"If it takes fighting a war for us to meet, my darling, it will have been worth it."

Or: the story of the ARC trooper and the royal handmaiden.

TCW canon-compliant; minor Legends EU sprinkled throughout; cc-headcanons about Naboo, Alderaan and the royal handmaidens. Primary focus is on political drama plot with slow-burn romance underneath.

**10/31/2017 EDIT: Now with chapter cover art!**

**Notes**

After a week or so of discussing the personalities of the handmaidens, the incredibly well-trained girl gang from The Phantom Menace that unfortunately never again appeared in canon, @evaceratops and I decided to give Sabé, Eirtaé, and Rabé the adventures they deserved. We started plugging them into canon storylines to see how well they fit and interacted with other characters. On June 1, we came to a few conclusions:
i. Rabé, despite being the combat expert out of the three handmaidens, is a complete and total sweetheart.
ii. Fives thinks he could take her in a sparring match, because she is a foot shorter than him, and he is extremely self-confident.
iii. He gets his ass handed to him - and promptly falls in love.

From these three simple conclusions, and many, many hours of discussion later, we had their story. Eva is my co-collaborator, my co-content creator, and I could not have done a work of this length, of this magnitude, with as much canon references and details, without her extensive help. Not to mention she puts up with constant questions about canon and has to deal with the rough drafts of each chapter, in addition to making beautiful art for every single chapter!

Eva: a simple thank you could never be enough, a million thank-yous wouldn't be enough! I'm so incredibly grateful for our friendship! You push me to write my best and I'm thankful for our conversations every day ❤️
prologue. the story of the arc trooper and the royal handmaiden

from which stars have we fallen
Lady Malyna Girard, Third of Her Name of that Noble House, had never been so set upon in all her long life. She scowled as she stormed through the streets of Aldera, the golden embroidery of her blood-red skirts catching the setting sun like embers stitched into her clothes. “Never have I been so insulted – forced to walk home like some – like some servant-” she spat, at no one in particular. Lady Malyna, much like her noble house, was not so great as she believed. Though her House had held some semblance of power many centuries previous, Girard had never managed to rise beyond a minor noble House of Alderaan. And there had always been someone to blame its failure on – Julan, her great-grandfather, had incurred massive gaming debts, for example. Still, Malyna thought she deserved nothing less than the best, nothing less than even what the House of Organa enjoyed. Fifty-
four years on Alderaan had spoiled her.

So when she was forced to walk home from a visit to the palace, it was nothing less than a grievous insult. Even when most would consider the twelve-minute walk quite enjoyable. Her singular guard scurried behind, struggling to keep pace with the insulted Lady.

Neither she nor her put-upon man noticed the hooded figure fall into place behind them. The newcomer walked at a steady, relaxed pace, never wavering as they followed the Lady’s loud, irritated steps. With the relaxed manner of someone merely taking an evening stroll to the store, their cloud-gray cloak hid them entirely from any curious eyes. Had anyone been watching, they might have remarked upon the strange line of people down the street.

Had the streets not been empty, perhaps someone would have intervened. Lady Malyna had no time to notice such a thing, however. All of her attention was currently focused on her bruised and insulted pride. It had never been so battered. “That Lady Fenian believes she’s so much the better, well I never-”

“Long live the House of Girard!”

Lady Malyna stopped in her tracks and spun around to face the voice. Her guard also stopped short, eyeing the stranger as Malyna called, “A sensible notion, indeed! Who are you, my shadowed ally? Show yourself to me!”

“A friend, my Lady.” The figure stopped short five paces from the guard and gave a quick curtsy, nearly stumbling over the long hem of the cloak into the man. The stranger’s voice was high and shaky, like they had spent the last hour crying. “Ah, forgive me, ma’am – I’ve just – I’m just so clumsy, and I’ve been anxious to speak with someone, someone with the power to help-”

Lady Malyna watched the fumbling, nervous stranger and felt her nerves settle just a bit. “You need help?”

“Yes, my lady – I hope you can forgive my need for this cloak, and this secrecy – I have – I believe there are-” They shifted, apparently addled by nerves, allowing the light reflected from the silver buildings of Alderaan’s capital city to catch on the tiny beads of chalcedony. The symbol of the House of Organa.

Lady Malyna’s strung-out nerves relaxed entirely. “Well then! There are people after you, in that fine cloak I should say I’m not surprised. You see, there are all sorts of scoundrels about who would like such a thing for themselves. You should be more careful – especially as you are traveling alone!”

The figure ducked their head and said, shyly, “You are very wise, my Lady. I had been told the House of Girard would be my best bet – and I see now that the advice is well-founded. I… If we could speak in private, I’m sure you would help me through my troubles, like they said you would!”

They! A mysterious they had been discussing her! Lady Malyna’s shoulders straightened and she sniffed in appreciation. “I should say so! Not many appreciate our House these days, but we still have much to offer Alderaan – and the galaxy!” Lady Malyna swept past her guard, who was still examining the stranger through narrowed eyes. She rested a hand on the stranger’s shoulder and smiled, a snake’s smile, her mind already racing with the gossip of ‘good Lady Malyna helping a poor being, out of the goodness of her heart.’ How Lady Fenian would regret sending her home without a transport…! “Certainly, I will speak to you in private – there is a park, not far from here – Kennis, you go on home.”

Kennis, the poor Zabrak guard and the only one who didn’t trust the stranger’s flattery, frowned. His
hand found the butt of his blaster as he said, as casually as he could manage, “My Lady, I’m not certain that’s the best-”

“You would ignore your Lady’s direct order?” The stranger asked, in a cool voice suddenly laced with a threat. Though they did not move, Kennis shuddered under the weight of the hidden stare.

“I – no – I do not answer to you, stranger!”

“Honestly, Kennis – I did give you a direct order, didn’t I?” Lady Malyna was liking this stranger more and more with every passing moment.

“That you did, my Lady. To be so disrespectful towards you, it boggles my mind, really it does.”

Kennis sputtered, “It’s not wise to wander off with a stranger, ma’am!”

She snorted. “They are a friend of my House, Kennis-”

“Ma’am, please-”

The stranger clucked their tongue in disapproval. “Interrupting your Lady and ignoring her orders?”

Kennis would have very well liked to throttle the stranger, but Lady Malyna’s pride was now firmly in the stranger’s grasp. Her dull green eyes were gleaming, a self-confident smirk on her face that Kennis knew only too well. Her mind was made up – caution and security be damned.

His shoulders sagged as Lady Malyna, puffed up on flattery, sniffed, “If you do not leave me and my new friend to our private business, I will dismiss you from my service. Go home, now.”

Kennis gave her a frustrated bow, but she was already turning away. He stood on the spot as he watched the pair turn back the way they had just come, heads bent close together, chatting away like old friends. He did not trust the stranger, not at all – why the cloak? Why the need for secrecy? But he knew that if Lady Malyna were to turn and see him still standing there, she’d flay him alive.

He squared his shoulders, casting one last look towards the departing pair, and went back to the Girard home to wait for his Lady.

She returned not a half-hour later, alone, and was just as insufferable as ever. More so, now that her pride had been coddled. When Kennis asked what the stranger had wanted, she waved aside his concerns. “Poor thing needed a few credits to help out of her sister. Neither of them earn enough in the Organa household, can you imagine?” She laughed as she shrugged off her coat, leaving Kennis to scramble to pick it up. “The ruling family being so frugal with their money, how awful!”

Kennis thought about his own meager wages and said nothing. The stranger had an awful lot of nerve, to walk up to a noblewoman and ask for credits like that. He almost said something to this effect, but Lady Malyna had already swept up the stairs, leaving him to glower with annoyance in the foyer.

He still had a bad feeling about the stranger, but they never showed their cloud-gray cloak again. Not one week later, both he and his Lady had forgotten all about the strange incident in the streets.

Somewhere in a forgotten, shadowy corner of the park, a tiny chalcedony bead shone half-buried among the flowers.

Had anyone been watching, perhaps this story would have ended before it began.
“Yes, of course, I agree with you, Senator Taa, but—”

The massive blue Twi’lek shook his head, his four lekku curling in a show of rage. It was the most emotion Padmé Amidala had ever seen from the Ryloth Senator. He took a great, shuddering breath and boomed, “Senator Amidala, the peace talks with the Separatist Senate was nothing more than a sham, a ploy to distract us while they moved to attack Coruscant! The bill will pass, whether you want it or not. We need more troops, now more than ever!” His voice shook the crystalline decorations on Padmé’s desk, and she reached out a hand to steady them.

“Senator Taa, this war is depleting our resources faster than we can regain them. People are dying, troops are dying by the thousands, we cannot simply let go of democratic restraints! Those laws are meant to protect millions of people, and dissolving them benefits no one but the Banking Clans!”

“My dear, you’re concerned for the clones? They are just doing their job, and besides – more will be ready when the Kaminoans get their next payment.” He laughed and shook his head, as if he found Padmé’s concern amusing. “That’s why they were created, after all.”

Anger curdled Padmé’s guts. She rose slowly, holding Senator Taa’s eyes with her own, fury pumping through her veins. Finally, she spoke, her tone as chill as ice, “I can see neither of us will move on our positions. To speak of these living beings, these men, in such a way is not something I will ever tolerate in my office. Good day, Senator.”

Senator Taa blinked at her, then gave her a stiff bow Padmé knew was only for show. His aides, two bright red Twi’lek women who were absolutely miniscule next to their Senator, glared at her as they turned to leave. Had they not been in her offices, she wouldn’t have been surprised if the massive Twi’lek man had simply spun on his heels without another word. When he had finally lumbered out of her sight, she sank back into her chair, drained.

Her holopad chirped pleasantly, and her fingers ached to throw it to the floor. Padmé allowed herself just one moment of stolen rest, shutting her eyes against the harsh blue of the holopad lying active on the desk in front of her. Every day, the infighting in the Senate grew worse. Tensions wore thinner with every proposed bill – and it was never what the Republic really needed. What its citizens desperately needed. No, it was always more money, more clones, more weapons. She rubbed her eyes, a small noise of frustration threatening to bubble out of her. This work was important, Padmé knew that, she believed it wholeheartedly, but… there were some days where she thought she might collapse from the effort. She opened her eyes, half-wishing that the reports had somehow read and filed themselves, only to find their number had increased.

1,898 unread messages.

And that was only from this morning.

Padmé couldn’t stop the frustrated groan this time. She rubbed her eyes, muttering under her breath, “What I wouldn’t give for a—” Cup of tea? Glass of wine? A nap? A distraction?

Her comms chimed and Threepio’s nervously optimistic voice rang through, “Mistress Padmé! Senator Bail Organa is here to see you.”

Well then. “Thank you, Threepio. Please send him in.” She wiped the exhaustion from her expression and shut off the holopad with a tiny, triumphant smirk.

C-3PO led Bail into the inner offices, chatting away about Bail’s speech to the Senate that morning,
Bail nodding and smiling politely until Padmé dismissed the protocol droid. Threepio never got used to being dismissed, but after a few moments of more nervous exclamations, the protocol droid finally ambled back out of the room. She rose from her seat, smiling at her old friend. As always, he was immaculately dressed, but under his eyes hung the heavy dark bags of exhaustion. Padmé wondered, briefly, if it was too early to offer him a drink.

“Bail! What a wonderful surprise. I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon after this morning’s session. An excellent speech, by the way.” She gestured to one of the chairs in front of her desk, continuing, “I couldn’t agree more about the need to stop borrowing money from the Banking Clans. It will set a dangerous precedent, if we allow it to continue. I can only hope the other Senators will see reason.”

“Thank you, Padmé.” Bail smiled at her, bowing his head a little. He shifted in the seat and said, “Though, if I may be frank, I’m not here to discuss official Senate business.” From a hidden pocket, he suddenly produced a flat silver disk and placed it on her desk. A personal communicator. A recorded message. He cleared his throat, glancing about the office, making sure the door to the outer room was shut. “You remember my wife, Breha?”

“Of course. Is she alright? I hope nothing is the matter?” Despite her desire for a large glass of wine and then sleep, something piqued Padmé’s interest. She leaned forward, intrigued. Something about the way Bail had asked made her think this might not Senate business at all, official or otherwise.

“Yes, yes. She’s fine. But… well… we appear to have a slight problem back on Alderaan. She asked that I deliver this message to you.” Bail looked at her and raised an eyebrow. “She’s heard of your penchant for… excursions, and thinks you may be able to help us.”

Padmé laughed, intrigued and curious and more than a little delighted that her reputation had reached Alderaan. She had met Bail’s wife on more than one occasion, both here on Coruscant and on Alderaan, but the Queen had numerous duties of her own to attend to and didn’t travel near as much as her husband. Padmé remembered her days as Queen – the long, lonely days of ruling a planet. They’d bonded over the memories, the difficulties, the struggles and the victories. One Queen to a former, Padmé and Breha had sparked an instantaneous friendship. But she hadn’t seen Breha in well over half a year now; she could hardly get away to visit her own home. “Your timing is nothing short of remarkable, Bail. Please,” she said, gesturing to the personal comms.

Bail flicked the activation switch, and a full-body holo of Queen Breha materialized in the air above Padmé’s desk. Even as a holo, Padmé could sense her friend’s quiet, well-hidden stress. The chalcedony wave necklace, House of Organa’s symbol of office and as valuable as Naboo’s royal jewels that Padmé had once worn, hung heavy at her throat.

Though slightly distorted by the recording, Queen Breha’s voice was still as cool and clear as running water. “Senator Amidala, my old friend, greetings. I know your duties as Senator have kept you busy, as they keep my husband. And now more than ever, during these troubling times of war. I’ve followed your speeches and votes closely, and I know that you strive to help those in need as best and as often as you can. I greatly admire this about you, and it is desperately needed. We need people, leaders, of good moral conscience to help us bring a quick end to this wretched war.” Breha smiled, some of the exhaustion lifting from her shoulders as she added, “Especially those who are unafraid to act, even when advised not to.

“And now, it seems the people of Alderaan are in need of such a person. I believe – and Bail concurs – that there is a Separatist spy in my court. I cannot identify them, but I have my suspicions. I cannot act on my thoughts without risking further division of my court. Already, well of a quarter of the noble houses believe the Republic is… misguided.” She hesitated over the words, and Padmé suddenly knew why she had sent a personal, private, pre-recorded message, one that couldn’t be
caught on scanners, or hacked as it was transmitted across the galaxy. If the wrong person were to hear the Queen of Alderaan speak of light treason against the Republic, it could end very poorly indeed.

The war could be brought to Alderaan.

Breha gathered herself and continued, a Queen’s hesitation quickly covered up. “As you know, I and my husband are strong believers in the Republic, though we may differ on opinions of the war. The thought of a spy in my court feeding information, money, and resources to our enemy is a difficult one, and I tell you this honestly, though it with a heavy heart. I’m sure you understand – sometimes I consider the court to be an extension of my own family. The thought of a spy, a traitor, hiding amidst those whom I consider family… it cuts through my heart every day.

“Padmé, I need your help. As I cannot identify and deal with the spy on my own without risk to myself and my court, I need someone who can. Stars know I would be in your debt if you were to come to Alderaan, help me identify the traitor, and take care of them. Quietly. Without any fuss or dramatic public scenes. You can help with all of this, I know it. I need help, and fast – I do not want this person spreading falsehoods about the role of the Republic as they sell her secrets. If you could perhaps spare a few weeks, under the guise of a simple vacation to visit an old friend, I would be forever grateful. Not to mention, a friendly visit from a Republic ally may quell any rising tides of… dissatisfaction.

“Come to Alderaan, I beg of you – and help me remove this person from my courts. Information about our involvement in the war is being spread, not to mention hundreds of thousands of credits siphoned off from the treasuries by an unknown party. Padmé, I am in desperate straits. I fear the hour of disaster is drawing nearer every day the spy has access to our planet’s files and treasuries. Please, Padmé, as a former Queen, as a Republic Senator – as a friend. Please help us find and remove the spy from our courts.”

Queen Breha took a slight, shuddering breath, as if the weight of her words had staggered her. She bowed as the recording shut off, leaving Padmé and Bail in a heavy silence. Breha’s fears, Bail’s tired eyes – Padmé could only imagine the stress of something like this. It shocked her – what intel could there be on Alderaan? Credits, to be sure – and just when the Senate was to vote on another bill to raise the limits of borrowing from the Banking Clans... And the personal cost to the Organas would be great – Bail could lose his seat as Senator, and Breha her throne, if this threat wasn’t caught and neutralized soon.

The timing was too coincidental, too perfect – look what had just happened with the Separatist peace talks, what happened on Raxus with Mina Bonteri. Breha was right. There had to be a spy in her courts. There were spies and shadows everywhere Padmé turned. And Breha was trapped, powerless to do anything except watch, even as this person might lead Alderaan to destruction. But such a mission would require careful, detailed planning – and she would need assistance. She sat with her hands clasped together on the table, frowning as her mind raced with all she would need to do, when a small cough drove her out of her thoughts.

Padmé could feel Bail carefully looking at her, his hands gripping the arms of the chair a little too tightly in nervous anticipation of her decision. Was he fearful that she wouldn’t help? She lifted her gaze and smiled at the Senator. He visibly relaxed as she took a deep breath and said, “Bail, you and Breha are two of my oldest friends. Of course I’ll help, I would be honored to – I was just thinking of all that needed to be done.”

Bail shut his eyes in relief and sagged back into the chair. She’d never seen him act like this – Bail was almost always the epitome of professionalism, even when dealing with angry dissenters
interrupting him during a speech. But this? This was an exhausted friend before her, and Padmé’s heart constricted with worry. She chewed her lip, her worries about the Organas only growing. “How long have you and Breha been dealing with this spy, Bail? You’re exhausted – even more so than normal.” She discreetly thumbed a panel on her desk, flagging Threepio to bring two cups of extra-strong caf. And some sweets. Might as well. Gods know we deserve it.

He chuckled and gave a quick shrug. “Breha noticed the missing funds first, about three months ago-”

“Three months? Bail, why didn’t you ask for help sooner?”

“We thought we’d be able to handle it on our own. But whoever this person is, they’re… slippery, to say the least. We think they’ve been part of the court for a long time.” His face contorted in anger at the thought. “Breha mentioned she has a few ideas on who the spy might be, but-”

“Of course I’ll help. I know you and Breha would do the same for me.”

“I can’t tell you how happy that makes me, Padmé – and how happy Breha will be to hear it. I’ll let her know right away.” He glanced at the holopad, which was shining with thirty-seven missed messages and calls. “How soon do you think you’ll be ready to leave?”

“I’ll have to make a few preparations. I don’t want to go in alone – it seems like this is a situation that requires multiple pairs of friendly eyes.”

Bail nodded. “I was thinking a Jedi or two couldn’t hurt.”

Padmé laughed. “No, they certainly wouldn’t hurt at all. That’d make it easy, to say the least. But – Bail. Is there some piece of information about, oh, I don’t know – resource allocations, or troop or front movements – something that would make the High Council more willing to spare a Jedi to come to Alderaan?”

Bail stared at her, then sighed and ran a hand over his face. “Well... yes. Yes, to put it simply. A portion of our resource levies are sent to medical bases. Hidden bases.”

“Ah.”

“If the spy follows the information, they could send the Separatists information about all of our medical bases and restocking stations in the Outer Rim.” He sighed and continued, “Those injured troops would be soft targets if the coordinates were leaked. We cannot allow that to happen – for their sake, as much as Alderaan’s.”

Padmé met his leveled, weary gaze and nodded, his words twisting in her heart like a knife. The thought of all those lives, already at risk, but unable to defend themselves… She nodded again, bracing herself, her mind already racing ahead with mental preparations. “I’ll speak with the Council tomorrow, see who they can spare. Hopefully we can depart before the week is out.” Even if she couldn’t get a Jedi, she’d still go. She had to at least try. “And will you be coming along as well?”

He shook his head. “Breha believes it would look too suspicious if I were to return with such a retinue. Besides, I have the bill to push against.” He gave her a tired smile and continued, “I pray we both find success.”

“I’ll get to the bottom of this, Bail. I promise.”
The Temple Archives were not nearly as busy as they used to be. Some of Ahsoka’s earliest memories of the Temple were of the massive rotunda, millions of texts giving off their faint blue light in a maze of knowledge. Once, you couldn’t walk through the Archives without running into entire classes of learners, or Padawans busy with coursework, or Masters pursuing the most forbidden texts on the upper levels. Though it was an Archives, a silent, stoic place of learning, Ahsoka knew it to be the true heart of the Temple. Here was where their histories intersected, where young generations had learned of the triumphs – and mistakes – of their spiritual ancestors. It had hummed with life, a healthy undercurrent in the Force, as dozens of Jedi came together at all hours to explore the vast sums of knowledge.

Now, it was always nearly deserted.

Ahsoka sighed as she stared down the long line of empty tables and work stations. So many of the Jedi were out, fighting in the war, that now the Archives was the best place for meditation. She was certain she could stay here for hours and not see another soul. Except for the passing droid reshelving the texts, the heart of the Temple was lonely now.

Which was, of course, exactly what she wanted.

She and Senator Amidala had returned from Raxus not a week prior, and in that time, Ahsoka hadn’t been able to shake a feeling of paranoia, of fear. Of confusion. The Senators had discussed the war over glasses of wine, amidst a gleaming city of chrome nestled in captivatingly beautiful mountains. They’d spoken of peace, had almost grasped it – until the attack on Coruscant’s power generators. The curfews were still in effect, and more of the Coruscant Guard patrolled the levels, Upper and Lower, and now the entire planet was rife with a fear Ahsoka usually attributed to battles on the frontlines. She was used to it. The citizens of this planet were not.

Anakin had been helping with the security efforts. He’d told her yesterday that Commander Fox was snapping at anyone and anything, near mad with guilt and rage over the attacks. He was commanding his men with impressive efficiency, Anakin said, but he worried about the Commander’s drive. It was near maniacal. Apparently, Fox had not slept more than three hours a night since the attack. Coruscant was meant to be untouchable. And the Separatists had exploited that peace of mind with horrifying ease. Ahsoka leaned against a windowsill and peered out through the thick glass. Some fires were still burning. She felt bad for Commander Fox. He’d been entrusted with the safety of a trillion civilians, and someone had snatched his security from right under his nose.

And she couldn’t shake the feeling that she and Senator Amidala were responsible. They’d spirited themselves away to the center of the Separatist alliance, and it’d cost people their lives. Ahsoka still thought the war a complicated, nasty mess – one that had just gotten messier. If they could attack here, they could attack anywhere. Even, she thought, running her thumb over the spines of the texts, maybe even the Temple. There were shadows everywhere, machinations she could barely see, and of what she could see she understood even less. All she knew is that her limbs felt disjointed, like her mind was floating a half-inch above the tips of her montrals. Like when you stared up at the night sky a moment too long, and got a feeling in the pit of your stomach that gravity might just decide to let you fall upwards into that vast, black void. That gravity wasn’t as steady as you always thought.

If Ahsoka stepped out in the streets of Coruscant, she knew that feeling would be in the very air she breathed. Shadows and snakes, everywhere.

She made a face at her faint reflection in the window. Maybe the Archives wasn’t the place for her to ease her rattled nerves after all.

Her wrist comms beeped, the sound clanging around in the empty Archives. Ahsoka winced,
covering the noise with her hand, glancing around for Madame Jocasta before answering. “Ahsoka here.”

“Hey, Snips. How’re you feeling?”

Ahsoka rolled her eyes, but it felt like a weight had lifted from her shoulders. “Not too bad. Trying to catch up on some reading.”

“Wha- wait, are you in the Archives right now?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I didn’t assign you any coursework, did I?”

She snorted at his genuine confusion, “No, I just wanted to come up here for some peace and quiet. I thought it would help clear my head.”

“And?”

“Not so much. My feelings are… all over the place. I don’t know how to feel about what happened…” She left the word unspoken, knowing that her Master would know she was talking about Raxus.

“Well, meditate later. We’ve been summoned to a meeting with the Council. And – no, don’t worry, Snips – it’s not about your little vacation with Senator Amidala.” Ahsoka breathed a sigh of relief as he continued, “But the Senator will be there, actually. A mini-reunion for you two. Maybe to plan your next trip? Aralia supposed to be very nice this time of year.”

“Ha ha ha, very funny.”

“Thank you. Anyways, the Senator supposedly requested us, personally-” wonder why, Ahsoka thought smugly, “- because this might have something to do with the cowards who attacked Coruscant. Don’t really know, though. Come up to the Council Chambers now, Snips.”

“Yes, Master.” Maybe it’d take us off Coruscant for a while – and even as she thought the words Ahsoka didn’t like the way they tasted. It was cowardly to run, but there was nothing more she wanted to do than kick some Separatist ass right now. Padmé usually had some surprises up her sleeves, and if she wanted to speak to the Council, it must be important. Ahsoka was impressed with the Senator’s stamina. She never seemed to tire of the constant politics or intrigue, running on her faith in the democracy of the Republic.

Ahsoka cast one last glance around the empty Archives, the empty heart of the Temple before she took off running towards the Council Chambers. And, just to make it more interesting, she challenged herself to make it there in less than ten minutes.

Anakin was speaking in a low voice to the Senator when she arrived in front of the closed Council Chamber not six and a half minutes later, thrilled with her time. “Senator, Master,” she said, bowing as she skidded to a halt. “I hear you have a mission for us?”

Senator Amidala smiled, though the tiredness in her eyes shone through. “Hello, Ahsoka. I hope you’re not too bored of me yet.”

Ahsoka laughed, “Never, Senator! Missions with you are almost always more interesting than the ones with Skyguy here.”
Padmé laughed with her as Anakin lightly protested, and then the Temple Guards standing at silent attention opened the door to the Council Chambers. Sunlight spilled out from the windows, casting the seated Jedi in golden shadows. They stepped into the room, Senator Amidala at the forefront, shoulders squared.

Shadows were everywhere these days, and Ahsoka was determined to do her part in rooting them out wherever they hid.
To stand in front of the Jedi High Council was not an act many considered lightly.

Though it was one of the highest points in the entire Temple, barring the Archives, stepping into the Council Chamber was like diving straight to the bottom of a deep ocean chasm. The Force quite literally pulsed in this room, it was alive, an invisible current that enveloped you entirely and sucked the breath from your lungs as soon as you stepped foot over the threshold. It always took a moment
for Ahsoka’s lungs to start working again. If the Archives was the heart, the Council Chamber was the mind of the Temple. She could feel the Force more clearly here than anywhere else, because the Masters seated before them were saturated with it, and the knowledge and wisdom of how to use it. And they were at rest. They were peaceful, meditative as the group walked in together in silence.

A shiver swept through her body as Ahsoka considered the pure power in this room, somehow both vastly intimidating and strangely comforting all at the same time. Though her own grasp of the Force was tenuous compared to the Masters, being in their presence let the Force flow through her with startlingly ease, like she had been stretched ever so slightly to allow the current pass through her. The group and the individual, one and the same, she thought as she gathered herself, following close behind Senator Amidala and Skywalker. If the Senator balked at the metric tons of spiritual pressure against her veins, she did not show it. Shoulders back, chin held high, she strode right to the center of the Chambers and planted herself firmly there, Ahsoka and Anakin fanning out behind her. Senator Amidala’s strength was not to be underestimated, not even by the Jedi Masters.

There was a reason younglings called her the Senator of the Order. Ahsoka was certain more than a few Masters thought so, too.

Masters Windu and Yoda, near-constant presences in the Temple, had summoned Obi-Wan, Adi Gallia, Kit Fisto, Plo Koon, and – most surprisingly – Shaak Ti, whose impressive grace was apparent even via hologram. Obi-Wan smiled at them, almost entirely dwarfed in his robes. Fresh ones, by the look of them, and before Ahsoka had time to wonder which backwater planet he had left the last set, Master Yoda spoke. “Senator Amidala, welcome. Anxious to hear what you have to say, we are.”

“Thank you for agreeing to see me on such short notice, Master Jedi. I’m afraid I don’t have better news to share with you, but yesterday, a delicate situation developing on Alderaan was brought to my attention.” She paused, glancing around the room at the Masters before bluntly continuing, “Queen Breha believes there is a spy in her court, and that they are leaking intel, credits, and resources to the Separatist army.”

Her words dropped like stones in once-still waters. The chill that rippled through the Force raised gooseflesh on Ahsoka’s bare arms. She stared at the Senator. Plo Koon and Kit Fisto exchanged glances, a miniscule tremor of worry lurking deep behind their mental shields. Ahsoka felt it and started a little – she wouldn’t have been able to sense a Master’s emotions if she wasn’t enshrouded in their power. Mace Windu leaned forward, his fingers laced together in front of his face, as he fixed Senator Amidala with a hardened stare. She gazed steadily back at him as he asked, “Alderaan supplies a vast majority of our resources. If there is a leak, this is grave news indeed. How did you come by this information?”

“Queen Breha sent a message with her husband, Senator Organa. He delivered it to me yesterday morning on a private communicator. Breha wanted to make certain that the information was secure; if she had sent it as a transmission, it might have been intercepted.”

“Trust your word, we do, Senator Amidala.” Yoda nodded slowly. “An ally to the Jedi, you are. Curious, I am – a Senate matter, is this not?”

“I agree with Master Yoda,” Mace said slowly. “I do not see why this might concern the Order.”

She bowed her head in thanks for the praise, but disagreed, picking her next words with care, “I’m afraid there’s more bad news – news which will directly affect Jedi and clone troopers in the field. Not only are credits and resources being stolen, but Senator Organa also has reason to believe the coordinates of Republic medical bases are now at risk – that, and there are… whispers of discontent in the Alderaan courts.”
Adi Gallia narrowed her eyes, her translucent headtendrils glowing soft orange in the brilliant Coruscant sunlight. “Whispers? About...?”

“About the Republic, the Jedi, and the entire war effort.”

A murmur swept through the Council members. Anakin folded his arms but managed to bit back what Ahsoka was sure was an angry retort – creative and decidedly un-Jedi-like curses boiled on her own tongue. Alderaan was one of the Core Worlds, one of the systems for whom they were fighting in the first place! Kit Fisto leaned back in his chair and murmured, “This is most troubling. If Alderaan were to fall to the Separatist cause, we would lose almost a quarter of our funding – not to mention the danger the medical bases now appear to be in.”

“Indeed, my concerns are with the injured troops,” Plo Koon said, tapping his ritual claws together in thought. “They are exposed, more so if the Separatists now have the means to trace their coordinates, and do not have the means to protect themselves. And if they are attacked, we might not be able to come to their defenses.”

“A situation like this could turn the tide of war against us,” Shaak Ti murmured. “You are asking for a Jedi escort, Senator?”

Senator Amidala nodded, “The situation on Alderaan is extremely troubling, Master Jedi. Though Queen Breha asked that I investigate the rumors, I believe this situation requires a delicacy and a dedicated team – and, if a Jedi could be spared, they could help me root out this spy.”

Ahsoka’s eyes flicked to Obi-Wan, who raised an eyebrow that said he knew exactly what she was thinking. She hid a tiny smile as he nonchalantly said, “Anakin and Ahsoka are both free, Master Yoda. I nominate them to accompany Senator Amidala to Alderaan.”

“Agree, I do. Your Captain and some clones, also will go. Select them wisely, you must.”

“Of course, Masters. I would be more than honored to help find this traitor. And, of course, supervise the Senator.”

Ahsoka resisted the urge to roll her eyes at Anakin’s subtlety – or lack thereof.

“If I may offer a recommendation, Skywalker,” Shaak Ti spoke up, the hologram flickering with distortion, “ARC troopers Fives and Echo have recently returned from a mission to Sullust. And as they both served in your battalion prior to their promotions, they are familiar with your particular tactical... style.”

Ahsoka didn’t bother to hide her laugh this time, and even Senator Amidala cracked a small smile. Anakin gave Shaak Ti a small bow. “Of course, Master Ti. I have no doubt the rest of the 501st will be happy to see them again, too.”

“Do not lose sight of the mission at hand, Skywalker. This is not a vacation.” Mace said sharply, reminding everyone of the seriousness of the situation. “Senator Amidala, I have confidence in your abilities to find the spy, but is this something you can do alone? A security detail of a few clones and two Jedi won’t be able to help with the more delicate work that I foresee this mission will require.”

Senator Amidala smiled and visibly relaxed as she said, “I have just the group in mind, Master Windu. Three of my handmaidens from my time as Queen, who now work as a sort of... special operations team for the Royal Houses of Naboo. We were trained for just this sort of thing.”

“Oh!” Obi-Wan exclaimed. He sat up straight and leaned forward, his eyes twinkling merrily. “Yes!
Sabé, Eirtaé, and Rabé, of course – we happened to run into them not too long ago. They were the ones who actually discovered the plans for more droid factories on that Separatist frigate a few weeks ago,” he explained to the rest of the Council. “I suspect we may have actually gotten in their way, but they are exactly what this mission requires, Master Windu. I have complete confidence in them, and I cannot recommend them enough.”

Senator Amidala said nothing, but grinned in delight at Obi-Wan’s high praise of her sisters as the Masters considered his words. Ahsoka remembered the trio of handmaidens, too, casually hacking into the Separatist mainframe after getting captured on purpose and laying waste to almost three battalions of droids on board. Yes, they are exactly what this sort of thing called for.

Mace nodded. “Very well. Skywalker, Padawan Tano – you are to escort the Senator and her handmaidens to Alderaan. Select no more than five of your best men, not including the two ARC troopers recommended by Master Ti. Find the spy, subdue them quietly, and secure our resources in that system.”

“Thank you, Master Jedi. I hope to return to you with good news.” Senator Amidala bowed, Anakin and Ahsoka following her lead. Despite the gravity of the situation, the ripples of the Force calmed as the Masters sent them on their way. Senator Amidala was, after all, the unofficial Senator of the Jedi Order.

“May the Force be with you all,” Plo Koon said, dismissing them, the sentiment echoing around the chamber in both words and kind smiles. Ahsoka’s mind already raced ahead with thoughts of Alderaan, a system she had visited once before with Padmé – except this time, Rex and the others would be with them. Oh, this will be fun.

As they left the Council Chambers, the doors sliding shut behind them, Ahsoka couldn’t help but laugh a little. When Anakin asked what, exactly, was so funny, she smirked and said, “You were right, Skyguy.” They crossed the carpeted hall to the turbolifts opposite the Council Chamber together, dim and gray as twilight after the brilliant sun-drenched rooms of the Chamber.

“About what?” He asked, pausing to Padmé and his Padawan enter the turbolift first. Two Temple Guards watched them leave, stoic and unmoving under their ornamental masks. The simple act of stepping over the threshold was all it took for the crushing pressure of the Masters’ presence to ease from their minds. Senator Amidala, for one, already looked more at ease than she had just moments before.

Ahsoka casually leaned against the turbolift wall, a cheeky grin already threatening to break her cover. She waited a tick before grinning up at him, laughing “The meeting was to schedule my next trip with the Senator!”

Anakin exclaimed in frustration and turned to Padmé for support, only to find her smiling fondly down at Ahsoka. He shook his head, groaning, “Why do I have the feeling that this mission is just gonna be you two ganging up on me…?”

“Oh, I think the fact that you’re Force sensitive probably has something to do with that,” Padmé replied coolly, much to Ahsoka’s delight. “But as for now, we have to start preparing for this mission. I told Bail I’d leave as soon as possible – would you and your men be ready to leave tomorrow?”

“Hell, we could probably leave tonight. Rex is onboard the Resolute right now, but I’ll let him know to get the troops ready.”

“Perfect – will he know where to find the two ARC troopers?”
“Sure,” Ahsoka spoke up. “He’s probably been in contact with them ever since they got back from their mission.”

“Will they mind making such a quick turnaround?” Padmé clasped her hands together, her eyebrows knitting together in concern. “I certainly don’t want to inconvenience them, but they would be incredibly helpful to have along…”

Anakin and Ahsoka shared a knowing look. “I’m sure Fives is already complaining about not having anything to do,” Anakin said gently. Ahsoka nodded sagely in response to his words.

“Yeah, don’t worry about them, Padmé. Fives and Echo are down for pretty much everything.” Ahsoka thought a moment, then grinned. “It will be interesting to see Fives and Hardcase – whom I assume is also coming along, Master – do an undercover mission like this.”

“You assumed correctly, Snips – I was also thinking of Kix and Jesse. That gives us six total men, plus us two, as the security detail – and then of course, you and the three handmaidens, Padmé.” Anakin ticked off the numbers on his hand, nodding to himself.

“What a group,” Ahsoka said slowly, mentally mapping the skills of the assigned twelve. She hadn’t seen much of Padmé’s handmaidens, but the little she had seen made her all the more excited for the mission ahead. “Whoever that sleemo is, they won’t have a chance.”

Padmé nodded, but there was still a trace of worry in her dark brown eyes. “I’m glad you’re so certain, Ahsoka. And it will be nice to see them again – it’s been so long…” As her words drifted into silence, the turbolift finally touched down to the lower Temple floors. After the dense silence of the Council Chamber, the bustle of Temple life was a balm for their spirits.

“What’s the plan now, Senator?” Ahsoka asked as they stepped out, narrowly avoiding a group of younglings on their way to forms practice, tiny lightsaber hilts clutched in pudgy hands. They started exclaiming when they saw Anakin until their crechemaster, an ancient Rodian with clouded galaxy eyes, hushed them and hurried them away with an apologetic look.

Padmé smiled after them and started to make her way out of the Temple, calling over her shoulder, “You and Anakin get back to the Resolute – I have a few calls to make.”

Kennis knocked on the door to the library, waited a moment, and pushed it open. The soaring red-gold thantra of House Girard parted, spilling the bright lights of the hallway into the shadowy room beyond.

Lady Malyna stood in the center, illuminated by the sharp turquoises of dozens of shelves of holorecords. She was staring at the ornate portrait on the wall opposite the door – a beautiful depiction of one of Alderaan’s traditional goddesses, though Kennis was never quite sure which one – in quiet contemplation. She did not turn when Kennis cleared his throat and stepped into the room. Datapads and records were scattered everywhere, open and gleaming in the dusk like some strange blue candles.

“Sorry to disturb you, ma’am, but I heard cursing – is everything alright?”

His Lady exhaled sharply through her nose and turned slowly, fixing him with a slow, curling smile. “Of course, Kennis. I simply had a moment of… frustration.” She cast a glance around the room at the scattered, half-read holorecords. “It seems my age may be catching up with me, for I have forgotten the passcode to my safe.” She shook her head and made her way to the chair behind the desk underneath the portrait. She sank slowly into it, rubbing her temples. Her graying hair was
Lady Malyna had been spending long days in her library, reading over reports with a gusto Kennis could not remember having ever seen before. In fact, she spent so much time in this room that her ridiculous and excessive demands of him had gone down to almost ten per day. *A blessed change of pace from the usual hundred*, he thought sourly. If it was due to a combination of her revived interest in politics and her failing memory – well. He’d be happy to help.

Kennis shifted in the silence, his eyes darting to the portrait that hid the Girard safe. A gigantic durasteel contraption with layers of locks, guards, and at least three doors – and a myriad of other devices meant to curtail self-assured thieves. He did not know what it contained – she would never have trusted him with that information – but he knew where she had encrypted the passcodes. He knew how to open the safe.

“I have the passcodes, my Lady. You gave them to me, for safekeeping, almost a year ago.”

Her eyes darted up to meet his in stunned delight. She nodded slowly, as the memory returned. “I knew I made the right decision when I hired you, Kennis.” She stood and gestured him further inside the library. “If you please.”

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Theed shone like a jewel, with its delicate, twisting canals of clear blue waters and gleaming marble buildings. Fountains bubbled in every square as birdsong rang through the air like soft chimes, twisting, dark green ivy a decadent decoration on ancient, proud buildings. Even the people were elegant as they haggled in the marketplaces, from the humble street cleaners to nobles strolling the wide avenues with a retinue of dozens. She knew it to be the most beautiful city in the entire galaxy, and even if it wasn’t her childhood home, she would have staunchly defended it against any who said otherwise.

Now, however, Rabé’s thoughts were wholly consumed by Alderaan.

She and Eirtaé had been at the shooting range when Sabé commed them. She had not bothered with a greeting: “Come to the Throne Room. We have a new assignment.”

Rabé did not know what, exactly, she had expected – theirs was a profession in which very little was ever predictable – but Padmé, their sister, their dear friend, was certainly the last thing she could have ever anticipated. It’d been years since they’d seen each other, ever since Padmé left for Coruscant nearly three years previous. When Sabé had decided to stay behind, instead of following her former love to the capital. Time and distance had apparently healed them both, a fact for which Rabé and Eirtaé were silently grateful. Still, Padmé was now a Senator, and Sabé was captain of their small unit – their paths did not often cross any more.

Rabé had burst into a delighted grin as soon as she saw the projection of Padmé in the Throne Room. Even Eirtaé had managed a tiny ghost of a smile, her eyes twinkling when they bowed greetings to Queen Neeyutnee. The Queen nodded at them, her painted lips pressed together in a thin line, as Padmé began to explain why she was contacting them.

Padmé had a mission for them. She’d explained she couldn’t give them all the information, but it was
of dire importance to the Republic, and to the war effort. “I realize how absurd this will sound, my Queen, but I dare not risk comprising this mission before it even begins. Difficulties arise when old alliances fall victim to shadows. You will just have to trust me when I say we need to work fast, and we need to work quietly. And my sisters are trained for exactly this.”

Her use of the coded language was clever – subtle enough that to any untrained ear, it would sound like nothing but political niceties, empty words devoid of any meaning. Only an elected Nabooian royal and their bodyguards would be able to pick up the threads woven between the phrases. Absurd, arise, alliances – the alliteration, three ‘A’s, told them Padmé meant to travel to Alderaan; old alliances meant the royal courts, led by Queen Breha. And fall victim to shadows – an informant. A spy.

Rabé shivered in excited anticipation, and from the way Eirtaé tensed next to her, her oldest friend felt the exact same way. Queen Neeyutnee was stiff-lipped, her face unreadable for the entire duration of the conversation.

They had two days to accept or decline the mission, as vague as it was, before Padmé arrived in the system with her Jedi and clone escort. Rabé knew they would accept. There was no question in her mind as Padmé explained the situation as best she could. Rabé, Eirtaé, and Sabé had been promoted to a special operations group by Queen Jamillia, in order to best serve Naboo and the Republic. They were the best of the best – trained to infiltrate and take down without raising any alarms. Theirs was a subtle warfront – but also a volatile one. One false step could have disastrous consequences, and Rabé knew this mission was exceptionally high-risk if Padmé depended on getting the information through to them in the coded language. It was a mission that the three women had trained their entire lives for.

It was also one that the Queen was not entirely thrilled with. They’d stepped out onto a private balcony after Padmé had ended the transmission, observing the capital city. Flocks of white birds circled around sunlit marble buildings, the clear waters of the canals glittering in the bright sunlight. Rabé and Eirtaé stood back as Sabé, their oldest sister and captain, patiently argued with the Queen.

“Your Highness, I understand your reservations, but if Alderaan is in danger of falling to a spy, we must step forward to help. This is why my sisters and I stayed on Naboo – to serve the Royal House, certainly – but also to offer our services to others as dictated by our superiors. Our loyalty is to Naboo, and to you, Your Highness, but Senator Amidala is another we will answer to.”

“I do not like sending the three of you away, on such vague instructions. What if a similar situation were to arise in my court?”

“Your handmaidens are just as well trained, my Lady.”

“Senator Amidala said she is arriving with a Jedi escort. How long before you offer your services to the Jedi as well? You are meant to be protectors of Naboo. That is your primary directive, Handmaiden Nyima. Our people, and their protection.” Queen Neeyutnee waved her hand over Theed’s skyline. “I do not want to lose your team to the service of this terrible war. Every mission I assign to you is one that places Naboo first. What does the situation on Alderaan have to do with our system?”

Sabé automatically straightened at her proper title, but her eyes did not lose that heated focus. Rabé chewed her lip as Sabé murmured, “Of course, our primary duty is to the people of Naboo. However, Alderaan is an allied system. Beyond what we trained for, we owe it to our allies to serve them as best as possible. If Padmé thought the situation required us, in addition to a Jedi and clone escort, it must be dire.”
The Queen fixed Sabé with a strong, pointed look. “And what if the Senator is mistaken?”

Sabé took a long, focused breath, not breaking eye contact with the Queen as she said in a low voice, “Padmé is rarely mistaken.”

Rabé resisted the urge to glance over at Eirtaé. Sabé was never one to back down in an argument, but one could not be elected Queen of Naboo without that very same trait. This was a discussion that could very well last until Padmé arrived two days from now. Especially if it ended with Sabé defending Padmé’s honor and integrity to the Queen. That was a stance Sabé could never be intimidated from, Rabé knew that for a fact.

The silence between Sabé and Queen Neeyutnee stretched, tension gathering in the air like knots. Rabé cleared her throat and stepped forward, “Your Highness – if I may?”

Neeyutnee broke eye contact with Sabé and nodded slowly at Rabé, who shot a quick glance to her older sister before she spoke, “Your Highness, if Padmé needed to acquire a Jedi escort to a Mid-Rim world, the situation could be worse than she let on – but it could also mean the work will not require much time at all. She said the Jedi and clones were a security detail, and if we were to accept, it would relieve us of the pressure of providing security for the Senator as we worked to find the informant. They would free our attentions, and the mission could be completed in much shorter time.”

Queen Neeyutnee considered this and then sniffed in disdain. She walked towards the balcony walls, placing her hands on the sun-warmed marble as she spoke, “I do not like the idea of offering you to work with the Jedi. They may see it as an invitation to request you, and distract you from your true work, in the future. It could set a precedent, and soon you might find yourselves running ragged across the galaxy to anyone with a half-formed story of political intrigue.” Her hands clenched into fists on the railing. “This is a period of war – and I would rather you stay close to Naboo than go traipsing off to Alderaan to take care of their mess. Why can their security forces not take care of the problem?”

The four women stared at each other, nearing a stalemate, daring another to speak. Queen Neeyutnee was no fan of the Jedi, or the Senate, or the war at all. It was silent again for a moment, and then Eirtaé spoke. “Your Highness, you’ve said it yourself. There’s no one like us in the entire galaxy. I have no doubt the Alderaan security forces tried to root out this informant – but we’re the best in the business. We could clean up their courts in no time.” She was silent, and then raised her startlingly blue eyes to meet the Queen’s once more. Eirtaé shook her head, frowning, as if a terrible thought had just occurred to her. “And, if the situation on Alderaan spins out of control, if news of this reaches other systems, who’s to say a copycat won’t appear in your courts?”

Sabé nodded, ignoring the Queen’s sharp, offended inhalation. “It’s best if we nip this in the bud, before it can take root and choke out other influential systems.”

“Your concern is with Naboo, and rightly so. Any action we can take to help bring along a swifter end to the war will protect our people in the long run.” Rabé finished gently. Her words softened the blows her sisters had dealt.

This was how they operated, and it came as naturally as breathing. The three handmaidens worked together as easily as rivers intertwining, gentle and ferocious all at the same time.

Neeyutnee’s shoulders sagged, ever so slightly, and just like that, Rabé knew they had won. The Queen did not give off an air of defeat, but Rabé knew how to read the deeply-hidden emotions of royalty. Padmé had hidden her emotions in the same way. “Very well. I can see I cannot easily convince you to stay on Naboo – and since the Senator has given us such a short turn-around time, I
will leave you to discuss what you will need for the mission.” She fixed Sabé with a hardened glare. “I suspect you’ve already given some thought to what you will require?”

Sabé bowed low. “Yes, Your Majesty. I will draw up a list and send it to you, after I have discussed it with Eirtae and Rabé.”

The Queen gave them a stiff nod and left without another word. As the hem of her heavy black gowns disappeared over the threshold back into the palace, Rabé glanced at Sabé. “You were never like this with Jamillia, Sabé.”

“Like what?”

Rabé clicked her tongue in mild annoyance. “You know what I’m talking about. You’re always so eager to argue with the Queen – why? She has been an excellent ruler.” Eirtae smirked and leaned against the balcony, squinting out over the city next to Rabé.

“Don’t lecture me, Rabé.”

“I wasn’t, but you know I’m right.” She put her hands on her hips and stared defiantly at her older sister. “You’re so… *abrasive* towards her.”

“I’m _abrasive towards everyone._” Sabé considered her words and then laughed, rolling her eyes. “You’re always ready to defend everyone. The Queen and I have differing opinions on the war, and I hope that’s no secret. She thinks it’s a waste of time and resources – and it might be, but I hardly see how that ignoring it will make it end any faster.” She reached over and affectionately rubbed Rabé’s arm. “Never fear, little one, I won’t be considering treason any time soon.”

Rabé wrinkled her nose. “I’m not that much younger than you, Sabé.”

“You are the youngest of all of us, though.” Eirtae murmured softly, a sly grin on her lips as she glanced back over her shoulder. “Even Dormé is older.”

“Eirtae! I thought you were on my side!”

“I’m just telling the truth.”

“Alright, enough, enough. Let’s focus up.” Sabé leaned back against the balustrade and folded her arms across her chest, closing her eyes as she thought out loud. “Alderaan, then. We’re going to need a few small ships, ones that can’t be easily identified as Nabooian. And I’m assuming since Padmé is going as herself, we’ll need to split up to get the information. An informant will know a Republic senator when they see one, and they wouldn’t dare risk talking to her. That’s where we’ll come in – and that’s how we’ll get the information. We’re not all going to be handmaidens this trip around, but specific assignments will have to come later. I’ll also need a schedule from either Padmé or Queen Breha, and a map of the palace.” She ticked off every thought on her fingers, one by one, the mission already mapping itself out clearly in her mind.

Eirtae turned her face towards the sun and took a deep breath. “I wonder which Jedi it’ll be. What are the odds it’s Master Kenobi again? He’d be good for this sort of thing.”

Sabé shrugged. “The Jedi and the clones are our security detail, apparently – or, more specifically, Padmé’s and whomever we decide to be – so I doubt it matters very much who they send along. They’ll probably just lurk in the background, trying to sense the informant, or whatever.” She waved her hand lazily through the air.

Eirtae and Rabé exchanged a glance. It obviously wasn’t the prospect of working with a Jedi that
excited Sabé about this new assignment.

“It’ll be wonderful to see Padmé again, won’t it, Sabé?” Rabé asked quietly.

A gentle smile broke over her sister’s face as she turned towards the sun. “Mhm,” was her only answer, a soft murmur to the warm evening air.

Chapter End Notes

The incident Obi-Wan referred to during the Council meeting occurs in a prequel one-shot I wrote, titled 'Decoys and Loyal Bodyguards.' It set the stage to bring the handmaidens back into the play, explaining just where our favorite girl gang went after the events of The Phantom Menace.

I also wanted to just say a MASSIVE thank you to everyone who reblogged our announcement on tumblr, commented, kudos'd, and checked out the first chapter for this extreme rarepair. It really means a lot to @evaceratops and I to see all the interest - and we've only just begun ❤️ (also! the cover for this chapter is outstanding and features everyone's favorite clone mom, Shaak Ti, because I gave @evaceratops a chance to draw Shaak and she /took/ it and it's /incredible/)
iii. cobalt armor, burgundy silks

At any other given point in time, the Resolute was a barely-contained chaotic fray of troopers, Jedi, ships, supplies, and droids all jostling up against one another, shouting orders and scrambling to complete them. It fit with General Skywalker’s style that the men under his command were laxer than in other battalions, always ready to fire a snappy joke or taunt a brother across the hangar – most of the time, it was the General firing off quips as he surveyed his troops. Currently, however, Skywalker’s commanding flagship was an empty husk in orbit around Coruscant. Supplies were stowed, droids in their carriers, ships docked and attached to their refueling lines. The hangar was as calm as it could ever be, and that was entirely due to the fact that most of the brothers were now wreaking havoc in the dance halls and bars of Coruscant’s neon-lit streets.
Most of them, anyways – bar the four men clustered around an empty storage container, lit from above by one of the powerful floodlights, the rest of the hangar thrown into shadows. Their buckets, battered from months of hard, constant wear, had been tossed together in a pile.

Captain Rex knew the others were cross with him – Jesse was leaning against the container, arms folded, eyes closed; Kix drumming his fingers on the metal, his lips pursed together in annoyance. Only Hardcase was unabashedly complaining about the prime hours of entertainment they were currently missing. Rex had caught the three just as they had been about to leave for the surface, so he couldn’t exactly blame them. Still, the sooner the General got here, the better. He wasn’t sure how much more of Hardcase’s ‘subtle’ complaining he could take.

“Sir, the 212th has been trying to take this bar for themselves for months, and if we’re not there tonight I just know they’re gonna take it-”

“Enough, Hardcase. General Skywalker told me that he needed to talk to the four of us. And while I fully appreciate your hard and I’m sure dedicated work to thwart the 212th, a direct order from your General takes priority.” He fixed Hardcase with a pointed look, fighting the urge to crack a smile. “Unfortunately.”

Jesse snorted as Hardcase made one final attempt to convince the Captain: “But this is the last night of our leave!” He spread his hands wide, mortally offended that Rex wasn’t budging from his position. “This could be the end of the turf war – and we’re just gonna miss it?”

“General Skywalker said he’d just come out of meeting with the Council. He’s the one who told me to find you three for a new assignment, and that’s all I know. You can complain all you want when he gets here.” Rex didn’t want to give Hardcase the pleasure of knowing he was irked, too – slightly, never enough to actually voice his frustrations – because he knew better than any of his brothers how insufferable Commander Cody would be if the 501st lost the bar tonight. Not to mention that, if asked, General Skywalker would have been just as enthused as Hardcase at any chance to annoy General Kenobi.

Even on leave, the men played at war, and any true man of the 501st would be damned thrice over before they allowed the 212th to win at anything. Cody must be getting sick of losing so often, Rex thought, allowing himself a private, self-satisfied smirk at the thought.

“It’s not like you were the only one defending that place, Hardcase,” Kix said, raising an eyebrow and smirking. “Literally the rest of the battalion is down there now.”

Hardcase sighed, defeated. “But I won’t be there, that’s the problem.” He rubbed the back of his head, a reflexive tick all the brothers shared, whether they had hair to run fingers through or not. “What’s the point if I’m not there? It took us so long to take it from them – I want to see their faces when they realized they’ve lost!”

Jesse laughed again as the familiar reverb of a LAAT/i started to thrum against the silence of the hangar. It moved easily through the airlocks, heading straight for the waiting group. Rex nodded to the pilots as the doors slid open and Skywalker stepped out, followed close by Commander Tano. She couldn’t hide a wide grin when she saw the four men waiting around the shipping container. Skywalker called out a greeting. He also looked very pleased with himself, his manner relaxed, an easy smile on his lips. Rex couldn’t remember the last time he had been this relaxed after a meeting with the Jedi Council – usually he would storm off the gunship, roll his eyes as he told Rex what the Council had wanted – and then would promptly go about doing the exact opposite of his orders.

Sometimes, Rex wondered if General Kenobi purposefully gave Skywalker incorrect orders,
knowing how his former apprentice operated. He wouldn’t have been surprised. But his General had one of the highest success rates in the entire GAR, and Rex was ready to attribute that to Skywalker before any clever scheming on anyone else’s part.

The four men snapped to an easy salute just as two more figures exited the gunship. Two ARC troopers, their strides long and confident – and two old friends.

Fives and Echo pulled their buckets from their heads as they approached the group behind Skywalker and Ahsoka. Fives grinning at Rex and Jesse, Echo inclining his head in silent greeting. Hardcase stared at them in open-mouthed wonder as they slid into position next to Skywalker and Tano, their movements smooth and mirrored to the other. Some ARCs worked alone, contracted out as needed, moving from assignment to assignment on their own – but not Fives and Echo. They were a team, had been since their days as cadets on Kamino. To have risen from the last surviving members of their original squad to ARCs was a rare accomplishment indeed – and they still paid homage to their home battalion.

Their double pauldrons, kamas, and armor were still painted in proud 501st blue, despite being promoted from the battalion nearly a four months ago. The sight of the blue handprint smacked onto Echo’s chest still made Rex’s heart leap with pride. He’d bestowed it when Echo and Fives were rookies, and now, here they stood, proud and accomplished ARCs. He’d seen them through nearly every step of their journey. Echo hadn’t needed to keep the handprint, but he had, and Rex considered it a humble honor. He was as proud as any older brother that the blue hand remained.

Once decorated, a brother’s armor was as unique as the man who wore it, a source of pride, a marker of the flesh and blood that drove it. Armor was a clone trooper’s second skin, and if they decorated their flesh to set themselves apart from each other, decorating armor was a natural and obvious next step – not to mention it positively infuriated the Kaminoan scientists, precisely because it disrupted their obsession with order. Clones may start as shiny white and interchangeable as newly-distributed armor, but give it half a day and both man and plates would be near unrecognizable. It was the perfect canvas to silently assert individuality to a galaxy full of beings that sometimes – often – considered that an impossibility for clones.

Even among the six brothers now waiting for their General to begin the debrief, the notion that they were entirely identical in every atom of their being was laughable. They shared the same face, the same training, the same blood – but Rex’s mind was his own. Of that, he was certain – and what better canvas to prove that point than with decorated plates?

Ahsoka leaned against the supply crate, bouncing her leg in excitement. When she caught Rex’s curious glance, her smile broadened so that the light of the floodlights threw her sharp teeth into stark relief. Rex took that as a very good sign. If both Skywalker and Tano were this eager to debrief the six men, the Council meeting must have gone very well.

“Evening, gentlemen!” Skywalker said as he stopped in front of them. “Hope I’m not disrupting any exciting plans tonight.”

“Well, General, now that you mention it-”

“Hardcase,” Rex warned. Kix and Jesse smirked at each other as Hardcase held up his hands in easy concession. “You have a mission for us, General?”

“That we do, Rex – and I know it’s the last night of our leave, but I promise it’s well worth the disruption.”

“It’s gotta be a good one, General, if we got two ARCs coming with us,” Jesse said, nodding
towards Fives and Echo.

Skywalker laughed and said, “Exactly! And that reminds me—” He quickly ran through introductions, mostly for Hardcase’s benefit. He still looked a little star-struck, staring with wide eyes as he leaned casually against the supply crate, trying to appear nonchalant in front of the ARCs when Skywalker introduced him. Rex could remember the first time he had met an ARC trooper as a cadet, and grinned.

Once the formal introductions were over, Skywalker clapped his hands and grinned around the circle at the men still waiting to be debriefed. “Right, who’s excited to go see Alderaan?”

An excited murmur swept through the men, and even Rex couldn’t help but feel the first excited twinges in his stomach at the mention of that Inner Rim planet. The 501st was rarely, if ever, deployed to Mid or Inner Rim worlds, instead focusing the brunt of their attacks on heavily contested lines in the Outer Rim. They saw heavy action, existed under intense fire and battles, almost none of it on a world such as Alderaan. They weren’t a relief battalion, bringing in supplies to war-torn worlds after Republic victories. The 501st went in, scrapped the tinnies, snatched the victory, and left clean-up for the relief battalions that followed. Other battalions thought the 501st was made up of nothing but adrenaline junkies and insane bravado.

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“Excellent! Personally, I’ve always wanted to see it – Snips says it’s really quite wonderful.” Skywalker smirked at his Padawan.

Ahsoka rolled her eyes and shifted her weight to the opposite hip. “When the vents aren’t crawling with bounty hunters, yeah, it’s great.”

“Sounds like my kinda place!” Hardcase’s sentiment was echoed by the others.

“What’s the mission, General?” Echo asked, his voice softer than his brothers, swinging the conversation back around to the issue at hand.

“It’s different than what we’re all used to – just going to be upfront with that, because I don’t want anyone—” Skywalker fixed both Fives and Hardcase with a pointed look, “– to get the wrong idea about our role there. We’re going to Alderaan as security and support for Senator Amidala and her some of her former handmaidens while they work to root out a suspected Separatist spy.”

The handmaidens! Rex knew Senator Amidala well enough – it was hard enough to work for Skywalker and not know the Senator – but the handmaidens were still something of an enigma to him. He’d been on that frigate, weeks ago, when Skywalker had thought Senator Amidala was in danger, only to be met with an impressive decoy and two others. He suspected it was these three women who were to accompany them to Alderaan – after all, how many handmaidens could the Senator possibly have?

In the silence that followed the debrief, Rex watched the others processing the information. Jesse was the first to clarify: “We’re going undercover?”

“Yes – again, as security—”

“With these two?” Jesse asked, pointing incredulously at Hardcase and Fives. Ahsoka burst out laughing as Jesse went on, ignoring Hardcase’s glare of mock offense, “Sorry, General, but those three things don’t ever belong in the same sentence – unless there’s a giant flashing ‘bad idea’ in
front of them.” Rex glanced over at him, appreciative that someone else had been thinking the same thing. It wasn’t that Hardcase and Fives weren’t exceptional soldiers – they were, when they put their minds to it – but he wouldn’t have put their names down for a mission such as this, either.

Fives snorted in thanks and gave an exaggerated shrug, “Hey, I can be quiet when I want to be! You’ll never even know I was there – I’ll be in and out and nab that Seppie bastard before you can blink.”

“Nah,” Kix shook his head. “Something is definitely going to explode by the end of this mission.”

“That’s exactly what I said!” Ahsoka said, as Hardcase threw up his hands in mock frustration.

“Alright, alright – look, I know we have an… unconventional group here, but for the record, Master Shaak Ti recommended I bring these two along – along with Rex and three of my best men. And that’s you guys, so! I’m actually following orders, for once.” Skywalker thought a moment and then finished, “So if something blows up-”

“When,” Kix muttered under his breath, earning himself an immediate punch on the shoulder from Hardcase.

“-then we can blame the Council.” Skywalker grinned to himself and nodded. “That sounds like a solid plan to me.”

Rex cleared his throat and asked, “How long is this looking to take, General?”

“Senator Amidala said she and her handmaidens have been trained in this sort of thing – subterfuge and all that – so her max estimate was two, maybe three weeks. They’ll be doing all the hard work, I suspect. Obi-Wan is going to be taking over the rest of the 501st in the meantime, keeping the fleet together, so everything appears normal to an outside eye.”

Rex nodded, his thoughts already racing ahead, ticking down a mental list of things that needed to be done, bolstered by the notion of adding three accomplished allies to such a delicate mission. His worries of an exploding Aldera were slightly assuaged by the thought. “And the handmaidens – are they the same three women we ran into on that frigate, a few weeks back?”

Ahsoka grinned and nodded. “Yup – Sabé was the one who was dressed like Senator Amidala, and Eirtae and Rabé were the others.” She could barely help from bouncing all around in excitement, even though her role would be dull compared to what she was used to on the front lines. All of theirs would be, as they sat back and let the handmaidens root out the spy. She considered Senator Amidala a close friend, however, and Rex suspected Ahsoka would get on very well with the handmaidens.

“Yes, exactly, those three. Supposedly they work for the Royal House of Naboo now, as a special operations unit for missions exactly like this. Mostly undercover work, but apparently they sometimes take out Separatist frigates just for the hell of it.”

Fives raised his eyebrows, nodding in appreciation as he muttered, “Sounds like my kind of woman,” earning him a sharp look from both Echo and Rex.

“Anyways,” Skywalker continued, talking over Fives, “Senator Amidala is going to let me know as soon as they’ve been granted permission – and we’ll leave as soon as possible for Naboo, and then Alderaan after that.

“One last thing. We’ll be answering to Queen Breha, but I suspect our contact with her will be
minimum to keep the spy from getting suspicious and jumping ship before we can find them. She’s the one who called Senator Amidala in the first place. We’re there as security and protection, to make the handmaidens’ job easier.” He looked around the group and put his hands on his hips as he finished, “Is that clear?”

“Sir, yes sir!” The resounding call echoed around the empty hangar just as Skywalker’s wrist comms beeped in a unique pattern, three short chirps following a longer, low whistle. Rex knew it was from the Senator – Skywalker had unique patterns for nearly everyone. He most often answered General Kenobi or Senator Amidala, and let comms from Council members slide until further notice. He was always ready with an excuse – or, more often, a victory achieved against orders.

Skywalker glanced down, read the notification, and nodded sharply. “Right, so that’s great timing – the handmaidens are in, and we leave for Naboo as soon as possible. Once we’re there, we’re background security for the women – so get it all out now, every urge to act like you would on the battlefield – as Master Ti so generously put it, our particular tactical style will be useless on Alderaan. Once we’re in, we’re in, until we find this spy.”

The affirmative call rang out once more, ringing off the hangar walls thrown into shadows. Change of pace might be nice, Rex thought as he watched Fives step up to Hardcase and shake his hand, glad to see a kindred spirit who appreciated the finer points of humor. Skywalker messaged the Senator back quickly while the others started to chatter in excitement – about Alderaan, about the handmaidens, about the spy.

Rex could only hope Kix was wrong about the potential explosions.

Padmé stood on the bridge of the Resolute next to Anakin, watching with growing anticipation as the readout scanner drew them ever closer to Naboo. To her old friends and sisters. She had not seen them in years – her duties as a Senator meant she had little time to visit her friends and family, and she knew Queen Neeyutnee kept Sabé busy. They’d find time to talk every now and then, but it was never enough. Every conversation seemed to deepen the longing in Padmé’s chest for her sisters, not lessen it. She missed the retinue of handmaidens, not for their impressive skills and loyalty, but for the late-night conversations that swirled around love and politics and hopes and dreams, for the way there was always someone to talk to, even in the dead of night. Their rooms in the Royal Palace had been their sanctuary from the stresses of ruling, where they could be teenage girls instead of the Queen and her Royal Handmaidens. A tight-knit group with the weight of Naboo on their shoulders. She missed their warmth, their inside jokes and pranks and comforting touches, but she had little choice when Queen Jamillia asked her to stay on as Senator.

They had trained together, they had lived together – and then, suddenly, Padmé was more alone than she could ever remember being before. Sabé had refused to come with her to Coruscant. Her reasoning had been sound enough, but Padmé had wanted all of her sisters there with her. Though they served as her decoys and bodyguards, Padmé would have never dreamt of ordering them to do anything against their will. She was grateful for the three that went – but then Captain Typho had caught wind of another attempt on Padmé’s life. The Trade Federation wanted her dead. Unsurprising, and it hadn’t seem like much cause for concern. There had been other attempts before, and obviously none had succeeded.

Cordé hadn’t even waited for the direct order, and then their numbers had been violently struck down one more. They’d lost a sister, and Padmé never let herself forget it.

Of course, none of the handmaidens were biologically related, though some, like Dormé and Sabé,
looked similar enough to act as her decoy when needed. *And Cordé*, Padmé thought, biting the inside of her cheek as the blue-white whorls of the hyperspace lane drew her memory back to the explosion. The cold, brutal snap of fear as Padmé had watched, horrorstruck and helpless, the blast flinging Cordé down the landing pad. Her sister had died in her arms, bloodied and broken, dressed as Padmé. She’d died in Padmé’s place.

And now that she thought about it, really thought about it, she hadn’t actually seen Sabé or the others since Cordé’s death, not in person. Captain Typho had told them – Padmé had still been in mute shock – and she had so desperately wanted them there with her. Instead they had to mourn Cordé separately, systems away from each other.

Every handmaiden knew that their role was a dangerous one – it was a tradition left over from a brutal era in Naboo’s past, when nobles regularly killed one another for a dagger’s edge chance at the throne. But to think of the danger slinking into the modern day, following them –

“Senator Amidala?”

Anakin’s gentle voice jerked Padmé out of her memories, though the acrid stink of spilled fuel and burnt flesh still hung around her skin like it had on that day. She hadn’t been able to wash it off, it had clung to her, and she’d had to throw away the gloves she’d been wearing while she cradled Cordé. Dormé had said, gently, as she prised Padmé’s stiff fingers open, that there wasn’t any blood on the dark leather after their third cleaning, but Padmé still saw the strains whenever she closed her eyes. It haunted her, but she had to continue her work. She had Naboo, and the Republic, to fight for and to focus on. To distract her. Otherwise she might have never returned to Coruscant.

She shook herself, the memories fading back into mist, and inclined her head towards her husband. The noise of the command deck around her rose again, men talking and laughing, consoles and monitors steadily humming in the background. Padmé couldn’t have said how long she’d been bogged down in her memories, but when she met Anakin’s eyes, she only saw worry. Love, of course, was there – hidden, buried deep in his eyes, but it burned as bright as a star to Padmé.

“Is everything alright, Senator? Your thoughts were… heavy – and I didn’t mean to pry, but—”

She smiled up at him, her fingers aching to drift forward and clasp his. “Yes, I’m fine, General. I was just thinking about seeing the girls again.” Her eyes drifted to the monitor again as she continued softly, “We haven’t been together as a whole group in so long. Dormé and Teckla were both upset after their third cleaning, but Padmé still saw the strains whenever she closed her eyes. It haunted her, but she had to continue her work. She had Naboo, and the Republic, to fight for and to focus on. To distract her. Otherwise she might have never returned to Coruscant.

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A foolish dream, she knew. They had grown up and moved along their separate paths. She supposed she should be grateful that Alderaan meant she could see Sabé, Rabé, and Eirtaé again, that she had a reason to finally see her sisters again. But she also knew that it would be like getting a taste of what could have been. Padmé was lonely for the company of her many sisters, and once she was back among them she knew it would be all the more difficult to leave them again.

“I’m sure they understand, Senator. Especially if Sabé and the others are the best of your former handmaidens, as you say.” He voice was still gentle, the voice he used when they were alone. It was almost disconcerting to hear him like this on the command deck of his flagship. If she closed her eyes, she could almost believe they were in her apartments on Coruscant.

“They are, but we used to do everything together. All of us. I miss that, sometimes.” She felt her thoughts drifting back towards a darker place, and forced them back. Padmé almost felt guilty – she should be excited, she *was* excited, but sometimes Cordé’s death sometimes loomed large in her
mind, seemingly without warning. It always took her a few moments to rally herself and refocus. “Don’t worry about me. I was just… reminiscing, that’s all.”

Anakin did not look convinced. But he hardly had time to push her further, because at that moment Captain Rex cleared his throat and called, “We’re exiting hyperspace, sir – Naboo is just ahead.” He stood behind them, and Padmé had little time to wonder how much Rex had overheard before the *Resolute* dropped out of hyperspace, and the jewel that was Naboo loomed large and sudden in the wide viewports of the deck.

The tired ache in her bones lifted as suddenly as the planet appeared. Even if she wasn’t setting foot on her homeworld, the mere sight of Naboo was enough to ease Padmé’s mind. It was a balm for her weary mind, a reminder of where she came from. Its vast oceans visible even from this distance, Padmé was soothed by the memories of the waters of Naboo. It was a gentle reminder to be as water – steady, calm, persistent, deadly and life-giving all at once. Her shoulders relaxed and she took a steadying breath – she could still feel Anakin’s worried glances, and she wanted nothing more than to reassure him with a kiss that she really was fine now.

But that would have to wait until later.

She turned to Rex and asked, “Captain, are the handmaidens aware that we’ve arrived?”

“Yes, Senator, I informed them a few minutes ago.” Rex checked a readout on the monitor in front of him and nodded sharply. “They’re on their way, in a diplomatic barge with two N-1’s as an escort. Should be here in a few minutes.” He glanced out of the viewport, and sure enough, a chrome-plated barge had left the atmosphere, growing steadily larger as it approached the *Resolute*.

The starship gleamed in the light from the system’s star, magnificent against the backdrop of inky black space as it gave a slow fly-by the command bridge. Her sisters were on that ship – and like the mere sight of Naboo, that was enough to lift her spirits. Despite her fears and worries of all that could go wrong with this mission, Padmé felt, for the first time since Bail stepped into her offices, a small twinge of excitement.

She inclined her head towards Rex in thanks and then glanced back to Anakin. “I’d like to meet them in the hangar, General” she said, a tiny smile dancing on her lips.

He apparently sensed the lightness of her mind and the worry in his eyes unknot themselves as he bowed to her, “Of course. I’ll tell Ahsoka and the others to meet us there, so we can all get a proper introduction.” Ahsoka had been assigned the thrilling task of going through their supplies, or so she had called out to Padmé when the Senator had first boarded the *Resolute*. Jesse and Kix had been with her, while Hardcase was going over the weapons. Padmé had not yet seen the two ARC troopers, but Anakin had reassured her that they were just as eager to begin as the others.

She’d worked with the 501st often enough that she knew most of their names, and could identify them under their armor. It was unusual for a Senator to have as much contact with the clone troopers as she did, but considering her apparently well-known penchant for ‘excursions,’ Padmé thought nothing of it. Other Senators were content with letting clones remain faceless, remain nameless. She thought Senator Orn Free Ta could learn something if he bothered to work closely with a battalion or two. Many Senators could.

As she followed Anakin out of the command deck, Rex turning sharply to walk behind them, she made a mental note to thank them, somehow, after they found the spy. There was no doubt in Padmé’s mind that they would catch the perpetrator, and she already felt immensely grateful towards the men for their cheerful, gung-ho attitudes. She’d have to ask Anakin or Captain Rex what they
would most appreciate – and she’d send enough for the rest of the 501st, too.

Ahsoka had gathered the rest of the men already by the time they got to the hangar, just in time to watch as the elegant chrome ship landed. It was in stark contrast to the battle-worn gunships and starfighters dotted intermittently throughout the hangar, sleek and imposing. It landed lightly, steam hissing into the air as the interior decompressed. Padmé smiled at Ahsoka and nodded towards the group of waiting men, including the two ARCs now. She didn’t know their names, not yet, but for now all she could focus on was the hiss of the ramp as it lowered. Padmé took a step forward, fighting the urge to run forward to meet her sisters at long last.

She should have known they would be just as eager to see her, too.

The ramp hit the floor with a thud, and Rabé flew down the durasteel first, right to Padmé, a massive smile on her face as she threw her arms around Padmé and kissed her cheek with a delighted laugh. “Padmé! I’ve missed you, it’s been so long!”

Padmé could not stop her own laugh from bubbling up as she hugged Rabé back, squeezing the youngest handmaiden fondly before stepping back and saying, “I’ve missed you too – I’m so glad you could come with us to Alderaan!”

Rabé’s smile broadened, her large, dark eyes crinkling up as she gave Padmé a tiny, informal bow. She was dressed in the burgundy silk battle robes, her long black hair pulled back into the split-buns. A royal pistol, plated in the same chrome as the barge behind her, was tucked into a holster around her waist, but Padmé knew that was not the only weapon Rabé had on her person. Most of the others would be so cleverly hidden that not even a Jedi would suspect the cheerful woman of carrying so many. Her eyes darted over to the clones and Jedi waiting patiently behind Padmé, curiosity and eagerness spreading over her face as she stepped to Padmé’s side.

Eirtaé slunk down next, dressed in the same robes as Rabé, her ice-blue eyes snapping up every detail of the hangar and its occupants. Padmé kissed her cheek, too, murmuring a greeting into Eirtaé’s thick blonde hair. Thought Eirtaé was nowhere near as forthcoming or talkative as Rabé, the tiny smirk and twinkle in her eyes was enough for Padmé to know she was just as happy to see her old friend again. She stared boldly at the clones in her silent, cat-like way, hands clasped behind her back, as Sabé emerged from the ship last.

Her lips were cool against Padmé’s cheek, her dark brown eyes carefully devoid of any emotion besides pleasant, stoic calm as she said, “Padmé, my Lady, it’s good to see you again.”

Padmé smiled at her. It was a different smile than what she had for Rabé and Eirtaé, and it almost felt heavy on her lips. She turned to face her selected few, who were all staring at the each other in open curiosity, wondering what would come of this mission, wondering about the training and capabilities of the other. Padmé couldn’t help but wonder the same thing, as she introduced her oldest friends to Anakin, Ahsoka, and the 501st. Now that they were all finally standing together, the mission at hand suddenly felt all the more real.

Six clones, two Jedi, a Senator and three handmaidens.

Padmé knew there was not another group so well trained, so vastly experienced and dedicated and loyal, in the entire galaxy. Whatever fates had deigned to bring them together, they had selected the twelve well – and in more brilliantly varied ways than any of them could have ever anticipated.

She had a very good feeling about this.
Fives straightened, the last to nod in greetings and introduce himself to the newcomers. He’d been working with Echo on weapons maintenance, joking around with Hardcase when Ahsoka called them to the hangar. If someone had asked what he’d been thinking as they watched the chrome Nubian starship land gracefully amongst the battered gunships and assault vehicles, a convor among reeks, he would have shrugged, “Nothing important.” A joke, perhaps, or the last mission on Sullust – maybe what Alderaan would be like, if the civilians there would be uptight or relaxed or entertaining. Worrying about how six clones, bred for battlefields, would be able to blend into one of the places they fought to protect.
He would have said it hadn’t mattered what he’d been thinking of before the Nubian landed.

“Let’s begin, then.”

As if she had given them an order, the six clones instinctively stood tall at the tone in Senator Amidala’s voice as she stepped away from the last dark-haired handmaiden – who could have been the Senator’s twin, for all Fives knew – and into the center of the twelve circled around the ramp of the chrome starship. Her jaw was set and her brows furrowed together, hands clasped firmly together behind her back as she fixed each with an unhurried, determined stare. Though General Skywalker, Commander Tano, and Captain Rex were all present, there was no doubt in Fives’ mind that Senator Amidala was the one in charge. It wasn’t simply because she’d been the one to bring them all together for this mission. She stepped into the role as naturally as if she had been born to it.

Fives knew she would have made a formidable General in another life – and her handmaidens would have undoubtedly been her Commanders.

They’d stepped off the ship and he’d known that at once. He’d been raised as a soldier, bred to be the perfect trooper. He could spot command stock from a klik away. The three women might have been diminutive in size, but their confident, relaxed stances and quick, observant eyes told him there was more to them than meets the eye. Despite being in the belly of a warship, surrounded by soldiers and the militaristic might of the GAR, they were completely and totally at ease.

“I'll start with this – I’d like to thank each of you for agreeing to accompany me to Alderaan. Queen Breha has entrusted me with this mission, but I knew this was not something I could have accomplished alone. The risks were far too great, the situation too delicate for just myself to handle.” Her gaze shifted to the handmaidens, and she smiled knowingly at them, “I know Queen Neeyutnee might not have been entirely thrilled with the prospect, and that it was the last night of your leaves or you had only just returned from another mission, but nonetheless, here you are.”

At the mention of their Queen, the handmaidens all exchanged glances, a private joke being passed between them in silence. Hardcase nodded in appreciation, grinning, and Fives was hardly surprised that the Senator knew he and Echo had just returned from Sullust not one day prior.

“All of my former handmaidens and I have been well trained for situations such as this: subterfuge, monitoring political strategies, and, if necessary, the subtle de-escalation of tense noble courts. Espionage, I suppose, in a word. Sabé, Eirtaé, and Rabé were by far the most accomplished out of all of us, however. Your skills and experience will form the focal point of how we proceed on Alderaan, as this is still your arena of expertise. And I suspect you’re all extremely well prepared for the tasks at hand.”

In perfect unison, all three inclined their heads in thanks for the praise, an exact reflection of each other. It was the movement of beings who had lived and trained together, spending every moment in each other’s company for years.

It was the movement of soldiers. Of warriors, Fives understood suddenly. The realization of why he’d felt so drawn to them, why the way they moved felt so familiar lighting his mind like a flare. Put any five clones together, order them to complete a drill, and they’d move their bodies the same way. Individuals that were an extension of the other – pieces of a greater whole.

The handmaidens were soldiers; a sisterhood forged strong through duty. Their battlefield might be different than his, but it was no less vital to the war for which they all fought.

Curiosity kept tugging Fives’ eyes back over to the handmaidens, and only one met his gaze and smiled back at him. Rabé Bhutia, she’d said, dipping a quick, graceful curtsiey during those first
tentative introductions. They were two groups of near-strangers trying to be as polished and impressive as possible. Eirtaé and Sabé were as stiff-backed and purely professional as the men, but Rabé’s bright smile came easily to her face. The three of them had recognized Skywalker, Tano, and Rex, but only Rabé had appeared genuinely happy to see them again. Fives had noticed that right away. She was very pretty – they all were – with copper skin just shades lighter than his own and sleepy, kind dark eyes. Even when she was standing still, she held herself in a way that exuded eagerness, lightly bouncing on the balls of her feet. Her gaze flicked back to the Senator and Fives realized, suddenly, that a faint smile was hovering on his own lips. Focus, Fives, he told himself. 

There’s a mission at hand. They’re here to fight, same as you.

Senator Amidala wasted no time. “Alderaan is facing a crisis. Not only is a suspected spy in the courts leaking intel and credits to the Separatists, there is also a distinct risk towards hidden Republic medical bases, a threat that only grows each day the spy is not caught.”

A low murmur swept through the men at this new development. Fives’ eyes narrowed as shock, then anger began to boil in his blood. Besides him, Echo clicked his tongue, a tightening grip on his bucket the only indication of deep worry. They hadn’t known the medical bases were in danger – all those injured brothers, unable to protect themselves, now in greater danger than they knew. Skywalker had only mentioned the leaking credits. But it had suddenly become all the more personal to each of the men. Shoulder to shoulder on those front lines; brothers! The words were burned into Fives’ memory. He’d only been a cadet on Kamino, shiny-white and inexperienced, dreams of becoming an ARC trooper still only that when he had watched Commander Colt giving his infamous speech.

But his loyalty to his brothers was still as strong as it had ever been. It was ingrained into every fiber of his being, into every red blood cell that pumped through his heart.

“Separatist sleemo, going after men who can’t defend themselves!” Ahsoka spat. She stood next to her Master, mirroring his pose – arms crossed, a determined scowl on both of their faces. Like General, like Commander, Fives thought, grinning at her.

“Our goal is to make sure they never get the chance to find the bases – as of right now, we believe the locations are still secure. But we can’t guarantee for how much longer. And, of course, after the attacks on Coruscant, we are going into a highly volatile situation. Many lives are depending on how well we work in the coming days.” Senator Amidala glanced down, worry briefly washing over her face as her thoughts turned to the injured men. She cared for the troopers, that was plain to see – and not in the way that most sentients seemed to ‘care’ about the clones. She cared for them as people, as men with their own private thoughts and lives and dreams. They were not just numbered, faceless drones to her. “All we can do now is get to Alderaan and start our work as fast as possible.”

“That raises the question of how we’re getting there, Senator.” Rex said slowly. “The only transports we have readily available are obviously military vessels. A Star Destroyer would blow our cover pretty quick.” His eyes slid to the General, patiently waiting for a plan.

Skywalker blinked back at the Captain, scrambling for words. “We could take the Nubian, I suppose – if it’s available to us, that is. I… I hadn’t really thought of that.” He gave a self-conscious laugh and said, “I do know we can’t arrive in the Resolute, but I guess I hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

An awkward silence fell over the group, and then Sabé cleared her throat. “If I may address this, my Lady?” She asked, her voice ringing out clear and relaxed. Senator Amidala turned, and after a moment’s pause, nodded at her to continue.

Sabé took a step forward into the center of the group. “Not to worry, General Skywalker. I have already taken the liberty of arranging for our transportation. A few of my contacts have acquired two
types of diplomatic starships – small things, meant for crews under five, but certainly far less noticeable than the sudden appearance of a warship over the horizon.” She grinned at the thought, and turned to Skywalker, tapping her wrist comms as she did so. “I have the coordinates of the drops here, General. I can give them to you afterwards. Queen Neeyutnee also graciously allowed us the use of this Nubian here,” she said, jerking her thumb over her shoulder towards the chrome ship. “That should give us plenty of options in terms of transportation.”

Senator Amidala smiled at her, and again, Fives caught a glimpse of the brief burst of powerful emotion in her dark eyes. She buried it quickly, however, and smoothed the front of her elaborate gown as she raised an eyebrow, “It sounds like you have a plan in mind, Sabé.”

“Oh, I’ve thought of one or two,” Sabé said idly, the corners of her lips twitching up in amusement. She gazed openly over the group of clones, her eyes moving steadily over their armor and faces, committing them to memory. Surveying them like an officer. “We’ve also prepped a crash course for those less acquainted with the inner workings, organizations, and expectations of noble courts.”

Behind her, Rabé giggled, Eirtae smiled, and Fives came to the conclusion that he really liked the handmaidens. Rabé met his eyes again and this time he didn’t bother trying to stop the grin from spreading over his face. The others were more relaxed now, too, excitement rippling through the small group.

Anakin folded his arms over his chest. “A drop-off like that seems risky, though. How do we know we trust these contacts of yours? What if they somehow alert the target?”

“I’ve staggered their arrival times. My contacts might not be the most… savory beings, but they’re trustworthy, General. And if not... I ‘let slip’ the fact I had need of diplomatic vessels for training exercises near Dantooine. Even if they do suspect the true need for the ships, they won’t look to Alderaan.” She paused for a moment, as if picking her next words carefully, and then smirked. “Also, they’re not the brightest people, either. So that certainly helps.”

Jesse and Kix exchanged a glance, impressed. Tano gave a low whistle, “Sounds like you’ve been busy.”

Eirtaé, the blonde handmaid with eyes as light and sharp as glass, didn’t exactly smile - her lips more or less twitched upwards - as she said, her voice low and husky, “We had some time to kill.”

“Good! At least someone’s being doing some work – but I guess that’s why you’re the professionals.” Tano joked, nudging her Master in the ribs. He brushed her away like he’d done a hundred times before.

“What about the rest of the fleet, General?” Rex asked, hardly blinking at the disruption. “Our absence will be noted.”

“OK, right, see – I did actually figure this part out, so I just want it stated for the record that I have been doing something,” he said quickly, making a face at Ahsoka. She rolled her eyes in response as he went on, “Obi-Wan has graciously offered to take full control of the Open Circle fleet while we complete our tasks on Alderaan. Hopefully he’ll be able to cover for our absences – and hopefully we won’t miss anything too exciting while we’re gone.”

There was a pause, and then Jesse asked slowly, “How is General Kenobi gonna convince the tinnies that you’re not suddenly MIA, sir?” He shifted his weight, grinning at Hardcase next to him as he finished, “Can’t really see him adapting to your battle strategies.”

Quiet laughter rippled through the men at the thought of Kenobi trying to act like Skywalker was still
by his side. Anakin grinned and waved aside their concerns, “I’d be very disappointed if Obi-Wan can’t hold his own for a few weeks, but I won’t complain if I have to rush in and save the day. Again.”

Ahsoka snorted out loud just as an excited – well, as excited as any droid’s voice could mimic excitement – voice rang out, “Mistress Padmé!”

Fives turned to see the Senator’s nervous protocol droid shuffling towards the group in excitement, pushing past Fives and Echo in his eagerness to get to Padmé. Skywalker’s little astromech followed, beeping and whirring its domed head in what Fives assumed was also excitement. Fives snickered as Threepio went right up the Senator, her face a mix between amusement and exhaustion.

“Look, Mistress – it’s Artoo – and Master Anakin! How are you, sir, I am extremely well, I was just making certain that Mistress Padmé’s affects were all in order when all of a sudden, who did I hear but Artoo–”

“Threepio,” Amidala said, exasperatedly trying to cut through the droid’s chatter, but it was too late. The interruption had banished any last shred of focus from the group. It marked the natural end of the unofficial meeting, Threepio’s wild gesticulations breaking their concentration like a well-timed shot. Fives tensed and released his knees, working blood back through the joints as the others shuffled around him. There was still a respectful distance between the clones and the handmaidens, but it had narrowed. Now the glances exchanged between them were not so brazenly defiant, simply curious and eager to see the capabilities of the other.

He watched as Rabé’s gaze was drawn to Artoo. She bent to get a closer look at the astromech, squinting, as it chirruped up at her with a binary question. She smiled like she was seeing an old friend again and patted the top of his dome as she called out, “Sabé, look – isn’t this the little droid you made Padmé clean after we escaped Naboo?”

Sabé, who had been talking to Amidala and Skywalker, turned and frowned down at the droid. Recognition dawned on her face and she gave a short, surprised laugh. “It is! R2-D2, right?” She recalled his designation number with ease, which absolutely delighted the little droid. She laughed and reached out to pet his head, “What are you doing here..?!”

Artoo whirred in excitement and rolled over to her as Ahsoka asked in surprise, peering around Skywalker for a better look, “You recognize this little guy?”

“He saved our lives during the invasion of Naboo. Broke us through the Trade Federation’s blockade on our way to Coruscant,” Sabé answered. “I was Padmé’s decoy then, and I may have told her clean him up after the battle.” She shot a grin over her shoulder to Amidala, who smiled fondly back at her. “In my defense, we were fourteen, the Queen never had to clean up anything, and I had to make it look convincing, right?”

Rabé laughed, “You saw the opportunity and took it – but Padmé, you were so mad at her.”

“I remember, I don’t think I talked to you for the rest of the day-”

They descended into a chorus of light laughter and shared memories, and Fives was mesmerized. He had learned about the invasion of Naboo, a preliminary battle to the war that truly began on Geonosis – but even though he’d read about Queen Amidala and the Trade Federation’s illegal blockade, there had not been a whisper of her handmaidens. Not in any of the lesson texts or lectures on galactic history they’d been forced to sit through as cadets. And they’d been there from the very beginning, in the shadows of events. Unnoticed, unrecognized – but essential.
No wonder Senator Amidala had requested them for Alderaan. *They’re perfect*, he thought, gazing steadily as Rabé burst out in cheery laughter to something Padmé said. Artoo was basking in their attention, self-satisfied, confidently responding as they asked what was in his memory banks of the incident.

He didn’t hear General Skywalker dismissing the men until Echo elbowed him with a questioning frown, “What’re you smiling at, Fives?”

He couldn’t have said.

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*All in all,* Padmé thought, observing the eleven around her, *that went well.* Of course, she couldn’t have predicted that the first debrief would have been cut short in precisely the manner it had been, but there would be plenty of time to fill in everyone on smaller details. Threepio and Artoo were unofficial members of the expedition, but she’d have to keep an eye on them. They had a way of getting into trouble when no one was looking.

Not to mention, Sabé was sometimes too observant for her own good. If she asked, directly, why a Nubian astromech was on a warship as Anakin’s personal droid, Padmé wasn’t sure she would be able to hide the truth from her. How could she – after all they’d been through? Sabé was her oldest and best friend. She pointedly ignored the look Sabé was giving her over Artoo’s head until the other woman sighed and looked away. The little space under the Nubian was suddenly full of excited chatter and vibrant laughter as the two groups finally relaxed.

“Sabé, I’d like to discuss the plans for the drop-off, and anything else you might have,” Anakin called over to her, Ahsoka and Rex waiting by his side. “The more we know about all of this, the better we can support you three.”

“Of course, General. Rabé, Eirtaé – go on and start unloading. I want to double-check our inventory. Make sure we have everything before we set a course for Alderaan.” Sabé jerked her head towards the Nubian. As they nodded and turned to go up the ramp, still laughing about Padmé being forced to clean Artoo, Sabé walked over to Padmé, Anakin, Ahsoka, and Rex. She still had that slow, steady step that let everyone know she was perfectly content to make them wait for her.

Padmé couldn’t stop a wry grin from sneaking onto her face as Sabé dove right in to her explanation, wasting no time on idle pleasantries, “For starters, in addition to the ships, I’ve always had the Captain of Security send me detailed blueprints of the palace. When we arrive – and I do have an idea for that as well – I’m to meet with the captain to finalize our secured common area for a base of operations. Most of the work will be done separately from each other, in small teams, but we need a place to regroup.” As she spoke, her fingers flew over her wrist comms unit, transferring the data to Anakin, Padmé, and – with a questioning look and answering nod – Captain Rex as well. “That all sounds good to me. And the division of the teams…?” Anakin asked as Rex flipped through the data, his eyes moving quickly over the dense information blocks.

“Alderaan is three and a half days away, so if it’s alright with you – and you, too, Senator – I’d like wait on assigning roles until I can see the dynamics of the group as whole. How we all interact and get along with each other, and so forth. Of course I’ll welcome any suggestions. Any tension between our team will definitely influence our work in the field, so we have to make sure our relationships are as smooth as possible.”

Anakin nodded, impressed, and then laughed. “You’ve got this well under control. I know these
guys pretty well, so I’d be happy to offer up suggestions when the time comes for assignments.”

Ahsoka grinned at Padmé and then up at Anakin, “Well – that probably includes us, too, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.” Sabé said coolly, smirking at her when Anakin frowned as if the thought had just occurred to him. “It absolutely does.”

“How will the great Anakin Skywalker handle being told what to do?” Ahsoka asked in mock concern. Sabé laughed, and an anxious knot of tension Padmé hadn’t known she’d been carrying suddenly lightened, smoothing the muscles on her shoulders.

Anakin and Sabé were getting along.

She hadn’t realized she’d been worried about this, her past and her present meeting again when things – when everything – was so different. They’d been children, teenagers during the invasion. Anakin knew bits and pieces of her past, about Sabé. But she had no idea how much Sabé knew, or had guessed at. Padmé hadn’t told her about her secret marriage, but she herself had said Sabé was the best of the best, a spymaster with a web of contacts and hidden eyes all over the galaxy.

But for now, they had a mission to focus on, a mission to distract her from the unexpected coil of tension in her belly. Padmé scrambled to get her thoughts in order, to drag her attention back to the conversation. *Neither of them are going to let their feelings get in the way of this mission, and you’d do well to follow suit.*

“I think we have more than enough to occupy ourselves until we get to Alderaan. Thank you, Sabé – this is all excellent stuff. I’ll let you go, but I’m very excited to work with you – and I’m sure my men are, too.”

Rex inclined his head in agreement as Sabé thanked the group and turned to the Nubian. Padmé hesitated, then said quickly, “Wait a moment. Let me help you.”

Sabé smiled at her and waited by the foot of the ramp. Padmé waited until they were halfway up the ramp before she said, softly, “You haven’t changed a bit, Sabé.”

“And neither have you.” Her words and tone were as steady as they always were, but the words still made Padmé shiver.

Before she could respond, Rabé’s laugh filled the air. She and Eirtaé emerged from the storage hold, both grinning at something Eirtaé had said. The dynamic was so familiar, so heartachingly warm that Padmé had to suck in a quick breath to steady herself. This is what she had been missing – her sisters were finally here.

“What are you two laughing at?” Sabé asked, tilting her head at the two youngest handmaidens. Eirtaé and Rabé had been close friends long before the Royal Academy, almost always together. They made for a striking pair – silent, watchful, pale Eirtaé who could have cold ice in her veins instead of blood, and small, dark Rabé who had bright, beaming sunshine in hers. Eirtaé was the tallest, Rabé the shortest, and they complemented every aspect of the other.

Rabé and Eirtaé exchanged an amused glance, then Rabé burst out, “It’s just – that’s little Ani out there, isn’t it?”

“Anakin Skywalker with the blonde bowl cut,” Eirtaé finished, the thought of the accomplished General being the very same little boy they had picked up on Tatooine all those years ago making all of them grin. “He had such a crush on you, Padmé – what was it that he’d called you?”
“An angel,” Rabé laughed in delight. “He’d called her an angel. And then he’d come looking for her before the Senate appearance, remember?”

“Poor thing, he’d been so sad when you said you’d ‘sent Padmé out on an errand.’”

“He certainly seems at home here, doesn’t he? It’s not something I could have ever expected, but he fits the role of General well!”

Sabé said nothing, but laughed as Rabé and Eirtaé pretended to struggle to come to terms with the nine-year-old they had known and the General standing outside their ship. Padmé closed her eyes and took another deep breath. Already, the four of them had eased back into their comfortable routines. Not only were they her decoys, her bodyguards, but also the only people she could truly relax around. Her home away from Naboo.

“Senator, handmaidens!” Ahsoka’s voice called up the ramp, shaking Padmé out of her thoughts. “Sorry to interrupt, but Skyguy wants to give you a tour of the *Resolute* – he’s been doing some modifications to the engines and wants to show off.” When Padmé raised an eyebrow at her in question, she grinned. “He’s already talked my and the boys’ heads off about it, so I’m afraid that you’ve drawn the short straws for this.”

“A tour of a warship!” Rabé said, her eyes sparkling. “We’ll be right down!” She paused, and then added softly, almost as an afterthought, “I wonder if any of the clones will come along, too?”

If Skywalker had not been a General or a Jedi, Eirtaé was certain that he would have done very well as a lecturer on mechanical engineering. They’d been given the grand tour, and not even his Padawan or any of the clones had managed to escape it. Padmé, on the other hand, had been called away by her protocol droid for an urgent Senate matter. She’d bowed apologetically to Skywalker as she went to answer the call. He’d dragged them all off to the engines first, excitedly chatting away the entire time.

Eirtaé’s eyes, skirting around the room like a cat taking calculated measure of her surroundings, landed on something over the Captain’s shoulder, and it only took her half a second to realize what she was looking at.

It was a poster of a handmaiden. Unquestionably a Nabooian royal handmaiden. To be even more specific, it a pin-up of a handmaiden. And a rather large one at that, dwarfing the blaster-wielding redhead and the coy orange Twi’lek taped up next to her.

Eirtaé had worn that flame-colored gown herself often enough. But, she conceded, lips curling up in a delighted grin, never like *that*. The artist had taken some liberties with the cut and weight of the gown - but baring the long, slim leg peeking out to reveal a generous amount of thigh, Eirtaé had to admit it was, more or less, fairly accurate. The detailing on the inner sleeve, for one. *Must have had a reference, whoever they were.*

The thought was so amusing that she almost laughed out loud.

General Skywalker was still rambling on about the technical capabilities of the ship, but his Captain had noticed her diverted attention. Eirtaé made note of that, at the moment far too thrilled with her discovery to bother investigating their relationship further. Rex glanced over his shoulder as she cleared her throat, jerking her chin at the poster when Sabé glared at her in response. But when her older sister followed Eirtaé’s gaze, her raised eyebrow and quiet “Huh,” swiveled a bright spotlight onto the... *creative* rendering of a sister. She actually felt the clones’ eyes all snap to the pin-up in one collective moment of quickly dawning realization.
Someone actually muttered, “Kriff-”

Rex’s head whipped back around, a cocktail of fury and exasperation in his narrowed eyes. There was a flurry of awkward shuffling and coughing from the men behind Eirtaé, who could not have been more delighted at the way this scene was unfolding. She put her hands on her hips, not bothering to hide her smirk.

Skywalker finally noticed no one was paying much attention to him anymore. He glanced around in mock frustration. “OK, what’s the big deal? No one wants to hear about the hyperdrive? I finished modifying it last week and it’s pretty impressive, if I do say so-” As he spoke, he turned around to see the source of distraction. His words died in his throat as he caught up. “...Ah.”

Silence descended upon the room as everyone noticed just how little the gown hid.

“I quite like it,” Sabé broke the silence, Rabé stifling her giggles behind a hand. “Not sure that I ever looked half as good in that gown, though.”

“Can’t hide a blaster in that skirt, can you?” Rabé asked, eyes sparkling.

“Uhm, Captain?” Skywalker asked, trying to keep his cool despite the growing delight of the handmaidens and the clones’ growing embarrassment. “Care to explain?”

“Sorry, General - thought I’d made it clear such material should have been removed before the handmaidens got here.”

If he wasn’t so clearly embarrassed, Eirtaé would have laughed out loud at the striking emphasis of Rex’s words. She could clearly picture him mentally smacking each of the troopers upside the head with each emphasized syllable.

There was more shuffling behind them, and then someone said, as nonchalantly as you please, “Pretty sure that one’s Hardcase’s, sir.”

“Jesse! I am going to kill you-”

“It is, though-”

“Enough, men!” Anakin sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Uh, well. Handmaidens, please forgive my troops, this is an… awkward situation, to say the least.” He gave a half-hearted chuckle, a faint flush spreading up from his neck, almost as embarrassed as his Captain. Almost. Rex was glaring daggers at who Eirtaé could only assume was Hardcase.

“Quite all right, General.” Rabé said, dipping her head and then meeting his eyes with a mischievous grin. “Besides, who’s to say we don’t have a similar poster of a trooper on our ship...?”

There was a bark of surprised, delighted laughter behind Eirtaé, and just like that, the joke melted all tension from the room. Eirtaé glanced over her shoulder to see which one had laughed. One of the ARC troopers, it seemed. Not the one with a handprint on his chest, who was so stiff that he might have snapped with the slightest breeze. The other one. She smirked and turned back around to face Skywalker and Captain Rex, who looked like he might just die of embarrassment - but not before taking Hardcase with him. Everyone else, however, had relaxed. And of course, it would have been Rabé, Eirtaé thought, smiling at her cheerful sister still laughing at her own joke. Of course.

Rabé would be the one to pull the two halves of the team together. Not Skywalker, not Padmé, but Rabé, with her bright smiles and unabashedly cheerful outlook on life.
Eirtaé was absolutely certain of that.
They’re pirates?!

Rabé glanced up at Anakin, his face contorted in confusion and disgust, and pressed a hand to her lips to keep from laughing at him. As the small group watched through the viewports, the ancient patchworked starship lit its thrusters to dock alongside the Resolute. She couldn’t quite tell if he was more upset over the fact that Sabé’s contacts were so obviously lenient of Republic law, as
evidenced by the graffiti scrawled across its hull, or the simple fact that their ship was ugly as sin. Something told her it was the latter. The Spider Lightning had obviously seen years – if not long decades – of hard and constant use. Its turrets were Nubian, its hyperdrive Corellian, and the entire starboard side was a mess of Mon Cala and Bith tech cobbled together. Whatever the original design, it had long ago been tacked over, buried beneath replacements and upgrades. It was an eyesore that hardly looked capable of atmospheric flight, let alone space travel. Despite its stitched-together appearance, there were a few reasons it was not rotting away on some backwater junkyard planet.

And one of those reasons was Captain Saphii Ninx.

“Not technically, General. They prefer ‘opportunistic scavengers’ to pirates.” Rabé corrected, enjoying his slight twitch of disbelief. They were at the first of the two drops Sabé had set up, about three hours out from Naboo – which had given them plenty of time for the tour, much to Skywalker’s delight. Sabé had timed it well. They’d only been waiting for ten minutes when the Spider Lightning dropped out of hyperspace.

“Come on - you cannot fly a ship like that and not be a pirate.”

“Perhaps not, but please don’t insinuate that in front of Ninx. She’s proud of this beast; put it together herself.” Sabé said over her shoulder, distracted as she watched Rex manually manipulate the controls to the Resolute’s connecting airlocks. The phrase ‘standard construction’ didn’t belong in the same system as the Spider Lightning, so the automatic lock had refused to cooperate. Hidden machinery whirred to life behind the durasteel walls as the bridge extended, forcing Sabé to raise her voice as she continued, “It would be best not to insult her before we get what we need.”

Skywalker folded his arms over his chest and grunted while the airlocks fastened together. For a brief moment, Rabé worried that the two ships wouldn’t catch, that the Spider Lightning would malfunction or fail to line up and the five of them would be dragged out into the freezing darkness - but then the controls chimed a pleasant confirmation. Rex stepped back, coolly confident, and Rabé knew her concern was unwarranted. The Resolute shuddered under the weight of the Spider Lightning as the blast doors confirmed the connection, settling into each other with additional support from activated tractor beams.

When the blast doors slid open, even Skywalker had to crane his neck in order to meet Captain Ninx’s gaze.

The wine-red Theelin woman towered over them all, a crooked grin plastered on a sharp face riddled with her species’ mottled skin. Hers was an unusual variant, a shimmering dusting of pale orange instead of the more common lavender. Her hair, as black as the cosmos, was spiked into a mohawk that added another half-foot to her already impressive height. Ninx liked to joke that perhaps one of her ancestors had been a Sith Pureblood – but Rabé hoped that the presence of the Jedi might stall that particular comment.

She took up nearly the entire corridor, legs spread wide, as she boomed out a hearty, “Here we are at last! Welcome, honored customers, to the Spider Lightning!”

Her eyes, luminescent and bright gold, landed almost immediately on Sabé. Skywalker grumbled something about getting this over with, and Sabé nodded to Ninx. “Captain. Have you a ship for us?”

“Indeed, I do, Lady Sabé. A fine Corellian awaits! If you’ll follow me to the hangar.” She spun on her heels, her long duster snapping with the sharp movement, and led the group away without another word. The interiors of the Spider Lightning were a stark contrast to the imposing uniformity of the Resolute, a winding, twisting mess of corridors like a rabbit’s warren. Like the crew had
carved the corridors and rooms into the mess of metal, without a care for any sort of strategic design.

The hangar, at least, was clean and well lit. Sitting in the exact center under bright floodlights, a Corellian corvette, devoid of any particular markings, gleamed like a proud beast as they followed Ninx. Some of her crew, a ragtag, motley bunch of assorted aliens, eyed them suspiciously but scattered with a single glance from their Captain. “There she is – small diplomatic carrier, just as you ordered, Lady Sabé.”

Sabé didn’t move for a moment as she contemplated the ship in front of her. She frowned and sniffed, and then nodded. “We’ll need to check it out.”

Ninx swept her a low bow that only felt partially mocking. “Of course. I’ll show you the specs, if you please.”

Sabé’s gaze was steady as she said, “Right, then. General, Captain – if you wouldn’t mind examining the interior while Rabé, Fives, and I check the hull for any problems?”

“Not at all.” Skywalker fixed Ninx with a frown as the pair walked past and up the ramp. Fives split off with a nod from Sabé, walking around the ship to examine the port side. Rabé began her work at the stern, at the unique eight-thruster design.

“Why are you working with a Jedi, hmm, Sabé? You didn’t mention you’d be arriving in a warship.” Though Ninx was leaning against the hull of the Corellian ship, casually examining her fingernails, she still towered over Sabé. “Strolling into my hangar, leading a Jedi General and clones like it’s nothing.”

Sabé was unfazed. “I did tell you. I said working with the Republic to train a few squadrons of troopers in diplomatic protection maneuvers, in response to what happened on Coruscant last week.” She rapped her knuckles on the hull of the ship and frowned. “This needs to be replaced, Saphii.”

Rabé turned away to hide the tiny smile that crept onto her face when Sabé used Ninx’s first name. She wouldn’t be surprised if both Sabé and Ninx forgot Rabé was there next to them. Bemused, Rabé quietly examined one of the starship’s turrets as they continued to banter.

Ninx clicked her tongue and straightened back up to her full height. “That piece is fine. And yet you had to come to me for a ship? Strange. I knew the Republic was short of funds, but not that short…” She smirked, gazing steadily down at Sabé, and put her hands on her hips. “I had no idea you missed me so much.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. Most Republic ships are currently seeing heavy use in the war. I merely agreed to provide them.”

Rabé glanced back over her shoulder at the pair of them, tiny Sabé and looming Ninx, standing far closer together than was necessary as they continued to banter in low tones against the hull of the cruiser. This wasn’t the first time Ninx had come in handy as a contact, and Rabé suspected both Sabé and Ninx liked it that way. She reached up to run her fingertips on the underside of the stunted starboard wing, the durasteel cool on her skin. So far, so good. Every piece of artillery was in decent working condition, and she could hear Skywalker and Rex as they stomped about the ship’s guts.

“Lady Rabé?” Fives’ voice, much closer than she was expecting, startled her out of her reverie, though she did not jump. He stood next the wing with her, a bemused expression on his face as he glanced at her outstretched hand. Unlike his brothers, his personal distinctions were simple – the tattoo on his temple, the simple black goatee. It was clean-cut, a stark contrast to his easygoing, jokester attitude. Rabé was fascinated by Kix’s intricate hair, and Hardcase’s geometric tattoos, but
she liked Fives’ simplicity.

“Oh, please – let’s not. It’s so horribly formal,” she begged at once, lowering her hand. “Rabé is fine.”

“Right, Rabé. My side’s all checked out – turrets functioning and ready to go.” As he spoke, his entire body followed the intonation of his voice, shrugging and nonchalantly waving his hand, gesturing portside. “How’s this side?”

“So far, so good. Sabé’s arguing the finer points of the deal back there, but I think this might be our ship.”

Fives raised an eyebrow as he peered over Rabé’s shoulder at the pair still bickering in hushed tones. “Captain Ninx and Sabé seem to have quite the, uh… relationship.”

Rabé couldn’t help but laugh a little. “That’s an understatement – it’s been like this for as long as I’ve known them. We’ve all known each other for years, but still…” Something caught Rabé’s eye, tucked in between the heat shield and base support of one of the heavy guns. She stretched up onto the balls of her feet, her words drifting off into silence, Fives frowning as he followed her gaze. Her fingers scraped over the smooth cover metallic cover, and the strange object vibrated slightly under her touch, protesting against the pressure. “There’s something there – do you see it? I can’t quite-”

Fives, squinting up into the nook, nodded. “Mhm, yeah, that’s not supposed to be there. Here,” he offered. “Let me.”

Rabé took a half-step back to give him some room, her curiosity keeping her close. With a firm tug and quiet grunt, the foreign object detached from its hiding place and came off in Fives’ hand.

They both stared at it, then at each other, and then Rabé noted the obvious. “A tracking device.”

“Definitely not supposed to be there.” Fives scowled as he turned it over in his hands, examining it from every angle. “Looks like the Captain isn’t quite as friendly as she seems.”

Rabé reached out to touch it, and again, it shuddered in his grasp. His grip tightened on it as she asked, “You didn’t see any portside?”

When he shook his head, she frowned. “We’d better double check. But first…” She plucked the device from Fives’ hand and turned, holding it next to her cheek as she rapped the hull twice to get Sabé’s attention. She didn’t break off from her conversation, gave almost no indication that she even noticed Rabé standing there.

After a moment, Rabé turned back to Fives and said, “Let’s do another check. Just to be sure.”

He was staring at her, frowning, but nodded. She raised an eyebrow, knowing what his question was, but not wanting to give an answer that Ninx might overhear, she shook her head, ever so slightly.

By the time they’d completed the second, more thorough check, finding no other tracking devices crammed into hidden hiding places, Skywalker and Rex had finished their own inspections. They came to stand around Rabé. Sabé stood between the four of them and Ninx, hands on her hips.

“Well? What say you to this beauty?” Ninx ran her hand over the durasteel plates of the hull and fixed Sabé with a broad grin. “Is she the one?”

Sabé smiled, dipped her head in answer, and then flatly said, “Fifteen.”
Ninx’s face immediately darkened. “Fifteen – Lady Sabé, this is a ship in fine repair, top of the line. You couldn’t ask for a sturdier model – not unless you want to break into the shipping yards and steal yourself a diplomatic carrier. It’s worth forty-five.”

“Fifteen.”

“I’ll not go below forty.”

“Fine. Twenty-five.”

“Lady Sabé, need I remind you that you need this ship. You won’t be able to complete your training sessions without it.” Ninx’s upper lip curled derisively when those words dripped from her mouth, but Sabé did not flinch.

“That may be true. But you need my money.” She paused and then continued. “Besides, a tracking device only detracts from the value. Isn’t that right?”

Fives sucked in a breath, impressed. Though Sabé had not said a word when Rabé had shown her the object, her hands had fluttered up to her collar, tugging it away from her throat once. A subtle sign for understood. The handmaidens could effortlessly communicate without words, even in groups. And Ninx was none the wiser, sputtering as she struggled to understand how, exactly, Sabé knew about the device despite not leaving Ninx’s side since entering the Spider Lightning’s hangar.

Now Rabé watched, nervously chewing the inside of her cheek, as Ninx and Sabé stared each other down. Ninx’s golden eyes bore into Sabé, unflinching as steel. Rabé’s blaster was a steady and comforting weight on her hip, and her fingers started to flex towards it. She was suddenly immensely glad for the Jedi and troopers, as she noticed several members of the crew watching them with guarded but threatening interest.

Ninx backed down first, holding her hands up and conceding. “Fine, fine, fine. Twenty-five, but only because you’re my favorite girl, Sabé.”

Sabé smiled as she slowly counted out twenty-five thousand credits, and when she dumped them into Ninx’s waiting hands, the Captain winked and thanked her for her kindness. Rabé suspected the negotiations were always meant to be this short. Ninx usually had trouble resisting Sabé, no matter how much money she stood to lose.

As the five of them walked up the ramp, Ninx called up, a wounded expression on her face, “Ah, Sabé, why do you insist on breaking my heart?” She clutched the credits her chest as if to make sure her heart was still there and beating.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sabé’s reply was cool and instant. “How could I possibly break something that isn’t there?”

For a brief moment, Ninx’s face twitched, but then her sudden, booming laugh filled the air as the ramp pulled back. “As always, a pleasure, Lady Sabé! Until next time.” Her eyes, sparkling with mischief, was the last thing they saw of the Spider Lightning.

“Finally!” Skywalker exclaimed as soon as the airlock was sealed, storming to the cabin and sitting down heavily in the pilot’s seat. “I know she’s your friend, Sabé-”

Sabé made an indiscriminate noise in the back of her throat as she settled down in another seat, tucking her credit pouch back into her robes.

“-but the sooner we’re away from this, the better. I don’t like the look of this ship, or that crew.”
“I agree, sir,” Rex said, sliding into the co-pilot’s spot. “Looked like they were ready to fight.”

Fives cleared his throat next to Rabé as the Corellian came to life around them, asking in a low voice that only she could hear, “Is this usually how these things go with you guys?”

Rabé grinned broadly up at him in response, and then he started to laugh, too.

She wondered, for the brief trip back to the Resolute’s hangar, why it was so easy to talk to him.

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“Jesse, your hand is still floating after you strike,” Ahsoka called from her position above the sparring mats. “Finish the motion all the way through, and finish it strong!”

“Yessir!” Jesse sprang back up to his feet to circle around Fives, their attention focused entirely on the other. They avoided the other sparring pairs without a moment’s thought, the movement natural and relaxed. While Ahsoka observed the men from above the mats sunken into the floor of the wide sparring room, Anakin was moving between them, correcting a stance here, or suggesting a modified move there.

Three and a half days left plenty of time to practice hand-to-hand combat, especially when the Alderaan mission called for something infinitely subtler than the typical flair of Skywalker-Tano tactical maneuvers. And Rex had wanted to make sure they got in the practice, scheduling the men for an early morning session in the ring the day after they departed from Naboo.

Fives, for one, relished the change of pace. Oh, to be sure - blasting clankers never got old, but there was something so gratifying about landing a good, solid punch. Rex and Echo were circling each other with narrowed eyes, the spar playing out almost entirely in their heads like a game of dejarik at lightspeed, while Hardcase and Kix had forgone all semblance of proper techniques to wrestle each other to floor like unruly cadets. Ahsoka laughed out loud as Kix managed to get Hardcase into a headlock, much to the vocal displeasure of the latter.

Jesse lunged forward, aiming for Fives’ chest. He sidestepped and countered with a blow to the outside of Jesse’s arm. Another block, and Jesse had the upper hand. It nearly knocked Fives over, but he twisted back upright and swept his leg. It continued, the two men nearly perfectly matched, until - Jesse’s weak follow-through. Fives saw the opening and took it - snatching Jesse’s hand and yanking, hard. Jesse fell to the floor was a grunt of surprise and annoyance, scowling up at Fives. “I don’t get it - why did I get stuck with the ARC trooper?”

Fives grinned and extended his hand. “To help you get better.”

“Like hell.” Jesse rubbed the back of his neck and took Fives’ hand. “You just enjoy beating me up.”

“Well-”

“Don’t finish that sentence!”

Fives burst out laughing and hauled Jesse to his feet. He clapped his disillusioned brother on the back as the doors to the sparring mats slid open and the handmaidens walked through.

The Senator was with them, looking far more relaxed than Fives could ever remember seeing her. As usual, the three handmaidens were dressed almost identically, their hair pulled back into dozens of elaborate braids. Ahsoka waved them over, greeting them with a slight bow. Sabé nodded towards the mats, asking Ahsoka something in a low voice while Eirtaé and Rabé turned to watch the
ongoing spars. They’d changed from their burgundy robes in favor of a more understated and streamlined, but no less elegant, uniform.

Eirtaé rested her elbows on the top of the railing, her chin in her hands, while Rabé leapt up, hooking her feet into the small space between the bars, and leaned over the railing. Her eyes traveled over each other pairs, but unlike her silent blonde sister who merely stared in that unnerving, all-seeing way of hers, Rabé smiled at Jesse and Fives when she met their eyes. Rex and Echo quickly drew her attention away, however. Fives got the distinct feeling she appreciated technique.

He squared his shoulders and turned back to Jesse, clapping him on the back again as he said, “Come on, Jesse, let’s give them a show.”

Jesse muttered out of the corner of his mouth, “You are not going to embarrass me in front of them.”

Fives grinned and sank into a ready position. “Fight better, then.”

Jesse rolled his eyes but copied Fives’ stance. They started to circle each other again, Fives determined not to check if Ra-the handmaidens, any of them, were watching. Jesse noticed, though, and managed to land a sharp blow to Fives’ shoulder that he barely managed to shrug off in time. Just as he did, Hardcase finally managed to pin Kix, who let off such a loud volley of curses that Anakin had to call out to make sure no one was hurt. Fives advanced again, light on the balls of his feet, confidence surging through his blood as he bore down on Jesse. Jesse bared his teeth in frustration and swept low, finishing with an uppercut. Fives jerked, air from Jesse’s hand whistling past his jaw. They were well matched, but Fives had ARC training on his side.

Jesse was on his ass again in just over a minute. He groaned and fell over backwards, sprawled in the center of the mats like an pouty cadet. Fives laughed as Ahsoka called out, “The follow-through was much better that time, Jesse. And Fives, clean up your footwork. It doesn’t need to be that complicated.”

Jesse gave her a tired, half-hearted thumbs up and Fives turned to ask the Commander when, exactly, she’d taken it upon herself to correct their techniques when he noticed the handmaidens and Senator Amidala had stepped down onto the mats.

General Skywalker cleared space for them, practically rolling Kix and Hardcase out of the way to make room. The women paired off and began their drills. Anakin noticed the men watching in interest and called out, “Alright, everyone, one more bout - then I want you all to switch up partners.”

“Yessir!”

Rabé and Eirtaé squared off against each other next to Echo and Rex, while the Senator and Sabé took up places next to Jesse and Fives. Soon, they had all forgotten about each other, so immersed they were in the spars. The room was filled with heavy thuds and falls and curses when techniques didn’t go quite as planned, pleasantly cool despite the amount of people practicing on the mats. A faint, salty smell of sweat wafted through the room, barely noticeable for the moment but sure to grow stronger as the hour progressed.

“Padmé, you are out of practice,” Sabé teased as she ran Padmé through the basics. She nudged Padmé’s stance wider with her foot. “Coruscant has softened you up, it seems.”

Padmé rolled her eyes but managed the next drill with grace. “Dormé doesn’t like to practice - not
mention I never travel without my blaster.”

Sabé shook her head and slid into the next movement, Padmé carefully watching and copying. “You shouldn’t be so lax, Padmé. I know you’re a crack shot with a blaster, but-

“Being a Senator unfortunately leaves little time to practice hand-to-hand combat. Every day, there’s a new bill, a new mess... Believe me, I wish I could practice like we used to - do you still take three hours every day?”

Sabé grinned, like she was recalling a fond memory. “Of course. When we’re not on assignment, I make sure we get those hours in.” Her eyes wandered over to where Rabé and Eirtaé had already moved on from the warm-up maneuvers. “And even when we are on assignment, it’s still worth it to find at least two hours.” She didn’t look at Padmé when she murmured, so quietly Padmé almost didn’t hear, “I still worry about you.”

Padmé was silent as she considered this. She was surprised to admit it, but she actually missed the hours of grueling practice Captain Panaka used to put them through during their training. Already, her limbs were relaxing into muscle memory, enjoying the push and strain of exercises she once could have done in her sleep. She missed this. She missed having her sisters by her side. Not just Dormé and Teckla - but the ones who had stayed behind, too. What Sabé had said - and what she left unsaid, for Padmé to discern between her words, awoke old wounds half-forgotten by the years. She gave herself a mental shake when Sabé turned around to examine her stance.

Sabé smiled softly, a near-imperceptible flicker of sadness flashing in her dark eyes. “Better.”

Fives knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t help himself. He’d never seen such a fluid, graceful style of combat before - clones were taught to hit hard, hit fast. Get the opponent down as fast as possible, disarm at the minimum, disable if necessary. Knock unconscious or - if in an absolutely dire situation - kill.

But the handmaidens had a technique all their own - one that almost looked like dancing.

He watched out of the corner of his eye while Rabé, her braids flowing around her like water, dropped Eirtaé to the floor and mimed an open-palmed strike to the neck. Rex nearly took him out with a quick leg-sweep and Fives forced his attention back to his own spar.

He knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that if it came down to it, their style was more for show than for actual self-defense. It certainly didn’t look like it could its own against a clone’s method of hand-to-hand. It was beautiful to watch, though. He could give it that much credit.

Rex grunted as they butted heads, grappling against the other, arms locked tight around shoulders, “I - remember when - you could - barely last - thirty seconds against me -”

Fives widened his stance, lowering his center of gravity, and threw Rex over his head. The captain landed on his back with a sharp smack against the mats and groaned as he sat up. Fives extended a hand. “I'm not a rookie any more, Captain.” He clapped Rex on the shoulder, a brotherly show of affection. No hard feelings.

Rex huffed out a short laugh and shook his head. “-'spose not.” He rubbed his lower back as Fives’ eye was once more caught by the dance-combat of the handmaidens. Again, Rabé finished the spar quickly, sending Eirtaé to her knees with little effort, and his curiosity finally got the better of him.
“Hey,” he called over, ignoring the warning look from Rex. “Can we spar?” Rabé and Eirtaé looked up at him, near-identical looks of confusion on their faces.

Eirtaé raised one eyebrow at him before glancing towards Rabé, who slowly asked, “...You want to spar against one of us?”

He shrugged, a self-confident smirk already spreading over his face. “Sure, why not? Change of pace to keep us loose. Besides - I’ve already won against all my brothers.”

“Just barely,” Rex muttered, still rubbing his back.

Fives ignored him and went on, “I’m curious to see what handmaiden combat looks like up close.” He shot them a crooked grin. “I promise I won’t hurt you. I’ll go easy.”

Eirtaé snorted, which drew the attention of Padmé and Sabé. Ahsoka was glancing over at the small group, too, and Fives was very much aware that the others were slowly stopping their own spars to watch. He knew he wasn’t the only brother who was curious - but since he was apparently the best of them, he decided to shoulder this investigation on his own.

It was Sabé who answered, her hands on her hips. “You think you’d be able to win so easily?”

“Well, I mean…” He trailed off but drew a line from his head above Rabé’s - gods, but they all were so kriffing small - letting the height difference speak for itself. Not to mention, his body had been literally built for combat. He had been trained from birth - and then some more to earn the title of ARC trooper. Fives was absolutely certain that he could handle a such a small opponent.

Rabé glared up at the hand until Fives let it drop back to his side. She glanced back at Sabé, who gave her a tiny nod and then took three paces back. Eirtaé and Padmé retreated to her side, but Rabé stayed where she stood in front of Fives. No matter the outcome of the spar, Fives liked her defiant enthusiasm. Now everyone was watching in a loose circle around them - Hardcase sporting a freshly cut lip, a sheepish Kix ready with a handful of clean towels.

Finally she smiled, a slow, calculating smile that was jarringly out of place on her kind face. It was a smile lifted from Eirtaé, and something in the rational part of his brain began to whisper that he might have made a mistake after all.

“Alright, I’ll spar with you.” Rabé brushed past him, the faint smell of sweat and something sweeter following, and took her position across the mat from him. As she slid into her ready stance, she cocked her head and said, “But don’t you dare go easy on me. I want a fair fight.”

Fives grinned in delight and sank into a comfortable squat. Neither of them moved for a second, each sizing the other up, trying to discern a possible first move, a counter, a block. And then they started to circle each other.

From where they watched, Kix muttered under his breath, “Why do I get the feeling he’s about to get his ass kicked...?”

Sabé gave a low laugh. “Because he’s about to get his ass kicked.” She shifted her weight and called out, “You got this, Rabé.” It wasn’t a sentence laced with worry. It sounded like she had said it many times before, with the same result every time. Eirtaé leaned back against the wall, not bothering to hide her tiny smile of delight.

Rex pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, exasperated. “Should we tell him she’s the one who wanted the Magnaguard staff?”
Ahsoka laughed, leaning forward, grinning eagerly. “Nah, he’s probably gonna figure that out on his own.”

Fives didn’t hear any of this. His focus was entirely on Rabé now, noting her deep, almost meditative breaths, the ease in her eyes. She wasn’t worried. Her stance was solid as she watched him, holding his gaze with a confidence that delighted him. She wanted a fair fight - and he was nothing if not obliging.

He shot forward, feinting with a swipe towards her right.

Rabé dodged, caught his other arm, and locked it across her body, twisting hard.

Fives grunted, more out of shock than pain, but kept moving, letting her move him into a new position. He countered again, trying to knock her off balance.

With a grip like iron on his arm, she leapt into the air and hooked one leg around his. Too late, he realized she was using his own momentum against him. He couldn’t get a hold on her. She was a smooth, lethal current.

And he was caught.

Next thing he knew, he was flat on his back, eyes wide at the woman crouching over in him triumph.

Rabé didn’t even look winded. Her multitude of dark braids cascaded over her shoulders like a waterfall, silver fasteners catching the light, her dark eyes crinkling in amusement as a slow, easy smile formed on her lips. She took a deep breath and pressed her lips together before asking, a laugh in her gentle voice, “Are you happy with your ‘fair fight,’ or would you like to try again?”

Fives could only stare up at her, half in shock at the spar - was it already over? - and half at the way his stomach was still flipping. Despite the rest of his body being very much at rest.

His mouth was suddenly very dry.

*Kriff.*

Rabé threw Fives over her shoulder, pinning him with ease, and the room exploded.

Padmé couldn’t help but burst out in exuberant laughter as everyone in the room started exclaiming in stunned disbelief at the top of their lungs at exactly the same time. Fives was still pinned underneath Rabé as Jesse bent over double, laughing until tears poured down his cheeks, as Hardcase roared in astonishment, one hand holding a small cloth to his cut lip while he punched the air – sometimes making contact on Kix’s arm – with the other. Rabé smiled down and murmured something to the stunned ARC trooper as she released the hold, blushing at the reaction as she straightened. Sabé and Eirtaé were grinning madly, observing the chaos, Ahsoka leaning over the railing until she almost fell in, yelling almost as loudly as the men.

“Hang on, hang on-”

“’ARC trooper training’ my ASS-”

“Rabé, holy shit, why-”

“She just tossed you over her shoulder! Like it was nothing!”
As Fives rose slowly to his feet, still wide-eyed, Echo’s voice rose above the cacophony: “What just happened?” He gestured wildly between the two, continuing in a rush, “Fives is – we are – a good twelve inches taller than you, how – how did you do that?”

Rabé glanced at him, choosing her words carefully, before she shrugged, “He’s not the first person to underestimate me because of my size. Taking down larger opponents is easy.” She shot Fives a cheeky grin. “Especially when they’re cocky.”

“Not to mention she’s our combat expert.” Eirtaé murmured. “Ranged and close combat. Obviously.”

“And besides, you know what Master Yoda always says,” said Ahsoka, her smile threatening to split her cheeks. She lowered her voice in a fairly uncanny imitation of the Grand Master as she struggled to keep a straight face. “Size matters not.”

Her words sparked yet another round of boisterous laughter and good-natured ribbing, but Echo wasn’t finished yet. “No – no, I mean – what tactics, maneuvers, did you use? You took him down in seconds! That technique was incredible-”

“Give it another go, Rabé – slow it down, though. A play-by-play for the nonbelievers,” Sabé called out, grinning. “Show ’em how it’s done.”

“Yeah, kick his ass again!” Hardcase cheered. Fives, busily rubbing the back of his neck, shot him a glare before laughing along good-naturedly.

Rabé’s smile dimpled across her cheeks again and she turned to Fives, asking, “Are you okay? Are you up for another round?”

Fives was immediately game, answering her with a wry grin and falling, once more, into position.

All eyes were on Rabé, everyone leaned forward, as she began again. “Alright, so – he came at me like this-”

Padmé, however, was watching Fives.

The deep breaths he was taking as he and Rabé started again, at half the speed. The way his arm jumped when she took hold of it, holding it gently across her torso, his fist clenched knuckle-white. The way he bounced back up after Rabé threw him to the mats once again, grinning sheepishly as his brothers clamored in an uproar at the sight of tiny Rabé taking on an ARC trooper with ease. The way he immediately agreed to another demonstration when Rabé asked if he was alright for one more round. And when Echo asked to spar with her, eager to try his own hand now that he knew her technique, the way Fives hesitated for a millisecond before stepping back, relinquishing his spot on the mats to his brother. He smiled and thanked Rabé for the spar, joking about “having learned his lesson.”

Padmé watched Fives as Echo and Rabé began to circle each other, as the other troopers and handmaidens cheered them on. Fives was quiet. He stepped back behind the others, and his expression – her breath caught in her lungs, because she knew that look. She recognized it, been on the receiving end of it countless times.

It was the same way Anakin looked at her. Like she had hung every last star in the galaxy for him, and him alone.

Fives didn’t know Padmé was watching him, because Rabé had drawn his gaze, every last shred of his attention, like a brilliant blast of lightning.
His soft smile was not the expression of a man just beaten in a spar, forced to his knees in a matter of seconds. Maybe he was flushed and out of breath from the hours of exercise. Padmé suspected otherwise. He shifted, unconsciously flexing his hands, as he watched her. Rabé was ethereal when she fought, she fought like a dancer, she always had. It was hard not to be entranced with her movements. And when she pulled her hands through her long hair, tightening the braids, Padmé watched as Fives’ breath stalled, as he swallowed hard and glanced away, like he was afraid to stare at her for too long. Like she was a brilliant star that would blind him if he wasn’t careful.

Padmé glanced at Anakin, and when he met her eyes, she knew that he had seen the exact same thing.

She turned to Sabé and said, just as Rabé got the best of Echo to the loud delight of the onlookers, “I have a suggestion for one of the teams.”

Chapter End Notes

“Colpo di fulmine. The thunderbolt, as Italians call it. When love strikes someone like lightning, so powerful and intense it can’t be denied. It’s beautiful and messy, cracking a chest open and spilling their soul out for the world to see. It turns a person inside out, and there’s no going back from it. Once the thunderbolt hits, your life is irrevocably changed.”

— J.M. Darhower, Sempre
Rabé was almost so exhausted by the full day of work that she almost didn’t mind having to return to their barren, isolated diplomatic suite for the night.

Almost.

At least Skywalker had been gracious enough to give them one room to share, tucked away from the yawning void of the rest of the corridor.

As with all Republic warships, the *Resolute* was equipped with three decks of guest residences, for the odd visiting diplomat or, more commonly, the transportation of war refugees. Though they were
equipped with the same furnishings and utilities as the barracks and command quarters, the same steel-gray walls and floors, there was a coldness to them that Rabé did not like. Disuse had settled over the Resolute’s guest decks like a fine dust. It was like sleeping in museum, like they were artifacts put away in suffocating silence, removed from the warmth and excitement that permeated every other deck on the ship. If the hangar had not been a madhouse of an active military ship, Rabé would have much preferred to sleep on the Nubian.

Sabé, however, had been adamant that they not be in the way if the 501st ran into a skirmish on course to the rendezvous point with General Kenobi. Rabé hadn’t bothered mentioning the chances of that happening this deep in Republic territory were slim to none; once Sabé’s mind was made up, there was no chance of dissuading her.

“They’ve been cleaned, but – we’ve been using these decks as extra storage, mostly, so a lot of these rooms are technically ‘occupied,’” Skywalker had said as the turbolift carried them from the hangar that first day. “And, uh, on that note – don’t be surprised if you hear growling. Or scratching. Or anything like that – trust me, nothing to be worried about.”

Sabé had raised her eyebrow, a curious laugh tugging at the corners of her lips. “Growling…?”

“I have this bet with Master Fisto. Ongoing. It’s a… long story… but I’m gonna be a hundred credits richer next time I see him!”

Normally Rabé would have laughed, or teased him about being so mysterious, but when the lift doors slid open to reveal a long, empty corridor, she hadn’t been able to stop a little shiver going down her spine. It stretched down the length of the ship, but there was no hustle and bustle of a working ship here, no troopers rushing in and out of rooms as they went about their business. It was as silent as a grave.

She hated it.

He had led them to a room with three bunks, spacious and bland and extraordinarily lifeless. The corridor stretched down the length of the ship, far too quiet for Rabé’s tastes. She didn’t like the thought of an empty hall full of shut and locked rooms, empty of beings and life. She would have much rather slept in the hangar, even if it would have been chaotic and loud. At least he hadn’t given them separate rooms, and she could share a room with Sabé and Eirtaé. It took her over an hour to fall asleep that first night, eased just a hair by her sisters’ breathing and the thought of a new day with their new partners.

Even the barracks would have been a better choice. In fact, that’s what she would have preferred to being locked away in these empty decks. Rabé was of the opinion that they should be spending every opportunity to get to know the men better – they’d be working close together, undercover, for a week or maybe more. This line of work required good relationships, for smooth and efficient execution of the goals. Not to mention it was their first time working so closely with clone troopers – Rabé couldn’t deny how curious she was to learn more about them. It was one of the few times they were able to work so closely with another group.

The three women were usually alone on assignments, a running joke between them that Neeyutnee disliked sharing them with anyone else, preferring to keep them close. In reality, it was because their skillsets were so specific, so finely tuned, that there were very few people in the galaxy who could keep up with them, who could work as efficiently as they. Unless, of course, those people were trained super-soldiers. They had vastly different skills, to be sure – but compatible with the handmaidens’. Rabé wanted to get to know them all before their mission began, wanted to see how troopers lived their lives, how they spent the long hours of hyperspace travel between one campaign
and the next.

But until they arrived at Alderaan, they were guests on an active duty ship, and were formally treated as such. And to Rabé’s mild annoyance, that meant staying in rooms well insulated from the inner workings of the *Resolute*. She was a tactician, a weapons expert, and to be sequestered away from the action made her fingers twitch with boredom.

It was a great comfort that this would be their last night on this deck. General Kenobi was going to pick up Skywalker’s fleet tomorrow, and then the twelve would head to Alderaan in their still-to-be-assigned teams.

And, of course, her sisters’ gentle, subtle distractions helped.

Sabé ushered Eirtaé down in front of the mirror first, as she always did, and began to undo her blonde hair from its elaborate twists and braids. Though the split-bun style was one of the simpler designs the handmaidens did, it was still Nabooian – and that meant elegance, even in the simplest things. Elegance in every detail, no matter how small. Eirtaé’s eyes slowly shut as Sabé worked, as the pile of hairpins grew on the table next to her. Rabé sat with her back against the wall, humming softly to herself as she waited her turn.

It had been a tradition amongst the handmaidens for as long as she could remember. Sabé had always undone their hair, every night, just as she had on Naboo, when they had numbered eleven instead of three. She’d always taken out Padmé’s first, as the monarch, and then moved along to every handmaiden. Rabé would never dream of taking her hair down herself, if Sabé was there. It was a comfort, a small, warm, personal touch that signaled the end of the day. As she waited, she let her thoughts drift, sinking beneath the deck, to Padmé and Ahsoka and Rex and the others, wondering how they were spending this time, if they were settling down for the night. *Or maybe*, she thought, as Eirtaé shook out her golden hair and kissed Sabé’s cheek, *or maybe they won’t go to sleep for hours yet – maybe Jedi and clones need less sleep.*

The mere thought made her yawn, drowsiness working like a thick sludge through her veins, weighing down her limbs and eyelids. A morning sparring session was nothing unusual – except when her opponents were her sisters, a few ARC troopers, and a Jedi Padawan. She’d held her own against them, but would have happily taken a nap after Ahsoka finally managed to pin her, had they not had to go meet Sabé’s next contact.

Fives, however, had not sparred with Rabé again. He’d watched her spar everyone else, laughed as she threw his brothers to the mats and endured the teasing directed at him, but he had been the first to leave when Skywalker dismissed them.

And, three hours later, Echo had accompanied her and Sabé to the next ship deal. He was kind, in a reserved sort of way, but she found herself missing Fives’ relaxed, jovial attitude.

“All right, come on, little one,” Sabé murmured, without turning around. She herself would not take her own hair down until Eirtaé and Rabé had both been tended to. “Your turn.” Eirtaé and Rabé exchanged places, and as soon as Sabé’s familiar hands started to work through her hair, Rabé’s shoulder eased from the stress she hadn’t known she’d been carrying.

“I hope you’re not too bruised, Rabé – I can’t believe you fought against that many people this morning.”

Rabé shrugged, “I didn’t mind at all – and it was actually a lot of fun! I’ve never gone up against ARC troopers or a Jedi before.” She stretched her legs under the table, her muscles protesting out of sheer exhaustion, not any serious injuries. “Nothing unmanageable.” She was definitely going to
have some impressive bruises tomorrow, though.

Sabé tsked. “That’s what you said when you fractured your ankle on Boothi XII.”

“But that was manageable!”

Sabé raised her eyebrow and pulled lightly on Rabé’s hair. “’Manageable’ until Eirtaé and I had to carry you back to the ship when you couldn’t walk the next day because you pushed yourself too far, remember?”

“I remember.” Eirtaé spoke up from where she was peeling off her burgundy robes, waving one arm free of the large sleeves. The extra fabric bunched up around her waist where it was still belted together, the entire effect quite undignified but very relaxed.

“Oh, quiet — but that was in a little more hostile territory than on a Republic ship.” Eirtaé smirked at Rabé’s reflection, Rabé stuck out her tongue, and Eirtaé, still grinning, turned back around.

“Alright, true. I’ll give you that.”

Rabé was quiet for a moment before her curiosity bubbled up out of her. “Have you made any decisions about the teams yet?”

“Oh! Hm. I’ve had a few,” Sabé replied nonchalantly. “Actually, this morning was very helpful for figuring that out.”

Eirtaé laughed, a true laugh, a light and pretty sound that only the other handmaidens ever heard. “Who knew the best way to get to know people was to throw them around for a couple of hours?”

“I prefer that icebreaker to anything else, personally,” Rabé said, laughing along with Eirtaé. “Everyone seems much more relaxed now, thank goodness.”

“That actually reminds me of something, Rabé-” Sabé’s eyes met Rabé’s in the mirror as she began to pull out the pins securing Rabé’s hair. Deep brunette waves cascaded over her shoulders, reaching the small of her back, as Sabé continued, “Your comment, in the engine room. When Skywalker was giving us the tour?”

It took her a moment to realize what Sabé was referring to. “Oh! With that poster?” She grinned, still extraordinarily proud of that joke, even though it’d been nearly a full day since the incident. *And it had made the others laugh, too.* No small feat, considering how tense the moment had been.

“Mhm.” Sabé continued to work with Rabé’s hair, fighting to keep the corners of her lips still. Rabé raised her eyebrows, confused and now slightly worried.

Eirtaé started to smirk. “Ah-ha, good. I was wondering about this, too.”

“Wondering about what?” Now she was even more worried. Her two older sisters were maneuvering into some position, barely-concealed teasing in their voices and too-relaxed manners. Rabé was the youngest of the four children in her family — she was well versed in the tactics of older siblings. She knew the two older handmaidens were luring her into a trap.

Sabé shrugged, brushing her fingers through Rabé’s hair, clearly enjoying dragging her feet to get to the point. Rabé turned in her seat and stared up at her older sister. “What, Sabé?”

“Were you thinking of any… particular trooper when you said we might have a similar poster on our ship?”
Rabé’s cheeks flushed almost at once. She spun back around and yanked the rest of the pins from her hair, swatting Sabé’s hands away. “No, of course not – I was only joking.”

“But were you?” Sabé’s voice was quiet, teasing, a serious question lurking in her eyes as she drummed her fingers on the back of Rabé’s chair, her other hand on her hip. Eirtaé was silently watching, her ice-blue eyes drilling a hole into Rabé’s head. “I mean, if you say you weren’t thinking of anyone, then sure. I’ll believe you.” She winked, saying very clearly not at all.

It didn’t make Rabé feel any better. “Of course not! We’d only just met them.” She didn’t raise her eyes to meet either of her sister’s. Which, of course, was as good as an admission in their minds.

“Hmm,” Eirtaé hummed from her bunk, her foot dangling lazily over the edge. “I’m sure.” She grinned at Rabé in the mirror before leaning back against the wall, closing her eyes.

“Eirtaé, please,” Rabé pleaded, her cheeks hot as she fumbled for the brush on the table in front of her. “I was only making a joke.”

Her fingers were as heavy as lead as she handed Sabé the brush, and for a moment the soft whisper of the brush through Rabé’s thick hair was the only sound in their bunk. Sabé kept trying to meet Rabé’s eyes, but she steadfastly resisted the urge to glance up. She couldn’t quite manage a deep enough breath to tell them off, either, a needlessly frustrating fact.

“In all seriousness, though.” Eirtaé said, raising her voice over Rabé’s quiet, desperate groan. “If you had to choose-”

“Can we not?” Rabé asked, the question muffled by the palms of her hands. Sabé gave a low laugh as she continued to brush Rabé’s hair.

“You made me think of it, you’ve brought this upon yourself – if you had to choose, which trooper would it be?”

“That’s inappropriate.”

“They have one of us! It’s only fair.”

Rabé resisted the urge to bury her burning cheeks in her hands. “That wasn’t a specific handmaiden, that’s different-”

“Still, I’m curious now-”

“Me too! Because, think about it – it all comes down to their personalities and how they distinguish themselves from each other, right? And… and even though they’re clones, they’re so… different from each other. Those tattoos and hairstyles, the scars – even their voices sound different.” Sabé spoke up, her voice a hair’s breadth higher than normal, quickly reigned back. Had her hands not been in Rabé’s hair, Sabé’s miniscule twitch of something almost like guilt would have gone unnoticed. She bit her lip as she thought, chewing over the words before saying, “What about Captain Rex? His hair is a nice color, and he has that quiet, stoic, strong presence. That’d be good for morale.”

“Personally, I’d vote for one of Kix.” Eirtaé sat up a little and held up her fingers in a frame, moving it slowly around the room until stopping on the wall opposite the door. “We could put it over there. With a caption like ‘Let our medics check you out,’ or ‘You’ll never want to skip your appointments now!’” She stopped, thinking for a moment longer, and then smirked, simpering, “We’ll teach you everything you need to know about anatomy.”
“Eirtaé!” Rabé squealed, blushing, as Sabé burst out laughing behind her.

“What? He’s objectively the most attractive-”

“Oh, how would you two know?” Rabé groaned, leaning back in the chair. She threw her arms dramatically over her face, desperate for this conversation to be over. “Jesse has kind eyes.” But her sisters weren’t finished.

“That wasn’t the question.”

Sabé burst out laughing and affectionately ran her fingers through Rabé’s long, loose hair. “I’m gay, not blind, Rabé. Anyway, I know who you’d like to see on a poster.” she teased.

“I know, too,” Eirtaé laughed.

“I can tell you now, you’re both wrong! The answer is none of them, because that’s inappropriate.” With a short groan, she sat back up and cupped her chin in her hand, pouting at the others. “I didn’t have any particular trooper in mind. Despite what you may think.”

“We’ve known each other for years. You can’t lie to me.” Eirtaé’s lips curled into a small, self-satisfied smile as she gazed steadily at Rabé’s reflection in the mirror. “Come on, Rabé. We told you ours. Fair’s fair.”

“Fine – but I swear, I wasn’t thinking of him – of anyone specific, I mean – but-

“You’re getting distracted,” Sabé sang.

“Fine, fine! I guess. Uhm.” She swallowed hard and looked down at the table in front of her, running her hand over the handle of the brush. “I guess I would pick... F-Fives.”

Eirtaé and Sabé triumphant glances were instantaneous.

Rabé’s blush instantly darkened by three shades. She opened her mouth, but to her dismay, nothing but an extremely undignified squeak came out. Eirtaé leaned forward on her bunk, Sabé leaning over the back of the chair, identical grins of pure delight on their faces. Rabé cleared her throat and tried again. Her cheeks were burning. “Why him? I mean – I haven’t – I wasn’t thinking of anyone!”

“Maybe not at that point, but you two seemed to be getting along very well on the Spider Lightning,” Sabé said coolly. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that.”

“I take it back, then. He was the first name that popped into my head.”

“I don’t know, Rabé. You’ve been a little... biased about him.” Sabé grinned, mischief lurking in her voice.

Her voice climbed even higher despite her very best effort to keep it level. “What? Biased?”

“I’m just saying, we seem to talk about him a lot. And you’re usually the one to bring him up, despite – like you yourself just said! – having only just met them.”

“What? No, I don’t!” Rabé hummed in frustration before continuing, “It’s only because of the spar, that’s all, it’s only because I won against him and he’s an ARC, that’s all-”

Eirtaé laughed. “Biased and defensive, now.”
Rabé groaned and buried her face in her hands. “You two *made* me pick!”

“Ahh, it’s okay, little sister.” Sabé said, laying a comforting hand on Rabé’s shoulder. “If it makes you feel any better, he couldn’t keep his eyes off you.”

Rabé froze, her heart stalling for just a moment before picking up its pace into a stuttering canter. She didn’t trust herself to move, because if she did, Eirtaé and Sabé would get the confirmation – confirmation? Confirmation of what? I don’t – there’s nothing... Her cheeks were on fire, and she was suddenly immensely grateful for her heavy curtain of hair. She forced herself to take several long, deep breaths, desperate to ignore the way her stomach had flipped when Sabé pointed that out.

“Yes, I noticed that too,” Eirtaé’s voice rang out. “Not to mention he was the first to laugh at your poster joke—”

“-and did you see the look on his face when you pinned him—”

“That one’s easy – I took him by surprise, that’s *all.*” Rabé squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as she could manage, but she was powerless to stop a tiny smile fluttered on her lips, because some small part of her wanted to believe what her sisters were saying.

But how could she pretend she hadn’t noticed it, too?

“You said that Alderaan is a monarchy – is it like Naboo, where the monarchs are elected?”

Rabé shook her head in answer to Echo’s question. She stood in the center of the eleven, trying to condense over a thousand years of complex Alderaanian politics and court culture into one morning session.

Luckily for her, the clones were extremely fast learners.

She supposed, on further reflection, that they had probably been designed with that in mind.

A brief flash of intense sadness spiked through her blood even as she answered, “Naboo is a unique case among monarchy-ruled systems – Alderaan is still governed by the Elder Houses, currently by the House of Organa. They pass on the title through their bloodlines.” She activated a node on the holoprojector display, and a dozen small family trees spiraled out like tiny fireworks, spinning slowly in place as she walked through them. “Here is the Organa bloodline. They’ve held power for almost fifteen years now, although the title of Viceroy has changed hands three times in that period. These are the other prominent families, and ones we’re most likely to run into during our time in Aldera.”

Echo nodded, narrowing his eyes at the information as if it would help him memorize it faster.

“Senator Organa is the Viceroy, right? Why doesn’t he have the full title of King?” Ahsoka asked slowly, frowning.

“While on Alderaan, his full title is Prince Consort to the Queen. The title doesn’t necessarily come with the position of Viceroy or Senator – Bail Antilles was the previous Viceroy, though he bore no relation to Queen Breha.”

Ahsoka nodded, even as she muttered under her breath, “Why do they need so many titles…?”

“Ok, right – so then, these royal houses-”
Noble, not royal.” Jesse interjected. “Pay attention.”

“Right, sorry.” Kix continued, pulling a punch towards Jesse without looking up from his datapad, “these families are in control of the planet’s resources, credits, politics… everything, right?”

“Right.”

“So the spy is probably from one of these houses, a minor house, if the Organas have held power for however long. They get tired of being less powerful, look for an opportunity to shake things up – and a war is probably the best opportunity they have for that.”

Rabé nodded, thrilled that they were catching on so quickly, and activated another node on the table. Several portraits from various houses blinked and grew, until they were frowning disapprovingly at the team of Jedi, clones, and handmaidens. Their shifting portraits, looming and incredibly life-like, cast the group into sharp acidic blue light. “These seven are Queen Breha’s primary suspects. All from minor families, all with significantly less power than what they were typically accustomed to.”

Fives frowned at the blown-up portrait of an elderly woman dripping in jewels, a calm, if slightly insipid smile on her drooping, wrinkled face. “None of these people look like the sort to put much effort in… well, anything.” He pointed up at a man who looked like he’d been at the very founding of the Republic, “When was the last time you think he even thought about picking up a blaster?” He leaned back, shaking his head in disbelief, and continuing, “They don’t look like criminal masterminds who’d sell out their own system. Is this list definite?”

She smiled down at her own datapad as Sabé said gently, “You’d be surprised at what some families have done for a chance at power – no matter how slim the chance or false the power.”

“Power struggles among those with none are perhaps the most dangerous of all,” Eirtáé murmured from her spot in the back of the group. “If they have nothing to lose-”

“-they have everything to gain.” Rabé finished, nodding. “But – Fives – to address your question, no. This list is not definite, and it could simply be the Separatist spy has planted false evidence on these people to lure attention away from their own work.” She glanced over at him, but his gaze was firmly fixed on the portrait of the old Alderaanian man, as if he was trying to get into his mind through the projection.

“And that’s what we’re there to figure out.” Sabé said as she signed break to Rabé without losing her train of thought, “Keep these faces, these names in mind – memorize this list if you have to. But keep an open eye – because whoever this spy is, they’re extremely thorough. They know what they’re doing, they’ve done this before, and if we’re not careful, they could cripple Alderaan entirely.”

“Exactly. Right, so – we’ve covered almost two thousand years of history, you’ve more than earned a break,” Rabé said, grinning as Hardcase leapt up at her words. “Although we will still have to cover court etiquette, but that can wait until we know our assignments.”

“You know, I normally hate learning about history – but this stuff is fascinating! It’s so gruesome, I had no clue that Alderaan used to be like this-”

“Maybe that’s because you have a better teacher this time around,” General Skywalker cajoled his Padawan as she flicked back through her notes, reviewing particularly bloody dates in excitement. “No offense to Master Bondara, of course.”

“He was a good lightsaber instructor, but history with him was a nightmare-”

Rabé blushed at the praise, but a quick movement near the back of her room caught her eye. Jesse,
Kix, and Hardcase were all stretching and walking towards one of the doors, Rex and Sabé were already deep in discussion about tactics, but Rabé glanced up and caught the end of Fives’ gray-and-blue kama whipping out of sight.

She bit her lip, confused – Echo was still here, talking to Eirtae, of all people – but Fives – *why had he left so quickly?* Everyone else was meandering their way towards the doors, but Fives – it was like he had been waiting to be released, like he couldn’t get out of the room fast enough.

*Is it – is he avoiding me?*

Her stomach churned, because now that she was thinking about it, really thinking about it, it made horrible sense – he hadn’t once met her eye during the lecture, even though he’d spoken up, cracked a few jokes. And that morning, while they were taking their meal together, he’d been tight-lipped and quiet. She’d tried to draw him out, but eventually gave up, turning to Hardcase and Jesse instead, leaving Fives to be sour on his own.

But yesterday – he hadn’t come with them for the second drop-off.

*Oh, no.*

The spar.

She’d offended an ARC trooper. It hit her like a slap in the face. She’d offended one of their partners, embarrassed him by beating him in a spar – she’d already muddied their relationship – *and that would affect the entire mission…!* Of course he’d be upset…

Sabé was the only one to notice Rabé slip out of the room after Fives.

To his credit, Fives realized he was being immature – and cowardly, which was somehow almost worse, because he was technically only twelve, he could afford to be immature, but cowardice? That word shouldn’t even be in his vocabulary, unless it was immediately followed with ‘*is never an option.*’ And yet – and yet…

“Fives! Wait a moment?”

*Oh, no.*

Damn his heart, it was only her *voice,* he hadn’t even – he turned slowly on the spot, watching as Rabé walked down the hall, straight towards him. The door he’d just been about to duck through closed behind him, cutting off his escape route. He wondered if he was sick, or if some Kaminoan-implemented scaffolding in his genes had suddenly malfunctioned, tricking his brain and nerves into thinking he’d been dropped in the middle of an enemy encampment without his armor or blasters or any hope of backup.

And this was just – no, not *just,* never *just* – Rabé. Just a single woman, shooting him a nervous smile as she ran to catch up to him. Never mind the fact that his grip on his bucket had tightened so much that he stood the very real threat of cracking it. He nodded at her and cleared his throat, suddenly conscious of how warm the corridor had become.

She stopped in front of him, her hands wringing together, like she was just as nervous as he was, as she began, “I’ve been looking everywhere for you, I really need to talk to you—”
Don’t say that, he begged her inwardly, his tongue lying thick in his mouth as he tried to act natural, as he tried not to notice how her dark hair framed her copper face like one of those flimsi paintings. And he especially tried not to notice how the collar of her burgundy robes dipped down to the base of her throat, how the silks came together and lay flush just under the ridge of her collarbones. Please don’t say that – “Mhm?” It was all he could manage. Here he was, an ARC trooper, losing his nerve and ability to talk, completely at a loss and near startled out of his wits. He was just grateful that no one else was around to witness this.

“I wanted to apologize.”

Apparently, it wasn’t just his brain that was malfunctioning, but his ears now, too. He blinked down at her, his brain stalling, before replying in a thick voice, “Wha- apologize?”

“Yes. For the, um.” Rabé shifted, glancing down at her hands. His gaze unintentionally followed hers, until she clasped them together and continued, “For the spar?”

“For the spar.” He repeated stupidly, not understanding in the slightest what was happening. His guts were churning like they had the day of his deployment, nerves and excitement and fear and adrenaline all roiling together in one gigantic mess. What’s there to apologize for…? I should be thanking you-

“I never meant – I didn’t mean to embarrass you,” she said softly. “I-I know you’ve been avoiding me… I feel really terrible about it, so-”

Embarrassed?! How could she think – sure, he’d been avoiding her, but it wasn’t because he was embarrassed by the spar. No, he was embarrassed that his body snapped to attention whenever she looked at him, that he couldn’t get the wiring in his brain to work when she smiled at him, that he simultaneously wanted to be close to her and on the next ship out of the system.

He stared down at her, wide-eyed, trying and failing to understand why she was so… so kind. He’d been the jackass, and here she was, apologizing to him. You’re an idiot, Fives – of course she thinks you’re angry, you have been avoiding her… And not for the reason she thought. Not at all. He knew he’d be thinking about the spar for the rest of the mission, every time he looked at her, and embarrassment was the farthest thing from his mind. And if he could only get his tongue to cooperate, he would have told her that in a heartbeat. But all he could manage was a stupid, “I’m not – I wasn’t embarrassed.”

Her eyes lit up at his words. “Oh, you’re not…?”

“N-no, not at all!” He cleared his throat, trying to talk around the lump in his throat. “You were a great partner – a-at sparring, I mean – and besides, I deserved that. Definitely!” He shot her what he hoped was a cool and collected grin, ignoring the fact that his heart was thrumming wildly against his ribs. “Y’know, I shouldn’t have assumed you’d be easy. To take on in a spar, I mean! There’s a reason why Senator Amidala wanted you three for this mission, right?” He’d never been so tongue-tied in all his life, never tripped over his words like this. “Trust me, I – I’m not mad.” Farthest thing from.

Rabé blinked in surprise, those lovely dark lashes brushing against cheeks that had suddenly tinged slight pink at his words. And then she beamed up at him, and his breath caught in his lungs, he didn’t know how it fit on her face, as big and bright and beautiful as a star. Oh, Force, he groaned inwardly as he tried not to stare. This isn’t fair...

“Oh! Thank goodness, I was so worried…”
“Worried? Shit, no, I’m sorry – I didn’t – argh, nah, this is – this is my fault,” Fives cleared his throat, giving himself a mental shake, because now all he could think about was that she had been thinking about him, but she had been thinking about how he was angry at her, which was wrong, but he couldn’t exactly blame her – his mind was one gigantic electrified bundle of nerves, thoughts looping and crashing into each other as he tried to finish just one sentence, which was proving much harder than it should have been. “It’s me who should be sorry, I didn’t mean for you to get… get upset, or anything…” His voice trailed off, and he rubbed the back of his neck as he attempted another small, casual smile. It was definitely getting warmer in the corridor.

She nodded seriously, like he was saying something profound and not acting like nervous cadet, and once again, Fives was struck by how small she was. Picking her up would be the easiest – nope, no. Stop that thought right there. “No, no, I was just worried that you were mad at me – for throwing you on your ass yesterday, in front of everyone!”

He burst out laughing, he couldn’t help it. “Are you kidding? Everyone loved that – Hardcase still hasn’t shut up about it.”

She snorted, pleased with the thought. “Glad to have entertained.”

“And I know Rex and Echo are now trying out those techniques you showed us. I think they’ve made it a personal goal to win a match against you now – so be on your guard.”

“Oh, yeah, Captain Rex has already asked me if I could give him some pointers – but don’t worry, I haven’t shown you guys quite everything yet.” She pressed her lips together in a mischievous smirk and Fives’ heart soared. He still felt that, if presented the opportunity, he was still precariously close to running away, but he was drawn to her. He wanted to talk to her, to make her smile and laugh.

“That’s good to hear – and I can’t wait for you to toss him over your shoulders next.”

Rabé giggled and he grinned, delighted with her delight at his words, wanting more. She pressed the tips of her fingers to her lips for a moment, as if to press her laughter back down, before she smiled up at him and said softly, “Thanks, Fives – I’m glad we talked. And I’m really glad you’re not mad at me, or embarrassed or anything.” She smiled shyly at him, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “That could’ve made the mission awkward…”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about, Rabé,” he murmured, determined not to notice how he nearly tripped over her name. “I think we’ll be just fine.”
“Well, now, this is impressive,” a familiar voice rang out in the hangar as an equally familiar pair of battered leather boots appeared next to Ahsoka’s montrals. She grinned and rolled out from underneath the engine of the Corellian *Consular* as Obi-Wan Kenobi continued, “All of this work in under a week? We can’t even acquire new ships that quickly.”

Ahsoka sat up on her mechanic’s creeper and nodded solemnly, popping her goggles from her eyes. Her thoughts were momentarily torn back to the seemingly endless war being fought all around them. They’d been so busy trying to learn everything from history to etiquette from the handmaidens that it had been alarmingly easy to bury themselves in the work. Ahsoka took a deep breath and
willed herself to be mindful of the grand scheme of their mission to Alderaan. It would affect countless lives – and she had to keep that at the forefront of her mind. Otherwise she might make a mistake that would have terrible ripples throughout the galaxy.

It might have been an even larger worry, had the handmaidens not assumed swift and total control of the mission from the moment they’d stepped onboard. She and Anakin and the boys were comfortable on the front lines. Their war was smoking blasters and thermal detonators, battle cries and bravado and forward charges. The handmaidens operated on an entirely separate level – one of smokescreens and elaborate political games played on a miniscule scale with galactic consequences.

“You can thank the handmaidens for our new fleet.” Ahsoka wiped her greasy hands and tossed the oily rag to the side as she carefully rose from the creeper. “Sabé knows a lot of people.” Including, but not limited to, pirates, drug lords, and royalty, she thought slyly. Handmaidens sure are a class of their own. “Glad to see you, Master. I don’t know where Skyguy is, though. He might be checking out that skybus – Force knows it needs some serious help.”

Obi-Wan, surveying the three ships and stroking his beard, smirked. “Of course he is. I’m hardly surprised. Does he ever miss the chance to fiddle with engines?”

The Nubian and Corellian were as close to masterpieces of engineering as a starship could get, proudly gleaming and ready to fly. The ancient, battered GX1 short hauler Sabé had acquired, on the other hand, had seen better days. Dents, rust patches the size of her head, countless scratches, and flash-repaired plates were its decorations. After Sabé had piloted it down next to its more luxurious counterparts the other day, Ahsoka had asked why she’d wanted such an ugly ship. Sabé had cocked her head and smiled a tactician’s calculating smile. “Can’t all be diplomats and nobility, can we?”

“I was about to ask why no one was there to greet me when I arrived, but I see now you’ve all got your hands quite full.” Obi-Wan murmured. “And I’ll assume the handmaidens have something do with the change of pace around here?”

Ahsoka laughed. He wasn’t exactly wrong. “Maybe you should think about hiring them? Officially as resource collectors, unofficially as spies of the Republic…?”

“The Queen wouldn’t like that, Ahsoka!” Rabé called from where she was working on one of the upper turrets, straddling the gun with her robes tied around her waist. Obi-Wan smiled kindly up at her as she hooked her legs around the gun, elbow-deep in the turret’s machinery. Scattered parts lay strewn about her, precariously perched on the ship’s frame, a small holoprojection of the internal blueprints slowly rotating next to her head. Various parts of the blueprint were glowing red, internal structures demanding attention and repairs, but as she carefully worked through the red gave way to a confident, calm green. She had gone from almost thirty red items to a neat six.

She sharply tugged at a hidden proponent in the gun with a quiet grunt and yet another red mark slid into pleasant green. As she pulled her hand out and deposited the offending piece in her neat pile, she grinned and nodded down at him. “Nice to see you again, Master Kenobi.”

Unlike Ahsoka, who was covered montal to toe in grime from the engines, Rabé was somehow entirely spotless, even as she gutted the old casings with an expert hand. She grinned cheekily down at the pair of Jedi and gestured to a tool by Ahsoka’s feet as she continued, “It was difficult enough to convince Her Majesty that we needed to accept this mission. Doubt she’d take you stealing us away very kindly.”

“Yes, well, I might have to have a word with her,” Obi-Wan remarked dryly as Ahsoka handed Rabé the tool. “I believe the Council will be very pleased with the way this mission is shaping up thus far. Is everything ready? Do you have all the supplies?”
Rabé nodded, shining a light into the gun before adjusting a hidden screw. Her brow furrowed in concentration as she answered, “Yes, more or less! Only thing left to do is polish up these ships, really. Sabé just has to announce the finalized teams, and then we’re off.”

“Excellent, really excellent – ah, there you are Anakin, thank you for finally joining us.” Obi-Wan greeted his old Padawan calmly, much to Ahsoka’s amusement. If they ever stopped bickering, she’d start to get worried. She folded her arms and leaned against the ship’s hull. She knew from experience not to try and get a word in edgewise.

“What? What are you talking about? We’re standing around on my ship, Master,” Anakin retorted immediately as he walked up to the Corellian. Without bothering to wait for a reply, he called up to Rabé, “How’s it looking up there?”

“No major problems up here, General,” she replied, leaning back to catch her breath, running the back of her hand over her forehead as she did so. “This is the second-to-last one, but I still want to check the big guns. Doubt we’ll need them, but just in case.”

“Hardcase can help you with that, when you’re ready. He’s also on that GX1 – which, might I say, is a disaster.” He gestured in frustration back towards the sad little ship as Fives and Echo stepped out of it, each carrying an armload of what looked to be junk more ancient than the ship itself. Artoo followed them down the ramp, pulling a small cart with more of the same behind him. “It’s hyperdrive is basically shot to hell, and I can’t figure out where, but I think something might have crawled into one of the engines and died.” His face scrunched up in disgust. “I’ll be able to fix the hyperdrive, but the smell? Not so much.”

Rabé laughed from her lofty position on the turret, swinging her legs in amusement. “Ninx’s Spider Lightning doesn’t look so bad now, does it?”

“I’d actually rather just have a ship that looks and functions as it should, but I guess that’s asking too much.”

“And how about the fleet? Have you briefed the rest of your men?”

“Yup. They’re all ready to go. Admiral Yularen is on deck right now doing final preparations from his end, and Alpha will be your Captain in the interim. He’ll direct the five-oh-first under your orders.”

“Good man, that Alpha. I’ve worked with him before; he’s one of the finest troopers I’ve seen.” Obi-Wan paused for a moment before continuing, a wry grin spreading across his face, “He supervised Commander Cody’s ARC training, no?”

“…I don’t-”

“No matter.” Obi-Wan started to head off in the direction of the lifts, calling over his shoulder, “I’m going up to the command deck to check in with the Admiral. Oh, hello, Senator Amidala, Sabé,” he called cheerfully to the pair as they appeared from the Nubian. They inclined their heads in greeting. Sabé was quite happy to see him, an easy, wide smile on her lips – surprising, before Ahsoka remembered that Obi-Wan had known them since he, himself, was a Padawan.

She tried to picture him without his signature beard and sporting a long Padawan braid instead, but the only image her brain could produce was a teenager’s body with Obi-Wan’s grown head tacked on his neck. She shuddered and let it go. He stepped into the lift and nodded before the doors slid shut.
Sabé glanced down at her datapad, made note of something, and then cleared her throat.

“Right, then. Assignments.” Sabé called out without looking up from her datapad. Senator Amidala stood quietly next to her former handmaiden, a fond look on her face as the rest of the group gathered round – all except Rabé, who stubbornly stayed in her perch on top the Consular. “It makes me feel taller,” she said, blinking innocently as the others laughed below her.

Sabé raised an eyebrow but made no comment, indulging her younger sister. She launched straight into the debrief, as per her standard style. No frills, no wasting time. Straight to the point.

“As this is a covert operations mission, the Senator and I have decided that it would be best to work in small groups, or – in some cases – as individuals. Each group has been designed with your strengths in mind, as the more we can spread and infiltrate the courts, the better chance we have at catching this spy.

“Not only is each group and each individual expected to maintain their assigned roles, what is most important in missions like these is looking out for each other’s safety. You must never drop your role, not even when you believe you are alone. Approach it like an actor, with much, much higher stakes. If the Separatist – supposed, I should say – is as discrete and cunning as Queen Breha fears, your safety, all of our safety depends on your ability to play your parts.

“As such, Senator Amidala and I have designed the teams as such: the bulk of the group will be forming a retinue around Senator Amidala. As a known Republic Senator, she’ll draw much of the court’s attention and act as our distraction. General Skywalker, Commander Tano, your roles are not much changed from your everyday life. You are the Senator’s Jedi escorts, assigned after the attacks on Coruscant. Jesse and Echo – you will be Coruscant Guards, with the appropriate armor.”

Sabé held up her hands, placating, as Jesse sputtered in mock protest against the very notion of pretending to be a Coruscant Guard trooper. “I know, I know – if it really bothers you that much, you can keep wearing your 501st armor – though technically, as a Senator, she should be escorted by the Guard. Either way, you have to match. One or the other.”

Jesse and Echo glanced at each other, until Echo shrugged and said slowly, “It would make more sense to go as Guards…”

Fives immediately gave him an affectionate, if slightly harder than need be, punch on the arm.

“Personally, I think the better reason to go as Guards is just how pissy those boys’ll be when you borrow their armor,” Hardcase offered.

“Thank you for your opinion, Hardcase,” Sabé remarked dryly, the corners of her lips twitching up in amusement. He gave her a tiny yet extremely elaborate and flourishing bow in answer. From her place on top of the Consular, Rabé giggled, and Ahsoka caught Fives’ eyes flashing up to her for a bare millisecond.

“Yeah! …Imagine the looks on their faces when we tell ‘em we were better Guards than they could ever hope to be,” Jesse said, grinning widely at the mental image.

Kix chuckled softly, “Couldn’t handle this mission, so they called in the best to be the worst!”

“Enough, you two.” Rex called out, before nodding back to Sabé.

She inclined her head in thanks and glanced between Jesse and Echo. “So… Guards? Or 501st?”
“Guards,” they answered in unison, Echo stony-faced as he mentally prepared for his role, Jesse smirking and cracking his knuckles for the chance to annoy the actual Coruscant Guard. Ahsoka smiled, thinking that a bout of friendly competition between the Guard and the 501st would be a welcome distraction for the boys on Coruscant still struggling to restore order after the attacks.

Sabé went on, addressing Eirtaé on her left, who, as far as Ahsoka was aware, had not spoken a word that entire morning. “Eirtaé, you’ll be Padmé’s official handmaiden for the duration of the mission.”

Eirtaé inclined her head in understanding but, as before, did not utter a word. She was quiet, but certainly not shy or introverted. One got the distinct impression that Eirtaé simply found talking a needless and tiresome activity, only speaking when absolutely essential. Her icy blue eyes lingered on everything, leaving no stone unturned, and Ahsoka found that Eirtaé could communicate very effectively – almost frighteningly so – with her eyes alone.

She fascinated Ahsoka.

“Captain Rex, you and I have drawn the short straws for this mission, unfortunately. Well, I suppose I assigned us the short straws. The head of security at the palace kindly informed me that they had openings for both an experienced court guard and a lady-in-waiting. We’ll be working independently of the others, mostly – we’re actually going to have jobs. But they’ll be inconspicuous positions that will let us move about through the palace unnoticed. Nobles have better things to worry about than a pair of servants.

“And that leaves you, Rabé,” Sabé continued, turning her face up to catch Rabé’s eye. “You’re going to be handling the bulk of the espionage work, as a young Corellian noblewoman embarking on her tour of the systems of the Elder House courts.”

Ahsoka blinked in confusion as Rabé understood at once: “As a debutante?”

“People do that?” Ahsoka interjected. The men looked just as confused as she did, and she caught Fives glancing up at Rabé again, his eyebrows knit together. “I mean – civilians do that?” When Eirtaé’s eyes slid her way, she stuttered onwards, “I thought that was just a thing people did in holovids…”

Sabé nodded, tucking the holopad under her arm as she answered, “It’s a rite of passage for young nobles in the Core and a few of the Inner and Mid Rim worlds. They often travel with a small retinue to star systems like Corellia, Naboo, and Alderaan – systems where the Elder Houses still hold court – to formally introduce themselves into high society.”

“Not quite the type of tour we’re used to, huh,” Jesse joked, but there was a faint bitterness in his eyes at the thought of nobles and well-to-do civilians touring the galaxy for the express purpose of showing themselves off. Ahsoka sensed it in the others, too, and she also thought the image strange and old-fashioned. Rich nobles traveling to the glittering capitals and courts to show themselves off in all their finery, while she and the 501st leapt from one war-torn system to the next, never catching a moment’s rest, left a slightly sour taste in her mouth.

Rabé seemed to notice the faint ripples of distress. She murmured gently, “It might not be what you’re used to, but you have to remember that these are the people in power. But we’re not there for them. We’re there for the war effort – for the rest of your brothers.”

Fives, Hardcase, Ahsoka, and Anakin all beamed at her, the rest of the men nodding as their bodies shifted and relaxed at her words. The handmaidens might not be soldiers in the sense that they understood it, but they were far from everyday citizens. Their focus and work was dedicated to the
same goal of peace that the Jedi and the clone battalions fought for.

“Not to mention the tour is a load of shit,” Eirtaé murmured, examining her nails. “It’s nothing more than prancing around to show off; ego-stroking and narcissism at its peak.” She looked around at the group, and a thin, icy smile slowly appeared on her lips. “I hated it. Took me away from the Royal Academy. Waste of time.”

Hardcase’s head whipped around, his jaw hanging open in comic shock. “You did that?”

She nodded silently, her eyes flashing in amusement as the men stared at her – whether in shock from the idea of Eirtaé as a debutante, or from the fact that that was the most she had spoken since arriving on the *Resolute*.

Kix turned to Padmé and asked, in a hesitant voice, almost as if he was afraid they had accidentally offended her with their disgust, “…Did you tour as well, Senator?”

Senator Amidala smiled kindly at him and shook her head. “No, I was too busy with my duties as Princess of Theed, and then as Queen-Elect, to ever do that. I believe the typical tour is at least three months – time I never managed to find.”

“Wait – how old were you when you did that, Eirtaé?” Anakin asked.

“Twelve.”

“Twe-what?”

“Usually people do it in their late teens, early twenties. But the Naboo have a penchant for doing everything early,” Padmé answered.

Eirtaé had made no motion to indicate she was done speaking, but Ahsoka was already used to the way the handmaidens spoke, a smooth, natural ebb and flow to how they finished each other’s thoughts, like an unseen channel connected them all. They spoke in circles with each other – not quite interrupting, but continuing, drawing on the same breath, the same thoughts.

It reminded her of the way Jedi spoke with each other. *The troopers, too.*

“That’s why Rabé’s the perfect choice,” Sabé continued. “As someone who’s not from a noble family, she’ll be virtually unknown in the courts. Corellian nobles tour at about her age, as well. Take advantage of every resource offered to you, Rabé.”

“I’ll be as wide-eyed and charmed as the best of them,” Rabé joked, cupping her chin in her hands and fluttering her lashes.

Ahsoka couldn’t help but grin: Rabé was leaning casually against a heavy turret gun that she herself had just finished modifying, surrounded by empty ammo clips and greasy machinery, her battle robes carelessly tied around her waist. She certainly didn’t look like a rich, sheltered debutante from one of the Inner Rim worlds.

“Precisely. A wide-eyed, inexperienced young woman eager to make allies in a new court. And, of course, such an innocent and naïve noblewoman needs her small retinue of guards.”

Rabé shifted suddenly and tensed. She wiped her hands on her robes, still tied around her waist, even though they were spotless. She cleared her throat and murmured, “O-of course.”

“Kix, Hardcase, that’ll be you – and I’m glad you two ARCs are here, it makes me feel good about
having one for each Padmé and Rabé, for extra protection. Fives, I want you as Rabé’s official Captain of the Guard.”

Hardcase stepped to the side for a better look at Rabé and gave another flourishing bow. “At your service, my Lady.”

She giggled, relaxing a little, and returned his bow as Kix said, “Like Fives’ll be much use in the ‘protection’ department – if anyone’s gonna be doing the protecting, it’s gonna be Rabé.”

“Yeah, didn’t we already establish that she can kick all our asses, ARC trooper or no?”

Sabé waited until the jokes died down before continuing, “Rabé doesn’t need protection, no. But a sheltered young noblewoman absolutely does – so, Fives, is that OK?”

Ahsoka cocked her head as a brief but intense flash of extreme nerves gripped Fives, even as he blinked rapidly and murmured, “Of course.”

She didn’t have much time to ponder this before Rex said coolly, “This is a fine plan, but I do have one concern.”

When Sabé turned to face him but did not move to reply, he went on, “Won’t it be suspicious for a group of clones to be escorting a noblewoman?”

Sabé’s eyes flicked up to Rabé before she took a breath and said slowly, “The likelihood of a noble from Alderaan – or from any court system, really – recognizing a clone trooper out of armor is… slim.”

Echo looked down at his hands, and Kix leaned back against the starbus as a chill swept through the men. Ahsoka glanced at Anakin, who looked as pained as she felt.

Rex nodded, but his grip on his bucket tightened for just a moment. The movement rippled throughout the rest of men. “Ah.”

“We have official Corellian uniforms for you three,” she went on, her tone regretful and slightly mournful. Sabé was well aware at the pain her words were causing, and her white-knuckled grip on her holopad showed how much she hated it. “Corellian guards cover their faces. Only Fives’ will be showing – and the same is true of the Alderaanian guards, but… you’ll blend in with the others. Attention will mostly be on Rabé and Padmé, so you won’t have to worry about being recognized.”

It was true, of course, that most people living such a peaceful system would have no reason to have ever seen the face of a clone trooper. But... but they’re doing so much for those people, Ahsoka thought, biting her lip. And they’re content with just... not knowing? Not knowing what the faces of their soldiers look like?

She was suddenly very glad that she would not be alone during this mission, or play a role other than the one she was already comfortable with, as a Jedi. It would have been a challenge to bite her tongue and not lash out at some ungrateful noble.

Senator Amidala cleared her throat and said softly, “Another thing to keep in mind – Queen Breha mentioned some in her court do not have the most favorable opinions of the Republic, or it’s place in this war. I want everyone to be aware of that, to prepare yourself in case you overhear... remarks of that nature. Alderaan is one of the stalwarts of the Republic, to be sure. But the dissenters are there.”

Another slight shift in the men, but it was not one of discomfort. It was resigned acceptance.
Ahsoka bit the inside of her cheek.

Sabé’s eyes cast regretfully around the group, but she moved on. As unofficial Captain of this mission, she had to keep pushing them forward, never mind the culture clash. There was no time to linger on the divide they all felt slowly inching wider between them – this was the handmaidens’ arena, they’d been in courts all their lives. But for Ahsoka and Anakin, for the men – for every new piece of information, every new antique rule or bizarre custom they learned about high society, the more discomfort pricked at her blood. We’re so out of our depth, she realized. Is it gonna be enough?

“So. There we have it. At this point in time, we are a half-day’s jump to Alderaan. As I said before, we have all the uniforms you’ll need. Even the Guard uniforms – so you won’t have to decorate your own armor in their colors, Jesse, Echo – but everyone else, we need to make sure they fit correctly. Eirtaé and I will help. Rabé, I want you to go get ready. After that, we’ll move out in staggered time.

“Senator Amidala, you and your retinue will take the Nubian and depart first in an hour. Rabé, you’ll wait another hour before leaving in the Corellian, and Captain, you and I will bring up the rear in the starbus after that. You two will be directed to the appropriate landing pads, and afterwards, you are to wait in your rooms until Rex or I come to fetch you. At that point, I’ll have our base of operations secured and we’ll rendezvous there.”

She cast a glance around the group and nodded. “And then our work can begin.”

Of all the places Rabé had gotten ready, the command quarters on a Star Destroyer certainly topped the list for most bizarre.

General Skywalker had offered her his personal room. She suspected Sabé had something to do with that – Rabé hadn’t been able to stop a tiny shiver of distaste from rolling down her back when Sabé had told her to get dressed while she and Eirtaé helped the clones with their new uniforms. The thought of having to go back to those cold, empty diplomatic suites alone – no. No.

His quarters were large, as expected for a General, but it was warm and full and welcoming – traces of Anakin in the posters of speeders and podracers, in the untidy, dusty desk strewn with what looked to be an entire mouse droid, expertly taken apart. She couldn’t help but smile fondly at it. Here, General Skywalker was not a General. Here he could relax.

She suspected he didn’t have much time to do that.

There was a soft knock on the door, startling her out of her thoughts. “Just a moment,” she called out, adjusting the dusty rose traveling cloak around her shoulders. It was pinned with a magnificent brooch, a gleaming platinum Corellian sea ray – the symbol of her House. Her gown underneath was a gauzy, airy thing, lighter pink than the cloak and embroidered with hundreds of delicate yellow flowers, a tiny pearl sewn into every petal to make them shine. She’d braided her hair and pinned it in place with a delicately woven hairnet, clusters of pearls floating in her dark locks. A simple platinum circlet and matching necklace completed the look.

From a greased-up mechanic to a Corellian noblewoman in under an hour, she thought, smiling to herself as she activated the pad next to the door.

Even though he had just knocked, Fives still looked startled out of his mind when the door slid open. His eyes met Rabé’s for a heartbeat and then flicked down to the helmet he carried in his hands. He cleared his throat and mumbled thickly, “Uh – I was just – we’re ready to leave, when you are.”

He was dressed in his new Captain of the Guard uniform, a simple steel-gray shirt tucked into dark
gray pants under a thick leather tunic, blasters slung into the holsters that fit snug around his hips. It was stamped with the same Corellian sea ray that Rabé wore pinned to her breast. His pants were embroidered with yellow bloodstripes.

Perfect for a Captain – though Rabé found herself wishing Sabé had given him red. First-order bloodstripes. She was sure he deserved them.

Sabé had not missed a single detail. Fives looked every inch the part, comfortable in the new uniform like he’d been wearing it all his life.

Eirtaé was a quick hand with the tailor’s needle – it fit him well.

Very well, indeed. Her eyes couldn’t help but trace the clean lines of the ensemble, how the somber colors looked on him, regal and professional and capable.

Rabé cursed inwardly at herself and wrested her mind and focus back to the mission at hand. She tried to smile, hoping it looked more or less natural, and said, in a somewhat breathless voice, “I’m ready to depart, Captain.”

He blinked at his new title, then met her eyes and grinned. “Then right this way, my Lady.”

Rex shuffled into the co-pilot’s seat, tugging at the high collar of his new uniform. It was comfortable, and light – too light, he thought, picking at the sleeves. It’s just fabric, it’d get torn to shreds in a second under fire, what’s the bloody point of something like this?

“You look a little perturbed, Captain,” Sabé said as she smoothly slid into the seat opposite. Her dress was beautiful, but it was simple compared to the formality of the Senator’s and the glamor of Rabé’s. In Rex’s mind, they all looked like nobles, but he could tell the fabric of Sabé’s simple white dress was not the same quality as the others. She did not look at him as they began the start-up procedures, moving in sync like they’d piloted together a hundred times. Instead, she waited for him to gather his thoughts. She did not push, and for that Rex was very grateful.

The starbus had been given the fastest system overhaul they could manage, but it shook and groaned like it was ready to collapse under the slightest strain. Rex thought that’d be the worst way to go out, crushed by decompression, dressed like someone who’d never seen a day of action in his life.

“This uniform isn’t exactly what I’m used to.”

She gave him a tiny smile. “I can imagine. GX1, preparing to depart.”

“GX1, cleared for take-off.”

General Kenobi’s voice crackled through the ancient comms, “Captain Rex, Sabé – may the Force be with you.”

“Thank you, General. Don’t get into too much trouble without us.”

“Oh, I’ll do my best,” came the immediate wry response.

Sabé laughed lightly as they took off, the GX1 groaning under every touch, no matter how miniscule. “It’ll be a miracle for this to make it to Alderaan in one piece.”

Rex grunted in answer, focusing entirely on piloting through the Resolute’s ray-shielded hangar doors. As soon as they were clear, the tension released from his body and he let out a quick, relieved
sigh. “I’ve flown with General Skywalker before. Think I’m immune to any fear of flying now.”

“Oh, I’ve heard. Padmé’s told me about Skywalker’s piloting skills. I won’t try any of his maneuvers, don’t worry.” She shifted in her seat and looked away, clearing her throat as she changed the subject, “I appreciate you and your men working so hard for this mission, putting in all the effort to learn about all this. I know it’s not what any of you are used to, that it’s a different world and it can seem…”

“Strange?”

“I was going to say wasteful.” She looked over at him and went on, “Frivolous and wasteful and self-centered and ungrateful, while you and your brothers fight for them on the frontlines.”

Rex was quiet as he chewed over her words. Sabé had a way of getting right to the heart of the issue, directly confronting problems as they arrived, and he appreciated that beyond words. They shared similar burdens and stresses of the duties of leadership, and out of all them, he was glad Sabé would be his partner for this mission.

He chose his own words carefully and said slowly, “We’re quick learners – we’ll be able to adapt, no problem. But… it might be difficult, for some of the men. To be in hiding and unable to say anything, should someone say something negative about the Republic, or the war. Or us.”

Sabé nodded. “We have each other’s backs now. All of us.”

She said it so seriously, so wholeheartedly, that Rex couldn’t help but grin. “Absolutely, we do.”

They punched in Alderaan’s coordinates and the starbus lurched into hyperspace.
Rabé was sitting across from him.

Fives knew that. He was aware of it – perhaps too aware. He’d sat down, resigning himself to a half-day of reading ‘his’ backstory, when Rabé had walked into the room, smiled at him, and sat down across the table. Part of him was absolutely thrilled, and part of him desperately wished she had stayed in her quarters until they began their descent.

She’d sat down an hour ago, and he hadn’t read more than two pages.

He was determined to not stare too much, or too often or too long at her, because he didn’t know
what he would do if she looked up and caught him looking at her. She was sitting across from him in the spacious, comfortable cabin of the Consular. Kix and Hardcase were piloting them through hyperspace to Alderaan, blasting their high-energy, frantic pre-mission music and debating which one of them looked better in their new Corellian guard uniforms. Both the music and the heated debate were muffled, carrying to where Fives and Rabé sat, each intent upon their own work.

Well, she worked. Fives stared down at his datapad, frowning at the Aurebesh refusing to sort itself out into proper words and sentences. And then his eyes would drift.

Rabé was wearing a dusky pink gown covered in jewels, her dark hair wrapped in pearls, and she was cleaning one of her blasters. She handled it with ease, paying careful and loving attention to every last piece of it as she meticulously ran a light cleaning cloth over its components. An ELG-3A pistol, sleek and beautiful. His own CDEF blasters felt clumsy in their holsters in comparison, even though they were infinitely sleeker than his deecees.

Everything about him felt clumsy and uncoordinated in front of her.

Fives was supposed to be reading one of the reports Sabé had prepared for them. He was supposed to be memorizing his fake persona. They were about to go undercover, and he was Captain of the Guard. He had duties and responsibilities – chief of which was to look after his Lady. Rabé is your number one priority, Sabé had said, her eyes drilling into his skull, the mere thought of it sending his heart pounding into overtime.

While Eirtaé had been tailoring his new uniform, Sabé had drilled it into his head that he’d be expected to escort Rabé, to speak on her behalf if someone came looking for her while she was busy with other matters, to always be by her side. To make sure she was always safe. To never let her out of his sight.

He didn’t want to tell Sabé how easy that would be, how thankful he was – and he certainly didn’t want to tell the two more intense handmaidens how absolutely terrified he was for the mission ahead. Not for any pissy noblemen whining about… whatever noblemen whined about, and not about the dangers of tracking down a spy. He was looking forward to those parts. And after the missions he and Echo had run, the systems they’d been, Alderaan would be a vacation. No, Fives was terrified for a completely different reason. And he was terrified because he was so terrified.

He’d never felt like this before. Never. How could he protect his charge - his Lady - if he couldn’t even look at her without forgetting how to speak?

His throat was very dry. His new uniform itched, and his foot was falling asleep. But he did not want to stand up and disturb her – she was so intent on her work –

“You’re staring, Fives.” She didn’t look up at him, but there was a tiny, amused smile on her lips as she polished the inside of the sleek chrome action, neatly arranging its tiny pieces on the table in front of her.

“…How – uh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.” He flinched a little, because that made it sound like he had been meaning to, and only regretted getting caught. He cleared his throat and asked, hesitating, “Was it that obvious?” Am I that obvious?

Her smile grew. She snapped the freshly cleaned ammo pack back into the blaster, and only then did she raise her eyes to meet his. “I’m trained to notice things like that, remember? To observe what others observe, to watch without being noticed. To be invisible. But… now that I’m thinking about it...”
Fives felt her eyes slowly trail over his body and face. They had a soothing weight on his skin, calm and unhurried, leaving pleasant trails of light in their wake. He watched her look at him, as she made notes of some slight body language, and wondered what she saw. What she thought when she looked at him. *Nothing special, probably.* For a moment, his mind leapt in fear that the position of his fingers, or the angle of his head, would reveal his thoughts to her – that somehow, his own body would betray what he himself hardly dared acknowledge.

*The mission. We’re here for the mission. The mission, and the mission only.*

He repeated the words in his mind, over and over again, until the solemn, cold weight of them numbed him to Rabé’s presence. He glanced down at his holopad, unable to look at her anymore, and noticed the time with a sick, desperate twist of his stomach – still over four hours to go until Alderaan. It wouldn’t be a respite, though. He’d be by her side until they found the spy and delivered them to justice. His grip on the datapad tightened at the thought of the days, maybe even weeks, ahead.

“I’ve figured it out,” Rabé said softly, pleased with herself even as Fives’ stomach dropped. He opened his mouth to apologize, to tell her as soon as they landed he would switch places with Echo, so she wouldn’t be uncomfortable. But before he had a chance to organize his thoughts, she went on, “You’re too tense – your shoulders are hunched up by your ears, your back is as stiff as a board – and if you were trying to convince me you were reading, you could’ve at least flipped through the pages more. Maybe… once every three-and-a-half minutes? To make it look natural, I mean.” When he didn’t move, she cleared her throat and suggested, her voice gentle, “It’ll help during the mission. You look so stiff you might snap.”

He certainly felt that was a distinct possibility. “Oh, right – so, like…” He leaned against the back of his seat and tried to force himself to relax, for his shoulders to lower and his breaths to even out. He loosened his grip on the datapad and scanned the words, flipping to the next page, focusing on appearing focused.

She watched, and after a while nodded. “Much better. A Captain will always be formal, but not so formal that he keels over from it.”

“Thanks. I’ve never really done this sort of thing before.”

“That’s why I’m here – to help out with that. Don’t worry, it’ll come easier the more you practice.” She inclined her head towards the datapad. “Is that your character?”

“Yeah. Captain ‘Elas Dathan.’ There’s… a lot. It’s like a book, his – *my* – whole history is in here. I went to school at Corellia University, studied engineering, traveled to Coruscant to train in their guard academies… My mother’s name is Nayla.” The word felt strange in his mouth. His mother. He never had a mother – the closest thing was General Ti, but he’d always known what he was, what he was born for. General Ti was always kind, in a firm, distant Jedi way. But he’d always known he didn’t have a mother or a father. He’d only ever had brothers. Dathan had an entire family, plucked from thin air, a fantasy spun and woven into reality. Dathan didn’t exist, and yet he had everything Fives didn’t.

His mind revolved around the words *my mother.* The possessive was especially strange in his head, tugging at his blood, teasing him with something that had never been, could never be. *My mother.* It floated in his mind and pressed up against the back of his eyeballs: *Clones don’t have mothers.*

Rabé took notice of how his mind frantically looped around and around, and cleared her throat, breaking his line of thought. She murmured, “You’ll have time when we get to Aldera, before Sabé and Rex come find us. You can study it then. Take a break?”
He shot her a grateful smile and powered the device down. He took a deep breath and glanced around for something, anything, to talk about. Kix and Hardcase were still arguing about something, but Rabé’s attention was fully on Fives now.

His eyes landed on the blaster in front of her and his mind leapt for it. “That’s a beautiful blaster.”

“Oh! Thank you – it’s an ELG-3A. We’re all trained with it.”

“I’ve heard of it – the diplomat’s blaster, right?” He knew what it was, of course. But he liked hearing her tell him about it. The way her voice had leapt in excitement at the topic.

She grinned and nodded. “Yeah. It’s discreet and slim enough to hide in a lot of formal robes.”

“Would a Corellian noblewoman carry it, even if she never had training?”

“I think so, yes. And, well, if I’m being honest – I don’t want to have to go without it. I’m so fond of it. It’s like… it’s like a comfort. It’s familiar and comfortable. I’m used to its weight and mechanics, how it fires.” She shifted awkwardly and fiddled with it. “Does that make sense?”

“Yeah – I feel the same way about my deeces.” He patted the holsters on his hips and laughed lightly. “I know a pair of DC-17s are probably much heavier duty than needed, but these CDEFs… they almost feel too light.”

“You use DC-17s?” When he nodded, she straightened in excitement and folded her arms on the table, leaning closer, and in response, he shifted, too, facing her straight on. Hardcase’s music continued to thrum from the cockpit, a pleasant beat under their conversation. “I’ve never handled one before, because I know the company has an exclusive contract with the Kam- with the army,” she said, hurriedly correcting herself. She flushed at her near-slip, at the reminder that both clones and their weapons were contracted products.

Fives smiled gently at her, to let her know it was alright, that the fact was simply that. Clones and DCs went together. It was the first weapon they ever held. It wasn’t her fault that BlasTech Industries had seen an economic opportunity and snatched it up. He sidestepped around it, leaving it behind them, as he answered her, “The 17s are more of a commando weapon, so I only started using them a few months ago during ARC training. Before that it was the 15S, and every trooper uses those, they’re not special. But the 17s felt good in my hands. Like I’d been born to use ‘em.”

She nodded. “Yes! I totally understand, it’s the same with the elega – uh, that’s what we call this guy, it’s easier than ELG-3A, ha – but some blasters just feel better than others. I like pistols, myself. Rifles will do, in a pinch, but smaller blasters are easier to deal with, I think.” She bit her lip, thinking, “The 15S is a… carbine, right?”

“Yup. And then we also trained for the 15As – those are the full rifles. Echo likes his rifle, but I prefer the pistols, too. More charge in a shorter amount of time, and that makes a difference.”

“That’s what I think! Do you dual-wield them? The 17s, I mean. I know Captain Rex does.”

“Ha, yes! I worked so hard for that. That was the first thing I made the trainers teach us. And when they didn’t – something about “unnecessary and more difficult than it’s worth” – I went ahead and taught myself. Got pretty good at it, if I do say so myself.”

Rabé laughed with him, and Fives was struck by how easy it was to talk to her, how natural it felt, to be sitting here, disguised as a noblewoman and her Captain. It felt right.

He wanted it to last forever, suddenly. His brain leapt to the next question with ease. “I’ve been
meaning to ask – when you get into skirmishes, do you prefer ranged or close combat?”

She smiled shyly and shook her head. “Neither. I actually… I don’t like fighting. Not real fights, anyways.”

“What? Really? But you’re so good at it – if I was as good as you, I probably would’ve make ARC trooper much sooner.”

Her smile widened, and she inclined her head in thanks. “I like sparring, and I collect weapons, but… I don’t know, it’s hard to explain. I guess I like the technical side of things? Learning the techniques, learning about various weapons, how they’re built and constructed – that’s what I like. Not actually having to use those techniques or weapons in battle.”

“You and Echo are gonna get along well.” Fives felt like they were getting along. He hoped she felt it, too. “He prefers the technical side of things, too. He’s always reading tech manuals – for fun.”

“Well, the best way to get acquainted with the techniques is to put them into practice. I find getting the theory down, understanding the how and why a particular blaster or combat technique works, transfers to the physical act of it.”

“I’m the opposite, I guess. I figure out how a weapon works by messing around with it, and then it just sort of… clicks into place in my head. If that makes sense.”

She nodded and straightened her cloak. “It does,” she murmured. “Absolutely. It makes sense – I can see you trying to figure out how to dual-wield the 17s through trial and error.” She grinned. “Bet you made an absolute mess of the target range, huh?”

He laughed, “Had to do custodial duties for a week. But it was worth it.”

They had leaned closer to each other over the table, and suddenly Fives was aware he was staring at her again. He couldn’t help it – the lights of the table, soft white and calm, threw her in a brilliant cast that drew his eyes. And when she tugged absentmindedly at the traveling cloak, it slipped. Just barely. But it slipped enough that the tops of her shoulders were suddenly bare and revealed to him.

Rabé looked at him again and smiled, amused. “You’ve tensed up again.”

“You have freckles,” he said meekly, stupidly, in a weak attempt to explain why he’d been staring. Freckles. A million freckles dusted the tops her shoulders, her cheeks and nose like clusters of stars. Some clones had them – random mutations of their skin’s genetic structure, so they spotted in sunlight, unlike the rest of their brothers – and he was almost certain General Kenobi had them, too, but they were still a rare enough thing that he couldn’t take his eyes off of hers. They just a few shades shy of her copper skin, faint and barely there, resting so lightly on her that a single breath might blow them away. He hadn’t noticed them before. But now it was all he could see.

Rabé turned almost as pink her gown. She readjusted her traveling cloak, her fingers struggling with the brooch of the Corellian sea ray. She tightened the cloak about her shoulders and Fives’ stomach twisted with guilt. He averted his eyes, his tongue laying like lead in his mouth, wishing he had never said a word. “-’m sorry, I shouldn’t’ve-”

“No, no, it’s, uhm. It’s okay…”

Silence fell between them, as heavy and thick as durasteel. He stared down at the datapad, his fingers white-knuckled on the frame.

She cleared her throat, her eyes darting up to meet his, when Kix and Hardcase burst into the room.
“Rabé! Two things-” Hardcase began, practically shouting, entirely oblivious to the way Fives and Rabé were sitting in tense silence, before Kix nudged him in the side. Fives released his breath, his lungs suddenly aching. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding his breath.

“Hardcase, come on, at least try-”

“Right, sorry. Uh, my Lady – we have two questions, if you’d be so kind as to help settle a debate?”

Rabé turned to the pair, her eyes faintly shining, determined not to look over at Fives. He didn’t know if he wanted to run Kix and Hardcase out of the room, or flee to the quiet of the cockpit himself. She nodded and flashed them a brief smile, “Of course, I’d be happy to help.”

“Excellent! See, Kix, I told you-”

Kix rolled his eyes as he interrupted Hardcase, “We were wondering – you’re the combat and weapons expert of the handmaidens, right?”

She nodded again, her smile relaxing, her color returning to normal as she leaned back in the chair. “Yes, that’s my official role.”

“OK, so… we were just wondering…” Kix began, hesitating, looking at her as if waiting for the all-clear, “why you… why you don’t wear stuff that’s easier to move and fight in – like those robes you sparred in? Because it doesn’t seem very easy… I mean, I don’t know, but I’m assuming it’s difficult to move in full gowns like that…? I mean, we know you’re going undercover as a noblewoman now, but even the rest of your robes…?” His words drifted off, instead he gestured vaguely to her gown, and Fives threw him an exacerbated look over Rabé’s shoulder.

Hardcase summed up Kix’s meandering thoughts with a simple, “Why not wear simpler stuff?”

“Oh! Oh, well.” Rabé cocked her head as a slow, bemused smile formed on her lips. “I mean, those robes are simpler than what I’m wearing now, but… it’s not like I’m weaponless right now. I was trained to fight in things like this – not to mention they’re excellent for hiding weapons, too.”

Kix stared at her, frowning. His eyes darted to the ELG-3A dismantled for cleaning, and narrowed. “What do you mean…?”

“I have – oh, let’s see, uhm. Seven different weapons on me, right now.” She bit her lip, either completely oblivious to or ignoring the looks of shock her three guards were giving her, “Oh! No, wait. Eight.” She laughed lightly and tapped the heel of her shoe to the floor. “I always forget about this blade.”

Hardcase exclaimed, “You have a knife in your shoe-?! …How do I go about getting one of those-”

“Absolutely not, Hardcase, you just got your thermal detonator privileges back-”

Fives was grateful for his brothers’ distractions, for the way Rabé was laughing and relaxing, like he’d never made her uncomfortable in the first place. He wanted to kick himself – they’d been good, they’d been talking, and then his brain had decided to screw it all up. Freckles, he thought glumly, averting his eyes from her again.

The mission. We’re here for the mission. The mission, and the mission only.

Nothing more.
It was silent in the cockpit as they watched Alderaan steadily grow in the viewport. From space, it was serene, icy blues and thick, swirling clouds – but it felt like they were about to descend into a pit of vipers. Something venomous was lurking under the beauty; a feeding parasite had latched there, intent on bleeding the world dry.

Padmé stood behind Anakin, one hand lightly resting on the back of his pilot’s seat, chewing the inside of her cheek. It hadn’t felt real, not until this moment. Breha had begged for Padmé’s help a bare week ago, and she’d worked as fast as she could to pull together her team, to delegate her Senatorial duties to Jar Jar, Dormé, Mon Mothma, and Bail – the few she trusted to speak on her behalf while she was away – but as she stared at Alderaan, she felt she hadn’t worked fast enough.

The spy had already siphoned off untold credits, resources – hopefully, the military intel was still secure, the hidden medical bases still safe – and the enormity of their task surged upon her like a tidal wave. It wasn’t any doubt of the abilities of her team. Rather, it was a sudden and brilliant hatred of the person who had slipped into her friend’s trust. The desperation Breha must be feeling, the quiet fear that must be gnawing away at her mind every second of every day… and she had to watch, unable to pursue the ones she suspected. The enormity of the trust Breha had placed in Padmé to root out the spy was like the entirety of Alderaan had been placed on her shoulders.

And, she supposed, in a way, that’s exactly what has happened. Next to her, Eirtaé shifted, the hood of her heavy dark purple cowl pulled down, her face thrown in deep shadows. She lightly touched Padmé’s hand in silent support. Ahsoka caught her eye from the co-pilot’s seat and nodded, a determined look set upon her young face. She was already wearing – or rather, swimming – in her Jedi cloak. Jesse and Echo stood behind her, silent as Eirtaé, their presence just as comforting. Though Padmé had to admit it was strange to see them in Coruscant Guard red, instead of their proud 501st blue.

Nevertheless: they were ready.

The sharp crack of the comms system nearly made her jump. “J-Type 327 Nubian approaching atmosphere, this is Alderaan Flight Control. Identity yourself and all passengers.” It was a brisk, snappy female voice, pleasant but authoritative, as if she was hoping the interaction would go smoothly but was entirely prepared to meet any disagreeableness with swift retaliation. “Be advised, we are scanning your ship now for illegal or unlisted cargo.”

Identify yourself and all passengers, Padmé thought snidely, allowing herself a moment’s pleasure in simply stating, “This is Senator Amidala of Naboo.”

“Oh – oh! Yes, Senator Amidala – you are expected and cleared for landing on Platform L1138.” The voice jumped, eager to please. That’s what I thought. Behind her, Jesse gave a low laugh. “Her Highness Queen Breha is waiting for you there.”

“Thank you.” Padmé’s voice was steady, calm, betrayed no surprise, but her grip tightened on the back of Anakin’s seat all the same. She glanced to Eirtaé, the twist of her lips mirroring Padmé’s own disbelief. Padmé had not expected Breha to meet them so soon, or in such an open location. However, if she was to keep up public appearances in the face of the danger… or, more worrying still, perhaps her meeting a Republic Senator was a sharp reminder to those dissenters in her courts who would readily denounce the Republic, a brazen public reminder of Alderaan’s place in the galactic democracy. Either way: a bold move.

“We shall escort you down to the landing pad. Prepare for atmospheric entry.” Though they could not see the being behind the voice, Padmé almost heard the salute in the way the last syllables bounced through the comms, crisp and clear.
Anakin took a breath, glanced around at the small team, and nodded. “Alright. Here we go.” He piloted the Nubian into Alderaan’s atmosphere with ease. Thick, rolling clouds obscured the capital city from view. After a moment, the ship’s controls beeped as two escorts appeared on the port and starboard sides, escorting them to the landing pad. Anakin scowled for a moment at the ships, offended. It felt like they were leading him by the hand, as if he was totally inept and liable to crash instead of properly land.

Padmé blinked, reconsidered, and then gazed fondly at the mop of untidy dark blonde hair in front of her. Well, actually… Not inept by any means, but still far more liable to crash than the escorts – and citizens – were probably comfortable with.

They burst through the thick clouds, ethereal trails following them like gentle waves, and were finally greeted with the sight of their destination, their headquarters, the place they were going to fight tooth and nail to help save.

Aldera’s brilliant white citadels and towers gleamed in the ash-colored lighting of the hidden sun, cupped away from the surrounding lake, snug between the waters and the Triplehorn mountains. The gentle, watered down sunlight did not diminish Aldera’s beauty – in fact, it gave the world a dreamlike tinge, like something out of a fondly-remembered but half-forgotten childhood story. The Alderaanians prided themselves on architecture that rested on top of the land, settlements that did not carve or break or whittle into the earth. Dozens of intricate, free-form bridges connected the city perched on the island to the surrounding green fields. Aldera itself rose like a bridge to connect the lake to the clouds above, proud and dignified as it supported the sky.

No matter how many times she saw it, Aldera always took Padmé’s breath away. It was a masterpiece of society – as they circled the city, she could see the Royal Palace, the University, the Museum. Anakin was escorted to a private landing pad a stone’s throw from the Palace. As he gently set them down, the two escort ships turning and shooting back off to their base, Queen Breha stepped forward to greet them.

Though she waited patiently as they disembarked, she could not hide her small smile of relief when Padmé stepped off the ramp and headed directly for her. Padmé’s retinue fell into place as naturally as she could have hoped.

Queen Breha was dressed in a sumptuous gown of deep blue silks, a thin leather overcoat tinged silver draped over her shoulders. Golden ribbons had been woven into her midnight black hair, adorning her head like a crown. A gossamer veil, dark blue but translucent, was pinned into place and fell about her gentle, round face like water. She surrounded by her own retinue: a single guard, armed with a rifle and baton; a tall, dark woman dressed in a simple silver dress and delicate silver chains woven into her thick, curly hair; and, most surprisingly, a handful of younglings, no older than fourteen, bright-eyed and eager as they waited impatiently around Breha. The three younglings stared openly at the Jedi and the two clones, whispering to each other in excitement. Padmé cocked her head and glanced towards Eirtaé, the question unspoken but understood.

As she stopped in front of Breha, Padmé and Eirtaé automatically bowed low to her, the hem of Eirtaé’s cloak sweeping along the dark stone of the landing pad. Breha inclined her head as Eirtaé murmured to Padmé, “The Queen’s Heirs – her personal students of culture and history.” She spoke so softly that not even Anakin or Ahsoka could hear the low murmur drifting like smoke from the shadows of Eirtaé’s hood.

And even if they had heard, they wouldn’t have understood. Eirtaé had not used Basic. There was only a bare handful of beings alive who could even recognize it as a language. She’d used ancient Nabooian. Once spoken by all, the lilting, serene language was now a dying language. Now, only
the noble houses, elected monarchs and their decoys – stalwarts of Nabooian tradition and culture – could speak and understand it. As a Veruna, Eirtaé had grown up speaking it to her family, just as Padmé had with hers. Eirtaé did not speak it so much as breathe the words out. They flowed from her lips like a calm breeze over the canals – faint, hardly noticeable, but carrying the weight of worlds.

Padmé gave no indication that she had heard other than a quick flex of her hand as they straightened.

Breha smiled a queen’s smile: diplomatic, calm, and utterly exhausted – but only to those who knew to look for it. “Senator Amidala, I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you arrived – and so soon! I had not expected you to get away from your Senate duties so quickly… it is so wonderful to see you again, I’m glad you’ve come.”

“Oh, of course, Your Majesty – I’m so happy to see you, it’s been too long.” Though she would never dream of admitting it to anyone, Padmé was slightly irked that Breha had not waited to greet them in private. Any chance they had at all to discuss the true reason for Padmé’s arrival would have to wait. Though, she reasoned, think how scared she must be. To be alone in such circumstances… If Padmé had had to deal with the Trade Federation crisis, and the ensuing invasion without her handmaidens, she was certain the fear alone would have made her collapse.

“Ahh, but you know how it is. Our duties come before all else, now more than ever. There is always more work to be done.” She cast a quick glance over the rest of the group, her dark eyes taking measured stock of them all. “You remember my personal advisor, Aria Thrasse?” As the dark woman by her side gracefully inclined her head, the chains in her hair rippled in the sunlight. “And my Heirs. I am personally tutoring them in matters of the courts. They shadow me throughout my day, to learn diplomatic skills.”

The three younglings bowed stiffly, and now Padmé could see the Organa crest brooch proudly pinned to their lapels. One of them, a young girl with skin as pale as snow, met Padmé’s eyes and immediately blushed.

“I know you’ll want to get settled before the official visit can begin. I’ll take you to your rooms – I’ve given you a block of suites in the East Wing.” She turned, and like planets caught in a star’s orbit, they followed. Padmé walked next to her, their retinues merging as one behind them. “I can speak plainly among this group: we are all aware of the growing dissent in my courts, of the whispers of leaving the Republic to join the Separatist cause.” Even as she spoke, Breha’s eyes narrowed in disgust at the mere thought of it. She led them through a vast hall, striding purposefully ahead. Though she was about Padmé’s height, her stride was long and confident.

Her walk might have been, but her words were not. Though she herself had said she could speak plainly in this company, she made no mention of the spy, of any possibility of such a thing – only the favorable whispers about the Separatist cause.

Padmé stared sadly at Breha as she continued to lead them through the Palace at a brisk pace, catching the bitterness lurking there, the tightness of her words. Servants leapt out of their way, but it was like the Queen was entirely oblivious, so intent she was on getting the newcomers to their rooms. The hall soon gave way to gently curving hallways the same brilliant white as the outside of the Palace. But all Padmé could focus on was Breha, her dark blue veils and gold ribbons whipping along behind her.

She hadn’t met them on the landing pad as an act of defiance. Though her words, her actions, had been nothing but formal, everything about her was tense. Fearful. She’d met them on the landing pad to reassure herself that support really had arrived. That she wouldn’t have to worry about this, to deal with it, alone.
Of course, that was the cruel irony of the monarchy. Breha was surrounded by advisors, servants, nobles, her Heirs, at all hours of every day – and yet she was entirely isolated. If she couldn’t bring herself to speak about the spy in front of her advisor, or her own personal students… How terrified she must be.

*Calm breaths now, Majesty. Don’t worry, please don’t worry. You’re not alone anymore.*
Lady Malyna was hard at work in her library when Kennis brought news of the Senator’s arrival.

The fact that Kennis had to clear his throat to get her attention was odd enough, but the fact that she was not alone was altogether more surprising. In all his years of service, he could not recall the last time Lady Malyna had hosted something other than a dinner party or luncheon, frivolous activities to pass the time gossiping with her friends. Lately, however, when Kennis answered the door, he was
mildly surprised to learn that his mistress was apparently branching out of her normal friend group. And new friends brought new activities, it seemed. Gone were the long, lazy afternoons of cards or constitutionals through the gardens. Dozens of records and datapads were scattered on the broad tables, all on a variety of academic topics he had been absolutely sure the family had collected just to impress visitors.

*Perhaps Lady Fenian finally drove her to wit’s end,* he thought grimly as he bent to Lady Malyna and delivered his news.

His quiet announcement dropped like a stone in the conversations, and the entire company of nine stared at him in silence before a wave of questions and frantic side discussions rose up to him, as if it was his fault entirely that the Senator had decided to come to Alderaan.

“A Senator?”

“Which one?”

“I… The Senator from Naboo, my Lady.”

If it was possible, the swell of voices rose all the more and Kennis fidgeted, wishing Lady Malyna would dismiss him before true arguments broke out. He didn’t care for nobles trading barbed words with each other, he didn’t want to stay and listen to petty gossips. He had a large mug of tea and the newest *Lakeshore Naboo* to watch in his small quarters.

“Who delivered this information?”

Kennis blinked at the nobleman standing by one of the shelves – young, with coiffed dark hair and a permanent sneer on his round face – and cleared his throat before he answered, “One of the landing platform assistants.” He glanced down at Lady Malyna, her hands suddenly tight on her datapad.

When she looked up at Kennis, her eyes flashed with what he could only describe as fear. “You’re sure, Kennis? You are absolutely sure it’s the Senator from Naboo?”

When he nodded, she cast a glance around at her companions. Finally, one of the oldest men shook his head and grumbled, “We’ll need to take this into consideration.”

“And keep an eye on her.”

“This does not bode well for us – I’ve heard about that Senator, supposedly she has a penchant for sticking her nose where it shouldn’t be.”

“We’ll be fine, we just need – I’m sorry, what are you still doing here?” The young nobleman by the shelves stopped short, sneering at Kennis, like he had quite forgotten the Zabrak was still there. Kennis took that as a dismissal and left them to their discussions.

No matter. He was just glad to get back to his holodrama and tea.

Alderaan had not changed from the last time Eirtaé had visited. Scholars scurrying from the University to the Museum, students in stark white and soft dove gray uniforms scribbling on their datapads, Aldera and its people remained unchanged. A silver brooch swathed in emerald green hills, timeless.

She had not expected it to change. There was a reason Alderaan and Naboo had allied themselves since the very beginning – the two societies understood each other, were near identical in their
priorities of culture and tradition. Where Alderaan was silver, Naboo was deep blue, sister systems half a galaxy away.

If Alderaan had changed, it would have meant something was wrong.

She was standing on the covered balcony of the rooms that would serve as their headquarters, observing the city and surrounding hills as they waited for Rabé and her guards to join them, given the all-clear by Captain Rex. Sabé and Rex were conferring with Padmé and General Skywalker, examining a blueprint of the palace. They’d already completed an extremely thorough scan of the old guest quarters, to be absolutely certain the walls were free of bugs. Queen Breha had given them rooms in a seldom-used wing. Few guards and fewer servants used the passageways that connected them to the rest of the palace.

Quiet voices carried to her on the gentle, cool breeze. The marble was cool under her palms. *The calm before the storm*, she thought, and turned to face Ahsoka as the Padawan stepped lightly over the threshold to join her.

“It’s too stuffy in there – I needed some fresh air. Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

“Thanks.”

She was quiet, and Eirtaé got the feeling something was bothering her.

“You’ve been here before, right?” Eirtaé asked quietly. “With Senator Amidala?”

Though Ahsoka quickly wiped the surprise off her face, she wasn’t fast enough to fool Eirtaé. “Yeah, and I was her bodyguard then, too. People will start to think I’m her personal escort, not a Padawan learner.”

Eirtaé laughed softly. “Quite the change of pace from your usual activities, I imagine.”

Ahsoka grinned, baring her sharp teeth, “Y’know, I’m not so sure about that – the Senator definitely attracts trouble.” She leaned on the railing of the balcony and peered straight down, the silka-bead decoration of her headdress dancing in the wind. “I don’t think I’d get bored.”

“Hm. I think you might change your mind after a few council meetings. But you’re right – Padmé’s take on politics is considerably more exciting than the average Senator’s. With a higher-than-average use of blasters, I imagine.”

Ahsoka laughed. “My Master likes to call that ‘aggressive negotiations.’”

“Oh, ha. I like that. *Aggressive negotiations.*” Eirtaé allowed herself a quick smile. “Are you anxious about this mission?”

Ahsoka didn’t move from her position over the balcony railing. She drew a pattern in the marble with her finger, thinking, before she said slowly, “Anxious isn’t the right word. It’s more like… more like unease. When we landed, I could tell something was different. Something about Aldera’s *changed.*”

Eirtaé frowned. Normally she was good – very good – at picking up subtle signs, but it appeared as though she had missed something. And that irked her. She tapped her fingernails on the marble as she watched Ahsoka and asked, “What do you mean?”
“The last time I was here, the Force was calmer. I mean – as calm as it can get, during a war – but
even though Padmé’s life was in danger, the Force was still stable. Solid. And now… and now it
feels like we’re walking on loose sand. Like something could shift, and we’d all be sucked down
before we knew what hit us.”

“That’s quite the bleak outlook.”

Ahsoka huffed a quiet laugh. “Yeah, I know. And I can tell Anakin senses it, too. The Force feels
darker, especially in the Palace. It’s like a storm cloud, and it’s taken over everything. And
everyone.” Her face darkened. Not with hopelessness: with grim determination.

Eirtaé was silent as she considered this. She hadn’t expected Ahsoka to be so full of metaphors, as
young as she was. Perhaps it was a Jedi tradition. Eirtaé pursed her lips and stared out over the city
again as she tried to sense what Ahsoka had, trying to fine-tune her barometer to find this storm
cloud. She didn’t like being in the dark. She’d make an effort to talk more often with the young Jedi –
Eirtaé prided herself on gathering information, pulling everything together until the story clicked in
her mind. She collected observations and knowledge like a Hutt collected podracers.

They were silent, watchful, for a few peaceful minutes, until Sabé called them back in. Rabé had
finally arrived.

Her new Captain of the Guard had taken to his position rather quickly, Eirtaé noted as she came to
stand besides Padmé. Fives stood behind Rabé, his hands clasped behind his back, a clone-shaped
brick wall behind the tiny, delicate debutante wrapped in pale pink.

An illusion, and quite the convincing one. Eirtaé did not wish for someone to attempt to harm her
youngest sister – but woe to the unfortunate fool who thought she did not pose a threat.

And then, of course, there was the matter of her Captain. He would certainly not take kindly to
anyone who threatened harm to Rabé, either – Eirtaé knew this for a fact, as sure as her name was
Veruna.

Eirtaé wondered if anyone had mentioned to Fives that he’d have to present Rabé to the courts. She
thought not – he might look considerably more nervous if he knew what that entailed.

She pressed her lips together to keep from smiling at the thought.

“I’m going to be brief.” Sabé said, quickly enlarging the blueprint of the palace. “Captain Rex and I
will have the most mobility out of all of you. I want to keep contact to a minimum outside of this
room – Padmé, you’ll have the most eyes on you. If people start to suspect you and Rabé know each
other in any capacity, we run the risk of scaring off our spy. Do not use any communicators between
the groups. The Captain and I will relay messages if need be – Eirtaé, perhaps you, too. Our rooms
are here, here, and here.” She pointed at the holographic blueprint and three blinking dots bloomed at
her command. Rabé’s rooms were the farthest from any of them. “From here on out, our
communication is limited. I’ll try to update each of you each day, but be prepared for stretches of
silence.”

She glanced towards Rex, imposing in his stark white guard uniform, and he nodded, taking up her
mantle, “Queen Breha has assigned us to the wings where she suspects the spy is most active, but…
she did mention she does not know for sure if they are residing in the palace. And, of course, there is
the matter of keeping a calm head. Men.” At his sharp tone, the clones snapped to attention and he
fixed each of them with a serious, stern look as he said, “This isn’t a battlefield. Our enemies are not
droids here. Problems can’t be solved with blasters and bravado – keep a cool head, walk off your
steam if need be, but do not attract attention to yourselves. We are here as security. Is that
“Sir, yes, sir!” It was almost strange, hearing that familiar bellow from the disguised men. They had been plucked from their comfort zone, dropped into an unfamiliar setting with even more unfamiliar armor. She wondered if they wished for a different assignment, if they wished to be anywhere but here, a smoking blaster in hand, with easy, direct targets to conquer.

They would learn from the handmaidens what it meant to wear their silk as steel.

Rex and Sabé exchanged a quiet look of satisfaction, and Eirtaé wondered what, exactly, they had discussed on the long journey to Alderaan. Before she had time to ponder it further, they were dismissed, and Eirtaé drew her heavy cowl about her again as the twelve dispersed like smoke on the breeze.

Rabé thought about returning to her quarters for all of two seconds before she decided she would rather brave a Naboo hurricane in the open than return to sit in silence, waiting for something to happen. There were more important things to be doing than lounging around in her quarters – not to mention, she was curious about the palace grounds. She’d never been to Aldera before.

She made a left where she should have made a right, and she could sense Fives’ falter for just a moment before following, Hardcase and Kix behind him. He cleared his throat and caught up to her, bending close to ask, “Milady - aren’t we going back to your – our – the rooms?” He stumbled a bit over the question, but Rabé quite liked the way his voice traced over the word milady.

“I thought you might be bored if we went back. I was already feeling antsy just thinking about it. I don’t think we’re expected anywhere until dinner – and besides, isn’t it good strategy to scout out the battlefield?”

Fives blinked and then flashed her a crooked grin, like he was simultaneously impressed with her and reprimanding himself for forgetting she was not, in fact, a helpless debutante. She pressed her lips together in a shy smile as he straightened again, and she tried not to notice how glad she was when he did not fall back to walk with Hardcase and Kix. He fell into step beside her.

Rabé suspected other young ladies’ hearts did not jump when their Captains walked next to them.

She did not have a destination in mind as she went along, her long skirts trailing along the cool white marble floors, her guards keeping easy pace with her. She would have much rather walked alone than with three bodyguards. It felt almost excessive.

One would’ve been more than enough, surely.

But she was not about to question Sabé’s careful schemes. Rabé’s part was the dazed and impressed debutante, not the combat and weapons expert of the royal handmaidens. She knew exactly what she was: bait. Still, she let her hand fall to her leg; the sheer, light skirts hiding the leather straps of her vibroblade holster. It lay flush against the outside of her thigh. Fives was carrying her blaster, tucked discreetly into his leather tunic. He’d offered to hold it for her – he knew she felt better with it nearby. And if he was to be by her side every minute they were out of the safety of their rooms… she trusted him with it.

Rabé stopped just short of a wide hall, where it seemed half the court had gathered for an afternoon promenade. She hadn’t expected this – she had only wanted to get an idea of the layout of the palace, to commit its passages to memory. But, she supposed, biting her lip and peering in, unexpected nerves fluttering about her stomach, now might be as good a time as any for an informal
Laughter and conversations drifted towards them, and somewhere, an unseen orchestra played a gentle tune she did not recognize. She took a breath and glanced up at Fives and said, addressing all of them, “Are you ready?” If truth be told, she wasn’t entirely sure she was ready, but there was no turning back now.

Fives nodded and squared his shoulders, “Yes, milady. We’ll follow your lead.” He held her gaze for a moment, then seemed to remember his role. She tried to remember his false name – Elias, Ellas, Elli – but none of them sat quite as right as his true name. And now her thoughts were pulled away, back to the ship, where she had caught him staring. And the look on his face when he’d noticed her freckles.

She hadn’t meant to let the cloak slip, truly she hadn’t. But there was a tiny part of her mind that was glad it had happened, and that wanted to do it again.

With effort, she forced that thought away. It wasn’t professional, it wasn’t right. She had a part to play and so did he. Their enemy could be in this very hall – they could not afford to be distracted. She took another breath and nodded to herself, her gaze flicking back to Hardcase and Kix, and when she was certain they were ready, she stepped over the threshold of the massive doors swung wide to let the lake breezes carry through the crowded halls.

To say that eyes of the court snapped to her was an understatement.

Conversations lulled as she walked in, and she felt Fives stiffen next to her before the natural sway rose up again. People were staring, as she knew they would be, but they were the open, curious stares of an entirely relaxed group of people. She was a new face, of course they’d notice her right away.

Rabé felt her Naboo self slip away, and the young Maitri Avalokit of Corellia rose up to make her grand debut.

Though the men had much longer strides than she, they let her set the pace, a natural company amidst the gleaming halls of the palace. With her three guards and elegant gown, Maitri was destined to catch the eye of every noble in the palace. She looked important, and Rabé couldn’t deny that she felt like a true noblewoman.

She softened her gaze, widened her eyes, kept her head on a swivel like she couldn’t quite believe she was here. And they fell for it. Nobles walked in small groups of two and three, the ladies inclining their heads, the men bowing gallantly, others smiling and executing graceful combinations of the two. Most were Human, though the odd Zabrak or Twi’lek wandered among them, bright spots of color in Aldera’s gleaming silver halls, walking with attendants and guards of their own.

It took them nearly forty-five minutes to cross the hall, though had it been empty it would have been a journey of mere minutes. Every group she passed introduced themselves to her, asked where she was from, if her journey had been uneventful or troublesome. An elderly man, old enough to be her grandfather and who walked with an elegant cane, was delighted with her stories of Corellia, and made her laugh with wild tales of his own. His granddaughter was near Rabé’s age, her dark skin beautifully offset with a gown of the most vibrant purple and gold Rabé had ever seen. Another couple, two women who walked with their arms linked, introduced her to their identical tiny animals, dressed in extravagant ruffles and shivering in their mistresses’ arms. Whatever they were, they were not friendly creatures. One snapped at Rabé when she tried to gently pet it, and its owner laughed boisterously. “That means he likes you, dear!”

She had smiled and moved on as quickly as she could without seeming rude, only to be swept up in conversation with a deep red Twi’lek, his long lekku draped over his shoulders and covered in
delicate silver jewelry. Queen Breha kept a full, busy court, and by the time Rabé had made it over halfway down the hall, she had received a dozen invitations to dinners, teas, garden parties. Aldera was entranced with Maitri.

It was easy to pretend to be dazed by the rushing crowd of smiling, cheerful faces – too easy. Rabé felt like a leaf caught in a current, and though she had memorized the list of suspects, none of them were here – or their faces had blurred too much with those she had just met. Aside from a few crochety old women who sniffed with disdain when she had accidentally interrupted their game of cards, not a one had been rude to her. All about her was a warm, cheerful welcome. Deception and suspicion were not present in this hall, not in any of the kind smiles and gentle touches, the eager introductions or invitations. She was grateful for the open doors and windows, turning her face to the blessedly cool breeze as a giggling group of young girls, the eldest no older than fifteen years old, were all clamoring for a Corellian lady’s opinion on their outfits.

She supposed she must’ve looked dazed, because suddenly Fives had caught her by the elbow and was leaning close, very close as he murmured, “My Lady, are you feeling alright?”

The girls in front of her all stopped at once, staring at the Captain touching his charge, the eldest looking absolutely scandalized. Rabé subtly flexed her arm, making him release his grip. She nodded firmly, tilting her chin towards her shoulder without looking at him and saying, quite sharply, “Yes, Captain, I’m fine, thank you.”

She did not move until he did, taking a step back, though she felt unbearably cruel to admonish him. He was looking out for his charge. Like Sabé had instructed him. Hadn’t we talked about physical contact? Didn’t we go over that…? Rabé’s head swam and she couldn’t remember – all she could think about was his hand on her arm, gentle and the most solid thing in the entire hall all at once. Suddenly she did feel faint, and murmured, “I beg your pardon, ladies – would you excuse me? I’ve heard wonderful things about the Palace gardens. Where might I…?” She let her question trail off, and the second eldest pointed to a cleverly concealed door near the center of the hall.

Rabé curtsied and hardly waited for them to curtsy back before she had taken off towards the gardens.

As she tried to walk as smoothly and as slowly as possible, without attracting attention or scurrying away, she gave herself a mental shake. She couldn’t afford to be off her game, but it was like one heel of her shoe was a half-inch taller than the other, or like she’d been pushed, just barely, until she was struggling to keep balance and to keep a level head. Two silent Alderaanian guards pushed open the doors as she approached, and the sudden blast of cool air from the lake made her skirts whip madly around her heels.

She kept going until she heard the comforting sound of the waves lapping against the black rocky shore of the island. Trellises draped in greenery and flowers hid lover’s benches from view, but Rabé suspected they were finally alone, and she took a deep lungful of the cold, fresh air. Well, that wasn’t the most graceful start, she thought as she came to a stop and turned to look up at Fives. Kix and Hardcase stopped behind him, their expressions careful and guarded. Regret was a sludge through her veins, and had it not been for the cold chill of the lake, Rabé knew her face would have been burning. Not a good start at all. Maybe there had been a better way to deal with – no. Follow through with your actions, take responsibility for it.

He was staring at her again, except this time his expression was regretful, sheepish. He cleared his throat and averted his eyes as he started, “I’m – I’m sorry, I didn’t realize…”

She shook her head, “You can’t do that sort of thing, it’s not appropriate for guards to casually… to casually touch their charges like that, Captain.” Of course, she knew she shouldn’t be discussing this
with him outside of the safety of their rooms where anyone could be listening in, but he had to act the part. And this was basic.

Fives’ mouth twisted in annoyance. “You looked pale. I was worried you were going to faint.”

Faint?! The idea was so absurd to her that Rabé couldn’t help but laugh a little, and Fives fidgeted even more, embarrassed, and the way his mouth quirked downward made her think there was no small part of him that was annoyed, too. Even though that was his top priority, to make sure she was safe, to hear him say that he was worried about her made her feel slightly giddy. Like she’d drunk a glass of champagne too quickly. “I wasn’t about to— …maybe I did feel a little lightheaded, but it’s been a long day, that’s all. I feel fine now.”

He did not look particularly convinced, and searched her face until she glanced away. In his steel-gray Captain’s uniform and yellow bloodstripes, he exuded a particularly breathtaking confidence. “Maybe you should sit down? Just for a moment.”

He might have looked the part, but he still looked uncomfortable offering her a suggestion, even one as innocent as this.

She blinked in surprise, but after a moment she smiled and inclined her head. “If that’ll convince you I feel fine now…”

She could feel his eyes on her until she moved towards the bench.

Hardcase leaned against the trellis as Rabé settled on the white stone bench, the leaves on the vine trembling as he stretched until his joints popped, “Yeah, Captain – remember that spar? I think our Lady can take care of a few meet-and-greets.”

Fives groaned as Kix and Rabé laughed. He shook his head, “Are you ever gonna let that go?” A faint smile twitched on his lips, though, and the tension started to ease from the air around them. “Nah.”

Rabé still felt muddled and elated all at the same time, but before she could reply, Kix hissed, “Someone’s coming.”

Hardcase straightened off the trellis just as a young man with coiffed hair and a doughy, round face rounded the corner and headed straight for their small group. Rabé watched his approach from behind Fives, where he shielded her from view for just a moment longer.

The man approaching was young, very young, perhaps a year or so younger than she, and was dressed in thick robes of light sapphire. His eyes were pale, and he walked with a lone guard of his own. His jacket was embroidered with a ferocious, roaring beast in dark red, and Rabé’s eyes narrowed, even as she prepared to play the overly-enchanted debutante.

The young noble stopped just short of the alcove where Rabé waited and called out, “Hello there! I hope I’m not intruding – my name is Varol, Tahsin Varol. I had been hoping to introduce myself to the young lady from Corellia, but she slipped away before I had the chance to meet her.”

At his words, Rabé gathered her skirts and stood, stepping out from behind Fives, where he shielded her from view for just a moment longer.

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At his words, Rabé gathered her skirts and stood, stepping out from behind Fives, and Varol’s eyes brightened. “I hope you didn’t think me rude, sir. I simply wished to see the gardens – I’d heard such wonderful things about Aldera’s palace grounds.”

Varol laughed lightly, amused, and walked closer. Fives hesitated only the briefest moment but stepped back, giving them room to converse. She offered her hand and Varol took it, bending low
before she knew what he was doing, and pressed his dry lips to the back of her hand. Fives made a
low, disbelieving noise behind her, and she coughed quickly to cover the sound. She smiled
graciously as he straightened, and dipped into a curtsy. “Pleased to meet you, Lord Varol. My name
is Maitri Avalokit.”

“Of Corellia.” Though he laughed and smiled, Rabé did not like the look in his eyes. He might be
young but there was a cold, calculating depth to the way he looked at her that made her shiver. “You
made quite the entrance in the hall. As soon as you left, everyone seemed to be talking about you. I
suppose the best way to describe it was… you were dazzling.” He half turned to her and offered her
his arm. “I’d be more than happy to give you a tour of these gardens, if you’d like? I know them very
well. My father helped design them.” He flashed her an overly-confident grin, looking quite pleased
with himself, as if he had had something to do with his father’s accomplishments.

A shameless charmer, I see, Rabé thought, even as she took his arm, her hand resting lightly in the
crook of his elbow. “I would love that. Was your father really in charge of designing them? They’re
absolutely beautiful…”

At her words, Varol beamed, puffing his chest out as he led her down the path. He might be a bit of
a show-off – but that could prove to be advantageous for her. If she appealed to his pride enough, he
could be an invaluable ally over the course of the next few weeks.

His hand was cold on top of hers. Rabé could not help but wish it was Fives’ steady, warm grip on
her arm instead.

Fives hadn’t known it was possible talk for so long about a kriffing garden.

Maybe that’s what people did, if they didn’t have to worry about a war. Varol had talked their heads
off for nearly two and a half hours about this bush, that gazebo, those flowerbeds, even the chemical
variations of the soil… his head ached, and he never wanted to hear about another gardener ever
again. Varol had hardly left room for Rabé to say a word, and yet she’d been as enthralled as she had
been on the ship, discussing her favorite weapons with Fives. She’d hung onto Varol’s every word,
just as she’d hung off his arm.

By the time Varol had finally run out of words, Hardcase had been twitching as his energy built and
built – for a clone trooper, walking did absolutely nothing to release energy – and Fives was nearly
bored to tears. Somehow, even without turning to look at them, Rabé had somehow noticed her
guards’ apprehension, and murmured that she had had a long, tiring day. Varol had escorted her to
their rooms, and had Fives not cleared his throat and shut the door in his face, it was entirely possible
Varol hadn’t been aware of Rabé’s guards at all.

He sat down heavily on the thick, plush couch next to Kix and groaned. “Of all the things to get a
lecture on, I think a garden tops the list of boring.” At least their quarters were comfortable: as the
noblewoman, Rabé had an entire room to herself, though a large living space connected all their
rooms. She’d excused herself almost as soon as they’d returned, and Fives was sure he’d caught a
glimpse of a quick flash of exhaustion in her large, dark eyes as she closed the door behind her.

Kix laughed and examined his cloth-and-leather helmet, rubbing off a piece of dust and straightening
the buckles. “I dunno, I thought the medicinal plants were interesting.”

“Oh, gods, shut up,” Hardcase groaned from where he was sprawled across the chair opposite them.
“If I have to hear about one more plant, I’m gonna blow that entire garden sky-high.”

“Sure, you could do that.” Kix offered, kicking his feet up on the table. “And then Sabé would
immediately kill you.”

Hardcase laughed, “Don’t kid yourself, Kix. She’d find out before I’d even finished setting up the detonators.”

Fives grinned in agreement and ran a hand over his face, suddenly drained. He hadn’t done much besides watch over Rabé, but for some reason it had taken all of his energy. He still thought that if he hadn’t taken hold of her, she would’ve stumbled. She had looked pale. He only regretted making her uncomfortable. And then Varol had shoved himself into their conversation, taken her hand, and kissed it – and she’d been charmed to the stars.

His hands fidgeted in his lap, and to take his mind off of the sight of Varol escorting Rabé through the gardens, he glanced around the room. Everything on Alderaan was a strange combination of modern and old, very old. Their rooms had an actual fireplace – something he had never seen before. Gentle lights from hovering candledroids shone off of the old marble and wood furniture. A wide, crescent-shaped balcony connected all of their rooms, covered in dark green ivy and flowers Fives now knew were called candlewicks. Flowers that bloomed, and glowed, only at night. He could see small clusters of them beginning to open now under the darkening twilight sky.

The balcony did not have any doors, and it wouldn’t have been difficult for someone to clamber up the thick vines and slip into their rooms. Sheer white curtains danced in the breeze from the lake. He stared it, annoyed. “That balcony is a weak spot. I don’t like it being so open.”

Hardcase snorted. “You’ve really taken to your role as ‘Captain,’ huh, Fives?”

“I’m serious. It’s not secure – we’re basically missing an entire wall there.” He ran a hand through his hair as he thought. “Maybe… we should set up an alarm—”

“Oh, good – I was going to ask about that,” Rabé said as she joined them, settling into the chair next to Hardcase, and the rest of Fives’ sentence died in his throat. “I agree with you, Fives. It’d be smart to protect ourselves there. Just in case.”

He hadn’t heard her door open, or noticed her cross the room. She had changed into a light purple shift, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders to keep off the chill, and she had taken her hair down. He tried not to stare – it felt like all he did lately was try not to stare at her – but her thick hair was a deep, chestnut brown, near black. It reached past the small of her back and shone in the gentle light of the candledroids. She smiled at him as she took a section and began to braid it, and suddenly Fives remembered that he’d been in the middle of speaking. He cleared his throat, but the words wouldn’t come, and he was horribly aware of how Kix and Hardcase were staring at him now, too.

Out of the corner of his eye, Fives watched as a grin of pure delight dawned on Hardcase’s face as the silence stretched on.

Rabé cleared her throat as her fingers made quick work of the first braid and fastened it. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Ah, don’t worry about that, Rabé. I think Fives is just tired,” Kix said, aiming the word like a kick to Fives’ shins. “Fives, you were saying – we should set up an alarm…?”

“Right.” His voice felt tight, it sounded forced and quiet in his head, like he’d stuffed his ears with thick cotton. “Uhm. Yeah, I was just – we have some alarms we could set up. Around the balcony doors.”

Rabé nodded, but her smile was awkward and she didn’t quite catch his eyes, so Fives tried again. “I
can rig them so that they’d catch anyone coming up from the outside. So… if we wanted to go out there, for any reason… we could do that…” His hands were suddenly very interesting. …Had that stain been there all day?

He swore he could hear Kix mutter, “Oh my gods.”

Rabé took a breath and said, a little quickly, “That sounds good – do you have the materials with you? Or would you need Sabé to find them for you?”

He shook his head, picking at an invisible speck of dirt on his tunic. “I have ‘em. And I can start setting them up tonight, if you want.”

“I think we should be fine for one night. Leave it for the morning, rest up. We’ve had an… interesting day.” She delicately paused over the word, and brushed off the back of her hand. The hand Varol had kissed.

Fives might not have been able to meet her eyes but as he watched her dust it off, he imagined she was brushing that kiss off, and a part of his heart gloated in petty victory. For what, he didn’t know.

Rabé had brushed his hand from her arm just as easily.

Hardcase bolted upright. “The tour?”

She held his gaze for a moment before the laughter bubbled out of her chest. “Varol was certainly very thorough.” She twirled her long, thick braid between her fingers and grinned mischievously.

Hardcase groaned and clapped a hand to his forehead, “That’s what I said! He just kept going, and going, and going…”

“He was enthusiastic.” Kix offered, and Rabé laughed again.

“Maybe so, but I think he’ll be good to keep in mind. Hopefully his enthusiasm translates into court gossip. He might know things about his fellow lords and ladies and lairdes.” She caught Hardcase’s confused look and smiled as she explained, “Gender neutral term, for those who don’t identify as either. Or who don’t care to identify as either.”

He grinned and nodded. “Lairde. I like it.”

Rabé released her hair and nodded, then stood. Without thinking, Fives shot up out of his chair, his knees crashing into the edge of the low table, and his face flushed almost immediately. She cast him a surprised glance but her eyes were kind as she murmured, “You all should get some rest. Just in case we have another garden lecture tomorrow. Good night.”

“Will do. Good night.” Kix replied, but he was staring up at Fives with a mixture of confusion and disbelief, and Hardcase’s all-too-familiar devilish grin had snapped back onto his face.

At least they waited until her door was firmly closed.

Fives sank back down to the couch and immediately glared at his brothers, trying to ignore the fact that his face was bright red as he rubbed his sore knees. “Not a kriffing word-”

But he was too slow.

Hardcase obliged and did not say a word – he did, however, almost immediately start crying from laughter. Fives groaned and buried his head in hands. Just what I needed, this is just great. As if it
wasn’t enough work corralling them, keeping them all in line, now they knew.

“Oh, my gods, Fives. *Fives.*” Kix said, as if he’d just discovered a piece of candy the size of a LAAT/i.

“Shut up.”

“Kix, Kix – do you have anything for *lovesickness*?” Hardcase wheezed, wiping his eyes – and as soon as he looked at Fives he burst into fresh laughter until he nearly fell out of his chair.

“Shut up, Hardcase.”

“I didn’t think I’d need to *bring* any, but fucking *hell*, Fives – you’re supposed to be the Captain! Aren’t those things against the rules?” Kix leaned forward, elbows on his knees, “You can’t even *look* at her – I mean, all she was doing was sitting here, having a conversation with us, and you-”

“Yeah, Fives, she might want your company, too-”

“Hardcase, be realistic! He couldn’t even look at her!” Kix laughed. “How in the stars would he be able to manage anything beyond a conversation?”

“Shut up – I *know*! Don’t you think I *know that*?” Fives erupted, frustration leaking into his voice. “I know that, and I don’t need you two reminding me about – about all that. I *know*.”

Hardcase stifled his laughter, taken aback by the sudden outburst, and Kix shook his head. “Fives,” he said again, gentle, placating – his medic’s voice, the one he used to calm flighty shinies after a near-hit on the battlefield. “What the hell are you going to do?”

Fives sighed and rubbed his temple before answering wearily, “I’m gonna do my job. That’s all I can do.” He took a deep breath and continued, miserably, “Don’t you dare say a word of this to her. She doesn’t need to know. It’d just… it’d make her uncomfortable.”

“We’d never do that.” Kix almost sounded offended at the implication, but he still looked worried.

“Just… don’t. Forget about it. Not for my sake – I don’t care what you say about this, once we’re a million klicks away from here and she – the handmaidens – are back on Naboo. For hers. Don’t – don’t embarrass her.” *It’s my fault we’re in this mess. It’s my head, my stupid, overreacting brain.* His stomach was churning and he suddenly ached all over, like he’d been thrown off the balcony to slam against the ground below.

A part of him knew that would hurt less than this, than his brain and heart and blood sparking with white-hot electricity every time she looked at him. It felt like own mind was electrocuting him.

It was quiet for a moment, and then Hardcase leaned back in his chair and let out a low, long whistle.

“We’d never do that.” Kix almost sounded offended at the implication, but he still looked worried.

“Why do you think we’d do something like that?”

A part of him knew that would hurt less than this, than his brain and heart and blood sparking with white-hot electricity every time she looked at him. It felt like own mind was electrocuting him.

It was quiet for a moment, and then Hardcase leaned back in his chair and let out a low, long whistle.

“You’re in some deep shit now, brother.”

Fives could not have agreed more.

But he was going to do his duty, and protect his Lady, and pray that his feelings would be gone in the morning. Evaporated like morning mist over the lake.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much to everyone who's been reading and commenting! I hope you're enjoying it as much as Eva and I are having fun writing this - it's so fun to see everyone's reactions to each new update!!

And now I must deliver some news - not good, not bad, simply neutral: college is now in full swing! Which means both Eva and I are balancing full course loads as well as planning, writing, editing, and drawing From Which Stars. We hope you understand that education takes priority, and so updates will now come ever /two/ weeks instead of every single week!

This means tighter and cleaner chapters and less stress for us, so please bear with us! As always, we're /more/ than happy to talk all things Arcmaiden over at our tumblrs! Definitely feel free to shoot us asks or tag us in posts if you're finding a lack of weekly Arcmaiden content disturbing! It always brightens my day when people stop by to talk to us about Fives and Rabé ❤❤

Thank you so much for reading and I hope everyone has a wonderful day❤
The summons finally came with breakfast one bright and sunny morning two days after their arrival. Both were delivered by a cheerful young page in Organa livery whose voice managed not to crack until the very last word in his carefully prepared speech:

“Senator Amidala, Her Majesty Queen Breha Organa asks you attend this afternoon’s court session to speak with her on matters of events, shared duties, and overall security regarding your stay here in Aldera.”

Cover art by the incredibly talented and hardworking @evaceratops ✧ Please consider giving the update post on tumblr a like/reblog if you enjoyed this chapter (and thank you so, so much to everyone who's been liking, reblogging, kudos'ing and commenting, we see you and we love you!) ❤❤
Padmé had given her word she would attend, and as the boy left – cheerful as ever – she’d glanced at Eirtaé with concern. *Still not a private meeting,* she had thought, and still the worry gnawed at her mind. They’d been on Alderaan for two days now, and the last they’d seen of Breha was when she had personally escorted them to their suites after their arrival. Padmé had no shortage of old friends and political allies to occupy her time, but Breha had thus far eluded her.

“We have to assume she’s being watched, then. And that she knows she’s being watched.” Eirtaé had said, ever calm and calculating. “Always an interesting place to find oneself backed into. Nothing must look unusual from her end. Perhaps she’s worried that a visit to a Republic Senator, even a friend, might look suspicious.”

Padmé had nodded and paced around the room, the others watching quietly. “Our appearance must have alarmed the spy.”

“Breha wanted to keep this as quiet as possible – there can be no suspicion that she brought you here to find the spy. Contact must be kept at a minimum, or take place in a public forum where your interacting with her is perfectly acceptable.”

“Right. Well, then - let’s get ready.” Of course, the chance to speak privately with Breha would help Padmé’s nerves to settle, but there was little she could do to force a private meeting if the Queen did not want one – or think it was safe to have one. She’d have to be content with the few meetings she could get.

*And besides,* Padmé thought as they set off through the gardens, *our group’s role is as the distraction. We must be succeeding at that, at the very least.*

The day had dawned bright and cloudless, a brilliant change of pace the gloom that had persisted since their arrival. Eirtaé walked on her left, her thick lilac robes complementing Padmé’s dark purple gown perfectly; Anakin and Ahsoka to either side of them, and Jesse and Echo brought up the rear as they made their way through the winding gardens to the Throne Room. Though the session was not due to begin for another half hour, Anakin had suggested arriving early so he and Ahsoka could split off and take up positions around the room. Jesse and Echo would stay near Padmé, and hopefully the session would prove to be useful. Padmé chewed the inside of her lip as she walked, comforted that Anakin stood so close but wishing she could take his hand without fear.

He caught her sideways glance and smiled softly, his hand twitching towards her, and Padmé made herself be content with that. She had to be.

There was a shout ahead of them, and then a brilliant burst of all-too-familiar delighted laughter. Eirtaé let out a low, bemused noise and murmured, “Wonder who that could be…?”

Just as the last word left her lips, Rabé darted out from a hidden corner of the flowering bushes, laughing as another girl tumbled out after her. Rabé’s smile was wide, her hair loosening from her braids and silver pins, giggling like there was nothing in the galaxy to worry her. “I’m teasing, Abeni – of course I am!”

The second girl, Abeni Alde, who Padmé now recognized from the day before at dinner, had a smile almost as brilliant as Rabé’s. She plucked a fallen leaf from her skirts and threw it at Rabé, who laughed and ducked away.

Their guards – three for Rabé, two for Abeni – stepped out calmly behind them, herding them down the path. Fives was gazing at the pair as they laughed, and Padmé raised an eyebrow at what she could only describe as a fond, gentle gaze. Rabé’s light cloak was draped over his forearm, ready should she want it, his other hand tucked behind his back. He quickly wiped his expression to
neutral, however, when he noticed the group they were stumbling towards. He straightened and nodded to them, the other guards doing the same.

Neither Rabé nor Abeni seemed to notice Padmé walking towards them, and Eirtaé’s glance was perpetually amused as Abeni – who had accented her beautiful dark skin with a billowing gown of pale orange and yellows – grabbed Rabé’s hand and started to chastise her, shaking her arm playfully, “Maitri, you know I would never!”

“Well? You seem quite breathless when he accepted-”

Abeni opened her mouth to reply but then suddenly noticed they were no longer alone. “Oh! Senator Amidala!” She exclaimed, making a quick curtsy – her arm still linked through with Rabé’s. “Good morning, Senator, I’m sorry I didn’t notice you-”

“It’s fine, Lady Abeni – you seem to be enjoying the morning,” Padmé said, her eyes resting curiously on Rabé’s. “I don’t believe we’ve met?”

“Ah! Yes, Senator Amidala, please allow me to introduce Lady Maitri Avalokit of Corellia. She’s on her tour!” Abeni leapt immediately at the opportunity to present Rabé – both of whom were still flushed from their laughter. “Senator Amidala of Naboo, of course.”

Rabé – Maitri – dipped her head and dropped into an elegant curtsy. Her voice trembled with false nerves as she said, “Pleasure to meet you, Senator Amidala.” She did not return her glance, and folded her hands shyly in front of her.

“The pleasure is all mine, Lady Maitri.” She cleared her throat and asked Abeni, “Might I ask where you’re heading off to? Isn’t there a court session this afternoon?”

“Yes, Senator, but my grandfather has asked Maitri and I to join him for tea in his apartments. We’re meeting Lord Varol on the way, he’s joining us too. I’m not sure if you’ve met him? We might make an appearance at the sessions afterwards, but Grandfather does love to go on,” she finished, but there was a bored undertone in her words that told Padmé politics were not particularly high on Abeni’s list.

Rabé still wasn’t meeting Padmé’s eyes – a nice touch, Padmé thought fondly, careful not to let the recognition slip onto her face. She kept her face neutral. “Of course.”

Abeni smiled and dipped her head, and only now did Rabé raise her eyes to meet Padmé’s. Her expression was calm and focused, as Abeni suddenly said, “Oh, Senator, I don’t know if you’ve heard, but supposedly the Queen is throwing a gala tomorrow night!”

“A gala?” That was certainly a surprise, in more ways than one. Eirtaé made a quite noise that told Padmé she was thinking the same.

“Yes!” Abeni glanced sideways at Rabé, who smiled and nodded in silent confirmation. “It’s only a rumor, of course, but I think it’s true – at least, I hope it’s true!”

Padmé smiled. “I’m actually on my way to meet with the Queen now; I’ll be sure to ask about a potential gala! Please give your grandfather my best; I don’t wish to keep you.”

Abeni and Rabé nodded and curtsied simultaneously, stepping out of the way. Fives and the other guards followed suit, quietly matching their charges’ movements. He kept close to her, his expression neutral as his General and brothers passed by.

Ahsoka waited until they rounded the corner before casting a glance over her shoulder. She grinned,
“Looks like she has everything under control, doesn’t it?”

“I’m glad she’s settled in so well – the tours can be exhausting and lonely. Lady Avalokit seems to be quite charming,” Padmé added nonchalantly, Ahsoka’s grin widening in delight at her words. “I’m certainly looking forward to speaking with her more.”

The gardens gradually gave way to a marble path, and soon the entryway to the Throne Room was in view. They could still hear Abeni and Rabé’s giggles winding through the gardens, though they were more distant now. Rabé’s wide-eyed, near-flustered performance was endearing and utterly convincing. Not a shred of Naboo hung about her – even the way she stood was differently, leaning slightly forward, favoring her right leg; not the straight-laced stance of a handmaiden but the relaxed posture of a young woman raised in peace and luxury. Her voice, too, was changed: nervous, eager to please, a posh Corellian accent instead of her natural canal districts’ Thedean lilt.

Fives, too, had appeared completely at ease with his new position. His eyes carefully took in everything – though Padmé had seen a faint smile twitch on his lips as he’d spotted Padmé’s group walking towards them – but they always, always returned to Rabé.

They worked very well together.

“But what was that about a gala?” Anakin spoke up. “I didn’t expect us to be going to many parties while we’re… y’know…” The rest of his sentence died off in his throat as he caught Padmé’s quieting glance.

Padmé waited to speak as two Alderaanian guards – neither of whom were Rex, and she wondered for a brief moment where he had been stationed – swung open the massive bronze doors to the Throne Room. “Queen Breha is famous for her parties.”

“Well, I’m glad you think so, Padmé,” Breha called out to them from where she sat at the other end of the hall at a low, wide desk, surrounded by account reports and expenses hovering in the air like dust motes. She smiled, waved a hand, and the data vanished as she rose to greet them. They were alone in the room – not even her advisor or Heirs waited by her side. Her hair was wound into an elegant chignon, wrapped in gold and blue ribbons that shone from the bright sunlight shining in through the wide windows. “I’ve actually planned this one in your honor.”

“Well, I’m glad you think so, Padmé,” Breha called out to them from where she sat at the other end of the hall at a low, wide desk, surrounded by account reports and expenses hovering in the air like dust motes. She smiled, waved a hand, and the data vanished as she rose to greet them. They were alone in the room – not even her advisor or Heirs waited by her side. Her hair was wound into an elegant chignon, wrapped in gold and blue ribbons that shone from the bright sunlight shining in through the wide windows. “I’ve actually planned this one in your honor.”

“Really? …It’ll be an excellent opportunity to meet members of the court.” Among others. Padmé’s natural instincts flew to Sabé, wherever she might be, and her undoubtedly developed plans for such an event. She had warned that there would be minimal contact between the groups – and then she and Rex had promptly vanished into the vastness of the palace. Padmé trusted Sabé, but this sudden announcement warranted a full group meeting as soon as possible.

Breha nodded as the group walked to her, their footsteps echoing in the wide, empty halls. “Precisely! I’m glad you’ve come early – I was hoping you would, I must admit.” Her eyes were tired, but filled with a steely determination. A faint orange glow, from the pulmonodes that had replaced her heart and lungs after a near-fatal mountain-climbing accident during her youth, pulsed softly beneath the fabric of her gown. She had told Padmé during their first meeting that she liked keeping the status lights visible. A reminder that she had survived.

Breha continued, “As a respected Senator, I’m sure many will be glad of the opportunity to speak with you.” Her eyes sparkled mischievously. “Speaking of – I’ve heard that the young lady from Corellia is settling in very well. Have you had the chance to meet her?”

“We just passed by her and Lady Abeni on their way to tea; she seems to be doing well, indeed.”
Breha held her gaze steadily and then sighed. “We can speak freely here – at least for a few minutes more. I know you’ve just arrived, and you haven’t had much time to meet the others, but…” Her façade as Queen faltered, and then slid off her face altogether. “I’m glad you’ve come.”

At her words, Anakin and Ahsoka visibly relaxed; they leaned against a pillar simultaneously as Jesse and Echo lowered their rifles. At last, the privacy they needed.

Padmé stepped forward and clasped Breha’s arms in comfort. “Of course, Breha. Of course. I’m so sorry you’ve had to deal with this alone – have you been able to recover any of the credits?”

“No, unfortunately not. Besides, it’s not the credits I’m worried about. Bail’s work to the front lines means the information of hidden Republic bases is stored in our databanks, and I’m worried that one day I’ll wake up to a breach.” She took a deep breath and glanced at Anakin. “General Skywalker, you’ve worked with my husband before, correct?”

“Yes, Highness.” His voice was low and guarded, wary of his surroundings. Ever the tactician – and now Padmé noticed Ahsoka’s eyes darting around the room too, her stance relaxed but as tightly coiled as a snake, like she was expecting to be attacked at any moment. Padmé’s heart constricted, she wished they could relax – but a constant, brutal presence on the front lines meant they had to examine every situation through a soldier’s eyes. “Senator Organa has personally delivered aid to me and my men on more than a few occasions. It’s always a good sign when we see his ship fly in.”

Jesse nodded absentmindedly and Breha smiled at them, pleased. “I’m very glad to hear it. It’s the least we can do – but I’m afraid that our aid might bring more destruction.”

“Don’t worry, Your Highness,” Ahsoka said earnestly, a fierce look in her eyes. “You’ve got the best of the best on the case now; we’ll catch that slee- oh! ‘Scuse me, the, uh, that guy sooner than you think.”

She darkened in embarrassment, Anakin shooting her a disapproving look, but Breha laughed at the near-slip. “I’m very glad to hear it, Ahsoka – and this gala will give you all the time you need to find them.” Her smile grew. “Alderaanian parties are famously long-lived, after all. Plenty of opportunities for this sort of thing.”

Ahsoka smiled shyly and then seemed to realize something, her face screwing up in frustration. “I left my formal robes at the Temple – I don’t have any clothes! And neither does Skyguy – can we even go to that sort of thing in this?” She gestured at Anakin’s dark leather Jedi tunic, ignoring his scowl that very clearly said he’d rather stay in his familiar clothes.

“If you’re truly concerned with that, I can send my tailor to you tomorrow morning. Your Jedi apparel would be fine, though – if you’d be more comfortable in that.”

“Hm. I’ll… I’ll think about it,” Ahsoka said politely, but something in the way she glanced at Eirtaé and Padmé made Padmé think that Ahsoka would leap at the opportunity, and that she would drag Anakin along for the ride.

Not that Padmé would complain about seeing Anakin in a tailored nobleman’s suit. She dragged her thoughts away from that extremely pleasant mental image as Breha turned to her and began to speak in a low voice:

“I’ve set up extra security measures around your rooms, Padmé, but I didn’t want to draw attention to the others.”

“That’s fine – I know I’m serving as the distraction, but the others can handle themselves. Gods
forbid the need arise for any of that, but it’s completely understandable.”

“And the list of names I sent you…”

“We haven’t had a chance to meet all of them since our arrival, but we’ve each of us memorized the list. I’m sure that—”

“Oh, wait a minute!”

Breha and Padmé turned to see Ahsoka staring up at one of the murals, a wide grin splitting her face as she gestured excitedly up towards the painted faces. “These guys are Jedi, aren’t they?”

Breha smiled and gathered her skirts, walking over to Ahsoka as she nodded. “Yes, they are! Excellent catch – and the first part of our shared history, in fact.”

Ahsoka dipped her head, smiling shyly at the praise. “Wasn’t too difficult to tell. It looks like Jedi fashion hasn’t really changed all that much in the past couple hundred years.” She made a teasing face at Anakin, who still stood in the shadows near Jesse and Echo.

As Breha laughed, the sound echoing off the high ceilings, Padmé caught Anakin’s eye as he pushed off from the pillar. Curiosity slightly dimmed the sourness in his expression as he crept closer. The mural took up the entire east side of the Throne Room, stretching upwards to the ceilings inlaid with porcelain patterns. They had to stand in the center of the room to admire the full effect.

Painted in gentle, sweeping brushstrokes, dozens of tranquil and smiling Jedi of all species reached out to the royal family, surrounded by cheering citizens from all walks of life celebrating some momentous event. The peaks of the Jorun mountains encompassed them all, dotted with giant firs, a moment of triumph and peace. As massive as it was, the details – the electric blue Nautolan’s headtresses, the gleam on the Queen’s crown, the spark of mischievousness in a Padawan’s eye – were simply breathtaking. Though it must have been centuries old, Padmé could discern traces of detailed restoration work. “It’s absolutely gorgeous.”

“Ah, thank you. It’s one of the most cherished legends of Alderaan’s history, one every child grows up hearing some variation of. …Master Skywalker, Ahsoka; have you heard the story?” Breha asked Anakin, who made a sort of indiscriminate noise in the back of his throat. She must have noticed the suspicion in his eyes, the discomfort in the way he folded his arms across his chest. Padmé’s heart ached for him, for the men – just how Sabé had predicted; how strange this all must be for them – but when he shook his head Breha’s smile grew, excited to share the story with them.

She’d already sensed that Anakin needed to feel appreciated; he needed to feel like he was part of something bigger. It was certainly one of the reasons why he was so successful when deployed to the front. Anakin needed to feel useful. And what better way to help him become more comfortable than to remind him of the Jedi’s own history here? Padmé allowed herself a small smile as Anakin’s curiosity was piqued, his shoulders dropping a hair’s breadth.

“I suppose that doesn’t surprise me – I can’t even begin to fathom how many worlds the Jedi have aided over the millennium. But we have not forgotten.” Breha lightly snapped her fingers and the candledroids lining the entire length of the hall began to float freely upwards, casting the mural in a brilliant light. Padmé noticed every lightsaber was as unique and lovingly rendered as the serene Jedi that carried them. In the calmly moving lights of the now-untethered candledroids, their fingers almost twitched with life, long-dead lungs seemed to expand with new breath. Like they were about to stand and stretch and step down from the mural – they seemed… they felt truly alive. The hair on the back of Padmé’s neck rose and she shivered under their steadfast gazes. Could the Force still be present in even the depictions of a Jedi? Can it transfer to a painting?
She made a mental note to ask Anakin later, even as the ancient Nautolan seemed to smile fondly down at her. *Clever,* he almost seemed to say. Padmé blinked and the warm feeling remained, the Jedi stilled as Breha began to speak, like they were eager to hear her words, too.

“During the Sith Wars, long before the fall of the Old Republic, Alderaan was invaded by the Sith Empire. It was a brutal, full-scale invasion, and of course our local militia could not stand against an army of dark warriors. They slaughtered thousands, and took the royal family hostage – they planned on razing our planet to its core. It was Alderaan’s most desperate hour. The Jedi were our only hope, and they came to our aid within a matter of *days* of the news reaching the capital. They took back our planet from the clutches of darkness itself, wiped them off the map. The Sith were crippled – they suffered a massive defeat – and fled back behind their own lines. Without the Jedi… I truly believe Alderaan would not be here, not as it stands today. We have not forgotten our debt to the Jedi.”

Ahsoka stared, wide-eyed at the scene, and even Anakin looked intrigued – not quite relaxed, not yet. But he did glance about the Throne Room with a new, appreciative eye. His glower had diminished slightly into a faint frown, and Padmé hoped his discomfort with the courts would soon evaporate altogether.

“There’s a sister mural in the Temple Archives, I believe,” Breha said, her lips quirking up into a grin. “At least, I still hope it’s there. The Jedi will always have an ally with the people of Alderaan.”

“And may it always be so,” Padmé murmured.

A tranquility settled over her shoulders like a warm, comforting childhood blanket. They gazed up at the mural for a few moments more, a gentle silence wrapping around the room that exuded peace – and then the wide doors at the other end of the hall were thrown open. Excited chatter scattered the peace into the shadows of the ceiling, and the strange spell was broken, the feeling of contentment ghosting through her mind like gentle fingers through her hair – and then it was gone.

Breha’s three Heirs immediately fanned out as servants carrying platters of drinks escorted a chattering crowd of people hoping for an audience with the Queen. Padmé scanned the crowd but saw no sign of either Rabé or Sabé. *Good. Divide and conquer, as it were.***

Aria Thrasse, Breha’s advisor, called out a greeting while glancing down at her datapad, her long fingers furiously working as she fired off in that breathless excited chatter, “You’ve got quite the morning ahead of you – oh, good morning, Senator Amidala, I hope you slept well, you *must* tell me if your rooms are to your liking, I certainly hope they are, I specifically requested they be warmed to Nabooian temperatures but I hope it’s enough? Ah, beg pardon! Madame, head of the kitchens wants to speak with you – something about an issue with ice, I believe, a strange issue to be sure – and I’ve *just* received confirmation that the flowers will be here within the hour. Oh! And the Governor has asked to speak with you about the new tariffs on exports-*”

“Excellent, Aria – let’s deal with the tariffs first,” Breha straightened and walked to meet her advisor halfway. Anakin slunk back to Jesse and Echo, while Ahsoka’s attention was still caught up with the mural. Both steadfastly ignored the curious glances and excited murmurs of the Heirs. “And then we can settle in with the more pressing business of planning this gala.”

She glanced at Padmé. Only they knew how important this gala would be.

“*Oh, there* he is! Varol – over here!” Abeni leapt up, waving the young man over to where she and
Rabé were waiting for him. “Damn the man, why is he always so late-”

Rabé grinned and murmured, “Perhaps he got lost in the gardens?”

Abeni snorted with delight. “Lost in his dear old father’s own gardens? I truly doubt that,” she said, patting Rabé’s hand fondly. “I still can’t believe he somehow convinced you to go on a tour of the gardens, of all places – you should be seeing Aldera, not the bloody plants!”

“In my defense, he was very charming.” Rabé replied innocently, repressing a smirk at imagining Hardcase’s wordless disagreement behind her. The two women were sitting on a bench outside of Abeni’s grandfather’s home on the edge of the palace grounds. Lord Alde was a riot of an old man, full of ridiculous stories and apt to waving his cane around for dramatic emphasis – and though she was working, Rabé couldn’t help but enjoy spending time with Abeni. The woman was just as clever as her grandfather, and though Rabé had just arrived two days prior, Abeni had welcomed her almost instantly with a carefree, cheerful disposition. Tea with Lord Alde and Abeni had already become a natural part of her day, one that she couldn’t help but look forward to. Rabé was certain the Aldes were not the Separatists they were looking for, and she certainly wasn’t going to complain about spending time with them. She might be playing a character – but she already considered Abeni a friend.

Varol, on the other hand…

Abeni rolled her eyes. “‘Charming.’ Certainly. Not the word I would chose to describe him, but perhaps standards for attractive young men are different on Corellia…?”

“Not on your life!” Rabé laughed, but the suggestion made her stomach squirm with unease. Next to her, Fives shuffled, almost to remind her of his presence, and she relaxed. The day was warm, gentle birdsong floated through the air – and Padmé was meeting with the Queen at this very moment. Everything was proceeding as planned.

Abeni fixed Rabé with a stern gaze as Varol walked to meet them. She quirked her eyebrows, a mischievous smile on her full lips, as she asked, “Really? Well then, Maitri, you’ll have to tell me your type later – if we don’t find you a date to the gala, your Captain will have to escort you!” The thought was so absurd to Abeni that she immediately broke out in peals of laughter.

Behind them, Fives shuffled again and awkwardly cleared his throat, and she was almost certain she heard Hardcase choke back a laugh.

Rabé flushed and stared down at her hands, working quickly around the sudden tightened nerves in her chest as she murmured, “I wouldn’t – that wouldn’t be so bad-”

“Apologies, ladies – I had some business to attend to!” Varol called out, drowning Rabé’s weak protestations. He smiled broadly at them as he approached their bench, holding his hands out to help them rise. “What’s so amusing, Lady Abeni?”

“Nothing that concerns you, Lord Varol – and next time I won’t invite you if you’re going to be so late! Luckily for you, my grandfather doesn’t really care about a few extra minutes.” Abeni led them through the gated courtyard, where a servant was waiting for them.

Though he had approached the group from Abeni’s side, Varol stepped around with surprising agility to walk by Rabé’s side. Abeni raised her eyebrows knowingly at her as he gave an apologetic wave of his hand. “Truly, I am sorry. I pray you’ll forgive me?”

Abeni considered. “Alright, fine. Just this once. Oh – Varol – you’ll be interested to know that we
ran into Senator Amidala just a little while ago!"

Varol’s face immediately darkened with disgust, and Rabé’s eyes narrowed.

“Really?” He asked, nonchalantly picked a speck of dirt from his tunic. His mouth had set into a thin, tense line, but Abeni did not seem to notice.

“Yes, in the gardens, just now – and we were still here before you, what an incredible waste of time you must’ve been dealing with, that we met with a Senator and you were still late. She is so kind, I’ve heard that she is—”

“Hmph.”

Rabé stared at him, and then slowly smiled in slight, vapid confusion, her eyebrows knitting together as she asked in total innocence, “Lord Varol, you don’t seem to like the Senator…?”

Varol shrugged. “I don’t agree with her stance on some things. She voted down the act to open a lease from the Banking Clans, which was a mistake. The Republic needs the funds and she claims to love the Republic so – but doesn’t have its best interests at heart—”

“Oh, gods, Lord Varol – enough. She doesn’t have absolute control of the Senate, you know – and I’m sure the issues are far more complicated than you know,” Abeni snapped, and Rabé fought to keep a satisfied smirk off her face.

“It’s true, though – we don’t need more clones, we need a way to end the war, and soon.”

The way he spat the word ‘clones’ made Rabé’s stomach churn. It took her a moment to notice her hands had suddenly clenched into tight fists. Neither Abeni nor Varol seemed to notice how she’d seized up. She took a breath. Relax. Focus.

“Varol, if you continue to spout politics, I’m sending you home right now.”

He blinked, and conceded, giving a forced laugh. “Forgive me, Lady Abeni, Lady Maitri – I promise to be on my best behavior for tea.”

“Excellent! Now come on, I don’t want to keep him waiting any longer—” Abeni rambled as she nodded to the servant to lead them to her grandfather, Varol close behind her. His expression was no longer dark; rather it was carefully neutral and devoid of any expression. He looked back at Rabé, but she dipped her head and gave him a disarming smile, waving him ahead.

Rabé waited a moment, just a moment – and then in unison, her guards closed in around her. Even though they were not in any danger, Fives automatically placed himself between her and Varol’s retreating back: a half-step forward, angling his body towards her, his stance relaxed but watchful. Ready, just in case.

And then, without a word, Fives unfurled her cloak from his arms and wrapped it over her shoulders. His hands were warm and comforting on her bare shoulders, gentle as he placed the fabric around her. Rabé knew he was doing it as an excuse to let Varol and Abeni walk ahead. That it was only to buy them a few seconds of privacy. She knew that. Never mind the way her heartbeat quickened as he adjusted it, taking a few seconds to make sure it hung straight, covered her shoulders completely. Never mind that. Fives is doing his part, he’s making it look convincing. That’s all. It was a clever move.

They watched Varol in silence, and when Rabé raised her eyes to meet Fives’, she knew he was thinking the same as she.
Varol’s face had not appeared on the lists that Breha had provided, and Rabé had no true reason – other than his strange, strong dislike of Padmé – to distrust him. But nevertheless… something didn’t quite sit right with him. Every time she met his eyes, there was a coldness to them that made her stomach curl with apprehension, or her skin prickle with faint unease. He was, physically speaking, as harmless as fresh dough, and would be about as powerless in a fight.

But physical ability was hardly the only way of accruing power, or the most worrisome.

Fives held her gaze a moment longer and then nodded once, sharply, as if she had given him an order. As Rabé stepped forward to join the others – laughing now with Lord Alde – her eyes caught the quick movement of his hands, signaling something to Kix and Hardcase in the blunt, sturdy Republic military sign language. She could not understand it, but she knew that he was passing along the conclusion without breathing so much a word: *keep an eye on Varol.*

It was almost enough of a distraction to take her mind off of the thought of Fives escorting her for the gala.

Eirtaé calmly gazed across the dejarik board at Echo as he pondered his next move. The myriad of holographic creatures – or the few that were left, anyways – rolled through their idle animations as they waited for his command. He was meticulous, exceedingly careful, and one of the best dejarik players she had ever played against. He drummed his fingers on the board for a half-second before inputting a command, and his Kintan Strider raised a club to strike Eirtaé’s Houjix off the board.

She nodded appreciatively, smirking, grateful for the challenge. “Well done,” she murmured – before sending in another piece to collect the payoff from her trap.

Echo laughed as the Kintan performed its overdramatic death animation and flickered off the board. “I’ve never seen *that* maneuver before.” The scoreboard updated – now Echo led by only two points. “You must’ve set that up within the first few moves of the game. How did you…?”

“An old family secret.”

He raised an eyebrow. “No chance of passing it on?”

“None. We’re very proud of our secrets.” That was the very least of it, the tip of the iceberg that was her House, but Eirtaé didn’t quite feel like going into her family’s history over a game of dejarik. The day was too nice; she didn’t want to spoil it.

“You shouldn’t take it personally, Echo,” Padmé called from where she sat at the wide desk. “House Veruna are famously tight-lipped about… well, *everything.*”

Eirtaé smirked, “A kind way of saying we’re perhaps a bit *paranoid,* my Lady.” Padmé returned the look with an innocent smile before returning to her work.

“Dejarik maneuvers are a family secret?” Ahsoka sleepily asked from where she watched from the couch. She had found the board first but refused to play, stating that she didn’t quite feel like losing so spectacularly today. Her chin resting in the crook of her elbow where it lay on the back of the couch, drowsily kicking her feet as the rooms near drowned in the bright mid-afternoon sun.

“Strategy games like dejarik are good for teaching military tactics. Of course, we haven’t had use for such a thing in… oh, a few centuries, at least. But we take pride in our tactical maneuvers. If I give up this one… I might as well hand you to the keys to our military knowledge.” Eirtaé answered.
Ahsoka frowned. “Naboo’s a peaceful planet, though. Why bother with all the secrecy?”

“Like I said. Paranoid.”

Ahsoka nodded, considering this for a moment before a huge yawn overtook her. She buried her face in her arm and then decided stayed there as Echo and Eirtaé continued their game. Alderaan might be cold, but the wide, gleaming windows amplified the bright afternoon sun, flooding the rooms with a delicious golden haze.

Anakin was seated on the couch, wading through General Kenobi’s minutely-detailed written updates from his fleet, his brow furrowed in concentration. Jesse was dozing in the sun like a loth cat, arms folded across his chest and head resting on the back of his chair. Both he and Echo were wearing their blacks and leg armor; Eirtaé had removed the stiff outer cloak of her conservative gown. Sabé and Rex would not be available until after their shifts were done – hopefully they weren’t just standing around or cleaning rooms, hopefully their positions were just as lucrative for information as Rabé’s. But they needed to discuss the gala as a full group. Breha’s timing was brilliant, but it would require careful planning and coordination: they would need to determine who would go where or interact with who, and how to communicate with each other over the course of the evening while playing their roles to the fullest extent. Rabé was well on her way to securing herself in the very pit of vipers they’d come to rat out – and in a neat couple of days, too. Eirtaé smiled at the thought of Rabé, arm-in-arm with Lady Abeni, on her way to the first of hopefully many social engagements. Her day had certainly been more exciting than theirs.

The front door slammed open with a thundering crash.

Eirtaé was on her feet in an instant, and so were the rest of them, games and reports and peaceful naps forgotten as a loud, muffled exclamation and Threepio’s anxious voice resounded together from the foyer. Anakin and Jesse leapt to their feet and automatically circled around Padmé, shielding her from the intruder.

They were all wide awake now, fingers flexing towards weapons as the last shred of drowsiness scattered from their limbs.

“Out of my way!”

Ahsoka narrowed her eyes as Echo reached for his blaster secured in its holster - but it was a young girl who barged around the corner, her eyes immediately landing on Padmé, Threepio rattling off protestations ignored by every sentient being in the room. If the girl was worried that two Jedi, two clones, and a handmaiden might finish her off before she took another step, she certainly didn’t look it.

Just as Eirtaé registered the young, pale face as one of Breha’s Heirs, the girl cried out, “Senator Amidala, I know why you’re here and I’ve come to warn you! The young woman from Corellia, just arrived – she is the Separatist you’re looking for!”
xi. knotted threads and tangled webs

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Ahsoka’s montrals rang in the silence that met the girl’s outburst. She was not that much older than Ahsoka, but her lung capacity was nothing short of incredible. The uninvited guest stared at Padmé, breathing heavily, her pale cheeks coloring with either determination or embarrassment in the silence - and then, all at once, everyone started talking.
Jesse and Echo glanced at each other, Ahsoka catching their identical breath of relief - *not a true threat*. Echo’s hand slowly moved away from the butt of his blaster, almost as if he were ashamed at his knee-jerk reaction. He flexed his hand self-consciously and looked down at the nearly-completed dejark game before quietly switching it to save-power mode. The pieces disappeared from the board with a low hum that Ahsoka was certain only she could hear.

Everyone else was still shouting. Anakin was glowering at the intruder, one arm stretched protectively across Padmé’s torso as she attempted to settle Threepio down. Threepio was somehow managing to apologize profusely for the commotion in between remarks of, “Certainly, it was so rude, I had just opened the door and then all of a sudden-”

Eirtaé strode forward like a storm, an icy warning in her voice as she gripped the girl’s forearm, “How did you get past the guards?”

She scowled up at Eirtaé, her expression almost as thunderous. “They recognized me and let me by!”

“They let you by?” Eirtaé’s narrowed eyes snapped towards the half-shut door, and Ahsoka almost felt sorry for the Alderaanian guards stationed outside their rooms. Almost. “Do you realize who’s rooms you’ve just burst into? Do you realize we almost shot you?” Without looking, Eirtaé jerked her head towards Ahsoka, and the girl’s eyes snapped to the lightsabers on her hips. “Or worse?”

The girl jerked her arm back. “Good thing you didn’t - I’m trying to help you, I need to talk to Senator Amidala-”

Just at that moment, two flustered Alderaanian guards burst in - one made directly for the girl as the other stopped in his tracks and began profusely apologizing, “Senator Amidala, please forgive us - we were just about to inform you of a visitor before she slipped by-”

“You shouldn’t have been fooled by a child!” Eirtaé snapped, and the poor man’s face froze in shock. He stumbled through his apology again in a weaker voice as Padmé rose and tried to placate the chaos, to little avail. “You are guarding a Senator of the Republic, you should be on high alert *at all times*-”

“Of course, ma’am, this was entirely our fault-”

“I’m *not* a child-”

“You are if you are so impatient you cannot wait to be announced!”

Ahsoka felt utterly, entirely useless in the midst of all the noise. She’d sensed the girl striding towards them, her thoughts firmly on reaching Padmé - but Ahsoka hadn’t thought her a threat. She shook herself, guilt trickling into her thoughts, and quickly focused on re-calibrating her threshold for threats. No battledroids would find them here, and she was certain that there were no bounty hunters crawling through the vents this time. The threats here wouldn’t be the ones she was used to, she’d have to look for subtleties in everything and everyone. She wanted to groan. *The problem, she thought sullenly, is that everyone here has a flair for the dramatic.*

Usually, the Force was contained to a dull roar in the back of her head, a faint hum and snap woven into her blood. At the Temple, it was peaceful, meditative; on the Resolute it pulsed with the energy of the 501st, sharp and exciting and crackling with energy. Even the handmaidens’ presences had been a natural extension of the clones’ energies; they’d merged almost seamlessly to pulse with eagerness, already a united front. But here in the palace, the Force slunk around in her head like an oily patch of water; difficult to grasp, obscuring individuals until they all blurred into each other. *We shouldn’t have been so relaxed, Ahsoka though, her heart thrumming with guilt. We shouldn’t have*
let our guard down. Of course, it was only a young, overeager Heir - for now.

Padmé cleared her throat and, in a deep, booming voice Ahsoka had not known her to be capable of, called out, “Enough! You two, leave us,” she commanded, and the two Alderaanian guards bowed and backed out as quickly as they could. Eirtaé and the girl’s argument choked into silence. “And you,” Padmé continued, turning her gaze to the intruder, whose face contorted only slightly with regret, “sit down, and explain yourself.”

When the girl didn’t move, Eirtaé grabbed her arm once more and dragged her to the couch. Anakin’s expression was as dark as thunder as they waited in silence for the girl to sit. Only when she had folded her hands in her lap, her gaze not moving from Padmé’s face, did Padmé finally move to the high-backed chair opposite. Anakin slunk behind her, arms folded and his expression as dark as thunder. Ahsoka’s nerves were still leaping - from guilt or shock or some annoying combination of the two - so she started to prowl around the room, stretching her senses outward until she could feel the terrible embarrassment of the two guards outside, now standing straight at attention, their spines ramrod straight. One of them was thinking very determinedly about not even a mouse making it past him, and Ahsoka almost let herself smile. The girl was nothing if not determined - but barging into a room full of trained warriors had probably not been what she had expected.

Padmé settled, smoothed her skirts, and stared at the girl. “Your name. Now.”

“Noemi Silviá, Senator Amidala. I-”

“I truly hope you have an excellent reason for storming into my rooms.”

“I do, I do! Senator, my assignment is to keep careful track of all guests in the palace, and this noblewoman – Lady Avalokit – she’s only been here a few days, but… The people she’s been meeting with are Separatists.”

Padmé raised an eyebrow. “Lady Avalokit…?” It took Ahsoka a moment to realize that Padmé was needling her for verification – if Noemi really thought Rabé was a Separatist. And not just any Separatist, she groaned, inwardly, as Noemi inhaled. But an actual threat.

“Yes, Senator – Lady Maitri Avalokit; light copper skin, long dark hair. Very small – just barely five feet tall – and about twenty-two, twenty-three years old. She arrived the same day you did.” Noemi rattled off. Padmé’s eyes flashed to meet Eirtaé’s, but their expressions were unreadable. Ahsoka’s light steps did not falter as she continued to circle around the room, but the sharp twist of her gut mirrored Echo’s growing unease.

Padmé was silent for a moment while she considered this, holding Noemi’s gaze until the Heir looked back down at her hands. Finally, “Why wouldn’t you bring this up with Queen Breha?” Her voice was gentler now, almost weary.

Noemi caught it, too. She hardly waited for Padmé to finish before launching into a breathless explanation: “I know why you’re here - Queen Breha told us you were coming, that you were coming to find the Separatists - and I know there are many, despite what she may think, and I know for a fact that they’re organizing something, or they at least have a group - and that woman from Corellia, Lady Avalokit, she’s coming in to help them organize, I’m sure of it!”

Padmé nodded, her expression carefully blank. “How do you know about the number of Separatists?”

Noemi’s chest puffed out with pride. “I’ve been watching them. And Lady Avalokit made straight for them - almost as if she knew them!” Her eyes narrowed in suspicion as she continued, “I don’t
trust her – I’ve been doing some background reading on her, and her family is one of the wealthiest on Corellia. I think she’s been sent to help the Separatists organize.”

“I see.”

“And Her Highness has sent you to help stop them from doing that! Lady Avalokit is the key, I just know she is!”

Ahsoka couldn’t help but snort a little, and Nohemi’s eyes flashed to her. Before she could say anything, Padmé rose. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I’ll look into this - but, Nohemi, this is a serious accusation. What if the Lady Avalokit simply... made the wrong friends? An unfounded accusation like this could have disastrous consequences for her.”

Nohemi shook her head, her ribbons fluttering about her head like a swarm of butterflies. “Senator, I’m sure of it. You must do something.” Her voice lost its harsh, abrupt edge, and suddenly she was just a young girl desperate to help her home in any way she could.

Padmé sighed, and her tone became gentle. “Who has Lady Avalokit made contact with that has you so worried, Nohemi?”

“Well, he’s not – he hasn’t said anything about being a Separatist, he hasn’t said anything incriminating, but I... Lord Varol, Senator. I think he’s... well, he’s not favorable towards the Republic...” The more Nohemi spoke, the weaker her accusations became, and the weaker her determination. Still, Ahsoka committed the name to memory. Varol. Sounds kind of slimy. If Rabé was hanging out with this Lord, that must mean she sensed something off about him, too. But now Nohemi was putting Rabé’s undercover work at risk. They had to redirect Nohemi’s attention elsewhere – and do it without rousing further suspicion.

Ahsoka’s head started to ache.

“Lord Varol. Has he said anything about defecting from the Republic?” Padmé’s voice was gentle, but when she caught Ahsoka’s eye, her expression had hardened. She was thinking the same: Varol might be the key, but Nohemi was about to destroy their carefully laid plans to apprehend the spy. “Is he vocal in his support of the Separatists?”

Nohemi looked downright miserable as she shook her head, “No, Senator. He disagrees with some of the Senate’s decisions, but... no.”

“Hm. That in itself is not unusual. I’m sorry, Nohemi, but... this all seems to be mere speculation. Out of everyone, you should know most of all that I’m not all-powerful. Besides, even if this Lady Avalokit is a Separatist, if her political stance leans that way, it’s really no concern of mine. I can’t force her to change simply because we might disagree on various issues. She’s from a Republic world. People are allowed to have differing political opinions, after all – especially in complex political climates such as this one. True, Queen Breha asked my help for identifying the most vocal Separatists, to quell any talk of illegal actions and to remind the courts of Alderaan’s support of the Republic – but a Corellian noblewoman is not why I’m here.”

“But... what if they hurt someone?”

“Are these people advocating violence in some way? Has this Lady, or this Lord Varol, threatened harm to others?” Padmé asked sharply, leaning forward – but the girl shook her head, her expression growing more bitter by the moment. Padmé sighed, and her shoulders relaxed just a hair’s breadth before she stood. “I am sorry, Nohemi. Lady Avalokit is not any of my concern at this point in time. I’m here to help with the Alderaanian voices of dissent, not other guests.”
Eirtaé rose with Padmé, and Nohemi reluctantly got to her feet as well, perfectly aware she was being dismissed, and perfectly annoyed with the entire concept. “Senator, please – I don’t trust her. Something’s… off about her.”

Seven hells. Ahsoka glanced at Anakin, while Jesse tapped his fingers on his arm. Nohemi was perilously close to the truth – and that distrust was hardening in her mind, even as Padmé tried to dissuade her. If she got in Rabé’s way…

“I am sorry I can’t do more, but for your sake, I would heed Queen Breha’s advance. Lady Avalokit will not be in the courts for a long time – she’ll soon be on her way.” As she spoke, Padmé gently propelled the girl back towards the foyer. “The most I can do is watch her, and take note of anything suspicious. I can’t force her to change her mind. And hopefully, my presence here will counteract any negative impact her presence might have.”

Nohemi’s face darkened, her annoyance rising with every step she took towards the door. After a moment, though, her emotions settled as she accepted her audience was finished. “You’ll consider this, then? And watch her at the gala tomorrow night? They’re going to do something soon, I know Lady Avalokit is going to be a part of it, but Her Highness has forbidden us from investigating. But you can! ...Will you? Please?”

Padmé smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. Her expression was unreadable – even her Force signature was unyielding when Ahsoka hesitantly reached out, her mind brushing up against durasteel will. “I’ll keep an eye out for suspicious, dangerous actions – but I’m not here to debate her politics. Do feel free to visit again, Nohemi – but please… don’t go chasing shadows.”

Nohemi bit her lip and nodded, her eyes downcast as if in defeat – but as the door closed in her face, Ahsoka felt her resolve to track Rabé harden. Anakin felt it, too; already, enemies of all kinds were closing in around Rabé, and the only thing they could do was hope she knew what she was doing.

Eirtaé exhaled slowly, her eyes sharp and focused as she moved to pull on her heavy cloak. “I’m going to go find Captain Rex.”

Before Ahsoka could ask why Rex, and not Sabé, she was gone.

The Palace Library was not like any other library Sabé had ever visited before. Normal libraries, even the one in the Palace of Theed, held collections of softly-illuminated record datapads. Here, in the heart of the palace, the books were… actually books. Here, Sabé could pick up a leather-bound book and flip through the flimsi leaves, she could feel the texture of the paper on the tips of her fingers. They were beautiful – in an austere, antique sort of way. The Organas embraced Alderaan’s ancient history, and the Library was open to all.

Including a lowly serving maid.

Queen Breha had made certain that Sabé was assigned to the public areas of the palace. Though the role of a serving maid left much to be desired – her hands were dry and cracked from the cleaning chemicals, her back ached from stooping to scrub every square inch of marble in the palace – she was ignored. No one paid her any mind. Her cleaning rags were a free pass to go anywhere she pleased. And that, she thought, gathering her skirts and rising from the floor, is a blessing.

She was invisible. And she was always listening.

“What happens now?”
Sabé looked up from her red hands and grinned to herself. *Speak of the devils.* Though she didn’t recognize the first voice – deep, young, tense but somehow still smug – Sabé was more than familiar with the second.

“What are you going on about?” The voice, amplified in her ears by the miniscule microphone she wore in each of her Alderaanian chrome ear cuffs, was genteel and elderly. It belonged to one Lord Ridan – an elderly gentleman with a shock of dyed bright blue hair. And one of the names on Breha’s list. She’d been shadowing him all day, hoping he might lead her somewhere useful.

*Thank you, Lord Ridan.* She pressed a light finger to her right cuff, and a quiet beep confirmed they were now recording.

“The Senator is here, why do you think that is? Someone’s been talking, and now Breha is suspicious—” The first voice was fighting to stay calm, to keep to a whisper.

Sabé spun her cleaning cloth around her hands as she took a quiet, cautious step forward on the embroidered rugs. She took long, slow, steady breaths through her mouth, grateful for her dark uniform, and the shadows between the stacks of ancient books.

“*Quiet.*”

She bent and peered through the shelves. All she could see was Ridan’s weathered hands, marked with liver spots. Of his companion, she could only see a thick shadow, a gleam of detailed embellishments on a rich jacket. Whoever it was, they were nervous.

“We’re running out of time!”

Very nervous.

“We don’t have many options, don’t you understand?” Lord Ridan sighed and murmured, his voice tense, “Don’t worry. We’re meeting again.”

“When?”

“Two days.”

“…Are you certain that the Senator—”

“How many times do I have to tell you to be quiet, young one?” Ridan hissed again. Sabé was close enough now that Ridan’s labored breathing, either from stress or excitement, seemed to echo among the books. “Keep a steady head until then. I don’t like the fact that the Senator’s here, either. But she hasn’t been doing anything except… well. Lounging around. She’s not here to work. I think we’re safe.”

“For now.”

Sabé and the first voice had the same idea. She slipped her rag back into her skirts and knelt with her rag to the dusty shelves as she waited for their footsteps to disappear.

*Who’s meeting in two days’ time, Ridan? And who was your friend?*
duty, but when he and Sabé had landed, he’d been ushered to this room almost immediately. Apparently, his vast experience meant an automatic promotion to Head of Security. Never mind the fact that this was a temporary post – Rex had already streamlined several timekeeping policies and implanted other, more efficient ones. He might be undercover, but the desire for efficiency was literally encoded into his genes. *I have to be convincing, don’t I?*

“Excuse me, sir.”

He glanced over his shoulder as his assistant Eder Basilio—a short man with a potbelly and surprisingly lanky limbs—asked the lilac-robed figure how they could help.

Eirtáé lowered her hood slowly as she took a seemingly hesitant step into the Center. Her gaze was fixed on Basilio, but her words were meant for Rex. “My Lady requests a change of the guards assigned to her door.”

Rex responded before Basilio could open his mouth. “Really?”

“The two currently assigned are… lax. And she would feel safer if the men were more attentive.”

“Let me see what I can do. Basilio, if you’d make our guest some tea…?” One of the perks of his temporary position was hot tea any time he wished. Rex intended to take full advantage of that simple luxury as often as he could. He might not have General Kenobi’s knowledge of the finer points of tea leaves or the properties of kettles, but he could appreciate the comfort it brought.

Basilio leapt to his feet, eager to impress the visitor. Rex waited until the door closed behind his assistant before stepping down from the platform. Eirtáé’s gaze was neutral, but the moment he stepped closer her entire demeanor changed. Her face seemed to grow sharper, more fearsome. “We have six and a half minutes. What happened?”

“We had an unexpected visit from a fourteen-year-old girl today, and she so thoroughly tricked our Alderaanian guards that it took them a full minute to realize she’d slipped by them. One of Breha’s Heirs, Nohemi Silviá; I’d rather it not happen again.”

“They just… let her by?” For the most part, Rex had found the Alderaanian guards to be more or less competent—but sometimes he found himself wishing for the unspoken understanding between clones that came from a lifetime of training together. He might complain about his brothers at times, but to witness the difference in their training and these palace guards had made him all the more grateful for his men.

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“All because of who she’s been connecting with. Nohemi was particularly anxious to stress that point. A Lord Varol, in particular, caused her much distress.”

She had hardly finished speaking before Rex was moving his hands across the control panels with a quick and determined focus, scrolling through the feeds he’d surreptitiously marked as footage of Rabé’s movements over the past few days. If anyone else reviewed the footage, the mark would
appear to be just a technological glitch, an easily overlooked minute corruption of a frame. He’d done so with all members of the teams, and was keeping an eye on Breha’s suspects, but so far had turned up nothing from his crow’s nest. Everyone was behaving as they should be. *More or less.*

He rewound the tapes until he landed on the moment when Rabé’s character had debuted in the Great Hall on the first day. Rabé moved through the crowds, parting them easily as she went – even in the distance, heads turned towards her. “These are all the people she interacted with on the second day. I’ve checked them against Breha’s list – none of them match. And there’s no footage of her with this Lord Varol. At least, not in this Hall during this timeframe. I’ll search the other tapes, but that will take some time.”

Eirtaé was not listening. She was staring at the screen, her eyes narrowed, her grip suddenly tight on the control panel. When she spoke, her voice was quiet but strained, like she didn’t want to believe what she was seeing. “Go back. Rewind the footage – please,” she added quickly, catching his raised eyebrow.

Rex obliged her, though he wasn’t sure what had made her so concerned. Rabé had conducted herself perfectly, no one had approached her with an intent to threaten her; her performance had been flawless. But he rewound the footage until she called, “Stop. Right there.”

On the screen, Fives bent close to Rabé, his hand on her elbow. Rex raised his eyebrow again and slowly said, trying to placate her, “That – I know that’s a breach of protocol, but surely not enough to warrant suspicion?”

“What? Oh, no. That was a faux-pas, to be sure, but we officially now have a bigger problem than just a suspicious Heir, Captain.” Eirtaé hissed, manipulating the feed until she found the angle she wanted, and rewound it again. They watched Rabé make her way through the hall again at double-speed, dipping curtseys here and there, but when Fives’ hand flashed out to grasp her elbow Eirtaé hit pause. Rabé’s head was tilted towards Fives, but Eirtaé wasn’t talking about the social faux pas. “A much bigger problem.”

She tapped the screen again, and the three girls Rabé had been speaking to suddenly loomed large in front of them, all shocked at the scene folding out in front of them. The eldest was no older than fifteen, her straight black hair and large, hooded eyes replicated perfectly on the youngest of the three. *Sisters, then.* Most surprisingly, the eldest had a tattoo of what appeared to be a simple thorn design under her right eye. Tattoos on young clones were nothing unusual, but seeing one on a young member of a noble House meant the girl was defiant and bullheaded. Standing on her other side, the last girl had extraordinarily red hair that almost threatened to escape its pins. Eirtaé had frozen the tape just as they had realized Fives was holding Rabé, and had Eirtaé not been concerned about something Rex would have found their expressions comical.

Though they were still alone, Rex matched her low tone as he said, “What are you talking about? How can it get worse than that?” The girls seemed harmless; the youngest no older than eight, laughing as she tugged on her sister’s arm. *They’re just younglings.*

But as he looked closely, something about the cut of their dresses, the exaggerated formality of the designs and colors, the sheer *antiquity* that hung about them like a brilliant, blinding aura…

Rex understood at once. “They’re from Naboo.”

Eirtaé nodded, her face stony, and the pieces fell into place. Rex sighed and leaned heavily against the panels as he muttered, “And they’re on their tours, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Damn it all, they must’ve just arrived, otherwise we would have known – we could have
rerouted them to another system until we were finished here. And I have no idea why Rabé didn’t pick up on this! She should have spotted them immediately – never mind. What’s done is done. We can’t keep track of them all the time, but they’ll be sure to get in our way.” Something almost like faint concern slipped into her voice, but Rex ignored it for the time being.

“They’re here now. We’ll just have to find a way to deal with this.” Rex’s thoughts landed almost immediately on Rabé. On her own, Rabé would have been able to handle Nohemi easily enough. And had the girl tried anything reckless or stupid in her attempts to frame ‘Lady Avalokit’ as a Separatist threat, Fives, Kix, and Hardcase were tasked with protecting her from threats of that very nature. Nohemi was nothing more than an overeager young child, easily handled on her own, easy to distract and mislead – but with the sudden appearance of three young nobles from Naboo, trained to spot deception and treachery, trained to pick up on political plots and discrepancies...

If Rabé made the slightest error, if she slipped back to her normal self in any capacity, these girls would see through her disguise in a heartbeat. She would have to be absolutely perfect, watertight and foolproof, every waking moment until they found the spy.

Eirtaé was not finished, however. “They haven’t introduced themselves to Senator Amidala, but they will soon, and as their senior, Padmé will be expected to check in on them regularly. Make sure they’re doing alright. It’s glorified babysitting, but not doing so would raise more questions then we need right now.” She exhaled in frustration, her frown deepening as she gestured towards the young girl with flaming red hair. “Not only that, but…”

And for the first time since they’d met, Eirtaé hesitated.

“What?”

“May I present my darling cousin.” Eirtaé gestured to the girl with bright red hair, her expression and voice equally sour. “Tyche Veruna.”

“…kriffing hell.” Now Rex could see it – the girl’s features were softened by her youth, but her sharp eyes and quirked mouth were an exact replica of Eirtaé’s own.

“Exactly. Look at her expression here – she’s already noticed something about Rabé. She’s trying to place her.” Eirtaé’s gaze was as calculating as a surgeon wielding a razor-sharp scalpel, and Rex couldn’t help but shudder under the weight of that look. Tyche Veruna had fixed Rabé with a strange, half-confused look, as if she were remembering something very faint from a long time ago. “The other girls, I recognize them, too. The Tapalo sisters – daughter of a former Queen. But Tyche knows Rabé, and her mother is originally from Corellia. If Rabé isn’t perfectly convincing in her role as a nobelwoman, Tyche will spot it immediately. Not to mention that Tyche knows I don’t work directly for Senator Amidala anymore.”

“So, when she sees you when they go to introduce themselves…” Rex let the rest of his sentence lapse into silence as they watched the three girls walk away, his mind firing into overtime to examine the situation from a tactical point of view.

Four threats to the entire operation in less than a day of each other. The situation was quickly becoming unbalanced, and Rabé’s team was going to have to carry the brunt of that load. Suspicion from all sides tightened around them like a vice, the number of eyes she’d have to perform for, be utterly convincing for, multiplying by the hour. The others might be able to pull some attention away from the Corellian team, but Rex didn’t want to risk anything. Rabé was trained to handle this sort of pressure – but he was worried about his men remaining innocuous under such intense scrutiny. They were used to General Skywalker’s way of handling things, not a royal handmaiden’s.
Eirtaé was watching him now, as if waiting for confirmation of her own thoughts. “I can assign a few more guards to keep an eye on them, for their own safety. And I’ll reassign the two who were supposed to be guarding Senator Amidala’s apartments. But beyond that...”

“We have to wait until the present themselves to the Senator to decide what to do.” Eirtaé nodded. “I agree.”

Rex rubbed his temple before he pulled out his datapad, making quick notes about all he needed to do before they came together as a group. As he spoke, he wiped the large screen back to its normal state of shifting security cams – but not before marking the Great Hall footage with another minor notation. “I’ll get the word to Sabé, she’s working in the library now. We’ll both be finished for the day in about an hour.”

“I’ll let the others know, then.” She met his eyes and nodded once, a slow smile curling over her lips. “Hopefully the rest of your shift passes in relative peace.”

Rex couldn’t help but grin appreciatively back at her. Something in her tone, slow and biting, told him she was well aware of how peaceful everything seemed to him, how calm it was compared to the hectic, brutal realities of his true occupation. Had they not still been fighting the Separatists, he could have almost considered it a true vacation. “We’ll see you then.”

Basilio pushed through the doors with three steaming mugs of tea just as Eirtaé turned to leave. He bowed as she left but muttered under his breath as he set the tray down. Distracted as he accepted one, Rex started scanning the feeds once more.

The pieces of the puzzle are only multiplying.
He would be lying if he said he didn’t enjoy the challenge.

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Compared to that first day, the suite that served as their headquarters was more subdued, as if it had absorbed all the focus from the team. Sabé and Rex were examining the palace blueprints again, speaking in low voice and marking off certain areas on the maps as they waited. Eirtaé was handing Ahsoka tiny headache meds that she’d fished from her hidden pack. Anakin’s presence behind Padmé brought her comfort, just as it had that morning when Nohemi had stormed their rooms. Even as the sun shone bright and cheerful, the rooms were gray, like they refused to absorb the light.

As usual, Rabé’s group was the last to arrive – she was moving quickly between social engagements, so their time was limited. Padmé was relieved to see her easy smile, as positive as ever, as she settled on the couch. Her disguise slipped from her face as she did so, relaxing against the arm of the couch, her hands finding the outline hidden blade Padmé knew she kept strapped to her thigh. She was quiet as she patted it, like to reassure herself it was there, to bring her a sense of comfort and ease. Hardcase sat next to her, Kix leaned against the wall behind them, arms folded, and only Fives remained standing. His eyes cast around the room until they landed on Echo, and he exhaled and relaxed.

The atmosphere had changed. Padmé did not have to be Force sensitive to sense the sharp nerves and racing thoughts of those around her. Everyone was tense; the day had brought too many surprises and revelations. Too many complications.

And the same sense whispered that it was far from over.

She shifted in her seat, caught Sabé’s eye, and said slowly, “I know we’re short on time. And we have many things to discuss – I’d like to save the gala for last – but there have been developments.
Complicated ones. For instance, Rabé, you are apparently a wealthy Separatist who came to help the nobles here organize against the Republic.”

Rabé raised her brow and let out a disbelieving laugh. “Am I now? That’s… news to me.” Fives did not look amused by the idea, his eyes flashing in irritation.

“Breha’s Heir Nahomi Silviá was very insistent this morning.” Padmé gave her a gentle smile. “So, I assume you’re right on the cusp of finding the actual Separatists – and, hopefully, the spy.”

“How did she come to this conclusion? If I knew who she most suspected, I could play it closer to them…”

“She only had one name. She didn’t know as much as she wanted us to believe. It was Varol,” Anakin said. “Some Lord named Varol.”

The group tensed as one. Rabé’s lips pressed into a thin line, and she shared a glance with Hardcase as Kix pushed himself off the wall. Fives had stiffened at the name. Not a one of them looked surprised. Kix cleared his throat and said slowly, “We thought so, too. Some of the things he’s said, well…”

“He really doesn’t like you, Senator,” Hardcase offered. “Something to do with the fact that you shot down the Banking Clans’ loan program.” The twist of his mouth told Padmé he was very well aware that the money would have gone towards creating more clones, and her heart constricted for a half-beat.

“Varol hasn’t said anything downright incriminating – yet – but I think he’s one of the Separatists, too.” Rabé murmured. “If the Heir believes I’m a Separatist because of how much time I’ve spent with him over the past few days, then we must be close.”

“Stay close to him.” Rex said, ignoring Fives’ noise of clear disgust. “I’ve started to gather footage from the security cameras that has him in it. Hopefully he’ll lead us to the others, but it will take some time for me to go through it all.”

Rabé nodded. “And what about the Heir? Her suspicions mean I’m on the right track, but we can’t risk her getting too close.”

Padmé shook her head. “I don’t know. I can try and slip a message to Breha, to try and keep Nohemi preoccupied with other tasks, but… she’s very suspicious of you.”

“And so is my cousin.” Eirtaé said bluntly.

Rex was the only one who did not start and stare at her.

Rabé went pale. She shifted and cleared her throat, “Your-”

“Tyche is here, and she met you on that first day, in the Hall. She’s with the two Tapalo girls as well, and she recognized you, Rabé.” It was difficult to tell if Eirtaé was anxious or not. She was staring hard at Rabé, who was clearly trying to remember when she’d met them. Padmé’s head was spinning – three Naboo nobles, and they’d met Rabé, they’d recognized her. It was as if the universe was throwing every difficulty it had at them, like it wanted to see them take a misstep. Sabé was staring at Rabé, too, her expression confused, biting her lip in sudden, uncharacteristic worry.

“Eirtaé and I found them this morning while reviewing the footage, looking for Varol,” Rex explained, casting a sideways glance at the men next to Rabé. They had all automatically moved slightly closer to her, leaning in – as if to shield her from Eirtaé’s sharp words and hard glance. “Here
He placed a small node on the center table and activated it. A still from the security cams lit up the room – and there they were. Padmé exhaled, and Rabé cursed under her breath.

“They’ll come introduce themselves either tonight or tomorrow, and Tyche will recognize me, and then she’ll place the fact that Rabé is one of my oldest friends, if she hasn’t already. That is inevitable.” Eirtaé said, finally looking away from Rabé. “We might be able to pass Lady Avalokit off as just an uncanny resemblance to the ‘real’ Rabé, but…”

“The Veruna paranoia you were talking about.” Echo finished slowly. Eirtaé nodded, and silence fell. Rabé, poor thing, still looked utterly mortified. Her face was still pale and her hands were clasped very tightly in her lap. Fives stared down at her, his hands clenched at his side, like he was resisting the urge to lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. Padmé could read the regret in her eyes, could see her furiously questioning herself why she hadn’t noticed the girls sooner.

“I’m concerned about the Tapalo girls, as well. They’re from the main line of the House – I recognize them.” Padmé said, trying to clear the tension and change the subject. “They’re Ianthe’s daughters. As in, former Queen Ianthe Tapalo. If nothing else, our concern has to be for their safety.” She paused and then allowed herself a small, stiff grin. “If any of the girls get hurt, we’ll have two extremely protective and very powerful Houses coming for us.”

Jesse passed a hand over his face and murmured something about the Naboo being crazier than he ever thought.

After a moment, Sabé shook her head. “We have to move on. I’ll try to think of what to do about the girls, but we’re running out of time, and we still have to discuss the gala. This morning was lucrative for me, as well.”

She removed one of her earcuffs and plugged it into the node Rex had placed down earlier. “Listen to this. I’ve identified one of the voices as belonging to a Lord Ridan – one of the names on Breha’s list – but I don’t know the second one.”

She activated it, and a low voice hissed, “Senator Amidala is here-”

And once again, Rabé’s entire group stiffened.

“That’s Varol.” Fives said at once, as Hardcase cursed. “That’s Lord Varol.”

“Without a doubt,” Rabé murmured, her color returning to normal. “We’ve spent enough time with him in the past few days to know that voice anywhere.”

Sabé raised her eyebrow and let the full recording play through, and Padmé’s attention was immediately caught by the mention of a meeting. Once it had finished, Sabé retrieved her cuff, and as she was fixing it back on, she asked, “You’re absolutely certain Ridan was speaking with this Varol?”

Kix nodded.

“Well, then. I suppose that makes your assignment for the Gala simple.” Sabé said curtly. “Stay near Varol, Rabé. Try to get an invitation to that meeting. Nohemi basically confirmed he’s working closely with our spy, he’s our ticket to them. Flatter him, get him drunk, promise him your hand in marriage; I don’t care. Just get yourself into that meeting.”

Rabé nodded, and for a moment, exhaustion flickered in her dark eyes before vanishing behind
steely determination. “Don’t worry. I’ll get us there.”

“Lady Maitri, it would bring me the greatest pleasure to escort you to the gala tomorrow night.”

Varol’s oily voice slid around Fives’ head, the words repeating louder and more obnoxiously until any chance of relaxing was thoroughly chased away. He cracked one eyelid open and the starlight near blinded him where it sliced onto his pillow. It was like Alderaan was trying to make up for the lack of a moon; the night sky was clear and riddled with stars like jewels. It cast everything in the room into strange half-shadows, like coating everything in fine ash and smoothing away edges until the room was bizarrely flat. Somewhere in the darkness beyond the light’s reach, Kix and Hardcase both snored away, fast asleep and unbothered with the dirty light.

_Damnit, ugly light, I’m trying to sleep. Who wants this? No one, no one wants this – kriffing obnoxious…_

He got up and padded over to the window, squinting in annoyance at the light slipping through the curtains. Everything was conspiring against his getting a good night’s sleep, it seemed. Eirtäé’s sharp words to Rabé, the way Rabé had tensed; how Fives wished he could have comforted her or shouldered the blame. Because he knew why she hadn’t noticed the three girls – it was his fault, he’d distracted her. He’d touched her elbow, made her lose focus. It wasn’t her fault. And then… the look on Varol’s face as he bent to kiss Rabé’s hand this afternoon, _again_, made Fives’ stomach churn in pure, revolted disgust. She didn’t like Lord Babyface, she’d admitted as much. And yet she had to pretend like she did. Varol might be their ticket to finding the Separatists, and Fives had to watch, still and silent and seemingly oblivious, as the charmless Lord flirted with her.

Fives had to pretend he didn’t wish it was _him_–

_No, no. No, I don’t. I don’t wish that I… I don’t wish anything. Nothing. Get it together, trooper._

_She denied Varol. She said no. She’d smiled and said she was flattered, but she’d denied him._

Which he knew had been on Sabé’s orders. They needed privacy to do their work tomorrow. At the gala.

_And what the bloody hell is a gala supposed to help with anything?_

A small part of his brain began to whisper again that he was _jealous_–

Fives groaned under his breath and leaned against the cool glass. His head felt warm and too tight, and suddenly the air in their room grew stifling. Everything about Alderaan, everything about this mission, was throwing him off balance. It was lucky he wasn’t alone. At least he had Kix and Hardcase to complain to when things got too ridiculous. But every second they spent outside the safety of their rooms, Fives felt like he was walking on needles – one wrong step and everything would fall to pieces.

Outside, the leaves of the candlewick vines that cloistered around the edge of the shared balcony shifted in the breeze. Fives watched for a moment before putting his hand on the curved handle of the door. A cold wind would clear his thoughts, calm his racing mind and cool his skin.

He looked through the window and everything fell into a deep, reverent silence, every detail sharpened into stark relief.
His body was frozen but then his mind was whirling, spinning chaotically in his brain, his thoughts crashing around his skull until he thought he would burst.

Rabé sat on the balcony. She was sitting in her own room’s balcony section, curled on a marble bench, huddled next to the glowing candlewicks. Soft gold light warmed her skin against the silver starlight. She was the only golden thing in the world. She wore a long pink robe over a nightgown of shimmering gray. Her hair was lazily tied up, a few strands blowing in the wind – but she took no notice as she concentrated on the datapad in her lap. Whatever she was reading, it had completely captivated her attention – her head was tilted to one side, a gentle frown creasing her brow.

His stomach turned over and climbed into his throat when the corners of her lips twitched up in a faint smile.

He took back everything he’d just muttered under his breath about the ashen light.

Kix coughed in his sleep and Fives leapt back from the window, heart pounding, and yanked the curtains shut tight. Still burning, he nearly ran back to his bed and burrowed under the covers, praying she hadn’t noticed him, refusing to let himself examine why, exactly, he was praying she hadn’t noticed. He couldn’t let himself wonder, couldn’t let himself even think about it, because they were here on a mission – and yet that was almost as bad as acknowledging it, because–

A quiet click broke through his churning thoughts.

He bolted upright in the darkness of their room, forcing his breaths to level out as he waited, frowning. Then the click sounded again, this time with a gentle creak, and Fives cursed under his breath.

The front door to their rooms, the one that opened onto their living space. It had just been unlocked. And then opened.

He didn’t even wait to hear it close before he was up – again – he raced to the window and pulled back the curtain.

Rabé was gone.

Fives cursed again, a chill rushing through his blood as he looked back to his sleeping brothers, his mind furiously working as he grabbed his jacket and blaster. He didn’t have time to wake them or explain – if Varol, or someone else, had taken her – focus, trooper. She wouldn’t have gone without a fight, so maybe he was overreacting. Maybe.

He wasn’t about to risk it, though.

He slipped out into the living space, his blaster hot and ready, and prowled over to Rabé’s rooms. There was no answer when he knocked, and when he pushed the door open, another stream of curses left his tongue as he registered her empty bed. Her room was dark – a little messy, too, he noted – and utterly empty. He’d been assigned to protect Rabé – and gods help the bastard who thought they could slip her out from his watch without a fight.

Just as he made to move towards the door, determination a cold, steady beat in his bloodstream, he noticed her coat was missing from its rung. Fives pulled on his shoes and yanked open the door in time to see Rabé slowly meander around the corner, still reading her datapad, utterly alone and free from harm.

A wave of pure relief washed over Fives. He took a steadying breath. She’s okay. She’s okay.
He knew she could handle herself. She was a better fighter than he was – when surprise was on her side, at least. But the thought of letting her wander away, alone, in the darkness of a strange palace where countless enemies hid… he’d be a poor excuse for a Captain of the Guard if he simply went back to bed. She might want to be alone – *I don’t have to walk next to her. I won’t bother her. I’m just... I’ll just make sure she’s safe.*

Fives steeled his nerves as he took a step into the hallway to follow her.

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Starlight danced on the cold waves of the lake, and Rabé shivered as she burrowed her nose into her thickly lined coat. Alderaan was colder than Naboo, but the sounds of the water against the shore were still a comfort. She’d heard them from the balcony and she had not been able to resist. It was like a small piece of home, and under the starlight, alone by the water, her racing mind stilled for the first time all day.

She should have noticed Eirtaé’s cousin. She should have recognized that the girls were from Naboo – it was so obvious – she should have spotted them, warned the others. Rabé rubbed a spot on her datapad and tried to forget the look Eirtaé had given her. She was unfocused, she knew that. Distracted. And that was unacceptable. She had to do better.

But every time her thoughts returned to the gala, her stomach twisted in unease. So much was riding on it, and she was more unbalanced than she could ever remember being on a mission. Her stomach twisted again and she leaned against the post of the dock, closing her eyes until the cold wind and sound of the waves was the only thing in her mind.

Her datapad almost slipped off her lap into the lake, and she caught it, the first line of her research catching her eye, and despite her low mood, she smiled at the words:

*Nobody kriffing knows anything about lightsabers – and those who do, aren’t talking about it.*

Earlier, once they’d returned to their rooms, she’d buried herself in her bed and compiled every document, every resource and note she could find on the traditional weapon of the Jedi Order – but there was frustratingly little. Rabé hummed lightly as she skimmed through the meager notes for a fourth time, wishing that she had asked General Skywalker or Ahsoka while they were all still onboard the *Resolute*. She knew they were powered with kyber crystals, but beyond that… their construction was a mystery to her.

“Lady Maitri?”

Her hand flew to her blaster as she spun around – and lowered again when Fives hesitantly stepped forward onto the dock.

“Fi- Captain!” Even in the strange, gray lighting, she knew it was Fives. He looked like he had just tumbled out of bed – his curled, springing hair was a mess. And then she noticed the blaster in his hands. “…What are you doing? Not going to shoot me, I hope?”

He started and looked down at the blaster in his hand, like he’d forgotten he was carrying it. He fidgeted, and then stowed the blaster in the low-slung holster on his hips. “No, it’s just… I heard – I thought that something had happened. To you. The door opened, and it woke me. The front door, to the apartment, I mean. Uhm. …I just wanted to make sure you were alright.” He wouldn’t meet her eyes, his hands moving for emphasis on every syllable. He ran a hand through his hair, and Rabé couldn’t help but smile at the gesture.
“Oh. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean – I just wanted to be by the water, that’s all.” Needlessly, uselessly, she gestured to the lake and fumbled for her datapad again. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

He shook his head as he stepped closer. “‘S okay. Just... doing my job,” he said, and then grinned sheepishly at some private thought. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Rabé couldn’t help but laugh. “At least we know my reflexes are as sharp as ever.”

Fives gave her another small smile, his hands clasped behind his back, and Rabé suddenly remembered her manners. “You don’t have to do your job from all the way back there.” She patted the wooden dock next to her, and for a moment he hesitated, eyes wide – and then he strode forward, as if he had to spend his courage quickly before it left him, and Rabé suddenly realized why she had been so off balance lately. It wasn’t mission nerves. It wasn’t stress about playing this role, it wasn’t anxiety that they were too late, that she wouldn’t be clever enough to outwit a spy. No, Rabé had handled these things before, and with exceptional grace. She’d been trained in the Naboo tradition, she’d been trained as a royal handmaiden. She was never afraid to tackle seemingly insurmountable odds or back down from a challenge.

No.

It was him.

Her mouth was suddenly very dry.

Shit. Oh, shit.

Fives settled gracefully next to her, the soles of his boots nearly touching the water below the dock, and warmth suddenly flooded through her blood. Still, she shivered. She told herself it was just the wind from over the lake.

Fives cleared his throat, the sound almost making Rabé jump, and jerked his head towards the datapad in her lap. “Doing some light reading?”

The ever-constant crashing of the waves meant their voices were covered – but it also meant, Rabé noted with a surge of anxiety, that they had to lean close to each other to be heard.

She forced what she hoped looked to be a natural smile. “Researching, actually. Helps take my mind off things.”

He quirked a grin at her. “Weapons?”

“What else?” She returned his smile. “I… research is a good distraction.” Her mouth twisted, and she looked away. Next to her, Fives’ motions stilled, and when she glanced up he met her eyes for only a moment before flicking back down to his hands. Rabé couldn’t help but notice that despite the chill, he seemed perfectly content in just his pajamas while she was nearly buried under three layers. She opened her mouth to ask if he was cold, but then he spoke.

“I’m sorry.” He said, without meeting her eyes. “It was my fault you didn’t recognize those girls. And then... Eirtaé-”

“She’s just doing her job.” Rabé said quickly. She knew what he was about to say. “That’s all.”

Fives cleared his throat and gripped the edge of the dock, aimlessly kicking his legs over the water. “Of course.”
Still, she was grateful for his concern.

They were silent again, the waves a steady undercurrent to their breathing. He sat stiffly next to her, staring off into the distance.

She shuddered against the wind and murmured, “I’m trying to find information about, uhm, ...lightsabers.”

“There’s no information – again. At this point I’m not surprised.”

She shook herself, refocused, and nodded. “Since we’re working with General Skywalker and Ahsoka now, I wanted to learn more about them, like how they work, how they’re constructed – what they’re capable of... I know the basics, and of course there are those old wives’ tales about lightsabers and Jedi, but I was hoping to find more technical readouts. Since we’re working with the Jedi – well, not you, I mean. My sisters and me, obviously, you’ve worked with them before, you probably know all about them...”

He was staring at her, a tiny frown creasing his brow, and Rabé’s words stuttered into silence, lying thickly on her tongue. The waves lapped at the shore, and she was grateful for the sound, but still her cheeks started to warm. Oh, gods, I’m rambling again and I’m not even saying anything clever...

And then Fives grinned, and her cheeks near burst into flame.

She couldn’t help it – does he know, does he realize? His smile was brilliant and she was glad that he smiled all the time, when he grinned his eyes crinkled up, his lips twitched to one side and it was like his whole body rose up with his emotions. It was different from the way Kix or Hardcase smiled – Kix’s was gentle, more reserved; Hardcase’s was liable to bring raucous laughter and tears to his eyes – but Fives’ smile was...

Not fair, she thought, biting down on the inside of her cheek hard as he shrugged good-naturedly, completely unaware. “T’be honest, I don’t think anyone really knows anything about the Jedi. Or their lightsabers. But maybe I can help...?"

As Rabé handed him the datapad, his fingers brushed over hers. If he noticed, he gave no sign, but Rabé’s fingertips were suddenly electrified. She pulled back as quickly as she could without wanting to seem rude and quelled it, forced the flurry of nerves away. He sat on the edge of the dock and leaned against the post, relaxing.

As he scanned through her datapad, Rabé was suddenly extremely aware of where they were sitting. How alone they were. The starlight danced on the gentle waves of the lake and cast his face into sharp, sculpted relief. He was so close that she could feel his warmth radiating against the chill of the night. She watched him read, her stomach twisting and every nerve suddenly alight with an electrical current.

He was reading along, muttering under his breath and Rabé let her mind wander. Fives was charming, he was funny and easy-going and he was so clever.

And something told her he’d be a very good kisser.

Rabé tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, nerves prickling the back of her neck as she watched him quickly skim through her research. He grinned at one of her notes – read it out loud under his breath, the corner of his lips twitching up in amusement – and her stomach twisted as he read her words back to her in his rough cadence. “’No information – again. At this point I’m not surprised.”
Still kripping frustrating, though.’ Heh, I didn’t really expect your annotations to be like that.”

She nodded, praying her voice was steady when she answered, “Makes it more entertaining.”

He caught her eye and smiled again, and again, the thought of kissing him – by the lake, under the stars, a noble Lady and her Captain, bodies pressed close together, their thoughts only for the other – rose up like a shock in her mind. He returned to her notes with another little laugh, leaning back on one hand, resting her datapad on his thigh as he continued to scroll.

She knew it couldn’t happen. We have a mission to complete. We can’t be… distracted…

Rabé glanced down. Fives’ hand was resting close to her – he was so tall that his reach could have easily extended all the way around her body. There wasn’t much room on the dock, they were sitting close together, and Rabé wondered what he would do if she took his hand in her own. If she rested her hand on top of his. He might jump a little… but she wondered if he would pull away.

If she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his-

“Looks like we’re pretty much even when it comes to lightsabers.” Fives said, and he pulled his hand away to rub the back of his neck again. Rabé’s thoughts jerked back to the present, to the now – and away from the what-if. “Sorry I can’t be of more help.”

She smiled to herself and buried deeper into her coat, pulling her hands back – aware of the space between them still, and of how it had suddenly cooled. “Back to square one,” she teased lightly, ignoring the steady pounding of her heartbeat in her ears.

She shut the datapad down and leaned against the post, staring off at the starlit lake, and silence descended between them once more.

“I am sorry.”

She turned her head and Fives was staring at her with the same look he’d given her in the gardens that first day. And just like it had then, his look sent shivers down her spine, and this time, she didn’t bother trying to persuade herself it was the cold wind from the lake. When she didn’t respond right away, he cleared his throat and went on, “For distracting you. From recognizing those girls.” His mouth worked strangely, like he was trying to push the words out from behind his tongue, and after a moment he said quietly, “I’m sorry about that.”

Rabé smiled and shivered, suddenly exhausted and entirely spent. All she wanted to do was curl up under her thick blankets and sleep for the next month. But they were far from done; the mission was far from over. “No. You don’t have anything to be sorry for, Fives. …I – thank you, though.”

She met his eyes, and this time, he did not look away.

And Rabé was suddenly nervous – very nervous – that she would lean forward and kiss him. She knew if she did, it would change everything. Everything. The way he was staring at her made her stomach leap, it made her heart thrum wildly against her ribs – and the words spilled out from her mouth before she could stop them, “I just have to charm Varol tomorrow at the gala, right? To make up for that, I mean.”

Fives’ expression flickered for a moment, and then he looked out across the lake again. “You’ll do fine. He won’t know what hit him.” His voice lowered, like he was speaking to himself. “You’ll be perfect.”
Please consider giving the [update post on tumblr a like/reblog](#) if you enjoyed this chapter - we absolutely love hearing your thoughts! It means the world to us ❤
“In seasons of cheerfulness, no temper could be more cheerful than hers, or possess, in a greater degree, **that sanguine expectation of happiness** which is **happiness** itself.”

- Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Just as Eirtaé had predicted, the three young Nabooian girls presented themselves the very next morning.

Unlike Nohemi, they patiently waited for the Alderaanian guards standing watch – new ones, assigned by Rex the previous evening and impressed with the importance of screening visitors to the suite – to announce their desire to speak with the Senator. They did not rush in, eyes wild and accusations loose on their tongue.

And also unlike when Nohemi burst into the room, this time, the team was ready for visitors. Jesse and Echo were fully armed and uniformed, standing at attention; Eirtaé wore thick robes of deep, emerald green that threw her face in shadows, and the Senator wore an even more sumptuous gown than her usual style. The only ones absent were General Skywalker and Commander Tano; they’d left the hour before to scout out the location of the gala with Captain Rex. It had been the Senator’s idea, to greet the young noblewomen in their full regalia, to impress upon them the importance of the visit - and, she’d added with a quirk of a smile, to see what they were made of.

If they had been younglings from any other system other than Naboo, Echo might have felt a little guilty about this sort of clandestine test.

Something told him they’d be able to handle it.

Senator Amidala stood in the center of the room as they strode in, clustered together like a group of nervous but desperate to appear more confident cadets. Two of the girls were clearly sisters, as they shared the same narrow, long face and heavy-lidded eyes. The eldest had thick, jet-black hair that hung to the small of her waist, simply plaited with a deep red ribbon and tied off with little flair. Though her deep red gown was extravagant and, for all Echo knew, proper for a young woman of her age, she also had a sharp graphic tattoo of a thorn branch under her right eye. She introduced herself first, curtsying as she said, “Senator Amidala, it is a pleasure to finally meet you. My name is Akantha Tapalo, daughter of Ianthe and Ajax Tapalo. This is my sister, Iole.”

Iole, who was holding Akantha’s hand with both of hers, stared at Senator Amidala with naked curiosity. She mumbled a shy greeting when prompted and then glanced up at her sister for approval. By Echo’s best estimates, she was no older than eight to Akantha’s fifteen years. The Naboo must have some training regimen, if younglings are allowed to conduct official business without a supervisor or caretaker to guide them. He’d expected a stern nurse or guardian, but aside from the typical retinue of Nabooian guards in blue and red leather, the girls were alone. Neither the Senator nor Eirtaé so much as blinked at this, so Echo assumed it must be common practice.

The other, surveying the room with a slow, level gaze, could only have been Eirtaé’s cousin. It was almost uncanny, the way she carried herself - like Eirtaé, she moved with no excessive or wasted movements. She wore her thick, bright red hair wound into a thick braid held in place with a headdress of silk ribbons - though it was much simpler than the Senator’s own. Her voice was lower than Akantha’s, but it still held the light ring of youth. “Senator Amidala, I am pleased to meet you. I am Tyche Veruna, daughter of Iliana Couronne of Corellia and Keirnan Veruna.”

Senator Amidala smiled warmly at them. “I’m glad to meet you. Please, come sit with me. I’m eager to hear how your tours are coming along.”
They followed her into the room, staring wide-eyed at Jesse and Echo as they clustered together on the couch opposite the Senator. Eirtaé slipped out of the room, and Tyche’s eyes flicked over to follow her movements, her expression unreadable. Senator Amidala waited until the littlest one - Iole - had settled before asking after their experiences on their tour. Within a few minutes, it was very clear that Akantha and Tyche had no trouble maintaining a conversation with a person of political power, but they were still restrained and formal. It was fascinating to watch as the Senator gently and subtly coaxed them into relaxing by sharing some of her stories. Soon they were chatting like old friends, laughing at the Senator’s stories of Akantha’s mother and Tyche’s cousin Ari, both of whom were elected monarchs before the Senator.

Eirtaé stepped back into the room, carrying a tray laden with sweet cakes and mugs for tea, and once more, Tyche’s eyes flashed to follow her. Her eyes narrowed as Eirtaé set the tray down, and as Akantha finished telling a story about her father almost embarrassing himself in front of the Chancellor, Tyche cleared her throat and murmured, “Cousin. It’s good to see you.”

Akantha fell silent, and stared at Eirtaé, who was unfazed. “Likewise. Are you enjoying your stay on Alderaan?”

Tyche’s gaze was as steady as Eirtaé’s. It was like watching two cats circle each other, each waiting for the other to slip first. “Queen Breha is very kind. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Hm. And why is that?”

Now Tyche seemed to hesitate. “Well, I…”

“Cousin, if you have something to say,” Eirtaé said slowly, spreading her hands in a welcoming gesture, even as her words were guarded and neutral, “then say it.”

Tyche bit her lip, and then glanced at Akantha, who steeled her gaze and nodded. They’d discussed something before coming to meet the Senator. See the challenge, Echo found himself urging them in his head. Don’t back down. Senator Amidala was watching them with the same neutral gaze, patiently waiting for their answer.

Tyche took a steadying breath and the words fell out in a rush: “Why are you here, with the Senator? You don’t work directly for her anymore. You work for the Queen now. If the Senator is here with two troopers—” Tyche’s gaze skimmed over to where Jesse and Echo stood, still as statues, watching silently, “—and two Jedi, then… then you don’t need to be here for security.”

“And there are no Nabooian guards,” Akantha offered in a steady voice. “It’s a strange retinue for a diplomatic visit. A large one.”

“And your friend - Rabé’s here, too, isn’t she?” When neither the Senator nor Eirtaé made move to answer, Tyche rushed on, as if she wanted to finish her thought before her courage left her, “We met her in the Great Hall the other day. But she’s… This is a military operation, isn’t it? You’re not just visiting Her Highness; you’re here for… for something related to the war effort, aren’t you?”

For a moment, no one moved. Akantha and Tyche waited with bated breath, their expressions waverling from confidence to worry - and then Senator Amidala exhaled, looked at Eirtaé, and smiled. “They’re clever, aren’t they?”

Eirtaé nodded. “The only ones in this court to pick up on it thus far.”

Akantha inhaled sharply as Tyche tentatively asked, in disbelief and growing excitement in equal measure, “Wait - so-“
“You’re correct.”

“We were right?”

Senator Amidala raised her eyebrow in answer and the girls exclaimed in excitement. She let them go on for a moment before clearing her throat, “I trust I don’t have to stress how important it is that you do not breathe a word of this - to anyone? Not until our mission here is complete.”

“Of course!” They answered in unison, looking mildly offended that they would even have to be reminded. Akantha opened her mouth, lost her nerve for a moment, and then charged ahead anyways: “Can we ask - what is the mission?”

That morning, Senator Amidala had made it clear that if the girls passed the test - if they were able to pick up the nuances of the conversation, to notice what no one else had noticed, to discern what the presence of a Senator, two Jedi, and two troopers could mean - she would recruit them.

And they’d passed with flying colors, so Senator Amidala nodded and slowly answered, “We’re here on special request of Queen Breha, investigating a Separatist spy who has been leaking credits, intel, and resources for the past few months. We’re here to find them.”

Echo hadn’t thought it possible for their excitement to grow, but now there was no trace of formal reserve in the girls’ expression. It was as if the Senator had given them each an unexpected and incredibly generous present.

Eirtaé picked up the explanation where the Senator had left it off: “We’ve run into a slight obstacle, however. One of the Queen’s Heirs is suspicious of Rabé, who has the most covert role out of all of us.”

Tyche nodded. “She’s a Corellian noblewoman on her tour?”

“Exactly. But… this girl is complicating the matter. If Rabé has to deal with a well-intentioned but over-eager and misinformed Heir, then she won’t be able to focus on the true task at hand.”

_Clever_, Echo thought. Another challenge. _Figure out your role, and it’s yours._ He shifted slightly in eagerness, closely following the unfolding action like a particularly exciting play in the bolo-ball games Captain Rex adamantly refused to admit he enjoyed.

Akantha broke the silence first, her voice breathless and eyes wide in growing excitement. “Are you - are you asking for our help, Senator?”

When the Senator nodded, a light smile playing on her lips, Akantha gasped in delight and clutched Tyche’s arm. “Heir Nohemi is dangerously close to ruining Rabé’s cover. I don’t want risk shifting Nohemi’s attentions onto another, because we need people to believe that Rabé is indeed a Separatist - or, at least, is open to their cause.”

Tyche nodded furiously, her eyes bright. “You want us to keep Nohemi away from Rabé, but keep feeding her suspicions, so it’ll get back to the spy and they’ll be more willing to let her into their circle.”

Eirtaé fixed her cousin with a look of pure satisfaction and pride as she sat next to the Senator. “Exactly. Now then, onto the more pressing details…”

From his post at the edge of the room, Echo watched as the littlest one’s attention began to wander. Iole was doing her absolute best to pay attention to Senator Amidala and Eirtaé as they explained the mission to the other girls, but the intense political discussion could hardly hold her interest. Her legs
kicked out from under her brilliant blue skirts, her eyes darting around the room as she started to bounce in place, trying to keep still and failing spectacularly. Her eyes landed on Echo and narrowed, and then flashed to Jesse and narrowed even more.

Akantha grabbed her hand and shook it gently, murmuring something under her breath – and this was apparently a sign that she was free to wander, because the next moment Iole had scrambled down from the couch and was determinedly heading directly for him.

She stopped about a foot in front of Jesse and Echo and stared up at them with wide eyes. Unlike her sister’s, which were dark brown, Iole’s eyes were a soft, pale green. Echo didn’t know what to do - his only experiences with younglings was limited to clone cadets. She took a moment to work up her courage before taking a deep breath and loudly and whispering in a low, serious tone, “Are you real? Or are you statues?”

Echo grinned – he couldn’t help it. It was such an earnest, innocent question. She’d recently lost some of her baby teeth, her youthful grin striking a stark contrast with her extravagant and regal gown.

Jesse stifled a laugh and said, in as gentle a voice as the modifier on his bucket would give him, “Oh, we’re real, little one.”

At his words, pure delight spread across her round face and she started to bounce in place a little more. “You’re standing so still! I thought maybe you were statues.” She glanced over at Echo, and he gave her a little wave, so as to reassure her he was not a statue, either. Her grin widened and she laughed again as she waved back.

None of the 501st had much experience with civvie younglings – which was, Echo thought, a good thing. They weren’t a relief battalion. If there was a youngling anywhere near the 501st while they were on active duty, it was terrible thing indeed. The 501st was usually sent to the worst messes, the most dangerous fronts. Younglings didn’t belong in those terrible places. And the missions that he and Fives were contracted out to were even more dangerous – not counting this one, of course, he quickly amended, resting the butt of his rifle on the floor as Iole bounced closer, staring up at them with excited eyes.

“Are you clones? You’re clones, aren’t you? I recognized the armor – and the helmet – I like that red color! Is that a real gun? Do you like Alderaan? How many systems have you been to? We’ve been to three already and Atha says this is our last stop before going back home, but I don’t know if I want to go-”

She had a thousand questions, each a little louder, a little more frantic and excited than the last, until Jesse knelt and gently said, “Hush, little one. You’re distracting the others.”

Echo glanced over at the gathered couches and sure enough, Akantha’s cheeks were bright red and her mouth a thin line as she glared at her younger sister. Tyche was grinning, though, like she was used to Iole’s boundless energy, and Senator Amidala and Eirtaë eyes were amused underneath their stern gazes.

Iole clapped a hand to her mouth and loudly whispered again, “Sorry!” Through her fingers, she mumbled to them, like she was sharing a secret, “Atha says I get too loud sometimes… She also says I have a lot of questions – but I don’t think that’s a bad thing… it’s not, is it?” Suddenly, her little face tightened in worry, and her hands clenched the sides of her skirts.

Echo dropped in a crouch next to Jesse and said, “It’s good to have lots of questions. A really good
thing, so I wouldn’t worry about having too many.”

She looked at him like he was the greatest thing in the galaxy, beaming, and Echo was suddenly hit with the realization that this is why he and the other millions of clones had been made. This is who they were fighting for, this is who they were protecting – for children like Iole all across the galaxy. Of course he knew that; it had been drilled into his head as soon as he had been decanted. It was the underlying moral behind every drill, every lesson. But it was one thing to hear the droids on Kamino relay the message, and quite another to look at the little face of one of the younglings he’d been created to protect. The thought of her getting hurt was suddenly almost too much for him to bear, and his grip on the rifle tightened as his resolve steeled. He didn’t need to look at Jesse to know his brother felt the same.

“What are your names?”

As they both introduced themselves, Iole repeated their names before dipping into a surprisingly graceful curtsy for each of them. “It is very nice to meet you! My name is Iole - oh, but you knew that already, oops...” She laughed again.

Before either Jesse or Echo had time to draw a breath, she launched into her next round of questions.

“What’s under your helmets? Can I see your faces?” Curiosity was written plain as day in her bright eyes; she’d probably never seen a clone trooper before. She started bouncing in place again, as if nothing could be more exciting than meeting two clones.

Echo’s mind automatically flipped to the reg manual he’d memorized well before being deployed to Rishi: Troopers will not remove their helmets while on duty, nor while interacting with civilians or charges. Trooper stationed in civilian locations [e.g. the 41st Guard on Coruscant] are to wear their helmets at all times.

But Jesse was already reaching up to remove his bucket, resting his rifle in one arm as he did so.

Iole’s eyes popped when the helmet came off. She reached for wonder towards his face as he smiled at her, his expression warm and fond. “Your tattoo! It’s so big!” As Jesse laughed, delighted with her reaction, she spun around and called out in a voice three times as big as her body, “Atha!”

Once again, the conversation stuttered to a halt. Akantha grew red again. “Iole-”

She pointed excitedly at Jesse’s head and said, “Look! His tattoo is bigger than yours! He wins!”

Akantha sighed, exasperated, one hand floating up to touch her own under her right eye. “Tattoos aren’t a competition, Iole.”

“Mm.” Iole turned back around and beamed at Jesse. “She’s just mad because she lost.”

Akantha groaned and buried her face in her hands as Senator Amidala burst out laughing. Even Eirtae and Tyche had small smiles, though both quickly wiped back to a neutral expression.

“Did it hurt? Did you have to ask someone to get it? Atha didn’t ask – she just showed up to dinner one day with a bacta patch under her eye – Mama was so mad when she found out!” Iole burst into delighted laughter at the memory, and Echo couldn’t help but laugh along with her.

He remembered Sabé’s regretful words on the Resolute the day they’d left, especially what had remained unsaid: the warning of ungrateful or uncaring civilian, nobles who sneered at the idea of the war while clones died by the thousands. He’d braced himself for that, prepared to be submerged in those attitudes – but Iole Tapalo could not have been farther from the image of a noble he’d
created in his head.

She put a tiny hand on Jesse’s helmet, tapping the red paint. “I like this color. It’s like the color of the Royal House! Mm… actually, it’s a little lighter than this. I still like it though. Do you get to paint your own armor?”

Jesse nodded, supporting his bucket on his knee as Iole traced along the lines of the red Coruscant Guard paint. “We don’t usually wear red, but we do get to paint our armor. My normal armor has my tattoo painted on it.”

“I wish I could paint my dresses. What color do you usually wear?”

“Blue.”

“Like my dress?! When Jesse nodded, Iole gasped in delight. “I won’t paint this one, then. It’s a good color!”

“A very good color,” Echo agreed as her bright laughter bounced off the walls.

Before Akantha had time to goodnaturedly admonish her sister again, the door opened and General Skywalker and Commander Tano sauntered back into the suites, looking every bit as capable and important as they did on the battlefield. Echo automatically straightened to attention, and little Iole, noticing his diverted attention, turned around to stare at the newcomers. She stepped closer to Jesse as she did so, her grip on the ridge of his helmet tightening. As Skywalker and Tano made their way to Senator Amidala’s side, nodding at the two girls on the couch, Akantha and Tyche exchanged looks, equal parts disbelief and excitement at the sight of two Jedi.

It seemed that a unifying moment across classes, across stations in life no matter how opposing they seemed, was the universal reaction towards meeting one’s first Jedi.

Tyche’s eyes flashed to Commander Tano’s sabers, and Echo noted the two older girls were about the same age as the Commander. The striking difference between their worlds hit him once again – the two young noblewomen and a Jedi Commander, all around fifteen years, leading vastly different lives but still, by some strange and brilliant circumstance, brought together in this room.

“Akantha, Tyche, Iole: may I introduce Jedi General Anakin Skywalker, and his Padawan, Ahsoka Tano.” The two older girls inclined their heads, excitement as clear as day on their young faces. Iole, however, stared hard at them for a bare moment before turning back around to the two clones. She smiled up at Echo, and his heart melted. Bouncing around with a hundred questions, Iole thought he and Jesse were vastly more interesting that the Jedi.

Akantha pressed her fingertips to her mouth and laughed with delight. “Wait until Mum hears that we’re helping the Senator and the Jedi!”

General Skywalker’s expression clouded with concern for a brief moment before brightening again as he turned to face the girls. “Are we welcoming three new recruits to our team?”

Senator Amidala nodded as Akantha and Tyche exchanged excited glances. “They’re going to help us keep Heir Nohemi distracted and away from Rabé - ah, beg pardon, Lady Maitri - while keeping up the appearance that she is Separatist-leaning.”

“Quite the challenge.” But his eyes were still concerned, that much was clear to see, even across the room, even with Iole still bombarding a patient Jesse with questions about his tattoo, his armor, his favorite colors, and whether or not he’d tried Nabooian chocolate before. General Skywalker watched her bounce around for a moment, his expression unusually soft, before he turned and bent
towards the Senator’s ear. She listened, frowned sharply, and shook her head. Though she spoke too quietly for Echo to hear, he could clearly read her lips: *They’re trained. They can handle it.*

General Skywalker was not about to let the matter drop so easily, however. “But what about their families? You said that if they got hurt, there’d be hell to pay.”

“Well we can handle ourselves, General.” Tyche spoke up, Akantha nodding in agreement. “We might not look like it - but we’re Nabooian. This sort of thing is part of our family traditions.”

“Family traditions?”

She nodded, and Akantha explained, “We’re from two of the oldests Houses. Iole and I are from the main Tapalo line, which means we’ve been trained in self-defense as well as diplomacy. And... well... Tyche is a *Veruna*. They’re famous for that sort of thing.”

Eirtaé laughed, and Tyche gave her a sly smile.

Skywalker stared at Tyche, and she returned it without flinching. Finally he sighed and shook his head, relenting with a sly grin. “And I thought the Jedi had some bizarre traditions.”

“Aha has seven knives!” Iole chirped helpfully, puffing up in pride for her sister, and Commander Tano’s eyes widened in surprise. “She’s *very* good at throwing them.”

“Really?” When Akantha nodded, Ahsoka grinned, impressed. “That’s so cool!”

Akantha flushed with pride. “Not as cool as *lightsabers*, though-”

Jesse gave a low laugh as the girls descended into a chorus of excited chatter, and glanced over at Echo. “What is it with the Naboo and weapons?”

“Especially hidden ones,” he replied, shrugging.

“I can’t tell you how happy I am that this has all worked out so well. I’m sorry to cut this meeting short, but we have an appointment with Queen Breha’s personal tailor to keep. We can go over some of the details before the gala. I want you to start thinking about how you’ll keep Nohemi busy. It’ll be a delicate balancing act,” Senator Amidala said as she stood and started to shepherd the girls to the door, “but I am confident you’ll be able to handle this.”

“Don’t worry, Senator Amidala, General Skywalker.” Tyche murmured, her voice low. “We’ll be ready.”

A brief burst of what Echo could only describe as pride flashed over Eirtaé’s face as her cousin fixed her wild red hair with the smooth, confident air of someone much older than her fifteen years. General Skywalker, looking a touch more convinced now than he had when he’d first noticed the girls, folded his arms over his chest and nodded. Commander Tano, on the other hand, just looked thrilled.

Echo couldn’t help but notice that Iole was steadfastly pretending not to notice her sister walk towards the door. When he raised an eyebrow at her, she frowned and put her finger to her lips - but to no avail.

“Time to go, Iole,” Akantha called as she and Tyche walked to the door. “We’ll be back soon, though, okay?”

Iole’s face dropped a little in disappointment at the direct order, but she complied all the same. When
she reached Akantha’s side, she looked back over to Jesse and Echo and gave them a sad, small wave.

“Senator Amidala? What about Iole?” Akantha’s expression softened as she glanced down at her sister, who automatically reached up to take her hand. “Who’s going to watch over her while Tyche and I are helping you?”

Echo cleared his throat, gestured to himself and Jesse in answer, and Iole beamed at him.

Fives woke with his cold, bitter mantra still running through his mind, as it had for the entirety of the night: the mission, and the mission only.

Unlike the night before, Fives did not scout out the balcony before he stepped outside. He was exhausted; his head throbbed with a steady, constant beat, and he didn’t quite feel like figuring out if it was because of his restless sleep or because of something – someone – else.

All he could think about was getting to the caff he knew the servitor droid had already set up. If there was one thing he could quickly get used to, out of everything here, it was the sheer abundance of food. Real food, not nutrient paste or ration bars. Civvie food. Stuff that clones weren’t meant to really get used to – so he and Hardcase planned to eat their weight in it every day. Kix was more reserved when it came to the food, no matter how much shit Hardcase gave him for it.

The cold morning air did nothing to wake him up, nor the chilled marble under his bare feet. He barely had time to note that the candlewicks had already retreated from their brilliant gold to a pale yellow before a gentle voice murmured, “Good morning, Fives.”

He stopped mid-yawn and blinked down at Rabé, sitting at the head of a table laden with what appeared to be three times the usual amount of food – scones, bacon, eggs, fruit platters and tea and three huge pots of freshly roasted caff. She was still in her silvery nightgown and pink overcoat, smiling gently up at him as she poured herself a cup of the strongest brew, careful to avoid spilling on her datapad. “How did you sleep?”

Her voice was slightly hoarse, slightly cracked from sleep – like she had just woken up mere moments ago – and despite all of his work last night, despite how many times he had repeated his mantra until the word became nothing but static bursts of noise in his head, the mere sound of her voice still sent a gentle warmth racing through his blood. He had hardly slept, and what rest he had managed to catch had been fitful; he’d wrestled with his own thoughts, pulling them away from her no matter how often they’d slipped back to the lakeshore, to the sound of her voice besides the waves.

“Fine, fine.” Fives lied as he sat down in the chair opposite her, still staring, before he remembered his manners. “And – and you?”

She slowly stirred the caff, steam rising in lazy whorls before a light breeze blew it away. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and gave a little laugh. “I had a little trouble falling asleep; I think it was the chill.” She shivered a little and cupped her mug in both hands, bringing it close to her lips as if to warm herself, “But I’m glad you slept well. I was worried that I’d kept you up, what with my wandering around.”

He smiled weakly at her, trying to appear more confident than he felt. He didn’t really feel like letting her know that he had fallen asleep thinking of her in the starlight. Something told him that was
inappropriate of a Captain. “Nah, no. It was – I slept fine.”

“Good. I’m glad.” She held his gaze for a moment longer, then looked away and took a small sip of her caff. From across the lake, echoing in the surrounding mountains, birdsong rose with the growing light of the rising sun. He almost wanted to say that if she had trouble sleeping again, he wouldn’t mind keeping her company.

But he didn’t, and instead they lapsed into silence.

In the silence steadily growing between them, Fives noticed again just how much food was set out on the table. He blinked at the array of sweet pastries, sugary confections and piled luxuries around him, far more than Rabé ever ate for breakfast. She usually stuck with fruits and toast, lighter things – as well as copious amounts of caff. He laughed a little as he started to pile some bacon and scones on a plate, grabbing indeterminately for whatever looked and smelled the best - which was, he admitted, almost all of it - and Rabé’s eyes snapped back to him. “Feeling a little hungry this morning?”

He winced at the awkward way the words tumbled out of his mouth, but Rabé didn’t seem to notice. She smiled and set her mug back down on the table, shaking her head. “I asked VeeCee to bring more up from the kitchens. Sweeter things, especially. Hot chocolate, and pastries and things. I… I noticed you liked them. You and Hardcase, I mean.”

Fives stared at the food. She’d ordered it all for them. She’d noticed, quietly made a note to order more for them. More of what they, personally, liked. Maybe she thought nothing of the gesture, but suddenly Fives felt like the most spoiled being in the entire galaxy. Her kindness towards him and his brothers warmed him to his core, but before he could find the words to thank her, the balcony doors crashed open and Hardcase tumbled out, followed by a yawning Kix. The moment between them – whatever it had been – was gone.

Rabé greeted them almost as warmly as she had greeted Fives, and he plucked at a dark berry pastry coated in a fine pale sugar as they exclaimed at the banquet. Kix kept trying to meet his eyes, and Fives steadfastly refused to humor the question he knew was lurking behind the glance. Hardcase exclaimed at the food, Rabé laughed, and the sound warmed him better than any caff. He avoided Kix’s curious eyes but his glance kept returning to her. And though he knew it was a foolish wish, a dream that would never be, Fives let himself imagine this was his life, instead of just a bizarre interlude between campaigns. Captain to a noblewoman, sitting at her table, eating breakfast with her and his brothers among the mountain air and birdsong. Nothing more serious to worry about than a gala, an annoying nobleman obsessed with gardens… An hour was hardly enough time, but though his feelings and thoughts were twisting and looping and crashing together, though his heart leapt every time she laughed at his jokes, Fives let himself relax, and imagine what could have been, in another lifetime.

It was too good to last.

“-and that’s when the Twi’lek says-”

“Lady Maitri.”

Kix sighed in mock annoyance as the Alderaanian guard’s curt voice ruined his punchline, but Rabé answered it as smoothly as if she had been waiting for the call. “Yes?”

“A Lady Ryoo is here to see you.”

She did not hesitate. “Thank you. Please send her in.” As the door to their suite clicked open – a sound Fives knew was now engrained into his memory, as sure as basic field treatments or how to
clean a DC-17 – Rabé rose gracefully from her seat and turned. She cast a glance over her shoulder at Kix and grinned. “I want to hear the rest of that joke, though.”

He laughed and nodded. “You got it.”

Eirtaé stepped onto the balcony, her thick robes brushing against the marble. She raised an eyebrow at the table as Rabé stepped forward to kiss her cheek. “Late night?”

*You have no idea.*

Rabé smiled as she gestured to the chair next to hers. “We’re taking our roles as nobles very seriously, Eirtaé.” Hardcase nodded furiously – like Fives, he was now surrounded by three plates piled high with food, two dirtied ones stacked next to those.

She almost laughed. “Good.” As she moved to sit next to Rabé, Fives noticed with a start that their movements were no longer identical. Before, when the handmaidens had first arrived on the *Resolute*, he’d admired how perfectly they mirrored each other, how all three had moved in perfect sync. Now, however, Rabé lounged against the back of her chair, resting her mug of caff on her knee, drawing her fingers through her hair. She was utterly relaxed while Eirtaé perched on the edge of her seat, hands folded under her large sleeves, as tensely strung as if she were standing at attention. Rabé had slipped into the role so perfectly that he hadn’t even noticed until now. It was a striking contrast from the way she’d carried herself on the *Resolute*, or even on the Corellian *Consular*.

He wondered if anything could faze her impressive concentration.

“I take it you’re not here to have breakfast with us?” Rabé tried to suppress a smile but failed, and this time Eirtaé actually *did* smile as she plucked a tiny piece of fruit off of Rabé’s plate. “We’re excellent company.”

“I’m sure. No, unfortunately, I’m here on business. First of all – my cousin and the Tapalo girls came to visit Padmé this morning.”

“…Ah.” Rabé’s hands tightened for a brief moment, and again, the apology rose up in Fives’ throat, though it could hardly do her any good now.

“Don’t worry, it’s good news; they’re going to keep Heir Nohemi distracted and away from you. Help you work in peace. They were *very* eager to help.” Eirtaé allowed herself a small smile, and Rabé visibly relaxed, exhaling with relief into her caff. “I don’t doubt they’ll be very good at it, too.”

“All the younglings keeping each other busy and out of our way,” Kix noted.

“Exactly.”

Hardcase cleared his throat before reaching over Fives to take three more sweet chocolate pastries. “Y’know, when the General told us about this mission, I didn’t expect our biggest problem to be four kids.”

“No, neither did I.” Eirtaé admitted before glancing at Rabé and raising her eyebrow. “As for tonight: are we going to have to add in another outsider to our plans?”

Rabé shook her head. “Lord Varol asked, but I turned him down.”

Fives rolled his eyes and Kix groaned at the mere mention of the man, but Rabé went on, unfazed:
“I thought it best not to have to worry about that social obligation on top of everything else. If I’d accepted Varol, we’d be cut off from the rest of the group for the night, and I wouldn’t be able to make contact with some of the other suspects without him getting suspicious.”

“Well, you turned down Babyfa- uh, Varol, so now what?” Kix asked, picking through the diced star fruits until he found a piece he was happy with. “What did Lady Abeni say? That Fives’ll have to be your date now?” He started to laugh, caught the look on Fives’ face, and covered it with an unconvincing cough. Fives’ hands, searching for something to do, for a distraction, found a tiny blue-and-white jar filled to the brim with a dark red jam.

Eirtaé raised an eyebrow and snuck another piece of fruit from Rabé’s plate as Rabé said, “Oh, that’s true, though.”

Fives jerked, and Kix cursed at him as the jam went flying, spattering the table with sticky deep red fruit. Eirtaé stared at him, her gaze piercing through his skull, and he fumbled again when Rabé handed him her napkin. He pretended not to see the concern skirting across her face as he stuttered, hastily trying to act like he hadn’t almost spilled half the contents of the table in her lap, “S-sorry – I have to.”

“‘Date’ is a little misleading; you’re going to have to escort Rabé. As the Captain of a noblewoman on her tour, it’s expected. You have to present her to the court.” Eirtaé’s voice was cool, measured, and Fives got the very distinct feeling she was trying to read his mind.

“Like dancing?” A sharp, anxious edge slipped into his voice without his meaning to. “But I thought – I don’t know how to dance, I thought I was just gonna be the… the chaperone, or something, not a… a date…” He caught Rabé’s eyes and his objections died down, even as his confusion remained. She glanced down at her clasped hands, and he felt like kicking himself.

If you could stop being a dick, Fives, that’d be excellent. He started to open his mouth, to try and backtrack, but Eirtaé cut him off.

“You won’t be her date, your role is that of ‘presenting a debutante to the courts.’ That’s all.”

Rabé nodded and glanced at Kix and Hardcase, who was still shoveling food into his mouth like he’d never had a full meal in his life. “This means you two have the night off. From guarding me, I mean.”

Around a mouthful of toast, eggs, and bacon, Hardcase mumbled, “Ooh-don-nee-arding.”

Kix stared at him, disgusted. “Very nice, Hardcase.”


Fives ignored both of them. “Presenting?” His voice sounded weak and anxious to his own ears, and he knew he was just repeating Eirtaé’s words back at her. Without meaning to, his eyes flashed to meet Rabé’s, and she smiled gently at him, reassuring – but underneath the warmth he thought he saw a flash of her own nerves. His stomach started to fill with anxiety, and he suddenly wished he hadn’t scarfed down all those pastries.

“More or less. As her Captain of the Guard, you’re the official escort. Taking her around the Queen Breha, some of the upper nobility. It’s all fairly simple. You’ll be by her side for the start of the evening, and then you’ll be free to return here, or go to HQ and help Captain Rex there. Rabé - do you have an outfit planned?” Eirtaé asked, changing the subject before Fives had time to process her words. Hardcase snickered under his breath and Fives aimed a swift kick to his shins under the table. Kix met his eyes as Hardcase cursed, and Fives could read the medic’s exasperation as clear as day.
Luckily, neither of the handmaidens had seemed to notice. Rabé looked almost offended, half-turning in her seat to glare at her, “Of course I do, Eirtaé – what kind of a question-”

“Well, come on then. I want to go over it with you – I have a threadcomm pack here, hopefully we’ll able to hook you through to Rex and General Skywalker.” As she spoke, Eirtaé cast a glance around the table, and though Fives was determinedly not looking at her, he still felt the weight of her icy blue eyes on him. “And then we’ll run through some of the things you’ll going to have to do tonight, Fives.”

He nodded, still staring at the mess he’d made, his mind spinning with thoughts of the gala. He’d thought he’d be assigned guard duty, off to the side with Kix and Hardcase, support should Rabé need it. He didn’t realize being Captain of the Guard meant taking an active role in the damn thing.

“Don’t worry.” Rabé murmured gently, like she could sense his growing apprehension, her smooth voice cutting through the roaring noise in his mind. Fives’ head automatically lifted at her words. His gaze found hers like a magnet, and she smiled as she rose from her seat. “It won’t be as bad as it sounds. It’ll be over before you know it.”

He nodded, biting the inside of his cheek as the two women stepped back inside through the door that led into Rabé’s room. The problem wasn’t that it sounded bad. He might not know what the hell he was doing, he might not know how the hell he’d get through the night without going crazy, but it didn’t sound bad.

The problem is that it sounds too good to be true.

Even the promise just a few hours by her side was enough to make his head swim in drunken, delirious delight.

Hardcase made a sort of eager, expectant noise next to him, and Fives was painfully wrenched from dreams of the night to come.

Kix waited until Rabé’s balcony door swung shut behind Eirtaé before he turned to fix Fives with a calculating, mischievous smirk. Hardcase put both his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands – both of them expectantly staring at Fives. He stared back and forth between them, but they said nothing, wearing identical, self-satisfied, curling smiles.

“What?” He finally asked, annoyed with their silent stares and the jack-ass smiles.

Hardcase laughed again as Kix rapped his knuckles on the table. “I’m just... curious about something. That’s all.”

Fives scowled at him but did not reply. He focused on pressing the clean napkin into all the spots where he’d spilled the berry jam, watching the deep red color soak through the pale linen like blood. He felt bad for making such a mess, even though the servitor droid – VeeCee, as Rabé adamantly insisted on calling it – would hardly complain about cleaning it up. Guilty, he continued to clean.

He hated this. Being off-balance. He felt ever-so-slightly out of place, like he didn’t quite fit in, like he was moving too slowly. Making a mess of things.

Fives had a distinct feeling he knew exactly where Kix and Hardcase were going with their questioning. It wasn’t that difficult to guess, especially with Hardcase – who was eagerly awaiting some sort of explosive revelation. The GAR was made up of the worst gossipers in the galaxy – maybe second only to the Jedi – and the 501st was the worst out of them all.
“Rabé seems tired this morning, wouldn’t you agree, Kix?” Hardcase finally asked, trying to be nonchalant but failing, staring hard at Fives. His eyebrow quirked up in devilish delight when Fives glared back at him.

“That I would.” Kix replied. “So strange. Like she was up all night, wouldn’t you say, ‘case?”

“I would say that! And – so strange – Fives! You seem to be just as tired as she is!”

“Did you two idiots rehearse this shit?” Fives snapped, but they plowed ahead, ignoring him:

“Where did you and Rabé sneak off to last night, huh?” Kix innocently asked, his voice cloyingly sweet and obnoxious.

Fives glared at him before slowly answering, “…we didn’t sneak-”

“HA! I knew it!”

“Shut up, Hardcase.”

“Ahaha, sorry,” even though he was obviously anything but. “Fives – did you – did you two-”

Fives’ mood instantly soured. “Leave it.”

“…but did you want-”

“Kix, come on, why’re you encouraging him-”

“What? I want to know, too!”

“No, no. Nothing happened, I didn’t – I didn’t expect anything to… to…” Fives couldn’t finish the sentence. The words, the lie, refused to dislodge from the back of his throat.

He hadn’t been able to fall asleep for two hours, maybe more, after they’d returned from the lake. They’d said goodnight, went to their separate rooms, a strange distance between their words, and Fives had almost turned around, had almost looked back at her – but then her words had echoed back at him. Her reminder of the mission. *I’ll just have to charm Varol.*

No matter what he thought he had seen in her eyes, no matter what he’d misread in the look she’d given him.

His last thought before falling into a fretful sleep was that he wasn’t as good at reading people as he thought.

He sighed and passed a hand over his face, dragging his thoughts to the present. “She wanted to be by the lake, and I went with her. That’s all. She read for a while and then we came back.” He caught the glance they exchanged and retorted, “She wanted to be by the lake. Said the water reminds her of Naboo. She was homesick – that’s all.” He was quiet for a moment more, and then mumbled, “It doesn’t matter what I - nothing happened, and nothing was going to happen. End of story.”

“Fives…” Whatever joke Kix had been about to crack was cut short as Rabé’s door opened and her worried voice cut through the air.

“-won’t be able to fit my blaster, maybe not even my knife. I don’t like being unarmed, not when we’re so close.” She was biting her lip as they came to a stop in front of the table. “I mean, I won’t be *completely* unarmed; I’ll have myself. But I can’t very well carry a blaster in my corset…”
Eirtaé didn’t say anything, but her gaze swung to meet Fives’, and held him fast as Rabé continued thinking to herself, “I guess this means… uhm. …Fives?”

His eyes snapped to her, at the way she said his name, but Eirtaé was still staring at him, her mouth twitching ever so lightly up in amusement.

Rabé flushed as she said, “The threadcomm pack takes up the space where I would’ve normally put my holster… I can’t even bring a knife… Uh. I’m sorry, but would you mind carrying them for me? Just my blaster and a knife, maybe two…”

He didn’t immediately understand. “Sure. Of course. I mean, that’s what I’m already doing, right?” He tried to shoot her a reassuring grin, but apparently it failed, because she was already shaking her head.

Rabé flushed harder. “No, I mean – if you carry my weapons tonight, you won’t be able to leave early…”

Fives blinked, and suddenly understood. Oh. Oh, kriffing hell.

Eirtaé waited a moment before clearing her throat, the sound as loud as a shot in the stunned silence at the table. “You’re officially Lady Maitri’s date to the gala, Captain.” She gave him a thin smile. “Congratulations.”

The words finally connected in his brain, and they drowned out the dull, harsh static of his previous mantra, drowned out the hard reminder of duty with the promise of something infinitely sweeter.

An entire evening by her side.

Lady Malyna sat in her darkened office, a forgotten cup of tea next to her anxiously tapping fingers. Elsewhere, people were excitedly preparing for the gala: choosing gowns and jewelry, fussing over lekku jewelry or body decorations, rehearsing dances and smiles and gossiping about and with their partners, friends, enemies, or lovers. But the growing excitement stopped cold at the threshold of the Girard residence.

Kennis hovered in the doorway of her office, waiting for her to notice him before he entered, but her attention was entirely fixed on the lit datapad in front of her. She stared at it, frowning, rapping her fingers on the table in a steady yet anxious rhythm. He was just about to break her out of the pattern when the datapad chimed softly, and she lunged for it as if it held the answer to her aching joints.

He cleared his throat as her eyes scanned the message, hoping to ride the coattails of goodwill that the message had brought, but it apparently hadn’t been what she’d wanted to read. She very nearly dropped the datapad to the floor as she beckoned him in, rubbing her temples with weary hands.

Kennis would have felt a small twinge of pity for her, except that when she noticed him standing in the doorway, her glare very nearly singed off the tips of his carefully polished horns.

“There’s an interested stakeholder wishing to speak with you, ma’am.” He felt ridiculous using the phrase. What had been so wrong with just using Ridan’s name?

That got her attention. “About what?”

“About the Senator.”
Her eyes flashed with weariness, and she pushed up from her desk. “Very well. Tell him I’ll be there in a moment – oh, for gods’ sakes, Kennis, why is it so difficult to get a proper cup of hot tea? Throw this out, make a fresh pot.”

He inclined his head so that she wouldn’t see the annoyance flare up in his eyes. “Yes, of course.”

She swept from the room in a huff, and Kennis raised his eyes to glare at the portrait of the Alderaanian goddess that hid the Girard family safe. Perhaps his Lady’s age was beginning to show; her temperament was getting more and more sour with every passing day.

As he walked around the desk to retrieve her cup of tea, the unlocked datapad caught his eye, as did the brief and unassuming message that had made her even more nerve-addled than normal:

*Do not stray from the course; their presence is irrelevant. Proceed as planned.*

Chapter End Notes

1 Hardcase, where are you manners? Mouth-full-of-food, translated: "You don't need *guarding.*"

Kix stared at him, disgusted. "Very nice, Hardcase."

"What?" He grinned and Kix's expression of disgust deepened. "She *doesn't.*" [return to text]

✧✧✧✧

Please consider giving [update post on tumblr a like/reblog](#) if you enjoyed this chapter - we absolutely love hearing your thoughts! It means the world to us ❤️
Memo from Heads of Security R. Imperarti-Fhet & V. Hallbjorn; H.A. A. Thrasse; Chief of Staff Steward L. Zorian, regarding the Events of the Evening:

Her Royal Majesty Queen Breha’s Gala, given in honor of the Senator Padmé Amidala of Naboo, will require the utmost care and attention. Given the recent attack on Coruscant, security is the highest priority. All nonessential guards will be assigned as walking patrols, and our H.o.S wish to remind everyone that cameras will be installed in both public and private areas of the gala grounds.
Best behaviors, please!

Guests will start arriving in the East Wing at approximately seven o’clock. Be at your first post by six-thirty. Please find the attached document to determine your assignments for the evening; most will be assigned to coat-check for the first hour or so, with a second assignment for the later part. Break and dinner schedules are also included on this attached document – INFORM your steward before leaving for a break! Formal uniforms have been cleaned and delivered (if we have delivered the incorrect uniform, adjustments are needed, or you would prefer another style, please see M. Jeeves within the hour). Hair should be neat and tidy; montrals, lekku, horns, etc. should be clean. Small, simple silver or leather jewelry is permitted.

Her Majesty will officially begin the Gala at approximately eight o’clock. Be at your second assigned post by this time, please! Stewards will be walking the floor throughout the evening, and should you feel ill or tired, inform a steward at once. Shifts will not last longer than forty-five minutes and are set up on a rotation.

Thank you all for your hard work over the past few days – we recognize the short notice of the event and wish to commend everyone for their perseverance and dedication to Her Majesty’s wishes.

Questions should be directed to C.o.S.S L. Zorian.

1805 hrs. ♦ 6:05pm

“Garden entrance, east door, second camera.”

“Up and running, sir,” Eder Basilio’s cheerful rumble confirmed through the wristcomms. Rex nodded sharply and thanked his assistant as he quietly slipped the stickymic next to the near-invisible camera nestled in the palace’s ancient stone walls. It adhered with a tiny confirming beep and, as he watched with narrowed eyes, its camouflage activated and it was gone in the blink of an eye.

The West Wing Head of Security, a fierce woman named Valquiria Hallbjorn in her late fifties with steel-gray hair and matching prosthetic legs, was speaking to her own assistant on the opposite side of the garden path. She and Rex were slowly making their way through the gala grounds again – their sixth and final time. Neither she nor Basilio knew that Rex was adding the stickymics to every camera in every nook and cranny of the Great Hall, the Throne Room, the corridors, the gardens, even the kitchens. Everywhere he could think that a secret meeting or conversation might take place. Rabé would have her threadcomms and he’d be tracking her from his crow’s nest, but Rex wanted double, triple insurance. The cams were standard procedure, but not the mics. Rex wanted to have every possible angle covered from his vantage point.

He was positive that by the end of the night he would have an incredible headache from keeping a constant watch on over three dozen cameras, but if it meant that their spy would reveal themselves, he’d take a minor annoyance like a headache in an instant. He’d made sure to leave them no place to hide.

Servants and servitor droids dressed in matching dark gray and green uniforms scurried around them, giving the two Heads a wide berth. Rex had thought the palace beautiful already, but Queen Breha had heightened it to a luxury he hadn’t known possible. Flower arrangements larger than even General Skywalker in every corner, marble and chrome statues polished until they shone, hundreds of thousands of candles – both real flames and technical projections – lit the halls and corridors in brilliant gold. Musicians in formal gowns and suits were warming up on the balcony above the Great
Hall, the gentle strings and wind instruments accompanying the excited chatter of the servants. Queen Breha herself was directing caterers and bartenders and all sorts of beings from atop the platform that the twin thrones sat on. She was already dressed in a gown of sumptuous blues and golds, detailed with the Organa chalcedony waves and crown. Her aides and Heirs were also ready, young Nohemi appearing more apprehensive than her peers. *Hopefully she won’t distract Rabé – and hopefully the Senator’s plan works.*

Rex checked his chrono. *Less than an hour to go.* By now, the others should be mostly ready. Sabé’s plan had been simple, but effective: Senator Amidala and her team were the distractions, to let Rabé uncover as much as she could from Varol and to get an invitation to the rumored Separatist meeting – *by any means necessary*, Sabé had said. They’d also be gathering intel on the other suspects, but Varol and his ancient counterpart Ridan were top priority. Skywalker and Ahsoka would be close by the Senator’s side for most of the evening but would split off to do perimeter walks at intermittent times. Both of them had mentioned something about the Force being somehow… *murkier,* and Rex pushed aside the worry tugging at the back of his head. Had they been on the frontlines, he would have nagged them to take a rest.

If they wouldn’t listen to him then, they sure as hell wouldn’t listen to him here.

He exhaled slowly. The spy had to be close. *One thing at a time.* They could afford no mistakes. “Last one, Basilio – garden path, east side, second of four statues.”

“Active, sir.”

“Good man. Go and get ready,” Rex said, pressing the last of the stickymics on the outstretched hand of the marble statue as Basilio thanked him and signed off. Whoever it was – a deity of some sort, he supposed – almost seemed to cast him a look of disapproval. He resisted the urge to make a face back at it. “Valquíria, all cameras are active on my end.”

“As are mine.” Valquíria rumbled, turning to face him. Like Rex, she was already ready in her formal dress uniform – highly decorated, a sleek saber hanging from her hip. “No chance of an *accident* like Coruscant happening.” She shook her head, casting a glance around the large gardens and bustling servants. “Hell of a mess out there. You’d think those clones would be more careful, it being the capital and all. What’s so difficult about doing your *job*?”

Rex gritted his teeth and bit back on the retort that sprang to his tongue. *You don’t even understand.* Commander Fox, last he’d seen, had been worn down to the bone and horrifically angry at himself for the mistake, a mistake that had cost hundreds of lives. *Civvie* lives. Fox was shouldering the losses – and much of the blisteringly furious blame – nearly single-handedly, and even for a man trained for the position, it was taking its toll. His men might get into scrapes with the frontline battalions while the later were on leave, but they were still *brothers.*

And Rex would be damned if anyone dismissed his brother’s pain so flippantly.

Valquíria did not notice Rex’s icy silence and nodded once more, the light of the late afternoon sun catching the gleam of her medals. “Right, then. I’ll take up position by the Queen – you’re sure you don’t mind staying in the crow’s nest?”

“Not at all. Basilio will relieve me, should I need it.” He wouldn’t need it.

“Like I said, I doubt anything very exciting will happen on our end. Just the usual – drunk guests, minor petty drama.” She shrugged, and then chuckled to herself. “If we’re lucky, maybe there’ll be a drunken fight. Always entertaining, *especially* between the old folks. They can hold grudges for *years,* and it all usually finds a way out during these galas!”
Rex gave her a thin smile, deciding that though her many accomplishments were impressive, Valquíria was ruthless in a way he did not even want to understand. “Here’s hoping.”

She gave him a curt bow and strode back towards the Great Hall. His eyes slid to the statue, and now it seemed to be directing its disapproval towards Valquíria. Before he could act on his childish impulse and join it, two very familiar figures in Corellian dress uniforms stepped out of the Great Hall and made straight for him. As planned, they would be a part of his security forces for the evening while Fives was – Rex still had trouble believing it – escorting Rabé. Part of the role of Captain of the Guard, apparently. They’d still be in their suite, getting ready.

He relaxed as Kix and Hardcase stopped in front of him, their arms twitching against the engrained impulse to salute him. “Good to see you two. How is everything?”

“Just fine, sir,” Kix said in a measured tone of voice that made Rex suspect otherwise. He glanced around before lowering his voice, “Eirtaé is helping the Lady and Captain get ready.”

“And how is the Captain?” Rex asked, the corner of his lips twitching up in amusement at the false title. Other than the slip on the first day, Fives appeared to be handling the role very well – which didn’t surprise Rex too much. And Fives had a healthy respect for Rabé after she kicked his ass in that sparring match – they all did – so Rex assumed that Fives would be eager to work closely with her for the evening. Even though a gala was extremely out of range for an ARC’s training, at least Fives had Rabé as a partner. She’d lead him through the night with ease.

Kix and Hardcase exchanged a bemused glance, and before Rex could ask what that was about, Hardcase said slowly, “He’s doing fine. Just a touch nervous about… uh. His roles for the evening, though.”

Rex raised an eyebrow as Kix continued, a mischievous spark in his eyes, “Right, well, I mean – can’t say I blame him. A lot of eyes will be on them. Presenting the Lady to the Queen is quite the role! And those dance steps seemed tricky, when Eirtaé was going over them.”

Rex stared hard at them, glancing from one amused expression to the other, before sighing and shaking his head. “…they’ll be ready, correct?”

“Yup!” Hardcase replied cheerfully just as Kix shrugged, “More or less.”

Rex shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, groaning under his breath, “Just one straight answer, is all I ask.” He took a breath and went on. “Alright, you two will be stationed in the Great Hall for most of the night, but I’ve given you a perimeter walk that’ll take you on a loop through the gardens as well. You’ll be able to keep an eye on most everything.”

“Excellent.” Hardcase replied at once, sounding far too enthusiastic about the position.

Rex continued, ignoring him. “I’ll be in the East Security Center, and Sabé will be working with the other servants, so don’t expect to see her too much tonight. We have eyes and ears in every corner of this gala – public and private locations both – and I want you to keep an eye on the Lords Varol and Ridan. Rabé will be focusing on Varol, but I want you as extra security, in case she somehow gets separated from Fives.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry too much about that,” Kix mumbled, and Rex fixed him with a hard glare now.

“There’s… not something I need to know about, is there…? A new development that I need to be worried about, for instance?” He asked slowly, but both men shook their heads.
“Nah, sir.” Hardcase beamed innocently at him. “We’re just excited for our first gala, is all. I’m sure it’s going to be absolutely kriffing fantastic.”

1920 hrs. ‧ 7:20pm

Sabé had long lost count of the number of curtsies she had already done, and still the stream of incoming guests stretched beyond the wide-open doors of the palace, and in the distance – above glittering jewels and towering headaddresses – she could see yet more transports arriving in a steady, constant flow outside the gates. Queen Breha had spared no expense, nor had she forgotten anyone.

Though this was her first time experiencing a gala as a maidservant, and though she was here on an incredibly important mission, Sabé’s heart still thumped wildly with excitement as she passed coats, shawls, cloaks, and capes along to the droids behind her, to be stored in a veritable maze of finery in an unused hall. The atmosphere was golden, intoxicating; as if the very air itself – the dazzling glamor and grandeur of it all – was laden with spiced wine. Though the brisk Alderaanian evening winds delighted at the open doors and whipped her dark green skirts about her legs, Sabé’s cheeks still flushed with exhilaration. She felt like a young girl again, and for a moment she let herself be swept away by the dazzling finery, the brilliant smiles and laughter wash over her until she felt near breathless and absolutely giddy with excitement. The servants on either side of her felt the same, and after particularly impressive guests strode by they would turn to each other and whisper excitedly under their breath until the next coat was tossed their way.

Lively music – the very distinct twang of a kloo horn interwoven with gentler strings – drifted from the Great Hall as Sabé curtsied to a beautifully imposing Twi’lek couple and welcomed them to the palace. They smiled, and Sabé’s heart stuttered like a lovesick teenager. She nearly fumbled with their cloaks as she handed it to the droid waiting behind her, and their grins widened. “Enjoy the gala,” she said, embarrassingly breathless, the golden lights of the hundreds of candles dancing off their intricate lekku decorations – and she hardly had a chance to recover before another beautiful woman swooped in, beaming at her, and in the back of her mind Sabé seriously wondered if she’d be able to survive the night without making a fool of herself.

The woman glided up the stairs like a dancer, but the next two guests snapped Sabé’s attention back to the mission at hand.

She pressed her lips together in a shallowly pleasant smile as Lords Varol and Ridan – whose hair was no longer dyed deep blue, but a rather pleasant shade of lavender, speckled through with gold flakes – entered the foyer together from the west wing of the palace. Both lived on the palace grounds, which is, Sabé thought as Ridan handed her his cloak, almost too convenient. As a lowly maidservant, Sabé had access to all of the rooms in the palace, a skeleton keycode that granted her passage behind all locked doors sitting comfortably in her decorative wristcomm unit.

She was going to do a bit of… tidying up in Varol’s suites while he danced the night away with Lady Maitri.

Lady Maitri, who was apparently quite the topic of conversation.

“-an offworlder, I’m telling you – and she’s rich, her family is old Corellian blood-” Varol’s voice, slick and low, was amplified by her earcuffs. Sabé suppressed another smile as the droid took Ridan’s cloak and sped away into the vast hall serving as a coat check. Varol did not so much as look at her as he tossed his own cape. His eyes were bright and shining – not the first group who had done some pre-gala celebrating – and, to her immense satisfaction, it seemed that he could not get
enough breath to sing Maitri’s praises. “I think she would be a useful addition, Baxil—”

“Please tell me you haven’t been running your mouth off to strangers, Tahsin,” Ridan snapped, both men’s eyes gliding over Sabé’s polite curtsy as they straightened their jackets. “Fancying a girl does not give you license to lose your common sense.”

Varol’s face darkened. “I haven’t lost—”

“Never mind,” Ridan said quickly, gesturing to the wide stairs. “Let’s get on with it.”

Sabé watched them move up the stairs, moving automatically for the next group. Curtsy, welcome, take the coats and pass them over, curtsy again. It was purely mechanical, and she watched Ridan and Varol out of the corner of her eyes as they stopped halfway on the steps, turning to wave at someone who had just entered.

In the crush of people – most arriving in groups of two or three, sparkling in their finery as they called to their friends and drank in the excitement of the atmosphere – the utterly bizarre look on the woman’s face stood out like a spotlight. She drove through the meandering crowds of guests, a look of equal parts disdain and – strangely – pure and utter exhaustion set like stone upon her features. Sabé was still curtsying when the woman, who couldn’t have been older than fifty, hurled her cloud-gray cloak over Sabé’s head with barely a second thought. Heavy chalcedony beads smacked her cheek as the lights were smothered out by the thick fabric, and Sabé had to bite down a caustic retort as her hands tightened on her skirts in anger.

The situation was certainly not helped by the giggles of the servants on either side, nor by the fact that when she straightened and pulled the cloak off, the loose beads caught in her hair and yanked out a substantial piece of her simple chignon. She barely managed to hold back a curse, and the maid on her left cast her a judgmental look even as she called out to the rude woman:

“Welcome to the palace, Lady Malyna; we hope you enjoy the evening!”

Sabé scowled at the woman’s quickly retreating back – and at the maidservant next to her – as Malyna hurried up the stairs to where Ridan and Varol were waiting. Sabé frowned; the woman had not been on Queen Breha’s list; the repeating thranta pattern on her deep red skirts meant she was a member of one of the noble houses, but Sabé did not know which one. Ridan and Varol both greeted her respectfully, which she returned with far less warmth; Ridan bending to whisper in her ear and extend his arm, which she took without so much a word. Varol was already busy scanning the crowds for the Lady Maitri, and Sabé feverently wished Rabé all the luck in the galaxy. If that group is going to keep her company for the evening…

The droid came back, ready to take Malyna’s cloak, and as Sabé handed it over, a few of the tiny chalcedony beads snapped off their thread into her hand. She considered letting them drop to the floor in petty revenge, but before she could move the crowds had shifted, and another cape was being handed to her, the comms unit in her earcuffs snapped to life as Captain Rex took his position and greeted her with a ready calmness that forced her to re-calibrate her own short fuse, so her hand automatically slipped to the pockets in her skirts as she went through the motions once more. Curtsy, welcome, take the coats and pass them over, curtsy again.

The handful of oblong beads were so small, so weightless in the dense fabric of her pockets, that she had entirely forgotten about them not ten minutes later.

She had more important things to worry about than a ragged cloak.
Two guards inclined their heads towards Rex as he strode towards the entrance. Behind him, the Great Hall was packed with guests – though a few stragglers were scurrying up the wide steps to join the party – as they milled about, mingling as they waited for the official start of the gala. The hall was designed to be shown off: a massive space that rose nearly three stories, a small army of chandeliers clustered together like bright stars in the center of the arched and tiered ceiling many dozens of feet above.

Two huge balconies hugged the edges of the room, and everything was covered in draping, flowering vines or hundreds of candeloids. And in the Hall itself were carved the history of Alderaan in minute, perfect detail. One could easily spend hours lost in the intricate carvings, but tonight, they merely served as the luxe backdrop to the Gala of Lights. Every surface gleamed bright and brilliant gold. Servers stood next to every marble pillar; servitor droids wandered through the crowds – careful to avoid the hems of skirts and trailing fabrics – with colorful drinks and small, intricately plated hors d'oeuvres. The musicians were seated at the topmost level, their music drifting down to the gathered guests, and above them, Queen Breha waited, beaming, the soft orange glow of her pulmonodes visible beneath the gauzy fabric of her gown.

As he walked around the perimeter of the massive, golden-lit space, keeping to the shadows, Rex kept his head on a swivel. Queen Breha had spared no expense, had invited every being of every level of importance. He spotted their targets – Varol, the elder Ridan, and a woman he did not recognize – at the center of a tight-knit cluster of nobles at the far end of the Hall. His face stony, he moved on. Waiting for the confirmation would be the most difficult part, he knew that already.

At the base of the wide marble steps, he spotted Sabé among the line of servants collected coats, capes, and cloaks. A few strands of her chignon had been pulled loose, and he thought he could detect a subtle flicker of nerves under her easy smiles to the late arrivals. He waited at the top of the stairs, nodding as a trio of nobles walked arm-in-arm up into the Hall, until she cast a glance and caught his eye. He waited a moment longer, and then descended, leaving the cacophony of sound at his back.

One of the stewards clapped their hands once and announced that the majority of the servants were now free to go to their next assigned post - Sabé was one of the few to remain at the coat check station. Muttering with relief and stamping feeling back into their feet, those freed disappeared into hidden doors as Rex came to a stop near the wide doors, still flung wide open to the evening skies. The cold air was a biting relief compared to the warmth of the Great Hall, and he shivered, clasping his gloved hands behind his back. He was a Head of Security at his post, making his rounds. Nothing more.

Sabé did not come close enough that they could talk, not even for the most casual of greetings, but she still managed to slip closer to his position by straightening the chaotic mess left by the guests. There was a flicker of movement from the corridor opposite Rex, and he made his face as impassive as stone as Senator Amidala and her large retinue stepped into the foyer.

She was dressed in a blood red gown, her hair pulled into two braided buns pinned to either side of her head. Jewels the color of fire shone in between the braids, on her layered necklaces, embroidered and hanging from her wide skirts. Sleek black gloves came to just above her elbows. She burned like a fire, her expression as fierce. She met Rex’s eyes, and aside from a mere ghost of a smile and nod, she might have thought him a spirit. Eirtaé wore a simpler gown of burgundy, her hair loose.
His COs were near unrecognizable in sleek formal robes. Anakin looked more uncomfortable than anything, but when he noticed Rex and Sabé quietly watching from the shadows, he visibly relaxed. He still stared at the opulent decorations with a mixture of disdain and confusion. Ahsoka, on the other hand, could not look more excited – her eyes were darting around the room, this way and that; the two Nabooian girls walking next to her and all three chattering away in low, excited voices. Akantha held her sister’s hand, but Iole was twisted around, jabbering excitedly up at Jesse and Echo as they brought up the rear. They, too were dressed in formal Coruscant Guard dress uniforms; sharp and detailed with the same bright red. Both carried twin blasters, and Echo caught Rex’s eye and nodded once.

That was the limit of what they could risk in public.

The Senator’s retinue had nothing to hand to the servants, and so they strode ahead towards the wide stairway that led to the Great Hall. The steward bowed low and greeted them, and gestured to one of the hidden doors in which some of the other servants had left through. Akantha and Tyche separated from the main group – like Rabé, they were set to formally debut and so had a schedule to follow – and Rex couldn’t help but smile as tiny Iole let go of her sister’s hand to automatically latch onto Echo. He looked absolutely delighted.

Sabé caught Rex’s glance and gave him a tiny smile.

As Akantha and Tyche followed a maid into the hidden door, which would take them to the second level balcony, the rest of the group made their way up the stairs. Kix and Hardcase were stationed at opposite ends of the Great Hall. Rex heard the crowd quiet for just a moment, and then the noise swelled again – the Senator was in place now, too.

Two to go.

When the Lady Maitri and her Captain finally arrived, they were a full minute late. Her hand tucked into the crook of his elbow, she looked nervous; he looked like he was bracing himself for the evening ahead. Both looked almost… distant. From each other as well as the event. Like there was a wall between them.

Rex frowned, but Fives refused to meet his eye as he escorted Rabé in.

Had he not known better, Rex would have thought Fives’ mind was very far away indeed.

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2000 hrs. ✧ 8:00pm

The view from the third-floor balcony was breathtaking – apart from the dizzying height, it provided an unparalleled view of the Great Hall below. Sabé leaned over the marble railings as far as she dared, staring wide-eyed like a child at the grandeur and extravagance all around her. Standing up there under the dozens of massive chandeliers, swathed in shadows while the rest of the court was bathed in golden lights, she felt almost like a ghost.

Or a goddess, she thought, bringing her thumb and forefinger together to pinch out the tiny Lord Varol below. If only she were – she could end this whole mess right here and now.

But perhaps the Queen would be upset with her, if she crashed the party with blood.

There was a shuffling sound from behind her, and she half-turned, her hand flexing for her hidden blade, before she registered Rex’s bright blonde hair as he came up the stairs. He raised an eyebrow
when he noticed her hand position, and she shrugged. “Better safe than sorry.”

“I’m not about to argue with that.” He joined her at the balcony railing, resting on his forearms. “We’re all in position now.”

“Good.” She sighed and resisted the urge to rub at her eyes, fully aware of the long night ahead. “And the confirmation…?”

“Either from the General or Ra- uh, Ryoo.” The codename stumbled clumsily off his tongue. She pursed her lips together to stop from laughing. Rex hid his exhaustion well – but she was used to reading particularly difficult beings. She could see it in his eyes, in the way he gripped the bannister. She wasn’t quite sure how he had managed to organize the security for this event. It was impressive, to say the least.

The music faded, and so too did the gentle undercurrent of conversations. A lull, pregnant with anticipation and excitement, grew in its place. From their position far above everyone else, Sabé and Rex watched as Queen Breha rose from her seat and called out in a booming voice that echoed in every corner of the Hall: “Welcome, welcome honored guests! I am so glad to see you all here tonight, at the Gala of Lights!”

The crowds applauded politely, and Breha continued. “We are so fortunate to welcome Senator Padmé Amidala of Naboo to our home.” She gestured to Padmé by her side, who stepped forward slightly and smiled, inclining her head towards the packed floor. “It is a time of great trial and tribulation for our Republic, but – if faced together, as one – I know we shall emerge, stronger than ever. Brave clone soldiers and countless Jedi risk their lives every day for our sake. As such, I ask you think of them this night. Many worlds are not so lucky as our own.” Here her voice grew mournful, soft, and the crowds had to lean in to catch her voice, “Alderaan has long been blessed with peace. It is my fondest desire to see this peace spread throughout the galaxy.”

More applause, more vigorous this time. Out of the corner of her eye, Sabé watched Rex’s reaction to the Queen’s words – but still his expression was impassive. Only exhaustion was written in the line of his face. He had fixed the Queen with an intense gaze, however, like he was hanging on to her every word.

“Therefore – should you feel inclined, should you want to spread our wealth and peace throughout the galaxy – my stewards are spread throughout the Hall. Every single credit donated this night will be used for relief efforts. To help those in need, those who have lost their homes or families – or hope.”

The word hung in the air, somehow both light and heavy all at the same time. Queen Breha clasped her hands together and nodded, smiling fondly around the Hall. “Hope is like the sun. We must not lose it, even in the darkest hours of the night. Dawn will come again – such is the balance of the way of the stars.”

Though Sabé was no stranger to the grand speeches of monarchs, the words still raised gooseflesh on her arms.

Breha let the words sink in, but just as she opened her mouth once more, two great knocks upon the marble floor sounded. She turned to the source, surprised, a flash of annoyance across her calm face – and then the resounding call: “His Royal Highness, Prince Consort Bail Organa!”

Breha gasped, delight breaking upon her face like the brightest sun, as the crowds parted and exclaimed. Sabé leaned even farther out over the banister to catch a glimpse of the tall man as he strode forward to meet his wife, his beloved, in the center of the Hall. Rex leaned forward, too, as
Breha’s mouth worked and she started to laugh in delight. Padmé beamed at them.

Bail bent and kissed her on the cheek. “I thought I might sneak back here for the Gala – were you surprised, my love?” His voice carried to them with ease, even at the top level of the hall. He was obviously very pleased with himself.

Breha, for the moment, seemed utterly speechless, and the crowds cheered as she blushed, as Bail’s hand came to rest on her waist. He laughed, and Breha pressed one hand to her mouth, though it could do nothing to hide her pure joy. Sabé smiled at the sight, shivering with joy at the sight as the Queen of Alderaan fluster and blush like a young lovesick teenager. The cheers lasted for nearly a minute, shaking the Hall.

As the crowd settled once more, Breha finally found her voice again. “Well – I – I was certainly not expecting this! You’ve quite thrown me, Bail…! Shall you do the honors with me, darling?”

“I would be honored.”

As one, they each raised one hand and called out, “Hope is like the sun!”

Every single light in the Hall immediately darkened.

The Hall was thrown into utter darkness, as if the light had never existed, as if it had been snuffed out.

And then, from above the chandeliers, a tiny spark – the very ceiling began to glow. To shine. At first, the crowd murmured, but then, as the light grew, as it expanded into glittering, dazzling, pure golden light. Like fireworks had been woven into the structure and had been lit from within, suddenly they were surrounded by it – and the crowds exploded into wild, exuberant cheers.

Bursts of light exploded from every surface in the Hall – from the ceiling to the carved walls, the marble stairs and floor and every surface in between – golden light pulsed like a heartbeat from within the foundations of the ballroom, like the hall had been constructed of pure, solid sunlight. The marble bannisters under Sabé’s hands glittered, and she exclaimed in delight. Rex was staring around the Hall in awe, running his hands over the bannisters – every touch trailed a cloud of glitter that clung to the surface for a moment, before vanishing back into the illumination of pure gold. It was the most impressive work of technical illumination Sabé had ever seen. Every surface has been programmed, she thought in equal parts wonder and pure delight. The Hall of Lights, indeed.

In the center of the light, of the exclaiming and cheering and applauding crowds, Bail and Breha Organa beamed, and once more, as one, they called, “Let the Gala of Lights begin!”

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2145 hrs. ♦ 9:45pm

“You there, Captain?”

“Sir.”

“How’s the crow’s nest? You two doing alright?”

“It’s fine. Been keeping an eye on most everything from up here – are you in a secure location?”

“I managed to sneak away. Don’t think Snips’ll be too happy with me, though. Or Jesse or Echo,
for that matter. We’re able to speak freely for the time being.”

“Heh. So – we saw that Varol and Ridan just presented themselves to the Senator?”

“Yup. I’m glad you caught that – you must have cams everywhere. Can you see me now?”

“Yeah – and maybe you shouldn’t wave your arms like that, sir? Someone might notice that. I didn’t want to leave anything to chance.”

“Ha. Fine. Anyways, good call on the cams, because those two are definitely up to something.”

“…You’re absolutely certain?”

“Yup. I think they had to introduce themselves to Pad- to the Senator. It feels like we’ve been standing in a receiving line for hours – but Ahsoka and I both caught something off about them while they were talking to her.”

“General – it’s Sabé – we could see that, even on the feed. Like they were being forced to talk to her at blaster-point, right?”

“Yes, exactly. It was weird.”

“What about the woman they were with?”

“She was also weird. It must be a requirement for their group? She was very… paranoid – jumpy.”

“Rex, that was the woman who threw her cloak at me.”

“Mhm.”

“She threw a cloak at you?”

“Yeah. Over my head. Not very noble-like.”

“Wow, okay. Yeah, those three are definitely our targets. Ridan was fine, but it was like Varol was just waiting for any and every opportunity to snipe at the Senator. He was vocal about his own political opinions – all sorts of nasty stuff.”

“We need a solid confirmation before I move out.”

“Right, of course. Like I said, Ahsoka and I both caught dark stuff from them. Ridan was more muted than the others, but Varol was especially nasty. He’s hiding something, and he’s proud of it. I say move in, Sabé.”

“…Well…”

“…I’d trust the General on this, Sabé. He and the Commander have got a pretty good gut feeling for this stuff. Y’know, the Force and all.”

“I know – sorry – it’s just – we’ve never worked with Jedi before. Apart from Master Jinn, I suppose, but that was years and years ago… I’m not used to ‘gut feelings’ being solid enough proof.”

“Qui-gon! That’s right, you knew him – and Obi-wan, too – you were in disguise-”

“Ah, General?”
“Kriff, right, right! Sorry – got distracted. This wine is free, did you know that? And there’s a lot of it. Anyways. You have to trust me on this, that Varol guy is a snake. And he obviously is proud of that fact, because he made absolutely no effort to hide his feelings towards the Senator. Or the Republic. It was clear. Very clear.”

“…Alright. If you’re certain-”

“Oh, SHIT-”

“General?”

“What happened? Is everything alright?”

“Yeah – yeah! Everything’s fine – but Eirtaé just spilled a drink on some guy! Shit – can you hear them? They’re throwing an absolute tantrum-”

“Eirtaé spilled a drink on someone!?”

“Look – there – third cam-”

“…Fucking hell, what was she thinking – is she trying to-”

“Gods, but is he pissed – okay, my cover’s blown, they’re headed this way – ah, and there’s Snips, finally caught on to me; I have to go. You set for this, Sabé?”

“Yes – and ask Eirtaé what the hell she’s doing, please.”

“You know, Eirtaé kind of scares me – but sure. I’ll ask.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll go ahead and let Rabé know to distract Varol for the next half-hour, General.”

“Okay, great.”

“And I’ll let you both know if and when I find the solid evidence.”

“And if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to the party before my Padawan skins me alive.”

“Ha. Good luck, sir.”

“And to you two, as well. Let’s catch this sleemo.”

2235 hrs. ♡ 10:35pm

Sabé waited until Rabé had chimed back with a confirmation before slipping out of the Security Center. On one of the dozens of screens that served as a backdrop for Rex’s pacing, Rabé excused herself from Lady Abeni’s side – though, had Sabé been in Rabé’s position, she would have found it exceedingly difficult to leave Abeni’s company for Varol – and touched Varol’s arm, gesturing to the open door to the gardens. Sabé did not see the look of pure delight on Varol’s face, but she did catch the disdain on Fives’. After a moment, he followed after the pair at a discreet distance. All three were soon lost to the mingling crowds.
But Sabé had her own mission.

In the chrome multi-purpose cuff on her wrist, feeding faint directions to her earcuff, she had both the map to Varol’s private suites, and the keycode that would grant her access to not only his rooms, but also any terminals or dataports.

In her dark green and gold servant’s uniform, she was nigh invisible in the shadowed corridors, and the few guests she slipped by were doing an excellent job of distracting themselves, and each other. No one cast her, a simple maidservant scurrying from one place to another, a second glance. Still, she proceeded with the utmost caution, every nerve alive and snapping, on high alert. As always, she wasn’t anxious or fearful. No, those would come later, once the adrenaline had worn down. For now, every sense was heightened, her mind keeping a steady, calm pace of her mission.

She could only hope that Anakin and Ahsoka’s senses were right, and that Varol’s arrogance would be his downfall.

*Steady in, steady out – focus. Breathe.*

It seemed to be a matter of personal preference, to live within the Palace walls or not. Ridan had an estate was a few blocks to the north, in the University District, but spent most of his time in apartments within the Palace’s towers. Too far away; too risky.

Varol had moved into these suites – east side, seventh floor, with room enough for a servant or two, west-facing balcony – not long before the team had arrived. Prior to this, the records she had dug up while Rex spoke quickly and quietly to Rabé suggested that Varol had lived with his father, in their family estate a few miles outside of Aldera city limits. A country boy, then; eager to impress the courts – and overly eager to impress a dazzling young woman from Corellia, judging by the rather one-sided conversation Rex had patched her into. Rabé’s replies were quiet, but she was obviously playing the role of innocent, wide-eyed, naïve and sheltered noblewoman very well.

*Focus.*

Varol’s suites were three floors down, two corridors over from the Security Center – which itself was planted in the dead center of the East Wing, with hidden passages to the other junctions and a brisk three minutes and seventeen second walk to the Great Hall, and the Throne Room beyond that. Sabé kept her pace in time with the faint strains of the slow waltz coming in through Rabé’s threadcomms. Slow, measured, purposeful.

Should anyone have asked, her reason for being in the residents’ quarters during a Gala were that she was checking in on someone’s elderly mother, who had fallen ill that afternoon and decided to stay in and rest.

It also would have explained it if anyone saw her entering or exiting Varol’s rooms.

From the corridor’s windows, she could see the brilliant golden lights of the Great Hall across the massive courtyard and gardens. Somewhere in there, Rabé was charming Varol, who was blissfully unaware of how close it all was to crashing down around him.

Her steps were light on the shadowy servant’s stairs, and she did not see a soul in the corridors. Right turn – and there. Twenty-eight paces from where the stairs let her out. She pressed her palm flat against the hidden switch, and the stairs vanished back into the rugged stone wall behind her. It amused her, in the back of her mind, that the Palace was alternatively modern and very, very ancient. It all melded together as one, seamless and beautiful despite the years.
The entrance to Varol’s suites were marked by his family’s crest and colors; two gaudy tapestries all but glowed in the faint light from the candledroids on either side of the sleek chrome door. Normally, his guards would be standing watch – but Rex had commed them for assistance not fifteen minutes ago. For what, Sabé wasn’t entirely sure, but she now had a grand total of eleven and a half minutes to break in, find his terminals or dataports, break into those, find even a semblance of a trail of credits or intel or resources, and then slip back to the Security Center.

Rabé laughed at something Varol said, and Sabé suppressed a grin as she held her wrist up to the passlock mechanism. It had been more of a vocalized exhale, a hum, rather than a laugh – Rabé obviously wasn’t too impressed with whatever he was saying.

The lock clicked open with a gentle click, and Sabé began her countdown.

She slipped in through the door, careful to close it without a sound, and turned to face the empty suite. It was much cleaner, sparser than she had been expecting. Before the automatic lights could switch on, she disabled them with another wave of her wristcuff and simply let her eyes adjust to the shadowy rooms, lit only by the starlight through the tall windows. Aside from a few paintings and sculptures that had obviously been some sort of housewarming gifts, Varol’s rooms were practically devoid of any personal affects. Most surprising, however, was the fact that Varol apparently had an affection for real books – three massive wooden bookshelves lined one wall, all completely stuffed to the brim with tomes of all shapes and sizes. Sabé stayed in the shadows, motionless, simply observing.

The foyer opened onto a living space, with room enough for three separate sitting areas. To her right was obviously the small servant’s quarters, and on the wall opposite was the door to Varol’s private room. She could see the dark, lumpy shapes of discarded clothes strewn on the floor – but as much as the sight amused her, she slid her gaze to the next door. It was, unlike the others, closed tight. His office.

Perfect. There – breathe.

She stepped lightly across the carpeted floors, and noted with delight that Varol had been doing some quick reading about the history of Corellia. Looking to impress someone, my Lord? She asked as she bent to look at the lock of the office door – unlike the entrance, this door was outfitted with an old-fashioned metal lock, meant to scare away or discourage potential intruders.

Luckily, Sabé was not a typical intruder.

It swung open in eight seconds, and she returned the pin to her hair. The lights remained off, but the terminal sitting on the desk in the center of the room sensed a presence and lit, throwing the small room into sharp sapphire light. Sabé waited again, waited for an alarm that she knew was not coming, waited for fifteen seconds and then she was in.

Eirtaé was better at hacking tech like this, but nevertheless, Sabé had the terminal unlocked within the minute. Varol’s files were organized, thankfully. She settled in, and began searching.

Her countdown clicked with every passing second, painfully loud in the dead silence of the suite. Her palms were dry, her hands did not shake, her heart did not race – Sabé merely focused on her breathing, on the words flashing by on the screen in front of her. One moment to the next, one problem at a time. The words rang in her head, and she glanced at the chrono. Seven minutes left.

There.
One file, buried amongst the others in the administrative directory, under finances. He was a meticulous record-keeper.

Inconspicuous – but marked with strange metadata. A shared file, recently updated.

She looked at the size, and balked.

It was huge.

Once she opened it, she immediately understood why.

Varol was extremely generous, it seemed. Hundreds of thousands of credits donated – submitted anonymously – to a charity called Society for Galactic Unification. A vague name indeed. A foundation that she had never heard of – and he was not the only one who had donated. She scrolled through the names – codenames. None labelled properly – which was suspicious enough. Sabé suspected that the foundation was a front for something much larger, and that the list of codenames was the list of their Separatists. But Varol was not the kingpin. He merely funneled his credits to this phony charity, wrote extensive documents that Sabé hardly needed to read in full to see that he was in vocal support of the Separatist cause. And the documents had been consigned by other members of this Society – again, no real names, none of the names from Breha’s list.

They had quite a large chapter on Alderaan.

In fact, their only chapter was based on Alderaan.

Their documents did not speak outright of treason, but if any group were to lean towards the Separatist cause – it would be this Society.

From her quick scan, they had seventeen active members – but three led the charge in terms of documents created, funds donated. One was Varol – the other two. They must be the ringleaders.

Another file caught her eye, and when she opened it, she had to resist the urge to leap up and cheer in petty, savage delight.

They were meeting tomorrow. Late afternoon.

For the first time, Sabé’s stomach leapt and her heart skipped a beat. They were close, they were so close that she could almost taste the victory. She moved quickly – only minutes now – and slid a slim datapack out of her wristcuff. Waiting for the file to transfer was the longest minute of her life, but as soon as the quiet confirmation chime sounded she was gone – the terminal wiped of her presence, the heavy wooden door locked behind her; she did not breathe as she reactivated the automatic lights so that Varol would not be suspicious upon his return; she did not breathe until she had slipped into the blessedly-empty corridor, the door locking behind her.

Sabé did not take a full breath until she had darted back into the Security Center and placed the datapack on the desk in front of Rex, and beamed at him.

0050 hrs. ♦ 12:50am

The Gala of Lights showed no signs of letting up.

Sabé and Rex watched the screens, occasionally commenting on the events but mostly in tense
silence. The datapack containing Varol’s communications – the proof of his support for the Separatists, for the enemy – sat on the desk, but it felt like the weight of every damning word was sitting on his chest, instead. Every five minutes, Rex caught himself glowering at it. He had to shake himself and tear his gaze from the small, inconspicuous datapack sitting on the desk in front of them. No matter where he looked, he could feel it. Like the taste of metallic blood coating his tongue that he couldn’t quite get rid of. It made his stomach churn. To watch this soft nobleman, who had never worked a day in his life, who thought himself above and beyond the repercussions of this bloody war, to watch him simper and charm his way through the crowds while he casually plotted to chip away at the Republic, to endanger Rex and all of his brothers, after everything they’d done for people like this-

Rex felt Sabé’s eyes on him and realized he’d tensed near every muscle in his body. Again. He worked his jaw loose, flexed his fingers, exhaled and inhaled again on a slow count – but still the anger burned in his blood. Sabé did not say a word, and eventually her gaze slid back to the screens. Rabé and her friend, Abeni, were dancing together – Rabé leading, both laughing without a care in the world. On another screen, Senator Amidala was deep in discussion with Senators Organa and Mothma. Ahsoka and the two elder Nabooian girls were exploring the gardens, eventually coming to a stop under a well-lit gazebo and the true reason for their explorations came to light. Rex couldn’t help but snort as one pulled out her throwing knives from within her sleeves and the Commander bent over them, fascinated, picking them up and testing their weight in her hands; all three far too energized for nearly one in the morning.

The youngest, meanwhile, was utterly and entirely asleep in Jesse’s lap. She’d refused to leave, even when midnight had struck, despite her sister, the Senator, and Eirtaé spending the better part of an hour trying to convince her to return to her bed. Jesse did not seem to mind. He, Echo, and the General were deep in their own discussion, occasionally casting glances around the room. Echo and General Skywalker occasionally rising to complete a loop of the ballroom. Lazily, though; not with any real urgency. When Sabé had sent confirmation of Varol’s involvement with the Separatists to the rest of the team, Rex had seen all of their shoulders literally drop. They had all well and truly relaxed – and he would be lying to himself if he said he wasn’t a little bit jealous. Sitting in the same room as that damned datapack was enough to turn his stomach, and all the while, he had to watch the others dance the night away.

Sabé cleared her throat, the sound cracking through the muffled conversations coming through dozens of stickymics. “What’s your assistant’s name?”

“Basilio.” Rex knew his tone was sharp, but he couldn’t help himself. They had the man. They had the answer, the criminal, in question – what was stopping him from marching up to Varol and arresting him?

Or punching him straight in his spoiled, simpering face-

Enough, a quiet voice in his mind whispered. Not enough solid evidence yet.

“Call him in.”

“What?”

“Call in Basilio.” As she spoke, she reached forward and enclosed her fingers over the pack. Rex stared at her, and she nodded seriously. “You deserve a break, Captain.”

He blinked in surprise, and she suddenly grinned before continuing. “You’re on Alderaan, close to one of Queen Breha’s famous galas – don’t you want to go experience it? Basilio can take over for the rest of the evening.”
Rex’s eyes were once again caught by the ongoing celebrations on the screen. Every screen was lit with exuberance and light. Ahsoka didn’t look like a Commander anymore – she simply looked like the young girl that she was, laughing with her new friends. Senator Amidala, General Skywalker, the handmaidens, all of his brothers…

They all looked happy. Even for just a moment, just for one single night, in between all the constant pain and grief and uncertainty of the war – they were free from it.

Rex watched the screens for a moment longer and then he met Sabé’s eyes, and grinned. He stood and gave her a mock bow, extending his hand to help her rise from her seat. She snorted but accepted, slipping her hand into the crook of his elbow. With his free hand, he paged Basilio, hoping he wouldn’t be too annoyed at the call.

"You just want to go speak with the Lady Abeni," Rex said, fighting to keep his face straight.

Sabé gaped at him for a second before she burst out in delighted laughter, pocketing the datapack into her skirts. “Unbelievable! I’ve been found out. Am I that obvious?” Basilio paged back an immediate confirmation and once again, Rex made note to thank Queen Breha for assigning the man to him. “She is very beautiful, and Rabé genuinely likes her, which is a good sign, but… but I don’t think she’d pay very much attention to a maidservant.”

Before Rex could express his sincere doubts about that, Sabé’s face contorted with confusion, and she withdrew her hand, something cupped in the palm of her hand. Three tiny chalcedony beads glittered in the light from the mosaic of screens.

She made an indistinct sort of noise, shrugging, before pocketing them again and grinning slyly at him. “Ready for your first Alderaanian Gala, Captain?”

“Absolutely.”
And we're back! Thank you so much for your patience, everyone; it really means the world to us! We only mentioned this on tumblr, but the Gala of Lights actually spans three chapters from each group's perspective to give them the screen time they deserve, since there is a lot going on. Last chapter was Rex and Sabé working behind the scenes, and this chapter focuses on Padmé's team (fondly dubbed the Distraction Team).

Which leaves us one final team to spend the Gala of Lights with, in the next chapter...

Enjoy! ❤❤
From the Desk of Her Royal Majesty, First of Her Name, Queen Breha Organa of Alderaan

My dear Padmé:

I still can’t quite express to you how happy I am to see you here! It is always a pleasure to see you, and I do so envy my husband in that he is able to enjoy your company more often than I. Though I do not envy you your duties in the Senate - from what Bail tells me, it is a wonder that you were able to slip away at all. I am very sorry I have not managed to meet with you and your group in private - so this will have to do. I hope you’ll find this note more charming than antiquated - I thought it best not to risk sending you message via the more usual channels (and it gives me an excuse to practice my handwriting) - as I wanted to tell you what to expect from this Gala.

I’ve informed the Heads of Security (including my most recent hire, an excellent man worth double his weight in gold) that I want the evening to be completely safe. Cameras are being set up in a variety of locations - for security, you understand? Even in the gardens, which are normally only serviced by foot patrols. Few people will be allowed weapons; however, as the circumstances of your retinue are more unusual than is normal, your guards will not be required to check their weapons. And, if I recall your fondness for your blasters, neither will you. I’ve informed my stewards of this (including another recent hire, a woman with a mind nearly as sharp as your own).

I’m hoping that this event will give you more opportunities to meet with the various members of the court that I have told you about. I am expecting all members of my court to make an appearance tonight. As we do have several debutantes, this will be the first event of the evening. I understand that, according to Naboo tradition, you have taken the three younglings under your care for the duration of their stay. My stewards have sent letters to the debutantes (including the young woman from Corellia, who seems to have caused quite a stir, though I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting her) informing them of their own schedules.

As I’m sure you remember from the last Gala you attended (has it already been two years?), we do not typically put an end-time to our parties. If I were to venture a guess, I’d say this one could very easily last until two or three in the morning - though of course you are free to retire at any time you please. I do hope that we’ll have a chance to speak about your latest work in the Senate tonight.

I’m eager for any updates you can give me - even the smallest news would ease my racing thoughts.

Breha Organa

H.R.M. of Alderaan

1735 hrs. 5:35pm

“...doesn’t know how to handle Naboo’s position in the war – she just wants to stay out of it, which is fine up to a point – but Apailana has given it some serious thought. She even gave a lecture on ‘the advantage of historical Naboo beliefs and traditions during the modern era.’ I attended it; she’s very well spoken.” Eirtaé finished as she spooled the delicate chain of fiery jewels around her wrist. She
bent closer to her handiwork – an intricate mass of looping braids and plaits pulled into two side buns – as she plucked the matching pin from between her teeth and carefully threaded the first loop of gold into the near-solid mass of hair.

Padmé – sitting as straight as she could, watching Eirtaé work in the mirror – nodded and winced as the pin lightly scraped along her scalp. “Does she have any solid plans to move into the public sector?”

“None as of now. My mother has certainly taken notice, though. I believe she will push for Apailana to run for Princess of Theed – once she finishes schooling, of course.” Pin secured, Eirtaé slowly started to unwind the chain of jewels, wrapping and pinning as she worked until a dozen of tiny embers glowed in Padmé’s hair. She stepped back and scrutinized her own work for a moment before nodding in satisfaction and picking up the next strand.

Padmé gave a short laugh. “That doesn’t surprise me at all.” Eirtaé’s mother, Deirdre, matriarch of House Veruna, was the most fearsome being Padmé had ever met. Calculating, driven, and of a tactical mind like nothing Padmé had ever seen, the fact that Deirdre had spotted a promising political talent this early hinted at a future change in the Naboo monarchy. Again.

Three monarchs in less than five years. Jamillia had stepped down just after the start of the war to marry and was now living in Theed with her two wives. Neeyutnee had been a natural fit, and even though she and Padmé disagreed on Naboo’s wartime responsibilities, Padmé thought she had been doing a fine job of the thankless position. Neeyutnee was only two years into her term. If there were whispers of her being unseated already…

“Supposedly the Chancellor himself sent Apailana a letter commending her on her thesis. She’s a bright talent, that’s for certain.” Eirtaé said softly.

“Hopefully the monarchy will stabilize soon, whether with Neeyutnee or her successor.” The war was tumultuous already. Naboo needed a steady, strong hand now more than ever; not this uncertainty that had marked its political landscape since before the war.

“My mother thinks Apailana may be our best bet for that.” Eirtaé secured the final jeweled chain into Padmé’s hair and closed their dark velvet box with a quiet snap.

Eirtaé was already dressed for the night ahead – a dark gown with blood red tulle peeking through deep slashes in the skirts. A sheer black silk wrap was pinned in place with gold epaulets on her shoulders and over her bright blonde hair. If Padmé looked like a fire, Eirtaé was the faintly glowing embers – ready to leap up any moment.

As she placed a heavy necklace of bright gold dripping with fiery jewels on Padmé’s neck, there was a gentle knock on the door. Eirtaé cleared her throat and met Padmé’s gaze in the mirror. “There you are, my Lady. If you’re not careful, you’ll steal the hearts of everyone in the court.”

Something in the way she said the words told Padmé Eirtaé knew it was Anakin behind the door. Before she had time to react, however, the blonde handmaiden had grabbed a cloak, opened the door and slipped out with a final, “I’m off to help Rabé. Be back soon.”

Padmé nodded without speaking, because at the moment, her entire being was preoccupied with the sight of Anakin in formal Jedi dressrobes. Breha’s tailor was skilled – the dark blue tunic was cut well. Very well. The full sleeves had been designed from a lightly patterned cloth, lighter blue than the tunic, and were accented with gold bands on his forearms and wrists. A simple necklace of banded gold lay under the stiff collar of the robes – though as Padmé stepped closer, mindful of the conversations and people just outside her open door, she could see lines of intricate and delicate
runes over each piece of jewelry. He grinned shyly under her scrutiny and pushed back his dark blonde hair, and Padmé’s stomach leapt when she noticed the gold-and-japoor earring glinting in the light. Her hand fluttered to where her snippet usually hung, and when her fingers couldn’t find it, she reached forward for his hands.

“How do I look, Senator Amidala?” Anakin asked, a mischievous glint in his eyes and a low undercurrent to his seemingly innocent question.

She couldn’t help herself – she stretched up on her toes and kissed her husband, trying not to think about how they had been together for nearly a week and this was the first time she had been able to kiss him – she kissed him until he laughed and wrapped his arms around her waist, their gold jewelry catching in the brilliant light of the setting sun over the lake.

“If you’re not careful,” she whispered, not caring that if Ahsoka or Echo or Jesse stepped around the corner, they – Anakin and Padmé, not the mission – would be ruined, “you’ll steal every last heart in the court.”

Anakin grinned and leaned forward to kiss her again, and again, and again – until Padmé was breathless and had almost entirely forgotten where they were, and why they were there.

1900 hrs. ✧ 7:00pm

“Akantha and Iole Tapalo, and Tyche Veruna to see you, Senator Amidala.”

Padmé caught Ahsoka’s eye and grinned. “Right on time. Send them in, please.”

Ahsoka had thought her formal Jedi robes – which were almost identical to Anakin’s, though the tailor had changed out the light blue fabric to match the stripes on her montrals, cut out some diamond shapes to match her normal clothes, and her jewelry was the bronze of a Padawan – were almost overbearing in their luxury, but when the three Nabooians stepped over the threshold, Ahsoka suddenly worried that her outfit wasn’t formal enough. Eirtaé had helped her with the lay of her formal akul headdress – adorned with tiny pearls and Shili rose quartz, like what Master Ti wore – but Ahsoka suddenly wished for more. More what, she had no idea.

She picked at the hem of her new dressrobes with unease, but put on what she hoped was a confident expression. Eirtaé greeted her cousin, and asked a question that Ahsoka had not thought to ask: “How do you feel today, Tyche?”

Tyche’s face blossomed like the sun. “Neutral. ‘They,’ please.” They caught Ahsoka’s eyes and smiled, and Ahsoka understood – they were genderfluid. Got it, she thought, smiling warmly back at them.

“Of course,” Eirtaé said - and then she reached forward to straighten out Tyche’s robes. “You three look fantastic - excellent colors…”

Tyche had decided on formal Nabooian dressrobes in brilliant teal with dark orange embroidered detailing on the high collar and fitted sleeves. They had braided their thick red hair into an intricate topknot, held in place with an ornate bronze diadem and dotted all over with tiny white flowers. A thick bronze belt decorated with a scrolling design of the Veruna falcon, matching tall boots, and a formal silver cape - the mark of a debutante - completed the look. Akantha’s gown was the inverted match to Tyche’s robes; her full, dark orange skirts swept the floor with crossed sashes of teal and
silver. Most surprising, however, was that her tattoo had changed as well. Instead of the usual static black, the ink was now slowly shifting between the colors of her ensemble.

“Nanodroids,” she told Ahsoka with pride, presenting her cheek for Ahsoka’s observation as the design under her eye shimmered in transition from silver to orange, the particles shifting like slowly falling stars. “I can program them to be whatever I want – any color or pattern you can think of, I can do.”

Ahsoka watched for a full cycle, entranced by the rich colors as Eirtaé fuss ed over the lay of Tyche’s robes. Animatats weren’t that uncommon, but the astronomical price of ink saturated with the tiny droids meant that they were vastly out of reach for both the clones and Jedi - which meant Ahsoka rarely, if ever, saw them. Jesse watched the colors, too, and Ahsoka sensed a very faint glimmer of envy spiraling between his nerves and excitement for the night ahead.

Iole wore a gown of shimmering pale greens and soft grays. She shyly thanked the Senator when she complimented her, but her attention was elsewhere. Iole was clutching a soft bag in both of her hands, and as soon as her eyes landed on Jesse and Echo waiting near the balcony, she made straight for them. Jesse’s whisper of envy vanished underneath his bright joy as Iole dug into the bag and produced two Nabooian chocolates for both of them. They were so large that her tiny hands had trouble holding onto them. Jesse and Echo thanked her profusely, beaming. They sat at one of the low tables near the balcony, and Iole clambered almost immediately into Echo’s lap. He beamed as she started telling them about where she’d gotten the chocolates, and how patiently she’d been waiting to give it to her new friends.

Jesse almost looked like he was going to cry as he opened the wrapped and took a bite of the chocolate. Iole was watching him with wide eyes, and when he told her it was very good, she clapped her hands in delight. Ahsoka grinned. She doubted little Iole knew just how much the men loved sweet things, but the gift was all the sweeter from a young friend.

“Ahsoka, if you’d please join us for a moment…” Padmé asked as she settled on the couch next to Eirtaé. Threepio scuttled into the room carrying a tray of drinks and pastries. “I want you to know the general plan for tonight.”

“Of course.” Heir Nohemi was the last problem to be dealt with – not including the spy themselves, of course. Under her excitement for the gala, for experiencing one of Queen Breha’s legendary parties, Ahsoka was getting restless. Antsy. Her new robes were only slightly uncomfortable, the sort of discomfort that rests mostly unnoticed in the back of one’s mind. But she still wished for the comfort of her old clothes, battleworn as they were. They were familiar. She’d just had the last little bit of familiarity in an unfamiliar situation taken away.

Ahsoka joined Anakin behind the couch as Akantha launched into her and Tyche’s plan for the evening. Anakin kept trying to meet Ahsoka’s eye, sensing her quiet discomfort, but she ignored him to focus intently on Akantha. Her tattoo shifted to bright, shimmering orange as she began, “Queen Breha mentioned in her letter to us that the debut ceremony won’t last longer than thirty minutes – apparently it’s a small group this year – and we don’t want to spend all the rest of the night with Nohemi. That’d be more suspicious than anything. We have to move around.”

“We’re supposed to meet all the people we can during our tours,” Tyche said. “We were thinking, Senator – if you could introduce us to Nohemi instead of one of us trying to get her attention by ourselves, that would be best.”

Padmé nodded. “I completely agree. She’ll be staying close by Breha’s side for the first half of the evening, and I need to speak with her on other matters. That will be the perfect time to introduce you to her Heirs.”
“We’ll look for you after our debuts are completed, then?”

“There might be a receiving line, though…”

“Yes, that will unfortunately push back the time you can meet Nohemi. However, since I am your Senator and elder, it would not seem out of place to stay by my side as I greet members of the court. We’ll try to stand near Breha; find us as soon as you’re able.”

Ahsoka’s attention drifted – although ‘drifted’ wasn’t exactly what a Jedi’s mind did. No, she thought to herself as the conversation went on, it’s more like ‘expanding’ than ‘drifting.’ She could sense Jesse and Iole trying in vain to beat Echo at dejarik together (Echo’s mind was completely fluctuating between letting Iole win, he didn’t want to be rude or hurt her feelings, she’d just given them a gift; or not going easy to help her learn – all it mean was that his strategy wasn’t as tight as it normally was - but he was still beating Jesse and Iole’s combined efforts with ease). They’d stay close to the Senator and watch over Iole tonight. Anakin and Ahsoka would prowl the perimeters, keeping an eye on everything and working as coordinators with Rex and Sabé in their crow’s nest. The eyes in the sky, she thought. Or is it ‘skies’? Eyes in the skies…?

Someone was walking towards their rooms.

Ahsoka jumped back into the conversation – Tyche was arguing that they should also speak to Rabé at some point, to keep her updated during the evening – and leaned forward to whisper in Eirtaé’s ear, “Someone’s coming.”

Eirtaé voice was quiet and as sharp as a knife’s edge with sudden worry. “What? Are you certain?”

“Yes. I think – I think they’re carrying something.”

Eirtaé frowned and excused herself. They’d spoken lowly and too quickly for Padmé and her protégés to catch on to what was happening. Anakin had noticed, though, and was frowning towards the front door as well. “Can you tell what it is?”

Ahsoka shrugged, “I… it just feels like a package.” She tightened her focus, narrowing onto the approaching figure in the corridor beyond. One of the Alderaanian guards held up his hand, and the figure stopped. “It doesn’t feel dangerous.”

“I don’t sense any danger, either-”

The comms unit built into the side table next to Padmé’s elbow crackled to life. “Senator Amidala, we have a courier with a package here for Padawan Ahsoka Tano.”

The conversation stuttered to a halt, and Tyche raised their eyebrow at Ahsoka, who only seemed capable of stammering out, “Wha- for me?”

Padmé cleared her throat and spoke to the comms: “Can you verify the contents of this package?”

“I’ve scanned it, ma’am. No threats of any kind – appears to be some sort of jewelry. I can send them away, if you’d prefer.”

Ahsoka’s confusion deepened, and Padmé smiled gently at her. “Bring it in, please. We’re very curious about this – who is the sender?”

“It’s marked from the Jedi Temple on Coruscant.”

Nothing makes any sense anymore, Ahsoka groaned inwardly.
The courier was dressed in Organa livelry, though it was not the same young boy who had greeted them the day before. He held a small, carefully wrapped package in his arms, and Anakin took it first. The boy’s eyes flicked to the lightsaber clipped on Anakin’s belt, and widened in awe.

There was something…familiar about the package. Heartachingly familiar. Aware of everyone silently watching on in curiosity, Ahsoka reached forward and took it from Anakin. The Jedi Order symbol was stamped on the thick wrappings. No indication of who had sent it – or why – but still that familiar force tugged her onwards.

A boa-wood box inlaid with transparisteel and lommite decorations didn’t help to answer her questions – but the contents inside, resting on a raised bed of soft velvet and shining in the light from the candledroids, certainly did.

And so did the note:

**Kotoyah, little ‘Soka.**

*I heard that you’re attending an Alderaanian Gala as part of your recent mission. I hope these find you in good health; I thought they could be of use to you.*

*Represent us well.*

*May the Force be with you.*

*Master Plo Koon*

She opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it after only a squeak of stunned surprise made it out.

“What is it, Ahsoka?”

She set the box down on the table, mindful of the group now crowding around her. She held up the necklace – the High Councillor’s necklace, inlaid with tiny kyber crystals and singing in the Force – and said, breathlessly, “It’s Master Plo’s – I can’t wear this…”

A chorus of oohs and aahs met her as she stared at the jewelry.

“Why not?” Padmé asked, eyes sparkling. “They’re absolutely beautiful.”

“It’s a High Councillor’s jewelry – they’re the only ones allowed to wear these-” In addition to the necklace, there were four arm bands and a dazzling headpiece that would rest near perfectly in between her montrals. And underneath the first layer – Master Plo had sent her a belt made of the same material. He hadn’t sent his clawplates, but the gifts he had sent along soothed her addled nerves as easily as if he were standing right next to her. “I’m just a Padawan, I…”

“Ahsoka,” Anakin said gently, “if Master Plo sent them to you, he wants you to wear them.”

She hesitated, but with an encouraging nod from Anakin, watched eagerly by Tyche and Akantha, Ahsoka slipped on the four armbands – and immediately her nerves softened, soothed away by a presence she hadn’t even known she was missing.

Eirtaé helped her fix the headpiece between her montrals – the kyber crystals dangling from its side
were pleasantly cool on her lekku – and she took a deep breath. Master Plo’s presence was so strong that she felt as though he were there beside her. Calm and encouraging.

*I can do this.*

Master Plo believed in her.

She could do this.

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**2040 hrs. ✧ 8:40pm**

The orchestra finished off the lively waltz with a flourish – the notes hanging almost crystalline in the golden illumination of the vast hall – and once more the guests erupted into cheers. The line of debutantes, their silver marks resplendent in the golden hall and flushed from the dance, curtsied and bowed once more. Padmé’s attention had been torn between her two young charges and Rabé and Fives, all of whom looked as if they had been born to play those roles, born to dance in front of the crowds of cheering nobles. Fives had looked like he wanted nothing more than to run away as he and Rabé moved into position, but as the music had started, softly flowing down from the balcony, his expression had changed. It was as if his nerves had entirely melted away as soon as he took Rabé’s hand in his own.

He was a very graceful dancer. When she glanced sideway at Jesse and Echo as the couple waltzed by, Jesse looked as if he couldn’t quite decide if what he was witnessing was more amusing or amazing. Echo – holding Iole’s hand – actually looked quite proud as his brother went by.

Tyche and Akantha had danced a traditional Nabooian dance that did not require one to lead the entire way through. Laughing as they switched, waving to Iole as they spun past, they shone, too, and Padmé had felt a surge of pride, an almost motherly instinct, as she watched next to Bail and Breha. The debutantes danced in the center of the crowds, trails of bright holographic glitter following their movements. It was utterly ethereal.

Breha’s Heirs stood next to her, and as the music ended, all but one – Nohemi – melted into the crowds for their own assigned tasks of the evening. Nohemi refused to meet Padmé’s eyes, her hands clasped politely in front of her. As the music ended and others guests swarmed the debutantes to congratulate them or introduce themselves, Akantha and Tyche slipped past the cheers to stand by Padmé’s side. Anakin and Ahsoka were cool presences behind her, though almost felt as if she could sense Anakin’s discomfort with the entire affair. She wished she could take his hand, comfort him in some way.

But duty called.

Rabé and Fives were swarmed almost immediately – though Fives created a barrier between Rabé and her admirers with a fierce look – and Padmé feverently wished her luck. Though as she turned to greet Breha and Bail, she caught many others looking her way with great curiosity. Breha clasped her hands in her own, smiling as brightly as a sun, Bail’s arm firmly around her waist. “Padmé, love, wasn’t that wonderful? I’ve always loved hosting debutantes – this group is one of the best, they danced so well-!”

She looked so happy, so utterly incandescently happy, that Padmé – for all her nerves and fears about the mission – couldn’t help but laugh with her. She squeezed Breha’s hand fondly in agreement, and then fixed her gaze on the girl standing by Breha’s side. “Nohemi, it is wonderful to
Noehmi ducked her head shyly, and for a moment Padmé wasn’t entirely convinced that this was the same brash and brazen young woman who had demanded an audience the day before. “You as well, Senator.” Her words were soft-spoken and awkward now.

“Have you had the chance to meet my charges?” Padmé asked, trying to make her voice as kind as possible. Without looking, she gestured behind her. “Akantha Tapalo and Tyche Veruna.”

At their names, the two stepped closer and greeted Noehmi with interest, Akantha practically vibrating with excitement at the prospect of their mission. Tyche was calmer, steadier, as they regarded Noehmi with guarded eyes. Noehmi bowed, a vision of Alderaanian beauty in the soft gold lights that surrounded them, and murmured that she had not had the chance to meet them.

Padmé smiled and nodded at Akantha, who stepped forward to grasp Noehmi’s forearm. “I think we’re going to get along very well, Heir Noehmi – I have so many questions-! This hall is so beautiful, isn’t it, Tyche-”

“Yes, it’s absolutely stunning – but I have questions about the position of Heir, if you don’t mind-”

Noehmi flushed with the attention and managed to stammer out if she might be excused, to which Breha inclined her head. “Of course – enjoy the Gala, you three.”

Bail watched the group – Tyche and Akantha hanging off of Noehmi’s arms, Noehmi relaxing with every question and laugh from the guests – and turned to face his wife and Padmé. He raised one eyebrow in confusion, but Breha laughed brightly and cheerfully said, “So wonderful to see the young ones getting along so well! Just think; they’ll soon be taking over for us!”

Bail laughed and bent to kiss Breha on the cheek. “Not that soon, I hope.”

2100 hrs. ∨ 9:00pm

Echo had long ago memorized the list Queen Breha had given the Senator. Rabé had been delighted when he’d asked for the list to be sent to his personal datapad, but Fives had teased him as Echo flipped through the names and faces on their way to Alderaan. And then Fives had gotten his ass kicked by a woman a foot shorter than him, so then the teasing had stopped. When Lord Ridan stepped up to greet her, flanked by an older woman Queen Breha introduced as Lady Malyna Girard and a round-faced young man – Tahsin Varol, thirty-one standard years – Echo’s eyes narrowed. Baxil Ridan, sixty-four standard years, senior member of Alderaanian Parliament had soft lavender hair sprinkled with golden glitter. General Skywalker, already tense, folded his arms across his chest and fixed Ridan with such an intense stare that Echo was certain the General was trying to read the thoughts swirling underneath that lavender hair. Behind the trio, a line of eager guests waited to greet the Queen and Senator, jostling each other, stepping out of the way of the dancers swirling about in the center.

It was absolute chaos, and both the Queen and the Senator seemed unperturbed. Echo shifted and strained to catch their words. Beyond the customary greetings, which always followed the same order – Queen Breha always spoke first, introducing the guests to Senator Amidala, who then greeted the newcomers, who were then free to speak – they had a small conversation that never exceeded forty-two seconds. Quick, efficient, but still giving each eager greeter individual attention. They walked away, puffed out and pleased with themselves.
Ridan asked how the Senator was liking Alderaan, a question she’d already received a half-dozen times. She responded politely that it was beautiful, though cold for her tastes (one of her four prepared answers to the question) and they all laughed.

Varol then spoke, and his cool, simpering statement made Echo’s guts churn with unease. “Senator Amidala, I’m so sorry to hear of the attacks on Coruscant. It must have been so terribly frightening for you.” The way he paused between the condescending words made his intentions very clear. He didn’t think she should be here. He thought the Senator a coward. He wasn’t even bothering to hide a faint sneer as he glanced down at her.

General Skywalker stiffened with anger but she was already replying with ease, unbothered by Varol’s attempt to throw her off balance, “It was a terrible tragedy, of course.”

“What the hell was this man on about?” Echo glanced over at Jesse, who was obviously thinking the same thing. The two were hardly related, the attacks on Coruscant had been a ploy by the Separatists to frighten the capital, not as some strangely targeted attack on the Senator, and yet here was Varol looking as proud as if he had just won the debate. Ridan, to his credit, looked extremely pained. The old woman next to them was silent and stiff, her eyes flashing around the room, her hands twisting together with nerves. Echo noticed that her steel-gray hair was coming undone from its plaits.

It was Senator Organa who steered the conversation back into more-or-less normal territory. “We were all frightened, Lord Varol. My offices were close to one of the bomb sites.” He shuddered. “I pray you never have to experience something so terrible, my young friend.” His smile told them they were done. Move along, move along.

Varol blinked in shock and Echo fought to keep the laugh off his face. Lord Ridan bowed, Lord Varol sputtered, his face reddening, and Lady Malyna’s wide, glassy eyes flashed around the room, looking as though she expected an attack at any moment – and then they were gone, replaced by another group. Commander Tano and the General exchanged a glance as the trio vanished into the crowds.

Echo hoped Rabé would step on Varol’s feet if he asked her dance.

2150 hrs. ♦ 9:50pm

Eirtaé was as still as a rock in a hurricane-battered sea as she observed the gala in full swing around her. She knew where everyone was – from here, near the edge of the raised platform where the thrones were sitting, unused as their normal occupants swept through the crowds, meant she had a near 360-degree view of the entire room. She kept her head on a slow, constant swivel. The orchestra, unseen except for the sporadic movement of the tips of bows and instruments, on the topmost balcony. Fives getting a drink on the opposite end, near the stairs; Rabé and Akantha talking by a statue of an Alderaanian goddess. Padmé and Ahsoka standing near one of the doors to the gardens, catching a cool breeze from the lake. General Skywalker had snuck off for the moment. Not far, though, she knew. He would stay by Padmé as often as possible. Kix and Hardcase, dressed in Corellian livery, making their rounds.

“So nice to have one evening without talk of this dreadful war. I’m quite tired of it, honestly. As long as those clones are taking care of the mess – I don’t want to hear about it!”
Her eyes snapped to the speaker – a pudgy Quarren dressed in the traditional broad-shouldered robes of xyr people and clutching a glass of what Eirtaé was certain was not xyr first glass of spiced wine – just as Kix and Hardcase passed in front of her. Kix heard the dismissive comment, too: his shoulders tensed, his jaw tightened, his hands clenched into fists – Hardcase whispered something forcefully under his breath and then the men were gone.

Eirtaé gaze remained fixed on the Quarren, however. Oh, no, she thought, tracking xyr movements through the crowd as she moved to Padmé’s side and asked if she’d like a refill of her drink. That will not do at all.

The Quarren’s robes were pale, dusty gray. A beautiful color.

She slipped through the crowds towards the bar with ease as Fives was leaving, two drinks in each hand. He looked quite good in his formalwear, but she’d have to tell him to wipe that grimace off his face once she got the chance. A Captain of the Guard shouldn’t look that nervous. He caught her eye and gave her a fraction of a nod.

Eirtaé asked for the darkest, reddest wine. As the bartender filled Padmé’s glass, Eirtaé’s gaze cut through the crowds again. The Quarren had, blessedly, come to a stop near enough Padmé that Eirtaé’s route wouldn’t seem suspicious.

She thanked the bartender, took hold of the glass, locked her sights on the target – and without a breath of hesitation, she walked straight into the Quarren’s broad chest.

Dark red wine bloomed over xyr gray robes like a beautiful painting. Xe shrieked, cursing at her in Basic, Quarrenese, and – surprisingly – Mon Cala as she scrambled to apologize – the crowds near them turned at the commotion and she raised her voice, raised the pitch of her quivering, shameful apologize so as to draw everyone’s attention to the mess. Wine dripped to the floor and a mouse droid sped out of its hidden charging station to clean it. Eirtaé begged for xyr forgiveness – “I am so sorry, it was my fault, please let me help clean-” – even as her eyes scanned the audience.

Kix and Hardcase were staring at the commotion, Kix fixing her with a disbelieving look, like he’d never expected to her to act so clumsy or sheepish in a million years.

Eirtaé caught Kix’s eye and winked as the Quarren cursed her so much that spittle flew from xyr tentacled mouth.

Kix blinked in shock, and the dawning realization on his face was a wonderful thing indeed. He beamed at her, then nudged Hardcase and whispered something under his breath. Both looked far happier now that the Quarren was doing a graceless dance in sopping wet robes – xe might not have to hear about the war tonight, and Eirtaé could feel both Padmé and Sabé’s eyes drilling into her head with disapproval, but she wasn’t about to let that sort of talk stand.

From across the room, Kix and Hardcase nodded at her, grinning and trying not to laugh.

That’s better.

2230 hrs. ✧ 10:30pm

Ahsoka waved her hand in front of Akantha’s face, adding to the wind of her fan, and grinned when Akantha’s eye cracked open to stare approvingly at her. Ahsoka leaned in and half-shouted above the cacophony of the gala, “Tiring out already?”
“No way.” Akantha sat up straight and tugged the hem of Tyche’s robes until they glanced down at her. “Since you’re already standing, Tyche, love…?”

They rolled their eyes but laughed as they took her empty glass and went off in search of the closest bar, moving with ease through the crush of people dancing, drinking, and conversing. Every part of Ahsoka’s head felt electrified – the pure amount and intensity of the Force in this room was nothing short of spectacular. That oily feeling remained, though it was diminished in the back of her mind. She wondered if that meant schemes and plots had been put on hold for the evening.

Across the room, her eyes found Rabé deep in conversation with the same girl – Abeni – that she’d been with all evening. Abeni was on her third or fourth glass of wine, but Rabé’s mind was as sharp and focused as ever. As the Force started to fade and blur around the other party-goers, Rabé and Fives both remained clear. Though Fives had filled her glass multiple times, it must have been with sparkling cider of some sort. Either that, or Rabé could handle her alcohol better than Commander Cody.

Ahsoka pressed her lips together at the thought – she wasn’t old enough to go to some of the bars that the men preferred while they were on leave, but… she’d certainly heard enough about the misadventures on the lower levels of Coruscant.

Akantha started to sing along to the orchestra, dancing in her seat – but her eyes flicked through the crowds, too; looking for Nohemi, Ahsoka suspected. They were in their established base for the evening – a tiny yet comfortable alcove with room enough for the whole team and unmatched views of the interior Hall. They were also situated close enough to one of the entrances to the gardens. Beings of every shape and size and color lazily wandered about without a care in the world, and had Ahsoka not been acutely aware of the reason why they were there, she would have found the entire display a strange mix of intoxicating and disturbing. There was no shortage of guests donating credits to the war effort, but… they were all here, in their finery, drinking spiced wine and dancing about a hall illuminated in gold.

She turned to Akantha, still furiously fanning herself and humming along in time to the music, and asked, “Is this what it’s usually like?”

Akantha stopped fanning herself just as Tyche slipped back to the alcove and handed Akantha a fresh glass of wine – and, with the faintest hint of a smile, a glass for Ahsoka. “Is this what – what? These types of things?”

Ahsoka took the glass with both hands and stared down at the dark red spiced wine. Sharp cinnamon and fresh citrus notes punctuated the thick, heavy scent – that in itself was intoxicating enough. Tyche settled against the marble column as Akantha studied Ahsoka. “Jedi don’t go to a lot of formal events, do they?”

Despite herself, Ahsoka laughed. “We used to. Jedi are peacekeepers, and I guess we used to do this sort of thing more often.” Her voice softened as she thought back to the mural adorning the walls of the Throne room, to the electric-blue Nautolan and the Kiffar Padawan, her spiritual ancestors, from over two thousand years ago. *But that had been during a war, too.*

Akantha fanned herself and considered this, the breeze moving her light earrings. Her tattoo shimmered into silver with tiny blue pinpricks like strange freckles. “Most of the time, yeah. Lots of dancing, drinking, adults pretending to like each other… parties on Naboo usually end with a weapons demonstration.”

From their perch next to Akantha, Tyche grinned and added, “Or a duel. If it’s a Veruna party, that is.”
Ahsoka opened her mouth, her brow furrowed in confusion, but before she could figure out if they were joking or not, Iole and her watchful guardians returned from one of the caterer’s tables that lined the outer rim of the hall. From the look of their bounty, they had found the desserts. Iole scrambled up onto the couch, standing on the plush cushions in order to rest her tiny hand on Jesse’s shoulder.

Akantha stopped fanning and tickled her sister’s side. “That looks good, Iole!”

“It is.”

“Can I have a bite?”

Iole handed a gigantic creampuff to Akantha, but her eyes were wide-eyed and focused on the party, watching the swarms of people dance and walk by the alcove. Akantha broke the creampuff into three pieces and handed one to Tyche, the last to Ahsoka. As they ate the treats in contented silence, two Rodians walked by, xyrs heads pressed closed together, galaxy-eyes reflecting the golden lights. A group of young boys ducked and wove through the crowds, mischievous grins plastered on all of their faces.

A movement caught Ahsoka’s eye on the far end of the hall. Rabé had risen, excusing herself from Abeni’s side, and was moving with purpose towards none other than Varol. Fives stared after her for a moment, and when she gently touched Varol’s forearm, Ahsoka could feel the annoyance ripping through Fives. Rabé smiled winningly up at the nobleman, and gestured to the garden doors next to Ahsoka’s alcove.

“Oh, Tyche, look-” Akantha said suddenly, pointing with her fan to Nohemi following Rabé’s movements, too. Her eyes were narrowed, and when Rabé placed her hand in the crook of Varol’s elbow, the Heir started moving towards them. “Looks like we’re up.”

Tyche straightened off of the marble pillar and they were off to intercept Nohemi. Ahsoka could just barely make out the babble as they pulled Nohemi away from Rabé and Varol, gently steering her towards the other side of the room. Iole giggled and swayed, her dove-gray skirts sweeping against the cushions, holding onto Jesse’s shoulder for balance.

Rabé did not give them a second look as she and Varol walked by – her eyes were only for Varol, who looked infuriatingly pleased with himself. And then, following at a short distance with a scowl as dark as thunder, her Captain of the Guard walked past. Fives’ emotions were a mess, but he gave Ahsoka a brief nod nonetheless. Sabé must be moving, then, Ahsoka thought, standing up and looking for Skyguy and the Senator.

Iole took another bite of her desert and laughed again, watching Fives with a delighted grin on her face. “Aha… he wants to kiss her.”

Jesse shook his head. “I’ll bet if Varol tries to kiss her, he’ll end up with a broken arm.”

“Not him. Her Captain.” Iole corrected him. “Her Captain wants to kiss her.”

Echo choked on his dessert and sputtered out in between great, hacking coughs, “Who wants to what now?!”
He supposed he should be paying better attention to the Gala around him, but in his defense, there was a much more pressing matter to deal with.

He wanted to kiss her.

Fives?

Rabé?

Gods.

Echo strained his head again, trying to catch a glimpse of his brother across the crowded hall without being too obvious. But Iole’s words were stuck in his head and he couldn’t quite bring himself to believe it – he’d been watching them for the better part of an hour now and hadn’t noticed anything that unusual – although… now he remembered how nervous Fives had looked when Sabé had assigned the teams. He’d almost jumped, his eyes had darted up to Rabé straddling the turret gun; Echo remembered because it had been such a strange reaction. He’d almost taunted him about it, but then there hadn’t been time; they’d moved too quickly for Echo to poke fun at him. Echo had thought he was just nervous to play the role of Captain. It couldn’t – had he already been…? Was that why?

Holy shit, was it because of the spar?!

Holy shit, Fives.

Echo chewed his lip – a nervous habit that had refused to be beaten down – as he tried to catch Fives’ eye. It would explain why Fives looked like he would like nothing more than to deck Lord Varol in the jaw every time he spoke to Rabé.

He reconsidered, because if Iole was to be believed, Fives would like nothing more than to kiss Rabé and then deck Varol in the face.

Echo wanted to deck Fives in the face – this was a mission! Not only that, but those feelings might make Rabé uncomfortable, and if it was true – if Fives did want to kiss Rabé, which Echo still couldn’t quite wrap his head around why, in seven hells – then Echo would be obligated to take his spot. Rex would support him. This mission was too high-risk, there was too much riding on their success. They were here on a mission and his idiot brother was apparently so head-over-heels for his mission partner that an eight-year-old could see it.

He reconsidered again. He hadn’t seen it. Despite his confusion and his growing annoyance that Fives had managed to avoid his eyes for the better part of an hour, he had to laugh a little at himself. This twelve-year-old hadn’t seen it.

Across the hall, Fives finally, finally glanced over at their alcove and Echo immediately jerked his chin, his fingers making quick signals that anyone else would have dismissed as restless ticks. Get over here. Need to talk to you.

Fives stared at him, frowned ever-so-slightly, and shook his head. Busy.

Echo sighed in annoyance, signed it’s important, and then Fives got that look of stubborn pride that had infuriated so many of their trainers, and Echo, exasperated, accepted that Fives would never come over now, purely out of spite. And as Echo watched, Fives got up and moved out of his line of sight.

Echo now really would have liked to punch Fives. Kix! Of course – where’s Kix, he probably
knows-

There was a gentle tug on his hand, and he glanced down to see Iole sleepily gazing back up at him. Immediately his frown softened as she rubbed her eyes. She stood between him and Jesse (who wasn’t nearly as concerned about this potential mess as Echo was, and only laughed his concerns off with an infuriating “They’re both adults, Echo.”). Even with the excitement and the truly astounding amount of sugar she had consumed – the vanilla pastries with tiny blackberries were her and Jesse’s favorite; Echo preferred the rolled vanilla and chocolate sticks dipped in dark chocolate (they had tested all of them many times – just to be sure, of course) – Iole was ready to sleep standing up. She’d adamantly refused to return to her rooms, despite the very best efforts of her sister, Tyche, Jesse, Echo, Eirtaé, and even the Senator. Staunchly refused to even budge until they relented, claiming she was nowhere near tired, thankyouverymuch. That had been over an hour ago.

She tugged on his hand again and asked, “Can we dance again?”

“Heh. Again?” Next to him, Jesse didn’t bother to hide another grin as he watched.

She nodded, and then rubbed her eyes, fighting back a yawn.

“We can dance here, okay?”

“No – I want to dance out there…” She pointed to the dancefloor, which was as crowded as ever. In fact, despite the hour, the partiers seemed to be gaining strength. The noise was incredible, like nothing he had ever even dreamed of hearing before – the music, the sparkling conversation and laughter and the dancers of every shape and color swirling before him, absolutely mesmerizing. Far above them, the glittering lights within the ceiling had started to fade to a deep, rich blue; golden glitter replaced by heart-stoppingly gorgeous renderings of slowly-swirling stars, planets, and galaxies. The universe was slowly overtaking them, and Echo couldn’t wait to see what it would like – the crowds of extravagance dancing in between galaxy superclusters and clouds of brightly colored nebulae. No, the end of the Gala was nowhere near in sight.

“But what if you fall asleep out there?” Jesse asked.

She considered this, and looked to Echo. “It’s a good point, little one. You don’t want to fall asleep out there.”

She yawned again and nodded slowly. “Okay. Let’s dance here! Can we do the clone dance? That one’s fun…”

Jesse danced with her first – although ‘dancing’ with little Iole was more like ‘hold hands while she stands on your feet and step a bit in circles’ rather than the complex dances the older guests were performing – and for a moment, Echo’s anxiety about his brother pulled back. Fives could be as stubborn as all hell, but he was an ARC. He wouldn’t needlessly risk a mission – and besides, Echo thought as Iole curtsied to Jesse and turned to Echo, holding her hands up to grab onto his, maybe Rabé hasn’t even noticed. If Fives could keep it together until the mission was done, then maybe it would be okay.

Iole barely lasted another three songs. Echo didn’t mind that he was an ARC with babysitting duty. Far from it – and when she actually did fall asleep, Jesse gently scooped her up and sat on heavily cushioned couches in their alcove, cradling her like she was his own daughter.

Echo swore to himself that he would face Grievous alone if it meant it would keep little Iole safe for the rest of her life.
Tyche was dancing with a handsome Twi’lek, Rabé with Abeni, and Fives was dancing with a young Pantoran nobleman who seemed to be doing a remarkable job of making the nervous Captain relax. Padmé was dancing with Bail while Anakin, Eirtaé and Breha talked in low voices near the thrones. And as for Akantha…

“Hide me!” Akantha furiously whispered as she scurried over to Jesse and Echo. Confused, they didn’t say anything – Iole was fast asleep in Jesse’s arms – and Akantha ducked behind them just as an over-eager young man nearly tripped over his own feet into their alcove.

Ahsoka, leaning against a pillar to block his view of Akantha, smiled at him, making sure to casually show off her sharp canines. “Hello,” she said sweetly.

He stumbled and gave them a clumsy bow. “Beg pardon, have any of you seen the Lady Akantha?”

Ahsoka hummed in confusion, pursing her lips as she looked at Echo, who looked equally perplexed, scratching a nonexistent beard as he thought. Jesse was deep in thought, and after a moment of serious thinking, Ahsoka turned back to the suitor and shrugged. “I think she left.”

His face so quickly that Ahsoka had to press her lips together to keep from bursting into very loud, undignified laughter. Jesse nodded and said, “I do remember seeing her leave down the stairs.”

The suitor sadly mumbled, “Oh, no,” and left, dragging his feet.

Ahsoka, Jesse, and Echo watched him race down the stairs, and then Ahsoka called over her shoulder, “Kay, coast is clear.”

Akantha burst forward and grabbed Ahsoka’s arm, “Thank you, I must have danced with him at least four times—”

Echo smiled as the music swelled to a dramatic end once more. Tyche broke off from her Twi’lek dance partner, whose impressively long lekku were twined into a faux-braid and draped with silver jewelry, and rejoined the group in the alcove. They raised an eyebrow as Akantha resettled onto the couch, leaning back to check on her sister’s sleeping face over Jesse’s shoulder. “She’s really fast asleep, huh?”

Jesse nodded, and Echo said, “Fell asleep about an hour ago.”

Akantha brushed a stray hair from Iole’s forehead and said, “You don’t have to hold her the whole time, you know.”

Jesse smiled softly and said, “I don’t mind.”

Akantha grinned at him and thanked them both for helping keep an eye on Iole. Suddenly, she snapped her fingers and spun around to face Ahsoka. “You wanted to see our knives, right?”

“Yes, absolutely – do you have them with you right now?”

For an answer, Akantha and Tyche just smiled. Tyche jerked their head towards the open door to the gardens. “Let’s go try and find the center, yeah?”

Before Ahsoka could answer, they were gone. She looked at Jesse and Echo, who both shrugged.
“Don’t worry, sir,” Echo said, angling his head towards the doors. “We’ll hold down the fort.”

Ahsoka cast one last glance at the gala in full swing. At the opposite end of the massive room, she could see Fives and Rabé at the center of a group of nobles – Fives needed to work on clearing his scowl when he looked at Varol – and she nodded at them in thanks. The cool air whipped her hot skin, and the night sky was studded with millions of bright stars.

Tyche and Akantha were waiting at the edge of the gardens, equally devious grins on their faces. Anakin’s attention was diverted. So was Padmé’s. The only one who could possibly be paying any sort of attention to her was Rex – but he wasn’t here. Rex was sure to have eyes everywhere, and she considered flashing one of the cams a toothy grin, but decided against it. She felt bad that he and Sabé were confined to their crow’s nest for the evening.

Ahsoka cleared her throat and said, “Come on, I’m not about to pull out my knives in the middle of the party!”

They tore through the maze with ease; Ahsoka’s Force sensitivity and Tyche’s impeccable memory made short work of the tall hedges. Well, it would have – Ahsoka was discovering that the wine made the Force a little fuzzy. Or maybe that was just her head.

Most of the maze was lit with gentle silver lights hidden within the hedges themselves. Ahsoka felt as light as air as they skittered through the puzzle, all three soon near overcome with breathless laughter. Once, though, they accidentally surprised a young couple in the shadows. The boy – no older than the three girls – flushed nearly as red as his neat hair and gently tried to dissuade his partner – a girl who wore an intricate lace diadem on her curly blonde hair – from rising to challenge them. “Lissa, no, don’t – it’s not worth it-”

“Sorry – sorry – didn’t mean to disturb you.” Tyche murmured as they slipped by.

“Enjoy the party!” Akantha called, before adding in a mischievous whisper: “And each other!”

Ahsoka laughed as they raced on, a part of her mind whispering isn’t it nice to have friends your age again? Akantha was surprisingly agile in her full gown, Tyche even more so in their robes.

Her lightsabers bounced off her hips, like they wanted to remind her she wasn’t there to make friends.

For now, though, she could pretend.

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0110 hrs. ▲ 1:10am

Eirtaé watched General Skywalker take another glass of spiced wine from a passing servitor droid, and as he brought it to his lips, she cleared her throat. “Perhaps some water first, General?”

He smiled into his cup and defiantly took a sip, and Eirtaé was very much reminded of her older brother Ari. She didn’t want to coddle him, but at the rate he was going, he was not going to have a good time tomorrow morning. It was stress, she knew. He was still tense, still anxiously glancing around at the revelries, as tense as he’d been when they’d arrived. The gala had calmed down – instead of bright golden glitter under every step, the illumination had dimmed to a beautiful deep blue. Tiny swirling galaxies were underfoot now; they danced among the cosmos, bands of stars and tiny bursts of colorful nebulae under their feet. Eirtaé wondered if it was an accurate depiction of the galaxy, or simply a romantic notion of the endless black. She flagged a server down and asked for
two glasses of water. As Anakin went to take another sip of wine, she deftly plucked it from his hands and put the water there instead.

He blinked at her, annoyance rippling across his face as he mumbled, “I don’t need you to baby me.”

“I’m not babying. Water is good for you.”

She turned to watch the dancers, pretending not to notice as he sipped at the water when her back was turned.

“Eirtaé?”

She almost didn’t hear him, his voice was so soft under the music, the conversations still floating over from the gardens and the hall. She glanced over her shoulder, and he moved closer, looking almost nervous. He took a breath and said, haltingly, “…Do you… do you and the other handmaidens know… know about me and-”

“There you are, General Skywalker,” Senator Organa called, Breha following close behind. She smiled at Eirtaé, who inclined her head and stepped back. Anakin’s face was already neutral again as he clasped Bail’s arm fondly. “I’ve been meaning to try and have a private word with you all night. Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Yes, Senator – it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. I’ve been trying to figure out how the illumination works all night.” He ran a hand over the nearest wall, a trail of sharp, pale stardust following the pressure of his hand. “It’s beautiful work.”

Breha laughed. “I’m sure our Head Technician would be thrilled to show it off to you tomorrow, if you’d like.”

Anakin smiled. “I’d like that. Thank you.”

They were quiet for a moment, Eirtaé standing in the shadows, watching. Waiting. There was a reason the Organas had come to find the young General, here in the corner.

“It’s a strange thing, isn’t it?” Breha asked to no one in particular. Her voice was soft, her eyes distant.

There it is.

Anakin and Bail were both silent as the Queen continued, her eyes catching the digitized starlight in the Great Hall. “There’s a war going on, all around us, and yet here we are. Dancing the night away without a care in the world. You and your men must think our priorities are… misplaced, to say it kindly.”

She said it without looking to be placated, like it was a fact of life she had long ago considered and come to terms with as a despised necessity. Bail placed an arm around his wife’s shoulders.

Anakin nodded. “I won’t pretend that I understand it, but... I don’t think your priorities are selfish. Alderaan donates more to the war effort and relief than any other star system in the Republic. You’ve even come to help us on the frontlines. And that’s something only a handful of Senators can say. And… I appreciate that. Even if I don’t understand all of this.”

“That’s kind of you to say,” Bail said. “I know that this sort of thing seems wasteful and extravagant. It’s a dreadful, difficult thing to rationalize in one’s mind.”
“We discussed this event for months, whether or not it was a good idea to host such a party.” Breha added, one hand drifting to find her husband’s. Her pulmonodes glowed soft orange in the darkening room, like she herself was made up of still-glowing starstuff. Eirtaé thought it an incredibly beautiful sight, but remained silent as she watched and listened. “Especially in light of the attacks on Coruscant, the attack on Padmé’s own life when she was here last, the constant battles you and your men face daily… a Gala in the face of such terrible things seems wasteful at best; cruel and self-centered at worst. Whichever angle you choose to examine it, it’s… complicated. Frustratingly so.”

Anakin did not say anything, and Eirtaé felt as if she could see that little slave boy from Tatooine all over again. He would never understand this, she knew.

“We do our best to direct funds to help those on the frontlines.” Breha turned to fix Anakin with a look that asked not to be placated or forgiven, but understood. “Our positions in this war are so different, but we do our best to assist the Jedi and the troopers.”

“For better or for worse,” Bail joked, winking at Anakin above his wife’s head. “Perhaps I get in the way more often than is helpful. General Skywalker has rescued me many times.”

Anakin really did laugh this time, and then he said slowly, like he was thinking over his words very carefully, “I don’t mind doing a bit of daring rescue every now and then, Senator.”

“Glad to hear it. I shall start planning my next escapade soon, then.”

“I don’t understand how a gala will help the war effort, but I trust you. And I know my men do, too.”

Breha smiled and looked out over the expanse of the Hall as she said softly, “As I said yesterday, the Jedi will always have friends with Alderaan and her people.” Within her chest, the pulmonodes pulsed, as if to lend emphasis to her words, her heart working with the sincerity of her thoughts, “I… I hope to adopt a child, soon. I’m not able to have children naturally – because of the injuries that gave me these,” and she touched her chest, gently, Anakin and Bail watching her quietly, “-but I have always wanted a family. And I will teach them the same.”

Eirtaé could not have said why the words sent chills down her spine.
xv. wildfire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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From the Desk of Chief of Staff Steward L. Zorian:

Lady Avalokit:

As Chief of Staff, I would like to personally welcome you and your retinue to Aldera! We are always delighted to host debutantes and are thrilled that you have made us your first stop on your Grand
Tour.

The Gala of Lights will begin from eight o’clock; however, to prep you for your formal debut, we ask that you and the escort of your choice arrive in the East Wing no later than 7:45 so that we may direct you to your entry location. As the eldest of our six debutantes, you will be last in line.

A Steward will await your arrival at that point in time. As you know, debutantes are traditionally marked with a piece of silver clothing. Should you need a replacement or a tailor, do not hesitate to contact us for assistance! We are here to serve you and ensure that your debut on Alderaan is everything that you’ve dreamed it would be.

At approximately 8:20pm, the presentations shall begin. Following your entrance into the Hall, the dance will begin. The order of introductions will be as follows:

- Her Royal Majesty, Queen Breha Organa,
- Senator Padmé Amidala of Naboo,
- Prime Minister Persephoni Olymm,
- Lord Sevros Alde,
- Lord Baxil Ridan, and
- Lady Ilyn Silviiá.

Last but certainly not least: calm those nerves! No one shall mind one bit if you’re nervous; they’ve been there before! This night is for you – take it in for all it’s worth!

Yours in Honor,

L. Zorian
H.R.M. Chief of Staff Steward – West Wing

1915 hrs. ∘ 7:15pm


Focus, trooper.

Fives, balancing on one leg in the common area of the suite as he struggled once more with the loose ends of a dark silk tie hanging round his neck, groaned as the dance steps melted together in his head. Once more, he wore the trappings of a Corellian Captain of the Guard, but this was different from his day-to-day garb. And if those had felt luxurious the first time he slipped it on, tonight’s outfit was nothing less than pure extravagance sewn together. He couldn’t deny that. Once he got over the gold – actual gold – bloodstripes, the cuffs and collars encrusted with jewels, the bright honorbraid and epaulets and gleaming medals, the thick gold-and-transparisteel laurel that rested on his temples and wrapped around the back of his head, hiding his tattoo but making him look like royalty… Once he got over the wealth that dripped from every part of his body, Fives’ confidence soared. He pulled his shoulders back and smirked at himself in the mirror. It was like the clothes had been made for him, had been stitched with him in mind. Queen Breha’s tailor knew their stuff.

He looked important. Dignified.

He also couldn’t deny he looked good. Very, very good. Black and gold weren’t his usual colors, but they pulled the light to his eyes, gave him a confidence almost like that of wearing his kama. Fives couldn’t stop glancing at himself in the mirror. He looked sharp – though he was glad Kix and Hardcase had left, because if they had caught him checking himself out, they’d never have let him
hear the end of it. Corellian military dress was sharp; every piece was perfect, in place, and so sharp he almost felt like he could cut through a Star Destroyer’s hull.

*Except for this stupid kriffing tie.*

No one had thought to mention that ties required nearly the same dexterity, speed, and mental fortitude of disassembling and reassembling a rifle. On his tenth attempt, Fives had started to wonder if the tie could sense his frustration and was purposefully slipping from his fingers until he wanted to forgo the whole thing.

Fives glanced over his shoulder at Rabé’s closed door. Every so often, he could hear Eirtaé’s low voice, Rabé’s gentle lilt, and their quiet laughter. He caught himself wondering what they were talking about, what was making them laugh. *Focus.* Eirtaé would be out soon. She’d tie it for him.

In the meantime, he had to practice; the steps had to perfect. Everyone, everything, was counting on him - Rabé was counting on him - to seal the act, to present a Corellian noblewoman to the courts, to not miss a step. He planted his feet, ignored the loose tie around his neck, and - placing his arms at Rabé’s approximate height, trying not to imagine her in his arms, trying to forget that soon he’d be dancing in front of the entire royal court - began again.

*Step back left, pause, turn, forward right-

“You messed up that turn again.”

He’d never get used to how quietly Eirtaé moved. Heart racing, he glared at her, “Kriffing hell, Eirtaé-”

“No, I didn’t look very sorry as she closed Rabé’s door behind her. Dressed for the evening ahead, she looked like embers hidden in the dark, her sharp blue eyes like ice – but still her lips twitched in amusement as she gently prodded, “You turn after the second sequence. Not the first. Remember?”

Fives scoffed under his breath and tugged at the ends of his tie like a petulant cadet. “Yeah, yeah, I remember.”

“You’ll be fine. If it’s any comfort, you’re already better than about half the Royal Academy when it comes to formal dances.” The hem of her skirts quietly brushed against the marble floor as she stepped down closer to the fire. Outside, a breeze moved through the tops of the pines, making the sheer white curtains billow against the darkening sky. “And the debut dance is about Rabé – beg pardon. Lady Maitri. As long as you don’t drop her, Alderaanian nobles won’t notice slight mistakes in a Corellian waltz.”

“Well, that’s just excellent.” He was only partially sarcastic; bare as it had been, it was still a compliment. “Eirtaé, would you mind…”

She glanced down at the tie in his hands, held hopefully forward to her, paused a moment, and then a slow smile curled over her lips. “I should be going. Remember, tonight’s about Varol. He’ll lead us to our spy, I’m certain of it. Don’t let Rabé drink anything you don’t get her yourself. Actually, on second thought, don’t let her drink anything alcoholic at all – she’s a lightweight and gets even friendlier than she normally is when she’s had a few-”

“Eirtaé -”

“And of course, don’t be late. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that, but,” Eirtaé said, picking up her heavy cloak from the back of the coach and ignoring Fives’ attempts to catch her attention, “better to
be safe than sorry.”

“Could you-”

She gave him a ghost of a smile, her blue eyes flashing in the setting sun, and murmured, “Rabé will be out soon.”

“But I-”

“She gave him a ghost of a smile, her blue eyes flashing in the setting sun, and murmured, “Rabé will be out soon.”

“See you at the Gala.”

Fives stared after her and then threw his hands in the air as she closed the door with a snap. He scowled and shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his dress pants, glowering as he glanced around the room. The couches and low table had been pushed aside to make room for the impromptu dance lesson earlier that morning - Kix and Hardcase had piled onto them eagerly in order to watch as Eirtaé taught him the basic steps of a simple Corellian waltz. They’d spent all day preparing; Lady Abeni had even called and Rabé had turned her away, apologetically citing private meetings with her false family on Corellia.

The dance wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d been expecting. He’d memorized it with ease, ignoring Kix and Hardcase’s good-natured taunts, confidence growing with every step – he’d even embellished in some spots, dipping Eirtaé or spinning in time with nonexistent music – until had she stepped back and called for Rabé to take her place. Whatever minor victory he’d felt at making Eirtaé laugh had vanished when Rabé’s soft hands slipped into his own. And then it was like someone had changed gravity just to spite him. He’d nearly stepped on her feet, and had almost dropped her once or twice - to his extreme embarrassment and Kix and Hardcase's wild, hooting jeers and offers to take his place - but she’d still smiled comfortingly at him, had straightened and given him a kind look that had nearly made his nerves give out all over again.

Here he was, an ARC trooper, and he felt as nervous as a cadet on their first training mission.

The long hours of the night stretched out ahead of him. One moment he was eager, ready to show off and play the role of a spy; the next, anxiety bubbled up through him and made his head ache. And his tie was still untied.

His scowl deepened. The rooms were quiet – Kix and Hardcase had left, shortly after Eirtaé had come back to help Rabé get dressed – and he was alone for a moment more. The flimsy silk hanging around his neck now felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. He resisted the urge to rip it off, to fling it into the low-burning fire.

For a moment, all he could focus on was his low-simmering frustration – which he knew wasn’t really aimed at the tie, but it was the closest thing he could pin his worsening mood on – but slowly, the soft glow from the embers in their marble fireplace drew his gaze. And for the first time, he noticed the painting above the fireplace, really noticed it. His heart stuttered as he did an embarrassing double-take. How he’d never noticed it before, he didn’t know.

Set in a gilded gold frame that looked as though it could feed the entirety of Ryloth for three weeks, it was a portrait of a young woman standing in a garden. Fives’ gaze softened as he stared at it, a small, nervous smile lifting the corners of his mouth. A young woman in a light blue dress, drenched in sunlight, her face hidden by a bouquet of thick, colorful flowers. Her dark hair was loose, it hung down to her waist and caught the painted sunlight like a delicate crown of pure light.

Fives didn’t need to admit to himself who she reminded him of, but all the same…
The firelight danced on the oils, and his heart stuttered when her painted eyes flashed up to meet his, just for a moment.

They were Rabé’s eyes – brilliantly deep and kind – and then the light danced away again, and she was hidden once more.

She reminded him of Rabé, and his heart twisted a little, and then so much that it almost hurt to breathe, as he stared up at it. The night before and this morning, on the balcony, had only served to confuse him more. He knew – as did, infuriatingly, Kix and Hardcase – that it was only a crush. If he could just focus on the mission, on rooting out the spy… and then on getting back to his normal life, away from all the pomp of high-society that he hadn’t been made to understand or partake in, he knew – or at least hoped, desperately – that eventually, his heart would no longer race when someone mentioned Rabé’s name. Or when she stepped into the room.

Or when she smiled at him.

Just a crush. That’s all. It’ll… it’ll go away. Eventually.

Just a crush. Like when he had danced with that devilishly handsome, smirking Zabrak at 79s during his last shore leave - a brief infatuation that would vanish with the next morning. Dissipate as sure as the morning mist over Aldera’s lakes.

The mission, and the mission only.

He was so focused on the words that he did not hear Rabé’s door open once again. He did not hear her step out into the common space, he did not hear her until she softly called his name, dragging the word like a gentle finger up his spine.

“Fives - oh you look wonderful...”

He shivered, braced himself, and turned.

She was wreathed in shadows by her door, but when she caught his eyes, she stepped forward into the pool of light cast by the gentle glow of the fire. And Fives felt the earth itself shift from underneath his feet, he felt the air splinter and burn around her.

His eyes went wide of their own accord.

Rabé...

She normally favored light colors, colors that reminded Fives of spring, of flowers. Normally favored soft greens and pinks and blues, colors as gentle as her smile – which was hovering nervously on her lips now – and flowing gauzy lines as soft as her eyes.

But this. Eirtaé had looked beautiful, Fives thought himself handsome in his dress uniform – but Rabé had surpassed them all.

Rabé did not look like the spring made sentient anymore.

Now, she looked like the first breath of the autumn chill, adorned in shadows, cast in gold; a reminder of her power that would strike down their enemies even as she danced their dance. She moved unseen among their shadows but would soon root them out from their hidden places, burn them from their rotten cores.

A goddess of justice, revenge, victory.
Rabé.

“Well?” Her voice was very far away.

“Well…? What?” His ears were ringing.

Rabé laughed and Fives’ stomach flipped over as she gestured down to herself, and his eyes followed the motions of her hands, the lines of her body that he could not stop thinking about, his traitorous eyes traced her without his permission, with her permission. He felt like he couldn’t quite breathe. Intricate dark gold embroidery over rich black silk that left her shoulders bare, the draping jewels and her long, unbraided hair, the confident look in her eyes as she stepped closer, her dark, numinous eyes held him fast and nearly knocked him over as she softly asked, “How do I look?”

How do you look –

His mouth was very dry. “Uh-

He was grateful that his mouth and tongue didn’t seem to want to cooperate with him, that the words locked in his throat, because if had been able to speak he would have said something he couldn’t say to a mission partner.

Beautiful.

Beautiful.

Gods help me, you are so beautiful.

He wanted to fall to his knees - they almost gave out anyways so he had to glance away before his nerves and joints failed him - he wanted to fall to his knees but instead forced himself to think what Kix or Rex would say. How they would act like the professional trooper he was supposed to be.

It was not a crush.

“G-good.”

No.

It never had been just a crush.

Rabé - gentle, sweet, kind, stunning and ethereal Rabé Bhutia of Naboo - had no idea. She had no idea that she’d made him fall head over heels in love with her.

I’m in love with her.

Kriffing hell.

I’m in love with you.

She smiled and closed the door behind her, and the fire threw golden light onto her bare shoulders, her bare back where the dress dipped below her shoulder blades. That dip below her collarbones - where her burgundy battlerobes, the symbol of her training and mark of her skills, met - was exposed to him and he felt as though he shouldn’t look at her there, but the thought of his lips at that spot on her throat rose unbidden to his mind, so he averted his eyes and pushed it away, pushed away the sudden pool of heat in his gut and the roaring in his ears. Her hair wasn’t braided, and the simple silver diadem – the mark of her false station - rested like a crown on her dark hair. He couldn’t look at her, but he also couldn’t look away; she caught his eyes like a moth to the flame. Like the moon
to the sun.

She looked like a goddess to him, and for a moment he felt the painting’s eyes on him again, as if it knew. As if it knew. His heart beat a tattoo against his ribs as she turned back to face him and her eyes flicked down to his untied tie. Her gaze was like a weight on his chest, and she laughed a little - she was laughing at him but the sound still made his heart flutter like a cadet - and said softly, “Having a little trouble there?”

He twisted the end of the silk in his hand and chucked, “They didn’t really teach us this sort of stuff on Kamino.”

Rabé dipped her head and gestured him over to where she stood at the top of the steps. “Ah. I see. Meanwhile, it was a part of our training.”

He blinked in surprise. “Really?”

She nodded. “Formalwear from twenty different systems - including Corellia and Alderaan.” She caught his eyes and grinned, “Convenient, no? For missions just like this one. Come here, otherwise I won’t even be able to reach your tie at all.”

Fives grinned weakly - ignoring the rioting in his gut - and stepped up. He wanted to crack some stupid joke about how they could finally see eye-to-eye, but then she reached for the tie around his neck and any half-formed joke he could have dredged up to his defense fled his brain. He still had to stoop, a little.

He planted his feet, grateful that the angle at which he was standing – awkward, half-bent, neck stretched up – made it impossible for him to even consider watching Rabé as she leaned forward. He didn’t even dare close his eyes. Her fingers were lithe against his throat, barely touching the fabric of his uniform but burning through them all the same. The tie tugged against his neck and he could feel her breathing, right there, she was standing so close he could feel her breath against his skin – he dug his fingernails into the palms of his hands, dragged his thoughts to the mission.

The mission that had suddenly involved a gala, of all things. A gala, and a dress, a private room and peace from Hardcase and Kix… alone with the sweetest, most gentle-hearted, beautiful woman he’d ever – no, no.

Try again.

The mission that involved Rabé seeking out a criminal, finding a spy that threatened the Republic and his brothers. The mission that relied on his professionalism, on his ability to do his job –

The tie slipped from Rabé’s hands and she cursed and Fives could not help himself, the sound was so charming, it puffed against his throat and dragged his eyes down to hers, and this time, he did not even try to stop the thought that if he leaned forward, if he let himself fall forward even an inch …

Blood pounded in his ears and he kept staring at her, heart aching, because he wanted nothing more than to lean down and kiss her.

He’d lean down slowly, just a quick press.

He’d straighten away even faster.

It would be enough, it would be more than enough.

A gentle kiss.
That’s all he wanted. The lightest, most chaste brush of… of…

His lips on hers. Her lips on his – the images were crashing around in his skull and he knew that her lips would be soft – would his? Would she shrink from him, would his beard scratch her? The embroidered jewels of her dress would bite into his hands but he wouldn’t care if it meant he could rest his hands there, on her hips. Where would she put her hands? The thought of her hands on his chest, caressing his cheeks, fingers curling into his hair… it was almost too much for him to bear.

Would she kiss me back?
Would she kiss a clone trooper?
He was an ARC… but.
Always a but.

She had the entire royal court of Alderaan eating out of the palm of her hand. They were all throwing themselves at her, men, women, others, all of them. Every rich, gallant, charming noble with connections to the Elder Houses and power liked he couldn’t even begin to conceive of or understand. The major players of the galaxy.

She was too good for all of them.

Which meant she was light-years too good for him.

Why would she look twice at him, why would she look at him like that? Like how he looked at her? The question was like ice in his veins.

She could throw him to the ground if he tried. She could break his arm and storm out of the room and the next thing he’d know he and Echo would switch places – he almost wished he could go back in time and beg Sabé for a different appointment. Anywhere but near her, please, he could imagine himself saying. There was no graceful way to say that. Anywhere but by her side, I feel like I’m drowning –

He hadn’t known this assignment would kill him.

And it was far from over.

With effort, he pulled his eyes back. Titled his chin to the sky. And dragged his thoughts to… somewhere, anywhere else.

He settled on Kamino.

Good. It’s not fair to her. It’s inappropriate – Rex would skin me alive… It’s not fair for her, wouldn’t be fair. It’d make her uncomfortable, and…

And that would make him sick to his stomach.

The mission, and the mission only.

The ice grew colder, sharper, and froze his thoughts to that of a coolly professional trooper until he was hardly aware of Rabé’s hands on his chest.

“Sabé can tie a tie in thirteen different ways, did you know that?” She spoke quietly, but Fives near jumped out of his skin.
He tried to act normally, tried to make his voice even, like he hadn’t just been wishing that he could kiss her, “Thirteen?”

“Yes - and most of them in under ten seconds.” Rabé’s eyes met his and the reflection of the low fire in her dark eyes was like a jewel, steadily flickering, quietly burning him. She quirked an easy grin. “I’m sure she’d be very happy to show off that particular skill.”

“Heh, not the - not the whole ‘highly trained spymaster’ thing?”

Rabé laughed and pulled the tie straight until the knot lay smoothly on his chest. She fiddled with it, making sure it was worthy of a Captain, and murmured, “We might all have the same training, but it’s our specializations that truly enhance us. Make us essential to our team and stand out. All part and parcel of what it means to be a royal handmaiden.” Her eyes flashed up to meet his - her dark eyes that held the warmth of summer suns he could hardly imagine - and she pressed her lips together in a coy, bemused smile. “Or a trooper.”

Fives stared at her, the way her eyelashes brushed against her cheeks when she looked down again, and tried to memorize the strange, slightly heady feeling of her warmth so close to his body. “Makes sense.” His voice sounded strange to his ears, but he pushed on. “How many weapons’re you packing right now?”

She laughed easily, delighted. “Not including my blaster? Eight.”

Fives’ eyes flicked to her simple earrings, the stacked rings on her fingers, the smooth, deceptively plain hairpins in her hair. He knew she carried a blade strapped in a hidden leather holster which lay flush against her thigh, blades hidden in locked springs in the soles of her shoes.

Before he could ask where the other tiny knives and poisons were hidden, Rabé murmured, “There. You’re ready for your debut, Captain.” Her fingers straightened the tie again, and Fives felt his heart crash against his ribs, launch into his throat, as she rested the palms of her hands on his chest and then gently move to his shoulders, brushing away imaginary pieces of dirt almost without thinking. Every stroke of her hands burned him through the uniform - and then she caught herself, cleared her throat, and stepped away.

Fives couldn’t tell if her face was flushed, too; if her cheeks were burning as much as his were, or if it was simply the light of the embers casting her face with deep, soft golden light.

He swore he felt the eyes of the painting on his back as a wildfire began to burn in his blood.

He might be in love with his mission partner, but they had a job to do. He quirked a grin that he hoped was more confident than it felt, straightened, and asked as nonchalantly as he could, “Should we go over the plan for tonight?”

_It’s your imagination, trooper_, he thought as Rabé nodded, stepping around him to sit at one of the chairs in front of the fire. Fives knew she still wasn’t used to the chill Alderaanian air and so moved to add more wood from the carefully curated pile to the fire, careful to avoid residual sap. She smiled gratefully at him, but her eyes remain fixed on the flames, then on her hands in her lap. “You have my blaster?”

Fives sat on the edge of the couch, at the edge of the pool of light, and patted the hidden holster strapped to the inside of his formal coat, compact but deadly, much like its owner. “I’ve got it.”

“Good, good.” Her voice was quiet, almost distracted as she went on, “I don’t expect we’ll need anything of the sort tonight, but I’d rather have them nearby, just in case.” She tilted her head a little,
frowning to herself - as she did when she was thinking, and Fives shifted in his chair as he waited and tried not to stare, tried not to wonder if she knew how beautiful she looked, how thoroughly she’d taken hold of him - and went on, quietly, “We won’t have to check our weapons at the door, as it were. And… and thank you, for carrying my elega, by the way. I-I know that this isn’t your usual mission parameter. Thank you for agreeing to help me.”

She smiled at him, and Fives tried to return the favor as he said, “Of course. And I’ve been practicing my dancing, too. Hopefully I won’t trip, heh.” If her elega had to stay near her, that meant he had to stay near her, too.

And again, his stomach twisted itself into knots.

She tilted her head. “Do you want to go over the dance one more time?” She glanced at one of the massive antique chronos, the kind with a glass face and long, ornate metal hands. “We have time, if you want…?”

“Oh-” Kriff. “No, no. I think I’ve got it down, more or less.”

“Ah…”

“…Kriff. No, no. I think I’ve got it down, more or less.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll be absolutely perfect. As for dealing with Varol and getting into that meeting, I have a few ideas…”


2035 hrs. ∘ 8:35pm

When Queen Breha gave her opening speech as the debutantes and their escorts lined up on the steps, far above the rest of the guests, in the shadows, Rabé knew she should have been mentally prepping herself for the night ahead.

When Senator Organa, Prince Consort Bail, had surprised his wife and strolled out into the center of the Hall to uproarious applause, Rabé knew her attention should have been on the spectacle below. She normally would have adored to witness such a scene; the very sort of grand romantic gesture she adored.

When the lights of the Hall had come to life under their very feet, Rabé knew she should have been paying closer attention to the situation at hand.

And when the orchestra had begun to play, when her false name had been announced to the Hall, she knew she should have given every thought, every last ounce of energy, towards the mission, towards the night ahead. She had to get an invitation to the meeting; in her mind, failure was not an option.

But how could she concentrate on any of these things, when Fives – dark and regal in his Corellian dress uniform – stood by her side, as breathtaking as a storm over the wild oceans of Naboo?

She hoped he hadn’t noticed how she’d nearly stumbled when she stepped out of her room. He’d been facing the fire, so when he turned at her voice the light cast him in brilliant, flaming golds and deep shadows; silhouetted against the fire, his eyes had shone like liquid bronze. He’d taken her breath away by simply standing there. A marble statue come to life.

If she was being honest with herself, she did not know how she managed to tie his tie without pulling him down to meet her lips; she’d be lying if she said she wasn’t thinking of kissing him still, if she ignored her duties, her priorities.

How in the stars could she focus on anything, on anyone else?
Her hand, slipped in the crook of his elbow, brushed against his arm. With his regal diadem, his half-
cape, his bloodstripes and the golden lights all around them, Rabé’s eyes and thoughts kept drifting
back to the ARC escorting her. His easy smile, his bright laugh – the fierce, powerful determination
that now rippled off him in waves; he was pure, roiling energy. A dark storm, ready to strike down
their enemies.

And then – they had begun to dance. And that did not much help her focus. Everything, everyone
else fell away in the shadows as the debutantes had taken their positions in the center of the Hall, as
Rabé had placed her hand in Fives’, when he stepped close to gently put his hand on her waist.

He had put on a drop or two of cologne; when she breathed – not too deep, otherwise she’d lose all
trace of focus - it was like she was standing before a dark ocean, thunder cracking overhead in storm-
dark skies. A warning; a beautiful, chaotic, vengeful, intoxicating warning.

A sudden burst of applause pulled her back to the present, as Fives easily lifted her from the
impromptu dip. He grinned at her, and her stomach flipped over itself. “Thought I’d give ‘em a little
bit of a show.”

Her stomach still reeling from the pressure of his hand on the small of her back, her voice weak to
her own ears under the music, “I thought you said were nervous – you’re a natural showman.”

His smile widened, his eyes crinkling in pleasure at her words. She had to crane her head, just a little,
to meet his eyes as he admitted, “It’s easier than I thought it would be. I’m sure Jesse and Echo are
getting a kick out of this, though.” He thought for another moment and then gave a short, amused
laugh, his breath skirting the top of her head like a ghost, “I’ve always been good with muscle
memory stuff.”

It was strange, to dance and smile and chat with such ease, as though they really were a Captain and
his Lady; but their eyes scanned the crowds as they continued to waltz. Their movements felt entirely
natural but they were merely performing the first act of the evening; the opening move in a life-size
dejarik game.

Rabé squared her shoulders and tucked a bright, false smile on her lips. She murmured under the
lively music, the ease of her voice strangely mismatched with the seriousness of her words, “Do you
have eyes on him?”

“Yes.” Fives said, just as quietly, his gaze fixed out over her head towards the enthralled crowds, an
easy, relaxed smile set on his face. His eyes, on the other hand… They were fixed, focused on the
enemies surrounding them. Rabé did not envy the beings on the other side of his hard stare. “He’s
with that other one, Ridan. And an old woman.”

“An old woman…”

“Don’t recognize her. Not on our list. All three of them are staring at us – at you – though.” A
strange edge had crept into his voice, but Rabé ignored it. She couldn’t get distracted, not now.

“Position me so I can see them, please. Where are they standing?”

“Near the thrones, close to our team and Queen Breha and Senator Organa. Commander has her
eyes on them, too,” he whispered, his mouth hardly moving as he gracefully, easily spun so their
positions had switched. Rabé resisted the urge to close her eyes as the gold and shadows of the Hall
blurred together, the music drifting down from unseen instruments, the blurs of the other dancing
debutantes. Fives’ hands were steady, his breathing calm; a solid bastion against the barrage of sights
and sounds. “I think it’s annoying her that they’re so close…”
“I can imagine.” She put the faintest amount of pressure on his right shoulder and he shifted at once, dancing slightly askew now so she could see them crowded right where he said they’d be. Ahsoka was indeed sourly side-eyeing the group, as if she was waiting for the first opportunity to handle things her own way. But Varol was staring hard at Rabé, a glass of dark wine in his hands; when she met his eyes, he flashed her a coy grin and raised the glass towards her. She hardly had to think before acting the flustered fool, inhaling sharply, glancing shyly away, meeting his gaze again through hesitant, half-lidded eyes, a tiny smile dancing on her lips like he utterly took her breath away.

Fives moved back into position, his jaw set and his voice tight when he asked, “You saw ‘em?”

“Yes.”

The music softened for several measures, and for a moment, it was too quiet to speak. For a moment, they were simply dancing. Akantha and Tyche spun by, giggling madly to themselves, as Rabé listened to Fives’ steady, relaxed breaths. Brass buttons and medals for honors she was sure he had earned a thousand times over glittered on his uniform like jewels in the dazzling gold of the Hall of Lights. His polite, light grip was nonetheless steady and warm on her waist, her hand lightly resting in his.

Had they not been there to unearth a threat, she would have had a hard time keeping her nerves steady.

The music began to swell again, signaling the last few measures of their debut dance, so Rabé took the opportunity to speak. As the orchestra rose in a frenzy, as their steps grew more complex to match the dramatic conclusion, she said softly, “I don’t recognize that woman, either. Hopefully they’ll introduce us to her.”

To her surprise, Fives gave a low chuckle. “Not if Lady Abeni gets to you first. I think she’s about to burst from excitement.” He nodded his head over towards the opposite side of the ballroom, and sure enough – Abeni was dancing in place, her kind grandfather watching as proudly as if Rabé was his granddaughter, too. When Rabé met her eyes, Abeni beamed and clasped her hands together, clapping as Fives and Rabé waltzed by.

Rabé couldn’t help a real smile from spreading across her cheeks, and this time, she actually did flush and duck her head. No small part of her wished she could actually relax; she desperately wished she could spend the evening with Lady Alde. Abeni had a spark in her, a genuine and cheerful warmth that drew everyone’s eyes and Rabé had no doubt that she would shine – but duty called.

Her mind’s eye turned from Abeni’s warm smile to Varol’s calculating smirk.

She’d wipe it off his face soon enough.

Fives swung her gracefully into a turn as the last lyrical melody swelled over the enraptured crowds, and like a dam had burst forth, the music was overtaken with wild applause. As they sank into bows in front of the Queen and Senator, the other debutantes doing the same, cheers washing over them, Rabé felt the steady resolve of her blood echo in time with Fives’. She smiled as the throng pressed forward, Fives immediately stepping up to clear a path for her well-wishers - Abeni primarily among them, flinging her arms around Rabé as soon as she was within reach - but her attention was on the group of three towards the back of the Hall, watching her as carefully as she was watching them.

Varol murmured something to Ridan while the woman nodded, playing with the sparkling jewels of her long necklace, like she was deep in thought.
As Rabé smiled and bowed and spoke with the crowds, Fives keeping most at bay, they watched out of the corner of their eyes as the group of three slowly made their way to the front of the crowd. When Varol stepped up in front of her, took her hand and bowed to kiss it, Rabé saw the unconcealed smirk in his eyes. He thought he was maneuvering around her, ensaring her to his cause. *Little do you know*, she thought with no small amount of private pleasure.

“Lady Maitri, you danced so beautifully - everyone’s eyes were on you! May I introduce Lord Baxil Ridan and Lady Malyna Girard? Lady Maitri Avalokit of Corellia, and Captain Dathan.”

Rabé curtsied, and behind her, after a split second of hesitation, Fives gave a deep bow.

Lady Malyna’s tight smile did not reach her eyes. “It seems hard to believe that you only arrived this past week. Varol speaks quite highly of you.”

“Talked all our ears off, I do say,” Ridan chuckled. Tiny flecks of gold - real, she had no doubt - sparkled in his pale lavender hair. “Lady Maitri this, Lady Maitri that.’ If you’re not careful, you may find him visiting your family’s estates on Corellia not a week after you depart! The boy is simply *smitten.*”

“Lord Ridan!” Varol interrupted, a furious dark blush spreading over his pale cheeks. “Please, sir. Pay him no mind, Lady Maitri.”

*Well then.*

She stammered out a weak, breathless reply and Varol’s smile was immediate, genuine, and exactly where she wanted him. Ridan and Malyna exchanged a look out of the corner of their eyes, and Ridan straightened, took a sip from his glass, and leaned closer as he said, “Lady Maitri, I am very much looking forward to getting to know you better.”

*This is going to be easier than I thought.*

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**2145 hrs. † 9:45pm**

It was only a matter of time before one or both of the young Nabooians found their way to her side. *Can’t blame them*, Rabé thought, smiling to herself as she watched the eldest Tapalo girl weave her way through the crowds, her sharp eyes fixed squarely on Rabé. *I would have absolutely done the same exact thing.*

She took a sip of her drink and smiled over the rim of the glass, listening to Abeni chatter excitedly to the Artorian noble, who was absolutely enthralled with everything Abeni had to say. Xe had hardly looked at anyone else all evening, had only politely nodded at Rabé as xe murmured xyr greetings, xyr eyes only for the dazzling Lady Alde by her side.

Akantha’s tattoo slid from silver to blue, smooth as silk. *Nanobots.* She wondered how Queen Ianthe had reacted to that particular enhancement.

Rabé angled her head to catch a glimpse of Fives in her periphery, standing behind the dark blue chaise where Abeni and Rabé were holding court. He was laughing with old Lord Alde but with a tiny flick of her fingers she alerted him to the approaching teenager. He gave a subtle nod of acknowledgement, all without breaking his train of thought. Rabé shifted so that there was room enough on the chaise next to her.

Akantha slid to a stop, dipped into a quick curtsy, and beamed at Rabé. “Hello again, Lady Matri!”
Rabé laughed as she returned the greeting and gestured down to the spot next to her. Akantha might be the daughter of a former Queen of Naboo, raised with the same intensity and training as any member of a noble house, but she was still a child; a young girl on her tour and filled to the brim with excitement over it all. “Akantha - I’m so glad to see you! Are you enjoying yourself?”

She tucked her skirts in and tumbled down gracefully next to Rabé as she answered in one long, excited breath, “Yes! I can’t believe our luck, that we’re here with Senator Amidala herself - and she’s brought two Jedi guards! I’ve never met a Jedi before, but here are two and one of them, Ahsoka, she’s our age and she’s so cool, the troopers are really nice too-” she pointed over to the alcove where Padmé’s team had set up for the night; Rabé could just barely see the top of Iole’s head in between her two watchful guards, “-they’re helping watch Iole so Tyche and I can go around and meet everyone we’re supposed to; when we were flying into this system Tyche said this was going to be one of the best stops and so far I’m inclined to agree with them-”

“Would you like another drink, Lady Akantha?” Fives suddenly asked, grinning as he stepped around the chaise and gestured to the nearly empty glass in her hands. He was just as amused as Rabé, who met his eyes and grinned cheekily for a brief moment. “It’s important to stay hydrated, after all.”

Rabé bit back her laughter; it was a bit too informal of a thing to say but Akantha paid no mind, thanking him profusely for his attentive eye. Fives glanced at Rabé and simply raised one eyebrow. She pressed her lips together to keep from smiling in amusement and did the same. As Fives turned to find a bar, she caught a quick smile flitting over his face and it took her a moment to realize Akantha was very carefully watching her in delight.

“So,” Akantha asked, her eyes sparkling as she leaned in closer to Rabé, “Your Captain is escorting you tonight?”

Rabé couldn’t help but smile. “Yes – Varol did ask me, but… I’d rather go with Captain Dathan than him. …it doesn’t make me look bad, does it?”

“No, no! Not at all. In fact…” Akantha paused, taking a sip from her wine that Rabé was not entirely sure she should be drinking, “I think it’s actually quite romantic.”

It was a good thing Rabé did not have a glass to be sipping from at the moment, otherwise she would have choked on it. “Romantic-?”

“Yes! My father was my mother’s Captain of the Guard, during her second term as Queen. They always talk about it; how they fell in love.” Akantha took another sip, clearly enjoying the moment, “Because you know that everyone else here is going with people they don’t like, or get along with. They’re trying to convince other people that they’re popular and well-liked. For them it’s a political strategy. How many people stressed for hours and hours about finding the proper escort, to make themselves look good? I really think it’s romantic, your going with Captain Dathan. That way you get spend the evening with someone you actually like, not someone you’re pretending to like.”

Rabé felt her face grow hot, and Akantha said nothing more; only gave her an infuriatingly knowing smile as Fives returned with their glasses. He glanced between them with curiosity, like he could tell they’d just been talking about him, but Rabé said nothing as she accepted his glass with tight-lipped thanks.

Akantha was all easy smiles, however. “Thank you so much, Captain!” She gave her empty glass to a passing droid and took the new one from Fives with a slight nod of her head. “I was just saying how wonderfully Lady Maitri and your colors complement one another, you looked utterly divine together-”
Before Fives could respond, however, there was a resounding crash from the other side of the Hall. His stance widened immediately as he turned, stepped in front of them, but soon enough the source was made clear - and Rabé wondered, briefly, if she was hallucinating.

Eirtaé was stammering and apologizing to a Quarren in robes that had, up until a few moments ago, been a beautiful shade of gray. Now, however, the wine bloomed over the robes like a brilliant flower; xey spat furiously at Eirtaé, who looked mortified, holding the now-empty glass - but her eyes were unmoved and Rabé realized she’d just made a commotion on purpose.

*Oh, Sabé is not going to like this,* she thought, even as her curiosity got the better of her and she shifted to get a better look at the drama. Fives, Rabé, and Akantha watched in stunned silence as Eirtaé blubbered and stammered in what was obviously - to Rabé, at least - the acting job of the millenium. Every apology, every word out of Eirtaé’s mouth towards the Quarren was as false as Lady Maitri herself.

“Well then!” Akantha said at last, as they watched the furious Quarren storm off, a sheepishly-sheepishly!- apologizing Eirtaé trailing close behind. “I ought to head back to my sister and Tyche before they get any similar ideas.”

Her eyes flicked over to where Varol was standing, back to Rabé, smiled, and Rabé was suddenly very much reminded of a young Sabé.

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2230 hrs.  10:30pm

“Rabé.”

She did not so much as jump as the tiny comlink hidden in her earring sparked to life. Instead of replying, Rabé simply hummed one short rising note. Acknowledged.

“We’ve got the confirmation from General Skywalker. I’m about to move in - distract Lord Varol, keep him occupied. I’ll only need twenty-five minutes to get to his suite and find what we’re looking for, tops.”

Rabé hummed again, a longer melody. Twenty-five minutes, starting now.

“Good luck.” And without another word, Sabé clicked out.

Rabé touched Abeni’s elbow and excused herself from the conversation. When Abeni rose to follow, Rabé shook her head and glanced over to the alcove where Lords Varol and Ridan were deep in conversation. Abeni raised her eyebrows, then her glass, and gave her a silent toast of good fortune.

Fives, on the other hand - having heard the same order thanks to the comms in his circlet - looked as though he wished to be anywhere but here. She gestured subtly at him, telling him to wait a few long moments before following. He nodded, still unhappy, and Rabé’s stomach twisted in unease. She didn’t blame him. She wasn’t exactly looking forward to a private conversation with Varol. But it had to be done; duty above all else.

She rose, and closed the distance.

When she touched his elbow, cleared her throat, the look of delight on his face told her they were, at least, moving in the right direction. “Lord Ridan,” she said, curtseying gracefully. “I was wondering if I might steal Lord Varol from you for a moment or two? I’m a bit too warm and I’d like to get some fresh air - if you’d join me?”
“Of course!” Varol said at once, not even waiting for Ridan to give his blessing. Ridan quirked his brow but said nothing, nodding and smiling as she slipped her hand into the crook of Varol’s arm. *Don’t be long, Fives,* she caught herself thinking.

They walked by the alcove where Ahsoka and the others stood guard, all eating some sort of gigantic pastry. Rabé felt their eyes on her as she passed, but her gaze was only for Varol as they slipped out of the Hall and into the gardens. Iole giggled behind her, but they were gone before she could hear what had made the little one laugh.

Outside, the chill Alderaanian night air did little to diminish the party; indeed, if anything, it had made the drinks flow all the faster. Boisterous laughter and hundreds of conversations replaced the sounds of the ever-vibrant orchestra, though some refrains still floated down through the complex and beautifully laid gardens. Hundreds upon hundreds of candlewicks were in full, brilliant bloom, casting the revelers in soft ember light like actors on a stage. Varol and Rabé wandered slowly across the ancient stone decks, passing other small groups and couples as they talked about nothing in particular. Rabé didn’t want to arouse suspicion by dropping immediately into discussions of war and politics, didn’t want to push too far, too quickly.

In the distance, the waves of the lake surrounding the palace crashed quietly upon their dark shore.

They found an empty alcove that bordered the far edge of the deck, outside of the bright light spilling from the Hall. They were quiet for a moment, watching the revelers and dancers in peaceful silence.

Out of the corner of her eye, Rabé saw Eirtaé step out onto the deck, her body half-turned from them but her attention focused like a scope on their dark alcove. Fives moved into position, too; watching like a hawk from one of the outdoor bars and plainly ignoring the shy, hopeful glances of the two young Zabraks sitting nearby.

She took a breath, and then murmured absentmindedly, “It’s a strange thing, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“This… this whole situation. The Gala. We’re all acting like there’s not a war going on above our heads, right this very moment, all across the galaxy.” Without meaning to, her eyes drifted up to the tapestry of stars. She picked out the location of Naboo, of Coruscant - faint pinpricks, millions of miles away - and her heart suddenly ached with the pure, immense pressure of all those lives. Countless beings depending on her skill as a spy. So she lowered her gaze so as not to drown under that weight.

“It’s easy to forget. Alderaan is protected from the worst of it. I’ll be glad when this war is over.”

“Mhm.”

“The galaxy will be at peace, and everything can go back to normal. Wouldn’t that be wonderful, Lady Maitri?”

“Of course! The sooner the war ends… the better, I think,” and she furrowed her brow like even that amount of thinking was difficult for her, and Varol’s expression - delight and a cold distant watchfulness that made her stomach twist in unease - told her he ate it up; she was a spoiled, sheltered, naive and - most importantly - incredibly wealthy Corellian noblewoman that would be of use to him. “It seems so complicated, I sometimes wonder…” and here she leaned conspiratorially closer to Varol, “I sometimes wonder if the Senate does everything it truly can to end the war as quickly as possible. Sometimes I think they *purposefully* complicate matters so that they can profit off of it…”
She was using his own words against him, of course, but still his eyes lit up with delight.

“You are so right, Lady Maitri. I wish others in the court could see as clearly as you do.”

She smiled shyly, watched the last bubbles dance in her drink as the commotion of the Gala around them seemed to hide them in plain sight. Eirtaé was keeping an eye on her, as were Captain Rex and Sabé from their lookout, but in that moment, separated from the crowds of extravagantly dressed guests, the Queen and Prince Consort not twenty feet from their alcove on the deck, she felt very alone.

Well - not quite alone.

Like he had sensed her thoughts, Fives straightened at the bar - one of the young Zabraks perked up hopefully - and signed, You alright?

Fine. Thank you.

Varol continued, oblivious to her fluttering hands, “I think we’re of similar mind, my Lady.”

Her stomach squirmed in distaste when he said those words, though. “Oh? How so?”

“We both want to help the galaxy. And…” he shifted closer, and Rabé could have sworn she felt Captain Rex and Sabé leaning in, too, leaning close to catch the words, the admission, “I think we both know that the Republic Senate is no longer our best hope for that. And maybe it never was.”

And there it was.

Rabé took a breath, staring at Varol’s chilly grey eyes as she let the words sink. “No… perhaps not… but then what can we do? There’s so much suffering in the galaxy, so much bloodshed, so many lives uprooted and lost…”

And suddenly all she could think about was Fives.

Suffering and bloodshed and lives uprooted, lost in the pursuit of peace…

One group in particular was especially affected, every single day, across the galaxy.

She could only think about Kix, about Hardcase, Echo, and Jesse, and Rex and all the other thousands of clones fighting the war, dying every day - and without meaning to, without planning for it, the words caught in her throat and her eyes filled with tears until she couldn’t see Varol’s face anymore.

“Oh - my Lady - please, don’t cry-”

She let Varol pull her closer, let him try and soothe and comfort her. “I’m so sorry, Varol-” and next to her, the young Lord puffed up as she dropped the formality, as she used only his name, “I just feel so hopeless, I don’t know how to help…”

“Maitri, please don’t lose hope. There are ways to help. I promise. And I know of one that will be damn more effective than the spineless Senate. There’s a group, I can petition for you to join us… You can help; you can help bring peace to the galaxy. Don’t worry…”

“Well done, Rabé,” Rex murmured in her comms, tight concern under his clipped praise. “I think we’ve got ’em.”
Fives stood by one of the doors that led to the garden, his mind still reeling from the conversation between Rabé and Varol. She’d started crying.

What in seven hells did he say to her?

She’d shaken her head for an explanation, her eyes still swimming with tears when she’d come back inside. “It’s alright, Captain - all for the show,” she’d explained - but he’d remained unconvinced. They’d slipped into a corner near the Senator’s team, Fives barreling his way across the deck as soon as they’d risen and started back inside, intercepting her with a growl barely concealed as one of those proper-fucking-smiles he was getting so sick of. Sabé had told him his job, his primary duty, was to make sure Rabé was safe. To protect her, so that’s what he was going to do.

Varol had opened his mouth to argue but Fives hadn’t made ARC for nothing - he might not be wearing the armor now but he still felt that blasterfuel in his blood, the grim determination behind that burning false smile. A warning shot. I saw her cry when she was with you, my Lord.

She’d made herself cry, and Fives still wasn’t sure as to why. She’d said it’d been necessary, that it had made Varol lower whatever guard remained, and Fives knew that, the bastard had admitted within ten seconds of her quiet tears, but all the same - why did she cry?

He’d nearly started across the deck when he’d realized, when he saw her wipe her eyes, when her lips had trembled. What did he say, karking bastard, what did he say to you? But then a sudden swift move from Eirtaé by the door, a sharp jerk of the head and he’d had to hold back, to act as though it was all alright. And as he watched Rabé and the Lord, he felt Eirtaé’s eyes never once leave him.

“It’s alright,” Rabé had murmured, wiping her eyes with a cold cloth given discreetly by one of the servers. Pressing lightly under her eyes until her color had returned to normal, Fives’ distress rose as she sighed and sniffed again. “It’s alright, Captain. I promise,” and then she’d given him that smile that made his knees weak, and he’d relented. Stepped back with a nod.

A flurry of movement from the Senator’s alcove caught his attention. As soon as he made eye contact with Echo, his brother jerked his chin and his hands flew: Get over here. Need to talk to you.

Fives’ mood soured all the more. He wasn’t in the mood for a lecture, he wasn’t in the mood for sniping, sarcastic comments anymore. He set his jaw and signed back, with a single shake of his head, Busy.

It’s important.

They glared at each other from across the Hall, towering about the oblivious lords and ladies and lairdes, neither one backing down, and then a surge of petty stubbornness swelled in his head and Fives stood up and walked away until he couldn’t see his batch brother anymore.

He slipped behind the columns and wished for a quiet, shadowy place to rest for a moment, to gather his thoughts. The lights and sounds of the Gala - beautiful at first - had soured now, were twisting into his head. He leaned against a pillar, hidden from sight, and closed his eyes.

“Hey, Captain,” someone said quietly.

He cracked an eye open and straightened a bit as General Skywalker stepped around the corner. “Sir.”
As if the night hadn’t already been a shock to his system, seeing Skywalker look as tired as he felt was almost too much to handle. The General shook his head as he came to stand near the ARC, folding his arms across his chest and letting out a long, tired sigh. They both might have looked like the rest of the guests, with their fine robes and medals and jewels, but they were stripped of their armor, their comfort zones, and it weighed them both down like rocks. “This is… something else, isn’t it.”

Fives relaxed again and muttered, “You’ve got that right.” It was jarring to see Skywalker so openly exhausted, but then again, this wasn’t their usual battle. Droids they could handle. Court politics, not so much.

*Thank whatever gods there are for the handmaidens, then* - but that didn’t work, because now his thoughts returned to having to watch Rabé cry and not being able to go to her, to help her.

“How’s it going from your end?”

Fives’ scowl deepened. “Fine.”

Skywalker chuckled lightly. “Don’t lie.”

He still considered it, though. After a moment he let his head rest against the column, and closed his eyes again. “I don’t understand any part of this. I thought I’d be able to handle it, but…”

His words trailed off under the chorus of music, bright laughter, cheerful conversations. *I’m not meant for this sort of thing,* Fives thought, and the misery dredged through his bones like a deep, persistent ache.

“Yeah,” Anakin agreed quietly. “Yeah.”

0100 hrs. ♦ 1:00am

The Pantoran nobleman was absolutely *delighted.* He and Fives were talking about something obviously incredibly amusing - he was making Fives laugh that wonderful boisterous laugh of his - as they danced. He was helping Fives relax, taking the weight from his shoulders and helping him have a good time, and for that, Rabé was immensely glad. Captain Dathan had looked so exhausted when he’d come back; but when Lord Junji had approached and brazenly asked for a dance with the Corellian Captain, *Fives* had returned with gusto and a swagger that had dimmed slightly over the course of the evening. He liked being the center of attention - and Junji was more than willing to give him that.

Rabé and Abeni watched from their seat, leaning back against each other, as Fives and the young Pantoran man danced around the hall.

She was happy Fives could relax and laugh, she *was* - but she also couldn’t deny that she wished that it was *her* making him laugh like that.

“Captain Dathan really is quite charming,” Abeni said, smiling brightly as they came around again. “He’s so graceful!”

Rabé’s chest swelled with unexpected pride. “Isn’t he? He was nervous about escorting me tonight, but I think he’s really grown into the role.”

“Oh, absolutely! I had no idea he was nervous; he’s so confident,” Abeni said, turning her bright smile on Rabé. “You’re very lucky to have him as your Captain, I think.”
Before Rabé could respond, however, Varol appeared, and a good deal drunker than he’d been two hours before. His normally-alabaster cheeks were now flushed dark pink, a lazy smile plastered on his face. In a loud, singsong voice, he called, “Why, look! ‘Tis the belles of the ball, the beautiful ladies Maitri and Abeni!”

Abeni raised an eyebrow and burst out laughing, “Hullo, Varol - seems like you’re having a good evening?”

“Oh, the best ,” he said, sliding onto the chaise next to Rabé. “The best! A grand night indeed, my dear Nini.”

“Nini?!”

“Nini!” Varol cheered, raising his glass to Abeni, who started laughing so hard she could not respond. “To Nini! May her smile never dim!”

“Varol , you are beyond drunk, my gods!”

“Correct, Nini. But it is a night for celebration!”

“Enough ,” she said, between gasping breaths of laughter. “Enough with the ‘Nini,’ that sounds like something my aunt would call me-”

As she and Varol argued over the semantics of the new nickname, the song ended, and Fives and Junji bowed to each other, still laughing at some private joke. Junji was almost as tall as the ARC, much slimmer and dressed in regal robes of purples, teals, and gold. He struck a beautiful contrast to Fives’ dark colors - and Rabé was startled when Fives glanced over at them at the same time Varol grabbed her arm.

“Maitri, I have some excellent news for you!”

“That you’re going to drink some water and soon?”

“Aha! Better; I’ve spoken to my group, and you have a majority!” Varol whispered softly in her ear, brimming with excitement as she passed him another glass of dark wine from the table next to the chaise. Fives dipped his head towards Abeni, and came to stand close behind Rabé and Varol - who took no notice of her Captain.

“What does that mean?” Give me the confirmation, tell it to me straight, she silently begged Varol - and once again, like putty in her hands, he obliged her.

“There are one or two more people left to convince, but I think they’ll let you in! We have to be quiet about this, see, because… well, it’s not illegal, but our political sentiments are…” Varol trailed off, glancing in drunken confusion at the full glass in his hands.

“…Unpopular?”

“ That’s it!” Varol laughed and Rabé couldn’t help but laugh, too; he was a fool, he was an utter loose-lipped fool and he was giving her everything she needed. He was sealing his own fate. “Exactly, exactly! I told them you would be an asset, that your power and influence on Corellia could help us make the change we are all so desperate to see!” He grabbed her hand with both of his and squeezed it gently with excitement. “We could end the war! We could do what no one in that Senate building is brave enough to do!”
“You really think it’s that simple? “Oh, that’s so wonderful!”

“Yes, yes, isn’t it? An end to the war… peace brought back to the galaxy…”

“And then the men could get some well-deserved rest,” Rabé said softly, almost without thinking, as she watched Kix and Hardcase cross the Hall on their rounds. Kix had told her that compared to their usual assignments, this mission was almost as good as a rest. Almost. “Gods only know how much they’ve earned it, and ten times over.”

“The men…? Oh - the clones, you mean?” Varol shook his head and laughed, and inched his way closer to her, until their knees were touching. “You have a bleeding heart, Maitri. It’s admirable, really it is! But…” he slowly swirled his drink in its glass, focusing hard on his next words, and suddenly he didn’t sound quite so drunk as he went on, “that’s what they’re for. That’s why we paid the Kaminoans in the first place. They’re weapons. In the end it doesn’t matter how many are killed; they’re not citizens. At the heart of it, the clones are little better than droids. Expensive battledroids! They’re both only good for one thing: getting rid of each other, so we don’t have to… dirty our hands, as it were.” He rested his hand on Rabé’s, who was trying very hard not to let her disguise slip, to not recoil with disgust, even as her blood howled with the desire to snap his wrist and watch him scream. “It’ll ease your worries if you think of them as products only. As things to be used - and then discarded once their usefulness is up. Don’t waste your kind heart on them.”

Bastard, bastard. Fucking bastard.

Rabé gaped at him in horror as she felt Fives stiffen behind her, like he’d been punched in the stomach, and in that moment, she hated Varol. Hated him to the very depth of her core, hated him like she’d hated no other being before. Varol took another sip, oblivious, and behind her, Fives - with all the proper decorum, as though those words had not just sliced him open like blades - quietly excused himself and slipped out of the alcove.

She watched him go, weaving in between the drunk dancers with ease, his face a stoic mask, and it was only when Varol cleared his throat and simpered, “Lady Maitri, what would you say to a dance?” - did she tear her gaze from Fives’ retreating back. She couldn’t speak, could hardly bear to look at Varol or place her hand in his own - but she had a mission, a duty, others were relying on her abilities to charm Varol. She had to get into that meeting; her mission was clear.

And in that moment, how she despised it.

0105 hrs. ✦ 1:05am

“Hey, Fi- uh, Captain,” Hardcase greeted, catching himself before Kix had a chance to nudge him. “How’s Babyface?”

“‘Case, come on. Be polite,” Kix said, and with the barest hint of a smile he corrected: “How’s Lord Babyface?”

“‘Case, come on. Be polite,” Kix said, and with the barest hint of a smile he corrected: “How’s Lord Babyface?”

“If that sleemo doesn’t shut the hell up - and soon - I am about to be arrested for shooting a nobleman in the balls.” Fives answered darkly, ignoring Kix’s look of shock as he grabbed a drink from a passing servitor droid.


“You should’ve heard what he just said. Bantha shit-for-brains- ”
“Captain,” Kix warned under his breath. Though they were sequestered in a quiet corner, lost among the celebrations, his eyes still cautioned him. “Easy.”

“You would’ve slaughtered him.” Fives spat, raking his free hand through his hair as he signaled the nearest servitor droid. “Kriff. You should’ve been the Captain. Not me. Not me, I’m not cut out for this kinda shit-”

“What, and you think I am? Why does everyone think I’m so calm and collected? I’m a medic, I can’t remember the last time I was calm -” Affronted, Kix interrupted himself and frowned in disapproval as Fives took another glass from the droid. “You should not be drinking, we’re here for a very specific reason-”

“Let him take a breather, come on-”

Fives, however, was not about to be chided and finished the second drink even faster than the first. “Or hell – why didn’t Rex-”

Just as he turned to shove the glass back at the droid, his eyes found her immediately. Like a moth to a flame, he couldn’t stop himself from staring across the hall where she smiled and took Varol’s offered hand, when she rose and stepped close to that sleemo.

His jaw tightened with anger and no small amount of jealousy – that was the one good thing about the mission, as unexpectedly brutal as it was turning out to be:

At least he could admit to himself that he wanted to be the one sweeping her off her feet.

He didn’t have as much time as Varol. It was a simple fact. Neither Fives nor his brothers had the luxury of time. And he wanted to spend as much of his short life with her.

Kix sighed and took a glass for himself. He raised it to no one, to nothing in particular, and murmured wearily, “May our enemies be drowned in their own wine.”

As the three clones watched the festivities in silence – annoyance and unease rippling from one to the next; what wouldn’t they give for another one of Eirtaé impeccable ‘missteps’ – Varol and Rabé circled close. They only had eyes for each other; Fives knew Rabé’s dazed look was a part of her act, he knew it was all a lie – but Varol’s feelings, the look in his eyes was one hundred percent bitterly real.

She didn’t even seem to notice her guards standing less than six feet away from where she and the Lord danced. Fives’ heart twisted but he couldn’t tear his eyes away. He watched in mournful silence, an empty glass clutched in his hand, his jaw tight. Get the intel. Get the intel, catch the spy.

They were so close that he could see the gold of the Hall illuminate her dark brown eyes like stars; so close that he could see the freckles on her shoulders, her arms, her cheeks.

They were so close that when Varol’s hand tightened on the small of her back, Fives saw the crease of her gown under the pressure of her fingers.

They were so close that when Varol leaned down, when he leaned down and tried to kiss Rabé – he put his hands where Fives had ached to put his own but resisted because of the mission, because of propriety – it hit Fives like the full force of an artillery strike unloaded in his ribcage.

His anger surged forward, riding the mercurial alcohol in his blood, and everything became muddled,
slow-moving, as Rabé quickly pulled away and twisted as soon as she realized what Varol was trying to do. All three of her guards started forward but then she was signing to stand down, I’ve got it under control behind Varol’s back, like she sensed them lunging to her aid.

“Fuckin’ hell, he’s a bold little shit, isn’t he?” Hardcase murmured, half in fascination, half in disgust, but Fives barely heard him as he stared, wide-eyed in mute shock, and felt something in him snap.

He had hallucinated it, but he could have sworn Rabé’s eyes flicked over to her company of guards as she declined the kiss.

Fives’ throat closed with strong, bitter jealousy as Rabé shook her head, denying him but still giving him that winning, gorgeous smile that he did not deserve. Kix and Hardcase stared at the scene, stared at Fives, and his skin crawled under the weight of their pitying glances.

Varol straightened and laughed sheepishly, pulled away a little, cracked some joke that made her laugh in turn - and then, as if nothing had happened, they began to dance once more. The orchestra leapt into a new piece, and every beat pounded Fives’ head like a hammer. Kix watched him out of the corner of his eyes, chewing his lip in concern, leaning slightly forward, ready to stop Fives if he tried anything stupid.

Like hell he would – he wasn’t about to risk their mission; blow her cover.

Rex’s words suddenly echoed in his pounding head. Take a walk, trooper.

“I’m gonna go get some air,” he mumbled, fists clenched at his side – wanting nothing more than to scrub his memory clean – numbly weaving through the crowds until he found a door that led him out and away from them all.

0115 hrs. ♯ 1:15am

Rabé found him in the gardens.

Fives was standing with his back ramrod straight, his hands clenched behind his back, as he stared off into the distance of the lake. If he’d come out here to cool down, to calm his head, it did not look like he’d been very successful. He looked - and Rabé’s stomach gave a twinge of sadness - utterly miserable. Rabé didn’t know what time it was - it was unnerving, Alderaan’s absence of a moon, and she couldn’t tell the time by its position in the sky - but it was late. Very late. The party had swelled to a roar behind them, laughter and cheers echoing down over the lake, but on the shore next to Fives, it was quiet.

Like it had been the night before.

For a moment, she wondered how this night might have played out if she had been just a touch braver, moved just a little faster.

He turned a little at the sound of her steps on the gravel path, his eyes unreadable except for the misery etched in his bones. He looked at ease in his Captain’s uniform, but she knew that he stood more at ease in his battle-scarred ARC armor than the dressings of a civilian captain. She smiled at him - tried to smile - as she came to stand next to him. The waves nearly drowned out the sounds of the Gala behind them, and for a moment, neither one of them spoke.

And then:

“I can’t stand that man.”
Rabé nodded, and Fives went on, the anger slipping into his voice, low and tense and bitter, “I can’t stand the way he looks at… the way he looks at you. The way he talks to you. Or the way he talks about the Senator, the war, the… the clones.”

Rabé tried to meet his eyes but Fives’ gaze was still fixed on the horizon. “I know.”

“How can he - he doesn’t understand - he has no idea the sacrifices, the pain that we’ve endured for the sake of people like him - he thinks it’s a fucking game, he doesn’t think my brothers’ lives, my life, mean anything. He doesn’t see us as men, he sees us as pawns. Pawns in a game that he thinks he smart enough to play. And he’s so kriffin’ stupid that he can’t even recognize a clone when they’re staring him in his stupid pale face.” Fives’ fists were clenched at his side and Rabé’s heart twisted in agony for him; of course she couldn’t understand the pain of his life, of being born to fight and die for a Republic that was still debating his personhood, his right to citizenship. But she knew war.

And she knew Fives.

She glanced over her shoulder before saying, quietly, “I hate that you had to hear him say that. It was cruel and terrible and it’s not true. I know it’s… it’s hard to believe, but I know for a fact most people don’t believe that.” She willed him to believe her. “Most people don’t act like that, or think like that. I promise you.”

“It’s… it’s hard to believe. When I just had to listen to someone say that the only thing I’m good for is as a fucking weapon.” His hands flexed in anger, his breath came short and shallow as he struggled to keep his voice down, and he looked as though he’d like nothing more than to rip something apart with his bare hands. “We were made for a reason. I know that. Everyone knows that. We fight for the Republic. We die for the Republic, every hour of every fucking day. And he… just… fucking hell.”

Rabé felt herself tripping over her words in her haste, in her effort to keep her voice softer than the waves but with an urgency to comfort him, to make him believe her words, “He’s an idiot. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He doesn’t know anything.” She wrung her hands together - almost wiping off the memory of Varol’s touch - and when Fives shut his eyes, pain rolling off of his shoulders in waves, she hesitated only a moment before reaching forward and resting her hand on his arm. His eyes sprang open and he turned to stare at her, innocent surprise ebbing from underneath his anger, his sorrow. “I hate that we have to work so closely with him, to find our spy. I hate that he’s the one we have to interact with, that you have to tolerate his...” his mouth worked strangely, like he was resisting the urge to spit out the word, “affections.”

So he had seen Varol’s attempt to kiss her.

She opened her mouth, but the way he’d said that word… she couldn’t speak, so Fives went on, a simple, miserable sentence: “He tried to kiss you.”

“Yes.”
“Did… did you want him to?”

Rabé knew that it was the strange hour of the night, and the hours of lying and subterfuge, of smoothing suspicions and stroking egos; she told herself that it wasn’t jealousy, it couldn’t be jealousy - they had roles, they had duties to perform, duties that had to be utterly perfect or else everything would fall to pieces, that it would best if she lied to him, to keep up the act - but she couldn’t lie to Fives. Not now.

She shook her head, her hand still lightly resting on his arm, and suddenly Akantha’s words came crashing back into her mind and Rabé knew that if she was to kiss anyone that night, it would not be Varol.

It would be Fives.

And gods, how she wanted to.

Fives let out a breath and nodded. He tried to smile, but it quickly disappeared again even as he nonchalantly asked, “So if he tries again, I can punch him, right?”

Rabé stifled back a snort of delight. “If he insults you again, I get to punch him.”

Fives grinned, and it was as if Rabé could see some of the weight rolling off of his broad shoulders. “Deal.”

Rabé didn’t want to think about why her shoulders suddenly felt lighter, too. We can’t. We have our mission. She let her hand drop from his arm, folded her arms protectively against the chill of the air, and gave a short laugh. “I almost broke his hand, though.”

Fives snorted, and Rabé smiled up at him. She liked making him laugh.

“Maitri!”

Rabé and Fives turned together as Lady Abeni gracefully slipped around the corner. “There you are, Maitri, I don’t know why you’ve run off in the middle of the night, but I have to talk to you - the Lairde, from Artorias, xey’ve danced with me all night and - Captain Dathan! Junji, that Pantoran nobleman, he’s been positively raving about your skills as a dancer, you have quite the line of admirers poking their heads around the Hall for you, you’ll be dancing all night-”

Fives shifted and grinned sheepishly at Abeni’s words as she slipped between them, talking all the while, hooked her arms through theirs, and hauled them both back to the golden lights of the Hall.

And the moment was gone. It left her cold, aching to be so close to him. But the mission stood like a durasteel barrier between them - and she couldn’t do anything to breach it.

0440 hrs. 4:40am

Hardcase greeted the two guards standing outside their suite door – fresh ones who’d taken over for the first pair – and the four practically fell through the doorway as soon as it was opened. Fives headed straight for the couch and collapsed face-first onto the plush cushions until Kix stalked over and unkindly pushed his legs off. Fives didn’t even have the energy to fight him for the space and simply laid there, half-on, half-off the couch. It was dark and quiet in the suites, and for once in his short life, Fives was glad of the calm.

Rabé and Hardcase, however, were huddled around the small bar against the wall opposite the cold
fireplace, tucked in shadows where the brilliant tapestry of stars did not reach their silvery fingertips. Fives turned his head at the sound of faint cursing and a cork, a quiet triumphant exclamation, and then-

“Sit up, come on; you’ll get wine all over yourself if you drink it like that.” Rabé was half-bent over him, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Here.”

He shifted so fast that Kix – who had just managed to squeeze himself onto the couch – yelped as Fives kicked him in the ribs. Rabé stepped out of the way, a tired smile hovering on her lips as she held two very full glasses of dark blue wine.

“Where’d you get this?”

She pressed her lips together as she handed him one of the glasses, and Kix the other. “Nicked it.”

From the bar, Hardcase confirmed as he poured two more, “From one of the caterer’s tables; I saw it happen with my own two eyes, otherwise I wouldn’t have believed it.” He upended the bottle, shook out the remaining drops of wine, and then chucked the empty bottle into the bin.

“Hell yeah, bless you, Rabé, and cheers to your sticky fingers,” Kix said in earnest.

“I thought we all needed a bit of a breather,” she said simply, taking another glass from Hardcase and slowly sinking into the largest chair. “It was a long and… interesting night.”

“I’ll say - Babyface was on an entirely different level tonight,” Hardcase said. “But he never even saw you coming!”

Rabé smiled and dipped her head as Kix agreed, “This went more smoothly than about ninety-five percent of our other missions.”

She laughed - a tired, slightly weary laugh - and tucked her legs underneath her, so that the fabric of her gown draped over the edge and to the floor. “How do your missions usually go?”

“More explosions,” Fives said, grinning at the thought as Hardcase nodded vehemently in agreement. “Way more explosions.”

“Usually Skywalker and Tano get into a competition of some sort. And then General Kenobi finds out about it, patches in and lectures them for half an hour-”

“I’m just glad I had the night off for once,” Kix said dramatically. “No explosions and no reckless competitions to see who can get themselves killed the fastest meant I could relax.” He took a slow sip of the wine and then said, “And I could people-watch.”

“Oh! Speaking of - do you know why Eirtaé spilled that drink on that Quarren?” Rabé suddenly asked.

“Yes!”

“She spilled it because xe were saying some shit about us, about the war-”

“I guess she overheard xyr comments and decided to do something about it,” Hardcase said dreamily. “She’s so fucking terrifying, but that was the best thing I’d ever seen.”

“And then she acted all sheepish and apologetic about it, but that faker words were never spoken-”

Fives drank deeply from his glass as he listened to the three discuss the events of the night, but he
was more drained than any of them put together. Escorting, debuting, dancing, the niceties and intricacies of court politics he only barely understood, Varol - the Gala of Lights was finally over, and with it went the last shred of his energy.

So he simply sat, and listened.

They talked for another hour - but Fives was content to simply watch dawn slowly creep up behind Rabé. He watched the soft blue and pink light dapple her skin as the breeze played with her hair. He was content to rest, and to watch. Surely there was nothing wrong with simply admiring her from afar, with these soft, lingering glances.

Dawn returned - and perhaps the sunrise was beautiful, but Fives watched that soft pale light illuminate her face, her radiant smile, he watched it catch the dark gold of her gown and knew it to be more breathtaking than all the sunrises he’d ever seen.

Chapter End Notes

One of the best and most exciting things that has come from this fic and this rarepair is the community that has grown with it; full of incredibly kind and talented people; a community that supports each others’ content and showers everyone with love and keysmashes. Neither of us really ever expected something like this to come from our top-tier-rarepair, and we're frequently at a loss for words at just how amazing this past year has been.

(If anyone is aching for more Fives/Rabé content, or wants to see some gd Kisses already, there's a TON of content over on our tumblr, @arcmaiden!)

So! Some shoutouts are due:

@rabesfives, @bxris-offee, @leopoldjamesfitz, @depabillabaa, @doveloves, @bisexualspacerevengers, @ghastlyshilo, @aerefyr, @cheesyonions : I just want you all to know that whenever you make anything for this rarepair/fic, we spend a good hour at LEAST yelling about EVERY. SINGLE. THING. Fics! Graphics!! Meta!! AUS!! ART!! Like! Holy hell! You've all inspired fics, meta, headcanons - even the rarepair fankids!! We appreciate y'all SO MUCH and I don't actually have the words to describe how much love is flowing towards you right now. You're absolutely incredible human beings, and we're so, SO thankful that you're here❤❤

And to everyone who has supported, read, liked, kudos'd, commented, and reblogged any of our works, or any of the content made by the wonderful human beings above : this thanks also extends to you!! Thank you so much for giving this tiny rarepair and ULTIMATE slowburn a chance, thank you for your wonderful comments and thoughts and love. It's reflected back to you, multiplied by millions!

Alright, I'm done being super sappy.

Thank you so much, everyone. Here's to another wonderful year of rarepairs and fantastic communities❤
The flimsi invitation had arrived with breakfast, asking Rabé to be ready to meet Varol’s mysterious Society for Galactic Unification by one o’clock.

By nine, the three teams had assembled in their headquarters, the atmosphere a strange, electric combination of careful planning and hopeful, eager satisfaction. Padmé and Rabé had argued about which dress she should wear - anything to give them an advantage - and when an agreement had finally been reached, Fives’ scowl - present but light all morning - had deepened into something Ahsoka could only pin down as jealousy.

By ten thirty, Rabé’s dark blue gown had been fitted with fresh threadcomms, her jewelry pinned with cameras.

At eleven, she met Lady Abeni for a late breakfast - much of the Gala’s attendees had take a leisurely morning, though Ahsoka though Abeni still looked absolutely radiant in a dress of deep red - and by twelve fifty-five, Fives had escorted her to the library doors and into Varol’s arms.

Ahsoka prowled along the edge of the room, restless nerves prickling into every one of her senses as Fives slipped back into the room. His expression was as sour as curdled milk, and Ahsoka could not blame him. She cast him a sympathetic wince as he tugged off his fine gloves.

His scowl darkened even further and he rolled his eyes; as he poured himself a glass of water from the small tray, Anakin let out a triumphant noise and sat back from the center console. Various wires lay scattered about him on the dark blue carpets and he nodded to Echo. “Okay. Try to start it up now.”

“Yes, sir.” With a press of the button, the projector began to stir, faint clips of voices and images stuttering through. Ahsoka and Echo breathed a simultaneous sigh of relief. “Good one, General.”

“Ah, it’s an old trick from back on Tatooine. It’s how I pirated edu-programs from unencrypted waves,” he muttered, distracted as he fiddled with the wires a little more until the images came into sharp focus. Ahsoka blinked at the easy, almost thoughtless, admission of something from his past. From his past before the Jedi. *He must feel safe here,* and the realization that pushed through her blood was bittersweet and heavy with a hollow, aching sadness.

Eirtaé looked up at Fives. “Everything go smoothly?”

“Smooth as silk,” he muttered. “Met up with Varol outside the library, and it’s like he didn’t even notice me there. Eyes only for her.”

“That’s good,” she said, glancing at Padmé. “He’s more likely to slip up if he’s half in love with her.”

Fives’ answer was another short, annoyed grunt - and Ahsoka had to press her lips together, turn away, so that he wouldn’t see her smile at Iole’s words from the night before.

Echo leaned against the back of his seat and let out a quiet sigh of disbelief. “So she’s really in the rancor’s den now.”

The holo of Sabé began to pace around the console, passing in front of Rex’s holo - both of them were watching from the security center - her gaze sharp and focused. “She’ll be fine. This is what we’ve been trained to do.”
Anakin pushed himself up onto the couch next to Echo, elbows on his knees, eyes narrowed and lip curled in disgust. His focus, laced with that low persistent hum of anger that they all felt, pulsed through the Force; Ahsoka started to prowl once more. Despite the warm sun, the gentle breeze, the room was as cold as ice for all the nerves dancing like sprites from one person to the next: this was it.

“Feels like I’ve hand-delivered her as a sacrifice to a Sarlaac,” Fives muttered as he came to stand beside Ahsoka. They watched the feed from the tiny cams on Rabé’s necklace and headpiece started to come to life before them. Another moment later, and the sounds from the mics also came through.

She was laughing at something Varol was saying as they strode through the dark shelves of the library, and Ahsoka just barely caught Fives’ low growl of annoyance as he took a deep drink of his water.

“-letter said we were meeting in the library,” Varol said softly as they wound their way through the shadowed aisle. “That was misleading, on my part. I do hope you’ll forgive me but I thought it necessary for a little extra precaution. I don’t think your Captain likes me very much.”

Fives and Kix both snorted loudly while Hardcase addressed the projection with a dopey grin, “Babyface isn’t a total idiot? Who’d have thought-”

“Enough, Hardcase,” Rex cautioned, but Ahsoka still caught the tiny smile on the edge of his lips.

“Oh? An adventure, then?” Rabé replied in a strange, slightly singsong cadence.

As one, Padmé and the other handmaidens exchanged a glance, and then Sabé’s hands started to fly over the controls in front of her.

Ahsoka wasn’t the only one who’d caught the look, either. “What, is something wrong?” Echo asked, concern flitting into his voice as he looked between Eirtaé and the Senator.

Eirtaé gave him one short shake of her head in response. “Wait a moment,” she murmured as the only explanation. Echo paused, considered asking again, but then nodded. His complete and utter trust in the handmaidens soothed his nerves a little, but now the slight ease from Hardcase heckling Varol had slithered out of the room. Rabé had communicated with her sisters, somehow; Ahsoka knew that much.

“There is a beautiful gazebo in the center of the hedgemaze; that’s where we going to meet my group.”

Sabé keyed in a final sequence and a tiny blueprint of the gardens sprang to life next to Rabé’s feed; a glowing, softly pulsing dark red dot making its way in time with her steps. Sabé caught Padmé’s eye and nodded once. Ahsoka, intrigued, watched as she lifted her hand and tapped twice on the brooch pinned to the front of her dress.

“I see,” Rabé said, once more with a quick lilt and slow fall to her words. Ahsoka’s montrals hummed with the words and Eirtaé caught how she cocked her head, and smiled.

“She was worried about the changed of location,” Eirtaé said swiftly as they watched Varol and Rabé step into the bright light of the gardens, a small moment of quiet between the agent and her quarry. In the distance, two people waited for them: Lord Ridan and Lady Malyna. “Wanted to make sure there were still active cameras from the night before.”

“Wh-“ Jesse began, all of the troopers, Anakin, and Ahsoka staring at the three Naboo women with growing awe.
“The way she said those words - or sang them, more accurately. Worry and blindness.” Padmé said, and now Ahsoka noticed how she shifted her voice on those words, how they’d matched Rabé’s, and she understood.

“Hearing between the words, as it were,” Sabé continued, distracted.

“And Padmé’s brooch is the signal. It’s linked to one of the jewels on Rabé’s wrist,” Eirtæ finished. “Two taps, and the jewel on her wrist responded in kind. She knows we have cameras up.”

“That’s brilliant,” Ahsoka breathed out in awe, and the three women quirked three identical smiles at the awed group around them. Anakin and Echo exchanged an impressed look as Hardcase laughed quietly in delight.

Lord Ridan greeted the two with a low, smooth bow, and bent to kiss her hand. “My dear! I hope you’re not too turned about with our sudden change in location?”

Rabé again, voice pleasantly confused, “I was wondering-! Why the gardens, my Lord?”

Varol smiled as Ridan patted her hand. “For the simple reason of privacy, my dear. We are a group fond of our secrets; and there is not a better place for it than the gardens.”

“There are no cameras in the gardens, you silly girl.”

Hardcase’s face twisted in annoyance as Kix clicked his tongue, and Ahsoka couldn’t help a small smile at their protectiveness. The speaker was Lady Malyna, who was staring down her nose disapprovingly at Rabé. “Our political views are quite a bit different than that of the majority of the court, or did Lord Varol not impress this upon you enough?”

Rabé’s voice was very small as she apologized, but it was near drowned by Varol and Ridan’s objections.

“Come now, Malyna. How is she to know?”

Malyna said nothing, but sniffed. “Let’s get a move on, then. The others are waiting - and I can’t imagine they’ll be thrilled with your idea, Varol.”

“Then we shall convince them.” Varol’s sugary-sweet voice dripped through the comms again. They turned a corner and in front of them was a beautiful marble gazebo, covered in twisting candlewick vines - the signature sunset-colored buds tightly closed against the mid-morning sun - and in the shadows, watching their approach, a group of fourteen assorted nobles. A traitor’s in there somewhere. More than one. Ahsoka felt the entire room hold its breath, lean forward as one, as Rabé took the smooth steps into the shadows, and the faces of the Separatists on Alderaan came into sharp focus.

“May I present, Lady Maitri Avalokit of Corellia.”

Fourteen beings stared hungrily at Rabé, and Ahsoka could not help a low growl rip past her sharp teeth. She flicked her eyes from one to the next, aching to be so close to the traitor and yet still so far from discovering who was leaking funds, resources, precious intel. Someone in that room was making it easier for the Separatists to gain influence.

Someone in that room had the blood of countless beings on their hands.

To her eyes, all of them looked like vipers - and they were all staring at Rabé like she held the key to their fortune, a hungry, curious, desperate look in their eyes.
It made her stomach twist with unease. Had she been in Rabé’s position, Ahsoka knew she could not have been as calm. Clankers, she could handle. This, however, was a battle entirely out of her expertise, and it terrified her to the bone. In the silence, Malyna strode to a low chair and sat gracefully down, her eyes watching Rabé like a hawk.

“Why aren’t they saying anything?” Kix murmured, eyebrows knit together in worry. “Shouldn’t they be saying something?”

“Quiet, now.” Rex said softly, as Rabé stepped up into the crowd. Stark, utter silence greeted her, and next to Ahsoka, Fives’ hands started to nervously drum on his forearms. There was a slight dip in the angle as she curtsied to them - not a being was breathing in either group.

Ahsoka wondered what that pressure felt like on Rabé’s slim shoulders.

Fives’ nerves were threatening to spill over when the silence was broken with a short, jagged laugh, and someone in the crowd called out, “Surely this is a joke, Varol.”

“A stranger?” A nervous laird asked, staring at Rabé with suspicious, watery eyes. “An offworlder, to boot?”

“Her family has the resources we need to make our plans a reality,” Varol stressed, steering her by the elbow further underneath the cover of the gazebo. Ahsoka wondered briefly how many secret conversations had happened there over the centuries. The stories that marble could whisper, she thought.

Rabé nodded furiously. “I… I told Lord Varol this last night, but I wish to help in any way I can.” She looked up at him, as if for guidance, before continuing, “If my family’s wealth could help bring the war to a close…”

“Money can help our effort.”

“But an offworlder - this is becoming too much!” The nervous laird snapped at Varol and Ridan, his gaze hardening. “Bringing in a stranger-”

“-will bring our plans to fruition!”

“-is perilously close to treason!”

“I did not take you for a coward, Owem.”

“Debating politics is one thing, Varol. What you are proposing is creating an alliance between systems that threatens the unity of the Republic; something that could destabilize it from the interior while there are enemies on all fronts!”

“Please, both of you! What a terrible welcome for our guest here - where are your manners?” Lord Ridan snapped from Rabé’s other side.

“My Lord, this is unwise and can only lead to-”

As the argument continued to crescendo, Ahsoka arched one brow in surprise and awarded Lairde Owem with the benefit of the doubt. Across the room, Padmé leaned forward in a mirror of Anakin’s pose, her fingers resting lightly on her lips. The others were just as silent, just as focused, on the
argument bubbling out of the comms and holoprojector. Ahsoka realized with a sort of morbid, hollow pang deep in her belly that the scene almost looked like a family gathering to watch their favorite holomovie together. No worries, no stress, beyond the actors playing out their dramatics in the shimmering lights of the projections. Her stomach tightened, and she had to look away, shake the thought out of her head.

“Kid, y’okay?”

She glanced up and met Fives’ concerned gaze. She nodded, but it didn’t seem to fool him. His own anxieties were a steady heartbeat to his attempt at a soothing smile, but it still felt nice when he reached over to pat her shoulder. She gave him a wordless smile of thanks as the meeting continued.

“Lady Malyna, surely you see how dangerous this is? If we entertain the possibility of adding in offworld funds, then-”

“Then the sooner the war might come to a close,” the old woman drawled from where she sat, observing the tense situation with a snide glance at the Lairde. “We need funds to continue aiding those in need.”

“I agree with Owem, this seems like a bad-”

“It’s only one girl, you’re overreacting-”

“If we step towards treason by admitting her, then I do not understand why you’re not reacting like-”

“All of you, enough-”

“We have so much to discuss, please, show gracious manners to our guest-”

Ahsoka winced as the voices rose like a flood all around them, opposition and accusations hurled from one to the other, when suddenly-

“Please, listen to me!”

Rabé’s voice was tense and sounded almost near tears, but it succeeded in making the rest of the conversations stutter to a halt around her. She stepped forward and took a shaky breath before continuing, “Please, I… I never wanted to be a burden, and I hate to have caused such a rift with my presence. But… but I’d be deceiving myself and my duty to Corellia, to the Republic, if I turned away from the chance to help us through this terrible war!”

Here she half-turned to face Varol, who was staring at her in half-pride, half-exhilaration. He smiled, gave her a tight nod of encouragement, and she turned back to the group, her voice a little stronger now. “I fear what Corellia may become should this bitter war go on. We have always been known for our ships, but… so much land has been taken up by shipyards and factories and waste refineries. They spring up to meet the demands of war but I fear that one day nothing but shipyards will remain of my home… My beautiful homeworld might soon be nothing but a planet for scrap to be refined into means of terror and death, and I cannot - I will not - stand idly by when you have presented me with the chance to help!”

Silence once more met her words, but now there was something other than worry dawning on most of the group’s faces. Two or three exchanged a look with each other, and Rabé’s words settled and soothed their fears right before Ahsoka’s eyes. Laird Owem remained unconvinced, and for a moment Ahsoka wondered if he sensed something off about this dainty offworlder who proclaimed a fortune the size of Corellia.
“There now. You see her intentions are the same as ours, surely?” Varol said softly, stepping in front of Rabé to address those who still doubted. “And if we call ourselves the Society for Galactic Reunification, then a logical next step would be to invite beings from other worlds to join our cause.”

“Her intentions might be the same, Varol, but you are playing with fire by bringing an offworlder, a stranger, into our midst.” Owem said, shaking their head. “I could rationalize donating credits, writing letters and petitions and debating, but this… admitting someone like her… it is a step too far.”

Several of the other nobles nodded in agreement, while others remained unconvinced one way or another. Most of them, however, were looking to one of the three standing around Rabé for guidance.

Varol, Ridan, or Malyna.

Rabé glanced one way towards Ridan and Varol. Varol was glaring at Owem, one hand hovering protectively over her arm as if to shield her from their critiques. Ridan was shaking his head and looking more like a mournful grandfather than a power-hungry Separatist. She looked the other way, towards Lady Malyna. Twitching annoyance, the wheels in her mind churning furiously as Owem began to step back, to gather their things.

Eirtaé was watching, unblinking, and as if Rabé sensed her sister’s focus, she took a tiny step back to widen the view, to fit more players into the frame. A tiny, almost bloodthirsty grin flitted across Eirtaé’s face before it settled once more into a cold, viper-like stare, and even though she was far from the receiving end of that gaze, Ahsoka could not help but shiver a little.

“Lairde Owem, I can assure you that allowing Lady Maitri to sit in on one meeting does not constitute treason,” Ridan said, shaking his head slowly.

“She is here for only a few days more. Surely that is nothing to be afraid of? We are merely including her in a societal club to be welcoming,” Varol added, emphasizing the last word so much that Owem nearly flinched.

“Regardless, it is unwise to grow this ideology into something greater, more tangible - and more traceable back to us.” Owem turned their gaze to Rabé and asked, gently, “Where do you wish your donations to go, should you join this group?”

“I- well, charity and relief efforts, my Lairde, like the rest of you.” She looked around the group before settling on Varol. “That was my impression…”

Ahsoka did not have to be in the gazebo to sense the uncertainty that flickered, just for a moment, across Varol’s face.

Sabé let out a quiet breath, glanced at Rex, and shook her head.

“You are quite right, my dear.” Lord Ridan said, just as Malyna nodded and went on in a placating, condescending voice, “Of course, that is where our efforts lie. Any funds we collect as a group are funneled towards relief efforts across the galaxy.”

“There, you see, Owem?” Ridan simpered, waving a hand and gesturing to the chairs scattered throughout the gazebo. “Only charitable efforts here.”

Without blinking, without even moving from what Ahsoka could only describe as a strike pose, Eirtaé’s lips twitched up in a half-smile. Like she’d caught her prey. “Liars,” she hissed between her teeth with delight.
That one word sent a wave of cautious optimism through the room as the discussion continued in front of them.

“You’re absolutely certain, Eirtaé?” Sabé asked quietly, studying her blonde sister out of the corner of her eye.

Eirtaé’s ice-cold eyes did not move from the projections as Rabé settled next to Varol - her body decidedly angled towards Ridan and Malyna across the way.

She knows, too.

“Behold,” Eirtaé murmured softly. “Our spider has ensnared her flies.”

A hunter’s thrill jolted through Ahsoka’s blood. And they have no idea.

Kennis had just decided to lean against the cool marble column when sharp, determined footsteps cut through the shadowed chill of the hall. He coughed, shook himself, and straightened awkwardly just as a huge tank of a man strode purposefully around the corner, hands clasped behind his back, dark golden eyes fixed ahead, shadows casting his strong-boned face into stark relief. Kennis knew of this man, though they had not formally met: he was a part of the Lady from Corellia’s retinue. Her Captain of the Guard, judging from the easy way he carried himself, two blasters on his hips, and the bloodstripes running down his legs. His jaw was set, but when he noticed the closed door and the small Zabrak man before him, he stopped in his tracks. His jaw tightened, and once more Kennis awkwardly cleared his throat under the weight of the Captain’s gaze.

For a moment they regarded each other - Kennis decidedly more cautious than the newcomer, by all the hells, he’s built like a brick wall - and then the stranger asked tersely, “They’re still out there?”

Out…? Strange. That accent…?

A decidedly informal way to begin a conversation, but Kennis politely ignored the breach of etiquette. He wasn’t about to risk offending this man. “Uh - yes. I believe they should be finishing up shortly, though.” He discretely tugged his sleeve up to examine his chrono. 1600, on the dot. The Lady must have asked him to return once the meeting was done. He nodded and hoped the Captain thought his smile genuine. “Any minute now.”

He relaxed, but not enough to dampen the tension Kennis felt rolling from his shoulders in great waves. His eyes moving past Kennis to rest on the thick wooden door. Kennis regarded him from the corner of his eye, standing straight at attention like the Captain, an awkward silence blooming in the shadowed hall. He could just barely make out a tattoo in the shape of the number ‘5’ on the man’s right temple.

The hallways leading to the great library at the heart of the palace were always in shadow, though hazy golden sunlight pierced the dimness through scarce arrowslits - a remnant from an earlier time, a less civilized age - and dustmotes danced in the strange, surreal light. Library halls were always quiet, removed from the excitement of the main palace. Normally, Kennis found the chilled dim marble hallways a comforting place to rest and wait. But the stranger - eyes still fixed on the great doors, like he had no time or attention to spare to Kennis - had almost brought the weight of the world with him.

Kennis thought there would be no harm in attempting some light conversation. The others would be along any minute now.
“You’re with the young Lady from Corellia, is that right?”

The man’s eyes slid from the door down to meet Kennis, a strange apprehension in his eyes. “That’s right. Lady Ra- Lady Avalokit. On her tour.” His words came out taut and quick, like he was working hard to bite other sentences back.

“I heard that she made quite the impression last night.” He nodded towards the door. “Must have, anyways, for my Lady - Lady Malyna - to accept her to this group.”

“Yeah, it seems to be rather… exclusive.”

“Oh, you’ve no idea,” Kennis replied amicably, eager as always for any chance to gossip. “My Lady won’t let me attend her during any of these meetings. And she refuses to let me serve the guests, when they meet at her home.”

The man was staring at him again, expression open and unguarded and now focused entirely on Kennis. Shit. He must have offended the Captain, to speak so easily about one’s superior. He scrambled to backtrack, “Is the Lady enjoying Alderaan?”

“Uh. Mostly. It’s too cold for her tastes.”

Kennis blinked, and then frowned in slight confusion. “I’ve… I’ve not been to Corellia, but… I had always heard that it’s weather is similar to Alderaan’s?”

The man’s expression quickly contorted and again, his eyes darted away from Kennis. “Well - mostly, yes - but her family lives in the warmer regions. We’ve just come from- uh, from Coruscant. Visiting Senators.”

“Oh. I see.” Kennis waited another beat, and then politely, apologetically asked, “I’m very sorry, I don’t believe I know your name?”

“It’s Captain... Dathan. Elas Dathan.” Dathan exhaled quickly and then, seemingly catching himself, quickly asked, “And yours?”

“Jeq Kennis.” Dathan’s accent - different from other Corellians he’d known - pricked a memory deep in his mind; a brief flash of familiarity that shimmered just out of his reach. Before he could investigate it further, however, the great wooden doors to the library opened, and the nobles streamed out - clustered around a small woman in a gown of dark blues, a thin cloak over her bare shoulders - filling the once-silent corridor with excited conversations and hopeful invitations to dinner later that evening.

The Lady had made a good impression, then.

When she saw her Captain, however, she quickly excused herself from the group, thanking them for their kind welcome, promising to get back about dinners and teas and strolls through the gardens with quick and easy grace. The dough-faced Lord Varol was even more puffed-up than normal, observing the scene with the pride of a master conductor relishing the grand finale of his symphony. He stood in the back, near Lady Malyna, and Kennis groaned inwardly when he noticed that the others’ infatuation with Lady Avalokit had not seemed to melt his own Lady’s cold demeanor. Varol exchanged a soft word with Lady Malyna and the purple-haired Lord Ridan, bringing up the rear of the group like a benevolent grandfather. Ridan looked pleased.

Malyna simply looked as sour as ever.

Lady Avalokit curtsied towards the group before taking her leave with her Captain - who, Kennis
noted, looked much more at ease. Happier, even.

His eyes weren’t as tense anymore; Kennis didn’t have to be on the receiving end of that soft gaze to sense how Dathan was relieved to see his Lady once more.

The rest of the nobles followed suit, scattering towards other appointments, until Lady Malyna and Kennis were the last ones left in the threshold of the library.

And then the memory clicked into place.

Kennis stared after the retreating Captain and the Lady Maitri, so confused he almost didn’t hear Lady Malyna snap at him, “What? What has so captivated your attention, Kennis?”

He dipped his head in apology. “Sorry, my Lady – it’s just-”

“Just what?”

“Lady Maitri’s Captain… I could have sworn – no. Never mind. Apologies, Lady Malyna – are you ready to depart?” The Corellian pair departed down the hall, the hem of the Lady’s skirts trailing gracefully on the clean dark marble of the hallway. Her Captain was nearly a foot taller than her, and looked like he could have broken Kennis’ arm with hardly any effort. But his hands were gentle when he took Lady Maitri’s cloak from her – it must have been cold in the archives of the library.

At the mention of the young Corellian woman, however, Malyna stiffened. Something rippled, almost flickered, across her face, like she had drawn a transparent veil across her features. “What about him?”

“It’s – well – I thought-” He fumbled with her cloak just as he fumbled with his words. He wasn’t entirely sure, anyways…

“For all the gods’ sakes, Kennis, give me a clear answer!” She snapped at him as she yanked the cloak away from him, throwing it over her shoulders with an annoyed huff.

“I think he’s a clone,” Kennis answered, unable to ignore a direct question, and before he could stop it, the story of his past bubbled up out of him. “My homeworld – Iridonia – hosted a battalion about three standard months before I moved to Alderaan… I never saw them out of their helmets, but his voice…” Kennis nodded, surer of himself now, even though Malyna was certain to be annoyed with his oversharing. “I’m almost positive he’s a clone – which is so strange, I had no idea that they were free to work… uhm… other jobs.”

He winced at the awkward phrasing, but for whatever reason the notion struck him as utterly bizarre. Everyone knew that clones were made to be soldiers, to fill the ranks of the GAR. Perhaps this one had been discharged, or injured, and then sent to Corellia for recuperation. Kennis found himself wishing he had gone to Corellia, instead of Alderaan; Lady Maitri seemed to be a kinder mistress than Malyna by light years.

He did not notice how Malyna’s eyes flickered, and then hardened, as she stared after the retreating pair, how her nervous movements slowed, and then stilled altogether.

Not unlike a thrantra contemplating its prey.

“My favorite part was the volcano!”
“That wasn’t a volcano, Iole,” Akantha chided her sister, laughing a little. “Remember? Xe said it was just a mountain.”

“Hm. Mountains are boring.”

“How can you say that, when Naboo only has oceans and plains?” Tyche asked, lounging across the aisle and taking up two more seats than they needed to, one foot lazily bouncing in mid-air. “Mountains are a rare sight indeed.”

“We have some mountains! And waterfalls. But no volcanoes!” Iole said, almost stamping her foot as the open-air ship descended slowly to the landing platform, the white marble-and-chrome city glinting like diamonds in the late afternoon sun around them. “I want to see a volcano. And lava!”

“How very brave of you!”

Rabé laughed behind her hand, glancing up to meet Fives’ eyes as the debate raged on. At first, Fives hadn’t understood why she’d been so insistent that she attend this tour with the other visiting debutantes. They’d finally narrowed the villains down to two - maybe three, there was still some debate about Varol’s involvement and yet she hadn’t wanted to keep working, to root them out. Somewhere - watching her walk around the hidden spring tucked away into the foothills of one of the highest peaks on Alderaan, perhaps - it had clicked.

For as long as they’d been on Alderaan, Rabé had been working as a mole directly in the enemy camp. Every movement, sentence, glance, laugh, and smile in the past week had been calculated. She deserved the rest - and hadn’t she told him herself, by the lake two nights ago, that being near the water refreshed her?

He shivered a little at the silver-etched memory, and tucked it close to his heart.

Besides, Fives would be lying to himself if he said he didn’t feel more relaxed now. It had been a calm reward for him, too.

Click.

A strange sound shook him out of his thoughts. *Huh. Must be a malfunctioning piece of equipment somewhere,* Fives thought to himself as he descended and stood at ease next to the ramp. He would have thought that Alderaan, jewel of the Republic, would have had better maintenance for their landing platforms. Iole, Akantha, and Tyche raced down the ramp - the older two letting Iole edge out in front of them and applauding her speedy victory - the older two letting Iole edge out in front of them and applauding her speedy victory - their cheeks still light pink from the chill of the mountain air. Their guards and retinue waited at the end of the landing platform, and Fives was glad to see both Kix and Hardcase were waiting for them, too.

Both of them probably guessed that Fives couldn’t have cared less about the sights along the tour, nor did they readily believe his excuse that he’d gone along to protect four Nabooians who could have easily handled themselves in any situation.

He wished he was an artist, like Hardcase. He’d have the image of her against the backdrop of snowy mountains etched onto a plate of his armor for the rest of his life.

On the ship, he could barely make out Rabé thanking the captain for showing them the sights of the city. He glanced up into the belly of the ship and resisted the urge to clear his throat so that she might look at him instead.

Click.
Brace yourself, trooper, his instincts, his conditioning sounded in his head, drowning out all other thoughts with an eerie, terrible calm.

Bomb.

His heart stopped as the sound, the word, the concept, registered in his head, and time slowed to a crawl.

Rabé, descending last from the ship’s ramp, lifting her skirts so that they wouldn’t be dirtied. Dread seeped into every fiber of his being, coating his blood like a deadly virus.

Click.

His legs felt like lead.

Akantha and Tyche swinging Iole around, laughing, laughing as they stepped off the platform. A retinue of Nabooian guards waiting for them.

Click.

His blood was heavy as durasteel. Time sped up once more and he exploded forward.

Fives launched through the dense horror, launched himself towards Rabé. He took a lungful of air as he ran, screaming until the sounds scraped the insides of his throat, “Get **DOWN**!”

No time - he sprinted as fast as he could towards the ship – people were staring and some of them were understanding but Fives only had eyes for her, for his Lady, still standing on the ramp, in the epicenter-

Click – and now something had started to whine and fizzle, a reaction, a countdown - “OFF THE PLATFORM!”

Rabé cocked her head, staring at Fives, and he could see the realization in her eyes – the dread quickly filtering into bracing herself – as he threw himself at her, over her, tackled her off of the ship’s ramp -

“**BOMB!**” Was that his own voice, or was it Hardcase’s, he could not parse through the dread in his mind-

And then it was as if the very air around them erupted.

Padmé smiled over the rim of her teacup at Bail and Breha. Breha, who was wearing her hair down and did not look even remotely as tired as she should be – given the previous night’s festivities – struggled through her laughter to finish her story. She’d worn her hair down today, wrapped in simple golden ribbons, but as always, the Queen of Alderaan exuded grace as well as beauty.

Bail quite obviously thought so, too. He couldn’t seem to tear his gaze from his wife, gazing at her with soft, fond eyes.

Eirtaé poured them all more tea, setting the teapot down on the cozy as Threepio and Artoo wandered between Anakin and Padmé’s groups. She took her place behind Padmé again, as still, as silent as a statue. Anakin, Ahsoka, Jesse, and Echo were reading over new reports sent in from Obi-Wan. *The war goes ever on.*
Padmé exhaled slowly, taking in the quiet, cozy scene with deliciously slow breath; savoring the peace like a drop of sweet honey on the tongue. Given the excitement over the past few days - and weeks, and months – a moment of respite, content in the knowledge they were closing in on their spy, that Breha could soon breathe easy. The gauzy light curtains fluttered in a gentle breeze from the open doors to the balcony.

Breha took a steadying breath, struggling to keep her face straight as she pressed on through her laughter, “-and of course I couldn’t reject such an invitation; they were the Senator, but I had never been to a Mon Cala feast before, so-”

Outside, the sky suddenly grew dark. The curtains stilled. The breeze took on a metallic scent.

Before Padmé could turn, the shockwave reached them and the peace was utterly, entirely shattered.

The force of the explosion ripped through the air, so deep, so horrifically loud that it rattled her bones but still she rose, almost drawn to the sound, racing out of the balcony behind Anakin and Ahsoka, behind the clones.

A thick plumage of dark smoke was rising above them. Anakin cursed, and Jesse shouted, “The landing platform!”

Padmé – heart thudding in her chest, teeth chattering from the force – looked over the edge of the railing.

“Gods-”

“Guards! Call the guards! Get the Queen to safety-”

Padmé’s mind went numb. Every part of her went numb – she thought maybe Anakin was gripping her elbow – as her heartbeat skyrocketed in pure, primal terror.

Padmé gripped the marble railing with numb fingers, ice spreading through her veins as she watched the ravenous fire lick the evening skies, thick black smoke billowing from the wreckage. Twisted shrapnel lay scattered across the landing platform, beings screaming, running, crying – and then the sirens began.

They rose from the palace itself into a high, desperate whine, but Padmé could not wrench her gaze from the awful, burning site.

Rabé was down there. Fives. Akantha, Tyche, Iole.

That had been their ship.

Though she was nowhere near the fires, she could feel the heat crackling and bubbling the air around her; she could smell the acrid black smoke, burning her nose, burning her throat, coating her lungs in thick gritty terror. Padmé’s fingers scraped at the marble as her mind, her memory, violently thrust her to another landing platform.

To another bomb.

A bundle of gowns, once-white soaked blood red, dying on the blast-marked platform amidst the fog of an early Coruscant morning.

*Cordé.*
Nothing left of the other.

*Versé.*

Again.

It had happened again.

Padmé was only vaguely aware of Eirtaé dragging her back inside, only dimly aware of Echo and Anakin scrambling to communicate with Fives, with Rex; Ahsoka arguing with the guards to let them pass – only to be adamantly refused. Bail and Breha had been whisked away by their own guards but Padmé was drowning under the weight of the memories.

Eirtaé pushed Padmé onto the couch, her sharp ice eyes betraying a hint of fear.

All around them, the siren wailed, and all Padmé could see, could hear, could think about…

-was another sister dying in her stead.
xvii. drawing out the poison
Once, during a three-day survival exercise at the Royal Academy, Rabé had been shot in the back by a training droid.

Nothing more than a stun blast, easily shaken off – the blow to her pride had been worse than the sharp, sudden pain between her shoulder blades – a swift, merciless reminder that she’d made a stupid mistake. She’d stretched after her watch had ended and the programmed droid that had been tracking them had landed the blow with terrifying accuracy. Her cry of shock had woken up the others and it was only thanks to Eirtaë’s stunningly fast reflexes and deadeye aim that the droid hadn’t taken the others out, too.

It had only been a training exercise but Rabé had vowed to never let her guard down again, tense and shamed as Padmé had gently cleaned it and pressed precious bacta packs on the irritated, swollen lump. The others hadn’t blamed her, of course they hadn’t; Sabé had taken over securing their little camp while Padmé worked, while Eirtaë hovered anxiously nearby, but the welt had, in Rabé’s mind, marked her as a failure. She’d gritted her teeth and vowed to never let it happen again.
She was pulled back to the present by a terrible, acrid smell, a sharp whine of an air raid siren – and her breath shook when she realized – Fives’ arms wrapped tight around her, one hand protectively on her head so that she was tucked in close under him as he sheltered her with his own body.

He’d flung himself at her, tackled and rolled her out of the ship as it’d- 

Fives groaned in her ear, a weak sound that dribbled out of the corners of his mouth, his breath hot on the top of her head, the full, dense weight of an unconscious ARC trooper crushing her slim frame.

Around them, the landing platform – and what was left of their ship – burned.

“Fives?” She whispered, voice hoarse – there was no point in using his false name, not now, not in the epicenter of an explosion, a bomb – he groaned again, but still did not move. Her mind reeled, struggling to comprehend what had just happened, what was still happening, fear lodged in her throat as he did not respond.

She didn’t let her mind wander, reined in the hot tears, and refocused. She wouldn’t let herself think that he might be-

Rabé grunted, feeling the sharp, hot gravel burning through her gown, scraping her exposed skin raw as she struggled with his dead weight. With a bit of squirming, she managed to free one of her arms that he’d so efficiently pinned by her side in his wild flight and rolled him off, just a little – her lungs immediately rejoiced at the freedom but the smoke was thick, horrible, coating her throat and making her stomach riot in protest.

“Fives!” There was screaming, horrible cries all around them, and her heart lurched at the thought of the kind-hearted pilot – and the young Nabooians! – she cupped Fives’ cheek and resisted the urge to pinch him, desperate for a sign that he was okay, that he wasn’t slipping away-

His eyelids fluttered, his mouth moved without a making a sound, and for a moment, just a bare moment, his grip on her tightened. The bright orange fires, the black smoke, the brilliance of the setting sun danced shadows on his face and when he opened his eyes she almost wanted to sob with relief. She pressed her palm on his cheek, gently rubbed her thumb under his dazed eye – he stared at her like she was a dream – and then she saw the blood.

“No-”

Seeping slowly, softly, almost gently through the beautiful embroidered fabric on the shoulders of his captain’s uniform – he’d had no armor to protect him the blast, and he’d taken the brunt of the explosion to protect her.

He didn’t even seem to realize, because now his golden eyes shone with feverish, adrenaline-fueled clarity and he pushed himself up with ease, pulling her up – thick dark smoke poured from where the ship had been, sirens and people wailed all around them, but Rabé only had eyes for him, her Captain. He sucked in a sharp breath and spat, “We have to get off the platform!”

“Fives – you’re bleeding-”

He blinked, and then waved aside her concern with a faint flash of that wonderful crooked grin, “’m built to withstand it, remember?”

But she heard the faint tremor under the words, the bright flash of pain in his eyes, the way he winced as he straightened to his full height.
Her throat closed and still she put his arm over her shoulders, one hand on his chest, the other on his back and now she could find the myriad of gashes, the horrible warm wet sticky blood as they stumbled their way across the debris-laden landing platform, eyes and throats burning with every step. Fives was breathing unevenly next to her and she could tell he was trying not to lean his entire weight on her, trying to keep himself upright as they ran as quickly as they could towards the edge of the platform.

_Alderaan is peaceful, they have no weapons-

_The spy – had they caught the scent?

_They were trying to kill us.

The thought filled Rabé’s head with a dull, droning buzz of paranoia – but her main focus, her only thought, the mantra repeating in her mind as her lips dried out from the blistering heat: _get Fives to safety, get him to the medbay, get him somewhere safe._

Her gown was scorched, her hair and arms and legs and back were surely burned and torn from the force of the explosion, but she couldn’t feel anything but a steady beat of calm determination.

All around them, the sirens wailed, and she tried not to notice how Fives’ blood was running down her arm now, too, staining the fabric until it was a dark, horrible red.

Like a mockery of her own battlerobes.

“Almost there, Captain,” she muttered through gritted teeth, her eyes straining towards the horizon. “We’re almost there, we’re almost there…”

He didn’t reply, and when Rabé glanced up at him her heart thrummed wildly in her throat at his set jaw, the glassy, tired look in his umber eyes. _Kix, Hardcase – please! Where are you?!_ She set their pace towards where she had seen them last and remembered with a cry of relief that the young Nabooians had stepped off the platform, she’d seen as Akantha and Tyche had let Iole win the little race off the platform – but the pilot was gone, the ship shattered into fiery shrapnel, Fives was injured, Fives was injured, _Fives was injured-_ All around them, the sirens wailed.

Someone had wanted them dead.

She clutched at the torn fabric on Fives’ back, shouldered his sagging weight, and had he not been struggling to stay conscious, he would have seen a flash of terrible, glacial anger in the diminutive woman’s eyes.

_Someone will pay._

Someone was washing his back.

That was the first thing Fives noticed as he groggily came to, facedown on a soft Alderaanian medical cot that only partially dampened the dull, pulsing ache in seemingly every joint of his body. He swam in and out of consciousness for… he didn’t know how long.

The gentle touches on his back weren’t steady and sure enough to be a droid, or even that of a
trained medic. It was almost as if the person tending his wounds – his back still rippled with memories of the blast, fire and shrapnel felt embedded in his very blood – was afraid to frighten him, afraid he might shy away from the touches if they overstepped their boundaries by a press too hard, a breath too close to his bare and burned skin.

He opened his eyes a fraction, looked at the carer by his bedside, looked at them from underneath his eyelashes.

It was Rabé.

In his pained and drug-addled mind, the only thing that washed over him was a simple: Of course.

Of course.

Her arms were wrapped in fresh, bright white bandages – his heart seized as he took in how much was covered, he hadn’t done enough, she had still been hurt – and her gown had been replaced with a medical smock. Still beautiful. He couldn’t see her face too clearly as she worked from a small medkit on her lap – now his other senses were waking from the meds and he could smell the sharp, clinical bacta, he could hear the low ebb and flow of a medcenter that had filled up too fast – but her thick, dark hair had been quickly pulled up and away from her face.

She still looked like a goddess to him.

She pressed the bacta into a rather large and angry wound and he hissed involuntarily – who had taken that piece of shrapnel out? – and her warmth by his side fled, leaving him cold and lonely.

“Fives?”

He groaned again and now she reappeared in his vision, closer than ever, and it took every last ounce of his training to stop the words from spilling over his lips, “An angel…”

He slipped under again, her hand on his shoulder, eyes full of a warm depth he knew he could only ever dream of exploring.

His eyelids grew heavy under the weight of the meds – high dosage, for an ARC – and he slipped back into the black without another sound.

It was well past ten at night when Rex and Sabé slipped into the Senator’s suites, neither one surprised to find it still bustling with barely contained chaos. With Anakin’s near fevered insistence as a looming backup, Eirtaé had finally managed to convince Padmé to retire early to the calm dark of her room, in the hopes it would hold off the worst of the panic attack.

Eirtaé had still gone to sit by her Lady’s bed, and from what Ahsoka could sense, the calm dark of her room had not managed to hold off the worst of the memories.

Ahsoka could not ever remember seeing the Senator in such a state of cold, deathly fear. As Eirtaé had escorted Padmé into her room, Ahsoka had settled into a meditative stance in the middle of the floor, desperately trying to find enough calm for herself to sort through the burgeoning chaos that had enveloped the palace in a matter of seconds.

She would have sat outside, but as soon as the Queen and Senator had left the rooms, all windows and doors in the palace had bolted themselves tight. Ahsoka knew it was to prevent wayward
intruders, keen to benefit from the chaos of a peaceful night shattered, but the sight of the tightly fitted durasteel blast doors only reminded her of a warship. She tucked her legs in tight and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to stay out of the way as much as she could.

Again, that feeling of utter uselessness rippled through her.

There was a stench of fear and anger swirling through the air, and had Anakin not been so distracted by Padmé’s blank stare, her cold hands and shuttered responses, he certainly would have been able to pick out Fives and Rabé in the chaos. Ahsoka could only sense the barest of glimpses – she was certain they were… Alive. They’re alive.

But the way the hopeful look had slipped from Echo’s face when she stammered that she couldn’t even sense if they were injured had tightened like a vice around her heart.

So, when Sabé and Rex stepped authoritatively through the doors, it was met with no small sigh of relief from everyone in the room. Sabé’s eyes strayed to Padmé’s quarters for the briefest moment, and then the hard look in her eyes had returned. Without glancing behind her, she waved her hand at the Alderaanian guards. “Dismissed.”

They glanced at Rex in confusion, but he did not come to their aid. He met their confused looks with a tightly set jaw and they bowed quickly, awkwardly, trying not to bump into each other or the doorframe on their way out. Peacetime guards with no sense of true battle, they were as flustered and unnerved as the unarmed servants scuttling through the halls. Ahsoka saw Jesse’s eyes crinkle up in amusement, felt the briefest flash of it flit through Echo, but it passed as quickly as it had arrived.

As soon as the doors had shut behind them Rex turned to the anxious company and said quickly, “All parties who had been at the landing bay at the time of the attack have been taken to the medcenter and, at the orders of Queen Breha, names of the survi... names of those in the center have not been released to forestall against the possibility of a secondary strike.”

Ahsoka groaned out loud. “That makes sense, I guess, but what about Fives and Rabé?”

“We… we don’t know.”

Echo’s face turned ash white.

She bit her lip and sprang up a little, trying to force a cheerfulness and optimism she did not feel, “Maybe I could sneak down there – I know I can fit through the vents-”

“No, Ahsoka,” Anakin said quietly, forcefully. “Don’t draw attention to our contacts.”

She scowled.

“We’re going to go to the landing platform and sweep the scene. The guards, the police, and the militia have all been there already but their only goal was to determine if there were more bombs elsewhere in the Palace. It has all the marks of a single desperate attack.”

“An attack on ‘Lady Maitri.’” Ahsoka murmured absentmindedly, and immediately wished she hadn’t. The only hint of Sabé’s distress at her sister’s wellbeing was a twitch of her fingers, but she nodded at Ahsoka.

It was quiet in the rooms, but Ahsoka could not withdraw from the pulse of fear that lay heavy over the Palace. After another moment, Rex gently touched Sabé’s elbow. Though Ahsoka had not asked the question, Sabé answered it all the same: “Yes. We’re operating under the assumption that somehow, the spy figured out who she truly was, who she was working for and towards what ends.
We think they got scared, and so tried to take her out of the equation.”

A messy attempt, Ahsoka thought, her battle-sharpened mind thinking of all the ways the spy could have – she stopped herself, a horrible pit of dread in her guts. Rabé had been perfect in her role – had any of them expected this, the possibility this assignment to the peaceful world of Alderaan could end in blood and death?

Her montrals ached with the anxieties of those around her, the weight of the corruption resting like oil on the Force surrounding the Palace.

“We’ll be back with updates, when we find them.”

The unspoken if we find any answers at all lingered long after they’d slipped back out.

Pure energy restlessly pounded through Ahsoka’s limbs and she groaned in frustration at being caged, but settled back into a meditation pose and tried to focus on finding some answers of her own.

“Captain.”

Rex stopped and looked back at Echo, who stepped forward and asked: “Sir. Please. Let us go with you, just to the medcenter.”

“We can go under the assumption that the Senator needs to know if her charges are safe. Remember?” Jesse cracked a smile, but it did not reach his eyes. “She said if they got hurt under our watch, we’d have two powerful families on our asses, out for our blood. Two Coruscant Guards, on special request from Senator Amidala…”

Echo did not say anything else. More than anything, Ahsoka wanted to leap up and join their party, but a tired look from Sabé told her that her presence would undermine the subtlety of two Guards. They could wear their buckets in order to betray no emotions if they found Rabé and Fives while they checked on the young Nabooians. Ahsoka would stand out like a – well, like a Togruta in the middle of a room full of Humans.

Rex – she noticed that the dark bags under his eyes were getting deeper every day – finally assented to their request, and they slipped out of the room together.

Echo’s nerves pulsed white hot in the center of his chest, and she felt much the same.

The medics had simpered, condescending and bemused, when the Lady from Corellia had insisted on washing her Captain’s injuries herself.

“It is not your duty, ma’am; we have trained medics for that.”

“Let me do it.”

“My Lady-”

“My injuries are minimal, nonexistent – I would be dead had it not been for his actions. He saved my life. Let me care for him.”

No amount of gentle persuasions could have moved her from his bedside, and finally a nurse – exasperated, a gnawing headache biting at the root of his skull at the chaos of his normally quiet and orderly center – had handed her a small medkit and waved for someone to bring her a chair.
She’d asked for a basin of water, too, and the nurse had watched from the corner of his eye as she’d put her hands over the water and shut her eyes, her lips moving quickly and silently as she sat next to his prone form, almost as if she were beginning a prayer of some kind.

It had charmed the medic, even as it had confused him. He knew some cultures believed in the miraculous healing powers of still water, and he wondered briefly how a Lady of Corellia had picked up this habit before one of the youngest patients in the center had zipped by, intent on escaping.

And then the Lady was left alone with her Captain, quietly dipping the washcloth into the water, cleaning the wounds, praying to every deity she knew that he would wake up soon. She worked slowly, thoroughly; it was like she was hoping her work would soak up the darkness that had lit the bomb before it seeped into his blood. Her gown – a lovely light green brocade, embroidered with the scenes of a lush summer garden – had been replaced with a simple light medical smock. As she wrung the bloodied water from the cloth, she was careful of the drops, but her true focus was on him.

And every so often, she would pause in her work and simply look at the face of the man lying in front of her, her eyes unreadable, searching for something in his unconscious features.

Four hours after he had collapsed at the ending of the ruined landing bay, both of them covered in his blood with the sharp smell of burnt fuel in their noses, three hours after she’d insisted on hand-bathing his wounds, two hours after he’d tensed and moaned in pain in his medically-induced slumber – Fives finally stirred and woke.

Rabé almost burst into tears when he opened his eyes and saw her, really saw her. His gold eyes were clear and sharp, not cloudy or dim or confused any longer. She pushed the basin of water, the washcloth, the medkit away from them as he woke up, not wanting to overwhelm or confuse him. When in reality, all she wanted to do was clamber onto the cot next to him and hold him, hold him, hold him until she was absolutely certain he was alive, that his heart was still beating.

She wanted to throw her arms around him, pull him close – kiss the sleep from his eyes, imagine the look on his face...! – but she refrained, held herself back. Remember, remember, you’re still a Lady with her Captain. The tears still gathered under her lashes as he turned over, as she found his hand, helped him sit up. For a moment, she couldn’t trust herself to speak, so they simply looked at each other in comfortable, relieved silence, Rabé trying not to let her eyes wander down the lines of his battle hardened, well-defined body, trying to ignore the blush that was almost certainly rising to her cheeks as she realized with a start that he was, in fact, almost naked in front of her.

A quiet internal voice that sounded eerily like Eirtaé chided her for admiring him like this, and the color on her cheeks darkened. She cleared her throat, and for a moment she could have sworn a gentle, amused smile – almost like he knew what she was thinking – flitted across Fives’ lips.

Damn the man, how she wanted to kiss him.

She still held his hand, and for a moment the desire to throw herself into his arms nearly overtook her. Her position as nobility had afforded them a mostly-private suite in the medcenter, but the never-ending bustle of droids, patients, doctors, and nurses meant any privacy could vanish without warning, especially now that he was finally awake.

So, instead, she smiled through her tears of relief and squeezed his hand. “You saved my life, Captain. Thank you.”

Stiff and formal, but she could not risk anything more, and she withdrew her hand.
His fingers flexed for a moment, and then closed into a loose fist on his lap. “Just doing m’ job, my Lady.” His voice was hoarse, a little tired, but she could sense no traces of lingering pain under his words.

After another moment of silence, she suddenly remembered the bundle of clothes next to her and made a clumsy grab for them. “Here – a shirt – or a smock, I suppose – because, you, uhm, your clothes… they’re, uh – burnt up…”

He took it from her with another glimpse of the brilliant smile and Rabé’s words twisted and spun on her tongue, becoming more and more flustered with every passing second. She almost wished for a nurse or doctor to bustle in, full of exclamations and chatter to distract him from her tongue-tied state. He was simply looking at her, and the heat on her cheeks felt like it could boil the Naboo ocean in an instant.

Suddenly she wondered if he could remember waking up as she’d washed his back, and her cheeks burst into nothing less than a star’s flames.

She cleared her throat, her eyes focused on her hands in her lap, very determinedly not meeting his eyes. “How… how do you feel?”

Fives was quiet for so long that her eyes snapped up, worried that he’d somehow overexerted himself, fallen back to the cot, unconscious and dazed – but no.

It was as if her words had triggered the memories of what had happened. Fives’ face contorted slightly, a light frown creasing his eyebrows as he quickly took stock of himself. Finally he just shrugged and flashed her another smile. “I’ve had worse, actually.”

Rabé hadn’t realized how exhausted she was, how terrified she’d been that he might die, not until this exact moment. She made a small, horrified sound in the back of her throat and blinked back sudden tears. He glanced at her, startled, and she quickly looked down at her lap again as she stammered weakly, “Worse? Worse than being at the epicenter of an explosion? Worse than getting - getting sliced apart by shrapnel-”

She was working herself up into hysteric, she knew that, but certainly she could afford to. She was playing at a soft and sheltered noble from Corellia, not the battle-hardened handmaiden of Naboo. The image of the blood - his blood - dripping from his back, winding down her arm as she struggled to heave him to safety...

She could afford a few tears. She could afford to tell herself it was all a part of the act.

“Well - yeah. I mean… I am an ARC. A clone. It’s… this sort of thing is what I was made for.” His voice was gentle and placating, and it struck her how backwards this situation was - shouldn’t she be comforting him? She sniffed, miserable, and he went on, “Like - there was this one time, on-”

Rabé glanced up and sharply shook her head, cutting him off before he could reveal anything more. She took his hand once more, feeling the warmth of his skin and regretting that her hands were still cold, wrinkled from wringing out the washcloth. His hands were covered in calluses, and she resisted the urge to explore them, to let her fingers wander over his palm and knuckles. “Please, Captain, do not over-strain yourself.” Was it to prevent a stalker in the shadows from overhearing and learning their true identities? Or was it because she could not bear the thought of imagining the pain that he had already endured, already become so comfortable with?

She could not have said.
I’ve had worse. So had she, certainly, but she hadn’t expected those words to nearly rend her heart in two.

“I’m fine, my Lady. I promise. Better me to have taken the blast than you, right?”

She frowned and plucked at the covers of his cot like a petulant child, and that made him laugh a little as he went on, teasing. “You could certainly try and argue otherwise, but I’m literally engineered for this kind of thing.” He considered his words and grinned crookedly at her. “Both the arguing and the taking hits like a champ.”

That did make her snort, and his eyes lit up at the sound.

“Alright. Fine. Nevertheless,” she said, smiling softly at him, “thank you.”

He nodded at her, the faint echo of a smile still on his lips, and for a moment they were enclosed in a quiet bubble, far removed from the bustle of the medcenter just outside their cloth partition. A small part of her was annoyed that they hadn’t been interrupted by a medic come to check in on Fives yet - but true to his words, he did seem to feel better. He was sitting up with ease, eyes bright and alert - and he already felt comfortable enough to tease her.

So it was a very small part of her that felt annoyed indeed.

Besides, Moteé had trained her well enough so that she was more than able to read the monitors ticking softly by his bedside. And, for the first time, she realized she could actually see traces of the Kaminoan engineering in his body in the readings: slow resting heart rate; deeper, more filling breaths; hardy resistance to any toxins left from the shrapnel; an immune system that looked as if the explosion had hardly even scratched the surface of its capabilities; the healing process already well begun. She stared at the monitor, transfixed.

He must have realized what she was looking at, because his heart rate jumped a little. She started to apologize for so blatantly staring when he spoke before she could.

“…your hair…” he murmured, one hand floating up – almost as if to stroke the strays from her face – before he caught himself, remembered himself, and pulled it back towards his chest. His eyes remained locked on hers, his eyebrows knit together in worry.

Rabé’s heart jumped, too. Her hand floated up the mess that was her hair and she winced as she felt the burnt edges, the tangles that would take the better part of an hour and quite a bit of elbow grease to tease out. A few of her intricate combs and pins were still expertly lodged in place. She didn’t quite want to think about how ridiculous it looked. “I know, it’s a mess,” she said lamely, tugging at the pins half-heartedly. One in particular had been knocked askance in the explosion and was - now that she noticed it - pressing hard into her scalp. “It looks awful.”

He half-shook his head in an automatic response. “Are those bothering you?” He asked, pointing to the long gold and green pin that seemed intent on giving her a piercing headache.

“Uh - well - I mean, a little, but they’re… that’s kind of low on my priority list…”

“I can take them out, if you want,” he said softly, and when she glanced up at him in surprise she realized his cheeks were also tinged a dark pink. “Only if you want,” he repeated, sitting up straighter, smoothing a little spot for her on the cot. An open invitation to sit next to him.

Rabé flushed darker and she nodded wordlessly, moving quickly before she lost her nerve. She was incredibly protective of her hair - Sabé was the only one of the handmaidens who Rabé let brush it, the only one who was really even allowed touch it at all - and yet when Fives had asked if she
wanted him to take out the pins, she had only felt eagerness, a faint tremor of immense and incredible
pleasure at the thought of his hands in her hair. She settled on the cot next to him, hands folded in her
lap.

The cot shifted as he re-adjusted his position and when he spoke - voice low and soft - it almost
seemed as if his lips were just barely brushing against her hair, his breath light against the exposed
skin of her neck and shoulders, “Let me know if I, uhm, if I pull too hard?”

Wordlessly, she nodded again, and tried not to shiver as he began. She bent her neck a little and tried
to make her shoulders relax as his fingers brushed against her hair, and then he cleared his throat and
said quietly, “These pins are really pretty... the gold looks beautiful in your hair.”

She shivered, extraordinarily conscious of the way his fingers worked through the worst of the knots,
but it was his words that made goosebumps rise along her arms. “Thank you. It was a gift, actually.
From Lady Veruna of Naboo.” Eirtaé’s mother had presented all of Padmé’s handmaidens with
specially designed pins upon their graduation from the Royal Academy.

Fives caught on, and she could hear the smile in his voice as he bent close and whispered
mischievously, “Bet there’s a secret compartment for poison, huh?”

She laughed as he worked the pin loose with a small noise of triumph, and turned, hand out with her
palm facing up. He grinned at her and delicately returned the pin to her hand. “Actually,” and as
soon as the pin was resting in her palm she pinched the small mechanism hidden in the wrought
metal of the banded decoration, and a tiny blade slid out without so much as a sound.

He laughed, too, and took it back from her, admiring the craftsmanship as he shook his head in
delight. “Absolutely genius. So you just…” he fiddled with the clasp and after a moment, the small
blade vanished into the gold frame once more. “Hah! Brilliant.” He set it down on the small table
next to the cot and gestured for her to turn around once more. “Two more, I think?”

“Yes. I don’t think any were actually knocked out by the explosion.”

Fives grunted, pleased, and got back to work in comfortable silence. Rabé let her eyes close, let
herself relax with the sounds of his breaths and his ever-gentle hands. It was as if he was afraid he
might break her – no small irony there, given that his roughness not six hours earlier had saved her
life. But his hands were as gentle as his voice, as gentle as the spark in his eyes when she laughed.

And for a moment – just the barest flash of a second – Rabé let herself wonder what his hands would
feel like tracing down the curve of her spine. If he would lean close and brush his lips against the soft
skin of her shoulders, if she would feel his breaths quicken with excitement…

Another pin loosened from her hair and Fives made a small noise of surprise as it tumbled down her
back. Now the last pin came free with ease, and they clinked together in his hands. He paused, and
then he lightly brushed her hair with the tips of his fingers.

Rabé didn’t need to turn to sense that he was holding his breath, just the same as she.

She didn’t move, and – he did it again, and she shivered and a tiny breath of air slipped from
between her lips and –

“Lady Avalokit, Captain Dathan?”

She stood from the cot so quickly that she nearly knocked down the chair. A medic turned the
corner, and for a horrifying moment Rabé thought the surprise on their face was because they’d
cought a Lady and her Captain – Captain, Captain, Captain, not anything more he can’t be anything
else we’re on a mission – in an intimate moment, but the medic moved to the monitor and stared at it in shock before laughing. “Well, you seem to be making an incredible amount of progress! Are you in much pain?”

Rabé didn’t look at Fives as he laughed weakly and made some comment about a hardy upbringing. The medic smiled and nodded again, asking once more just to be certain, and then turned to Rabé. “Lady Avalokit, you have a visitor.”

Sabé? “Who is it?”

“Lord Varol. We tried to turn him away, but he says it’s urgent and planted himself outside until I agreed to speak with you. Seems quite spooked – he must have been worried sick about you.” The medic gave her a stern look, “But if you’re too tired, I would not mind sending him away until morning.”

Fives’ face darkened, but Rabé was already nodding at the medic’s words. “Oh, of course. Show him in, would you?”

The medic gave a slight bow. “I’ll be right back, and I’ll bring some salve for those cuts, sir.”

As soon as they were out of earshot, Rabé said quickly, “He might know something.”

“If he indicates in any way that it was his fault, I’m going to throw him out of this window.”

Rabé did not doubt that.

When the medic returned, they were nearly barreled out of the way by Varol. “Thank all the goddesses, you’re safe,” he said, visibly sagging in relief when he saw her. “Captain Dathan, are you-”

“-’m fine,” Fives retorted, and had they not been in the company of the medic, Rabé would have shot him a reproachful look.

“Lady Maitri, I need to speak with you. I-in private,” Varol added hastily, casting a nervous glance at Fives out of the corner of his eyes. His normally pale face was tense and drawn tight, his light eyes roving around the room as if he were looking for something – or someone. Varol’s hands fidgeted with nerves as he went on, “Please, it’s urgent, and it won’t take long. Please,” he added weakly, ignoring the dark look of suspicion on Fives’ face.

“You can use the hall outside, Lady Avalokit,” the medic said, helpfully-but-unhelpful. “I have to apply the salve to your back, sir, so I’m afraid moving is out of the question.”

Rabé did not hear what Fives’ growled in response, as she was already gesturing towards the hall outside.

Varol stayed his distance. “Your Captain really isn’t too fond of me, is he?”

Rabé wondered if Fives was still holding onto her pins. “He’s… he’s very protective of me, that’s all.” She resisted the memory of Fives flinging himself over her as the world erupted into flames around them, and raised her eyebrow at the nervous Alderaanian man in front of her. “The medic said you ‘urgently’ needed to speak with me?”

He nodded ferociously – again those nervous roving eyes – and cleared his throat. “Lady Maitri, I… I know you do not feel the same way that I do about you.”
She blinked in surprise. *This was the urgent news?*

“I suspected even before the Gala, but when – the, uh – when I tried… well, suffice to say, I learned my lesson last night. I enjoyed spending time with you, so even though you do not feel the same way, I still wanted you to have a good experience during your time here.”

Rabé did not interrupt, sensing that he needed to get all of this out at once – and something in the way he was nervously fidgeting…

“I wanted to spend more time with you, since I know it’s very limited, and I thought… I thought that our little club would have been more welcoming. I thought it would have been interesting for you, to get to know some of the others. You were so kind… and I…”

After a moment, she gently encouraged, “Please, say what you need to say.”

He took a deep breath and stuttered softly, slowly, almost fearfully: “Lady Maitri, I think I know who set off that bomb.”

“Miss Tapalo, please, I need you to be still-”

Echo raised an eyebrow and cast a sideways glance at Jesse as the hurried to the bustling overflow from the medcenter – an extra room repurposed to house the sudden influx of victims – but from the sounds of it, there was at least one who did not feel quite like a victim, and more like a witness to the most exciting story of all time.

“Iole, listen to the doctor-”

“I can’t! I’m too excited!” Came the immediate and shrill reply, followed by a bout of wild giggles. Jesse’s gray, tense expression melted at the sound – Echo would be lying if he said he didn’t feel instant relief, too.

“Iole-”

Tyche’s exasperation was interrupted by an excited shout when Iole saw the two troopers walk up to the small cluster of cots. She stood up on her bed, a wide, excited grin on her face, and immediately launched herself at them, babbling all the while as Jesse caught her with ease, all expertly ignoring the haggard-looking nurse whose feeble calls for order fell on deaf ears.

“WE SAW AN EXPLOSION!”

“Are you hurt?”

“NO!” Iole started to vibrate with excitement.

“We’d just stepped off the platform,” Akantha said from her own cot, resting politely under the thin cotton sheets. There was not a scratch to be seen on her, her sister, or on Tyche – not even a singed hair on any of their heads.

“I WASN’T EVEN SCARED-”

“Shh, shh, little one.” Jesse said, laughing, as he sat her back down on her cot. “You weren’t scared? *I’d* have been scared.”
Iole jumped to her feet again, the cot shivering under the sudden movement. “I wasn’t scared! The Captain yelled for everyone to run away and so we did! But then he saved the lady!”

Echo met Jesse’s eyes – Fives and Rabé – and was just about to ask when Akantha jumped on the story, too: “Yes! It was so romantic, he tackled her off the bridge just before it went up in the air! I saw them land! He saved her life!” She clasped her hands together in delight.

“Without even thinking!” Tyche exclaimed, now riled up as well – to the utter dismay of the nurse. They sat up in their bed and demonstrated with their hands: “He took a running leap like this – and then they rolled out of view – and then the ship just exploded.”

“He JUMPED! To SAVE HER! Like THIS-” and had the nurse not stood and firmly shooed the two troopers out of the room at that exact moment, Iole would have thrown herself at them again in her excitement.

Jesse couldn’t help a small chuckle as he ran a hand over his face. “Well, good to know they’re alright.”

“Yes, absolutely… hey, I’m gonna-” Echo cast a glance around the deserted halls surrounding the medcenter. For once, he was thankful that the Palace had been on complete lockdown – he didn’t want to jeopardize their mission, but he had to see if Fives and Rabé were safe. They’d been near the epicenter of the explosion, and his heart hadn’t stopped jumping in fear since that morning.

He had to see them for himself – for better or for worse.

“Go on,” Jesse said, smiling. “Tell the Captain his dramatic chivalry has earned him some lifelong fans. I’ll head back to the Senator’s rooms and tell them the Nabooians are safe. And very excitable.”

Echo laughed. “Ah, but then he’ll never let us hear the end of that.”

Jesse clapped him on the shoulder. “‘Fraid not.”

“I’ll knock him down a few pegs for running towards an exploding shuttle.”

“Yeah, you’d expect an ARC to know better than that.”

Just as they had expected, the landing platform – or what was left of it – had been entirely roped off. Rex, in his Alderaanian Captain’s uniform and Sabé, in the (slightly ill-fitting) uniform of a palace guard, were waved forward by the posted troops. Even though they presented the proper credentials, even though Sabé recognized some of the troops, they still eyed both her and Rex with suspicion, and she could not blame them. New hires, and not even a week later – the first bombing Alderaan had seen in over three centuries.

Eventually, they were cleared. With a silent nod, they split up towards opposite ends of the platform and started scanning the ground for something, anything that might clue them into who had set off the bomb. Sabé begin with the perimeter – holograms marked where the ships had been, and for a moment she stopped and stared at the marker indicating what had been Rabé’s ship. Dead center.

She bit her tongue to stop her rage from boiling over, and directed her eyes to the ground.

At the far edge of the platform, stacks of crates full of goods for the war effort waited patiently in their heavy-duty durasteel containers. She poked her way around them, running her hands across
their blast-marked surfaces. They were stacked in a strange way, and at first she just assumed that the blast had knocked them around.

Stepping behind them, though, her stomach dropped. They formed an almost-perfectly innocuous shelter from the blast, and from this position – she stepped back, that familiar sense of cold precision taking the place of hot adrenaline and anger – she could clearly see not only where Rabé’s ship had landed, but she had a perfect view of where the ramp would have dropped.

She would have had a perfect view of whoever was walking down that ramp.

Before she could curse out loud, she took a step backwards and nearly slipped on something caught under her heel. Grabbing for balance, she kicked at the interloper in annoyance, and something rolled softly across the platform, coming to a stop in a puddle of light from a bright floodlight.

Sabé felt her blood run cold as she realized what she was staring at, and why it was so familiar.

[–]

“Lady Maitri, I think I know who was behind this attack,” Varol said slowly, ashamed, fiddling with the sleeve of his robe. “I’ve put you in danger, and for that, I regret everything. I was blind to the signs and I believe this person has been… hasn’t been telling us everything. They’ve put us all in danger but I hadn’t realized how much until today. They’d see us in prison for treason, for terrorism.”

[–]

Sabé bent and carefully plucked them up, one by one, dropping the items into the palm of her hand. She stayed like that for just a moment, and then glanced up to find Rex staring at her. She jerked her head and slowly stood up, pushing the items around, her heartbeat steady despite the picture they painted for her.

Wordlessly, she held them out to Rex as he jogged over, and it took him half a second to realize what she was holding. His mouth set in a grim line and he spun to stare up at the palace, up at what Sabé herself was looking at:

The medcenter.

[–]

The rest of the world – the chaotic medcenter, Fives’ suspicious, hurt gaze, Rabé’s hairpin in his hands – fell away as Varol took another breath. The world was quiet, now, and she put a gentle hand upon his. “Please, Varol…” she whispered, and that was all it took.

He met her eyes and gave her the name of their spy: “Lady Malyna.”

[–]

Sabé reached into the pocket of her uniform and pulled out the beads from Lady Malyna’s cloak. Her hand, she noticed distantly, was almost quivering – with what? Excitement? Fear?

She held out her hands in the light, palms up: the beads from Malyna’s cloak in her right, and the small items from the landing platform in her left.

A perfect match.
“Seven hells,” Rex cursed next to her, and brought his comms up.

[--]

“She hasn’t told us everything. What she’s doing is, I think, vastly more dangerous than she ever let on to our group. She suspects you of something, I know this. Lady Maitri,” Varol said, clutching her cold hand, “you are still in danger.”

Rabé, for her part, felt like the world was moving in slow motion for the second time that day as Varol’s words washed over her.

For at that very moment, she saw a distant figure wearing cloud-gray cloak whip out of sight around the corner at the far end of the hallway.
Cover art by the incredibly talented and hardworking @evaceratops ✧ Please consider giving the update post on tumblr a like/reblog if you enjoyed this chapter!

*Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 22:33:07*: target survived, and now more suspicious than ever, please advise next steps

*Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 22:47:48*: please advise - enemies closing in, need extraction
Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 22:51:32: mission compromised, please - is anyone receiving??

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 22:53:29: running out of time!!

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 22:57:56: I know you’re receiving - I can see the green indicator light - please advise or send for extraction, I might not last the next 24 hrs, the little slime told her I just know he did, it’s not my fault

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 22:58:16: please advise

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 22:58:32: mission will be compromised in less than a day

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 22:59:06: don’t know how to protect my cover, please advise please advise please advise

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 00:07:45: fine - i’m taking matters into my own hands, then? is that what you want??

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 00:08:03: it’s subtle - little slime deserves it

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 01:43:27: i promise it will work - it won’t kill the little slime, it’ll just teach him a lesson

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 01:44:09: please believe me

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 02:16:51: don’t abandon me please - it’ll work

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 02:17:03: it wasn’t my fault!!!

Outgoing transmission to [scrambled interference code] at 02:26:45: i’m going to fix it; please believe me… please

They were finally closing in, and Sabé relished the way her fingertips tingled with anticipation, the way her senses and synapses were firing like wildfire. In an hour, maybe less, they’d have their target in custody.

Malyna had gotten sloppy, towards the end – and while Sabé was beyond relieved that no one in their party had been killed, it had been close. An Alderaanian civilian pilot was dead. Rabé’s hands and arms bandaged tightly in clean white gauze. Fives’ stiff movements under his apparent nonchalance, the way he winced when he thought no one was looking – the way he looked at Rabé whenever she absentmindedly ran her fingers over the gauze, guilt in his dark gold eyes.

The way Rabé’s eyes kept drifting to Fives, even when someone else had been speaking.

Rex had met Sabé’s eyes when the two had finally slipped into the headquarters the night before, after escaping the wardens at the medbay. Their injuries… His back, her hands and wrists; according to the young Nabooians, he’d thrown himself at her, tackled her off the gangplank seconds before
detonation.

Like puzzle pieces.

All she’d said to Rex in a low voice was, “They’d better keep it together until all this is finished.” Rabé hadn’t been subtle about her slight crush on the ARC trooper around her sisters, but she’d been able to keep a handle on the situation, and now they were finally entering the last phase of the mission.

After that, they were free to do or pursue whatever they pleased.

For now, though, all sights, energies, thoughts, were to be aimed at Lady Malyna Gerard.

She covered a deep yawn with her sleeves, shook any remnants of hazy exhaustion from her limbs, and told herself there would be time aplenty to rest after they’d apprehended their subject.

Sabé gathered her skirts as she pulled the door to Rabé’s suites shut tight behind her. Back in the unassuming dark green of the servants - albeit a slightly larger size this time, quickly modified by Eirtaé to accommodate the relatively thin Nabooian body armor underneath - she was to make her way towards Varol’s suites without gathering any attention, as per Fives’ instructions. The body armor wasn’t entirely blister-proof, but burns would be better than a smoking hole in her skin. She wasn’t expecting Malyna to put up too much of a fight, but given that Sabé’s mother had just last year fought off a small band of pirates by herself, Sabé was careful not to second-guess older women.

After much deliberation, Rabé had insisted on going without. She’d argued – despite Sabé and Fives’ best efforts – that to disregard how she had dressed up until this point would garner more suspicion. She could not be swayed, and had shooed them both out to don a sleek, pale silver gown the color of starlight on the waves. Sabé had seen Fives’ breath catch in his throat when she’d reappeared as he’d tried to stammer out the need for proper armor once more. Rabé had shaken her head once, and that had been the end of it.

“Oh – excuse me?”

Sabé’s mind went to the blaster tucked between the thick folds of the heavy skirt, but she stayed her hand because it was immediately familiar. Calm, curious, non-threatening; it was Lady Abeni.

Sabé remembered very well the brilliant yellow gown the young Alde had worn to the gala not two days prior. Rex had even teased her about it. Sabé had always been able to hide everything with ease – except for her feelings for a crush.

She looked as radiant as ever, and Sabé swallowed, hesitating for just a moment and hoping Lady Abeni would see it as deference rather than… well. “Yes, my Lady?”

Her smile left Sabé absolutely breathless. She gestured to the door Sabé had just come out of – a gesture made slightly difficult thanks to the huge bouquet of sweet-smelling flowers in her arm. “I wanted to check in on Lady Maitri… I was just so terrified yesterday, especially when I heard she’d been in danger… I brought her these!” And she brandished the armful of fresh-cut flowers towards Sabé, who couldn’t help but grin at her enthusiasm. “I picked them myself,” Abeni finished proudly, as the sweet smell of the flowers mixed with her perfume and settled over the pair of them like a gentle breeze. “Is she in?”

“Oh – no, my lady. Lady Maitri has gone on a walkabout,” Sabé answered honestly. “She felt too restless to stay confined in her rooms.”
Abeni blinked in surprise. “Even after what happened yesterday? She is strong, I wish I were like her… Ah well, maybe I’ll run into her later. Would you mind terribly…?” And, her dark eyes as warm as the sun, she held the bouquet out towards Sabé again.

“Of course, Lady Alde. I’ll put these in her rooms right away – I’m sure she’ll love them.” In order to fit her arms around the mass of flowering greens, Sabé had to wind her arms through Abeni’s, who only let go when she was certain Sabé had a gentle grip on the stems.

Abeni clapped her hands, and Sabé realized the noblewoman had somehow slipped her guards. They were alone in the corridor, and as soon as she realized that, she felt her cheeks begin to warm.

Luckily, Abeni seemed to take no notice. “Thank you… I hope she loves them. My grandfather helped me decide which ones to bring to her. These ones, these Alderaa roses…” and she leaned close once more towards Sabé, lightly brushing her fingertips against the deep pink petals of a large bloom not four inches from the dazzled handmaiden’s face, “are for good luck.”

She gave Sabé another brilliant smile before curtseying and turning to scurry back the way she had come, leaving weak-kneed Sabé in a dazed trance made completely of the Lady’s sweet perfume.

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Rabé wondered if Fives suspected that she’d chosen this dress for a very specific reason.

Given the way his face had flushed when she’d stepped out, she thought he very well might. She knew it was a juvenile thing to be focusing on, but she liked making him stammer over his words or fidget a bit more restlessly than normal. After Malyna was apprehended, after they recovered the data, the money, the weapons – Rabé’s own chest could barely contain her heart when she thought of the sweet potential of the word after.

The plan had all been Fives’ idea, and Rabé wished she had taken a moment, just a few moments alone with him, to tell him how utterly brilliant he was. There had been no time, of course, in the mad rush of late-night preparations in the half-shadows of the quiet yet anxiety-ridden Palace.

After the things Varol had said about clones at the gala, Rabé had wanted – selfishly, it was a cruel thought, she knew that – to leave him to the consequences of his words. She knew that if he had known that three clones were within earshot, Varol would have held his tongue – but he still considered them lower. Lesser. Fives had straightened his back when the discussion the night before – no, morning, it was only a few hours ago – had turned to Varol and reminded them, though his tone was bitter and annoyed, that’d they’d promised Queen Breha no deaths.

“And we’ve already fucked that up.” The room had gone quiet, mournful, at the thought of the poor pilot, caught in the crossfire none of them had been able to see until it was too late. Fives had shifted and gone on, gesturing to Rabé, Kix, and Hardcase standing by him, “You know as well as anyone that I can’t stand that bastard, and I’ve got every right, but… He’s in danger. We have to protect him. We have to do the right thing.”

And Rabé had pressed her lips together as she stared up at him, hands and wrists carefully bound in bandages, in absolute and total awe.

How wonderful you are, she thought briefly now, allowing herself only that and hoping he could somehow sense it as they stood in front of Varol’s suites and waited to be admitted. If this goes well, if no one else gets hurt… after. After, after, after.

He caught her eyes and gave her a confident little smile, and her stomach twisted so hard it nearly left
her dazed. Her arm slipped through the crook of his elbow, she ached at even this small touch. *No more mistakes, and we'll have all the time in the world, after.*

*Lie.*

They heard Varol’s valet quietly announce their presence, and the next moment the young Lord was in the doorway himself, and immediately Rabé knew Fives had been correct to worry about Varol.

“Lady Maitri! You should be resting – ah, good morning, Captain Dathan! What *are* you doing here-?” Varol’s pale eyes were nearly bulging out of his head as he tried to get a coherent sentence out, and despite the chill of the morning, the distinct scent of sweat and tightly wound nerves radiated from his dark green robes and overcoat. His hands trembled as he ushered them in, and he licked his lips nervously, again and again, as he followed them in, asking his butler to fetch more cups for the tea tray.

He had very good reason to be so unnerved.

Sitting in a pool of bright morning sun, glaring icily at the pair of them over the rim of a steaming cup of tea, was none other than Lady Malyna herself. The bright powder she’d caked on could not hide the dark circles under her eyes.

Rabé let go of Fives’ arm and stepped forward to give her a curtsy, the very picture of innocent naïveté.

“Ah, Lady Maitri,” she said coolly as Rabé gathered her skirts and sat on the couch opposite her target. Fives positioned himself behind her, standing tall, arms clasped calmly behind his back – not that Rabé needed to even turn her head a fraction to sense his warm presence behind her. “When I heard of the… *tragedy* yesterday evening, I had not expected to see you up and about so soon.” Her eyes rested on Rabé’s bandaged wrists and arms. “I am glad to see you were not injured further.”

*Lie.*

Rabé was not as skilled as Eirtaé in spotting deception, but even she could tell the twitch of Malyna’s eye was barely contained anger. Rabé demurred and gestured towards Fives, who came to stand behind her, close to the door – close enough to block that exit, should Malyna try to run. If the others were in place. “Captain Dathan recognized the danger before anyone else. He ensured my safety, and that of the other passengers as well. He saved our lives.”

Malyna sounded like she was barely swallowing her rage. “How very fortunate to have such an… *astute* Captain.”

Rabé tilted her head ever so slightly to the left. A sign that Fives could respond without arousing suspicion. “It’s all thanks to my training, ma’am. Best in the galaxy.” He let his natural accent slip through, ever so slightly – and that caught Varol’s attention at once, though he seemed to have trouble placing it. As he settled on the chair closest to Rabé, he stared in open curiosity at Fives, who pretended not to notice.

Malyna gave a slight *hrmph* sound and rested her teacup on the saucer in front of her. “Should you not be resting, Lady Maitri? I should think everyone at court would understand if you wanted to convalesce for a few days… or even return home, to Corellia? It must have been a terrible fright.”

*How very heavy-handed you are,* Rabé thought through her easy smile. “Oh, I was frightened, yes. But the medical staff here were all so wonderful and kind, and I was feeling too cooped up in my suites. I wanted to visit my friends, to reassure them I am alright.” She turned her smile towards
Varol now and reached across the space between the couch and the chair to rest her hand on his for a brief moment.

“Don’t worry, ma’am,” Fives added suddenly, every part the concerned and protective Captain of the Guard. “The Palace Guard believes they are close to finding the suspect, I have it on good authority they’re closing in and will have them in custody soon enough. Within the day, even. Everything should be back to normal soon.”

Rabé withdrew her hand.

For a moment, there was a brief silence, and then Rabé brightened as she nodded towards the sleek, dark ebony piano in the corner of the room. “Oh! Shall I play, to prove I am really quite alright?”

Varol’s sweaty nervousness had started to ebb. “Lady Maitri, you play?”

She laughed sweetly as she stood and made her way across the room. “Of course! My mother is far better than I, but I take private lessons, even now.” Truth. As she settled on the bench – wonderfully positioned to have a full, complete view of the receiving room – she smiled nervously at Varol. “You’ll forgive me if I’m a bit out of practice.”

He smiled and inclined his head, relaxing back into the chair as Rabé played a few scales to warm up. After a moment, she stretched and adjusted the heavy ruby jewels against her throat, fingers easily finding the activation latch hidden in the intricate whorls of the platinum casings. It vibrated in confirmation; the same necklace she’d worn to that meeting in the Palace gardens.

Malyna watched her, the sunlight from the windows casting her face into deep, scowling shadows, and at this angle, Rabé could clearly see the outline of some small vial tucked into the older woman’s thick skirts. Her right hand was curled awkwardly on her thigh, an unnatural resting position, the entire right side of her body tense and drawn around whatever was in her pocket. Rabé raised her eyes as she gracefully lowered herself to the bench, made eye contact with Fives, and played a little major flourish to indicate positive.

His face – tense with determination – melted into pride, a tiny, self-pleased smile playing on his lips. She raised her eyebrows – he was getting better at keeping his emotions in check, after all. She made a mental note to congratulate him. After.

There was little doubt Malyna would be armed, but after a bomb, Rabé had been expecting a blaster. Not poison.

Fives had, though. “She’s inexperienced with big stuff; she doesn’t want to draw any more attention to herself. She’s scared, so she’s gonna try an’ be more subtle this time around.”

Rabé started to play, an elegant little Corellian romantic waltz. Despite their dire situation, she’d thought it’d be an appropriate choice against the backdrop of Alderaan’s snowy mountains. Lie. As soon as she played the first notes, the ruby necklace pulsed twice, ever so faintly. Moving into position.

Fives had remembered her mentioning that her mother had taught her how to play, and had suggested it be the signal for their movements. Eirtaé had been able to confer when she’d been too surprised to respond at first.

The countdown had begun, and now the others – who had been sealing off the wing, and then the floor, and then the corridor – began to creep ever closer.

“Something to drink?” Malyna suddenly said brightly, so suddenly Rabé let herself jump, the sweet
notes of the piano jangling and clashing awkwardly before she straightened with an apologetic look towards Varol. “Let me fix you all some tea, to calm our nerves since the excitement yesterday. One for you as well, Captain?” She rose with surprising grace without waiting for an answer and stepped quickly towards the tea set that Varol’s butler had surreptitiously deposited on the counter that ran along the room a few minutes earlier.

Her hand slipped into the deep pocket of her skirts, withdrew white-knuckled clenching around something, and Rabé met Fives’ eyes. He half-turned – Varol was entirely enthralled with Rabé’s playing now – and watched Malyna from the corner of his eye.

Rabé continued to play, the music making her feel much more at ease now. Every measure, however, made Malyna’s shoulders rise and rise in tension, until it looked like a stiff breeze might have been able to knock her over. It was like she was absorbing all of the tension Varol had been carrying on his shoulders before Fives and Rabé had knocked politely on his door.

Malyna turned, tray in hand with four steaming cups of fresh tea, a plastic smile pasted on her face. “Lord Varol, you’ll have to send your man back out to the kitchen for fresher tealeaves,” she chided, with a stern look towards the impassive butler by the door. “You see the color? Someone’s cut your supply with older, lower-quality leaves, I think,” she said, face twisting in sympathy.

Lie.

Varol winced, but Malyna went on, staring at the poor color in distaste, and then gestured to Rabé at the piano. “The Lady Maitri and her Captain have already been through so much. I’m sure you don’t want to add poor tea to that list! That wouldn’t be very welcoming of you.”

Malyna knew how to push Varol’s buttons as well as Rabé, and soon the butler was on his way to the kitchens in search of fresh leaves.

As the door slipped shut quietly behind him, Malyna’s smile turned genuine.

Fives slipped from his post by the door, and Rabé added a pretty little flourish to the piece as the Captain gave a polite bow and said, “Allow me to serve them, ma’am.”

“Oh, I couldn’t ask that-” but Fives was already lifting the tray from her hands, herding her back to her seat like an overbearing chaperone. Rabé could see the tray clearly now; one of the cups’ handles was pointing inward.

Fives set that one down by his own spot, and Malyna’s face did not just twitch in anger – it flickered, like a hologram. Or a mirage.

Varol titled his cup carefully in his hands, so that it caught the brilliant morning sun, and he made a face that no one paid much attention to. “Ugh! You’re right, my Lady. The color is slightly off, but-”

“But the taste is just fine.” Malyna retorted, staring hard at Fives.

Rabé and Malyna both watched – Varol chatting to himself all but faded in the background – as Fives picked up the cup meant for Varol and politely sipped at the poisoned tea.

His idea.

He didn’t even flinch. She did.

Instead, he just shot her that wonderful, winning crooked smile as the anti-bots he’d taken just before they’d knocked on Varol’s door leapt into action, working alongside the truly astonishing immune
system of a clone trooper. He’d even gone along with her three-a.m. insistence on blood test comparisons – Sabé had worked her way through every poison in Eirtae’s terrifyingly robust compendium – with a kind, patient smile. Not a one had made even a dent on the sample’s health, but she could not fight the rising fear she’d kept clamped down until just this moment.

Not even Kix’s begrudging admission that “in order for any poison native to Alderaan to kill Fives, it would have to be three times the dosage to kill a Hutt” could soothe her nerves.

“And!” Fives had said cheerfully, apparently unconcerned with the looks of horror that the Nabooians were aiming his way, “If she takes the chance to get rid of us, she’ll have to dilute it even further. It’ll be like a bad shot of booze, then.”

Kix had sighed, and Rabé had bit her lip, but as stubbornly as she’d insisted on her usual style of dress, so to had Fives insisted on snatching the poison right out from under Malyna’s nose.

She couldn’t watch him get hurt for her sake. Not again. Never again.

Still, she wished he wasn’t so brazen. She knew it was partially a ploy to scare Malyna, but it was also a huge risk, and was really just a chance to show off how hopelessly outwitted their target was. Rabé had been hoping poison wouldn’t have factored into the situation at all, but she knew that had been wishful thinking. Fives lifted the cup to his lips once more, and Rabé had to look away for the sudden tears burning in her eyes.

He was wonderful, but did he have to be that reckless, so stupidly reckless?

Malyna was speechless, mouth hanging slightly agape as she watched in horror. When Fives didn’t keel over or turn purple, she blinked in surprise, and – sloppily – opened her left palm to stare in confusion at the small glass vial in her hands.

Rabé focused on the measures of the waltz, willing her hammering heart to steady, to slow, to calm down. Though, she supposed, she was playing as a sheltered young woman who had just been the victim of a horrible bombing not twenty-four hours before. If she suddenly burst into tears, no one would think that strange.

She wished Fives would stop throwing himself headfirst into danger. It made her near sick with worry, and she had to focus. There were only a few more measures until the end of the piece – the signal to close in and apprehend Malyna. They were so close, they had to-

There was another knock at the door.

Fives frowned – it was too early, they hadn’t yet given the signal – as Varol rose to open it, in lieu of his butler.

“I thought I might find you here, Maitri!”

This time, Rabé truly did jump in surprise as Lady Abeni easily waltzed in, beaming and heading straight for her.

Fives stared at her, speechless, as Varol – confused yet clearly delighted at the popularity of his suites so early in the morning – excitedly announced her presence.

Rabé hesitated for just a moment, her mind whirling in confusion because how did she manage to slip by the others, she shouldn’t be here – and then she switched the final measures of the Corellian waltz for the middle bars of a Nabooian sonata.
A jarring and very, very apparent misstep.

As Abeni swept her into a quick hug, the necklace pulsed twice again in confirmation, and Rabé could almost feel the confusion in the signal. Behind the now-excitemently chattering Abeni, she watched Fives quickly pull up his sleeve to type out a rushed and angry message to the rest of the team.

Varol had already been one risk, and now Abeni had been added to the mix. Rabé eyed Malyna out of the corner of her eyes – the older woman was so stiff that a slight breeze might cause her to snap, jaw clenched tight and a vein pulsing on her forehead. Malyna’s confusion and anger at Abeni’s sudden appearance meant she hadn’t planned for this, either. And now Rabé watched in horror as Abeni settled herself comfortably within Malyna’s sights, right in the line of danger, right next to Rabé, still playing on the piano.

Malyna looked as if she were barely keeping herself together. The strange flux that reminded Rabé so strongly of a mirage returned, full-force.

“Good morning to you as well, Lady Malyna – weren’t you so terribly frightened last night? I was so worried about you, Maitri, because I remembered you saying that you and Captain Dathan were planning on joining the debutantes from Naboo for that wonderful tour – and to have it end so tragically…” Abeni’s beautiful face fell for a moment, and Varol rested a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Not to worry, Abeni. Captain Dathan informed us, before you came in, that he has it on good authority that the guards are – what was the phrase you used, Captain?”

Fives swallowed thickly, on edge and ready for the situation to collapse entirely as he responded thickly, “I, uh. Um. ‘Closing in and should have them in custody within the day.’”

Malyna flinched as Abeni clapped in delight. “Oh! That’s wonderful news, Captain! Do your friends with authority know why the shuttle was attacked-?” She looked hopefully up at Fives, who was very much looking like he wanted to find his helmet and jam it on his head to avoid the line of questioning.

Rabé winced as she kept playing the Nabooian sonata, and cleared her throat, “They haven’t told us anything, Abeni.”

Abeni did not look very convinced. “But they set a bomb to go off on a landing platform, directly under the shuttle set aside specifically for off-world debutantes… And Maitri was injured! So were you!” She turned to Varol for support, who had once again gone gray. He, too, looked as if he would pay absolutely anything for the conversation to turn to another subject. His eyes flicked over to Malyna, who was sitting very still, apparently entranced with Rabé’s playing. “Don’t you find that suspicious, Varol? It’s like whoever set it wanted to get rid of our wonderful visitors…”

“Hm. Yes. Yes, quite.”

Abeni turned her attention to Fives again, who looked mortified as he realized the extent of his misstep. “Are there any answers, Captain? Any news at all?”

“I – well, uh. You see, there’s some evidence that it was a targeted – no, I’m sorry, Lady Abeni, that information is confidential.” He cleared his throat, flushed, as his eyes drifted towards the ceiling as if he was hoping it would provide him a script, “I-I don’t know much. Of anything about this. Uhm. It was really just talk. Between the guards. That’s all.”
Rabé exhaled softly and nodded as Fives’ desperate eyes found hers. He relaxed, and she gave him a reassuring smile. He still looked like a deer in the headlights, but the moment had mercifully passed. Abeni’s shoulders slumped in disappointment at the lack of new gossip and she gave a great dramatic sight, smoothing out her skirts as she sniffed, “I was just so worried about Maitri. For someone to do something like that! It’s cowardly, and shameful, and I think the person who’s responsible should be locked up for the rest of their life.”

Malyna jerked, and the cup slipped from her hands and shattered on the ground.

As Varol started and rose to her aid, Malyna shook her head and murmured in the shocked silence, “Forgive me, everyone. I am not… feeling very well.” She rose, slowly, and continued in a strange monotone, “I think… I think I shall retire to my own rooms…”

Fives’ entire body was tensed to intercept her, and he locked eyes with Rabé.

She stopped playing, and the necklace immediately pulsed in response.

Malyna’s gaze turned sharp and sour as the final notes rang out in the awkward silence.

They were both too slow.

She did have a blaster, after all.

Rabé sprang to her feet, lunged for Abeni, and yanked her friend to the floor just as a clumsy spray of blaster fire hit where their heads had just been moments before.

“Cover your head!” Rabé shouted at Abeni over the noise, drawing her own slim Elega pistol and pulling Abeni behind the relative coverage of the piano. Abeni obeyed without a word. More blaster fire split the calm of the morning to pieces, and from her position she heard Fives bellow at the top of his lungs to draw Malyna’s fire.

She couldn’t see what happened, sheltering Abeni behind the piano – more blaster fire, the sound of heavy running steps and a grunt and a heavy thump and then – the lid of the piano splintered into a shower of slivers as Malyna took aim at the top of Rabé’s head. More running feet, more confused yelling, more blaster fire and then–

Silence.

Rabé peered over the edge of the ruined piano to find a scene of absolute destruction and absolutely void of Malyna. Varol was on the ground, face bright red as Fives hauled him to his feet from where he’d tackled the young noble out of the line of fire. Fives none-too-gently shoved the nobleman onto the chair and spat, “Guess us clones are good for something after all, huh?”

Varol’s face drained of color.

Fives met Rabé’s eyes before nodding and drawing his own blasters from their holsters on his hips as Rabé kicked off her dainty yet impractical shoes. Down the corridor, she heard more shouts of surprise and sprays of blaster fire. She quickly pulled the stunned Abeni to her feet and directed her to the couch next to the gray-faced Varol, “Stay here, call your guards, shut and lock the doors,” and then the ARC trooper and the handmaiden were gone, chasing their spy into the heart of the palace.

Rabé easily kept up with Fives’ more loping gait, glad that she had asked Sabé for a more dressed-up version of the twin-buns hairstyle – if she had to deal with hair flying in her face during this chase, she might very well have lost the last few shreds of her composure.
Her stomach was churning in pure anger. It had been going so well, everything had been fine, and then Abeni had somehow managed to slip past their defenses, so who was to say Malyna wouldn’t do the same? She might find the same overlooked door and slip away and then they’d lose her – annoyance and adrenaline mixed together in her bloodstream – her jaw was clenched so tightly in disappointment at the sloppy job they were doing and she pushed herself even faster, following the whipping skirts of Malyna.

Fives grunted in mild annoyance, “Kriff, she can move for an old lady, huh?”

She glanced sideways at him, and remembered that the 501st almost specialized in plans going awry. He looked absolutely thrilled, whereas she felt their plans collapsing all around her. It was almost suffocating, after the rigid structure of the past week. She liked having a plan, and suddenly being left without one felt akin to drowning. Sabé was the one that handled loose plans well. Rabé and Padmé liked the security of a tight plan, tight execution, clean finish.

Her stomach churned in disappointment at herself, at her inability to adapt, as she and Fives ran side-by-side down the wide marble halls of the Aldera Palace.

Fives… Fives was in his element now. There was a fierce, excited gleam in his eyes, a delighted smile curling his lips and he served as her block.

She wished she had his confidence and ease.

She hated it when things went wrong. Especially when they put others in danger.

Luckily, the sunlit marble corridors were calm and empty. They paused only briefly as a group of Alderaanian Palace Guards stormed in the opposite direction, most likely responding to the reports of blaster fire from Varol’s suites, sent by Rex and directed to let the team finish their job.

As they rounded the next corner, they came face-to-face with the panting, desperate woman. Rabé and Fives skidded to a halt as she leveled her blaster at them, shaking and breathing heavily through her clenched teeth as she shrieked, “Leave me ALONE!”

Malyna wasn’t confident with the blaster – her hands shook slightly when she took aim – Rabé gathered her skirts, eyes narrowed and focused intently on the old woman’s hands – and then the air was knocked clean out of her lungs as Fives tackled her out of harm’s way for the second time in less than twenty-four hours.

They hit the marble floor hard, her elbows cracking painfully under his weight as they tumbled gracelessly out of the way of Malyna’s wide-arcing shots. If she’d been trained with the blaster, Malyna would have turned it on the column Fives had dived behind.

Instead, the noble turned and fled down the corridor.

Rabé couldn’t help but curse as she struggled to push Fives off of her, “Damnit – Fives! I had her!”

His jaw set defensively as he gracefully pushed himself away, extending his hand towards her to help her to her feet. “I wasn’t just gonna let her-”

“I was trained for things like this, I can handle myself.”

Her words were cut off by a sudden shout of surprise, and they scrambled to follow, Rabé at least thankful for the free-flowing movement allowed by her gown.

They sprinted around the corner, and skidded to a halt, struggling to comprehend what, exactly, they
were seeing.

Breha’s loyal-to-the-point-of-trouble Heir, Nohemi Silviá, was staring, wide-eyed, at an exact mirror image of herself.

*Seven fucking hells.*

Fives lowered his blasters as he spat, “A karking *Changeling*, huh.”

*Why is it always, always, always a Changeling.*

Nohemi – the one on the left – was absolutely transfixed, rooted to the cool white marble beneath her formal dark navy slacks, eyes filling with tears as she struggled to comprehend seeing a clone of her own face. Nohemi-on-the-right angled her head, her face contorted in a confused sneer as she examined her twin.

Teary-Nohemi noticed them and immediately the tears started to overflow as she pointed a shaky hand at sneering-Nohemi, “W-what is going on? Who is this, I don’t know – what’s *happening*?”

Comprehension dawned on sneering-Nohemi’s face as she watched, fascinated, as tears rolled down her cheeks, from her eyes, on a completely different body. She jumped a little in excitement and returned the gesture as she turned to Fives and Rabé, delight in her dark eyes, “This is the spy, isn’t it? The Separatist!”

“*S*-Separatist? H-how dare you, I am one of Breha’s Heirs!” Teary-Nohemi all but shrieked, stamping her foot as the tears increased. “I can’t be a *Separatist*!”

Rabé exhaled slowly as she looked from one to the other. Nohemi had thought she, Maitri, was the spy, and had burst into Padmé’s suites to deliver the news. She was headstrong and determined. Rabé waited a beat, and then slowly flicked her hand back at Fives, who understood and raised his blasters once more as Rabé stepped forward to the Nohemis. “No sudden movements,” she warned them. Teary-Nohemi clutched herself while sneering-Nohemi merely nodded, watching Rabé with fascination.

“I will ask you each a question. Answer it correctly, and we will know who’s who.” Nohemi had been in Padmé’s rooms. “Who’s rooms did you visit to accuse me of being the spy?”

Teary-Nohemi leaned closer first, and Rabé angled her head, at the ready in case Malyna attacked. “Padmé Amidala’s.”

Rabé nodded, and gestured to the other.

“Senator Amidala of Naboo,” sneering-Nohemi whispered in her ear.

Rabé leaned back, and gestured for them to reset. Fives’ blasters were still trained on the two, watching carefully. She heard his comms activate, his quick and hushed reply, and let his low voice calm her racing mind as she tried another question:

“What color is the hair of the handmaiden currently accompanying Senator Amidala?”

Sneering-Nohemi leaned in at once. “Blonde.”

Rabé turned to look at tearful-Nohemi, and like mist in the wind, the mirage flickered over her face – but she had to be sure. Had to stall, give the others as much time as possible.
False-Nohemi whispered to her, “B-brunette, of course. To match Padmé’s hair.”

How could Rabé have missed those dark circles under false-Nohemi’s eyes, the trembling fear and rage of false-Nohemi’s hands?

She had the spy, and the trap sprang shut.

Rabé leaned back, and clasped her hands behind her back. Using the first two fingers of her right hand, she pointed at teary-Nohemi, and then the sign for wait. Fives cleared his throat twice, and despite the situation, despite the pressure of what was to come, Rabé had to suppress a quick, fond smile. He’s a fast learner.

“Last one.”

The two Nohemis watched – one fearful, her disguise slipping ever-so-slightly around the hairline, the base of her throat flickering with scales now; the other calm yet fascinated, like a scientist watching an experiment go awry.

“How did Queen Breha send for Senator Amidala?”

The true Nohemi made a triumphant noise, and false-Nohemi’s eyes flashed in terror as she saw the newcomers emerge behind Rabé. She heard the heavy footfalls of Jesse and Echo – of course she could tell their steps apart by now, Jesse favored his left leg ever so slightly – and knew Eirtaé was between them.

False-Nohemi’s face drained of color until it was a sickly pale green.

Nohemi leaned to give her answer, her own dark eyes flashing in pride, and then Malyna screamed in rage as her plan collapsed around her.

Her fist made solid contact with Nohemi and the Heir gave a horrible pained shriek, reeling back and clamping her hands over her now-broken nose. Blood poured from between her fingers as Malyna returned before their eyes – Jesse and Echo shouted behind Rabé and she heard Fives’ blasters click – and dragged the hapless Heir in front of her.

Their spy now had a hostage, and seethed with enough rage to do something drastic if pushed too far.

Rabé held her hands up and out, and the movement behind her ceased at once.

The only sound in the corridor was Nohemi’s pained noises, and Rabé’s anger returned, full force. She tried to tell herself that she had done the best she could, that there had been too many factors, too many things that had been out of her control.

Lie.

The young Heir – no older than Tyche or Akantha, her eyes wide and pained – stared as Rabé and Fives advanced slowly on Malyna, eyes fixed on the blaster pressed to the girl’s temple. “Not a step closer!” Malyna hissed, and the girl shuddered at the sound, wordlessly pleading with Rabé to do something, anything. “One step closer and I’ll kill her!”

Behind Rabé, she heard the rest of the team arrive and skid to a halt, Jesse and Echo in the corridor opposite Rabé and Fives, all others in their positions but too late, and suddenly the only sound in the atrium was Nohemi’s labored breathing as the blood poured down her face, dripping onto her starched white shirt, shaking quietly as Malyna started to drag her backwards. Rabé’s mind was
reeling as she searched every angle for the opportunity to knock the blaster out of the spy’s hands, but her head was terrifyingly, totally blank.

Frustration at Fives for ruining her earlier opportunity coursed through her blood and she shoved it down, horrified at the intensity of the emotion, as she raised her hands, slowly, slowly. “My Lady Malyna, there is no need for this,” she started slowly, but at the title Malyna’s eyes glistened in fury and her grip on Nohemi tightened.

“You follow me, she dies,” Malyna spat, and the girl whimpered, both hands grasping at the iron grip around her throat. “I won’t hesitate, I sw-”

Something smacked her on the back of the head, and as she yelped in surprise, a handful of tiny chalcedony beads clattered noisily to the floor.

Malyna spun, furious, swinging the Heir around as a shield and trying to shoot her attacker all at once – but she didn’t have a chance.

Rabé didn’t move as Sabé – from seemingly nowhere – straightened up behind the spy, grabbed Malyna’s wrist that held the blaster, and twisted, hard. It fell to the marble floor with an ear-splitting crack, and Sabé deftly kicked to Eirtaė, who picked it up and trained it on the now prone noble in one graceful motion. Malyna cursed them in a language Rabé didn’t recognize as Sabé smoothly, quickly forced her to her knees, one hand shielding Nohemi from Malyna’s fury, Sabé’s face impassive but for a single spark of what could almost be pity.

Without a word, Kix and Hardcase rushed forward and clapped Malyna’s wrists in a binder as she howled in fury. Sabé released Nohemi – who was now thoroughly flushed, a hand over her heart and eyes wide at the sudden change of hands. “Are you alright, Heir Silviá?”

She could only nod in mute surprise.

Sabé smiled sadly at her as the two troopers hauled Malyna to her feet. “We’ll take care of this. Go to the medical center, get checked for bruises or sprains, have them give you something to soothe your nerves.” Her gaze was warm as she put her hand on the woman’s forearm. “You’ve been through a scare today. You need to rest, Nohemi.”

Echo stepped forward. “I can escort you there.”

She nodded once more, and as they parted to let them pass to the medbay, Rabé’s stomach dropped at the sight of Lady Abeni standing at the opposite end of the corridor.

Abeni must have followed them out of Varol’s chambers.

No.

She had seen everything. Everything. Her shocked eyes were boring into Rabé’s, no one else mattered to the young noblewoman – and the look on her face made Rabé’s blood run cold. Abeni’s eyes filled with shocked, mute tears, and she stepped away, almost frightened of what she had seen, her arms wrapped tightly around herself, her shoulders hunched miserably around her ears.

Rabé should have been elated as she watched the spy be taken in, but all she could see was the dawning look of complete and utter heartbreak on her Abeni’s face as she realized that her friend Lady Maitri was nothing more than a finely crafted, tightly woven fabrication.

Maybe she’ll understand. Maybe I can explain it to her, and she’ll understand why we had to do this.
Lie.

They had captured their spy at the cost of utterly shattering Abeni’s heart.

Works inspired by this one: over the noise (a single thought appears) by ghastlyshilo

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