop, and not of his own accord. He had no real memory of waking here before, but for once, recent -- Shiv telling him to go back to sleep -- though he thought he must have at some point or another, because he knew where he was, even asleep.

The Nightbrothers of Dathomir had a phrase: What humans would call half-hearted, they called _one-hearted_. But more than just encompassing the weariness and apathy, as half-hearted did, one-hearted also meant something more; it spoke to the emptiness in one's chest, the hollow ache of it, the feeling of being slow and suffering. Laboring. They spoke it for the deaths of little brothers to the harsh environment or to disappearances to the Sisters; they spoke it to describe what it was to _lose_.

Maul had never learned this phrase; had always adopted the words belonging to species which had only one heart and therefore could only halve it. Had he learned it, though, he would have known instantly that it applied to him now. He had never learned the words, but he knew how they _felt_.

He counted the losses. They numbered too many, but he counted them; some shared, some his own, some without words or explanation, only the sense of being whittled down again. He wondered, abstractly, how much of him there was left to be carved before he was nothing but metal and bone. He wondered how he could keep any of his promises when he was.

For one more moment, he went back to Felucia.

The line of _before_.

_I don't know if I can do this_, he thought, the ghost echo of pain and fear and desperation giving way to realization, looking down into Rabbit's eyes as they started to peer into whatever was beyond them. To feel Rabbit's tears gather against his fingers; to feel the understanding and the desperation that existed within them both.

Rabbit looked back, somewhere on the shoreline between Maul and eternity.

_Don't forget me, okay? Take care of my brother?_

Maul could have begged him; could have cajoled or ordered or a thousand other things. Replayed the scenario even if only in his own mind, and tried to reach back to change the outcome; another attempt to fix it and another failure. Or he could have laid down there next to Rabbit, and closed his eyes, and followed.

But even now, even knowing how much this was going to hurt and how broken everything would be after, he found only truth; in the tears scalding and stinging his face and the feeling of the forever
of the loss, he found only truth.

*I love you. I'm proud of you.*

When Maul opened his eyes again, Raze was cradling his face and nuzzling their brows together, sniffling; when Maul got his good arm around Raze, the sniffling turned to sobbing.

Maul put his own wet face into Raze's shoulder and held on and kept breathing.
Into Gold, Part 3

Chapter Summary

Pieces of hope, and the final goodbye.

"Good morning, I already made the caf."

Tally blinked his eyes open to find Zan peering over the top of the couch at him, and it took him a few seconds to catch up. He'd been pretty beat when he finally walked the two and a half klicks to Zan's apartment, carrying his datapad and trying to focus on that instead of the fact that they would be burying Rabbit the following day; still, once he'd gotten there, he had barely given Zan a chance to greet him before bombarding the zabrak with questions.

To Zan's continued credit, he answered them as well as he could. But he'd also put together a snack and some kind of herbal tea meant to promote sleep and then offered to let Tally crash on his couch. Given that it was a very nice couch, Tally had accepted. He wasn't sure exactly when he'd fallen asleep, but it had hit him like a ton of duracrete when he had.

"Oh frip, what time is it?" he asked, sitting up and scrubbing at his eyes and then making a face because he'd forgotten to brush his teeth, a shot of panic firing through his chest at the idea he might have slept through the funeral.

Zan smiled at that, shaking his head. "You've got time. An hour or so."

Tally blew a long breath out, folding over his own knees, ending it with a groan of relief. Enough time to clean up, bolt down some caf, find some decent clothes maybe. There was already some temptation to fill part of that hour up with more discussion. Beyond the legal issues that went into freeing Maul -- whoa, kriff, the legal issues alone! -- there were all of the technical, ethical, biological and logistical issues that Tally wanted to grasp, and Zan was more deeply involved than he'd let on originally.

But even though Tally wanted to get right back into it, today was the day he was going to go help bury his little brother.

That realization stopped him cold, heart going heavy in his chest.

"You have a spare toothbrush by chance?" he asked, getting up and working over his face with both hands as he tried to pull his mind together and back on task, to put aside the ache in his chest.

"I've got a pack of preloaded disposable ones in the medicine cabinet." Zan was just regarding him with a kind of amused fondness, and Tally didn't know how he was supposed to feel about that look.

"How do you take your caf?"

"Uh-- straight black, thanks." Tally blew out another breath, trying to breathe off the stress, rolled his shoulders, then headed for the 'fresher. It was nicer than even the one on the Nest, and that one wasn't too bad as 'freshers went. He wished he had some clean clothes, but even a shower would be good, especially after the past day or two.

He didn't linger as long as he wanted to; when he came back out, there was a steaming mug sitting
on the kitchen island and Zan was dumping scrambled eggs on the plate. When Zan heard him coming out, he said, "The bacon is pre-cooked and reheated, but it's pretty good anyway. Do you have funeral clothes?"

It brought Tally up short, kind of. That Zan made him *breakfast*. Feeling off-balanced and flustered, he pulled the stool out from under the island counter, sat down and picked up the caf for a quick sip. "No. I mean, we have civvies that we've collected, but--"

"We're pretty close to the same size. I probably have something suitable in my closet." Zan set the plate and silverware down in front of him, offering him a grin that made Tally's face go warm. "Let me go look while you eat. If you don't want to walk, I can give you a ride to the palace, too."

"What?" Tally asked, then immediately winced at himself. Of course, he continued to compound his own awkwardness by trying to explain, "I mean-- uh-- I mean-- that's a lot. Of-- stuff."

"It's not." Zan patted him on the back, shaking his head and heading towards his bedroom.

*Kriff, I'm an idiot,* Tally thought, but that didn't stop him from watching Zan walk away.

For Shiv, morning started both quieter and less awkward.

He drifted awake in his assigned bedroom with the feeling of Dani's slim, strong fingers skimming through his hair; occasionally, her nails would rake lightly across his scalp and send goosebumps trailing down his neck and back. Since Tally was off with Zan, they had the whole, giant bed to themselves and after the tears and explanations and holding and talking, they'd made use of it, though not nearly so vigorously as times previous.

Shiv was honestly touched at how affected by Rabbit's loss Dani was. She explained how she'd helped him off the sidewalk on Corellia, how sweet she'd found him as he asked to be kept with his brothers; how just that little moment had impressed Rabbit on her mind as someone worthy of remembering and caring for. Her empathy for Shiv added to it; for all of them, really. Apparently, even Croft was upset by it, and that further calmed some of Shiv's own uneasiness about everything.

It was easy to paint all of the Jedi as out of touch, and Shiv still thought most -- if not all -- of them probably were, but he didn't think that was necessarily because they all wanted to be, or intended to be.

He didn't end up telling her anything about Maul's current plight, beyond that he'd been hurt on Felucia too and was very good friends with the Alderaanian royals, but the whole evening had done a lot to soothe Shiv's lesser worries, anyway.

"Morning," he said, finally, reaching up to brush his fingers through her bed-wild curls.

"Yeah, it is," Dani said back, a teasing little grin tugging on the corners of her mouth, as she leaned up and pressed a kiss to his jaw. Then her face got more somber; the morning light reflecting off of the ceiling turning her eyes a smoky dark violet that Shiv found achingly beautiful. "Are you sure it's okay for me to be there? I know-- how tight-knit you guys are. I don't want to intrude."

"Yeah, I'm sure." Which, Shiv mostly was. Dani wasn't an unknown, she wasn't brand new to them.
And Shiv wanted her at the funeral, especially because she seemed to want to go to say goodbye and pay her respects. He smiled, sad but honest, and kissed right between her eyebrows. "You might even get a hug off of Castle for helping us on Llanic, and he doesn't give those to just anyone."

That got Dani to smile back for him. Then she rolled free of his arm, only to straddle him and rest her hands on his chest; the feel of her there was enough to make Shiv's heart beat hard, never mind what the rest of him was doing.

It might have seemed incongruous, given how heavy the conversation had been the night before; the reminder of what they were going to do today. But it didn't feel that way; instead, it felt like life. Like the celebration of, in the face of grief. A reminder that he was alive, and not alone; not out there, with his brothers, or in here with her.

"Well, if we shower together--" she started, then bit her lip and grinned around it.

"We can conserve water?" Shiv asked back, gasping when she shifted her weight, but not getting distracted from sliding his hands up her thighs. "That's the most cliché line I've ever been handed, Daaineran."

"Conserve time, smartass," she shot back, dropping her chin and looking down at him, eyes shifting dark. "So we have more time for this."

"Shared shower it is, then," Shiv said, and grinned, and then laughed as he teased that cute little squeak out of her that he never got tired of hearing.

Tango's morning was less physical than Shiv's, but more awkward than Tally's. At least, that was what he would have said, if anyone had explained what his brothers were doing and asked him.

Raze was still sleeping cuddled up to his side, but Tango finally pulled out his datapad and looked at the notifications from the JGFA. It wasn't that he felt like getting back into writing, or anything else, exactly; it was that he felt oddly lonely, even here and surrounded by his brothers. Even with Raze's head on his shoulder and the arm tucked around him.

Well, maybe not lonely. More-- cut off. Isolated. He knew it wasn't accurate, because he could go out after the funeral and go around Aldera and soak in the life of people who weren't bought-and-owned soldiers for awhile; still, it felt like losing Rabbit had cut off all connection to the galaxy that he'd cultivated, and he missed the people he'd been slowly making friends with on the forums. He missed feeling like he was valued outside of the GAR for something, even if it was just telling stories for people scattered across the stars.

He missed feeling like a person, instead of a tangled ball of grief, and guilt, and loss. Instead of trying to breathe through his despair all of the time.

First, he opened the comments on the story he'd posted in the early morning before Felucia. They started off cheerful and upbeat; gushing praise and lots of twinkling stars and hearts interspersed with the comments. They were all positive and encouraging and excited. His favorites were the ones that went on and on about what they thought was gonna happen with Khameir and Tanner, what they hoped for the future, what part of the story was their favorite and why. MycaBlue's were so sweet and enthusiastic that even now, it kinda made Tango get misty-eyed.
But then, they started getting more serious.

*I'm so, so sorry for your loss. We love you. Please don't forget that we love you, we're here if you need us.*

All of them followed that theme. Tango realized, looking at the timestamps, that those comments came after he had posted on the forum.

He didn't know what to feel about that. He'd kind of come looking hoping for an escape, but--

He chewed his bottom lip, blinked the tears away, and read them; the tears cooled as they dripped off of his jaw and landed on the front of his t-shirt. People who hadn't commented before on his stories came to add to the chorus of how much he was cared for, and how sorry they were for his loss. People who had been reading for awhile told him in detail how much his stories had touched them; recounting favorite parts from the whole series.

Some told him about how his stories were helping them through their own bad times. Even though he'd only been writing for a short time, comparatively. How good it was, to feel hopeful about something when the galaxy was so kriffed up.

Tango read, and cried. Read the comments, then the responses to his forum posting; another deluge of love and sympathy.

Someone even commissioned a piece of art to go with his story of Tanner’s and Khameir’s first kiss. Tango didn't follow the link to the new forum thread yet, not feeling ready for it, but he was awestruck by that.

Finally, he noticed that the private message function had four new notifications on it and opened it.

**PM from MycaBlue, 1.2 weeks ago at 14:16:**
*I'm so sorry about your brother, StarDancer. I've been crying since I saw your forum post. Please PM me if I can help in any way, okay? I don't have any siblings, I don't know what you must be feeling, but if you're lonely, I'm here to listen.*

**PM from MycaBlue, 5 days ago at 08:11:**
*I imagine you're really busy right now. I hope you're hanging on. I just wanted to let you know I'm here and I've commissioned an artist to draw for you, because I'm really awful at anything more complicated than stick figures. You don't have to look at it or anything, but I wanted you to have it when you come back, if you come back. If that's not okay, let me know when you can, and I can have them keep it private?*

**PM from MycaBlue, 3 days ago at 23:22**
*Still thinking about you. You're not alone, and you are loved, and I hope wherever you are, you have people with you who let you know that.*

Tango set his datapad down, just to hold his hand over his own quivering mouth, the tears falling so thick he couldn't see properly past them anyway.

Because he had been lonely. Because he still was, in some ways. Because if he'd broken from the Wolf Pack, maybe he could have drawn the vultures off of the base before they dropped their bombs. Because the seat next to his on the Nest was supposed to be Rabbit's, and now it was never going to be again.

Because even though he knew his brothers loved him, he didn't know how to tell them that he had
been so fripping happy to be flying combat and cover on Felucia that he had been happy during the moment his little brother had died and had been flying just above the smoke while it happened, oblivious and stupid and--

He was sobbing hard enough by then to wake Raze, who immediately moved to shift their positions; Tango found himself buried in Raze's arms, guilty and wretched and hardly able to breathe as he cried, and therefore didn't get a chance to read MycaBlue's last message--

**PM from MycaBlue, yesterday at 21:56**

Still here, StarDancer. We still love you, and we're not going to stop, even if you don't come back. I promise. That's the most important part of all this.

I was talking to Shera (LiterallyHorny's real name, she said I could use it here) and we got to thinking. My name's Mycaylah, by the way, but I really do go by Myca in real life, without the blue part. I know you probably can't answer this, and that's okay if you can't, because the last thing either of us wants to do is get you into trouble. But we were talking about your stories and how real that they seem, if that makes sense. And how you got into that forum-brawl over Khameir's height because you said he wasn't as tall as we were making him. And some other things.

Wow, this is getting long, and I am so sorry. But we also started looking into other things, like what's really up with the clone troopers. How they don't actually have Republic citizenship, how they don't even get paid like citizen soldiers do. The news doesn't talk about that stuff, but there are people talking about it in some places, and we were wondering?

Are you a clone trooper?

I'm sorry, I know that's probably really forward, and again, you definitely don't have to tell us. Especially if it gets you in trouble. But you're a really amazing writer, StarDancer, and you're a really sweet person, and if we can help you, we want to. We really do.

Love,
Myca and Shera
--not yet, anyway.

"This particular yellow is the color of mourning, here. And it also stands for courage, too," Smarty said, unzipping the garment bag and revealing his shirt, trousers, socks and shoes, all laid out neatly.

Misty looked up from where he was buttoning up his own shirt, which was the same yellow-gold color as Smarty's, and Smarty tried to smile for him. There hadn't been time for the royal tailor -- they actually had a professional tailor on staff -- to come up with individual outfits for all of them on such short notice. But the tailor -- Mari Redstone, a beautiful woman with almost black skin and buzzed short hair with patterns cut into it -- had taken a group of them out to pick out clothes for them and their brothers off the rack, on behalf of the Organas, on the Palace Boulevard in Aldera.

Misty and Brody had mostly been quiet as they went, caught up in their own thoughts. Smarty, though, had taken the opportunity to distract himself from all of this grief by asking about the cultural symbolism of color on Alderaan. A lot of planets had their own historical or traditional meanings for different colors, and he was curious about Alderaan's specifically, since Rabbit had been dressed in a
long, belted yellow-gold, fitted silk tunic over white, loose silk trousers. No shoes or socks, though. No other adornments.

She had confirmed that the yellow-gold was the traditional mourning color, but had clarified that it also stood for courage. It was one of the colors of House Antilles for both reasons; the other was white. "The white symbolizes peace; most Elder houses of Alderaan have some variation of white or silver in their house colors after our civil war. The silk is used because it's a sustainable, biodegradable fabric and because it's considered beautiful."

"What color should we wear with our gold?" Smarty had asked, as she led them through the store that had willingly stayed open late to let them look.

"You have a choice. Black is often worn; it denotes humility and honor, among other things." Mari had pulled a shirt off of the rack and held it up to Smarty, eying it carefully, maybe trying to see if it would suit him. "Blue is often worn by those in service to others, and it also means hope. House Organa's blue and silver reflect that." Apparently, she didn't like the look of that one and then had selected another.

One by one, as she had picked the clothes and asked opinions on behalf of those who weren't there, she explained the colors of this world; red, for passion and sometimes love; green, for nature and renewal and growth; violet, for prosperity and tradition; orange, for simplicity and family. Sometimes, different shades could mean different things, though she did say that in normal, day to day functions, people usually just wore what appealed to them. It was only for formal occasions, or in artwork, that the themes became prominent.

Smarty couldn't say the outing was fun, but it was pleasurable in small ways. In learning new things about the world he was on, one of the Republic's founding worlds, and also one of the ones most dedicated to peace and equality.

Now, he finished trying to tame his hair -- and he wondered if Brody had shaved the full-on beard he was wearing now, or at least trimmed it -- and started pulling on the funeral clothes. He'd chosen black trousers and shoes, in the end. After everything, he couldn't see any reason to feel prideful right now.

It felt good to put them on. Carefully, so as not to wrinkle the fine fabric. There was a solemnness to dressing that made Smarty's heart ache and threatened his composure, and after he finished, he noticed Misty standing there dressed himself -- in gold and blue -- and staring out the window with his mouth trembling.

Hugging probably wasn't the best idea, given wrinkles and nice clothes, but Smarty was pretty sure Rabbit and everyone else would forgive them for it anyway.

*Don't hurt him,* Raze had begged Rancor silently, the night before. *Please don't hurt him.*

It had been the first time Rancor and Maul had come face-to-face, or so Raze had heard, since being on the *Resolute.* Raze had heard from Castle what had happened there; Rancor, blaming Maul for what happened. And Maul just taking the punishment without even trying to defend himself.

It was the first time since, and they met on either side of Rabbit's body.
It had never occurred to Raze to blame their Lieu. He and Rabbit had both come up with the plan to go to the base together, and he was the one who had abandoned his brother, instead choosing to haul another injured brother out of the way, sure in that moment that Rabbit would be fast enough to reach cover. That, being the fastest of them, he wouldn't need someone pointing him in the right direction. Raze'd been obsessing about it since then, too, all at once feeling guilty for it and trying to make the pieces fit. He couldn't remember enough of the base thanks to his concussion, either, which meant trying to paint in big, blank pieces on a wrecked canvas and not having any kind of luck. It felt like drowning, Raze thought, or at least it felt like what he thought drowning would be like.

But Rancor had pinned the blame on Maul, and then they were face to face, 'cause Maul had finally gotten permission to get up and move around and the first thing he'd wanted to move to do was go see Rabbit, and Raze had been terrified of the idea that it might break out into some kinda awful one-sided fight, and he'd have to see both these guys he loved hurt in about a thousand different ways.

Please, he had begged, in his mind, at his only remaining little brother.

He didn't know if Rancor saw it, but Rancor didn't go on the attack. He had only said, after the tense silence had lasted too long, "I want to request a transfer."

Raze had already known that was coming, but it didn't stop the tears from welling up in his eyes at hearing the words. He had chewed on his lip, debating on whether to speak up and let it all tumble out of his mouth, how much guilt he himself carried so maybe then Rancor wouldn't go, maybe Raze would be transferred instead or-- or--

"Are you sure?" Maul had asked, voice quiet and heavy and tired-sounding.

Rancor had nodded, jaw clenching. "Yeah. As soon as possible. Sir."

The tone wasn't mean, but Raze could still see the impact the words had, and then Maul had nodded back and turned and made his way back out. No limping anymore, but he looked like he could barely stand under the weight of everything anyway.

Once he was gone, Raze had sniffled and said, quivering, "I shoulda grabbed Rabbit first, I just-- I thought he was so fast, he'd get under cover before I could, I know I thought that, I mean, I don't remember everything because I got hit in the head, but I know I woulda thought that--"

"I can't, Raze," Rancor had said back, interrupting him. Then he'd shaken his head and dropped it. "I can't. I just-- can't."

After that, Raze had left; he didn't know what else to say, but he got that Rancor couldn't handle his explanation and he even got why. So, he had walked with Maul for awhile, until Bail came and led him to his room, and then he'd crawled into bed and sobbed until Husk had shown up to cuddle on him. When he woke, Husk was gone, and he had been sleeping against Tango, and Tango was crying too.

Now, it was only a half-hour until they were going to go put Rabbit into the ground and Raze was just trying to hold himself together, even as he was trying to hold everyone else together, and he still felt like they were falling apart. He tried to think of what Tally had said, that he didn't need to hold it together, but it wouldn't stick in his head no matter how hard he tried.

At least Husker had come back, and the three of them -- him and Tango and Husk -- all got dressed together, all varying themes of gold and black, just like their armor, but absent the red.

Maybe we were always meant to be mourning, Raze thought, as he straightened his shirt and tried to
get used to the nice shoes that were stiff on his feet and to keep his tears under control.

"C'mon, I'll do the drivin'," Husker said, breaking into that thought like a lifeline thrown at sea, tone gentle even for the gruffness of his damaged voice.

On Coruscant, Ahsoka straightened up in her fatigues to attention -- something she had to learn on the fly, how to stand at attention like a soldier -- and said, "Corporal Tano, reporting for duty, sir," to Captain Rex, who was looking at her with mixed emotion and pride.

"--first thing tomorrow morning, we're voting on the Military Leave Act. I want to see you, but I need to go over it one more time," Padmé said, hiding her nervousness, but allowing her regret to show through. Anakin could get pushy when he wanted to spend time with her, and she didn't want to spend the next hour on the comm line trying to reassure her husband that she still loved him, she did want to see him, she just didn't have the time this moment.

But Anakin didn't push, this time. He looked disappointed, but then he nodded. "Yeah. Tomorrow night, then?"

"That would be great," Padmé answered, not wanting to show her relief any more than she wanted to show her nerves.

"I'll let you go, then. Maybe go watch Snips start her abbreviated Basic." Anakin smiled a little, sadly, then he said, "Thank you for doing this. You're amazing, you know? And this'll save lives, so thank you."

When they signed off, Padmé was left to smile in quiet, breathless wonder.

On the Resolute, most everyone had already been given leave to the base while the group underwent repairs and upgrades, but a line of brothers stood witness as the incinerators aboard the ship fired, taking the chance to say goodbye.

On Alderaan, it would be the very last time they would all be together as a squad. No matter what
happened from there, one of them would forever be missing from their number.

Husker knew he wasn't the only one who had that wrenching thought. It reflected in the faces clustered around the neat-edged hole in the ground where Rabbit's casket would be lowered. The casket itself was made to dissolve into the world; in the top, over Rabbit's chest, was a seed and a nutrition package for the tree that would grow over him; for a tree whose roots would cradle his bones until even they were a molecular part of Alderaan. The grave itself wasn't that deep, either; deep enough that weathering and flooding wouldn't expose it, but not so deep that the tree couldn't grow.

Rancor had chosen a valley cedar that would reach for the very stars, the tallest type native to this area. It would take it hundreds of years to reach that potential, and it would be nurtured and protected as it did, living in this meadow until the meadow someday became a forest.

Husk found that fitting.

"We figured out how to trick the comb sensors early," Rancor said, quietly, referring to the stacked units they had all slept in when they were growing; their isolated little holes, which when closed left behind a white, sad wall with round hatches, nothing that would mark which individual slept there. "I don't remember exactly what age we were when we started doing that, but we figured out how to trick them into thinking that we were in our own bunks, and then we would climb into one of the unassigned ones together at lights-out, and since everything was automated, no one saw us besides the rest of our batchers. And they never told anyone. Some of them did the same, once we showed them how."

The wind rustled the relatively sparse trees in this area of the memory park. Husker watched Rancor's face; took in the lost look in his eyes, as he spoke.

"We whispered. We gossiped. We argued. We never fought, though, not really." Rancor wasn't looking at any of them, he was just staring at the casket where his brother was. "I'd give him part of my rations sometimes, when he was extra hungry. He'd slow himself down sometimes, just so I wouldn't be left behind. We had other brothers -- other batchers -- we'd team up with to play pranks on different platoons. Most of them are dead now too, though." There was a beat, then he said, "I don't know how to be the one left behind. I don't know what tomorrow feels like. Or-- the day after. Or forever. I don't know how to live with 'never again.' I just think it's kriffin' unfair that I have to try anyway."

On the other side of the grave, Shiv's mouth had tightened; his girlfriend, Dani, had her fingers laced through his, and was making no effort to wipe the tears off of her own face.

There was no formal speech written or anything. No formal ceremony, beyond what they had already done. No prayers; they knew no gods.

Rancor had fallen quiet there, and since the silence weighed more than the casket, Husk spoke up, "I know most of you don't really like the Mandalorian connection us older clones have. And I know most of you don't like the whole 'marchin' far away' thing, too. I used to, but nowadays, not so much."

At that, Tally nodded; across the way, Smarty did, too.

"But there's one part that I think applies here: *ni partayli, gar darasuum,* Husk went on, reaching up to wipe a hand across his cheek. *I remember you, so you are eternal.* It's not the same thing as livin' with it, or-- and it doesn't do anything about the unfairness of it. But it's somethin'. There are thirty-two brothers he saved who will remember his name, long as they live. And there's us. I know
it's not enough, but it's important anyway."

Husk didn't know how wide-ranging that statement was, when he said it; he didn't know that Rabbit's name was circling the GAR, or that there was a small group of natural-born people crying for their fellow author's brother, even not knowing his name. He didn't much get the Force, or the concept of an afterlife, or any of that.

But he knew that it was the truth.

"It was one of two things he asked for," Maul said, surprising everyone, since he'd been so quiet. "To not be forgotten. The very last thing he asked was for me to take care of you," he added, looking Rancor in the eyes.

Rancor's chin wobbled, but he tipped it up anyway; his voice cracked as he said, "That's why you have to let me go."

Maul only nodded; resignation. Acceptance. "I know."

The quiet that fell this time felt somehow peaceful, and they stood in it for long moments, once again whole in their shared grief. And they remained that way as the moment came to put Rabbit into the ground, as they each helped shovel in the dirt. Whole, as they passed the shovels between them and wet the ground with their tears.

The golden morning light was bright like a promise of hope, if not now, then someday.

When the last shovelful was in place, Tango said, "Stories are immortal, little brother. We'll take yours with us to the end."

And, they would.
Chapter Summary

Some of the Blackbirds get their first taste of the dangerous, intricate plan to save Maul. Maul, meanwhile, is starting to find out that the only way out is through.

Chapter Notes

This has been in the works forever. The majority of the chapter is dialogue heavy, but I hope that it all makes sense. <3 Thanks to B_Radley for letting me borrow Dek Antilles!

"Don't look at me, I don't know what's going on, either," Brody said, scratching at his now-trimmed beard, his other hand wrapped around a big mug of caf. To their right, rain sheeted down the giant palace windows in the gray morning light, and up ahead was the conference room where they had been requested to attend a meeting.

Shiv grunted back an agreement; he was more awake than Brody because Dani was sticking around for the rest of their time on Alderaan, and waking up with her was both a pleasure and an athletic experience, but he was definitely feeling that ground-in exhaustion that came with piled-up crises. He wasn't sure why they had been summoned -- and why it wasn't the whole squad -- but he had a feeling it probably had to do with Maul, and as such, Shiv would most definitely be attending.

It had been two days since they buried Rabbit, and those two days had been largely spent trying to realign their view of the universe around the death of one of their own and the transfer of another. Tally spent a lot of it with Zan, and with Queen Breha's nephew Dek; Castle, Husk, Misty, Brody and Smarty had gone out the night before to explore Aldera. Tango, surprisingly, spent time with the Queen, kind of camping in her office when he wasn't busy; Raze, too, though he was also pretty glued to Maul's side otherwise.

And Shiv spent it around the palace, bouncing between Dani, his squad and Maul.

(Dani had gotten a hug from Castle. And from Raze. And several questions from Smarty about Zeltron culture and her empathic resonance, which she answered with humor and grace. It had made Shiv smile and feel proud, though he wasn't sure why.)

Rancor's transfer orders -- still within Croft's 332nd, but a different unit -- had come through and he was leaving the next morning. In the end, Shiv had helped Maul handle that part of things, but Maul had done most of the work requesting it himself; they had sat with a datapad, Shiv keeping their shoulders together, and when it was done and they transmitted it, he pressed his brow to Maul's temple for long moments, a silent reminder that whatever happened, they were in it together.

He still knew that it hurt; Maul was so quiet that it was worrying everyone, but he was healing and he was still breathing, so Shiv refused to let go of the faith he would continue to. And in the meantime, he himself found as many moments as he could to remind Maul that he wasn't alone in
this, and knew everyone else was doing the same.

Now, they rounded a slow curve and found Tally waiting outside of the conference room, looking annoyingly awake. "It's a good thing there's a caf maker in there, isn't it?" he asked, smirking at them in their drowsy state.

"Yep," Brody just answered, saluting with his mug as he passed Tally and headed into the room.

Tally looked back over his shoulder, the smirk softening to a smile, then looked back at Shiv, who had paused there in an attempt to mentally prepare himself for whatever was coming. "Bail's going to comm in when we ping him, if need be; we might not need to. Did you hear that the Military Leave Act passed? It was closer than anyone sane is comfortable with, but it finally passed late last night on the second try."

"Yeah, Dani told me," Shiv said, rubbing his eyes and finally straightening up. "I'm guessing this is gonna be about Bail's plan?"

"Yeah." Tally's look went pensive anew, and he fidgeted there; Shiv wondered if his sharp-eyed alertness was him taking stims again, but figured it was probably just nerves. "I don't know how I feel about Maul not being here, because even though we're only talking chances and possibilities, it's about him, but--"

"But you're worried that it's too much to put on him right now," Shiv finished, after Tally trailed off.

Tally nodded, mouth going straight.

"I think that if we feel the need to, we can always call him," Shiv said, after several moments where he thought about it. He tended to have a pretty high amount of faith in Maul's ability to stand up under even a nigh-impossible burden, but he also knew that Tally had his own reasons to worry and they were informed and legitimate. "We won't know right now, anyway, so--"

Tally blew a breath out, then nodded. "Yeah," he said, turning back to head into the room. "Well, c'mon, Smarty's been practically gnawing on the table since he got here."

Shiv followed; he was definitely curious about the roster attending. Smarty was their research genius and Brody was their slicer, and what both of those had to do with this yet-unknown plan wasn't hard to get a feel for, but it implied a pretty wide effort. Sitting at the table was Tally's crush -- even if Tally hadn't figured it out yet -- and Queen Breha's nephew, who looked to be no older than Rabbit had been. Unsurprisingly, Frayus was there, too.

"Medical and technical. And me," he thought wryly, as he found a chair and settled into it, looking around and offering a bit of a grin. "This everyone?"

"Yeah." Tally sat down again, picking up the datapad he had sitting on the table and taking another deep breath as he interfaced it with the holoprojector on the table. Immediately, the crest of House Organa popped up, and Tally asked, "Have you guys ever heard of Spaarti Creations?"

Shiv hadn't. And apparently Brody hadn't.

But it seemed Smarty had, because his eyes went saucer wide and he breathed out, "Oh shit."

"That is exactly what I said when I first skimmed the plan," Tally said, finally cracking a real grin. He tapped a few things into the datapad, and what looked like a schematic came up on the projector. It reminded Shiv a bit of the tech on Kamino in form, though-- not quite. "Bail figured that we have two options, and both of those options require a lot of work -- and a lot of it illegal as hell -- in order
for either of them to have a chance of success. The first is that we upgrade Maul's cybernetics. The second is this--" He gestured, and Shiv likely wasn't the only one who saw his hands trembling. "--where we clone the replacement for them and restore his organic body."

There was a moment of silent shock, then Brody and Smarty started talking over each other; Brody actually stood up, like he'd been hit with a stun stick in the ass, just to gesture. "--takes ten years to grow a clone--" "--can even afford--" "--ban on selling cloning tech to private--" "--maturation rates wouldn't match--"

"Guys, c'mon, let Tally have the floor," Shiv said, raising his voice to break into it, and trying to pretend his heart wasn't hammering in his chest hard enough to feel it in his toes. Dek was looking startled, but Zan was smiling some to himself, and Frayus was watching with a similarly amused expression, though not unkind.

Brody dropped back into his chair, mouth hanging open. *He's definitely awake now,* Shiv thought, with his own little, wavering grin.

"The Spaarti cloning cylinder can apparently clone an entire functional person -- with flash training -- in a year," Tally said, then held up his hand, "but before we get into that -- and we will get into that -- we need to discuss what would have to happen to even offer any option."

"Control over Maul's cybernetics," Smarty said, once he'd picked his jaw up off of the table, face going more serious. "Nothing happens if we can't disable that kill switch without killing him in the process."

Tally nodded there, solemnly. "Got it in one."

"In theory, we could try to do so without the control for them," Zan said, likewise looking serious himself, "but going in blind, trying to figure out how to breach the box in question, would be an unacceptable risk to his life. Tally had mentioned that an EMP took them offline once, but that he doesn't know if the security measures were also offline, or if those, unlike the rest of the cybernetic platform, were shielded to prevent that. I think they would have been, if the point of them is to keep control over Maul."

"I'm almost sure they're shielded from an EMP and that was the only reason why the rest of the platform was able to come back online after that hit on Big Murder Mountain," Tally added. "Another problem is-- we're not even sure if their functioning is linked to the mundane systems. So, if we do take it offline, we might be taking the limited life support offline too, which would dramatically cut how much time we'd have to work in order to keep Maul from going septic and dying. Barring cutting him in half again -- and I don't think his body could take that kind of shock now, never mind that it's kriffing horrible -- our only safe option is wresting control of them from the Jedi somehow."

The number of moving parts in this plan had Shiv scrambling, but he took a breath and tried to absorb them, reaching out and pulling a spare datapad across the table. "Then, let's get methodical. If we're going to collaborate on a way to make this workable, we need to be methodical."

Smarty nodded in emphatic agreement. "Point one: Who has control and how do we get it?"

Shiv felt a grin tug his lips as he typed that right into the datapad; Tally, though, was the one who answered, "The Jedi Council, probably the head of the Temple Guard, but also-- Vokara Che. She's been taking care of Maul since he landed in Temple custody, and out of anyone, I think she's the one most likely to try to help him."
"But would she?" Brody asked, skepticism thick in the words. "I don't think we can just walk up and say, 'oh, yeah, you're part of the group holding our L-T as an illegal prisoner without any due process, how about you give us control of his cybernetics so we can do what you've had almost eleven years to do', can we?"

"I think she would help," Tally said, which surprised Shiv. "I think she cares about him. I cringe when I read his medical records, but that's not because she didn't do her best by him, just that-- her best is informed by being a Jedi healer. The thing is, I can't see of any way to ask her without it possibly getting back to the Council, because in the end, she's still a Jedi. And it might mean bringing Maul even more to her attention at a time when he can't afford to be flying on anyone's radar, let alone someone who controls whether he's deployed or not. If she's genuinely worried that being out here is dangerous to him, she'll pull him back first and ask questions later."

"That's a pretty big hurdle, Tally," Shiv said, as he typed in her name. "Almost insurmountable, unless we take a big risk and approach her."

"Couldn't Kenobi?" Smarty asked, frowning.

Tally shook his head. "He's been nudging her about upgrading Maul's cybernetics for awhile, but the Council's not hearing it; that doesn't give me a lot of confidence about her possibly going ahead with a clandestine plan to free him. And remember, she's also the Surgeon General of this army, so she's got a lot more to worry about than just Maul right now."

"You've got more than that to worry about yourselves," Frayus broke in. Before now, he'd just been watching under his bushy white eyebrows. "Note it down, don't get caught on it. This isn't my area of expertise, but if you get hung up on the first point, you'll never work out how to handle the rest."

"After control of the cybernetics, we'd need-- kriff," Shiv said, trying to think it through. If they did have control of those, suddenly there was endless possibility, and it was overwhelming to even contemplate. "He wouldn't have to answer to the Jedi anymore."

"His commission is through the Order." Smarty drummed his fingers on the table. "Like he said himself, he's under their banner. If we remove their control of him, there's nothing to stop them revoking his commission."

"Bail's got a plan for that," Zan said, half-grinning. "Which is where you--" he added, pointing to Brody, "--would come into it."

Tally nodded there and hit the datapad; onscreen, there was a backdated refugee asylum form for Alderaan on it, in Maul's name. "Yeah. We would need to slice into the GAR's databases -- all of them, including backups -- and establish him as a presence outside of the Jedi Order, backdated to when he was first on the battlefield of Christophsis, if we can manage that. Or at least immediately after Zigoola, if not. This is where we start getting into the wholly illegal things that would have to take place for any of this to work. Bail and Queen Breha are ready to claim him -- that refugee form is already in their system, just hidden, and its timestamps are all correct -- but that still comes back to getting the Jedi to release control of him."

"Oh kriff. Oh kriff." Smarty moaned, burying his face in his hands, sounding like he was on the edge of either a laugh, or a sob, or both. "They've been holding him illegally themselves this whole time. If we remove the control of the cybernetics and establish him as a citizen here, what can they do? Go admit, 'oh, we've been holding him prisoner without trial since Naboo'? Even without Republic citizenship, Maul's entitled to due process in the Republic, so they'd have to admit they broke the law."
"They could do a lot, in terms of making our lives miserable, and his," Brody pointed out. "Even if he's established as a Republic officer, the Jedi still are the ones in control of the GAR, with the Senate's authority."

"But Kenobi's the head of the entire Third Systems Army," Shiv cut in. He knew that Kenobi and Maul were currently on the outs, though he wasn't sure why, but he also thought that Kenobi would shield Maul regardless of that. "And Bail is on the Security Committee. And even the Chancellor himself plays light touch when it comes to Alderaan. Kenobi controls his own troop movements and he's been standing between Maul and the Council's will for this long; I don't think he'd stop. In fact, I think he'd push even harder."

For a merciful moment there, silence fell, as they all chewed over that part of things. Yeah, all of it was dependent on getting control of the cybernetics, but even just establishing a legal presence for Maul was a huge mission in itself.

*And it will be a mission*, Shiv thought, rubbing over his own adrenaline-fueled heart. *Already is, I think.*

The date on that asylum form was nearly a year old. Bail and Breha Organa had been putting pieces into play before the Blackbirds were even assembled, to try to save Maul. It was--

He didn't know if there was only one word for it. It was devious. And incredibly damned gutsy. And it was beautiful and painful and so filled with hope and love that it made his eyes burn.

He took the moment to add more subsections on the list he was creating on the datapad and tried to calm down. "All right. Gain control of Maul's cybernetics. Then, establish him in the GAR's systems as a citizen of Alderaan by way of refugee asylum status. Then, find a way to establish him as a member of the GAR by way of Alderaan's volunteer militia, including inventing training records so that his Grand Army commission comes across as valid?"

"The Organas were already on that, too," Tally said, clicking to the next projection, which showed records covering all of those things. "They have that paperwork in their system, too -- also currently hidden and waiting -- for reveal when we can manage to disseminate those records into the Republic's systems. Though, they did have to fudge the dating on that one to make it look like the records were already there around Zigoola, in regards to his service record and later commission as a second lieutenant. He was listed as infantry, then they have him having attended an abbreviated Alderaanian officer candidate program during that span of time between Zigoola and our assembly as a squad."

"That's a lot of slicing," Brody murmured; he looked scared out of his wits, but game. "And I'd have to erase the Jedi Temple's internal records of him, too, and all of that within the same timeframe. And I don't know how I'd get to their backups."

"Good thing you've already figured out how to get into the Temple system once, isn't it?" Tally asked, offering a reassuring if nervous grin. "We can work out how to get the backups as we go."

Shiv smiled for the reminder of their first, unofficial mission as a squad. "We'll have to have a crate of caf pods ready."

"I think Radio Anarchy would be able to help with the Republic systems. If they can help me do that, I can take a crack at the Jedi Temple's," Brody said, after heaving a breath out.

"Okay. So, once we do manage to gain control, then make him legal across the board-- then what?" Shiv asked, glancing around the table.
"He chooses which option he wants; either an upgrade of those cybernetics, or a restoration of his organic body," Tally answered, quietly. "If it's the first, that's pretty fast and simple comparatively." He moved to the next presentation, where there were ten different models of cybernetic platforms on the projector. "Organa's already done his homework. All of these models are capable of standing up to heavy, wartime use; some of them are a lot heavier than Maul's current cybernetics, but some of them are only a bit more and are just made of much tougher materials. None of them have quite the level of articulation his current platform has. But he's going to have cortosis shelled onto whichever one he would choose, if he chooses this."

"What's cortosis?" Brody asked, brow furrowing.

"A really, really expensive mineral that absorbs energy," Smarty said, offhandedly. "Supposedly, it can even stop a lightsaber strike. The fibers of the refined version are kinda fragile, but paired with heavy duty alloys underneath? He'd be a hell of a lot more protected than he is now."

"Is there anything you don't know?" Shiv shook his head with a chuckle.

Smarty grinned back, sharply. "Plenty. But when I achieve maximum knowledge absorption, I plan on taking over the galaxy."

"Fair enough."

"Of the two possibilities here, just upgrading his cybernetics would probably only take a couple weeks. It's still going to involve surgery, it's still going to mean recovery time and an adjustment period, but it's in a lot shorter timeframe than the other option," Tally said, pulling them back on task, resting on his forearms on the table. "We can also modify them to help compensate for the organ damage he suffered post-Felucia, though that's not a permanent fix."

"We could probably give him replacement organs, if need be," Zan added, when he caught Shiv's frown at that. "The U of A has a small-scale organ builder, though it works on stem cell technology and builds from a map. It's not enough to replace anything large, but it could build new kidneys. We could replace his at the same time as we upgrade the cybernetic platform, if that's what he wants."

"Or that." Tally fidgeted with the datapad, a wry smile on his mouth. "I hadn't thought of that."

They were dancing around the big possibility there; Shiv could practically smell it, the nervous tension, so he decided to just go ahead and pull it out into the light. "So, what if he takes option two?"

"That's where we become considerably more useful," Zan answered, chuckling, gesturing between himself, Frayus, Dek and Tally.

All this time, Dek Antilles had been quiet, watching them with sharp, dark eyes and fiddling with something soft and textured in his hand, rhythmically running his thumb nail over the texture. Something about that reminded Shiv of Raze a little bit, but he wasn't sure why; Raze, at least when he was feeling okay, was definitely not quiet. Now, though, he spoke up, "Doctor Frayus's original scans from the lieutenant's first visit to Alderaan included tissue samples. From that, it was no trouble building a full genetic profile. Having studied it, I think the Spaarti technology can be used to build a second body with negligible mutation, and with a likewise minimal chance of rejection to act as a donor."

"I'll just say straight up, I'm not comfortable with the idea of cloning our L-T just to kill the second one for parts," Smarty said, sitting up straight and looking deadly serious, right before Shiv was about to say it himself.
Dek shook his head, emphatically. "We're not looking to grow a functional clone for sacrifice. Beyond any legal issues, it's ethically against everything we believe in on this world."

Tally nodded. "Believe me, that was the first thing I worried about. I mean, obviously--" he said, gesturing between himself and Brody, Smarty and Shiv. "But the Spaarti cloning technology, paired with a cranscoc scientist, can be highly specialized to produce a-- shell, I guess you could say. No higher cognitive function of its own. Especially since, in order for this to even remotely work correctly, we'd have to actually have Maul himself provide the neural map; for a little while, if he agreed, he'd basically be one person controlling two bodies."

Shiv was getting more and more uneasy about this; about a thousand different horror scenarios jumped into his mind, and he held up his hand to ask for quiet while he tried to sort through them. And, too, to sort through whether it was his own life experience as a clone having any bearing on how he was feeling.

"You're going to have to explain it in plain terms for me," he finally said, when he had no luck whatsoever detangling what he was thinking or feeling.

"You can't transplant a brain," Zan said, taking a deep breath and speaking softly. "You can't even really transplant a head. I know it's been tried, but inevitably, so much goes wrong that what comes of it never amounts to anything good. That's one of the big reasons why we don't have people running around immortal, simply switching into cloned bodies as they see fit. Likewise, the process of recording a person onto circuitry or organic matter only has limited applications. You can sometimes save pieces, but the essential person is lost."

Shiv nodded, and saw the others doing the same out of the corner of his eye. "Still with you."

"Right." Zan gave him a thin smile there. "Flash-training -- the act of imprinting a person's memories and skills onto another's brain -- is highly fraught because of that, be it from one natural-born person to another, or to a natural-born person onto a clone, or even from clone to clone. Flash training has been tried -- is still being tried, I suspect, in less reputable circles-- but the rate of failure and the amount of devastating neurological and psychological repercussions keeps it from becoming a common practice."

"That's why the Kaminoans grow us for ten years," Tally added, folding his arms on the table after scrubbing his face. "I might hate them, and I'm sure they tried flash-training early on, but even they realized that it was ultimately futile."

"So, how does this apply to Maul?" Smarty asked, still looking wary. Shiv couldn't blame him.

"If we grow a clone of the lieutenant that has intact cognitive functioning, the clone will be a person and entitled to live a life of his own," Dek said, taking it up from Tally. "If we grow a clone without any manner of cognitive functioning, it would be a body, but the wiring for that body, for lack of a better term, wouldn't be able to work with his current brain. We can't transfer the brain. Therefore, the option is that we grow the body and block it from developing into a person, but through a highly detailed series of sensors, have that body respond to him as if it's his own. It wouldn't be a perfect translation -- as Doctor Yant said, there's never been a truly successful recording made of a person -- but it would likely be detailed enough that the new, donor body, and the part of it we would take to restore the lieutenant, would be able to work with his current form. Given he has most of his spine, the current neural map would be enough."

This was still pretty far over Shiv's head, but he thought he was getting enough of it to understand the broad strokes anyway. It sort of eased some of his worry that they weren't setting up for murder, at least.
"To use a really crude and damned uncomfortable comparison, it'd be like them building a duplicate droid with everything but a processor, then having the first droid's processor run both to make sure it's functioning," Smarty explained, when he saw Shiv's expression. "Except, there aren't enough wires to just make a copy of the first droid, so they take apart the duplicate and use it to rebuild the first after it's been tried and tested."

"So, a year?" Brody asked, looking still-uneasy himself.

"If you're not growing a person you intend to be functional, if you're essentially growing a shell, it can be done in three weeks," Dek said, pausing for a moment there to let them gape -- which, they did -- before continuing, "As a geneticist, I would have to closely monitor the process to watch for any mutations that could cause rejection or harm, but it can be done in three weeks. We're looking to replace what he's missing, and what's been badly damaged enough to warrant replacement, which entails considerably less risk than trying to clone a functional, independent person."

Every single piece of this plan just kept getting bigger and bigger. Shiv was half tempted to crawl into some dark cave and hide there in order to escape it long enough to process it, but enough of it was already whirling around the inside of his skull to make him want to see it through to the end. Then, maybe he could put the pieces together.

And he was already starting to worry -- deeply -- that Maul might reject both options. Because this was an extraordinary amount of effort for one person. Each piece of the plan alone was a feat; taken together, it was nearly astronomical. Maul wasn't likely to see the point, especially right now when he was on the rocks, and even if he could grasp the point, he wouldn't probably think he was worth it.

Shiv figured he woulda balked himself four steps back, looking at the amount of risk versus reward and the danger that it could bring down on the people who loved him enough to assume that risk anyway.

"I've never replaced half of a body," Zan was saying, breaking into Shiv's train of thought, "but I've done limb reattachment, tissue and bone grafting, and organ replacement. My big concern would be making certain everything aligned enough -- even clones have some variations on the paths crucial nerves and blood vessels take -- in order to be able to put him back together again. He would still need a neural mesh -- a much more sensitive one -- at the break in his spine, and it might require other, limited electronics to bridge the gaps, but even though the surgery would be a marathon, it's the least intimidating part of this whole process. If it failed, switching back to to the first option wouldn't be impossible; we could even have the base platform ready if things went awry during surgery."

"Where are we going to get the Spaarti cloning cylinder and a scientist, anyway?" Shiv asked, crossing his arms tight against his chest, mostly to make himself feel better. It helped, but not much.

"Good question. Privately owned cloning tech is illegal without Republic permission," Smarty added, frowning. "They outlawed it months ago. And it wasn't easy or cheap to get it before that, either."

"Uncle Bail already has it," Dek said, quietly. "He sold out his interest in his family's vineyard to his sisters and their husbands, and he sold off half of the stocks that had been held in trust for him. My aunt also contributed from her own funds. He managed to get the cylinder and contract with the scientist right before it was outlawed. I think he knew that the moratorium on cloning was about to go through and moved to get it."

"Oh frip." Brody buried his face in his hands, then dragged his hands back through his hair, sending
it even wilder. "So, he's already sitting on a highly illegal piece of tech? He's a senator!"

"His purchase of it goes beyond your lieutenant," Dek shot back; not mean, but definitely defensive. "Its medical applications, its research applications, go well beyond this. By putting a moratorium on cloning, the government has essentially stalled medical advancement in the areas of limb replacement, large organ replacement, and it's made researching gene therapy exponentially harder. After Lieutenant Maul, it will be put into service for conducting research in areas where single organs and scientific modelling can't possibly give us the answers we need. We wouldn't be able to disseminate that information until the legal climate changes, except covertly, but the knowledge would be there and ready."

"When it comes to tech like this -- cloning tech -- there's no clean answer. It can do good. It can be made to make armies of men to die for a Republic that doesn't consider them people, too," Tally interrupted right before Brody came up with a retort, shaking his head. "Either way, Bail already has the tech. Justify it however you want, he has it. It can be used to restore Maul's body to something nearly identical to what he woulda had, if Kenobi hadn't cut him in half. Debating about whether it should exist isn't the point right now. It exists. It can be used here."

There was something there -- in all of it -- that was still pinging on Shiv's mind. Something they hadn't brought up. He closed his eyes while they discussed the more mundane aspects of what a surgical effort like that might entail, stuff that he wouldn't be able to help with, and tried to get a lock on it.

It wasn't that Maul was a hybrid; if Dek thought he could successfully pull it off as a geneticist, then Shiv wasn't informed enough in the field to second-guess that. He'd leave that worry to the medical people. And even though Shiv's first big concern right now -- before the legality, before the ethics, before anything else -- was Maul's mental state, it wasn't that, either.

When it did come to him, in the memory of a crashing ship and the overwhelming power he'd brushed up against through Maul, it made him shiver.

"What about the Force?" he asked, accidentally interrupting Zan. "He's Force-sensitive. What would this do to that?"

"We don't know," Dek admitted, after a long moment where they all fell quiet and glanced around at each other. "There have been no studies done -- at least that I've had access to -- as to the cloning of Force-sensitives and the success rate. But in terms of organ replacement with organic tissue, sometimes even extensive -- a heart, lungs, kidneys, livers -- it didn't hamper their abilities enough to be notable."

"It might be it diminishes Maul's. It might negate it entirely. Or it might not change it. Hell, it might even increase it, since no one knows how the hell midichlorians attach themselves to us or what attracts more of them to certain people," Tally said, rubbing over his face. "It's another piece of a very large puzzle."

"So, forgive me for asking, but what good comes from offering that second option?" Shiv made himself ask, even though he instantly felt lousy for it. "I'm not saying that to be mean, guys, but that's what Maul's going to be thinking. If you're going to sell the idea to him even enough for him to consider it as an option, then you have to be able to point out what he could gain there that he couldn't with a cybernetic upgrade, and you have to do it without focusing on what we think is fair, or good, or right. He's not gonna weigh it on whether he can feel his toes get cold, he's going to want to know what use it would have."

"It might level out his Force sensitivity, provided it didn't remove it," Tally replied, at length. "He'd
be a lot less likely to go into hypovolemic shock like he did after Felucia because he'd have a proper blood volume paired with that zabrak durability of his. He could heal if he's wounded, instead of worrying about replacing or repairing parts; in cases where we're far away from spares, that can only be a good thing, because you never know what we might encounter. He'd be able to climb without watching his feet because he'd be able to feel his footing. He'd be able to run easier on uneven ground. He'd be able to do a lot of things that he's probably not been able to do since he was cut down, and what's more, it would give him back his flexibility; he wouldn't have that durasteel mesh holding a cybernetic platform to his body anymore. He'd also gain back his natural buoyancy. Any which way, it would absolutely make him more effective as a soldier on a battlefield. Tally's mouth twisted bitterly as he spat out those words; Shiv knew how much it cost him to do it. Which was probably why he added, "And even the best cybernetics in the galaxy aren't better for a body than healthy, natural tissue and bone. Or the mind."

"It's technically cheaper, too," Zan said, after giving Tally a commiserating look. "Bail already has the technology and the expertise right here. The expense is over and done, all that's left is to use what he put into place. A new cybernetic platform would cost a good deal, especially with the cortosis, and none of us are cyberneticists; they would have to be hired to help do the work, which also opens this up to more people who we're not able to vet as carefully in terms of trustworthiness."

There was a lot more that was going to have to be wrestled with. The risk to the Organas, owning illegal technology, saving an ex-Sith, stealing him from the Jedi Order; the basic fact that any one misstep in the plan could spell disaster for the squad, for their allies and for Maul himself.

But even then, Shiv knew he was willing to try. He didn't have any illusion that it would 'fix' Maul somehow; that somehow this would magically cure everything wrong with him, even if it restored his body, or that it wouldn't be dangerous. But it was a chance to give Maul his freedom, and for that, Shiv was willing to assume the risk and thought probably everyone else would be, too.

It also didn't fail to occur to him that by giving Maul his freedom, they were one step closer to achieving their own. That the squad could go AWOL then, if they had no other choice, since they wouldn't have to leave him behind for the sake of his life.

"Okay," he said, breathing out. "We'll pare the offer down to its bones and then find the best time to present it to him in the next week or so, and after that, we can go from there. So, Brody and Smarty, you two work on the data and legal logistics, and you doctor types, you figure out the best way to present the medical side. And we don't let the other Blackbirds in on it until we let Maul in on it."

Much as he hated the idea of keeping anything from the rest of the squad, Maul deserved to be the next to know. But Shiv thought that after that, it was going to take all of them to pull this off.

"Yes, sir," Zan joked, eyes twinkling in good-humor; despite having just met him for the first time, Shiv decided then and there that he was probably worthy of dating his brother.

"That mean we're dismissed, Sarge?" Smarty teased on the heels. He and Brody both looked stressed, but-- the right kind of stressed. The challenged kind, instead of the devastated kind.

"Yeah, you're dismissed." Shiv waved, smiling back. "Try to get it all distilled in three days or less, because once we're off Alderaan, coordinating is going to get harder."

They dispersed there, in their little groups, absent Shiv; instead of joining them, he went for a long walk in the rain and found a quiet, sheltered spot in the royal gardens to panic for awhile at the size of the heist they'd just come up with. The heist that they were going to see through, if he had anything to say about it.
They might have lost one, but here was a chance to save another.

The Nest was dark and empty, and it felt like both of those.

Maul wasn't sure what had drawn him to their ship, sitting on the landing platform where it had been left. He vaguely remembered Queen Breha talking to Castle at some point about her offering some amenities; remembered, in that same fog, assenting to whatever they wanted to do when they asked his permission. He couldn't imagine climbing back aboard and leaving, but then, he couldn't really imagine anything right now. Sometimes it still surprised him, dully, how quickly he ran out of breath; how much he ached, physically. How quickly his endurance was shot. How cold he felt all of the time.

Obi-Wan had left him two messages, but Maul hadn't listened to them. It wasn't anger that kept him from it. He didn't know what it was. Obi-Wan would forgive him and take him back in a moment, Maul knew that, but he--

Couldn't. Couldn't any of it. Not the Nest and not Obi-Wan and not--

Any of it. All of it.

Even berating himself for that weakness seemed hollow.

He managed little things; when Raze came up beside him, silent and radiating mixed determination and desolate heartbeat, he offered a shoulder. When Shiv was there, more solid than any rock, he didn't pull away from the proximity. When Queen Breha brought him breakfast -- the same kind of hot cereal she'd made before when he was on Alderaan -- he sat and ate it alongside her, albeit slowly, and thanked her for it.

Beyond the little things, everything was in a fog. He slept at strange intervals, woke at stranger ones and sometimes lost the line between dream and reality. He no longer chased Rabbit, but Rabbit was always there somewhere, a ghost on Maul's shoulder. He almost wished that ghost was cruel, but its presence wasn't; silent, invisible, but trusting and warm and if there was anything at all that kept Maul from trying to find a way out of this trap he was in, it was that trust that all but one of them had in him.

He had not been prepared for how wretched it left him to lose Rancor's. Or how much it had come to mean to him, that his squad had -- mostly still -- believed in him. That every method he knew to escape suffering -- by anger, by fleeing, by distance, by death -- fell apart in light of what it would do to his Blackbirds if he succeeded, or even if he tried.

He stood with the quilt in his arms; the instant spark of life carried in its shared scents of each and every one of them -- including Rabbit's -- had jabbed a hole in the numbness sharply enough to leave him in bewildered tears all over again. He had nothing left in him to be frustrated by those tears and nothing left in him to deny them, either, and so he just existed in that moment of helpless grief and loss and wet the binding of the quilt with them, standing in the dark.

He had no idea that the people who loved him were trying to save him; that they were planning an intricate, risk-filled operation to give him a future he couldn't feel or fathom. He only knew, in those moments, that he himself loved and hurt and could not pick one of those apart from the other; that
they co-existed and that there was no escape he was willing to take or capable of taking.

Rancor's duty bag was sitting slumped by the back hatch waiting for him to grab it on his way to his transport the next morning, empty but for his issued blacks and his weapons; even his armor was being abandoned, in favor of a white new set that would not wear their colors.

It was impulse that had Maul fold the quilt and roll it into a more compact form; it was love and letting go, to put it in the bottom of the bag so that the last reminder of Rabbit's living scent would go with his twin into whatever future it was that Rancor was seeking in order to survive.

When Maul stepped off of the Nest, it was unwittingly, unknowingly, into his own.

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