Tell Me No Tales

by seasstruck

Summary

Cody survived the war. And he'll survive the Empire, even if it kills him.

Or: Years after Order-66 destroyed everything he'd fought for, Cody finds himself as an inside agent for the rebellion after his chip malfunctioned. Along with a small group of clones, he navigates dealing with a merciless Admiral, saving people he thought were long dead, dealing with his ghosts and - maybe - his ghosts coming back for him.

Notes

So, this is the first thing I've ever posted on AO3 and the first thing I've written for this
fandom (and the first thing I've written for any fandom in a long time), but it was an idea that kept smacking me around until I wrote it. This chapter is mostly back story to set up the plot, character and other such things, so it's a little wordy at times, so forgive me and try to go with it. All mistakes are mine. Enjoy. I hope.
Chapter 1

“You’re dismissed, Commander.”

Cody saluted, ignored the casual distaste in his Admiral’s voice and left the command deck with brisk footsteps. In turn, he ignored his own disgust at the disorganized waves of stormtroopers that fell away from his retreating form with a skittish haste and marched through the Imperial cruiser’s hallways with a barely contained fury that had become more and more normal as the days and weeks passed. He pushed the pad to the lower deck armory with enough force that the durasteel gave slightly under his fingers and he felt a sort of detached, vicious vindication at damaging the ship in even some small way.

The moment he processed that he was alone in the room, he ripped his helmet off and took in large lungful’s of recycled air in an effort to ease the clenching in his chest. He fought the vague nausea that never seemed to completely leave and the swirl of dark emotion fighting for control of his body and struggled to stay upright. Several minutes passed before he was able to release the death grip he had on a shelf of demolition grenades and his breath evened out. Shakily, he ran a hand down his face and rubbed wearily at his eyes; tiny sparks of pain only serving to ground his body even more.

You can’t shoot him, not yet, he told himself, you have work to do. One day, but not today. Not yet. It was the same mantra that he’d been repeating to himself for the better part of four months. And a variation of the one he’d been beating into his brain since he woke up from a blow to the head on one of those miserable backwater desert planets that dotted the galaxy and realized that his life had gone to karking hell. Since the question about the General had died a swift and painful death at the emergence of his memories of Utapau’s cliffs and the faint whisper of good soldiers follow orders had resulted in a series of involuntary dry heaves. The head injury had been a miracle really; not only for destroying the programming in his mind, but for the built-in excuse it gave him for the erratic behavior he couldn’t quite control in days following his revelation.

Not that scaring the shit out of Empire shiny’s wasn’t fun, but it was hard to appreciate the humor when he kept hearing a Coruscanti accent wondering if terrifying the new recruits was completely necessary, really, Cody?

(“Cody, really, they’ve barely seen the space beyond Kamino, I hardly think that telling them that I’m a magnet for twisted Separatist’s affections and that I have the self-preservation of a Corellian lemming is supposed to make them feel any better about the situation.”)

“I’m simply conveying pertinent information about the current tide of the war, sir. And familiarizing them with their General.”

“Any more dramatic and they’ll think that I’m like one of those awful characters in the holo-opera’s that Waxer pretends he doesn’t watch.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, sir.”)

Still, it had taken two weeks just to process everything that had been taken from him. Another five or six weeks before eating his blaster didn’t sound like the best thing he could possibly do. After the worst of that passed (mostly, sometimes at night he stared at the bunk above his and ran circles in his mind about how many he could take with him when he finally lost all perspective), he got angry. An all-encompassing rage, the kind he’d only felt bursts of after a particularly bad battle or the first time he’d seen General Kenobi after he returned from his “death”, that burned through everything and only left scorch marks in its waste.
And that was how he joined the Rebellion.

The thing about being a clone in the Imperial Army was that he was seen as both expendable and invisible. As a clone officer, this was taken to a kind of extreme that meant he was privy to lot of information that he was never expected to comment on or do anything with except go and do whatever his reg-born superiors wanted him to (good soldiers follow orders, good soldiers follow orders…) and use his acknowledged expertise to fulfill. It was like he was a droid, almost, standing on the peripheral of their conversations and strategy meetings with troop movements and numbers and logistical information flying around his head and he’d thought – once – that the rebellion would probably kill to have access to this kind of intel. Of course, the problem, was how exactly did one find the rebellion (labeled a myth in propaganda, but a source of constant vigilance and contention in the ranks) and pass along what he knew?

As it happened his chance came to him in the form of a female rebellion operative named Celese, who was captured while they were on a campaign in the Mid-Rim and was brought aboard to be questioned by one of the Imperial Inquisitors. Using his officer’s preoccupation and his fellow stormtroopers incompetence against them, he was able to create a distraction and steal the confused human away from the chaotic bridge where the computer systems were going haywire after his little internal jamming signal fritzed them temporarily, and down to the hanger where he all but shoved her on one of the new tie-fighters and forced the pre-prepared data pad into her bruised hands.

(Her blue eyes were wary as she looked at him, gingerly taking the data pad, body still poised to fight. “What’s this?”

“Information. They’re planning to invade Haveen and they suspect that Governor Ekrol is sympathetic to the rebellion. It won’t be a kind invasion.”

She quirked a dark eyebrow at that. “Is there such a thing as a ‘kind’ invasion?”

He looked at her through his helmet, the HUD – which had been mildly affected by the jamming transmitter – was beginning to reboot the systems that had gone offline, meaning they didn’t have much time. “There’s invasions, Sergeant, and then there’s slaughter.”

Her eyes had widened slightly at his use of the rank he had heard the Admiral use for her, then fell into a furious understanding at his warning. She nodded and turned briefly to the fighter, before rounding on him again. She latched onto his wrist and the expression on her face was darkly suspicious.

“Why should I trust this? Any of this? Why are you helping me?”

“Because the Empire has taken everything from me,” he said and let the pain and anger he felt on a near constant basis come through the voice modulator, “and this is the only way I know how to take something back.”

She released him, but kept searching his impassive stormtrooper armor as if it would give her some kind of insight. “Who are you?”

He twitched. “That’s irrelevant,” he said and turned to blast the homing beacon on the fighter so that once the computers came back online they wouldn’t be able to track her location. “You should leave.”

“Wait,” she said, keeping him from walking away, “at least tell me how I can contact you. If this information is right…we could use you.”
He’d hoped she would say that. He reached up and handed her a small frequency communicator that the Empire had given out to all its officers and which he had modified extensively in the past few weeks. She took it and gave him a questioning look.

“I can pass on information to you using that. If you need to contact me, it’ll transmit the signal and then we can arrange a call from there. If I don’t answer within two standard Coruscant days, assume I won’t be answering.”

She closed her fingers over the device and quickly deposited it in one of the pockets of her flak jacket. Still, she hesitated. “What do I call you?” She asked.

He smiled inside his helmet. “Rako. You can call me Rako.” Why not? Everyone who knew the significance of that name was dead anyway.

She nodded again, and gifted him with an off-kilter (but, he thought, genuine) smile and climbed into the fighter. Once the pilot’s pod had shut, she sent him a small salute and disappeared out of the hanger where he could just make out her lights zipping into hyperspace. A handful of minutes later the systems completed their reboot and a second round of chaos ignited when the Admiral discovered his prize capture was missing.

When the Empire touched down on Haveen a month later, it was to a near abandoned planet; officials – including Governor Ekrol and his family – had vanished and the crops and refineries that the Empire had so coveted were either destroyed or still burning. Admiral Laquad was summoned to meet the Emperor himself. He never returned.)

From there, after what he suspected was a series of vetting missions from Celese and her immediate superiors, he was eventually cleared and given his designation as an official double agent for the rebellion. The reg-borns of the Imperial Army had yet to cotton on that their dutiful clone Commander was the one passing along any information and continued to discuss details of various ventures around him like he was deaf and dumb. It was all he could do some days to keep from screaming (he didn’t even try to stop from rolling his eyes) and at times, he wondered how the hell the Empire succeeded at anything.

And then someone like Admiral Poole came along and he remembered very quickly.

Poole reminded Cody of Tarkin in the worst way possible. He was frighteningly efficient, expected results from all of his subordinates and couldn’t care less for the lives of his stormtroopers and many of his officers. He crushed dissention and was, to the extent that many of the Empire’s officers were, a zealot in his devotion to the Emperor and Imperial values. Working under him was like having chunks of his flesh flayed from his body and his self-control was tested minute by minute; hence the small refuge he carved for himself in the lower deck armory. At times, it was all he could do to keep from blasting a hole straight through the kriffing bastard’s heart.

Not that the fucker had one.

To his right, the door of the armory opened and soft footsteps padded over to his side. He glanced over as the stormtrooper removed his own helmet and stared into matching amber eyes. Boil lifted an eyebrow at his slumped form.

“Sir. You look like banthashit.”

Cody snorted. “Thank you, vod.”

Boil shrugged, but there was an assessing look on his face. “Poole?”
“Who else?”

Boil’s eyes narrowed and his grip on his helmet tightened. “I’m going to enjoy blowing up his ship. And him. When do we get to do that, again, sir?”

Cody straightened his body completely and sighed. “We don’t know what he’s planning or when it may be happening. Or where for that matter.”

“So. Not yet.”

“Not yet.”

Boil eyed him speculatively. “Does it get easier to tell yourself that?”

“No.”

Boil returned his aggravated sigh and then stuffed his helmet back on his head. “Well, then we’ve got work to do, sir. Can’t do that hiding in the kriffing lower deck armory.”

Cody smothered a wry smile at his second’s displeased tone and took a long breath before putting his own helmet back on and following the other man back into the frustrating fray of Imperial life. No one gave them a second glance as they wound their way through the hallways to the commissary and he kept his eyes trained on Boil’s back as they walked and allowed the sometimes-overwhelming feeling of relief of not being alone wash over him.

He so rarely saw any of the remaining vod’e and even more rarely were ones he knew; (brothers he’d fought with in the 212th or 501st or his batchmates and those similar in age and experience) that at times immediately following the programming’s short-circuit (chips, he could still remember the haunted look on Rex’s face when he tried to explain Fives meltdown, the incredulity he’d felt when rumors of a clone killing a Jedi had first reached the 212th, now it just made him incandescently angry at himself for not taking any of it seriously) he’d felt like the only clone left in the entirety of the galaxy. The last ones to come out of Kamino, the ones who had never known the Jedi or fought in the GAR or even finished their training, they were different than the brothers he’d known. More like droids, less independence; it was like they’d been simplified somehow; like their genetics had been wiped to a clean slate and fully incorporated with Imperial standards and obedience. It had made being around them nearly impossible post-chip; just one more reminder of how different things were, how the Empire operated and what it valued.

And the vod’e like him that were left were mostly still caught in the throes of the programming. He saw the distrust they had of the reg-born troopers and the uneasiness they shared at the obvious dismissal of their superiors, but not a one of them mentioned the Jedi, the purge or gave any indication of desertion or resistance. Sometimes, they were even harder to be around than the oblivious shiny’s.

Well. Most of the time, if he was being honest.

Then, out of the blue, while he was in the commissary a stormtrooper sat down opposite him, pulled his helmet off and about gave Cody a heart-attack.

Cody was used to eating mostly alone. He was a clone and an officer which made him a double strike in the social-strata’s of stormtrooper commandry, but occasionally another brother would sit with him for comfort’s sake more than anything. Never had anyone simply strolled up to his table, all but dropped his tray down and slipped into his seat with a kind of disregard that came with familiarity. He’d been curious, then Boil had revealed his face and Cody had felt such a rush of
mixed emotions he still couldn’t pinpoint what all of them had been.

(“Sir.”
“-------”

“Aren’t feeding us any better in this Empire are they? Isn’t everything supposed to be better now? And how’d you manage to get fresh fruit? Is it because you’re an officer?”
“-------”

“Not feeling very talkative today, Commander? That’s fine. I can work with that.”
“-------”

A dubious look. “You’re not damaged, are you? Because that is going to make this much more awkward. Do you know who I am?”

“Boil. What in the karking ---”

“Oh. You do remember. It’s good to see you again, sir, glad you’ve made it through, etc, etc. Are you going to eat that? Because I haven’t had fresh fruit in a lightyear.”

A tray being pushed to the other side of the table. Happy munching. And a kind of weightless sense of happiness that it was almost enough to make him cry.)

Through a strange kind of dance of half-truths and verbal calisthenics, Cody learned that Boil’s own chip had been out-and-out removed when a non-Imperial medi-droid had performed surgery and had mistaken the piece of circuitry for a scrap of shrapnel. Like Cody, the other man had taken a long time to come to terms with what he’d been made to do and then went searching for any remnants of the 212th he could find and managed to get himself transferred to Cody’s outfit when he had found out that his old Commander was still alive.

(“What would you have done if I’d still been chipped?”

Boil thumbed his chin at that. “I guess I would’ve had to find some way to dislodge the damned thing.”

Silence. “At least tell me you would’ve been subtle about it. Head wounds are not common, vod.”

“The very soul of discretion, sir. Probably just would’ve used a good, old-fashioned blaster-whipping.”)

From there, Cody had told him about his new status as a spy for the rebellion and Boil had recruited himself into the cause. Between the two of them, they had thwarted no less than a half dozen rebellion ambushes and a dozen other small incursions and saved more people than they ever saw. It kept the nightmares at bay, at least. Most of the time.

(“What does the rebellion call you, Commander?”

“Rako.”

Boil blinked, then a small, brittle smile crossed his face. “Did the General know about this streak of passive-aggressive vindictiveness, sir?”

Cody felt the air in his lungs dissipate at the first casual mention of the General since he’d been put
back into his right mind. It felt kind of like how he imagined dying might. “He did.”

“That explains so much.” The words stopped there, but Boil’s hand reached out and gripped Cody’s neck briefly in a familial gesture of comfort and understanding.)

While Cody focused most of his attention on the gathering of intel and vetting its sources rigorously, Boil kept up his side project of tracking down and locating what remained of the 212th and through what Cody considered a succession of minor miracles, was able to have four of their brothers transferred over to their legion. None had had their chips deactivated and thankfully, Boil didn’t need to resort to beating any of them in the head, just kept throwing short range EMP frequencies at them until they found one that short-circuited the sith-damned things.

For a brief time, all six of them were out of functional commission as he and Boil tried to talk down Crys, Walker, Sero and Rush from the inevitable breakdown that happened in the aftermath (Rush, especially, had a hard time; he’d been the alternate artillery trooper on the cannon that had…well, he and Cody had a lot of sleepless nights for a while), but they’d managed to make it through without anyone noticing how out of it four of their stormtroopers were. A fact that Cody put down to the officers being busy with the welcoming of their new Admiral and their fellow stormtroopers being too frightened of him and Boil to get close enough to see that something was off.

When they’d ended their self-imposed isolation, it was to be greeted by the new Admiral of Fleet, Admiral Telis Poole. The one saving grace of Poole that Cody could see was that he hadn’t been a major player in the Clone Wars and so while he knew intellectually the training and abilities of he and his brothers, he also – like much of the command officers – took those same abilities for granted. It made keeping their operation secret only fractionally more difficult than before, if only because his competence brought with it a more capable group of subordinates and an increased presence of Inquisitors.

Ahead of him, Boil ducked into the mess hall and after picking up the day’s barely palatial rations, they gravitated towards the table where their brothers were already camped out and speaking Mand’o in hushed voices. Like every other day in the Imperial Army, they were given a wide berth; which in turn allowed them to speak more freely than they otherwise would have been able too. It was stunning the kind of advantages there were to being outcasts.

“Sir,” Crys said, his blond curls falling over his forehead in soft waves and detracting from his dark expression, “Tell me you’re eating more than that.”

Cody glanced down at the mostly barren tray in front of him. Just the idea of the bland food course made him nauseated. “I don’t see how it’s any concern of yours, trooper.”

Crys made to harp on him about his lack of nutrients (in the absence of any real medic, he had taken it on himself to badger all of them about their personal health) when Boil dropped one of those strange blue oranges from Felucia on his tray. He shot the other man a look and Boil just shrugged. “You probably need it.”

“Was he hiding in the armory again?” Walker asked, his forehead tattoos wrinkling with his concerned expression. Boil rolled his eyes and nodded, which caused all four of the others to throw him disappointed looks.

“You should come down to the training decks when you’re angry, sir,” Sero said, his voice was soft, but the animalistic smile on his face made him instantly more menacing, “Work out the aggression instead of hyperventilating in a room full of bombs.”
Sero’s initial response to most situations was to bash it upside the head and hope for the best. His favorite method of unwinding was to fight as many reg-born troopers as were stupid enough to take him up on it. Beside him, Walker scoffed and pointed his fork at the stubbled trooper.

“You’re going to run out of shiny’s soon and then where will you be? Start challenging the Inquisitors?”

Sero rolled his shoulders. “Why not? The Commander beat a General in hand to hand once; pretty sure these bastards aren’t that tough.”

Rush widened his eyes comically and swung them over to Cody. “You beat a General in hand to hand?”

“It was just a spar,” Cody muttered as he peeled his slightly off-putting orange, but his protestation went unnoticed by Boil who grinned at their youngest brother.

“General Skywalker,” he said and Rush’s eyes got even wider, “I made Jesse polish my boots every time the 212th and 501st had joint mission after that. I think Rex didn’t know whether to be proud of his vod or embarrassed for his General.”

Cody brushed aside the awe that Rush turned on him and ate the segments of his citrus while pushing Boil’s hand away when he reached over to take a piece back.

(He remembered that fight like it’d been captured in high def holo, pinning General Skywalker to the mats and the subsequent pout. Commander Tano’s teasing, the delighted whoops of the watching vod’e and General Kenobi, blue eyes dancing and mouth pulling up at the corners in a mischievous smirk; kriff, how Cody had wanted).

“So,” Crys said once the table had gone quiet, “should we ask why you needed a visit to your favorite armory?”

Instantly, the occupants of the table were on alert as they looked at him. He ate the last of his slices and contemplated the empty tray before sighing.

“The Admiral informed me that a landing party on Corkus was unnecessary as the situation was resolved.”

Boil stopped chewing his protein ration and frowned. “Resolved?”

“A special forces team ‘took care of it’.”

Walker looked a little sick at that, but unsurprised. “And the contact?”

Cody clenched his fists together underneath the table. “I was told that they found a rebellion spy hiding among the villagers. The spy was interrogated and found to have no useful information.”

Crys looked grim. “They’re dead?”

“I believe the Admiral’s words were ‘their betrayal of the Empire was thusly repaid in kind’. Apparently, we’re moving on.”

Boil’s face had a terrifying blankness to it and was probably an approximation of the look Cody himself had worn when he’d been updated by the Admiral. Crys cursed softly under his breath, Walker and Sero shared a look and Rush just pushed his tray away.
It was rare that the rebellion wanted to meet any of them in person, but Celese’s last call had been urgent; some kind of information that they didn’t want to risk over the comms. Whatever it was had died with the spy, but it was a dull consolation and they were still as in the dark about what was happening as the rest of the Imperial Army. Worse, he would have to contact Celese and inform her, and she hadn’t looked good in their holo communiqué. The golden hue of her skin had been drained away and she had a barely healed bruise just visible near her collarbone and a more recent stitched cut above her right eye. He liked Celese; she reminded him a little of Tano at the end, frustrated, but fierce and determined all the same; he hated delivering bad news to her.

“And we have no idea what they wanted to tell us?”

Cody shook his head and rubbed along the edge of his jawbone. “None. But it was important. They wouldn’t have risked sending someone to us otherwise.”

“Now what, sir?”

“We keep digging,” he said, “something is being set in motion. There has to be some clue of it here; and in the meantime, I’ll contact Celese and see what I can find out.”

“If there’s something to find, we’ll find it, Commander,” Walker said with an assurance that Cody appreciated, even if it felt a bit thin to him.

“No time like the present,” Sero said and stood with his tray and tugged on Walker’s armor, “come on vod, a soldier’s job is never done.”

Cody waved them off and Crys forced his no doubt nutrient packed drink at Cody with a stern look and a wordless admonishment to actually drink it before he followed them out of the commissary.

“Sir,” Rush said, a saddened ghost of an expression passing over his clean-shaven face, “should I…I mean do you think I should recite a remembrance for them? The contact, I mean.”

Cody felt a punch of pride at the question. Rush had been little more than a shiny himself when the purge happened. As such, he didn’t have the cynicism that pervaded the ranks after the fucked up mess that was Umbra, he hadn’t been there for the seemingly innumerable instances that General Kenobi all but killed himself in battle, and certainly hadn’t been there when the whole of the 212th sat in stupefied horror when they’d been informed of their General’s murder (to be fair, Cody didn’t remember much of what happened after that either; he’d spent most of the days following it either too drunk to think straight or too immersed in work to feel much of anything; it hadn’t been his finest hour) the worst of the battles had been over when he had joined the legion, but he’d survived the memories of Utapau and managed to keep from wallowing in the swells of pure rage that he, Boil and Sero sometimes fell into. A part of Cody wanted to protect him from the more inglorious truths of the Empire and its machinations.

“I think it’s a good idea, Rush,” he answered, “Do you want company?”

Rush shook his head. “Probably look too suspicious if a bunch of us were reciting a remembrance when no one’s actually died. As far as they know.”

Cody had to give him that. “Okay. As you wish.”

“Thank you, sir,” the younger man said, saluted Cody and Boil in turn before joining their other brothers in leaving.

Boil nudged Cody’s shoulder when they were alone and sent him an inquiring look. Cody returned the glance warily.
“Did the Admiral tell you where we’re going?”

“Just said to be ready to make landfall at 1200 hours a day and half from now.”

Boil thought for a moment then shrugged. “Yeah. I got nothing. Some poor bastard probably did something to an Imperial official and we’ll have to do some kind of show of force to reign him in.”

Privately, Cody had a feeling that it was probably something a lot worse than the garden variety greedy Governor or official who thought he could outsmart the Empire. Those kinds of things were a dime a dozen out here, Poole wouldn’t be put in charge of that kind of routine mission. He was a doer, the missions his legions fulfilled had a distinct air of bloodiness to them. The fanatical gleam that Cody had learned to fear and despise in equal measure had flickered behind Poole’s grey eyes when he’d spoken to him earlier. That in itself was enough to have the invisible hackles raising all along his back and alarm bells going off in his mind.

“Maybe.”

Boil eyed him. “But you don’t think so.”

“No.”

“Great,” Boil sighed, then gathered up his mess and stood himself. Before he left the table though he rapped lightly on Cody’s shoulder, “Try to sleep, Commander. If it’s as dire as your face is saying it is, every hour will be worth it.”

“You too.”

Boil mustered up a somewhat forbidding smile, as if he realized how much easier it was to say than to do and then proceeded out the door, helmet settling back on his head as he went. Cody glanced around the room; mostly empty and what few people were there weren’t paying him any attention. Finally, he slipped his own helmet over his head and took comfort in the familiar HUD display before pushing himself to his feet with little grace.

He had some calls to make.
I just wanted to thank everyone who commented and left kudos. You guys make me day!

“We suspected, but…thank you for confirming.”

Cody watched Celese’s face fall and there was a minute slump to her body that spoke of how much of a blow the news of the operative’s death was. He kept his silence and let her work through the information on her own time.

“And the Empire wasn’t able to extract anything from him?”

Cody shook his head. “Poole said they didn’t. If he lied, then they’re keeping the intel close to their chests.”

Celese’s eyes took on a faraway look and she rubbed at her mouth absentmindedly. “Let’s hope they’re still in the dark. Do you know where you’re going now?”

“No,” he said, some of his frustration leaking into his voice, “all I know is that we’re less than twelve hours out.”

“And you have no idea what you’ll be doing once you get there?”

“I’ve got the men digging, but so far we’ve haven’t been able to come up with anything. Not even rumors.”

Her face remained impassive, but her arms crossed her chest and her back straightened. “But?”

“I’m sorry?”

“I may not be able to see your face, Rako,” she said, waving at him, “but you’re tense. Unnaturally so. You must have some idea of what’s coming.”

“I don’t like surprises,” he said and when her only response was to raise an eyebrow inquiringly, he sighed, “Poole is…excited.”

She blinked. “Excited? What does that mean?”

Unconsciously, he reached up to scratch at his jaw and had to abort the motion when it caught up to him that he still had his helmet on. Sometimes, he regretted the decision to keep his clone identity from her, but he was acutely aware of the reputation of clone troopers in much of the galaxy and didn’t want to undo all the work it had taken to get her to fully trust him in the first place.

“Whenever Poole is excited it tends to end in copious amounts of bloodshed. I’ve learned to be especially wary when he gets like that.”

She frowned. “That sounds…terrible. Do you have your current coordinates? I can have someone
run a sector scan, see what planets might be in your time range.”

He gave her the numbers and watched as she gestured and said something to someone out of view. When she turned back to face him, he turned the conversation over to the whole reason he had called in the first place.

“And while we’re waiting, maybe you can fill me in on what exactly the contact was supposed to tell me.”

She stared blankly at him and tapped her long fingers on her arm restlessly for a few quiet moments before seeming to realize that trying to outwait an expressionless mask was futile. She turned to someone off-screen again, presumably to ask permission to tell him outright, and the grim set of her features when she came back was worrying to say the least.

“I can’t go into full details here, but the short version is that one of our secondary bases was compromised.”

“Compromised?”

“Attacked, really,” the lines of her body grew more agitated as she spoke, “it was completely unexpected; most of our forces stationed there were killed in the fight and the few that managed to escape said that the Imperial troops had an…uncanny ability to get through our defenses.”

A rush of cold dread went through Cody’s nerves at the implication. “Were any of your people captured before this happened?”

“No.”

A spy then. Cody cursed fervently in his mind. Celese shifted her weight and rubbed at the stitches on her forehead before looking him in the eye, or, well, where his eyes would be if she could see them.

“There’s more. The last survivor of the attack said that she saw Vader there.”

Cody honestly had no idea what to say to that. Darth Vader was a strange, horrifying, anomaly to him. The one and only time that he’d been in the same room as Vader – before his chip had malfunctioned – the force user had almost visibly startled when Cody had recited his designation; black gloved hand twitching seemingly involuntarily towards his lightsaber. After his memories had returned, he had realized that Vader must have known who he was; had known that CC-2224 was the clone formally known as Cody; the Commander of General Obi-Wan Kenobi’s 212th Attack Battalion. It hadn’t exactly been a secret among the GAR that the 212th was one of the more fanatically loyal and protective legions, or that General Kenobi had taught all of his officers at least basic ability to fight against other force-users (hence the improbable win against General Skywalker), considering the interest and propensity both Dooku and Ventress (and later, Maul) had in showing up where the General was. With that in mind, he wondered if Vader’s first, instinctive reaction was to protect himself against a potentially vindictive foe; as absurd as the notion sounded.

When he’d told that story to Boil, his second had insisted that Vader must have been a Jedi before the purge; maybe even someone they had fought with that had turned traitor. Why else would the second most powerful man in the galaxy react so strongly to one chipped clone? Cody, personally, thought that was even more ridiculous than Vader being afraid of retaliation; none of the Jedi that had fought in the Clone Wars would willingly have sided with the Emperor. Cody was far more inclined to believe the rumor that Vader had fought and killed Generals Windu and Skywalker and had been watching the war from whatever shadowy din the Emperor had stashed him, and that was
why he knew who Cody was. The 212th, after all, had not exactly been unknown to the galaxy during the conflict.

Still, the notion of Vader searching a rebel base had a certain amount of terror to it.

“Was there anything at the base that the Empire might have wanted? Besides the obvious?”

Celese’s right hand gripped her arm tight. “That’s why we wanted to speak to you in person. It’s… sensitive and not something any of us are comfortable putting across the comms. Even secured lines.”

He felt a spark of irritation at that even as he understood the need for the cloak and dagger mystique of it all. He hadn’t even revealed his own face to them and they had taken his unwillingness to unmask himself with relative aplomb, he couldn’t begrudge them their own, probably necessary, secrets. Especially considering his position as an inside agent made him a potent security risk should he be caught. He nodded sympathetically at her metaphorically tied hands and she relaxed a bit at his concession.

A beeping on her end of the call distracted her before either of them could speak and he watched as her eyes widened considerably at whatever she was being told. She turned and gestured at something, then returned her attention to him with renewed purpose.

“We ran a scan and there are three planets within the t-minus twelve hours drop you mentioned. One of them is an Imperial loyalist stronghold, another a gas giant that’s basically inhabitable.”

Cody eyed her warily. “And the third?”

“It’s called Mab. It used to be a mining planet during the Republic, but the war with the Separatists cleaned it out of its precious metals. The atmosphere is breathable and the mountains used in the mining are surrounded by jungles. Plenty of water, game to hunt; but of little use to the Empire. The people living there are simple farmers, hold overs from the mining days.”

Cody scrutinized the emotions filtering across her face and didn’t like it. “And? Is there a point to this planet realtor spiel?”

She closed her eyes for a moment, gathering her thoughts. “As of several years ago, it’s also the location for a new Jedi school.”

Cody felt his heart stutter in his chest.

Sith-fucking shit. “Fuck.”

Celese opened her eyes and the fear in them was the realest emotion he’d seen on her face since her initial doubt of him in the hanger when they first met. “Exactly. That has to be Poole’s destination. The location…they must have found it in the databanks of the base they razed.”

Or the spy found out and told them, he thought distantly, but didn’t say. His mind was too busy tripping over everything. For there to be a school, then that meant at least one of the Jedi had survived the purge, and probably someone of Master rank, because he couldn’t imagine someone else taking on such a mission. He was simultaneously relieved and incalculably jealous at the idea that one of his brothers might’ve beaten the programming and saved their Jedi. Officially, the Empire declared the Jedi extinct, and practically speaking it was true, but there had always been whispers that one or two managed to escape the Emperor’s grip. And – for once – it appeared that the rumors were sound.

“If you’re right,” he said, barely able to push the words out past his mounting horror, “then they’ll be butchered. Even the non-Jedi; harboring force-users is a capital offense.”
She nodded. “I know. We can alert the Master’s, but we won’t make it in time to help. I’m sure they have protocols for this situation, but with such a short amount of time…”

_Not all of them will be able to get out._ Cody swore verbally at that and sent his mind reeling on what they could possibly do.

“Rako,” her voice was grave and he gave her his undivided attention, “The Masters…the Empire can’t have them. They know too much, they’re too valuable.”

“And what would you have me do?”

She smoothed out her countenance until it looked eerily similar to the mask he wore himself. “What needs to be done.”

He actually, physically, flinched back from that. _No_, he thought desperately, every muscle in his body straining to repel the suggestion in that statement. _No, I can’t do that again. None of us can. You can’t make us._

“No.”

“Rako…”

“No,” he all but growled the word, “I won’t. We’ll think of something else.”

“I know how horrible this sounds; how cruel it is to ask,” she began tentatively, “But this is _their_ plan. They’ll understand.”

He wanted to laugh. The very idea that she understood just how cruel it was to even _imply_ was laughable, but he had a feeling it would devolve into something so broken that she would think he had finally lost it. Sometimes, he _really_ wished he’d told her he was a clone.

“I’ll take it under advisement.”

She sighed, probably knowing that was as good an answer as she was going to get. “Very well. We’re trying to contact them now. If you’re serious about this alternative plan then I suggest you act fast. You don’t have much time.”

“I’m something of a specialist in FUBAR missions, Lieutenant. We’ll come up with something.”

A small hint of a smile crept up the edges of her mouth. “If anyone can…be careful, Rako. And may the force be with you.”

One day he might be able to hear that phrase without it feeling like someone stabbing him in the chest; that day was not today apparently.

“And you as well, Celese.”

He broke the connection and looked at the time display on his HUD. They’d talked for longer than he had planned and now he had a little over ten and a half hours before they reached Mab and even less time to come up with some way to keep whatever Jedi were on the planet out of Empire hands. He squeezed his eyes closed and took a deep, calming breath.

Out of the battle and into the Zillo pit, it was.

---
“Did you just say what I think you said?”

Cody nodded and Boil’s look of surprise expanded into plain shock. Beside him, Walker and Sero looked equally as blown away by the information he had relayed to them.

“Well…” Crys began, a lost glint to his expression, “that’s nice? That they weren’t all…I mean, that some of them made it.”

“But how? I had that kriffing chip active in my head for years and I never came close to overthrowing the damned thing.”

“Maybe we just weren’t strong enough,” Rush’s soft voice answered from where he was huddled on one of the bunks of the empty living quarters they were using to discuss the situation.

Boil shot him an incredulous glare, but Cody shook his head at him before he could unleash the rant he knew was gathering in his brother’s throat. It wasn’t worth it and they all felt awful enough as it was, there was no need to make it worse. Boil huffed, but backed down without issue.

“None of the details of how or why matter. Right now, there is an unspecified number of Jedi who are in direct danger. Help isn’t going to get there in time, so that makes us the only support they have.”

Boil frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t suppose there’s any kind of plan in place for this?”

“Not one worth talking about.”

“You might as well tell us, Commander,” Walker said, “It can’t be worse than the nothing we have right now.”

Cody let his face go still and just stared at the men. The others returned the stare with confused ones of their own, until Sero’s eyes flew open wide and he took a step backward as if to put distance between himself and his dawning realization.

“No.”

The bald man began cursing vigorously and his violent reaction clued Boil in. His Second blinked rapidly and then his arms fell to his sides limply.

“That’s the worst fucking plan I’ve ever heard, sir. And I’ve heard General Skywalker’s plans.”

Cody sighed. “I know.”

“What plan?” Walker asked cautiously, glancing around at his brothers.

“The Masters in charge are a security liability to the rebellion if they fall into the Emperor’s hands. Apparently, the Jedi decided to remedy that possible contingency with a self-destruct. Or in this case, a mercy kill-order.”

“Fucking Jedi,” Sero said plaintively.

“No,” Rush’s panicked voice cut through the mumbling of the others like a sharp vibroblade, “No. I won’t. I can’t. I can’t do that again…I…I…”

The youngest member of their group doubled over on the cot and starting hyperventilating in earnest, whole body quivering uncontrollably and breaths coming out in harsh, ragged wheezes. Crys
dropped immediately to his knees beside him and began calmly talking him out of the panic attack. The rest of them shifted around him so that some part of each of them was touching Rush in a clear move to ground him; give him something to latch onto.

Rush eventually looked up, eyes wet, but much more in control of his breathing. He glanced at Cody and then away, as if ashamed of his behavior.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Don’t apologize. We all understand and we feel the same way.”

He swept a hand over Rush’s shaggy hair in commiseration and the muscles of the crouched clone released a lot of the tension that had built in his frame. Boil squeezed Rush’s wrist and looked up at Cody despite speaking mostly to Rush, a ruthlessly determined air to his being.

“No Jedi is going to die tomorrow.”

“No,” Cody answered, “they aren’t.”

“Alright, then,” Sero said, a falsely jaunty note to his voice, “so, how in the kriffing hell are six clones going to save a group of Jedi while participating in the invasion to find and kill them?”

“It’s not like we can just wander off without anyone noticing. Potential combat zones are about the only time anyone bothers to pay attention to what we’re doing,” Walker added.

“Jedi aren’t dumb,” Cody began, though they are remarkably well adjusted for a group of highly trained, insane people, “the rebels were contacting them before I left, we have to assume that they’ve gotten the message by now and are well on their way to packing up and shipping out.”

“Maybe they’ll all be gone when we get there?” Rush’s taxed throat croaked out hopefully.

Cody shook his head. “We can’t rely on that. Some of them will almost certainly be gone, but Celese believed – and I’m inclined to agree – that at least a small minority of them might still be in atmo when we touch down. If that’s the case, they won’t be able to risk flying out until we’re distracted or gone.”

“So, we have to find them before anyone else.”

“Okay,” Crys said, a hint of sarcasm creeping into his words. “but when was the last time that we were all put on the same landing team?”

“The last of never,” Sero responded balefully.

“Exactly,” the blond clone said, emphatically pointing a finger, “we’ll be on six different teams, with six different officers and six different groups of troopers. There’s no chance that we can coordinate anything once we’re on the planet’s surface.”

He has a point, he thought and if the voice that said it had a certain familiar, amused cadence to it that was no one’s business but his.

“And, how Cody hated that reasonable tone Boil always used to deliver bad news, “we’re clones. As far as Command knows, we’re chipped clones. They’re probably hoping one of us finds the camp; it’d be a sure-fire way to make sure no one survives.”

“We might have to get rid of the rest of the team, then,” Sero mused, but the expression on his face
was grim.

While it was true that there was a distinct lack of trust or friendliness between the reg-born stormtroopers and batch-born clones, killing people just to get them out of the way wasn’t the kind of thing that sat right with any of them. It was the exact kind of mentality the Empire had that they were fighting against. Besides which, while many of the troopers believed in the Imperial cause, there were still some that had joined simply for the lack of other prospects or familial pressure; executing them would be little above murder.

Well, vod, now what? This time his thought took on a uniquely Rex sounding vibe; which was perfect, he’d always wanted to be haunted by the people he cared about the most. Frustrated, he rubbed viciously at his eyes and tried to think.

The worst thing about this was all the unknown variables. While he was reasonably sure that the Master’s first priority would be to get the younglings off planet, he couldn’t be certain that all of them would be gone and that complicated things; kids always complicated things. (Though, after that mess with the pirates and Grievous, Cody was aware that Jedi kids were maybe built of a different breed). Also, any Jedi that was left would – rightly – have a fight now, ask questions later mentality once they saw stormtroopers and identifying themselves as clones...he had a feeling that if the situation was already out of control that could just inflame it more.

Stars above, sometimes he wished he’d never been sequenced.

Except, then Rex would’ve been alone in having to deal with the combined insanity of the Kenobi, Skywalker and Tano contingent during the war and that sounded like a case of crimes against clones if there ever was one. And who would’ve talked General Kenobi down from some of his more incredulously dangerous schemes if he hadn’t been there? Waxer? Boil? Boil would’ve just asked how much ordinance he should bring and Waxer had had the alarming tendency to think General Kenobi’s plans were good ideas; the man thought dropping his lightsaber in a combat zone was a good idea, if Cody hadn’t been there he’d have been dead the first year.

Maybe what he really wished was that something could be easy for once in his life.

“Won’t work,” Boil said, still with that infuriatingly reasonable tone, “blaster marks are a lot different than lightsaber wounds. Command would know they were killed by stormtroopers.”

“Maybe we can convince them the Jedi had blasters?” Rush questioned, finally sounding normal again.

“Jedi don’t use blasters, they’re uncivilized,” Cody answered absently, mind still trying to parse out all the tangled threads they would have to navigate. When no one spoke, he noticed the newly heavy atmosphere of the room and looked up, only to be greeted with five pairs of wide eyes.

“What?”

Boil shook his head, but the look on his face held a wealth of empathy. “Nothing, vod.”

Cody felt his teeth grind at that. "What?"

“It’s just...” Crys ran a hand through his hair and refused to meet Cody’s eyes, “You sounded an awful lot like the General just then.”

Cody went back over what he said and stilled. How many arguments had he and General Kenobi gotten into over the years about blasters? The words had been practically involuntary; an automatic response to the idea of Jedi and blasters being used in the same sentence.
The General heaved a long-suffering sigh that just kicked Cody’s blood pressure up a notch; if anyone was suffering in this, it was him.

“I’m not going to carry a blaster, Commander. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself; you’d think I’d never fought before in my life.”

Cody resisted the urge to smack the man upside his pretty head. “I never said that you can’t fight, sir, but I’d feel better if you had a reliable weapon on you at all times.”

The General quirked a brow at him. “And, for some reason, my lightsaber doesn’t count?”

“Not,” Cody ground out forcefully, trying to reign in his anger, “when I have the damned thing half the time because you insist on throwing it all over the kriffing battlefield.”

“Half the time? Bit of an exaggeration, isn’t it? It can’t be more than a quarter, surely.”

“General!”

“Cody,” the man’s voice softened, accent making the word almost liquid sounding; Cody had to fight the urge to visibly react to his name being said that way, “You know how much I value your opinion and insight; I rely on you far more than some think I should,” here a strange sort of wistful emotion crossed his fine-boned features, “And I appreciate the concern, but I assure you that there’s no need to worry. I certainly don’t.”

“But why?”

Again, the General’s face contorted briefly into an expression Cody couldn’t decipher, before he smiled. “I have you.”

Cody stopped…everything, really. Breathing. Thinking. His whole body felt numb. Enough so, that he didn’t completely register the brush of what almost seemed like phantom fingers that lingered momentarily against his cheek. By the time he came back to himself, the curious feeling was gone (if, indeed, it had ever been there in the first place) and the General was regarding him with a bemused look.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. “I — thank you, sir.”

The General squeezed Cody’s arm as he walked past him and down the empty hallway of the Negotiator. Then, while Cody was reeling himself back in from the emotional blow, he turned around and gave a careless gesture, accompanied by a wicked grin and Cody knew exactly what was coming even before he said it.

“Besides, you know how I feel about blasters, Commander. They’re far too uncivilized.”

“Right,” Cody said, and even he recognized that he sounded a little lost, “I----”, and then he stopped because he didn’t actually know what to say to that.

“Anyway,” Boil said, deliberately clear voiced, like he could talk over top of the strained tightness of the room, “so we’ve outlined most of the problems we’re facing. Now how the hell are we supposed to counter any of them?”

“I don’t know if we can,” Cody said slowly, mind picking up where it left off and then he had to shush the others when they immediately began voicing their displeasure, “Look, there’s too much we
don’t know, right now. We don’t know who might be left, where they are, what supplies or ships they have…and all of that is a problem, but we’re forgetting the biggest one: Poole.”

He stared at the blank stormtrooper mask of Walker’s discarded helmet sitting at eye level on the opposite top bunk and continued speaking as things fell into place in his mind. “We don’t know what Poole wants. Does he want to capture all of them he can? Kill some of them, and keep the others for the Inquisitors and himself? Will we be in standard teams or will he want to sweep through the place like a wave? No matter what plan we come up with, he could throw it all away with one order. We need a skeleton plan; something that can fit a lot of situations and be improvised if things go south quickly.”

Sero snorted. “Isn’t that what most of our plans were like in the 212th?”

“No,” Boil grinned, “those plans were detailed and planned down to the last man. And then shit would blow up or the clankers threw a supertank at us and the plan became ‘fuck that, take out as many as you can, we’re going in’.”

Cody gave Boil a dubious look, but the other man just shrugged unrepentantly. “Is that not how it went? Or are you telling me that shit on Serilso was what was supposed to happen?”

Cody thought about Trapper and Mix using the reinforced fan belt from a trashed out tank as a bomb slingshot. Patches, Whip and Rue deciding that it was acceptable to divert a waterfall to flood the plains and washing a portion of the battle droids away all the while bogging the tanks down in mud. The wild grin on General Kenobi’s face as he hitched a ride on one of the building sized birds that flew him up to the overhanging ledge that the Separatist Commander was cowering in.

So. Maybe Boil had a point.

“I’ve got a Command meeting with Poole a couple hours before we make landfall, so at least we’ll have some kind of heads up on his side of things. But I think the way to go is incapacitation.”

He gave a pointed look to Walker. Their mechanical expert blinked, then let a toothy smile spread over his countenance.

“What did you have in mind, Commander?”
Telis Poole’s exterior – to Cody’s disgust – did not match his interior. He was fairly young (ages still threw Cody off, but even he could tell the human was younger than most of his peers), average height, but with broad shoulders, space-black hair that always looked immaculate, and dark grey eyes. If he was someone else (literally anyone else) he would have been attractive, but unfortunately, Cody had once seen him laugh at a man begging for the life of his wife and parents and then made him chose which of the three he wanted to live. That kind of thing tended to destroy a person’s physical appeal.

Cody stood to the Admiral’s left and listened with the rigidly impassive face he had perfected over his years in the Imperial Army. Fanned out around him in a loose circle were the Admiral’s other senior officers, only one other who was wearing trooper armor and none of whom were clones. Close to a decade after Order 66 and he still wasn’t completely used to seeing reg-borns where his brothers once stood.

“Jedi,” Captain Allon said with a flick of discontent; he was a sturdy looking man who was normally in charge of the logistical affairs of Poole’s missions, “how many are there?”

“Our intelligence says that there are two of Master level, two Knights and a dozen of potential apprentices. All of whom are hiding in the temperate jungles somewhere north of these mountains,” Poole pointed to a series of snow-capped points on the map; a range of dense looking vegetation spreading out below on its northern side.

“Are they trying to rebuild their temple?” Commander Vequell, a recent transfer, asked warily.

“Perhaps,” Poole murmured, but he didn’t sound like he believed that, “I think it more probable that they took advantage of the Empire’s lack of notice to reestablish a semblance of normalcy. Building a temple would be unwise; our allies on Rulow would’ve seen the construction eventually.”

Rulow, apparently, was the loyalist Imperial planet nearby that Celese had mentioned.

“You said there were other inhabitants?” Commander Yulish was an uncompromising woman in her middle years and Cody didn’t think she had the ability to smile; even when the Empire scored a resounding success, she still managed to look disapproving and hard.

“Around three hundred. Farmers. They won’t be an obstacle.”

“They knowingly protected Imperial traitors,” Captain Forge’s indignant voice all but seethed with malice.

Captain Milo Forge was Cody’s least favorite among Poole’s top subordinates. He was an arrogant man, around the same age as Poole himself, but he lacked the emotional discipline that the Admiral had. He was loyal beyond compare and Cody suspected that was why he was so far up the chain of
command to begin with because as far as he could tell, Forge was a decent fighter, but a below average tactician. He was also petty and jealous. He resented Yulish’s experience, dismissed Lieutenant Clawler as beneath him and thought of Allon as little more than a data-pusher. He was especially obvious in his hatred of Cody; the idea that a mere clone was, technically, his superior officer was almost more than the bigoted man could handle.

The Admiral turned his cool gaze to the furious Captain. “And they will be dealt with accordingly.”

“Admiral –”

“Everyone has a part to play, Captain. Might I remind you that the Jedi are known for their compassion; it’s their greatest weakness. We can exploit that by taking the villagers hostage to lure them out. After we’ve captured the Jedi, their collaborators will reap the consequences of their actions.”

Captain Forge stood down at that, but there was still a vague bristle about his body. In the tense silence, Lieutenant Clawler – the other man in stormtrooper armor and by far the least offensive of the lot – straightened himself to his full height and cleared his throat.

“So, we’re taking the Jedi prisoner, then?”

Poole nodded. “The Masters and Knights take priority of course.”

“Do we have an exact location of the village?”

“No, but considering the topography of the planet, I think the most probable place for a settlement is within this grid here.”

Poole had a section of the jungle singled out and Cody agreed with the man that it was an ideal spot to set up a small community. The broad-leafed trees that appeared to permeate the area looked more spread out and there was a river that bisected the edge of the jungle from the rocky, inhospitable base of the mountains with several smaller tributaries cutting inland along the river’s path. There wasn’t any indication of activity or housing on the map, but they could easily hide further under the trees where the scouting wouldn’t be able to have visual confirmation. How they were going to get to the potential site was a whole other matter; the closest landing zone that he could see was to the south, where there was a large vegetation free vale.

He tried not to think about how the Jedi might’ve gotten off planet.

“Commander Allon, I assume most of our assets would be rendered unusable by the terrain?”

Allon nodded in agreement. “Underbrush on planet’s like these tend to be misleadingly dense and they hide all kinds of things that could trip up narrow base machines and with how thick the upper foliage is… I believe searching by foot may be easier.”

“Very well. With such a small group we shouldn’t need the heavy artillery or tanks anyway. One advance battalion will be fanned out while we search the sector, and another in the rear, ready to move up in support should we need it,” Poole said, his voice indicated that he thought the chance that they would be used was minimal.

“Commander Yulish, I want you to lead the garrison on our flank. Vequell, the left center position, Forge, right center,” Poole nodded at each of his officers in turn, then he settled on Cody with a heavy gaze.

“2224 and Clawler will have the center.”
Considering the likely placement of the village based on the scans, the center would be the first on target and therefore odds were good that if there was resistance that’s who would be struck first. He was a little surprised by that; normally, as Poole’s most trusted field commander, Yulish was given the most heavily fortified area of attack. He took the change of assignment without comment, as he had a feeling he knew why things were being changed around, but he was (apparently) the only one.

“Is that…wise, Admiral?” Yulish’s expression almost showed a hint of confusion; for her it was the equivalent of slack-jawed amazement.

Forge didn’t show her restraint. “You can’t be serious, Admiral! He’s a…the center is the most important position on this mission. We’re going up against **Jedi**, we can’t rely on a **clone** to lead the attack!”

The utter idiocy of that statement almost broke Cody’s durasteel clad control on his own emotions. Of all of them, he was the only one with any practical knowledge of the Jedi; and with his superior reflexes and training he was one of the only troopers who wouldn’t be immediately outmatched in a one-on-one. From that perspective, he was the only one who should take point on this assignment.

Poole obviously agreed with him because the look he shot Forge was pure venom. “Are you questioning my decisions, **Captain**?”

Forge lost some of the color in his face as it dawned on him exactly what he’d said and who to. “I— sir…”

“2224,” Poole spoke over Forge, eyes fixed on the quickly panicking man despite the address, “do you have any objections to my orders?”

“No, sir,” Cody answered, voice calm and level.

“Captain,” Poole continued on, “have you ever fought against a force-user?”

Forge cringed. “No, sir.”

“Have you ever **seen** a force-user fight?”

“No, sir. My homeworld was neutral during the Clone Wars.”

“I have,” Poole said, the darkly malevolent tone of his voice made Cody sit up and take notice instantly, “and they are unlike anything you have ever encountered or ever will. 2224 is a clone, that’s true, but he is also the only one who has extensive experience with them. Commander,” Poole’s grey eyes settled back on Cody, “what can we expect from the **Jedi**?”

Cody internally cringed and sent a silent plea for forgiveness; it may have been necessary for his cover to pretend to despise the Jedi and use his knowledge to the Empire’s advantage, but it always left a sticky taste of bile in the back of his throat. Externally, he just kept his rigid posture and blank expression and began to recite familiar information passively.

“The traitors will each have at least one lightsaber; there are disciplines that require two, so that may be a factor. Highly trained in combat fighting, their sabers can be used for a variety of purposes including deflecting blasters bolts. Superior reflexes, agility and the ability to manipulate both the physical world around them and the minds of the people in the vicinity. While the concept is foreign and unknowable to me, they can also – at times – be given forewarned knowledge by the Force itself.”

“And what, in your opinion, would be the most effective way to fight them?”
Cody wanted to shift anxiously; Poole never asked for his opinion on anything, of course he would start on the one thing he didn’t want anything to do with.

“Overwhelm them, sir. No one except force-users are a match for them individually, but I have seen them fall when they were attacked on all sides without hesitation in unceasing barrages.”

“And hostages?”

“In my experience,” Cody ignored the sick feeling building in his gut, “they valued saving lives above all else.”

Poole nodded in that self-satisfied way that inevitable made Cody’s hatred of the man only grow and faced his other subordinates again.

“Then the plan is set,” he said with a note of finality to it, “Go and prepare your companies and be ready to disembark at 1200 hours. Dismissed.”

The group dispersed with intent and Cody went to put his helmet on and check in with Walker before assembling his given unit, when Poole’s voice halted his progress.

“2224, stay a moment, won’t you?”

Despite the wording, it wasn’t a request and Cody didn’t treat it as one. He turned back towards Poole and ignored the look of contempt Forge threw him as the man passed by and waited for the Admiral to speak.

Poole appeared to be focused on the map still hanging above the meeting table, but Cody had little doubt that his attention was squarely on him. “How do you feel, 2224?”

Cody blinked. “Feel, sir?”

“About this mission.”

Cody was, frankly, befuddled. “I…don’t know what you mean, sir.”

“I know very little of the details of your battlefield experience, Commander, except that you’ve performed admirably since the attempted coup. Still, I wonder…did you serve under a Jedi for the entirety of the Clone Wars?”

Cody fought to remain steady, extremely uneasy at this line of questioning. “Yes, sir.”

“And?”

“Sir?”

Poole huffed impatiently. “This won’t be a problem, will it?”

Cody honestly couldn’t say what Poole was getting at. Did he suspect Cody of harboring some kind of affinity for the Jedi? And if so, why didn’t he just come out and accuse Cody of being a traitor? Did he not know about the chips or was this a test to make sure that said chip was still effective?

“The Jedi are traitors, sir. They betrayed everything I was fighting for and had been created to do. I’m glad the Emperor was able to see through their lies in time.”

Poole faced him for the first time in the conversation, eyes boring into him searchingly. “The Emperor is a great man.”
“Yes,” Cody tried not to gag, “he is.”

A rare upturn of the lips flashed briefly across Poole’s face. “I shouldn’t keep you any longer, Commander, you have work to do. I…appreciate your intel on this operation.”

“Good soldiers follow orders,” Cody answered without hesitation and worked to keep his body flinching from his own words. Poole seemed to relax even further.

“Yes, they do. That will be all, Commander.”

“Sir,” he saluted and did everything he could to keep from hightailing it out of the command deck as fast as his boots could carry him.

Just outside said deck, he nearly ran into Lieutenant Clawler who straightened at the sight of him and saluted smartly.

“Sir,” the taller man said, “should I gather the men?”

Cody nodded. “Tell them to gear up for the terrain and have them assemble in the main hanger to wait for instructions.”

“Sir?”

Clawler was a decent man, and Cody actually thought fairly highly of him. He didn’t seem to be an Empire purist and he was decidedly disturbed by some of the actions command wanted him to fulfill. And he was young – barely more than a shiny – enough that Cody had a feeling he’d been forced into one of the officer academies they touted on Imperial worlds without any choice in the matter. Now, his brown eyes were troubled and Cody could understand why.

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Do we…I mean, with all due respect, sir, but is this a fight we can win?”

*Let’s hope you never say anything like that to Poole, or – force, forbid – Forge, they’ll have you disciplined so fast your head will spin,* Cody thought, somewhat amused. On the outside, he frowned at Clawler’s lack of faith in the cause and watched with relief as his face shut down and became the blank, Imperial mask it should always be in front of officers. *It’s for your own damn good,* he wanted to say.

“This isn’t a force of Jedi, trooper. It’s a few straggling traitors; we’ll have a whole battalion with us, we can and will win this battle.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, get going. I have a couple of things I need to get; I’ll meet you in the hanger.”

Clawler saluted again and turned on a heel to call the men to arms. Cody sighed and made his way in the opposite direction to the armory where Walker was waiting to give him the incapacitation stunners they’d talked about. And hopefully, with any luck, this mission wouldn’t turn into fodder for his nightmares.

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He hated jungles. The humid temperatures always left him feeling sticky and uncomfortable despite the undersuit of his armor having built in therma-cooling technology. It wasn’t helped by the natural
nervousness he was laboring under.

The stormtroopers were spread out in a convex V formation, meaning the only ones he could see were the troopers directly to his left and right, but he knew Clawler was a just a few paces behind him and that the other officers were positioned along the front where Poole wanted them. The underbrush that Allon had mentioned was, indeed, thick and it made the search slow going and because of it, despite their careful steps, they were making more noise than any of them wanted.

Somewhere to his left, Crys and Rush were both part of Vequell’s unit, which made them the closest vod’e to him. Boil and Sero were in Yulish’s and Walker – to his chagrin – had ended up in Forge’s. Sero had clapped Walker on the back in commiseration before they fell into their lines and Boil had thrown Cody a look and shook his head from his place on the flank. The group hadn’t been able to meet up as one before they’d been called to the deployment hanger, but each of them did have a brand new, micro-small spatial stunner in their possession. Cody had his tucked just underneath his left vambrace, ready to be used if needed.

Walker had made himself an even nicer version that could wipe out the communication devices and HUD displays of most of the battalion with one push of a button. He’d tried to explain the theory behind it, but Cody’s technical knowledge had been taxed with the internal jammer he’d used to save Celese years ago; this was beyond his comprehension completely. As he told a grumbling Walker; as long as it worked, he couldn’t care less about the intricate pieces of its makeup.

They’d been marching for a good hour when they reached the first tributary that marked the beginning of what both he and Poole thought might be the outskirts of the settlement. It was a shallow creek more than anything, barely came up to his mid-shin and was maybe the width of three men, but wading through water of any length was never fun in full armor.

“Lieutenant.”

“Yes, Commander?”

“We’ve reached the first marker; have the men be on the lookout for any signs of activity and report to me.”

“Of course, sir.”

He heard Clawler reissue his orders through the battalion wide comm as he pushed through the water and then pulled himself up on the inner bank. The trees were noticeably more spread out ahead, and streaks of sunlight were pouring down in small pools through the thinned foliage. It gave the area a kind of ethereal look that Cody had rarely seen in his planet hopping; it was far too beautiful to be poisoned by the Empire’s presence.

The battalions progress sped up as the jungle floor was less packed with debris and the tree roots were more visible. Still, an almost pervasive sense of stillness and quiet reigned over the place and the further inland they went, they more it set Cody’s internal alarms ringing.

Fifteen agonizing minutes later, Cody stopped and held up a hand to halt the advance. There, just within sight, was a series of roofs. He took a deep breath and made an effort to calm his racing heart. He turned and motioned for Clawler to join him at the front. The lanky man did and immediately saw what he did.

“The village?”

“Looks like,” he murmured, then switched on his comm. “I have eyes on the village; a klick north,
just past the second water marker. Eyes open, defenses up.” He then held up his hand again and twirled a finger and motioned forward to restart the march.

The prevailing feeling of dread that had been bubbling in his gut, simmered over the closer they got to the target. The silence persisted and Cody felt his muscles tighten with the increasing notion that something was very wrong here. He glanced to his left and tried (with no luck) to pick out which of the blank, white faces were Crys and Rush; he wanted to know if either of them felt the same kind of disconnect that he did.

When he and the rest of the center position reached the edge of the village it was without fanfare. The main drag was empty; homes of various size, but with the same integral structure stretched out, but none of them appeared to be in use. Chimneys were smoke-free, porches were bare and there wasn’t a rustle of movement or sound coming from any of the side alleys or buildings. Stormtroopers were checking doors and windows (one even peered down a community well) to no avail. For a moment, the tension in Cody’s body washed away and he thought maybe he and Celese were wrong. Perhaps the Jedi managed to evacuate both themselves and the villagers before they arrived.

Then, the afternoon sun shifted and he saw a vague – almost invisible – shimmer near the feet of one of the troopers. The man in question passed through the line like it wasn’t even there and Cody’s heart stopped.

“Get dow---”

The world exploded.

Darkness.

Then:

Pain. Breathless, all-encompassing pain.

His ears were ringing horribly and the vibration of it made him want to retch. His eyes were clenched shut as tight as he could get them and he feebly tried to move his useless body.

(“Commander! Commander, can you hear me?”)

With monumental effort, he tried to drag a few, warbling breaths into his starved lungs. He blinked open his eyes, only to squeeze them back closed when a blinding light pushed the bile to the back of his throat.

(“Commander! Cody!”)

Slowly, he pushed the palm of his right hand on the ground, raked his fingers into the packed dirt and attempted to shift his body onto his knees.

(“Cody, damn you, look at me!” A hand was cradling the side of his head and it burned.)

He pulled his other arm around to help balance and kept his head down.

(“Cody, force help me, if you don’t come back right now…” Blood? He could feel blood, rivulets of it sliding through the hand trying to keep it in and down his cheek and jaw. He was hit?)

He breathed.

(“Cody…please…please, wake up.”)
Hesitantly, he opened his eyes again. The blinding light of before was gone and with the burst of energy he got from the relief, he used his arms to push himself up into an upwards crouched position, weight shifted forward on the balls of his feet.

(“Come on, vod, this is no place to take a nap.” He knew that voice. Kix? The 501st was here? Wasn’t that where Rex had been assigned? Agh, he’d never let him hear the end of it.

“Wh’t ‘appned?”

“One of the tanks was blown sky-high and some of the shrapnel caught you in the head.”

“Will he be okay?” He knew that voice too, it was the one that kept yelling at him earlier.

“He’ll be fine, General. Head wounds bleed like hell – probably have some scarring though.”

“Scarring is fine. Scarring means he’s alive.” General Kenobi. He wanted to curse at that, he’d only been the 212th’s Commander for a few months; he’d wanted so badly to make a good impression on his Jedi. He made an attempt to sit up, but two pairs of hands were keeping him down.

“’m fine.”

“You’re really not, Commander.”

Cody pushed futilely at Kix’s hands. “’m still here.”

“Yes, you are,” Kenobi again, and his voice had lost that angry, panicked edge.

He opened his eyes and was met with his General’s bright blue gaze. He was blotting out the worst of the sun’s glow, and it gave him a kind of inhuman backdrop and lit up his red hair in a fiery halo. He stared at the reds and orange’s in fascination; before he’d seen the General he didn’t know hair could even be that shade. Weakly, he lifted a hand and brushed that one stubborn lock away from Kenobi’s face; he needed a haircut.

“Yo’re on fire, Gen’rel.”

“Okay,” Kix’s voice sounded amused now and he’d choked a little on the word; strange that, “time to get you to a medbay.”

Kenobi squeezed his hand – when had he taken it? Everything was so fuzzy – and a relieved smile planted itself on his face. The rumors had been true; he really was stunning.

“Rest, Commander,” the General said, ordered more like, “and we’ll talk about your propensity for self-sacrifice later.”

“Okay.” Kix injected him with something and he felt himself sinking back down into the darkness.)

“I’m still here,” Cody muttered to himself and shook his head, forcing the memory from his shaky head. When he could think again, he realized the ringing had gone down a few decibels to manageable and he forced himself to focus on what was happening around him.

It was chaos.

Bodies of his fellow troopers were scattered on the ground and there was a series of craters lining the road where the blasts had detonated. No one else was moving, but he didn’t know if that meant they were all dead or if he was simply the first one to come back to himself. In the far and near distance,
he could hear the sounds of a firefight, blaster shots, grenades exploding and even some of the dull thwacks that went with hand-to-hand combat. The comms were a mess, now that he could hear them; Yulish’s voice was screaming orders and was occasionally drowned out by Forge’s mix of furious curses and orders to retreat.

He reached over and picked up the blaster he’d dropped when the bombs had knocked him out and slowly dragged his aching body into a stand. As he was reorienting his senses and looking around for Clawler; just the faintest whiff of noise told him that someone was sneaking up behind him. He waited, muscles loose, until he felt the movement of displaced air and then he struck.

He dropped down and kicked one leg out, sweeping the feet out from under the hooded assailant. He watched, blaster poised to fire, as the person fell and went immediately into a roll, then popped up with the kind of athletic grace he’d only see one kind of people possess. It was enough to let his guard waver, which allowed the other the opening they needed.

The Jedi (and it had to be a Jedi, no one had those kind of reflexes) flung a near-by metal barrel with a force throw at his head and then, while he ducked to protect himself, charged him. Cody barely managed to block the first strike, but felt the full force of the second as his own move was used against him and the Jedi kicked his knee out from under him. He dodged the punch aimed at his throat, grabbed the passing arm and twisted it until he was able to position his weight and momentum and throw the Jedi over his shoulder and down to the ground behind him. The Jedi sat up, shook its head until the hood fell off and revealed the familiar green/blue crest of a Rodian. The Jedi, stood, faced him with star-lit blue-black eyes watching him warily and drew their lightsaber.

Cody straightened up as well, and cautiously brought his hands up in a peaceful gesture. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

Those interesting eyes narrowed, but the Jedi stood their ground without moving. “You’re a clone.”

“Yes.” He took a step forward and then stopped when they just raised the lightsaber in response.

The Rodian frowned, as much as (she? He thought the voice sounded female) they were able. “Clones killed the Jedi.”

Cody closed his eyes briefly. “We had chips implanted that we didn’t know about. It…made us lose ourselves.”

The Jedi’s arms lowered fractionally. “You know about the chips.”

Cody took another pace forward and this time the Jedi didn’t do anything. “Mine malfunctioned years ago. I work with the rebellion now. I’m here to help you and anyone else that’s still on planet.”

The Jedi seemed to waver. “Why should I—”

Both he and the Jedi were knocked off balance by a thunderous explosion a half a klick behind the village. Cody looked back and saw a huge plume of smoke rising from where Yulish’s unit was. He felt a spike of fear for Boil and Sero race through him and even took an involuntary step in that direction before his body caught up to his mind. Boil and Sero were tough bastards, they could take care of themselves; he had a mission and Boil especially would tear him a new one if he came this close and didn’t try to complete it.

He turned back to the Jedi, only to see the flap of their robe disappear into the outer jungle on the far side of the main drag of the village. He cursed, stuck his blaster in its holster and took off after them at a sprint.
He was able to just keep them within sight until they dropped down a sharp incline and seemed to
disappear into the ether. He slid down the embankment and then looked around with extreme
cautions. It was just a nook of open space in the jungle, a small clearing really, but the corps of trees at
the boundary of the space seemed...oddly positioned to him. He went to investigate it but stopped
abruptly when he felt the buzzing heat of a lightsaber appear at his throat.

“Turn around.”

He kept his hands pointedly away from his weapon and did as the accented voice asked.

A blue lightsaber was held at his neck in what were obviously practiced hands and he stared at the
slim, teal-skinned arm and hand that was attached to the handle. Something was poking at his brain,
but he couldn’t quite figure out what. The woman’s face was obscured by her own hood, but she
seemed familiar to him.

“Why did you follow us alone?”

“I’m your rebellion back-up,” he said and hoped that Celese had told them that an inside contact
would be there to offer assistance.

The female Jedi flinched at the sound of his voice. “The rebellion sent a clone to help us.”

“They don’t know I’m a clone.”

“So, if you are lying to the rebellion, why should I believe you are telling the truth about helping
us?”

“My chip stopped working.”

The arm tightened. “Convenient.”

Cody suppressed a growl. “How can I convince you?”

The Jedi was quiet for a moment. “What is your call sign?”

“Rako.”

Even though he couldn’t see her face, he felt she was surprised to hear that. “You were a part of Obi-
Wan’s 212th. Or, perhaps, Skywalker’s 501st.”

“Yes.” He refused to specify which.

“Lucky you,” she murmured softly after a tense moment, “that I can sense your honesty.” She
powered down her saber and took a step back from him.

Without flourish, she reached up and pushed the hood of her cloak down and he stared. Teal skin,
brown eyes and a beautiful face stared back at him, lekku contained behind her. He wasn’t ashamed
to say he gaped a little at seeing someone he thought long gone.

“General Secura.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Three things: One, later tonight I'll be posting the first of a series of interludes that will be from different rebellion people so we see a little bit of the other side's dealings that Cody doesn't know. These will be every three or four chapters, so feel free to skip them or read them in your own time/order that you choose. Two, the updating might take a couple extra days from here on out because there are plot elements I still need to sort through. And three - Happy Halloween! For those of you that celebrate it tomorrow, have fun!

In the months immediately following his chip’s failure, he had tried to track down his fellow Commanders in the Empire’s databanks as discretely as he possibly could. As he’d looked, he had imagined what they would’ve done if any of them had been abruptly snapped back into reality like him. Wolfe and Gree, he’d figured with a smile, would’ve destroyed as much shit as they could, as loudly as they could, all the while giving the Empire a giant ‘fuck you’. Ponds maybe would’ve taken the route he eventually took; becoming a source for the rebellion and subtly maneuvering forces from within. Grey, he’d remembered sickly, had had a Padawan Commander, he’d likely never totally recover. He’d had a feeling that Rex may have been smart enough to have the damned thing removed after everything that happened with Tup and Fives, though he’d never been able to confirm it.

And then there was Bly.

Rex was always the vod he was closest too, but Bly was the one he understood the most. He knew the way Bly used to look at General Secura, the off-duty, rotgut soaked ramblings that Cody listened too with all the solemnity they deserved. At the time, he had almost hoped that if Bly were still alive, that he never remembered. He wouldn’t have wished what he was feeling on any of his brothers, but especially not one who understood what it was like to look at their General and see their entire future. He’d been half relieved never to have found any trace of Bly in the system.

As he stared in stupefied shock at General Secura’s somewhat entertained face, he thought of Bly. Questions crowded into the forefront of his mind; was Bly able to beat the chip? Had he had it removed before the purge happened? Was he on a rebellion base somewhere right now waiting for the Jedi to make it back safe and sound? No, the last question was stupid; if Bly were a part of the rebellion he would be right here standing beside Secura.

“General, I –”

“I am not a General,” the Twi’lek woman said, voice firm, “But if you insist on a title, Master will suffice.”

“Master,” he corrected and then stopped, unsure what else to say.

Secura continued to look almost amused. “How long has your chip been broken?”

“Close to five years.”
She widened her eyes in surprise. “That is a long time to be hidden inside the Empire.”

“It is what it is,” he said and then cleared his throat, “Master Secura, as much as I’d like it, I don’t think we have much time to waste.”

The openness of her expression shut down with a calculating gleam overtaking it. “You’re right. We need to get to the last of our ships before the distraction is voided.”

Before he could inquire as to where exactly said ship was, they both turned towards the ledge he’d slid down earlier. There was clearly someone – multiple someones – approaching their position and he motioned silently for her to hide. Without delay, she seemed to melt from the clearing and out of sight of the canyon line near the corps of trees he had noticed before. He withdrew his blaster and waited.

Just over the ridge, two stormtroopers appeared.

“Identify, yourselves,” Cody barked, pretending to sound frustrated.

The trooper on the left lifted his helmet up until he could make out Crys’ face. The blond clone mustered up a bit of a smile. “It’s just us, Commander. Me and Rush, I mean.”

Cody let out a breath. “And you’re alone?”

“Yes, sir,” Rush answered, while Crys let his helmet fall back into place.

“You’re sure you weren’t followed?”

“Positive,” Crys said and Cody could almost hear the wicked grin in his voice, “Walker’s cooked up a kind of mess back there. Communication is shot to shit and HUD displays are wonky as hell.”

“Then how’d you find me?”

“Walker apparently put a tracking device and private channel comms in those spatial stunners.”

Cody blinked. “That was...thoughtful of him.”

“Yeah,” Crys said, with a note of fond exasperation, “he’s a real piece of work. So, he contacted us, said we were closest to you. Figured we’d help. If you needed it, sir.”

“Well, you’re in luck,” he turned back to where he’d seen Secura disappear and made an all clear motion with his hand, “You’d better get down here.”

The two men walked down the incline slowly and then Rush tripped himself up when Secura walked out of the mid-afternoon shadows like a ghost.

“General Secura! You’re alive!”

Secura graced their youngest vod with a tentative smile. “It appears that news of my death was widespread among the Empire. And it’s Master, now, my friends. I assume that like your Commander, your chips have become defective?”

“Yes, sir, uh, I mean, Master.”

Secura nodded and then turned to face the corps of trees and waved. “It’s alright, Ganodi, it’s safe.”

“Master,” the Rodian from earlier said and walked out from behind the trees, saber held in her hand
loosely.

“The little ones as well.”

On either side of the Rodian – Ganodi, that sounded almost familiar to Cody, though he wasn’t sure how or from where – two heads popped up at the address. One of them, the smaller of the two, ran for Secura and watched the three of them with a furiously suspicious expression. She was a Twi’lek herself, maybe eight or nine years old, with brown eyes and skin the color of milky caff with accents of teal on her lekku and around the eyes. Ganodi and the other youth (who appeared a year or so older), a human male, walked more cautiously to Secura’s side. Both younglings had lightsaber’s holstered at their sides.

“Right,” Cody said to break the uneasy silence coming from the other Jedi and the awkward awe practically echoing off his brothers, “You said something about a ship?”

“Yes,” Secura replied seriously, “It’s only a small, old passenger line, but it’s been upgraded with cloaking technology just for this kind of situation. Unfortunately, it’s docked at a small valley around the corner of Mt. Olveren.”

“Let me guess, it’s to the south? Near the Empire landing zone?”

Secura twisted her lips in grim awareness. “Something like that. It is out of sight at present, but once we lift off…”

“Won’t the cloaking keep it out of detection?”

“Yes, but while the cloak is in place, our weapons are useless and the lightdrive can only be activated outside of stealth mode. So, we will need to be extremely careful in our departure.”

“How far out are we from it?”

“A couple of klicks, more if we have to go around the village.”

“It’s a nightmare back there, sir,” Crys said warily, “We heard the explosion in the village and then all kriffing hell broke loose. Villagers jumped down on us from the trees and just kind of appeared behind us too. Vequell told us to push toward the village, find out if any of the center were alive. But Walker said Forge was retreating and Yulish had fallen back to create a perimeter for the back-up battalion.”

Cody gripped his blaster a little tighter. “Is everyone alive?”

“Oh yeah, Walker confirmed. Then we heard Sero call him an ass and Boil was yelling something about Geonosis? I’m not sure, sir, it was kind of chaotic, but they’re alive.”

Cody breathed a sigh of relief. “Did Walker say how long we’ve got before the knock out becomes suspicious?”

“He says he could keep it up for awhile,” Crys answered, “Said that the villagers were actually helping with the plan because some of them were wearing jamming radios, so if it takes longer than normal, the blame will just be put on them.”

Cody turned back to Secura. “So, what’s the plan, Gen—Master.”

She pondered that for a moment. “If the village is cut off, then the shortest route left to us is through the old mine.”
Cody really didn’t like the sound of that. “Is that safe?”

Secura looked down at the young Twi’lek girl and smiled softly. “As safe as it can be. Expediency is required; if your support battalion acts quickly, then we do not have much time before the people are defeated.”

“Ah, with all due respect,” Rush asked, “but why are they fighting? They have to know it isn’t going to go well.”

The Rodian Knight scoffed. “We got most of them off-world before you showed up. These are the ones without family’s who refused to leave. They said the Empire would have to pry their home from them if they wanted it.”

Cody felt a surge of pride and understanding at that. And judging by how the fighting had sounded, they were certainly making it count.

Crys echoed his sentiment with a low whistle. “Impressive.”

“Lead the way,” Cody said, gesturing up the side of the ravine. Secura nodded and then all four of the Jedi proceeded to leap and somersault through the air to the top of the ledge. Cody rolled his eyes. Showoffs. He turned to Crys and Rush.

“Well, get moving. And while we’re at it, why don’t you show me how to operate this secret comm unit Walker forgot to tell us about.”

As their small group made it closer to the edge of the settlement, the noise of battle picked back up. Unfortunately, those sounds were further interspersed then they had been when he had first left the area and Cody felt like there was a ticking clock just counting down the minutes they had until the last of the villagers had either been killed or captured. Secura clearly agreed with his worry, because she picked up the pace of their march.

They stopped just on the outskirts of the village and Cody watched with a certain amount of dread at the increased presence in the streets. Several of the stormtroopers had dents or scorch marks decorating their armor and they were very careful in where they stepped. The carnage he had left behind when he ran after Ganodi was mostly cleared away and only a few bodies still lay where the blasts had initially happened. The fighting they could still hear was noticeably farther away.

“We have to pass by,” Secura said, frowning with agitation, “the entrance to the mine is just a few meters past. The jungle will camouflage our movement at this distance, but if any of them make it to the edge of the wilderness they may be able to spot us before we make it to the mine.”

Cody looked over to where she had gestured they had to go and glanced back at the milling stormtroopers. They were making good progress through the abandoned community and odds were that she was right; one or two might see their retreat. He shifted off to the side and commed Walker as quietly as he could.

“Walker, what’s the fighting like now?”

“Slowing,” the other man replied promptly, he couldn’t hear much background noise which just confirmed Walker’s assessment.

“Do you know where the majority of the battalion is right now?”
“Most of us are bogged up at the flank; it’s where the last of the hold-outs are. Vequell’s forces aren’t running into much resistance now, so most of them have either been moved over to our side of the battlefield or were sent to scope out the village itself.”

“So, the left is thinned out?”

“Quite a bit, yeah. Clawler’s looking for you, sir. He keeps asking the comms if anyone’s seen you.”

Cody winced. “Alright, good to know. I’ll get back to you, Walker.”

“Sir.”

He moved back to his place beside Secura who was looking at him assessingly.

“What do you have in mind?”

“We get to the other side here and once we’re there, you and the others will continue on to the mine. My men will lead the closest troopers on a bit of a runaround.”

She watched him steadily for a few seconds then nodded. “Very well. I trust your judgement, Commander.” Without any more talk, she ducked low and guided the small troupe through the thick brush as quickly and quietly as possible.

Cody turned back to Crys and Rush.

“I need the two of you to make sure none of those troopers come this way. I don’t care what you tell them, just make sure they either stay in the village or go in the exact opposite direction.”

Both men saluted in synchronized movements. Crys reached over and squeezed Cody’s arm afterwards.

“We got this, Commander. You just get them to their ship.”

Cody nodded, then followed behind Secura’s group. While we went by, he watched the stormtroopers movements closely, looking for even the slightest sign that they had seen anything. None of them even so much as glanced in their direction.

Once on the other side and back out of sight, Ganodi herded the younger Jedi towards the mine entrance. Secura took a short moment to look at Cody.

“We will wait for you, but do not delay yourself long.”

“I’ll catch up,” he confirmed, making sure he sounded certain.

Secura inclined her head in acknowledgement and then slunk away to the other three as they made their way over to the open doorway of the exit route. Cody turned backward and motioned the go-ahead signal to Crys and Rush across from him. He received a quick gesture in return and he watched as both men stood up and rushed out of their hiding spot and into the settlements main drag with faked alarm.

“Lieutenant Clawler!” Crys cried, faux worry in his harried voice, “Sir, it’s about the Commander!”

A quick shuffle, then Cody heard Clawler’s voice through the main comm. “Trooper, report.”

“Sir, we saw the Commander chasing a Jedi and when we tried to follow –”
Cody didn’t stick around to listen to anymore of the charade. He spun on a heel and quickly sprinted after the Jedi who had almost reached safety. All three of them had disappeared into the dark of the mine when he reached the entrance himself. Just out of sight from the doorway, he spotted four bright lightsabers in shades of blue and green lighting the way into a hallway.

“Ganodi, please cover our backs. Commander, I would have you with me,” Secura said once he was standing with the group.

“Of course, Master,” the Rodian said and let Cody pass her on his way to the Jedi Master’s place at the point. The two younglings fell into place in the protected middle without complaint, though the look on the Twi’lek girl’s face said a lot about her feelings on the matter.

“This shaft will lead us straight through to the where our ship is located.”

Cody brought his blaster up. “We’ll follow your lead, Master.”

Secura set out down the long passage and the rest followed as closely as was safe in her footsteps. Cody kept his weapon pointed ahead and took in the mine as they walked. The rock of the mountain was pitted and hollowed out in places, but the structure holding the mine in place seemed sound. None of the metal beams were rusted or damaged beyond what was probably normal in an operation as dangerous as mining, and the ground beneath their feet was smooth and beaten even after years of disuse. The only terrible thing about it was the smell, a dose of animal excrement and dead, musty air.

They continued in relative silence, though when Cody glanced over at Secura, he noticed that she kept looking back at the Twi’lek girl with an almost nervous being. The girl, for her part, was stealing glances at him, strangely enough, with a kind of hopefully curious look on her face. Cody didn’t know what to think of that and when he peered over at Secura again, he was met with her own saddened gaze.

He turned his attention back to the front and tried to disregard the strangeness of it all. The quiet persisted until Cody could just make out a dim light that signaled the end of the tunnel. Secura picked up her pace and by virtue, the rest of them followed. Just at the end of the passage itself was an expanded chamber with discarded mining barrels and to the right was another passage which led back into the heart of the mountain. Outside the open doorway was a decent sized, flat area; big enough to fit the kind of small ship Secura had mentioned earlier. Said ship must had been cloaked, because mostly it looked like empty space.

Well, except the four confused stormtroopers who were facing the nothing in front of them and carefully reaching out to touch the void in awe.

“Shit,” he heard Ganodi mutter behind him and whole-heartedly agreed with the sentiment.

The group shuffled over to the other corridor to better stay out of sight and talk without being heard by the troopers outside. Secura shrugged out of her cloak and rolled her shoulders in anticipation.

“I will handle them. Commander, you and Ganodi stay here.”

The Knight looked mildly perturbed by that, but both younglings seemed outraged. Neither got to voice those opinions though because the look Secura sent them was so fiery it could have melted rock.

“No objections.”

“At least let me radio my men and make sure it’s none of them,” Cody argued. Secura waved a hand.
“Be quick.”

Cody tapped the private comm again. “Walker, you have visual on all of the vod’e?”

“Boil and Sero are in front of me, sir. Last I heard, Cry and Rush were ‘looking for you’ in the northern jungle.”

Cody relaxed at that. “Remind me; if I use this stunner will anything happen to my own HUD?”

“It’ll fritz,” Walker said with a clear shrug in his tone, “Sorry. I didn’t have time to tune it and filter out specific frequencies.”

“It’s fine. Just wanted a head’s up.”

“Sure thing, Commander. The Jedi safe yet?”

“We’re getting there.”

“Well, just so you know, sir, the fighting’s pretty much done. Admiral Poole has been notified.”

Cody cursed. “Alright, thanks.”

“Anytime, sir.”

Cody looked at Secura. “I have a spatial stunner that I can focus to cut off their comms and blackout their HUD’s. All you’d have to do is knock them out from there.”

Secura powered down her lightsaber and clipped it to her waist. “At your mark, Commander.”

They moved to the side of the exit and peered out at the still befuddled stormtroopers. Cody pulled the small device from under his vambrace. Secura nodded her go-ahead and he pressed the button just as one of the troopers appeared ready to use his comm. Immediately after he did so, the HUD on his helmet went staticky and then died completely. He only heard Secura leave the mine and the short, precise cracks as she efficiently laid the men out.

“Clear,” Secura’s voice called to them from outside.

Cody felt the others pass by him, then he pulled his own helmet off and walked out to be greeted with an invisible ramp opening and a seemingly floating ship interior. The four stormtroopers were laying on the ground some feet away; still, but breathing.

“I’ll go start the engines,” Ganodi said and walked into the ship and disappeared; presumably on her way to the pilot’s chair.

The two younglings followed, but the Twi’lek girl stopped at the top of the ramp and looked back at him.

“You’re a clone?”

Cody nodded, the breeze was drying the sweat on his face nicely. “I am.”

The girl studied him intently. “You don’t have any tattoos.”

Cody blinked, surprised. “No. But many of my brothers do.”

She pondered that, then nodded as if confirming something to herself. “Thank you, Uncle.”
Cody watched, flummoxed, as she too disappeared into the ship. He looked over at Secura and she was watching the girl leave with a very peculiar expression. After a moment, she turned to him and sighed.

“She’s mine.”

Cody blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“She’s my daughter.”

“Oh,” Cody said, beyond confused. Jedi didn’t have families, right? But maybe that had changed with the rise of the Empire. “What’s her name?”

Secura shifted. “Blayara. After her father. She’s called Yara for short.”

Cody’s mind felt like it had short circuited along with his HUD. Her father. Her father. For fuck sakes, she’d called him uncle. He stared at Secura disbelievingly.

“How?”

Secura flinched at his name, but a sad smile seemed to involuntarily appear at the same time. “Yes. It was only the once; I didn’t even know until after…”

This time it was Cody who flinched. “I’m sorry.”

She turned from him, gazing at nothing and crossed her arms over her chest. “Don’t. It was not the vod’e’s fault. And anyway, Bly saved my life.”

“How?”

“I was always especially entuned to Bly’s thought patterns and emotions even before we bonded. He was a grounding force during the war; something that kept the pain of it further away. Steady. I was facing a field when the order came, and for a split second I felt his horror and then nothing but seething malice. It startled me, and I reacted instinctively. I took one blaster shot to the shoulder and another to the lower back, before I managed to throw myself into the fields stalks and lose them. It was after I was found by the remnants of the Jedi and given medical attention that I was informed of the pregnancy.”

She smiled softly at Cody’s amazement. As soon as he was able, he pulled himself into some kind of semblance of propriety. Bly had never told him that he and Secura had slept together; but then, it must’ve been at the end of the war, and Cody was with the rest of the 212th scouring the galaxy for hints of Grievous and Dooku at that point; he hadn’t seen Rex much then, let alone any of his other brothers.

(Bly downed his shot with all the ease that came with ingesting subpar liquor for the better part of three years. “Do you think we fucked up somewhere?”

Cody drank his own shot and wiped at his mouth. “What?”

“I’m serious,” Bly said and waved a hand expansively in the air between them, “do you think we did something on Kamino to deserve this? Did we insult the force somehow and that’s why we’ve been saddled with this mess?”

“You’re not making any sense, vod,” Cody answered.
Bly scoffed. "This. No one else has to deal with this. Rex got a little sister out of this. Wolfe got a
krieffing father. Ponds got, I don’t know, a sabacc buddy,” here Cody laughed, “But what did we
get?”

"Trouble?” Cody said wryly.

Bly pointed at him. “Exactly. Trouble. I just keep thinking that there must be a reason that I was
assigned to her. Someone in command who knew how this would turn out and did it to laugh at
me.”

Cody poured them both new shots. “She is beautiful, Bly. Anyone could have been in your position.”

Bly snorted. “You like beards and insanity, what do you know?”

They both went silent at that and threw back their drinks with almost complete unison. Bly rubbed at
his face with an almost vicious fervor afterwards. The tattooed man looked over at Cody with a lost
look on his face; he sympathized with the feeling.

“I don’t deserve her,” Bly said quietly. “But there isn’t a sith-damned thing anyone could do or say
about it if she wanted me back. I’d fight the krieffing council if that’s what it’d take.”

“Of course you deserve her,” Cody said as gently as he was able, “But they’re Jedi. And Jedi…
don’t.”

“Unless your name is Skywalker.”

“Unless your name is Skywalker,” Cody agreed. He poured another set of shots.)

Cody exhaled shakily. “I’m still sorry.”

She laughed faintly. “And it still isn’t your fault, Commander. But, I wonder if I might ask a favor of
you?”

Cody nodded readily. “Anything I’m able to do, I will.”

“Bly is alive.”

That pulled Cody up short. “With all due respect, Gen—Master Secura, how can you know that?”

“I can sense it; Jedi so rarely bond deeply enough to have that kind of awareness of someone else,
but Bly and I did. Do. If he died, I have little doubt that I would feel it.”

Cody was, frankly, at a loss for words. “And what do you want me to do?”

“Find him,” Secura said as the the hum of the ships engines started up.

“Sir,” Cody said helplessly, “That might be impossible. I wouldn’t be able to guarantee anything.”

“I’m aware, Commander. But you have access to records I don’t. And I know it’s dangerous, but…
he deserves to know his daughter. And she deserves to know him as more than the stories I can give
her.”

Cody closed his eyes at that. Gripped his helmet a little harder. “I can’t promise anything. But I’ll
try.”

He opened his eyes and met Secura’s suspiciously damp brown ones. She graced him with an
appreciative upturn of her lips.

“It’s all I ask, Commander, thank you.”

He shook his head ruefully. “Don’t thank me yet. Tell Ganodi to be careful and use the mountains to
shield yourself until you get out of atmo. Avoid going near Rulow; I imagine that they’ve been
alerted that not everything has gone to plan and they may be looking for stragglers.”

Secura nodded absently, mind already planning an undetectable escape route. Cody glanced over at
the still-out stormtroopers and winced as an idea came to him. It was probably for the best.

“Also, if I could ask my own favor, sir.”

Secura focused back on him. “Of course.”

“Hit me.”

She looked at him disbelievingly. “Hit you?”

Cody grimaced. “A black eye would make it look better for me when I report that you escaped.
Maybe a lightsaber burn, too? It needs to seem like I at least tried to bring you down.”

Secura had a highly skeptical look on her face, but she nodded in agreement all the same. “Very
well.”

She drew her lightsaber and gently brought it across the armor covering his torso at a diagonal so that
it singed and bit into the armor enough to look like he had narrowly missed a fatal strike. She
powered down the weapon and then eyed his face carefully.

“Brace yourself, Commander.”

He shut his eyes and tried to do just that. The punch when it came was solid and hurt like hell;
glancing off his eye and cheek and banging painfully into his nose. He was grateful she didn’t pull it
at all, even if part of his mind was cursing at the feel of it. He peered over at her as she lowered her
now loose fist, an apologetic look to her face. He cracked a smile.

“Thanks.”

She rolled her eyes. “Vod’e. Always so reckless with your own beings.”

“We learned from the best.”

A shadowed kind of acknowledgment passed over her features. “I shall take that as a compliment.”

She turned and stepped onto the ramp, then faced him again. “Good luck, Commander. May the
force be with you.”

He inclined his head in farewell and watched as she turned to move into the ship and the ramp closed
behind her so that the only trace of the ship in front of him was the soft whirr of the engines as it took
off. Once even that was out of his range of perception, he sighed and slung his helmet back on. The
HUD was basically up and running again and the planet seemed silent and still all around him.

He walked over to the fallen troopers and kicked at the nearest one until the man groaned groggily.

“Get up, trooper.”
“Sir,” the other said and then noticed his surroundings. “What happened?”

“You tell me.”

He moved to pull himself up and accidentally elbowed the trooper next to him in the head, which woke him up with a pained hiss. Cody went to the other two and kicked their feet until they too had been roused. Once the four were back on their feet, they glanced at Cody with a distinctly wary hold to their bodies. One of them couldn’t seem to lift his head beyond the black lightsaber burn on his armor.

“We were attacked,” the first of the quartet answered, still shaking his head, “our HUD’s went offline and then…it must have been a Jedi.”

“Oh,” Cody said, sarcasm creeping into his voice, “You don’t say.”

They straightened at his tone. One of the others nodded. “We take full responsibility for our failure, sir.”

Cody shook his own head at that and waved a hand at the burn. “Be glad you didn’t engage them. You’d be dead if you had.”

With that, he flicked his head back towards the jungle. “Get moving; I think the battle’s done and you need to report to your commanding officer.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” they said in unison and then began moving back – presumably – the way they came. As the first three disappeared past the treeline, the fourth trooper stopped and faced Cody hesitantly.

“Sir. I think they had a cloaked ship.”

Cody sighed internally. “You think?”

“There was something there,” he pointed into the small clearing, “I’m sure of it.”

“Alright,” Cody said, “Include it in your report, then. Now go.”

“Sir,” the trooper said and saluted, then rushed to join his squadmates.

Cody rubbed the outside of his helmet wearily and then flinched when it pressed against his bruising cheekbone. With heavy steps he followed the path of the four troopers back toward the battlefield.

Cody approached the ravaged environment with caution. Trees were downed, ground split and cratered and bodies of troopers were strewn around the jungle floor. It looked like a munitions cache had exploded; which was likely why such a small group of combatants were able to put up such a strong fight. The demolition weapons they had were probably all left over from the mining operation, and with strategic placement and concealment, they would have been able to take out large numbers of troopers with ease, while shielding their own paltry ranks and creating a panicked chaos that would only work in their favor. It was, as Crys had said earlier, impressive.

He had a feeling that Poole wouldn’t agree.

He made his way through the recovery efforts of the remaining troopers; some collecting fallen weapons, others fallen troopers, and managed to avoid any of the other officers for the time being. He marched to where he thought the flank may have been positioned during the fight and then
stopped when he came to edge of a massive crater. The bottom of the pit was piled with white armor; though none were still in the shape of human beings. If he’d been a less experienced soldier, he would’ve gagged.

“Knocked us all down,” a voice said to his right.

He felt his muscles relax and turned to face Boil. The other man was staring down as well, a disgusted look on his familiar features.

“Boil. You hurt?”

“Nah,” he said and then hissed softly as he rolled his shoulders, “Well, not too badly anyway.”

“Sero?”

“Took a blaster hit to the knee. Broke a collarbone. He’s already bitching about being laid up and he hasn’t even seen a medi-droid yet.”

“Walker?”

“Smug as fuck. We didn’t have to use the stunners – for obvious reasons – and taking the HUD’s out completely would’ve been suicide, so the full effect wasn’t used. But the comms worked like a dream and he was able to keep the officers from coordinating an organized counterstrike.”

“Crys? Rush?”

Boil motioned over to their left, where he saw both the vod’e in question speaking to a banged up, but alive, Clawler. The last of the tension he’d been holding released at the confirmation of all his brother’s survival.

Boil raised a brow at him. “What about you? You’re armor looks shot to shit.”

For the first time, Cody looked down and catalogued the damage to his own person. There was the lightsaber cut, but there was also a black scorch mark on his left hip, thigh and ribs from where he’d been thrown down by the initial blast and small pot marks from flying debris on both sides. He took off his helmet and inspected it as well; there was a scuff on the right side from the metal barrel Ganodi had flung at him.

“Looks worse than it is.”

“Uh-huh. That’s quite the bruise you’ve got; it looks ready to turn a lovely shade of purple.”

“Necessary.”

“Necessary? You mean you asked – no, nevermind. It’s your face, sir.”

Cody grinned, humor in his tone. “It’s your face, too.”

Boil sniffed and raised his head at the old joke. “Not with that kriffing ugly bruise it isn’t. Also, your nose is swollen.”

Cody reached up and gingerly prodded at the appendage. It was certainly tender enough to back up Boil’s claim. He dropped the hand – no point in making it worse – and raised his own brow at the contemplative expression on Boil’s countenance.

“What?”
“I’m assuming everything went fine?”

Boil’s tone was almost bored, but there was an intensity to his eyes that belied that. Cody shrugged.

“For the most part.”

Boil narrowed his eyes. “What does that mean?”

“It means that after I make my report to Poole, I have something to tell you. All of you.”

“Important?”

“Yes.”

Boil frowned, but refrained from asking. “Of course. I’m glad you’re alright, sir.” Then the man saluted, which was a clear sign that they were about to joined by someone other than a vod. Cody returned the gesture and then watched as Boil turned on his heel and went to where there was a group of troopers struggling to move a tree trunk off one of their injured fellows. Only a few seconds later, he felt someone stop just behind him.

“2224.”

Cody swung around to face Poole. The man’s face was little more than a blank mask. He straightened and saluted himself. Poole waved it off, irritation filtering into his body at the motion.

“The Jedi?”

“I don’t know, sir. There were only two that I ever saw and I…failed to capture them.”

Poole glanced down at the lightsaber burn and his mouth twisted into a thoughtful frown. The man brought his eyes back to Cody’s face and lingered on the developing bruise. “Can I assume that the wound on your face is a direct result of your engagement with said Jedi?”

“Unfortunately, sir.”

“And there were only two, you said.”

“One Knight, who I could fight fairly well and one Master who I…was not so capable against.”

Poole’s eyes flickered back to the burn. “I see.”

The dark-haired man took the flattened battlefield in with a rapidly darkening expression. Cody felt the tension he had dropped during his conversation with Boil begin to take back over. Defeat was not a concept that Telis Poole was much familiar with and Cody had seen the rage that followed only once. To say it hadn’t been pretty, would be like saying the Emperor was fond of power. Worse, it was a drawn out poisoning. The violent outbursts of Forge and his ilk, Cody would handle with relative ease; it was like waiting out a storm. Poole’s ire was deep, and smothering; like the slow burn of frostbite; it was impossible to outrun and you couldn’t wait it out. All you could do was bundle up in layers of protective walls, try to find shelter and hope for the best.

Poole seemed to make a conscious effort to appear mostly unaffected. “Help the others collect what can be salvaged. We’ll debrief once we’re off-planet.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And 2224?”
“Sir?”

“Have Lieutenant Clawler burn the village,” Poole swept his eyes over the homes with a well of contempt and gave Cody an unfathomable look.

“There can be no guesswork in how the Empire deals with traitors.

Chapter End Notes

So, just as an aside, I'm operating under the idea that Secura didn't tell Cody that Obi-Wan was alive for a couple reasons: one, that she doesn't know who Cody is beyond being a clone officer who served with either the 212th or 501st and therefore it wouldn't have occurred to her just how important this information might be to him and two, that Jedi seem to be notoriously bad communicators on personal matters.
Interlude - Celese

Chapter Notes

Guys, I am so sorry. Real Life made me a liar. Like I said, this is just an interlude to show a glimpse of what the rebellion's up too. It gives hints to future plot, but skipping it won't hurt in the long run. Also because I was rushing a little, there might be more errors than normal. Sorry. Again. (And Happy real Halloween!)

Celese was used to sleepless nights.

The rebellion as a unit never slept. Individuals caught a rest when they could. Pilots had mandatory hours of shut eye, but intelligence officers like herself normally trained themselves out of such luxuries as soon as possible. One never knew when potentially game changing information would become available, or when an agent would be compromised and contingency plans had to be initiated. So, she was used to the strain of working on little to no proper rest.

It didn’t mean she liked it.

Sometimes, being awake at seemingly all times meant she saw good things. Like, a few hours ago when Master Secura and Knight Ganodi touched down in the main hanger bay to be greeted by an enthusiastic Wookie and smiling Tholothian, both of whom had their own lightsabers attached to their belts. It was the final group from the Mab raid to make it home safely and Celese had watched the reunion with a measure of contentment. A tally mark to put in the win column at the end of the day.

They didn’t often have days where victories outweighed the losses.

So. Tired. She was exhausted really, worried about the school, worried about Rako and whatever idiotic plan he would inevitably come up with to help the Jedi escape and worried about what Poole would do when he realized his plan had been routed. She didn’t know Poole well – none of the intelligence core did – but what bits of him she had pieced together were terrifying. Ruthless in his loyalty to the Empire, willing and able to outmaneuver much of the rebellions efforts to help the bedraggled citizens on non-Imperial planets and uncaring of who or what he had to ground in the dirt to do so. The question she’d most like to know was why. Poole didn’t exist in their sphere of knowledge until a handful of years ago when he appeared out of nowhere, already a Commander and suppressing an uprising in the Outer Rim. For all that she knew Rako was walking on thin ice every second of every day, she was still grateful that he’d been assigned to the man; having one of their own next to the Admiral was a force-sent.

“Are we absolutely sure this is accurate?”

She looked up and met Senator Organa’s concerned eyes. He was only joining them through a holocall, but the man was obviously echoing the sentiment she could see on the faces of the present rebellion council around her. She kept her posture straight and affirmed.

“As best as we’re able to determine, Senator. With the attack on the base, and now the thwarted raid on the Jedi school, we have to assume that the Empire was able to procure all the information hidden in the databanks.”
The Senator’s mouth pulled down in a tight frown. “That is greatly, disturbing, Lieutenant.”

“It’s disastrous!” Admiral Ackbar seethed from the Senator’s side, his hands slapped the projector in an angry exclamation point to his words. “First a spy and now this!”

“Lieutenant Lajia, have any of your operatives been able to glean where the next attack may occur?” Mon Mothma spoke with the regal elegance that made her such a touchstone for the rebellion and managed to soothe Ackbar’s indignation with one serene look.

“That’s why this meeting was called, ma’am. Sergeant Andor reported back two hours ago to tell us that Tarkin has disappeared off the grid again and there have been rumblings that Poole was ordered to dock at Falice to wait for his next assignment after news of Mab’s failure reached the Emperor.”

“And Vader?”

Celese looked over at General Kenobi. The Jedi was sitting almost perfectly still, the only movement the rhythmic tapping of his right hand where it rested on his opposite arm. His blue eyes were focused on her with the kind of unwavering intensity that she had come to associate with the man, but had always unnerved her terribly. For such a slight and generally affable person, he was – frankly – intimidating to the nth degree.

“Sergeant Andor said the it appears that Vader is planning a visit to the New Citadel sometime in the near future.”

Kenobi stopped tapping and his expression sharpened. “Do we know which prisoner he plans on seeing? Or is this a routine check-in with the Warden?”

“Andor is looking into it, General.”

That answer seemed to do little to assuage Kenobi’s worry, however, based on the look he shared with Senator Organa. Her superiors were convinced that Kenobi and Organa knew more than they were telling them; some railed about the injustice of it, about secrets going unshared and weakening the rebellion from within. (A notion she found laughable on most days; as if they didn’t have at least as many and probably more secrets) And while she agreed simply based on her observations of the men, she knew it had to be for a damned good reason. Senator Organa was the leader of an entire planet and hiding in plain sight of the Emperor; if things went askew he would be one of the first under scrutiny. And General Kenobi was a Jedi, one of only four known survivors of the rank of Master, the tactician who had – on numerous occasions – led the Empire on wild chases and saved legions of innocents from the Empire’s schemes. He was also, of course, the infamous Negotiator; a man who could spin yarns so well that a person wouldn’t know they were tangled up until it was too late; she had little doubt that he had things he played close to the chest. Unlike her superiors though, she knew when to admit defeat and she trusted that whatever information he had was on a need-to-know basis and so far, none of them needed to know.

“And what of the search for the spy?” Mothma asked.

“Ongoing, our internal investigators are doing the best they can.”

The light-haired woman acknowledged that with a slight nod. “We’ve alerted our other bases to start looking into their own people and move to backup locations for the time being. It’s all we can do until we know more.”

Ackbar muttered fitfully to himself at that, but the others only shook their heads agreeably. Mothma smiled at Celese softly and waved a hand.
“Report back when your operatives find something concrete, Lieutenant. And if I may offer a suggestion? Take a few hours and sleep, you look ready to drop.”

“Ma’am.”

Organa covered his own yawn and glanced at his fellows sheepishly. “I suppose that’s my own cue; I have a meeting with the Empire’s version of the Trade Federation tomorrow, I need to be on my toes.” His face grimaced like he had eaten something sour.

Kenobi’s mouth twisted into a smirk. “Do try not to start any wars, Bail. I hardly think the galaxy needs another one at the moment.”

Organa laughed. “I’ll try my best, old friend.” With that, the leader of Alderaan blinked out of sight.

Ackbar was the next to stand. “If I’m needed, I’ll be on my ship. It took some damage in the last skirmish and there’s no use in being unprepared.”

With that announcement, the rest of the council members filtered out of the room murmuring to each other quietly. Mothma gripped her arm and offered her another warm smile before leaving herself.

Celese took the datachip out of the projector and glanced up only realize that General Kenobi was still in the room with her.

“Sir?”

Kenobi seemed to shake himself out of his thoughts and graced her with a rueful grin. “My apologies, Lieutenant, I was just thinking. Though,” here the other man stood as well and walked around to her side, hands pushed into the sleeves of his robe, “I wonder if I might walk with you for a moment?”

Celese blinked in bewilderment, but nodded readily enough. “Of course, General.”

They left the chamber and began the trek back across the base to where the housing apartments were. They walked in silence for a few minutes, the quiet of the night crew shuffling along in mostly empty hangers and corridors as the only sound outside of their steady footsteps. In the absence of conversation, Celese took the time to discretely catalogue the Jedi Master beside her.

He was a handsome man, the General, though her own heart led her towards men and women of sharper features and more imposing builds. His red hair had a growing collection of grey intertwined with the threads of dulled color, a relatively blemish and line free face despite the years of hardship and war and he had one of those smiles that invited a person to be in on the joke, personable. Still, if one looked hard enough, you could see that the man was too pale by half, probably underweight, and his scars – while not painted across his skin, like most – were badly hidden beneath the charming façade he presented to the galaxy. His eyes, she had always thought, were haunted; the kind of depth of pain one only saw in people who had lost almost everything dear to them. It humanized him in a way that Jedi weren’t supposed to be; at least not the Jedi she had heard stories of from her parents and seen on holonet war reports in her youth.

As always, the thought of her parents was accompanied with a bitter splash of regret. *How proud would you be, she thought with sardonic amusement, to see your daughter stand beside a Jedi as allies.* Angrily, she mentally shook the thought from her mind; her family was all but dead to her now, no use in reliving the past.

“I wanted to thank you, Lieutenant.”

The random words confused her and she peered over at the older man. “I don’t know what for,
“It was your agent that alerted us to the raid on Mab was it not?”

“My informant works for all the rebellion, not just me,” she answered as diplomatically as she was able. She never discussed undercover agents if she could, their identities were too precious and precarious to be waved around, even to the Jedi. And Rako was just about at the top of the list of names that she kept safely hidden in the dark. A decision she had become incredibly thankful for since the possibility of a spy in the ranks had made itself known.

“Hmm, either way, I’m grateful to you and to them for today.”

“Well, it’s unnecessary, General, but you’re welcome.”

Kenobi smiled sadly. “I can assure, my dear, that it’s entirely necessary. The thing about the Purge that has always haunted me the most is the massacre at the Temple; to be able to keep it from happening again – albeit, on a much smaller scale – is something I treasure deeply.”

Celese couldn’t help the horror that brushed through her mind at that, but was able to keep it from showing to much in her physical being. What was done to the Jedi Temple on Coruscant was the main reason Celese had run away from her loyalist family as a teenager; how anyone could support a regime that thought of that kind of baseless slaughter as prudent was simply beyond her ability to comprehend.

“In that case, General, I’m glad I was able to help keep history from repeating itself.”

They turned down the main section of housing quarters and Kenobi stopped her before they could go any further. She looked at him inquiringly.

“I have a request, Lieutenant.”

“What can I do, sir?”

“I would like to be informed directly if any of your agents uncover any evidence of Vader moving on Saleucami.”

Celese felt her brows furrowed in bemusement. “Saleucami?”

“If it’s not too much trouble,” his tone was light, but there was a weight to the words that said it wasn’t exactly something she could say no too. She frowned.

“With all due respect, General Kenobi, I can’t decide arbitrarily to give out intelligence information. Or withhold it from the rest of the High Command.” And my superiors would have my head if I gave any of it to you.

Kenobi gave her a wry smirk. “I’m well aware of what those in charge of the intelligence ranks think of me, Lieutenant. And I’m not asking you to withhold any information from anyone; I’m simply requesting that if Vader has any plans for Saleucami, that I’m told as quickly as possible.”

Celese eyed him warily; Kenobi stared back without guile. It was a useful trick of his, appearing as innocent as could be when she knew that he was planning something. “What’s on Saleucami that would important enough to garner Vader’s interest?”

“Nothing terribly so,” Kenobi lied brazenly, without a qualm, “Still, it would be nice to have prior warning.”
Celese sighed. She knew that she could talk in circles with the Jedi for hours and he’d never give her anything. Worse, he would be able to anticipate her moves and position his own accordingly. She glanced down the hall as if someone could save her from the situation she’d gotten herself into, before turning back to the man in question.

“If I say yes,” she began haltingly, “will this come back to bite me in the ass?”

Kenobi laughed. “I promise you, Lieutenant that I will make sure it doesn’t.”

Celese was unimpressed. “That’s not very reassuring, General.”

Kenobi shrugged, completely unconcerned. “I became something of an expert in managing unanticipated consequences and failed plans during the war, Lieutenant. It’ll be fine.”

_Huh_, she thought, _that sounds familiar_. “Whatever you say, sir.”

Kenobi inclined his head to her, a more genuine smile on his face now. “I appreciate it, Celese.”

She startled at hearing her name, but offered a small smile in return. “Of course, Master Jedi.”

“Mon was right,” Kenobi called to her over his shoulder as he turned to leave, “you look drained. Sleep will do you good.”

She watched him leave, surreal grace surrounding him and shook her head, before continuing the rest of the short journey to her assigned living area.

The space was economical, just big enough for one person not to feel totally hemmed in. She changed out of her uniform quickly and fell into the small bed in just her underwear. She laid stretched out on the thin mattress and just sort of let her body sink; the hypervigilance that marked her waking hours slowly releasing its hold on her. Absently, she threaded her fingers through the chain hanging around her neck; smoothed a thumb over the polished stone arrowhead pendant attached to it and tried not to think of her brother’s smile and how he might have felt when she left him behind.

Instead, she forced herself to focus on Kenobi’s request. Saleucami. She couldn’t think of one thing that might be on the planet that the Empire would want; she couldn’t even think of anything the rebellion had there. Certainly nothing worth Darth Vader’s time. Whatever it was had to have been stashed in the raided bases archives; maybe something well above her paygrade. She sighed and flopped backwards until she was facing the dull, grey ceiling.

It wasn’t her place to question her superiors anyway; she would just do what any good soldier did and follow orders. And General Kenobi was of much higher rank then her direct commanding officers so they would just have to put up with it. She slid the pendent down the length of the chain and back.

“I became something of an expert in managing unintended consequences and failed plans during the war, Lieutenant. It’ll be fine.”

She stopped the motion of her hand abruptly, pendant near her ear and chain outstretched.

“I’m something of a specialist when it comes to FUBAR missions, Lieutenant. We’ll come up with something.”

She thought about the put-upon note to Rako’s voice when he’d said the latter and the almost jaunty tone that General Kenobi had mirrored the words with. She wondered what were the odds that two
completely different people would say the exact same thing (slightly changed but essentially the same) to her in a period of one day. Two people who had, presumably, never met before. It was strange. Though to be fair, strange was probably a relative term at this point.

_I wonder_, she thought dreamily as sleep began to claim her and her hand dropped from the pendant to the bed. She drifted off with the idea that maybe it was time to convince Rako to let her in on the secret of his identity. Sometimes her commanding officers weren’t wrong; sometimes the only power a secret had was being told.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Have I mentioned lately how awesome you all are? *smiles and flails*

Anyway, this is a lot of filler/setting up the next mini-arc (which, I think explains why I had such a hard time writing it; filler is so damned tedious) and then we'll be on our way onwards and upwards. As always, errors are all mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cody looked at his fellow officers with a sense of dread. Of all of them, Vequell was the only one without any visible injuries. Yulish had bacta patches covering one side of her neck and disappearing under the collar of her uniform and her jaw was held painfully still where the bone was reknitting itself; when she had walked in earlier he’d noticed that she was also nursing a slight limp. Forge had one badly burned hand (and he’d heard that the scars went right up his arm), a newly relocated shoulder and he was breathing heavily, trying to recover from a collapsed lung. Clawler had a broken nose where his helmet had been crushed against it when he’d been thrown by the blast in the village, but was otherwise fine except for a few contusions. Cody, for his part, was starting to regret asking Secura to hit him; his cheekbone was almost black and the eye above it was hurt enough that he could only open it halfway. Putting on and taking off his helmet, he had discovered, was a chore that required plenty of cursing to get through at the moment.

Poole clearly could not have cared less about their misfortunes.

The man in question was pacing in front of their small gathering with a kind of manic energy that Cody had never seen from him before. There was a looseness to his body that was completely unexpected considering the circumstances and the light in his eyes was feverish. It all combined to give him an unpredictable menace that everyone – including Forge – was obviously wary of.

“This shouldn’t have happened.” They were the first words anyone had spoken.

“Admiral –”

Poole swung around and fixed Vequell with a deadly glare. “We had indisputable intelligence and the Jedi should have had no warning. Instead, we find a fortified village, a group of combatants that led a suicide charge and only two Jedi, both of whom escaped right from beneath our noses.”

Poole stalked closer to Vequell. “But I am so very curious, Commander, about your version of events and how they differ from mine.”

Vequell slid his eyes to just beyond the Admiral’s shoulder in deference. “Obviously they were tipped to our intentions.”

“Obviously,” Poole scoffed and backed up a step to regard all of them with a discerning eye. “Well, there is an obvious explanation for that. There is a leak in our ranks.”

Poole just swept his cool grey gaze around at them and let the implication sink in.

Forge’s pale face went hotly indignant. “You think it’s one of us?”

“It makes perfect sense,” Poole answered gravely, “Our informant in the rebellion delivered this intel directly to highest echelons of command; I find it…convenient considering we were the only ship included in this mission.”

Cody appreciated the confirmation of a spy in the rebellion ranks, though it confused him that Poole was willing to admit it aloud to a group of people he suspected of spying themselves. Unless it was something he was using to trip them up, Cody resigned himself to keeping the information to himself for the foreseeable future; hopefully the rebellion was already looking into the matter anyway. Right now, his ass was the one in the crossfire.

“But, sir – I would never!” Forge exclaimed and Cody believed him completely. The idea of him having enough independent thought to betray the Empire was laughable.


“We shall see,” Poole muttered, threat clear, “Each of you will be given a debriefing away from distraction and outside influence. And your actions will be evaluated accordingly.”

Cody actually felt relief at that; as he was alone for most of the excursion he’d be able to spin his own tale without contradiction from the others. Hopefully, he’d be convincing enough to throw off suspicion; he made a mental note to tell the others to lay especially low in the following weeks.

Forge, apparently, didn’t like the sound of his decisions being questioned. “Why bother? I can tell you who it is right now,” the man snarled and waved a hand in Cody’s direction.

Cody narrowed his eyes at the other man dangerously. “Excuse me?”

Forge pulled himself around until he was standing only a couple feet from Cody with a curl to his mouth and his breathing was lapsing precariously through his battered lungs. Cody stared him down with the kind of banked fire he used to save for particularly reckless vods who disobeyed orders. He had it on good authority that it was an intimidating face. He was rewarded when Forge stopped his forward movement and what little color he had leached from his face completely, but – to his credit – he didn’t actually retreat.

“Stop pretending; I’m not stupid or so easily swayed,” Forge said lowly.

Cody fought to keep himself in check. “Is that right, Captain? And just what am I pretending?”

Forge’s rage lit up with the reminder that Cody outranked him and his entire body began to shake, in anger or exertion, Cody didn’t know.

“Captain Forge,” Poole said, a neutral tone to his voice, “Stand down.”

Forge ignored him and continued to meet Cody’s eyes with the edge of zealotry that Cody associated with him. “He’s a clone. He’s a clone that fought in the war; a clone commander. And we all know that they served directly under the traitorous Jedi scum.”

“Captain Forge,” Poole reiterated, but once again Forge brushed this aside.

“I remember the rumors,” Forge spit out venomously, “they said the clones that worked with the Jedi were different than the others. More loyal. More apt to shoot first and think later if a Jedi was in
danger. More likely to sacrifice themselves for the *cause,*” here Forge looked Cody up and down contemptuously, but with a strange suggestiveness that put Cody on immediate high alert, “It was even said that some of them were secretly fucking the Jedi; sets a whole new precedent to the term serving, don’t you think?”

Cody saw red. He took a step forward without conscious thought and it took every last once of willpower he had to keep from ripping the bastard to pieces. This was what Forge did, he dug into a person’s feelings and bloodied everything they were until they inevitably lashed out. Crushing the man’s face would undoubtedly be satisfying, but it would also be more detrimental to Cody than Forge in the long run. Being accused of sleeping with the enemy, so to speak, could be enough to provoke a reaction, but only if it appeared that he was insulted on his own behalf and not the Jedi’s.

Force, how he hated the Empire.

“I have *never* fucked a Jedi,” Cody growled, “None of my brothers would ever have done such a thing. The Jedi were our slavers, cowards who got drunk on power and tried to destroy everything we sacrificed for. And I will not be insulted by your gross insinuations.”

It was always struck Cody as interesting how easy it was to lie. Began with a foundation of truth (his first statement, was in fact, exactly that; it was just the rest that was utter banthashit), sprinkle it with harsh words, just a touch of defensiveness and then channel real anger into the rest and people tended to believe anything you said. Mostly whenever he had to knock the Jedi down, he tried to funnel Slick’s protective rage into it; he knew that the Jedi hadn’t been perfect – not by any stretch of the imagination – but most of them tried and it was certainly more than could be said for the Empire.

“No one is saying that you did, Commander,” Poole’s silky voice cut into the dense air of the room, “I won’t say it again Captain: stand down.”

Forge – reluctantly – did just that. He backed away from Cody and took a couple rattling breaths, before sweeping his gaze past Poole. “My apologizes, sir. I got…carried away.”

“Clearly,” Poole replied with a kind of amused clip to the word. He settled on Cody with a dissecting eye. “Commander, do you have anything to add?”

Cody made his hand release the death grip it had on his helmet and shook his head. “No, sir.”

“In that case, this meeting is adjourned for the moment,” Poole said, “but all of you will be available at any time for your interviews. Am I understood?”

There were a chorus of ‘yes, sirs’ at that and Poole swept out of the room, leaving them to break up and go their separate ways. Yulish glanced at both Forge and Cody with a critical expression and then left with Vequell to who knew where. Clawler actually graced Cody with a pained half-smile of commiseration before he took his leave. Forge looked at Cody who stared back at him with what he hoped was his disgust written plainly on his face.

“You should be careful, Captain,” Cody said, emotion reigned back in, “You never know when I might be the only thing standing between you and a vengeful Jedi.”

Forge sneered at him outwardly, but there was a definite hint of fear in his eyes that made a buried part of Cody glow. The man gave him a wide berth as he walked by and Cody watched him hobble away before following smugly in his wake.

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When all was said and done, though, the fact remained that Poole was on a mission and he would be
monitoring the holo-connection and every frequency from here to Naboo looking for the spy. That meant, of course, that he wouldn’t be able to contact the rebellion until the air had cleared a little; at least until they docked and Poole left to make his own reports. That left him a day to check on the others, get new armor and – at some point – think about what exactly he was going to say to Poole when his interview happened.

He strode into the infirmary and weaved around the beds and medi-droids occupying the space until he reached Sero. Walker was already there, standing over the injured man with a kind of expectant exasperated air around him. Sero had a deep scowl marring his features and looked like he was a about four seconds from launching into a rant. Cody sighed. It would’ve been nice if their genetic code had allowed for graceful recuperation, but with the exception of the vod’e with medical training, most of them (Cody, grudgingly put himself in this category as well) had the temperament of an ill-mannered cat when they were laid up.

“Sero.”

The man in question sat up when he heard Cody’s voice. Walker turned to look at him as well and saluted. Cody waved him off and noticed the frown on Sero’s face had actually worsened by virtue of his collarbone not letting him salute as well. Cody tipped his head at him.

“You alright, vod?”

“Fine, sir,” Sero said immediately, his arm was in a sling, and one of his legs was encased in some kind of brace. There were a couple quasi-healed cuts on his face that had probably been treated with bacta when he’d first reported to the medbay, but looked pretty good now.

“He’s being stubborn,” Walker replied as well with a knowing smirk.

Sero shot him a thunderous look. “It’s nothing really. I’ll be back to normal in no time.”

Cody rose an eyebrow and pointedly looked at the swath of bandages on his knee and the immobilized sling around his shoulder. Sero winced.

“Well,” he backtracked, beyond irritated, “I feel fine.”

Walker snorted. “And that would be the drugs.”

Sero didn’t acknowledge that statement at all and instead returned Cody’s appraisal with one of his own. “What about you, sir? That’s a hell of a shiner.”

“And a hell of a scorch mark,” Walker added, brows furrowing.

“This is what you get when you try to subdue a Jedi Master,” he answered carefully; the medbay wasn’t the place to get into details about the encounter, it had substantially more eyes and ears than the mess hall or an empty bunkhouse.

“I won’t ask if you won, then,” Walker said.

“That would be for the best, vod,” Cody answered wryly.

“How angry is the Admiral?”

Cody winced himself at that and it sent the other two into a tense straightening of their spines. “The Admiral is…displeased. Understandably.”
“Understandably,” Sero echoed with a frown.

“The Admiral believes that there may be a traitor in our ranks,” Cody continued, voice as level as he could make it, “All of his officers are going to be reporting separately on the incident.”

Walker looked alarmed at that. “A traitor, sir? Surely, that can’t be true.”

He was proud of the perfect slice of indignation and shock Walker was able to put into his tone at that. Sero mastered his own expression into one of distaste. Acting had become a necessity in their line of work; but it still amused Cody whenever any of them proved up to the task.

“Unfortunately, it makes sense,” Cody ruminated with his own sense of false disquiet, “Hopefully, this will all be dealt with quickly.”

“I’m sure it will, Commander,” Sero said, “the Admiral would never let a traitor fall out of his grasp.”

How any of them managed to keep a straight face at that pronouncement, he would never know. As it was, Cody clasped the sitting man on his good shoulder and offered him as reassuring a smile as he could. “I’m sure you’re right, Sergeant. Get some rest; I hear the training deck will miss your presence.”

Sero grinned at that. “They’re probably having a party right now.”

Cody glanced at Walker. “When you get the chance, go and speak to Boil. I think he mentioned wanting to talk to you about something.”

Walker nodded. “Of course, sir.”

Cody returned the gesture and then made his way back out of the infirmary with a few small acknowledgements of the other troopers waiting for treatment on the way. From there, he marched through the corridors of the ship with a purposeful gait to keep from being detained. It worked, but it certainly didn’t stop the glances his ruined armor got from the stormtroopers patrolling the halls. When he reached the aforementioned mess hall, he was greeted with Boil, Crys and Rush who had obviously been waiting for him. He grabbed a tray of food and methodically began eating after he sat in the seat they had left open.

The moment he had finished the bland food, he looked at the others. Crys shoved his protein drink at him and Cody huffed, but didn’t actually protest.

“They filled me in on most of it,” Boil said mildly, “But they got separated from you, so if there’s anything else we should know…”

Cody took a drink of the vaguely vanilla flavored liquid and thought about how he should phrase it. “Bly is alive.”

Boil looked surprised. “Is he with the others, then?”

“No, but the source was certain of its validity.”

“How?”

Cody pinned that man with a stare. “Apparently, dying would have severed the bond.”

Boil blinked dumbly for a moment before it sunk in, then his eyes flew open. “You’re joking.”
Cody shook his head ruefully. “I’m really not. And there’s more.”

Boil waved a hand. “By all means.”

He sighed and looked at all three of them in turn. “One of the apprentices that was there is their daughter.”

Crys actually choked on air at that. “What? You mean that—”

“Yes.”

“What the kriffing fuck.”

Boil watched Cody’s face intently. “Did you know about this?”

“Which part?”

“Any of it.”

Cody shook his head, tired. “I knew he…but I didn’t anything had happened.”

“This is insane,” Crys stressed visibly fretting. Cody gave him an unimpressed stare until he made an effort to calm himself down. Once he appeared back in control, Crys looked between him and Boil.

“What now?”

“It was requested that we…look into locating Bly.”

Boil threw Cody an unimpressed glare of his own. “Please tell me you didn’t, sir.”

“Obviously we can’t right this moment for several reasons,” Cody ignored the disgruntled cast of Boil’s features and kept his eyes on Crys and Rush’s wide-eyed visage, “But we were able to track all of you down; it’s possible.”

“You mean I tracked them down,” Boil said, “This is dangerous, sir.”

Cody sighed. “I’m aware of that, Boil. Thank you.”

Boil stared. “But that won’t change your mind.”

Cody scratched at his jawline and then flinched when his nail caught the edge of his bruised cheek. “No. It won’t. Boil…I get it, I do. But this is our brother. And he has a family, an honest to force, family out there. How many more of us can say that? How many more of us have something outside of the vod’e?”

Boil glanced away and fidgeted. Internally, Cody felt bad; he was no doubt bringing up memories of Waxer, but it couldn’t be helped. For a moment, none of them spoke. Then Rush cleared his throat determinedly.

“Then we should help. Someone deserves a happy ending, right? Like in the holovids.”

Crys nodded immediately at their youngest vod’s words. “He’s right. If we can find him, we have to help.”

All of them turned to Boil. The man stared at all of them with a blank expression, before his frame sagged in his chair. “Fine. It’s…fine. We’ll look into it.”
Cody nudged Boil with his shoulder in thanks and Boil responded with a smile; a bit thin and brittle around the edges, but there nonetheless. Cody finished his drink and pushed his chair out in preparation to stand.

“At some point Walker is going to find you; tell him what I told you. Don’t do anything until we’ve docked at Falice. And lay low; Admiral Poole is on the warpath. All of us officers have to have a special meeting with him so he can assess whether we’re treasonous bastards or not.”

Boil’s placated face went incredulous at that. “You couldn’t have led with that? Isn’t that slightly more important right now?”

Cody gave him a weary look. “It’s my problem; I’ll handle it.”

Crys’ mien soured. “You’re our brother, too, Commander. You’re not alone.”

Cody waved away the sentiment, even though he appreciated it. “I know, Crys. But there’s nothing any of you could do. Just go about your business like nothing’s wrong. We’ll figure something out later.”

“If you’re sure, sir,” Rush replied hesitantly.

“T’m sure.”

He stood up, returned the other’s goodbyes, disposed of his tray and then made his way back to his own bunk. The adrenaline of the day’s events was rapidly catching up to him and he had to fight his exhausted body to keep from swaying as he walked the distance between the mess to the living quarters. Once there he barely pulled his armor off before collapsing on the thin bed. He was asleep in seconds.

When he woke up a few hours later, he decided that a trip to the fresher was necessary. After that he picked up his armor, threw it back on haphazardly and then glanced at it. It really did look like shit, so, a visit to the quartermaster it was.

He requisitioned what he needed and the man nodded distractedly, writing down his information all the while staring at the lightsaber gash on his chest plate like it might reach out and attack him. He was about to go on his patrol rounds in the meantime before his new armor could be delivered to him, when he was approached by a nervous looking Lieutenant that he didn’t immediately recognize.

“Commander?”

He looked at the man and knew instantly what this was about. “Yes?”

“Admiral Poole would like to see you now.”

Cody nodded and rearranged his features into a polite mask. “Are you my escort?”

“Yes, sir.”

Might as well get it over with. “Lead the way, Lieutenant.”

And may the force be with me, he thought.

Poole’s personal ready room was a strange mix of spartan decorating and decadent comfort. The walls were devoid of almost any personality and there were no knick-knacks scattered around the
room like Laquad had had. The furnishings, however, were all of the finest quality and had an almost plush sense about them. Even the chair positioned in front of Poole’s clear-topped desk was comfortable. To be honest, it threw him off. Which – upon reflection – might be what Poole was going for in the first place.

The Admiral sat, relaxed, in the chair behind said desk. He waved off Cody’s salute and motioned for him to take a seat. He did; putting his helmet on the floor at his feet and then met Poole’s eyes and waited for the interrogation to begin.

“Well, Commander, if you wouldn’t mind, start from the beginning.”

Cody did as he was bid and relayed the march to the village and the eerie stillness that had encompassed the jungle before they reached the settlement and all hell broke loose. He told Poole about noticing the trip wire too late and the bombs that had detonated afterwards.

“And then?”

“I don’t know for sure, sir,” Cody said honestly, “the blast knocked the whole division out, including me. When I woke up, the villagers had already begun their attack.”

Poole nodded. “What did you do when you regained consciousness?”

“I was attacked by a Jedi; the Knight,” he answered, “we fought and then the explosion in Commander Yulish’s sector happened. It distracted me for a second and when I refocused, the Jedi was running into the jungle. I followed.”

Poole’s eyes sharpened. “And you caught up to said Knight?”

“Yes, sir,” he said and then made sure to carefully construct his story from here on out; keep it relatively simple and hope it didn’t seem like a lie, “I chased them to a small clearing. They had disappeared, but before I could figure out where too, the Master appeared behind me. I was able to fight off the initial spell, but then the Knight returned. I admit, sir, that I was… grossly outnumbered at that point.”

Poole’s face showed no emotion. “The fight continued?”

“For a brief time, yes. But, to be honest, sir, it was mostly a survival move on my part. I was able to dodge some,” he glanced down at his singed armor, “but not all.”

“Why do you think they let you live, if you were so beaten?”

Cody shrugged. “I can’t know for sure, sir. But it’s possible that they felt some kind of remote mercy. Nostalgia, maybe.”

“Nostalgia?”

“My helmet was dislodged during the fight. After they saw that I was a clone, they seemed to change their fighting to a more measured degree.”

Poole contemplated this. “And your black eye?”

“I heard movement in the jungle approaching us. Two troopers had followed us, and the Master must have felt that it was time to conclude the fight, because she powered down her saber and used hand to hand to get close enough to do this,” he gestured at the bruise, “it rattled my senses for a moment and they got away. I sent the troopers back for reinforcements when they showed and then went after
the Jedi.”

“Did you find them again?”

Cody winced theatrically. “No, sir. When I reached the end of my tracking, it was too an empty plateau and four knocked out stormtroopers. They said they didn’t see who attacked them, but that it had to be Jedi. One of them also said that they thought they had a cloaked ship.”

“Well,” Poole mused, “that would explain why none of our sensors could find them.” He looked at Cody inquiringly. “Did you recognize the Master or Knight, 2224?”

He knew he had to tell the truth here for appearance purposes, but it still rankled. “The Knight was unknown, but the Master was Aayla Secura.”

Strangely, Poole did not seem neared as shocked as Cody himself had been to hear that Secura was alive. All he offered at the information was a distant, “Interesting,” which struck Cody as even more bizarre.

“Did you serve under Secura in the war, 2224?”

“No, sir.”

“Hmm,” Poole said, but didn’t elaborate, “well, it’s good to know which of the clones failed in their duty to rid us of the traitorous force users. Secura was one of the better front-line Generals in the war from what I’ve heard. Perhaps it should not be so surprisingly to hear of her survival.”

Except you’re not surprised at all, Cody thought, bewildered. He studied Poole’s face and tone and realized that it wasn’t news to him to hear of Secura’s existence. Was that the reporting of the Empire’s spy? Or was there something else that he had missed that had clued Poole in?

“As you say, sir,” Cody answered, keeping his disbelief and uneasiness out of his voice.

Poole settled into the silence and then nodded, seemingly to himself and leaned forward on the desk. “Lieutenant Clawler collaborates your story about the Knight attacking you in the village and then the chase into the jungle. As well as the report of the troopers who stumbled into your confrontation with the Jedi.”

Cody, was, frankly, shocked to hear that. For Clawler to say he’d seen he and Ganodi fight…he had to have been awake for most of the time that the Knight had shown herself. And if he was awake for that, then he had to have seen Cody back down and maybe even hear him promise not to hurt her.

What in the kriffing hell is going on here, he thought, a bit dazed.

“And while I can’t know what happened between then and when the stormtroopers you found reported you waking them up, I trust you didn’t hit yourself in the face hard enough to bruise quite that badly. So, at the moment, I’ll believe that your story checks out.”

Cody heaved a sigh of relief inside his mind.

“But, Commander,” Poole went on, “I’d like to remind you that until the spy is caught; everyone on this ship is going to have a very short leash. Officers included.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Good. Dismissed.”
Cody collected his helmet from the floor and stood. He made a move towards the door and was stopped by Poole’s voice.

“Oh, and next time we encounter a Jedi I expect a different result, 2224.”

Cody wasn’t fooled for a second by Poole’s off-hand tone. This was a warning, plain and simple.

“Of course, sir. You have my word.”

“I’ll keep you too it, Commander. Do not disappoint me again.”

Cody saluted at that ominous statement and left the ready room. As he walked back towards his bunk he thought over the Admiral’s lack of surprise and then, even more confusing, Clawler’s own, unexpected help. Something was going on here that he didn’t understand; and if there was anything that he hated it was not being able to see what was going on around him.

He needed to do some digging. And talk to Clawler. He refused to be manipulated anymore.

Chapter End Notes

This has nothing to do with the story but, if there are any readers here from Texas, I just want to say that we grieve with you.
Chapter 6

Once again, thanks for the kudos and comments! They're always lovely to receive. Also, I have untangled some of my plot points (they grow unexpected branches all the time) and hope to have the next chapter out sometime in the early week.

Cody didn’t have to be a genius to tell that Boil was unimpressed. His second’s scowl was etched into his face and the cadence of his voice was so sharply sarcastic it felt a little like it was cutting into him with each word.

“So, let me repeat that – and please, correct me if I’m wrong – you want me to not only search for any trace of Bly I can, but also break into Lieutenant Clawler’s personal records to see if there’s any evidence of rebellion sympathies. And you want me to do that here, at the base where our ship is docked, while the Admiral reports to command. From a communal holonet port.”

When put like that it seemed even more ridiculous than when Cody first asked. “Uh, yes.”

“Sir,” Boil began and Cody braced himself, “I’m seriously beginning to believe that the knock that Jedi gave you might have done more damage than we thought.”

“Boil –”

“And why,” the other man spoke over him, “do you want to look at Clawler’s record anyway? And what are you expecting to find – that weird glitter text teenagers use on holonet forums saying ‘I Heart the Rebellion’? Sir, if anyone had even the slightest inkling that Clawler sympathized with the rebellion he’d have been jettisoned by now.”

Cody couldn’t actually argue with any of that. But still, Clawler had always been different than the overwhelmingly majority of Empire officers and now he was suddenly helping cover up Cody’s encounter with a Jedi? Trying to puzzle out Poole’s…everything was complicated. Right now, Clawler seemed like the easier target to focus on.

“I know it sounds…”

“Idiotic? Suicidal? Utterly karking mad?”

“…difficult. But I think Clawler is helping us and I don’t have any idea why that might be. We need to know if all of this is going to fall apart at some point. Wouldn’t you like a head start if the glass house is going to collapse?”

Boil grimaced. “Yes, obviously.”

“You don’t have to do this alone. The rest of us will help anyway we can. And Walker is just as good at this sort of thing as you; delegate. Let him deal with Clawler’s records; you worry about Bly.”

Boil slumped, defeated. “Fine. But I just want to say that I protested. You know, in case we end up being forced choked to death by Vader sometime in the probably-not-so-distant-future.”
“And, in that case, I’ll be sure to show you proper deference while we wait for our execution.”

“That’s all I ask, sir.”

Cody slapped Boil on the back gently and left the other man to mutter to himself as he made his way across the open dock towards the so-called recreation center where the holo-ports were.

Cody stood there in the open air for a moment and just took in his surroundings. Being planet side was always preferable to the long weeks on ships cruising the galaxy, and Falice, for all that it was an Empire loyalist planet, had a beautiful lavender sky that filtered the sun’s light just enough that it always looked like the planet was either in the midst of a sunrise or a sunset. It was known mostly as a resort planet, with stunning teal seas, golden beaches and a backdrop of snow-capped mountains. And the planet only had a month-long storm season in its ‘winter’ and was nothing but lovely, pleasant temperatures the rest of its ten-month year. The Falician people were humanoid with a natural set of colored fins down their back and forearms and bright lines tattooed around their starburst-iris eyes and cheekbones. And while they had an affable, gentle air about them, they were also clearly terrified of the Empire. Cody thought that the only reason they were loyal to the Empire was there fear of it; non-humans had more problems than others with the Empire, it was a boon for them that their planet was lovely enough to keep the Emperor from crushing them.

It would’ve been nice to visit in the pre-Empire days. Maybe after all of this –

Cody shook his head to dislodge that before it could become a full-fledged idea. Planning for the long-term future was senseless; especially for someone in such a dead-end position. All that did was give him hope; and if there was one thing he had learned ages ago, it was that hope was for dreamers and idealists; not a clone soldier stuck in the past.

And that’s why we have to find Bly, the voice in him that sounded like an amalgamation of all the people he’d loved and lost said, He has something to hope for. Something good waiting for him at the end. Something to truly live for.

Cody closed his eyes wearily.

(“What do you want to do after the war?”

Cody startled and sent a glare at the General before the actual words sunk in. Once they did, he just stared. “Sir?”

General Kenobi smiled, hands laced behind his back as he faced Cody. “Have you ever thought about the future; after all this is over.”

Cody watched the interested look on his General’s face and drew a complete blank. Frankly, the war itself seemed never-ending, and even so, as one of the foremost front-line battalions – not to mention the stunning amount of Separatist bad blood that the General had accrued over the last two years – he didn’t expect to survive to see the end of the war. Still, he couldn’t actually tell the General that.

“I’ve never given it much thought, sir. Seems like tempting fate to think that far ahead.”

Kenobi lifted his brows incredulously. “I didn’t take you for superstitious, Commander.”

“I’m not,” Cody agreed immediately, “just realistic.”

“Ah,” Kenobi said, but there was a pained, apologetic expression that flickered in his eyes, “Yes, I suppose I rather attract more than my share of trouble.”
Cody blanched. “That’s – that’s not what I meant, sir.”

Kenobi waved a hand. “That doesn’t mean it isn’t true. I know that the 212th is overworked and put in more hazardous situations than most; I would change that if I could.”

Cody frowned and tightened the grip he had on the supplies he’d been processing when the General began speaking. “They take you for granted.”

“What?”


Kenobi blinked, a puzzled look overtaking his countenance. “I’m no different than any other Jedi.”

Cody reigned in the disgusted scoff that wanted to escape at that. “Sir. They ask you to plan every attack you’re involved with and a few you aren’t. They send you in to do negotiating all over the galaxy both for the Jedi and the Senate. You’ve been at every glad-handing gala and event that calls for a Jedi to soothe the ruffled feathers since the war’s inception. It’s exhausting just watching it, sir.”

Kenobi’s fine-boned features went blank. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about, Commander. I’m a Jedi; this is my duty.”

Cody wanted to scream. “With all due respect, sir, we’re worried about you. It’s…too much. You do enough. You do more than enough.”

The genuinely confused look that statement incurred was heart-breaking for Cody to see. He looked like no one had ever said that to him before and that the entire concept was beyond comprehension. He’d obviously never met Master Qui-Gon, but for a moment Cody wanted to punch the deceased Jedi more than anything. Right after he finished shaking some sense into General Skywalker. Kriff, telling someone they cared about them or were proud of them wasn’t that karking difficult. Sometimes the Jedi didn’t make a bit of sense.

“I – thank you, Cody. It’s never my intention to worry anyone; least of all the men.”

He heard the stunned, almost delicate tone the General used with the words and felt his chest seize some.

“Worry is a mutual concept, sir. You worry about us. And we worry about you,” Cody shrugged nonchalantly, and looked down at the cargo briefly, “We know you fight for us, sir. We’d do the same for you, if you let us.”

Cody glanced back up and was instantly alarmed by the shine of what appeared to be unshed tears in the General’s eyes. He took a step forward, and the General turned away to collect himself. The silence between them was almost raw.

“Sir?”

“I’m fine,” Kenobi said, and when he faced Cody again the tears were gone and his voice had only a streak of unsteadiness to it, “it’s – fine.”

Cody highly doubted that, but the frantic beating of his heart slowed a bit at the words like it had been trained to do so. “Dinner.”

Kenobi blinked at the non-squinter. “Dinner?”
Cody felt his skin heat up, but pushed past it. “After this is over. I’d like to eat at a restaurant that serves four-course, interplanetary cuisine. Waxer was reading about some place on Coruscant from the holonet the other day and I’m sick of the protein rations.”

Kenobi’s being softened and he sent Cody a delighted smile. “Oh, Cody, you don’t need to wait for this wretched war to be over for that. Next time we’re in Coruscant, I’ll take you to one myself.”

Cody was so thankful for his darker complexion as he felt his blush gain even more traction. “It’s a date,” he said and then promptly wanted to drop dead of humiliation, “Uh – wait, that’s not –”

Kenobi’s frame began shaking faintly and then a full-bodied laugh filled the space. Cody just stared at the happiness etched on his General’s face and ignored the astounded looks the other vod’e in the hanger were throwing their way. It was totally worth making an idiot of himself if this was the result.)

Cody opened his eyes and looked at the washed-out Empire base around him and the patrolling stormtroopers with a heavier heart than normal. With a sigh, he began walking in the direction of the cantina situated just on the outskirts of the base itself and was used to the presence of Imperial troops and officers.

He needed a drink.

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In the days of the Republic, Cody had gotten accustomed to bad whiskey and poorly made rotgut that several of the vod’e concocted on the ship. Being in the Empire didn’t change that, but for the first time there was a cheapness to it that he wasn’t fond of. Still, it didn’t keep him from sitting at an end stool, nursing a watered down rye and avoiding the eyes of the nervous bartender and the hesitant Falician servers.

The cantina itself was packed and had the kind of generic, upbeat tempo music that he’d never been much of a fan of pouring from a stage at the back. The patrons were a strange mix of Falicians, various tourists and a few, straggling off-duty stormtroopers who seemed well on their way to completely shit-faced. Cody sat, hunched over, helmet on the bar beside him and drank with a single-minded purpose that would have had Rex slapping him upside the head. He just wanted a few moments where Poole, Clawler and his own memories would leave him in relative peace.

He watched the surroundings without interest and waved a scared looking Falician away when they accidentally bumped into him. A fight broke out at one point and was quickly dispersed by the security detail employed by the cantina. Cody drank.

It was approaching dusk when Crys sat down beside him. He glanced over at his brother’s weary disappointment and snorted.

“Contrary to your belief, vod, you are not my keeper.”

Crys frowned harder. “No. Just a concerned brother.”

Cody rolled his eyes. “Whatever you say.”

Crys sighed, took the shot out of Cody’s hands and downed it himself. Cody rose a brow at that, but Crys just gave a smugly satisfied look in return. Cody rubbed his eyes and swiveled on his perch until he was facing the other man. He motioned at a newly unoccupied table near enough to the music that anyone not paying attention wouldn’t hear them, but far enough that they wouldn’t have to yell to be heard. Once they had seated themselves, and Cody poured them both a half-glass of
liquor to further the charade, he met Crys eyes and nodded.

“Alright. You have my attention.”

“Walker sent me. He said that Clawler is from a staunchly loyalist family from Rybin. His parents sent him to the Imperial Academy on Coruscant when he was a teenager and he’s been in the Army since.”

Cody waited and when Crys stayed quiet, he gestured impatiently. “That can’t be it. Walker wouldn’t have sent you if all he had was nothing.”

Crys rapped his knuckles on the bar and then lowered his voice further. “His record from the Academy isn’t exactly spotless. He questioned orders more than they were comfortable with and he even got into a fistfight with an Admiral’s son during his graduating year.”

Cody peered at Crys incredulously. “He hit an Imperial legacy and wasn’t kicked out of the Academy.”

“Yes,” Crys said, popping the ‘p’ showily, “but his parents are wealthy and they have connections that spared him. That and he was an exceptional soldier when he did lower himself to follow orders.”

“So, he had a disagreement,” Cody shrugged, “even the Imperial ranks have their rivalries.”

“True,” Crys said, “but his temperament has been a thorn in his commanding officer’s sides. He’s been formally reprimanded four times in the last six years.”

Cody blinked, shocked. “What? How the hell is he still an officer?”

“The aforementioned parents,” Crys answered ruefully, “Though it appears even they can’t help him anymore – this is supposed to be his last chance. He was assigned to Poole for evaluation; see if he was a lost cause or not. Get him into shape.”

“Huh,” Cody said and tapped the empty shot glass between them ideally. “And all of this was in his records?”

“Walker was very careful to backtrack his work and leave no trace of his access. He memorized the interesting parts quickly and got the hell out of there.”

“Good. Boil?”

Crys made an uncertain gesture. “Don’t know. I haven’t seen him since we disembarked.”

Cody scratched at his forehead tiredly. “Well, we should get back to the ship anyway. The Admiral should be just about back from his debrief with high command.”

He drained the rest of Crys’ glass in retaliation for earlier and stood. The other trooper followed his lead and with a brief stop at the bar to pay his tab (the bartender refused to meet his eyes), they began the short walk back to the heart of the base.

Poole’s flagship, the Tenacity, was docked near the end of the port. It wasn’t a particularly intimidating ship, per se, the same blah, white color scheme that most Imperial ships boasted and was actually smaller than a lot of the other cruisers in his fleet, but it’s Admiral’s reputation more than made up for it. The hangar doors were open when they arrived, and they marched up the plank and into the now teeming halls of the flight deck. Cody frowned at the increased activity; when he and Boil had left in the early afternoon, the ship had been sparsely populated as was wont on downtime
breathers, but now it appeared to be in full swing.

Cody grabbed the nearest pilot, who immediately saluted when he saw Cody’s face. Cody gestured at the hurried motions of the other pilots, engineers and troopers. “What’s going on?”

“Just got word, sir,” The man said nervously, green eyes shifting to look over Cody’s shoulder in deference. “Admiral Poole returned a few minutes ago and said we had to start getting ready to leave.”

“When?”

“Admiral said in a couple hours, sir.”

Cody released the pilot and waved him back to his duties with a frown. He looked over at Crys who had a similarly surprised expression covering his countenance. Normal operating procedure said that they would have two days – minimum – at port before they received their next mission. It hadn’t even been twenty hours yet.

“Call Boil and the others; make sure they know to get on board as soon as possible,” He said and Crys nodded.

“Where are you going, sir?”

“To the Command Deck,” he replied as he left his brother in the corridor, “I have a feeling I’m about to get a summons.”

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True to his expectation, halfway to the main deck, his presence was requested by order of the Admiral. Him and every other Command officer. Once he arrived, only Yulish and Allon were waiting by Poole’s side. The Admiral was standing straight and there wasn’t even the faintest hint of emotion on his face to give Cody any clue as to what he may have been walking into.

After Forge, Vequell and Clawler showed, the Admiral gestured for all of them to sit at the conference table that dominated the space in the room. Belatedly, Cody realized that they were completely alone; the normal crew that manned the navigation and piloting of the cruiser were all absent. He sat with a new sense of foreboding, it was rare that Poole depleted a room for their orders; instead he mostly acted as though the people at their stations were little more than deaf droids.

“We have been given a new task,” Poole said with all the gravity that meant this was especially important, “As an escort and – eventually – a force needed for a specific retrieval mission.”

“Sir?” Yulish said, ready to move on his orders; instantly if needed.

“We will be meeting up with Lord Vader on the way to the New Citadel.”

The room became hushed at that pronouncement. That was not what he was expecting. And – in almost every way – was far worse than he had hoped. Vader was a wild card; a dangerous supernova that Cody didn’t have an idea how to handle. Worse, as a force user he and the other vod’e would have to use their taught shielding to keep the hulking behemoth from figuring out that they were unchipped and spying for the rebellion. And while everyone knew that clones had been taught shielding both in a rudimentary stage by Shaak Ti and then far more in depth by their individual Jedi Generals, using it without seeming suspicious would be tricky to say the least.

And that was when he didn’t factor in the strange familiarity that Vader seemed to have with him
when they met. If he paid him any attention at all, the differences in his demeanor would be prevalent.

He was wrong earlier. Now he needed a drink.

His fellow officers didn’t appear to have his dilemma. Yulish and Vequell were unfazed by the news, Allon interested and Forge had a gleam in his eye that spoke volumes as to how he felt about Vader. It was the same look Cody had seen on inexperienced diplomats the first time they had met General Kenobi; like he was something beyond dreams. It had never failed to make his Jedi uncomfortable (though he rarely showed it); he had a feeling that the Emperor and Vader felt differently at receiving that kind of sycophantic devotion.

“Were we given any specifics about the mission, Admiral?” Yulish asked with her usual lack of flair and practicality.

“All that Lord Vader is going to the New Citadel to interrogate a prisoner housed there; an old Wookiee pirate who is believed to have vital information on the whereabouts of important members of the rebellion.”

Allon scoffed. “The rebellion employs pirates now? And here I thought they couldn’t fall any lower.”

Poole gave a bloodthirsty grin that made Cody present his most aggressively passive face to the outside. “We will be rendezvousing with Lord Vader once we reach the fortress. After he extracts the information we will be his escorts and invasion force to apprehend these rebellion members.”

Forge mirrored Poole’s look with a spark of zealotry madness thrown in for good measure. “It’ll be an honor, Admiral, to serve at the Lord’s command.”

“I don’t need to tell you the importance of this assignment,” Poole said finally, and the tone he used to deliver that message was icy in the extreme, “I will not be made a fool in front of such illustrious company. We are being given a chance to redeem ourselves after the last…misfortune.”

Cody saw Poole’s hand clench in a contained rage that said that despite his calmness, the debriefing he’d gone to at Command probably hadn’t been pleasant for the prideful man. He had little doubt that a deluge of destruction would follow in the wake of another failure. And in related news, Cody felt a wave of thick nausea begin to form in his stomach.

“We have two days before he reach Mustafar,” Poole continued, “Be ready to greet Lord Vader upon our arrival. We’ll be shipping out within the hour.”

“All, yes, sir,” all six of them said by rote and saluted Poole as one. They knew a dismissal when they heard one.

Cody started down the hall after the other officers and had been walking for several minutes, lost in a sort of haze, before he realized that Clawler was walking in a determined air beside him. He stopped when they had reached a deserted stretch of corridor and turned to the other man.

“Is there something I can do for you, Lieutenant?”

“Mustafar is where Lord Vader murdered the Separatist leaders after the Jedi revolt was put down, right, sir?”

Murdered. Not killed. Not executed. Murdered. Cody left it alone, but he dearly hoped that Clawler had half a mind when he spoke to his other commanding officers. If that didn’t sound like criticism of
the Empire’s actions, he didn’t know what did. “And the sight for the construction of the New Citadel. Only the most dangerous of Empire enemies are put there; the volcanic surface of the planet makes it treacherous for anyone even thinking of trying to escape. Was there something else you wanted to know?”

Clawler looked uncertain. “Have you…have you ever met Lord Vader, Commander?”

Cody swept his eyes over Clawler’s features and realized that he was nervous. Paler than normal, and there was an agitated restless aura to his body. Cody abruptly wanted to shake some sense into him.

“Yes. Once.”

“What was he like?”

Cody thought about that. How did one describe Darth Vader? “He was…impressive.”

It was an inadequate word. But one with a double meaning to it as well. Everything about Vader was memorable; his stature, his mechanized voice, the all black suit, the dramatic (and, from what Cody could tell, completely unnecessary) helmet and mask; even the blood red lightsaber was unlike anything Cody had ever seen. And to the fawning Imperial masses, all of that theatrical nonsense was very impressive. To his enemies, however, the most impressive thing about him was his stunning ruthlessness.

It didn’t settle Clawler at all; the man still looked like he was frightened half to death. “Of course,” Clawler gamely said, but his tone was all wrong for the words, “he’s the Emperor’s right-hand man after all.”

And his left. And his attack dog. And his mouthpiece. All in one horrible, bloody package, Cody thought sardonically but didn’t say. “Is that all, Lieutenant?”

Clawler looked at Cody with the kind of hesitation that meant he wanted to say more, but didn’t know how to. There was a pleading edge to his eyes that Cody recognized from his own face on days when the past was just a little too close to the surface; when all the vicious anger he had stored away was only a word or so from breaking his cover. It always made him feel like he was on the precipice of being swept away like one of the waves of his homeworld.

“I—” Clawler began, but seized up and just stood in front of Cody silent. He let the other think for a couple seconds, enough to at least formulate some kind of reply.

“Clawler?”

“I just want to apologize, sir,” Clawler finally said, and the words clearly weren’t exactly what he wanted to say, but they were still measured and slow, “For Captain Forge’s behavior at the last debriefing.”

Cody stilled in confusion. “Lieutenant?”

“It just…it seemed cruel.”

Cody had no idea how to process that. “Cruel?”

“Cruel,” Clawler reiterated, some resolute strength reentering his voice, “To remind you of your past suffering. I imagine the war is something of a difficult subject. And with the presence of a live Jedi, it must have seemed even more trying.”
Cody felt his facial muscles jump slightly, but he kept up the blasé stare. “It was no more trying than any other mission, trooper.”

Clawer rearranged his own features into an approximation of Cody’s own unconcerned mask. “I had an older sister,” he said, seemingly randomly, “who once met a Jedi.”

Cody kept a very closed lid on his internal reaction to that bit of news. “Oh?”

“My father was an Ambassador for Rybin during the Republic,” Clawer said nonchalantly, “and sometimes, when he met with Senators and other Ambassadors or diplomats, he took her along. He wanted her to follow in his footsteps.”

Here the other man stopped, and his studied expression collapsed onto itself with a flash of pain, before the wall was rapidly remade and he went on. “During the Clone Wars, he was once ferried by a Jedi and his clone detachment to a meeting. She was so excited when they made it home; she told me everything. For a solid six months afterwards, she told everyone that she wanted to be a Togruta when she grew up. My father was furious.”

A bolt of pain rose up in Cody’s chest. He had a feeling this was going to make him want to rip his own heart out.

“Anyway, she talked about the clone Captain the Jedi had, and how they had both designation numbers and names they were given; earned, really. She said his was CT-7567 or Rex. Every clone she met, he introduced with both, and she remembered them all.”

Clawer shrugged with a saddened movement, but his eyes never left Cody’s. “When he told her that all of the clones considered themselves brothers, she said that she asked him whether he was more loyal to his Jedi or them. And he said that sometimes a clone was lucky enough to have a Jedi that made it easy to be loyal to both because they were loyal to them in return.”

Cody wished he could disappear. He could just hear Rex’s patient voice explaining all of that; the gentle tone, the calm conviction that what he was saying was the absolute truth. “Lieutenant, I –”

“So, of course, she asked if that was true for him. He said yes. And then he told her that his closest brother had a Jedi like that too,” Clawer spoke over him without even raising his voice, “My sister said that he called him Cody,” the look Clawer gave him made old pains reach up and choke him, “I don’t have to tell you his designation, do I, sir?”

Cody felt almost removed from his own body. “No. You don’t.”

Clawer nodded. “Knowing that, sir, now what do you think I need to know about Vader?”

Well, that all but confirmed that Clawer was definitely not the good Imperial solider type. There would be no reason to fear Vader if one was loyal to the core. Cody looked at Clawer and without thought said: “He’s a grotesque parody of a Jedi and can read your mind like an open book.”

Clawer had the good sense to go sickly pale at that. “That sounds bad, sir.”

Cody, who was still dazed from Clawer’s story, acknowledged that distractedly. “It is. You may be the senior most of the lower officers, but I doubt Poole will actually call you to stand in when Vader shows. Hopefully, you can make it through the majority of this without being in the same room as him.”

“And if not?”
Cody looked at Clawler with his full attention. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. Until then, we probably shouldn’t be seen communicating outside of normal situations for the time being; Poole is still looking for something to pin on someone. Now, if you’ll excuse me, trooper,” Cody said and left the taller man standing in the hall, “I have some people who need to know about where we’re going and for what.”

He didn’t have a clue as to how he was going to get word out to Celese; he was serious when he said that Poole was still on the lookout for any kind of suspicious activity, which made his window for communication even tighter than normal. All he did know was that something important was waiting for them at the New Citadel; something that the rebellion had to know about.

And if it meant that Vader found out that he was the spy when everything went to shit? As long as he was the only who was caught (he had no intention of sitting in that cell with Boil somewhere just waiting), then so be it. He’d never planned for the future anyway.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Once again, you guys are the wind beneath my wings. *smiles* I meant to have this posted yesterday, but I decided not to rush it, so here it is now.

“Well that was awfully daring, sir.”

Cody rolled his eyes at Sero’s incredulous tone. Not that his brother was wrong, really, but still, it wouldn’t kill any of them to be a little less impressed with his skill at evading Imperial detection. He’d been doing this for longer than any of them had been stationed on the Tenacity; it shouldn’t be that surprising that he was good at his job. Dependable had been the first descriptor others had used about him for a reason – he was good at his kriffing job.

“Thank you, vod. Your worry is noted.”

“So,” Rush asked, eager, “what did Celese have to say?”

“Apparently, they knew that Vader was headed to the New Citadel, but they didn’t know why. And they had no idea that we would be meeting him there. She seemed a little harried, frankly.”

To be honest, Celese had stared intently at him for the entirety of their short, low-res call and he wasn’t sure if that was because the connection was purposefully more blurred to avoid detection on the more regularly used call frequencies and to keep the Empire’s monitoring system skimming right over top of the call in the first place; or, if there was some other reason he couldn’t fathom. But the curious look she had pinned on him at the beginning faded to a more familiar seriousness at his new information.

“What do they want us to do?”

“Nothing,” he said, “they had already planned to send a force to try and rescue the prisoner once they found out who it was. The plan’s just been bumped up in firepower and time.”

“That’s comforting,” Sero said wryly, “They know we’ll be there before they are, right?”

“Obviously. But we can’t really help much; Vader is going to be there. Honestly, I don’t want any of us anywhere near him, we’re too vulnerable around a force-user. Trying to help the contingent of rebellion soldiers at the same time? It’ll be impossible.”

“Did you speak to Clawler?” Crys asked into the silence that followed that statement.

Cody winced, the syrupy feeling of the reluctantly remembered past surfacing back to the forefront of his mind. “Yes.”

When he didn’t elaborate, the four of them glanced between themselves and then turned confused looks on him. “And?” Walker finally said.

Cody ran a hand through his hair with a resigned feeling. “He knows who I am.”
“What?”

Any other time the comically incredulous cast to Sero’s features would’ve been endlessly amusing to him, but with the weight of everything still pulling him down into a depressed chasm, it barely registered. “Apparently, Clawler’s sister met Rex once and he... mentioned me.”

Crys’ face was screwed up in a befuddled scrunch. “And he remembered that? It had to be over ten years ago.”

“Better yet,” Walker added, grimly, “He actually straight out told you that he knew you? Why?”

“He wanted to know about Vader. And apologize for Forge.”

“Forge,” Sero sneered, “what did that waste of space do now?”

Cody thought about telling them about the insinuations Forge had made to him at the debrief, but just the reminder of it made his blood simmer hatefully. If he told them, then Sero would have a conniption and force forbid Boil ever found out; the man would flat out murder him and throw all of their covers to the wind. Probably best not to risk it; no matter how satisfying watching the bastard bleed out would be. He waved the question away as inconsequential.

“Irrelevant.”

“Do you trust him?”

He turned to Rush’s soft voice. “Trust him?”

Rush shrugged noncommittedly. “To help us. Or, at least, stay out of the way?”

Cody answered that the best he could. “I don’t think we have a choice.”

The five of them contemplated that and were only broken up by Boil walking into the bunkhouse. He stopped immediately and frowned at the strange atmosphere of the room. When he approached the group, he shot Cody a disgruntled look.

“Why am I always walking in on you bringing down the whole damned room, Commander?”

Cody rolled his eyes. “Well, Boil, feel free to give us some good news to counteract my gloominess.”

Boil threw his helmet on the closest bunk and cracked his neck in agitation. Not a good sign. “Yeah, well, that isn’t going to be happening.”

“Then fuck you, I’ll be as kriffing depressing as I damn well want.”

A sharp quasi-smirk cut into Boil’s face at Cody’s belligerence, but fell quickly. “So, I went digging,” he said and then stopped.

“And?” Walker said flatly, with the kind of tic to his facial muscles that said plainly how done he was with the dramatics of his fellow vod’e.

“And nothing. There wasn’t a trace of Bly anywhere in Imperial battle records. Look, whole swathes of brothers were reported derelict and/or missing in the aftermath of the Jedi purge – especially the ones stationed out in the Mandalorian system, but that’s still a lead to something. I found several members of the 327th who were KIA, MIA and still actively serving in the Empire. But Bly? Nothing. He was a Commander, for kriff sakes; someone that high in rank doesn’t just disappear.”
Cody listened to the clear frustration in Boil’s words and a sense of dread fell over him. “Poole knew.”

Boil rounded on him, baffled. “Knew what?”

“So about Secura,” Cody said slowly as he worked with the scraps of information they did have in his head, “When he was interviewing me; he wasn’t surprised to hear she had survived.”

“Well, they obviously never found her body,” Sero pointed out, “She was probably listed as missing. Even without confirmation, they could’ve just assumed she had lived.”

“I thought maybe the spy had told them,” Cody muttered, not quite talking to anyone but the air, “But Secura said that Bly hesitated; that she felt his fear before the programming took over. She was even shot before she managed to escape.”

“Sir, what are you thinking?”

Cody lifted his eyes to meet Boil’s identical ones. “I don’t…something isn’t adding up here. Something I’m not seeing.”

“Like what?”

Cody tapped restlessly on the helmet he had abandoned on the bed he was leaning on. “The KIA you found from the 327th…did the records go back to the purge or were they all post-Imperial power?”

Boil frowned. “Actually, there were two from Felucia that had been marked suspicious. Why?”

Cody stilled. “Felucia was where the 327th was stationed at the time of the purge. Did it say why it was suspicious?”

“No. Just a general notation about investigators being consulted.”

“See,” Cody said, mind running furiously now, “that doesn’t make sense. Why would anyone have cared about the deaths of two clone troopers; especially in the wake of Order 66 and the rising Empire? It shouldn’t have even mattered.”

“Maybe Secura was able to take them down before she escaped?”

“She was shot in the back,” Cody stressed, “She told me; and it was such a shock, she didn’t have time to do anything but save herself.”

“Cody,” Boil said gently, and Cody blinked in surprise; Boil almost never used his name, “talk to us. What are you thinking?”

“You remember what the chip was like?”

Boil grimaced, hands curling into fists involuntarily. “Yes. Always.”

“If we hadn’t…” Here Cody staggered, his voice lost in the burst of still visceral pain the image conjured, “…if we hadn’t seen him fall; if he had – somehow – clung to the rockface, or pulled himself out of the water…if we didn’t know that we had shot him down – would we have stopped?”

Boil had lost the color in his face and the horrified faces of his brothers stared, almost unseeingly, at him. Rush looked positively stricken.
“No,” Crys said finally, voice thick with agony, “we wouldn’t have.”

“Good soldiers follow orders,” Rush murmured almost reflexively and then flinched from his own voice and huddled in on himself.

“So why did the 327th?” Cody asked, his own voice was fucked, but they didn’t have time for him to have a breakdown, so he continued, “She was injured and probably confused and afraid; even the Jedi aren’t immune to the kind of poor decision making that happens in those conditions. And she was alone, surrounded by people that had turned on her. Why didn’t they follow her? It would’ve been easy; it should’ve been easy.”

He let the words hang in the space between them. Boil visibly composed himself and Cody watched as he forced himself to think.

“You think Bly killed them,” he said finally.

“I think,” Cody replied, “that the chip’s influence was strained by his bond with Secura. Maybe he didn’t have control of himself when she was right in front of him, or even with just the initial surge of the programming, but I think he might have fought back.”

“And killed two brothers?”

Cody wavered, but didn’t back down. “Maybe they wouldn’t stop. Maybe they turned on him when he regained his self. I don’t know, Boil.”

The other man still looked dubious. “Even so, why would any of that have to do with Bly seemingly ceasing to exist?”

“The chip was their way of controlling us,” Cody said, a familiar white-hot flash of fury at the idea kindling in his gut, “And Order 66 was their way of destroying us. Imagine if there was a clone that beat the chip’s engineering? Don’t you think the Empire would want to know more about that?”

“A cover-up?” Crys asked, but there was a trace of understanding seeping into the words. “They go to Felucia and not only is Secura missing, but they have a – what? – a glitching clone commander on their hands?”

Cody pointed at him. “Exactly. Look at how much they’ve disregarded about the War; like they can rewrite history in their image. It wouldn’t have been hard to cover up the existence of one clone.”

“This is all wonderfully horrible,” Boil interjected with a huff, one hand at his hip and the other waving around in a sarcastic gesture, “But none of that helps us find him. If any of its even true.”

“We weren’t searching for the right things. We were looking for Clone Commander Bly; he’ll be far more hidden than that. See if you can get a look at some of the Inquisitor's records, follow up on the so-called investigation into the deaths on Felucia; anything that might seem promising. Whatever they’ve done to him or wherever they’ve stashed him, it can’t be pleasant.”

Boil threw his arms up in exasperation. “Are you serious? Now you want me to get into the Inquisitor's records? That's just stupid!”

“I’ll help,” Walker volunteered immediately, “With two of us, we can always be searching.”

“Good,” Cody said, relieved, even if Boil was still giving him the most royally enraged look he’d seen on the man in a long time, “Crys, Sero, Rush, I need you to keep a distant eye on Clawler. Don’t go out of your way to talk to him; but I want to make sure he stays as far away from Vader as
we can manage.”

“This is insane,” Boil muttered, “This is insane, and you’re insane. I’m certainly insane for agreeing to it.”

“It’ll be fun,” Walker said enthusiastically, slapping Boil on the back, “Like doing a puzzle.”

Boil eyed Walker like he dearly wished he had something to beat him with. “I hate you.”

“Of course you do, brother,” Walker replied gracefully, completely unconcerned.

“…and it would be a good idea to start shielding yourselves,” Cody picked up over his brothers bickering, “It’s risky, but better than giving Vader instant proof of our double-crossing.”

“You’re sure the rebellion doesn’t want us to do anything?” Rush asked again.

“For once, they seem to have a plan,” Cody said, “We should let them execute it without getting in the way.”

“If you say so, sir.”

“We have enough to deal with right now,” Cody added at Rush’s less than convinced tone, “Vader is…not someone we can ignore.”

“We understand, Commander,” Crys said.

“You be careful, sir,” Sero peered at Cody, “We’re not the ones who are going to have to be near him.”

Cody gave them an unsteady smile. “I’m always careful.”

The extremely skeptical looks all of them repaid him with answered just how ridiculous they thought that statement was.

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The following thirty-six hours were pure torture. Cody went through the motions of his Imperial life like he was walking on hot coals. He patrolled with hypervigilant muscles and he ate with one ear constantly trained on the fragments of conversations he could just hear traces of around him and he kept everyone, even – maybe especially – the vod’e in an effort to appear busy and unattached.

Thankfully, Poole was actively gearing up for their meeting with Vader and it kept him occupied to the point that Cody hadn’t had to really see him in more than brief passing moments since the officer’s gathering. The others were equally as absent from his daily life and despite the relative peace he got from that, it didn’t lessen the sense of encroaching anxiety that was pushing at his senses the closer they got to Mustafar.

The only time we talked to his brothers was when Boil or Walker passed him and subtly motioned their lack of luck and the nods of formal acknowledgment he got from Sero or Crys as they discreetly kept tabs on Clawler while the other man went about his own patrols and reports. For his part, Clawler took Cody’s warning seriously and maintained a healthy distance from Cody except when he had to directly report something to him officially. It all reminded him of those tense months following his own dechipping; like he was one step away from certain doom; like every pair of eyes that looked at him saw how up-ended he had felt. There was a pervasive sense that his fear was almost a tangible force surrounding his body and projecting his increasing dismay outward.
Needless to say, he was stressed.

Once they reached Mustafar’s atmosphere and he received Poole’s summons to be ready to disembark in an hour, a curious calm settled over him. All the trepidation of the past day faded into the background; a secondary, ignorable emotion. It was like all the energy he’d wasted worrying was useless now that the object was in front of him, so his mind recalibrated to keep him in a more manageable focus; it was a throwback to battle – waiting was almost always worse than being in the middle of it.

He went to the exiting hanger and watched as the ramp was lowered to the planet’s surface. The heat surged upward and into the hanger with a force that made Cody glad he had already put his helmet on. The barren, cracked rock and dirt of Mustafar stared back at him; on both sides of the landing area he could see wide rivers of lava and even through the armor’s filtration systems he could taste the ash hanging in the air. Nothing about the planet was hospitable, which, he reminded himself, was exactly the point.

In the near distance the spiral towers of the New Citadel rose above the molten seas from its perch on a piece of extended rock. The details of the formidable prison were lost to him, but it certainly boasted an impressively unwelcoming presence. The kind of prison that other prisons aspired too. He’d hadn’t been on the mission General Kenobi had gone on to infiltrate the Separatist’s version, but he idly wondered if this was more or less intimidating than the last.

“Commander!”

He turned in surprise to hear Boil’s voice call to him. The other man was decked out in his own armor and was holding a datapad with him. There was a tired weight to his gait that spoke of how endlessly he (and Walker) had been working since he’d asked them to backtrack through Imperial channels of information.

“What is it?”

“You need to sign these requisition forms before you go, sir. They were due last night.”

Cody took the offered pad with hidden confusion. Boil wasn’t even on logistical duty at the moment and Cody definitely didn’t have any overdue paperwork to fill out. He glanced down at the pad and saw it was open to a plain communiqué template. He deliberately kept his body loose as he read the words left there.

He’s here.

He looked back up at Boil. His second very pointedly peered over his shoulder at the looming prison in the backdrop and then returned his armored gaze to Cody. Cody touched the screen and a second message appeared.

He’s in solitary.

Cody touched the screen again and when no other words showed, he pretended to sign the blank screen and gave the pad back to Boil, mind racing.

“Thank you, Sergeant.”

“Sir,” Boil said and with a prim salute.

“Keep up the good work,” Cody told him, “If there are any problems, we’ll address them when I return.” I’ll see what I can do. Take care of yourselves; don’t do anything stupid.
“As you wish, Commander,” Boil replied with a barely there nod to indicate that he received the coded message in his words. With that the trooper left the hanger at a normal pace.

Cody stared after him for a brief time and then turned back around to face the planet surface and wait for Poole to appear. While he stood there, he felt a jolt of the previous day’s jumpiness sprint along his nerve endings. He gazed at the windowless fortress and tried to picture the cramped halls and – no doubt – badly conditioned cells and wondered which one Bly was wasting away in. How long had the other man been there? The construction of the New Citadel was completed just over eight years ago; surely it couldn’t be the whole time? And if so, what state would Bly even be in after that much time in Imperial hands?

Before he could imagine the full extent of the horror present in that thought, he heard boots closing in behind him. He glanced to the left and saw Vequell and Allon approach. Both men nodded to him.

“Commander.”

“Sirs,” Cody answered with a nod of his own.

A minute or so of silence later and Poole entered the hanger himself; trailing behind him were Yulish and a delighted Forge. All three of them were decked out in immaculate Imperial Army dress uniforms and had clearly made an effort to look their best. Cody glanced back over at Vequell and Allon and saw that neither had changed out of their regular outfits; so, they had probably been designated to stay with the ship.

*Lucky them,* Cody thought sardonically.

“2224,” Poole acknowledged, while two double speeders were unloaded beside them, “Lord Vader has requested that we meet him at the New Citadel. Are you ready to leave?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good,” Poole then walked down the ramp and waved Cody and Yulish to the second, keeping Forge by his side. He had mixed feelings about that; on the one hand, he was grateful to not be riding with Forge, but any time the Admiral spent alone with Forge seemed like an opportunity for the petty man to try and turn Poole against Cody. And to be honest, Cody didn’t think that Poole needed much of a push in that direction.

On the speeders, the four of them came up on the prison quickly. A small transport ship was docked in the narrow bay beside the prison with two stormtroopers guarding the end of its entrance ramp. Vader’s most likely. Both troopers saluted Poole as he climbed down from the speeder, but Poole paid them no attention; just squared his shoulders and led their party inside the reinforced durasteel door and to the main chamber of the New Citadel’s “welcoming” hall.

As expected, the walls were gloomy and dark, and their boots echoed heavily in the open room. Despite the space, there was an almost claustrophobic feeling to it that set Cody on edge. Not that that wasn’t anticipated – it was a prison for force-sakes – but it made him even more uncomfortable than he thought he would be.

“Admiral Poole.”

The mechanized voice drew Cody’s attention instantly. The prison itself disappeared in light of the man standing to the side, observing them intently. Cody’s shields, which he had been working diligently on since he’d heard about Vader’s soon-to-be appearance, shored up their defenses as carefully as he could and he turned to face the Emperor’s prodigal apprentice.
The Sith in question was in his recognizable black garb, with his signature lightsaber barely visible behind his cape. The gliding grace that Cody had gotten used to witnessing during the war was evident in every movement that Vader made as he walked over to where Poole was standing.

“Lord Vader, it’s an honor to serve at your behest,” Poole said smoothly accompanied with a deep bow.

“Your assignment on Mab did not go as expected.”

Poole visibly reigned whatever his initial reaction to that statement was. “It was a regrettable set of events, my Lord. An aberration, nothing more.”

“I see,” Vader said slowly, but with a definite trace of some other emotion that Cody couldn’t readily identify in his low voice, “Let us hope you are correct, Admiral.”

Poole inclined his head respectfully. Vader then looked at the rest of them. “Your officers?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Poole said and introduced them, “Commander Ralina Yulish, Captain Milo Forge and Commander 2224.”

Cody watched Vader as he – presumably; that damn mask hid the man’s facial expressions so he couldn’t know for certain what or who he was really looking at – gazed at each one in turn. Cody was fairly certain that he didn’t imagine that Vader lingered on his form longer than the others. He carefully kept the unobtrusive haze of obedience and duty layered over his shielding so that that would be what Vader would feel if he skimmed the surface of Cody’s mind. Hopefully it would be enough to keep him from going further. For now, at least.

“It’s a privilege to meet you, my Lord,” Forge said, awe filtering into his voice, “Truly an honor as the Admiral said. Everything you’ve done for the Empire is simply unparalleled, my Lord.”

Vader turned to Forge and there was a distinctly unimpressed air to the force-user. The smile on Forge’s face swiftly fell and he crumpled in on himself slightly under the uncompromising stare.

“How fulfilling – to hear that my service to the Empire meets with your approval, Captain,” Vader stated with an almost darkly amused manner to it.

“Forgive Captain Forge,” Poole stepped in, shooting daggers at the other man, “He’s simply pleased to meet you; he means no insult.”

“As you say,” Vader said.

Poole gathered himself artfully and asked: “What are your orders, my Lord?”

“There is a prisoner here that I believe has vital information on the whereabouts of important rebellion leaders. The capture of these leaders will be paramount in our fight to eliminate the rebellion once and for all,” Vader explained, then, with a much more frightening quality to his voice, “I will have this information by any means possible.”

“Anything you wish, my Lord.”

Vader circled back towards the lift embedded into the left wall. “You along with your officers are welcome to accompany me to the interrogation,” Vader added as he made his way to the mode of transportation, “Perhaps Captain Forge can tell me his opinion on my methods afterwards.”

Forge went pale at the plainly spoken suggestion badly hidden in Vader’s words. Poole leveled him
with a venomous glare to keep him silent then aimed his gaze back at their superior.

“We would be thrilled to go with you.”

Poole led them to the lift where Vader waited for them. Cody stepped onto the conveyance with all the helpless terror that came with being a spy in an enclosed space with the galaxy’s second most dangerous person.

*Anytime, Celese,* he thought manically, a hysterical kind of amusement intensifying the waves of emotions that were beating at his mind, *If ever there was a need for distraction, it would be now.*

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When they arrived at their destination, Cody knew instantly that they were in the solitary section of the structure. If he weren’t so busy being alternately petrified and trying to maintain his shielded imitation of calm, the notion that his enemies had just carried him straight to the site he wanted was laughable. As it was, he silently followed in the wake of Vader’s confident strides down the hall and wondered which of the barricaded doors Bly was behind.

There was a fatalistic atmosphere to the confinement cells that reverberated with neglect and abandonment. It was sad. That was the only word for it really; sad. Colorless, dank air and almost soundless; like being in space without any chance of rescue. He trudged along and tried not to let the aura of the place sink its claws into him.

Vader stopped in front of one of the cells and waved a hand at the door which unlocked and swung open without touch. The five of them crowded inside the room and Cody took up residence in the corner nearest the door where he could see both a glimpse of the hallway and all of the room’s occupants. When everyone had settled, he glanced at the chained figure at the far side of the cell and fought not to contain his shock.

He looked old. It was a strange thought; all the times Cody had seen the pirate he had seemed ageless; a cornerstone without give. Space was dark, water was wet and Hondo Ohnaka was an enthusiastic, everlasting pain in the ass of authority the galaxy over. But looking at the Weequay now, it was harder to equate the bombastic personality he had gotten used too with the specimen sitting on the cell floor. His signature red coat was in tatters, his goggles missing completely and he was barefoot. It was a disconcerting sight, if Cody was honest.

Still, when Ohnaka looked up and saw who was standing before him, he didn’t even flinch. “Lord Vader,” the pirate’s accented voice rang out with a pleasant kind of nonchalance to it, “to what do I owe the pleasure?”

Vader said nothing for a time and then: “I think you are aware of why I’m here, Ohnaka. You have information I want.”

“Oh?” Ohnaka asked, feigning confusion.

“Locations of certain members of the rebellion,” Vader elaborated.

“The rebellion! Well, this is a surprise,” Ohnaka declared with the familiar pomp Cody remembered from the war, “I am truly sorry that you have traveled all this way for nothing, but as you might have guessed, I am no friend of the rebellion.”

Vader stayed stock still and the tone of his voice was flat. “Is that so?”

“The rebellion is full of noble people who believe in a – how should I put it? – fair exchange of
goods. I believe in the right to make your own enterprise,” Ohnaka grinned charmingly.

“Well, if it’s just between you and me,” Ohnaka said and leaned forward as if imparting a secret, “They did inquire through an independent agent once, but they took exception to my prices. I cannot eat for free, you know.”

“And your men agreed with your stance as well?”

“Ah, my men,” Ohnaka said with a reminiscing spark to his voice, “Cut-throats and savages every last one of them. They wanted to cut the agent to pieces and send him to the rebellion as an answer,” the pirate sniffled as if he were tearing up with pride, “They grow up so fast.”

Vader looked down at the unruffled man and then took a menacing step forward, until his boots were mere inches from Ohnaka’s vulnerable feet. The pirate’s eyes narrowed momentarily at the action before affecting an open expression.

“You have not changed, Hondo Ohnaka,” Vader said musingly.

Ohnaka tilted his head to the side questioningly. “Have we met?”

Vader chuckled – actually chuckled – and the rasp of the mechanization made it sound like metal being grated. “Do not concern yourself with trying to remember, it is of little consequence. But if there is one thing that I know you are, it is a liar. You would lie to anyone if it suited you and you’re lying now.”

Vader bent over until he was practically eye level with Ohnaka, who instinctively drew back away from the proximity. “I do not like being lied too,” the Sith crooned and then straightened up.

“Now, will you give me the information I want?”

Ohnaka stared at Vader and there was a minute shake to his limbs, but Cody watched as the pirate set his defenses and shored up his courage. He’d known that by the end of the war, General Kenobi had developed something of a soft spot for the Weequay male, but this was the first time Cody had understood why.

“Alas, Lord Vader,” Ohnaka said with faked regret, “I am an old man now and my memory is no longer the paragon that it once was. Any dealings I have allegedly had with the rebellion have no doubt disappeared.”

The force-user nodded, seemingly to himself, and then lifted a hand. “Very well, if you won’t give me what I want, I will simply take it from you instead.”

An invisible force pushed Ohnaka’s head backwards into the wall and an involuntary noise of distress and pain escaped the pirate. Ohnaka’s wrists tugged sharply on the manacles holding them and his hands clenched into tight fists.

He’s searching his mind, Cody thought with a rising horror that he tried desperately to keep hidden behind his shields.

He watched Ohnaka struggle futilely against whatever Vader was doing and made sure to keep his eyes open, no matter how much he wanted to blot it out. He owed Ohnaka that much. Still, it only exacerbated the sick feeling of fear, anger and despair roiling in his gut.
Anytime, Celese, Cody thought again and his listened to the first of Ohnaka’s screams, Anytime.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

First I want to apologize if something doesn't make sense; I've been editing this enough that not everything makes sense to me anymore. Also, the holidays made this later than I wanted it to be; but I hope everyone who celebrates Thanksgiving had a wonderful time. All mistakes are belong to me.

Boil may have been able to joke about Vader just two day ago (two days? Force, it felt like forever), but that - Cody now knew - was because he had never witnessed what Cody had been forced to watch. As the minutes passed by, he had had to fight with every essence of his being not to be sick and to maintain some semblance of his shields. The grip he had on his blaster had gotten progressively tighter and he could feel his hands shaking slightly.

Yulish’s emotionless mask was perfect so he couldn’t begin to imagine what her feelings were, and Forge actually looked a little sick himself. Poole, though, Poole looked a little like he was having a religious experience. Awe and rapt attention warred on his face while his body was stilled in anticipation; there was even a small upturn to his mouth.

As if Cody needed more reasons to hate the man.

Vader, for his part, was focused entirely on Ohnaka. The pirate had stopped screaming and was digging his fingers into the metal manacles, but for all intents and purposes he appeared exhausted and just about at the end of his rope.

He wasn’t sure how long they had been in the cell (too long, far too damned long), but abruptly Vader lowered his outstretched hand and the tensed line of Ohnaka’s body went lifeless. If it weren’t for the shallow breathing Cody could just make out, he would’ve been afraid that Vader had killed him. A moment after that thought crossed his mind he wondered why the Sith hadn’t actually done so.

“My Lord?” Poole ventured.

The Sith stared at the pirate like the Weequay held the secrets to the universe. For all Cody knew, Ohnaka did, but there was a kind of unsettled energy the swirled around Vader that had Cody longing to the see the other man’s face.

“We will be going to Saleucami, Admiral. Tell your men to prepare to ship out.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Poole answered and then tapped on the ship’s comm unit attached to his wrist. “Commander Allon, plot a course for the Saleucami system, we will be leaving shortly.”

Silence.

Poole’s brows furrowed. “Commander Allon, respond.”

Silence.

“Commander Allon!”
Poole glanced over at Vader, who had rounded back on him at the hint of trouble. Poole’s face was red and he was clearly fighting down his anger. “I’m sorry, my Lord, but my ship is not responding.”

Vader tilted his head slightly and lifted a hand to stop Poole when it looked like the man was going to say something else. “Jedi.”

Poole’s eyes widened. “Sir, I—”

They were interrupted by the appearance of a stormtrooper slipping past the doorway. The man’s blaster was up and he was breathing hard and once he spoke, Cody easily identified him as Clawler. “Admiral, Commander Allon sent me to inform you that our communications have been jammed; and when we got here, we were confronted by a contingent of rebellion soldiers.”

“The resistance has arrived,” Vader intoned, and his voice made Clawler visibly flinch. “Were you sent alone?”

“No,” Clawler said with barely a hesitation; Cody was almost proud, “He allotted me a company in case there was something happening here, they’re currently engaging the enemy, sir – uh – Lord Vader.”

Vader stared at Clawler with a stillness that made Cody extremely uneasy. “Very well. There are more than one Jedi among them; and they are shielding the rest of their numbers. Leave the Jedi to me. Trooper, you stay here and guard the prisoner – no one takes him until I allow it, is that understood?”

Clawler nodded. “It will be done, my Lord.”

Clawler nodded. “It will be done, my Lord.”

Cody pressed down on his own shields at that turn of phrase, and pushed the echoes of his own robotic voice saying just that to a hazy hologram of the Emperor just before he ordered his life shot off a Utapau cliff. Vader seemed to flicker in his direction and he gathered the attentiveness of imminent battle around his thoughts quickly. Vader, in turn, looked back at Poole.

“The rest of you will follow me,” Vader said, “Captain Forge, I am entrusting you to get back to your ship and inform the remaining officers there of what is happening. After we dispatch the rebellion members foolish enough to show their faces, I intend to head for Saleucami immediately.”

Forge saluted. “As you wish, my Lord.”

Clawler threw Cody an abbreviated glance and then set himself up next to where Ohnaka had perked up a little and was watching the proceedings with an unreadable look. Poole, Forge and Yulis all charged up their own weapons and stood at the ready; Vader swept out of the cell with a single-minded determination and the other three followed like herd animals; Cody nodded briefly at a stone-faced Clawler and hoped the other man wouldn’t do anything too stupid before he trailed after the others.

They had descended three flights before the noise of fighting reached their ears. The whirr of blaster shots bounced around and were accompanied by shouts both from trooper voices he recognized and rebellion ones he didn’t. Over all of that, the faint buzz of activated lightsabers confirmed Vader’s idea of multiple Jedi being there.

Vader held up and then with an ominous deliberateness, he reached over and his own lightsaber blinked into existence. The red glow was so unlike any of the Jedi weapons that he had gotten used to seeing that he stared blankly at it for a long moment before facing forward once again. Vader flicked his wrist and the door separating the stairwell from the cell block’s hallway opened to chaos.
Close quarter combat was always complicated and needlessly dangerous. He used to hate fighting on the ships during the war; there were too many things that could go wrong and too little space to correct any mistakes in positioning. Too easy to accidentally shoot a friend and despite the lack of area to work with, seemingly too easy for the enemy to duck into converging corridors and disappear. He rolled his shoulders and assessed the scene as best he could.

The troopers in the cell block were doing a poor job of holding the line, mostly because there were two Jedi standing in front of the armed rebellion members and were blocking every shot that the troopers were raining down on them. The Human male and the Nautilan looked young and they didn’t have the refined grace that Cody had seen Jedi Masters encompass, so he assumed they were more Knights who had managed to survive the purge somehow. The Human had a fierce, toothy smirk on his face and the Nautilan appeared to be in a kind of locked-down focused rhythm and they moved together like they had known and fought beside each other for years; it reminded him of General Kenobi and General Skywalker which just made him even more reluctant to even put up the pretense of fighting.

“I will handle this,” Vader said and took a step forward into the hall, he motioned to the stairs, “we need to contain them. Go to the other floors and take control of any troops that may be there.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Poole replied and immediately started down the next flight of stairs; Cody caught one last glimpse of the combined shock and fear that filtered over the Human and Nautilan’s faces as they realized who had entered the fray and offered up a stunted prayer-like hope to the force itself before he turned away.

Yulish broke off from them at the next floor down and instantly began ordering the troopers who had become stuck in a stand-off with a group of non-Jedi rebellion soldiers. Poole pushed Forge forward and gestured for Cody to follow him after the next two floors were empty and he stopped on the one next to the ground floor.

“I’ll take this one,” Poole said, raising his voice above the din of the fight, “Forge get to the speeders and back to the ship. 2224 cover him until he makes it out and then find a group to engage in.”

Having to protect Forge grated painfully along his nerves, but he saluted Poole all the same and then shoved Forge towards the next flight of stairs. Forge, as a token of how messy the situation had become, didn’t even glare at Cody for the manhandling.

The ground floor was set up in a more formal battle zone, the extra space of the entrance hall afforded both sides a sort of entrenchment that meant a true stand-off was contained in the majority of the room. Still, it was obvious that the rebels were trying to either clear the way to the stairs or one of the lifts (less promising; stairs wouldn’t malfunction if a stray blaster hit it after all) so that more of their troops could level up. Forge cursed and then tugged on Cody’s nearest vambrace to get his attention.

“There’s a window over there,” the man pointed to a plane of glass miraculously in tact with the fight waging around it, even better, no one on either side appeared to be paying it any mind, “if I can shoot it—”

Cody didn’t wait for Forge to keep speaking, he just raised his arms and fired directly at the glass and watched as it shattered. Forge’s face twisted into a grimace, but – also miraculously, it was the day for it, so it seemed – didn’t say anything. Cody looked back to the floor and waved Forge away.

“Get out. I’ll cover this,” he said and Forge actually gave an abridged salute and dashed off to the makeshift exit. Cody fired his blaster without intention to maim anyone, and crept over to a small contingent of troopers that included one who seemed to have taken charge of the operation.
“What do we have, trooper?” Cody asked after he had taken shelter behind the square pillar beside the entrance desk they were using for cover.

“A whole kriffing mess of rebellion soldiers, sir,” And Cody actually took a moment to breathe a sigh of relief to hear Boil’s cheeky voice answer him; how Boil had managed to get himself assigned to Clawler’s company he didn’t know, but he was grateful for it, “A lot more of them have been able to get to different cell blocks. Including four Jedi.”

*Four, so there are two more running around somewhere*, Cody thought and hoped at least one of them was capable of at least keeping up with Vader. “Right, well, our job is to keep as many down here as possible,” Cody said and sent a couple of un-aimed blasts around the pillar; high enough to keep from hitting any of the soldiers and low enough to have them ducking for refuge.

The two sides traded a series of shots before something caught Cody’s eye. He pinpointed the silver shine of as it was rolled over to their position and he had only a moment to recognize it as one of the repurposed grenades that the Republic had used against the Droid Army during the war that allowed them to take out whole handfuls of droids from a distance. The rebellion had collected some of the surplus and had rigged them to work as a kind of EMP bomb that took out their HUD’s and exploded rather spectacularly. Cody had a moment to yell a warning and watch the other troopers disappear behind the desk completely while he hunkered down and waited for the bomb to detonate.

Debris rained down on him from the force of the explosion and part of the pillar had been torn apart behind him. A whole section of the desk had been wiped out, but none of the troopers appeared more than a little dazed. He shook his head and smacked his helmet a couple times to stabilize the sight of his HUD, but like he expected most of the information he was used to seeing across the screen had faded from existence. Not the strongest of there grenades then; and after a careful glance around what remained of the pillar he saw that the bomb itself was mostly for distraction as a group of rebellions soldiers were streaming through the doors into the stairwell in the confusion.

He shifted to his feet in a crouched position. “Sergeant, keep the fighting as contained as possible, I’m heading after the escaping enemy.”

“Need any help, sir?”

Cody waved off Boil’s question. “Just do as I say, Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir.”

He sprinted back over to the stairwell and narrowly missed being clocked in the head with the butt of a blaster. He twisted away and brought his hands up to block the next blow and threw his elbow up to back the attacker off without causing permanent damage. The blaster was knocked to the side, and he used his own to shove the person backwards until they hit the wall with enough force to push a small grunt from the rebel. He kept his blaster pointed down and used his arm to keep the person’s shoulders in place, then slipped a leg between theirs to keep them immobile against the wall.

That settled, he actually looked at the face of his attacker and almost laughed in relief. Celese’s blue eyes were fiery as they stared at him, there was a small line of blood making its way down her chin from where his elbow had probably split her lip open, but otherwise she appeared unharmed.

“I’m going to let you go now,” Cody said slowly, and saw a burst of confused recognition light up Celese’s expression. Carefully, he eased out of his hold and backed a step or so away from her, so that they were no longer touching. Celese eyed him and pushed herself a short distance from the wall.
“Rako?”

“Celese.”

Celese’s shoulders slumped and she nodded. “Sorry.”

“Understandable,” he said and then glanced upward at the three or four rebels that had obviously backtracked to help their leader and were now pointing their weapons at him.

“It’s okay,” Celese said, command clear in her voice as she picked up her fallen blaster, “He’s one of us. Our inside contact.”

With trepidation, the others lowered their weapons, but kept close eyes on him. He focused back on Celese who offered him a small smile.

“You’re looking for Ohnaka?”

She nodded. “You know where he is?”

“Sixth floor, the solitary cell block.”

Celese took a look up the stairs. “What can we expect?”

“We don’t really have time to stand here,” Cody said and pushed Celese gently in the direction of the steps, “I’ll explain on the way – don’t stop near the third floor, Vader is there.”

Thankfully, Celese understood his urgency and started a brisk pace up the flights with Cody on her heels, keeping one eye on their progress and the other on the look out for any stray stormtroopers or – force forbid – Vader himself. He had no idea what might happen if they ran into the inverse Jedi, but Cody had a feeling that without actual Jedi back-up, it would be up to him to distract the Sith until the rebels could get off planet. And frankly, that was a death knell for him; one sparring win against a Jedi that died at Vader’s hands did not inspire him with confidence as to his chances.

When they reached the cell block in question, Celese pulled him aside. “Now, can you tell us what we’re facing?”

“Vader assigned a stormtrooper to guard Ohnaka, but he’s on our side. The plan was containment; it’s possible no one else has gotten back here yet.”

Celese didn’t look much convinced. “You’re sure he’s on our side?”

Cody nodded. “Yes.” He didn’t elaborate further. Standing here was a making him itchy; he gestured to the hall. “Can we go now?”

“Right,” Celese said, “Let’s move.”

They moved down the corridor and towards the only open door on the whole block. Cody, who was watching their six and listening for any sound that they weren’t alone, almost missed the harsh withdrawn breath that sounded in the small cell. He looked up and realized that, strangely, the noise had come from Clawler of all people. The rebels had their weapons pointed and faces blank, except for the faintest hints of confusion. Clawler’s hands had gone lax on his blaster and he took an unsteady step towards Celese.

“Celle?”

Celese stopped like she’d walked into a durasteel wall. Her eyes widened and she mirrored Clawler’s
forward progress with a backward one of her own. Clawler scrambled to tear his helmet off his head with one hand and his facial appearance was colorless and disbelieving. Cody tightened his own grip on his blaster, desperately confused and not liking the lack of movement. They really didn’t have time for this. Whatever this was.

“Doren?”

Clawler let out a noise that was a close relative to a sob, dropped his blaster and pulled Celese into a fierce hug. Celese, cautiously as first and then with a distressed need, brought her own arms up and wrapped them around Clawler’s shoulders.

“Not to break this up,” someone said, and through a haze of bafflement Cody realized that it was him, “but time is getting scarcer.”

The two parted and Clawler – without taking his eyes off Celese – acknowledged Cody’s statement. “Sorry, Commander.”

“Right,” Celese said and her voice was raspy with unshed tears, “get Ohnaka out of there.”

The rebels, who seemed to be equally as confounded as him, moved towards the pirate on her orders and used their weapons to break the chain holding Ohnaka’s arms pinned to the wall and his hands attached to one another. Ohnaka looked up at them, quietly regarding their faces.

“Well,” the Weequay said, tone distant sounding, but with a wry twist, “I did not expect the rebellion to stage a rescue for little old me.”

“Did you tell them anything?” Celese asked.

Ohnaka frowned and leaned on the nearest rebel as he forced his body to his feet woozily. “I…I do not remember.”

“He did,” Cody answered, and Celese’s eyes flew wide with alarm and Cody sighed, “Not voluntarily. Vader went into his mind. It took quite awhile, and it wasn’t pleasant.”

Ohnaka snorted, but refrained from saying anything. He looked like he could pass out at any time. Cody turned to Clawler, who had at least gained a bit of decorum back even if the stunned expression was still painted on his countenance.

“We should go,” Celese said, but her attention was on Clawler again as well.

Cody stared out at the cell block and glanced backward at the rebels. He listened for any movement and when the block stayed still, he stepped outward and went to the end of the hall and began shooting out locking sequencers.

Celese and the others – including Clawler – ventured into the hall and gave him frantic looks. “What are you doing?” Celese hissed, which he thought was a little dubious on her part all things considered.

“I promised Gen-Master Secura.”

“Promised her what?” One of the other rebels asked incredulously.

“That I would look for her…” Cody peered into the third empty cell and moved on to the next one, “…husband.”
“Master Secura isn’t married,” Celese said.

“Not technically,” Cody muttered and checked for a pulse on human in the occupied cell next to Ohnaka’s. There wasn’t one. He moved on.

“I’ll help, Commander,” Clawler said and stepped out of the cell, blaster up and ready.

Quickly and efficiently, he and Clawler broke into six more cells – two empty, one with a dead former rebel spy and one with a barely living rebel spy and one with a former senatorial mistress who had the unfortunate distinction of being Twi’lek and therefore disposable when she was discovered in an anti-non-human Empire. She had a hard look to her, like the time for tears had long passed and she was ready for revenge; she accepted their help gratefully, but refused to be coddled. Cody liked her.

On their seventh cell he wrenched open the door and then stared dumbfounded. Bly was virtually unrecognizable; beard and unruly, curling hair – neither of which had obviously been attended to in quite some time – but there was no mistaking the familiar facial features hiding underneath it. He was thin and dirty, missing three fingers (two on his right, one on his left) and several scars down his naked back that had clearly been only minimally taken care of. Still, when the noise of the voices of the rebels and their new parolees reached the cell, the man shifted his body and looked over at the doorway. At seeing Cody’s armor, he just closed his eyes and turned back to the wall he’d been facing.

“Bly?” Cody walked into the dungy room and slowly knelt by his brother’s prone body. Bly blinked slowly, his lips were cracked and dry and looked painful, but he had a spark of remembrance in his dull eyes.

Like Clawler had done earlier, he tore his own helmet off so Bly could see his face. He ignored the sharp intake of breath that came from the direction of the hall (no doubt the others were watching from that vantage point) and let Bly take in his face.

“Cody?”

“Yes,” Cody said and tried to smile reassuringly at him – he probably missed that mark – and rested a hand on Bly’s bent knee. “Brother, we’re here to get you out.”

Bly looked wary. “Oh?”

Cody nodded. “How long have you been here, vod?”

Bly shook his head. “Forever. Never. I don’t know.”

“Why did they put you here?”

Bly looked at him with a manic gleam to his eye. “I failed.”

Cody’s heart rate spiked. “How?”

“I…” Bly trailed off and then an animated energy rushed across his face, “They wanted me to shoot Aayla. They said she was a traitor, but… I couldn’t… she would never betray the Republic. But Chancellor Palpatine said… good soldiers follow orders.”

Bly grabbed Cody’s hand with a surprisingly strong grip. “I didn’t want too. I – they wouldn’t stop trying to kill her. I had to kill them. I… love her, I couldn’t, even if…”
Cody clutched his hand. “Bly…”

“I mean, could you?” Bly asked, “If they had told you to shoot him… you understand, don’t you?”

Cody felt his heartbreak, both for the obvious distress Bly was experiencing and at the knowledge that he hadn’t been strong enough to push past the programming. That General Kenobi hadn’t been lucky enough to be loved by a clone with a little more fight.

“Yes, brother,” he said lowly, “I understand.”

“We need to go,” Celese’s voice overlaid the silence and Cody looked over at her. She was watching Cody and Bly carefully, but without the scorn or suspicion that Cody had always assumed would be there if she found out that he was a clone. She was holding Clawler’s hand desperately. He returned his attention to Bly.

“Vod, we’re getting you out of here, okay? The rebels will help you.”

“Will they fix my head? It’s…it’s so tiring feeling like this.”

Cody had to assume that the chip had never been removed and that the dissonance that Bly was oscillating around was in part because of that. The pull of his love and bond with Secura was somehow disrupting the chip from full effectiveness, but not enough for him to order his own thoughts. He stood and gently pulled the other man’s brittle body upwards.

“Yes, they will. And you can see General Secura again.”

Bly laughed, it was terrible. “Aayla’s dead, Cody. They told me.”

“She’s not, Bly,” Cody said firmly, you’re a prisoner for kriff’s sake, of course they told you she’s dead, they did it to make you complacent and it worked, “I’ve seen her myself. She and your daughter are waiting for you.”

Bly stared. “My…daughter?”

Coyd nodded.

Bly’s face crumpled. “You’re lying.”

“Listen to me, Bly,” Cody said with all the urgency he felt, “I would never lie about this. I know you, vod. I know what this means,” Bly just stared at him, cautious hope beginning to dawn in his eyes, “Now please, brother, go with them. For your own good. I promise you’ll be alright.”

“Okay,” Bly finally relented and took the guiding hand that Cody held out to him and the two limped their way to the cell entrance where the rebels were waiting in various states of agitation and readiness.

Once they had all gathered in the hall, Cody replaced his helmet and turned to Celese. “Where’s your transport off planet?”

“Just outside the prison,” she replied as their stilted group began their trek out of the cell block.

“Seriously?” Clawler beat him to disbelieving question, “Vader’s ship is docked there.”

“We took care of that.”

Cody looked at the bland expressions on the rebels faces and sighed. “Did you land on the ship
The lead rebel threw him a smirk. “Well, they were in the way.”

Cody rolled his eyes, but followed the strange troupe through the hall and too the stairwell. It was slower going than anyone of them wanted; Bly was in pitiful shape (though like all vod’e, he complained little and did what he could to help himself), the Twi’lek was doing fine, as it seemed that she had been essentially brought to the New Citadel and mostly abandoned, which meant she was in bad shape, but essentially in one piece and could walk on her own accord and the rebel spy was being helped by his fellows, while Celese, one of her rebels and Clawler, led them.

As they began the slow trudge down the first flights of stairs, Cody watched the closeness of Clawler and Celese in a kind of stupefied cloud. The two were talking softly and leaning into each other’s bodies like they were used to such actions. If he weren’t so concerned with the well-being of his brother and wondering what they were going to do to get out of there, he might have tried to make a point of it.

As it was the echoing sound of a door being ripped off it’s mooring stopped him from breathing and the others froze in their tracks.

“Shit,” one of the rebels near him – a pretty dark-skinned woman who latched onto the rescued spy and had seemed to be berating and apologizing to him in equal measures – mumbled from where she was all but carrying said rescuee.

Celese moved quickly, prying open the door to the cell block they had just begun to pass and ushering them all in with quick, staccato movements. “Go, go, go.”

They didn’t need to be told twice. All of their now nine person band swept into the unfamiliar block. Celese closed the entry and then bashed the palm pad with the butt of her blaster. They shuffled around, and took in their new surroundings. Strangely, it looked like they had walked into an administrative area of the prison, there were no cells in the immediate area and instead the space was filled with work stations and a series of observation ports.

Or, Cody thought, peering at the footage being played on the screens, *this is where they monitored the prisoners*. Several of the screens were blank, though whether that was deliberate on someone’s part or a casualty of the fight, he couldn’t be sure. What he didn’t like was the far most screen showing the broken doors of the solitary cell block and Clawler’s forgotten helmet laying in Ohnaka’s old cell.

“All of this needs to be destroyed,” he said and Celese, whose eyes were also trained to the screens, nodded in agreement.

Before any of them could do anything about that or locate the datahub that stored all the footage and information; the low whine of an activated lightsaber sounded on the periphery of their position and Cody tightened his grip on Bly even as he raised his blaster.

*Not Vader,* was all he could hope, *Not Vader.*
Cody watched as the rebel fighters immediately hoisted their weapons in the direction of the enclosing force-user and waited. He gently led Bly away from the open area and shoved his brother as carefully as he could behind the nearest row of screens while he copied his fellow soldiers in stance. After a moment of thought, he peeled off his helmet and put it on Bly as a last ditch source of protection for his weaponless brother. Not that he held out much hope; if it was Vader there wasn’t a damned thing any of them would be able to do to save themselves.

He glanced briefly at Celese and Clawler; the former was holding up a closed fist in indicate to her own people to wait for her mark to fire and the latter had the grimly determined set of face and a angled body like he could protect the woman by sheer force of will. The rescued Twi’lek woman had produced a cylinder pipe of some kind out of thin air like it could shield her and Bly, as out of as he seemed, still had that implacable look that said just how annoyed he was that he had no way of protecting himself.

The next half a minute (or ten hours, depending on who was asking) passed in tense silence and then a silhouetted person crossed through their line of sight and the glow of a non-crimson lightsaber cast a line of vague shadows over the Jedi’s young face. Cody kept his blaster poised, but the majority of the tension in his muscles dissipated.

Celese dropped her hand. “Kanan. It’s just us.”

She and the rebels stepped out of their various hiding places and the Jedi’s shoulders collapsed. The man walked over to Celese and took in their appearances with a quick flick of his eyes; though the way he did rang weirdly in Cody’s mind. He pushed that thought away as irrelevant and then took in the Jedi’s ragged body language and the nasty gash on his arm that looked exactly like the saber wounds Cody had seen Ventress inflict during the war.

*He survived Vader,* Cody thought and then wondered what had happened to the two younger Jedi that he had seen confronting Vader earlier with a pang of dread, *But surviving means that he’s still out there – and probably not that far away.*

“Did you find Ohnaka?” The Jedi – Kanan – asked slightly out of breath.

“Yes,” Celese motioned to the pirate in question who waved at the Jedi, despite his still haggard appearance, like the madman he was, “How are our people?”

“Losing,” Kanan said with a brutally honest, matter of fact tone, “We need to leave.”

The man swept his unnerving gaze over the rest of their group and then stopped all motion when he registered Clawler’s presence. Celese, who had been watching, threw up an arm to calm the other man.
“It’s fine,” she said in a soothing voice, “He’s with us.”

Kanan didn’t exactly buy that and whatever assurance Celese had tried to give died before it could catch on when the Jedi noticed Cody pulling Bly back standing and to his side while taking back his helmet. The loose grip he held his saber tightened and he brought it up into attack mode, all the while bracing himself and taking an instinctive step backwards. Cody very carefully kept his weapon at his side.

“Clones!”

“Kanan,” Celese reiterated in the steady tone that she had just finished saying her previous words in, “I know it’s –”

“You don’t know what they did,” Kanan cut Celese off with a dark tone of his own, “My master was killed by clones.”

“And you know damned well why,” Celese said in a louder, less kind bark, “Now put the kriffing lightsaber down.”

“I do know,” Kanan agreed, still arced to attack at a moment’s notice.

“And you also know that sometimes the chips didn’t work at all,” Celese countered, which made Cody flinch, what in the sith-be-damned hell was she talking about?

“Not his,” Kanan continued, trained on Cody, “His worked.”

Celese’s brow knitted together, confused. “Obviously not.”

“Commander Cody,” Kanan spoke with a savage relish, ignoring Celese completely, “The most dependable clone in the GAR. Loyal to a fault. And it didn’t keep him from shooting Master Kenobi off a cliff.”

A few times in his life Cody had felt completely alone. Waking up from the programming was one. This was certainly another. Every eye turned to stare at him incredulously. He dug his fingers into Bly’s side and the handle of his blaster, but kept quiet while he waited for Kanan to continue. Or for the rest of them passed judgement; whichever happened first.

“Well,” Kanan said, harsh tone leaking pain all over the space around them, “Nothing to say?”

Cody slid his eyes over to Celese who was staring at him with a stunned look of disbelief written on her features. He regarded Kanan again and then sighed. “My chip was disabled in a fight years ago.”

He heard the subtle maneuvering of weapons being changed in his direction. He didn’t look at anyone else, the only person who really deserved an explanation was the one standing at the ready in front of him.

“And there is nothing – nothing – that I wouldn’t do to take that back. To be able to make things right. Your master was killed, you said, I am sorry about that. And I’m sure that if the clone who did is still alive, he would be too. I—”, he stopped, tried to think of how to put it without crumpling,

“Right now I am trying to get you and yours off this force-forsaken planet, fulfill the promise I made to General Secura and after that I’m going to go to Saleucami and try to save whoever the karking hell Vader wants there. And after that, if it goes well, maybe I’ll be able to look at my own reflection without wanting to break it.”

During his little impromptu speech, the Jedi had lowered his arms, probably in an unconscious
gesture to the raw honesty the man could hear in his voice (or read from his mind; Cody had never understood the fine nuances of force powers). The people around them hardly seemed to breathe.

Kanan finished bringing his weapon to his side, and the planes of his face had softened minutely. “Commander—”

“It’s fine,” it’s not fine, it’ll never be kriiffing fine, “But if you believe me, then I suggest we get the hell out of here, don’t you?”

Celese broke the quiet and coughed to break up the stupor her soldiers had succumbed too. “He’s right, if our forces are being beaten back, then now’s the time to leave.”

“Good,” Cody answered and turned towards the rows of security footage, datahubs and holonet ports that were scattered out around them, “Let’s destroy these first.”

Celese nodded and the ones not supporting the rescued prisoners (and Cody) started to fire at the anything that might have stored information. He was about to do the same, when a weak squeeze of Bly’s fingers on his shoulder forced his attention to his brother.

Bly’s facial expression (what was visible anyway) was mostly blank, but there was a depth of pain in his familiar eyes that almost made Cody flinch away. The edges of his tattoos pulled down with his frown.

“I’m sorry, brother,” he said with a kind of heartbreaking empathy that he didn’t want to contemplate at the moment.

“It’s –” don’t say it’s fine, it's not fine, it's not, it’s not, it’s not, “—not your fault, vod. Not anymore than with you and the 327th with General Secura.”

“Right,” Bly said, unmoved, but he didn’t say anything else and Cody sighed.

“Right,” he agreed and shot at the closest screen with a satisfying fury.

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After their self-appointed task was done, Kanan led them out of the observation room and down the hallway. They carefully made their way through corridors and down stairs away from the steadily decreasing sounds of fighting. At one point, Kanan stopped completely at something that none of the others could sense and then ushered them all hurriedly into a nearby alcove just seconds before a small group of stormtroopers with singed armor rushed past them. They made sure to up their pace in the wake of that.

The lack of Vader’s presence was both a boon and a worry to Cody. He had to be prowling around the prison somewhere, and with a Jedi actually among their number now, it seemed even more likely that they would be found. Still, the minutes passed as they warily wound their way down the cell blocks and still no sign of the Sith. By the time they reached the ground floor, Cody was barely able to move properly he was so tense.

They were greeted by a bleeding rebel, who sagged against the wall when he saw Kanan and Celese. “Sirs, the stormtroopers have overrun most of our position.”

“We know,” Celese said, and they had – despite not being stopped in their progress, they hadn’t missed the debris of battle that they had gone by; strewn bodies (both sides; though the rebels had suffered more losses) and sections of doorways and halls were pockmarked by blaster wounds and sections of wall that had been gutted by the fighting. “Tell the others that the mission was a success
and we’re leaving this hellish planet as soon as we can.”

“Yes, sir,” the rebel said, standing with more poise then Cody would’ve thought him capable of before he relayed the message to the nearest rebels, who in turn passed the information along.

As streams of retreating rebels brushed past them from the ground floor stand-off (he hoped Boil was still alright), Celese motioned for the other rebels in their group to follow. They did so with no other prompting; Ohnaka stared back at Cody for a few long seconds, sparks of recognition in his gaze now that he knew who he was, but he only nodded solemnly once as he was pushed out the door with his human brace.

“Your fellow Jedi?” Celese asked as they joined the ranks and made their way out of the New Citadel and into the muggy, dense air of Mustafar.

Kanan’s mouth thinned. “Petro and Zatt are both badly beaten. They were caught by Vader in one of the blocks. I showed up and they were able to escape, but I have no idea if they’ll make it.”

Cody grimaced, those had to be the two Jedi he had seen earlier. It wasn’t surprising that they were hurt, but it still stung that they might not survive.

“And Katooni?”

Kanan’s expression lifted slightly and he smirked. "She's fine. She led a whole group of troopers into one of the containment facilities and knocked them out with the electric fields.”

Celese sighed, but there was a smile in her voice when she spoke. “Why are all six of them so damned reckless?”

Kanan shrugged. “Creations of the Clone War. They learned to be brave early. And none of them had a Master to steady them.”

*And now here they are in the middle of another war,* Cody thought as he tugged Bly with him. He had never had seen peace either; it sounded like an impossible dream at this point.

“Kanan,” Celese said quietly, “Get the others to the ship safely, I’ll catch up in a second.”

The Jedi frowned. “Celes –”

“Go.”

He still had a mulish look on his face, but he obeyed without another words. Once he was out of range, Celese turned to him and Clawler with a hard set to her shoulders. “I think this is where we part.”

“No,” Clawler said abruptly, a ripple of desperate emotion in his tone.

Celese nodded. “Yes, Doran. We need to go, and you can’t be implicated. I’m sorry.”

Clawler looked like he was going to cry and frankly, Celese didn’t look much better. Cody sighed. Why was it his niche in life to be surrounded by self-sacrificing idiots?

“It’s time for both of you to go,” he said, which drew their attention to him.

“What?” Celese said.

“Clawler’s going with you.”
“What?” Clawler echoed sharply.

“You left your damned helmet in Ohnaka’s cell, Clawler,” he said, exasperation threading through his own voice, “And you’re not dead. And Ohnaka escaped. Tell me how you think any of that is going to work in your favor? Do you want Vader to interrogate you?”

Clawler’s complexion went waxy and Celese’s own bronzed skin paled as well. They shared a look and then turned back to Cody.

“What about you, sir?” Clawler asked.

Cody tried to smile, and was probably unsuccessful if their twin looks of disbelief were anything to go by. “That’s the beauty of it, Clawler. The only person who has to take the blame for this – is you.”

“What?”

“You were left in charge of Ohnaka. Ohnaka escaped. And with you missing, it ties everything up in a bow. Clearly, you’re the spy that Poole was worried about and now you’ve left to rejoin the rebels. Mystery solved.”

Clawler still looked horrified, but Celese’s face had turned considering. “That’s a good idea.”

Clawler sputtered, but Cody just quirked an eyebrow. “I know. Besides, once they know that you two are…whatever you are –”

“Siblings,” Celese answered.

“ – things were just fall into place. I might even make it to Saleucami to see what the hell is so important there.”

Celese’s face contorted. “Right,” her voice went raspy and distant and she didn’t take her eyes off of him, “Doran, maybe you should take, uh, Bly was it?”

“Yes.”

“Bly, to the ship with the others.”

Clawler looked confused at the change in atmosphere. “Celese?”

“Don’t worry. I just need to talk to Commander Cody alone for a moment.”

Cody startled at hearing his name spoken so nonchalantly, but he understood Celese’s caution. He passed Bly over to Clawler before the other man could object further. He reached over and squeezed Bly’s hand tightly.

“Say hello to General Secura for me.”

Bly squeezed back as best he was able. “Stay safe, vod. And thank you.”

An indecipherable look from Celese later and Clawler sighed. He nodded at Cody and then, after a brief hesitation, he saluted.

“It was an honor, sir,” he said and Cody managed a wobbly smile for the other man at that. He returned the salute and the two trekked over to the other straggling rebels. Both he and Celese waited until they were out of hearing range before they faced each other again.
"Saleucami?" Celese finally said.

“That’s where Vader said we were going after he was finished interrogating Ohnaka. No word on what or who might be hiding there; just that it’s some rebellion big shot.”

Celese bit her lip. “Right. Thank you, we’ll look into it,” She looked at him dead on with a strange gleam in her gaze. “So, you’re a clone.”

Cody straightened. “Yes.”

She nodded. “I remember the clones. One of your brothers was kind to me once.”

Cody flexed his hand on his blaster, remembered the story that Clawler had told him on the ship before all of this. The sister that had known Rex. Who had admired Commander Tano so much she wanted to be just like her.

Who know who he was.

“Rex was my closest brother.”

They stayed silent. Neither looked away from the other; secrets laid bare. Celese approached him and then pulled him into a tight embrace. Caught off guard, it took a second for him to raise his own arms and return the gesture.

“Thank you,” she whispered, “For giving me back my brother.”

“He gave himself back,” he answered.

She snorted in amusement. “Still. Listen to your brother and be safe.”

“I’ll try.”

As he tried to pull away from the hug, her fingers dug into his armor forcibly. He stayed, confused.

“What is it?”

The words she tucked into his ear in response were nonsense. He heard them clearly and yet nothing of it made any sense. Even the cadence of her voice was strange and alien and he didn’t have a clue what was going on. After she finished, she pulled away from him and had an earnest look on her face. Cody didn’t know what to say.

“Contact me later,” she finished and then with a thin smile, she turned and sprinted over to the ship that was parked in the distance.

He stared bewildered and felt his heart beat like a speeder engine as he watched them scurry into the ship and fight off the last of the troopers who were trying to stop them from leaving.

He’d managed to walk back the short distance to the prison and was wandering into the open area where Boil had been when he left to chase Celese and he was so dazed he almost walked right into a pillar.

“Whoa,” a voice said and steady hands kept him upright, “Are you okay, Commander?”

He looked over at a barefaced Boil who had a crease in his forehead as he stated at Cody. Cody shook his head again, like that would empty out the webs that seemed settled there. Boil’s frown intensified.
“Sir?”

“I don’t…Boil?”

“Is that…are you crying, sir?” Boil sounded alarmed.

Now that he concentrated, he could feel the air drying tracks on his face. Huh. How could he even feel the air, he had his helmet on.

“It’s in your hands, sir,” Boil said and there was a panicked undertone to his voice.

“What is?”

“Your helmet.”

Cody glanced down. Boil was right. _Huh._ “When did I do that?”

“You walked in without it on, sir,” Boil answered, the other man closed a hand over his arm. “Sir, what happened?”

“Nothing,” he muttered, but he still looked at the blank mask of the trooper helmet like he was seeing it for first time.

“2224.”

Cody instinctively turned towards Yulish’s strong voice. She stepped up to Cody and her own organic blank mask had a stark cut across the bridge of it’s nose. “Yes, sir?”

“Have you seen Lieutenant Clawler?”

He shook his head. “No, sir.”

She frowned. “No one has been able to reach him since communications have restarted.”

Cody blinked. “That’s…something, sir.”

The sharp-eyed woman looked at him assessingly. “Did you run into any Jedi?”

He squinted, was that a question? “Yes?”

“Make sure that he gets help,” Yulish said after a brief interlude, “I think the Jedi might have done something to his mind.”

“Sir,” Boil responded.

Boil led him over to a ledge that somehow remained intact after the firefight and stared at him with a fathomless expression. Cody winced preemptively.

“Are you going to tell me what happened just now?”

“No Jedi messed with my head.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so. That all?”

“I found Bly.”

Boil’s brow rose up his forehead. “Alive?”
He nodded. “He’s with the rebels.”

“Well,” Boil said with almost no inflection, but there was a slump to his body that spoke of his relief, “That’s good then. All that skulking around Empire files was worth it.”

“So,” Boil continued after a tense silence, “Where is Clawler? You were lying earlier.”

“Celese is his sister. He left with her.”

His brother’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“That works in our favor doesn’t it?” Boil said, processing the new information. “They’ll just assume that he was the spy all along.”

“Here’s hoping,” Cody replied as reality set in around him. He glanced at the carnage littering the room and waved a hand questioningly, “How did this go?”

“Better than I wanted,” Boil answered with a wry twist to his mouth. Meaning that he and the other stormtroopers had obviously done more damage than the other way around, but as they had their own loyalties elsewhere, it wasn’t the success that either of them was comfortable with.

“Commander Yulish,” Poole’s voice rang out over the low din of troopers cleaning up and talking amongst themselves, the talking stopped at the words and a hush fell over the people present.

“Yes, sir?”

“Causalities?”

“Minimal,” Yulish reported, “And we were able to take half a dozen prisoners.”

“Good,” Poole had a trace of sweat over his face and his clothes were haphazard from the fight, but he didn’t appear to have sustained any injuries himself. What a pity, “Have the men prepare to transport the prisoners and travel back to the ship at once.”

Yulish inclined her head in acquiescence. “As you wish, Admiral.”

Yulish began speaking into her communicator while Poole spotted Cody and made his way towards him. Cody pulled himself into a standing position, waved Boil away and braced himself at attention. Poole swept his eyes over him and then met his eyes calmly.

“2224, did Forge make it back?”

“I was able to create an opening for him to leave and he did,” Cody answered, “If no one caught him outside the prison than he should be on the Tenacity by now.”

Poole clearly went to say something else, but was beaten too it.

“Communication is back,” Vader’s menacing tone said from behind Cody, who still immediately, “The rebellion’s jamming ended when they ran.”

“Lord Vader,” Poole greeted with a bow, “It’s good to see you unharmed.”

Vader’s lightsaber was still activated and there was a barely contained, furious set to his body that struck Cody as almost familiar. The larger man was vibrating with pent up emotion. In Vader’s other
hand was a discarded stormtrooper helmet; Cody very carefully kept his shields as steady as possible.

“I found this in Ohnaka’s cell,” Vader lifted the helmet than shoved it at Poole, who hastened to take it before it dropped. The Admiral looked at the white armor pensively.

“And Ohnaka?”

“Gone,” there was a frozen quality to Vader’s voice, “As is your Lieutenant and a number of prisoners also housed on that cell block, Admiral Poole. It appears that your abject failure on Mab was not as isolated an incident as was promised.”

“There was some concern that there was a traitor in our ranks,” Poole began with a smooth confidence that belied the awful tension that had flooded into his frame at the accusation, “But we had little time to do a thorough investigation.”

“That is unfortunate,” the sarcastic cadence that wrapped around the words was almost more frightening that the frigid tone of before, “But it appears that we now have a definite answer as to whether those…concerns were valid. I expect an extensive report on Lieutenant Clawler’s intelligence access and background.”

“Of course, Lord Vader.”

The black helmet of Vader’s glanced behind Poole. “Are those the prisoners?”

Poole spun to face a ragged group of rebels that were being led into the main floor, hands bound behind them and grim faced. Two of them were bleeding and all of them had visible bruising. Poole confirmed Vader’s question and then followed as the Sith moved to stand in front of the abruptly wary prisoners. He surveyed the group steadily and then stopped in front of the youngest looking rebel.

“If you tell me what I want to know, I will perhaps spare your pitiful life,” Vader intoned.

The young man glanced up at the hulking figure and stayed silent, though Cody could read an involuntary shudder that ran through his body at being confronted. Vader made a low considering sound at the lack of response, but continued in his questioning.

“Who told you about Ohnaka?”

The man dropped his eyes and gritted his teeth.

“How were you able to disrupt our communications on such a long-range scale?”

The rebel squared his shoulders in a visible sign of defiance.

“Who led your operation?”

Nothing but silence.

“Very well,” Vader said gently enough, but there was a streak of vindictiveness to his being and he raised his hand towards the man on the other side of the rebel and there was an immediate gasp that stuttered into the air. Vader slowly clenched his fist and the gasp became all out choking. The young rebel whipped his head to stare – horror stricken – at his fellow soldier.

“Now,” Vader said, “Will you tell me what I want to know?”

The rebel began to shake. “You’re a monster.”
Vader’s other hand, the one that still held his lightsaber, actually made an abortive flinch at the word ‘monster’. Interesting that a living menace like Vader didn’t want to be called something so terrible.

“Does the rebellion know why Ohnaka was important?”

“I don’t know,” the rebel said faintly.

Vader’s hand tightened. “I do not like being lied too.”

“I don’t know!” The rebel exclaimed and finally looked up at Vader. “We were told it was a rescue mission; important to the rebellion’s cause, nothing else.”

“And your leader?”

“An intelligence officer,” he said, eyes shifting back towards his fellow rebel, “We don’t always know their names. They need to be anonymous.”

“The Jedi that were with you?”

“Just Knights, the Master’s have their own missions. Their own agendas. I’d never even met any of them before we disembarked.”

“Has anyone in the rebellion mentioned any plans for the planet Saleucami?”

The rebel’s brows furrowed briefly. “Saleucami? No, it’s never been mentioned.”

Vader contemplated the man for a moment before he dropped his hand and the choking man began raggedly breathing again. The rebel nearly collapsed in relief. Vader stood there, as if captivated, staring at the scene he had created. Force, what Cody wouldn’t give to see the man beneath the mask just once.

With a dramatic swish of his ridiculous cape, Vader turned from the rebels and faced Poole. “Leave the rebels here; let the staff deal with them for the time being, we have other places to be.”

“My Lord,” Poole acknowledged, “Will we be stopping to inform high command?”

Vader paused beside Poole and gave the man what might have been a searching look if the damned helmet wasn’t in the way. “No, Admiral, we will not. The rebels have Ohnaka, no doubt they will be aware that Saleucami’s location is no longer unknown. We need to arrive there before they can marshal their forces to protect it.”

Poole did a half bow and Vader brushed past him and out of the New Citadel completely. Poole took an unsteady breath of his own and then began barking orders at the remaining stormtroopers. In chaotic hastening around them, Cody met Boil’s perturbed gaze with a matching look of his own.

Just what the karking hell was so damned important on Saleucami anyway?

And maybe more importantly, was he finally losing his mind? Because he could have sworn that Celese had said -

("He's alive.")

Chapter End Notes
I have never seen Star Wars Rebels. So, if Kanan is totally OOC than I apologize - just think of it as being both AU and close to a decade earlier than Rebels, so people change. If that helps.
Interlude - Aayla

Chapter Notes

I recall that I said that the interludes would be shorter than the other chapters. Clearly that was an ambitious lie on my part. Like the other interlude, this can be skipped, but it does talk about what happened to the Jedi that survived, and Obi-Wan is there at first as well. All errors left standing (and I’m sure there are some) belong to me. (Happy Belated Holidays everyone!)

Aayla Secura hated feeling helpless. Before the war, it was a feeling that she didn’t experience very often, during the war it would crop up in times of stillness, when she had the ability to slow down and hear her own thoughts. After the purge it was a relentless wave of emotion that tested every one of her Jedi teachings and made her burn with a fathomless depth of banked anger; it was difficult to handle and impossible to destroy. It was why Obi-Wan had suggested that she take charge of the school in the first place; a chance to grasp at a piece of serenity (or at least what passed for it post-Republic) and calm herself. A chance to raise her daughter outside of the sphere of violence, and fury that marked much of the remaining Jedi’s missions in the Rebellion. She was used to being a warrior, and it was a gift to mold herself into a teacher instead.

Standing in the hanger waiting for the returning operatives was a throwback of roiling emotions. She could barely resist pacing in the relatively open floor and she absolutely refused to look at Obi-Wan’s sympathetic face from where he was perched on an overturned crate to her left. As a compromise to her restless connection to the world around her, she crossed her arms just under her chest and tapped one finger on her arm rhythmically. She could feel Obi-Wan’s rise in amusement coalescing in the force surrounding him.

“Are you quite all right, Aayla?”

She stopped tapping. “I am perfectly at ease.”

“Of course,” he replied with that infuriating tone he used to say that he was allowing the speaker their illusions, but that he wasn’t personally fooled in the slightest, “Still, this is a momentous occasion.”

“Momentous is not the word I would use,” She answered with as much grace as she could muster. Obi-Wan’s expression softened from humor to understanding.

“He’s alive, Aayla,” he murmured, “Alive and now he’s safe as well. A celebration would not be out of hand.”

I already knew he was alive; it was all of you that are shocked, she thought with the trace hints of bitterness that still flared to life now and then. What she hadn’t known until Lajia’s transmission, was that he was aware and had survived the dechipping surgery that their onboard medi-droid had done. Not, apparently, in one piece (missing fingers, she had had to resist the temptation to break something at that news) but far more healthy that she had been dreading. Furthermore, he had been asking about her. And their daughter.

So. Obi-Wan wasn’t wrong; she and Yara had plenty of reason to be relieved and joyous. Yara had
been beside herself at the knowledge that her father would be returning to them. It had been all she
could do to convince her to stay with Ganodi for the time being while she went to greet the surviving
raiders.

“I know,” she said finally, her finger resumed the tapping unconsciously, “And I am grateful for it.”

Grateful. An inadequate word, but she wasn’t Obi-Wan, her words were not her strong suit; she
didn’t have the ability to weaponize them or pull them around her self like a blanket. And even if she
had been given that talent she wasn’t sure that she would be any better at recreating what she was
currently feeling into a knowable stream of syllables. It was a bubbling fountain of mixed reactions
that left her breathless.

Obi-Wan eyed her for a moment and then nodded seemingly to himself. “Whatever the two of you
may need; I am at your disposal.”

She felt her body stance loosen at the genuine tone of the other Jedi Master’s voice. “Thank you,
Obi-Wan.”

He smiled gently and then turned to face the empty space in front of them to give her some
semblance of privacy. In the aftermath of the purge, she and Obi-Wan had become much closer than
they had been during the War or in the peaceful times of their youths. Partly because of necessity;
precious few of their ranks had survived the cull and many who did were worn down and cracked
around the edges. Yoda had retreated away from the rebellion completely and seemed to either be
losing his mind or becoming even more himself (which of these options was the better one, no one
could say), Plo had spent a great deal of time in recovery from the nearly fatal injuries he had
incurred when his ship was shot down; a fate that Luminara had not been spared, as she had
succumbed to her own wounds a month or so post-purge. The rest of the survivors; mostly
Padawan’s or younglings, looked to the them to know what to do, or see how they should react. The
handful or Knights that had made it out were scarred deeply by the war and the betrayal in turns and
were angry and barely able to control their own emotions. Despite her own condition, it left her and
Obi-Wan as the sole survivors that were of at least somewhat sound mind and body.

So, with that responsibility weighing on their shoulders, they banded together to create a pale
imitation of the old ways; with some notable changes. Obi-Wan kept his rank as General and helped
to slow the Empire’s reach and conquest down considerably, and Aayla took over the position of
main teacher of those still in need of it. Between the two of them, they all but ran the remnants of the
Jedi Order, while helping the rebellion in whatever capacity that they could. And if in between
teaching and missions, Aayla scoured the galaxy for Bly, well, Obi-Wan only encouraged her. For
the most part anyway.

At times, she wondered how disappointed Yoda and the other council members would be in them.
The Jedi she and Obi-Wan were training now bore little resemblance to the ones they themselves had
become and knew. They showed far more emotion and were encouraged to form friendships and
lasting bonds if they so chose. With seemingly so little to live for, how could they justify having any
of them sever ties that gave them peace or happiness? How hypocritical would either of them be to
stifle something both of them had allowed to take root in themselves? And Aayla watched as, despite
the times and hardships and pain, many of them thrived under the new system. Often, she found Obi-
Wan, eyes befitting a tragedy, avoiding them altogether. When she had asked why, a crooked smile –
hardly worthy of the title – had crossed his face.

(“I should think that I’ve done enough damage to one generation of Jedi.”

Aayla blinked, startled at the self-deprecation in Obi-Wan’s tone. “You can’t be serious.”
“Aayla,” he began, stopped, sighed and then began again, “When Ashoka was accused of treason, I did not nearly enough to prove I was on her side. I went along with a horrific decision by the council that betrayed the trust of everyone I held dear. Anakin – a man I have loved as my own kin for over a decade – fell to a darkness I can’t even comprehend while I stood by and left him alone to Palpatine’s machinations. This is my legacy. The Empire, Vader…I’m not arrogant enough to believe all of the past, present and future atrocities at their hands can be laid at my feet, but it doesn’t make it true that none of them are my own.”

She hadn’t the faintest idea what to say to that. She knew he felt guilty – the conversation they had had about Vader’s true identity had been terrible in every sense of the word – but this was far more than she had dreamed. “Obi-Wan, you cannot think like that. Even the wisest minds of our Order did not foresee this. None of us suspected Palpatine. And Anakin…you cannot take his decisions from him; whether he felt…neglected or marginalized or not, it is – was – his choice to become Vader.”

“Strangely, that doesn’t make me feel any better,” Obi-Wan said wryly, but he offered her a smile that said he appreciated the effort nonetheless.

“You didn’t cause this,” she stressed, “We as a group – the Jedi as a whole – we grew lazy and disconnected. We set the foundations for our demise and refused to see it.”

Obi-Wan set his hands inside the sleeves of his robe and nodded, the fall of the Jedi and the complacency with which it happened was an old discussion for them. “And yet, for all of Palpatine’s scheme’s, would any of it have worked if Anakin hadn’t have fallen?”

She frowned and squared her shoulders in the same manner she had grown accustomed to berating a student with. “If you insist on believing that Skywalker’s fall rests on your conscience alone than I must insist that any failure on your part must be placed with the Council and the rest of the Order who failed to prepare any of us for the burden of love and commitment. We have all suffered enough, have we not?”

“Some of us more than others,” he said looking at her with the knowing light of a kindred spirit; she clenched her hands into fists at the subtle reminder of Bly, unsure how Obi-Wan could stand to speak of their lost Commander’s so casually, and Obi-Wan reached out to squeeze her wrist gently.

“What’s done is done,” she said, choking back the swamp of emotion that had the alarming tendency to engulf her at regular intervals, “We must look forward. Lighting the shadows of the past will only destroy us.”

“Just because we have climbed a set of stairs does not mean that the stairs cease to exist,” he reminded her, but while there was still that aching sadness pooled in his eyes, there was also a hint of his trademark humor flitting across his features, “Keeping the path behind us lit ensures that should find ourselves in those spaces again, the journey will be far less treacherous the second time around.”

He glanced behind her and then brought a hand up to wave. She turned to see whom he was waving at and saw an awkward looking Katooni standing a few feet away holding Yara, who was grinning and waving unsteadily back at Obi-Wan.

“She wanted to see you, Master,” the teenager said with that perpetually hesitant tone that all people that age used when they thought they were interrupting.

Obi-Wan squeezed her wrist once more than let go and she moved over to Tholothian’s side to take her daughter whose arms reached for her immediately.
“Master,” Katooni said and there was a kind of cautious tone to her voice, “Are you alright?”

Yara buried her face in Aayla’s neck contentedly and a push of the recycled air in the base brushed against her cheeks; cooling the moisture that sat there. Belatedly, she brought a hand up and wiped at the tears she hadn’t realized had fallen. That certainly explained Katooni’s confused wariness; how often had any of them seen someone of her rank cry?

“Yes,” she answered, “Everything is alright.”

She was one of the last surviving members of an ancient, flawed Order fighting against the very people who had tried to eradicate them and raising a daughter whose father she missed like a breath of fresh air in the vacuum of space.

Being alright was the only viable option.)

She dug her nails into her arm as she dragged her mind back to the present. The loneliness that she had felt and the hope that festered in her heart wasn’t a dream any more. Bly was safe. And, if her senses weren’t deceiving her, only a handful of minutes away. Obi-Wan left his seat and glided the short distance to her side, obviously hearing the same thing she was. They stood in silence as the ship appeared and then began it’s landing sequence. Once it had shut down and the hatch had opened, Aayla almost felt like she was standing outside of herself; an apparition watching events unfold, but removed from them.

The ramp fell and a harried looking Lieutenant Lajia stepped down and headed straight to were they were parked. At her heel, a tall, dark haired man wearing only a basic black undersuit with a blaster at his hip followed. His eyes swept over the base with a kind of dazed surrealism to his expression; as if unsure how he came to be in his position. If that wasn’t enough to tell her that he was someone they had met at the prison, the swirling confusion and uneasiness that hung around him like a shroud would have.

“Celese,” Obi-Wan greeted amiably and the woman in question offered him a tired smile.

“General Kenobi, Master Secura,” she answered.

“Successful mission?”

Lajia scrubbed a hand down her face. “More or less. We lost…more than I would have liked.”

“A fact of war,” Obi-Wan rejoined with the calm air of empathy that he seemed to wear like one of his oft-disappearing robes, and then a more studied look of concern creased his face, “There’s something beyond that bothering you.”

“How annoyingly perceptive of you, General,” she said wryly and then gestured for the now awestruck man behind her to step forward. He did so without comment and there was a rigidness to his spine that spoke of a military background.

“General, Master, this is my brother Doren.”

Obi-Wan raised his brows in surprise. “I thought your family were loyalists.”

“They are,” Lajia replied, but with a sour tinge to her smile, she shrugged, “I left Doren with them when I ran.”

“Celese –”
She waved the unimpressed tone of her brother’s voice away imperiously. “And now he’s with us.”

*It’s never that easy for defectors,* Aayla thought, but judging by the looks on both Lajia and Doren’s faces they knew that as well. Obi-Wan nodded, that well of sympathy evident on his face and he inclined his head at the younger man.

“Then let me be the first to welcome you to the rebellion, Doren.”

“Uh,” the other man stammered, wide-eyed and glancing between Obi-Wan and her like they were hallucinations that had inexplicably begun speaking to him, “Thank you, Sir.”

“General,” Lajia said and the air around her changed into a mix of nervous anticipation and worry, “If I could speak with you?”

Obi-Wan’s manner didn’t outwardly change, but Aayla could tell that his attention had sharpened on her at the words. “Is it important, Lieutenant?”

“It’s about what you wanted to be informed about, sir,” Lajia answered.

Obi-Wan straightened instantly and he shared a quick look with Aayla. “Saleucami?”

“Vader interrogated Ohnaka before we got there,” she said apologetically, “Rako told us that he gave the order to ship out to the system immediately after they leave Mustafar.”

Aayla blinked at the sharp indrawn breath from the man beside her. She turned to Obi-Wan and saw his already pale complexion go a deathly shade of white.

“Rako,” Obi-Wan stated, but there was a flat demand in the tone.

“Our contact in the Empire,” Lajia managed not to quail under Obi-Wan intense stare, but Aayla saw her hands twitch with a distant amusement.

“Your contact,” Obi-Wan repeated, disbelief written in the words, “Your contact in the Empire used – uses – the codename Rako.”

His incredulous tone made her frown. When the man in question had told her the name, she had assumed that Obi-Wan knew that his former alias was being used by a former 212th member for undercover ops. That was clearly not the case, and she felt a wave of guilt that she didn’t mention the man’s existence to him when she and the students returned to the base.

“As I said, General,” Lajia said slowly, “I need to speak to you. Privately.”

Obi-Wan looked at her with a lost glint to his eyes. Aayla tried to project a sense of assurance to her friend, but her attention was abruptly split between the scene in front of her and the sight of Zatt and Petro being carried on stretchers down the ramp. Zatt was awake but barely registering his surroundings and Petro was nothing more than a lump of wounded flesh where he was being fussed over by the onsite medi-team. Kanan, who had disembarked with Petro, explaining the younger man’s injuries as he did so, threw her a look when he caught her gaze and made an uncertain shrug to indicate that their conditions were unfathomable at the moment.

“If you’ll excuse me, Aayla,” Obi-Wan’s voice cut through the haze of concern that had built in her chest at seeing her former students so gravely injured; he had an apologetic looking expression on his face. She waved him away absentmindedly.

“Of course.”
Lieutenant Lajia, her brother and Obi-Wan vacated the area and so – perhaps fittingly – she was alone when she first saw him.

Kanan had just paused briefly beside her to acknowledge her before one of the last doctors ushered him along behind the rest of the medical faculty of the base, she assumed to look at the cauterized lightsaber wound that dug into the meat of his shoulder, when she returned her attention to the ramp there he was.

He was being partially supported by one of the least injured rebel soldiers and they made their way very carefully over the decline of the bank of the ship. He was wearing someone’s plain, spare clothes that were an ill fit and left him looking sunken and too thin by half. The gait of his encumbered walk was nothing like the purposeful grace that she had become accustomed to during the war and he held the rest of his body like it was a thread away from scattering to pieces. His hair was shorn to a recognizable length, but even with the distance she could see a patch that was bare from the chip removal surgery. The arm he had slung over the shoulders of his helper was missing both the ring finger and pinkie and his left, clutched in the grey borrowed shirt, appeared to be absent a middle finger. There was a jagged scar that wove around the corner of his left jawline and skittered down his throat and, and she knew – from the report she’d been given – multiple scars littering his back. His cheekbones were too prominent in his gaunt face and his skin tone’s normally rich color was dulled somewhat from years absent of sunlight.

He was so beautiful she could cry.

She took a step forward and then stopped when his eyes lifted and caught her own. His whole body stopped with such force that his crutch was jerked backwards with a curse. It was only when she noticed the minute tremor that started in his limbs that she jolted back to herself and resumed her trek to his space. When she was close enough, his left hand instantly reached up to brush his remaining fingertips over her cheek in the lightest caress she could conceive of.

“Aayla?”

(Her new clone Commander eyed her. There was a calculation in his brown eyes that she couldn’t quite get a read on. Still, as she approached, he snapped to attention and saluted crisply.

“Commander CC-5052, reporting for duty, sir.”

Aayla frowned. “I do not ascribe to numerical names, Commander. What is your chosen name?”

He lowered his hand gradually, eyes tracking her every movement. “Bly. My name is Bly.”

“Commander Bly then,” she chewed on that for a moment and found she liked the taste, “Now, what information do you have for me?”

She didn’t have to be looking directly at the man to be able to tell that there was a measure of give to his frame that had been absent before. Good. She had no interest in being one of those Generals that kept herself so distance from her men that easy trust was impossible. She didn’t expect or need the closeness of Master Plo’s contingent, and frankly the rumored insanity and near fanatical loyalty and intertwined…something of Kenobi and Skywalker’s battalions seemed almost unhealthy. She just wanted people she could trust. People she would be proud to fight or die beside.

She looked back at Bly and he met her eyes and then a thin smile ticked up the corners of his mouth.

“If you’ll follow me, General Secura,” he said and stepped aside to allow her to pass him by. She put a hand on her hip and stretched her other arm out in front of her.
She reached up and put her hand on his, keeping the palm on her cheek. “Bly.”

The shine of tears dotted his lashes and a hitch in his breathing told her all she needed to know about what he had thought had happened to her. Even if he’d been told that she was alive (which, obviously he had since he had asked about her on the way to the base), she understood that knowing something intellectually didn’t mean a thing in the face of the emotional backlash of first hand witnessing. The image of his tattooed, scarred face blurred around the edges as her own feelings welled in her eyes.

As if by silent agreement, the man holding Bly upright gracefully surrendered his charge to her arms without a word, only lingering long enough to confirm that she could handle Bly’s weight and remain standing. She dug her fingers into his side and tugged him as close to her side as she could; he may have lost weight but warmth still seeped from him to her. The arm he tentatively wrapped around her shoulders barely rested there, as if she would disappear if his touch was too substantial. The whole time she was maneuvering him, his eyes never left her face.

“Ready?”

He nodded solemnly and they slowly made there way out of the hanger and towards the maze of halls that would lead them to the living quarters. The quiet between them was persistent as they trailed through the walkways; and Aayla made sure to keep her eyes on the path in front of them and not on the avoidance that Bly started employing when the attention of the rebels followed both of them as the populace thinned out in the more casual areas of the base. She understood the curiosity; there were so few Jedi that all of them gained notice wherever they were (she, Obi-Wan and Plo were the most likely to be watched – Yoda, when he had been on base, was treated like a mythical figure who had been somehow breathed into existence) and clones were even more rare; most of whom belonged to the either remnants of the Wolfpack that Wolffe had personally dragged back to sanity and duty, or grimfaced 501st veterans who had had the foresight to have their chips removed after the incident with their brother. Bly clearly didn’t fit into either of those categories.

Despite the unease of the unnecessary gawking, they arrived at Aayla’s apartments with no hassle and in fairly good time. Carefully, she led him to the master bedroom and sat him on the side of the bed itself. When she turned to go get him some water, he snagged her hand in a show of those superior reflexes and pulled her too him.

“Bly?”

“Stay,” he said, and his hand gripped hers fiercely, “Please.”

“At least lay down,” she said and helped him take off the boots he’d been given and moved him to the middle of the bed before laying down at his side, facing each other.

He adjusted the grip until their fingers were intertwined and then his eyes roved over her features thoroughly; as if re-memorizing their exact likeness. She conducted her own study and then traced her free hand over the new scar on his jaw.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, grazing down the line with a frown, “I knew you were alive and I—”

“I thought we had killed you,” Bly interrupted softly, distracting, the way he always did whenever she began to blame herself for something he saw as out of her control, “I sat in that empty cell and just… mourned.”
She rested her hand on his neck and swept her thumb over his pulse point repeatedly. “Why didn’t the Empire –” She stopped before she could ask.

Bly attempted a shrug while laying down, (it wasn’t completely successful) and answered her because he had always been in tune to how her mind worked. “They tried to figure out why the chip was glitching and if I knew of any other clones who had the same problem – sometimes forcefully – but as the months passed, I think they just stopped caring. Or got bored. I think they finally saw that the worst torture was the one they hadn’t inflicted. Losing the 327th,” he tucked their folded hands up to his chest protectively, “Losing you; all of that was far worse than anything they could do to me.”

Sometimes she wondered how any Jedi had managed to maintain the emotional distance that had been required of them; how anyone could hear something like that and not have it burn through them seemed like a travesty.

“I will endeavor to make sure you do not lose me again,” she said when she was able to speak without her voice cracking.

He gave her a smile, but the shadowed undertone to it spoke volumes of his understanding that that wasn’t actually something she could guarantee; especially while the Empire still had an iron clad grip on two thirds of the galaxy.

“Me too,” he answered instead of pointing any of that out.

Before either of them could say anything else, the chime of the door sounded in the other room. He furrowed his eyebrows and glanced over his shoulder curiously.

“Expecting someone?”

She gathered herself and stood, heart hammering in her chest, matching the rhythm of the one just outside of the apartments. “Yes, wait here.”

She walked back through the living area and opened the door to Ganodi’s worried expression and Yara’s anxious one. She smiled gently at her daughter and then nodded at Ganodi, which had the younger female lowering her tensed stance.

“I’m sorry, Master, but she wouldn’t wait anymore.”

She was that ruthless? Aayla thought with a spark of amusement, but she knew her daughter and Yara wasn’t one to sit around and wait when she didn’t have too – if there was one thing that growing up in a warzone had taught the young, it was that time was far too precious a commodity to be wasted for no reason.

Yara huffed and crossed her arms unrepentantly. Aayla waved Ganodi’s apology away easily. “It’s quite alright, Ganodi. I’m sure Petro and Zatt could use the company; I believe that Katooni is probably in the infirmary with them.”

“Thank you, Master,” the young Rodian bowed quickly and then took off in the direction of the base’s infirmary.

Once they were in the apartments, the staunch determination that Yara had no doubt exhibited in front of Ganodi died away into a precariously set hope. Yara’s eyes darted around the room, and she slumped when she realized it was empty.

“Mother?”
“Yara,” she began, unsure what to say; how to explain before introducing them, “you have to understand that the last ten years have not been kind to your father. His physical condition is somewhat…delicate at the moment.”

“But he’s here?” Yara pried stubbornly.

“Yes,” she said, “He’s here.”

“Then I don’t care,” Yara said decisively, “Uncle Kix said that all of the vod’e were too stubborn to be put out of commission for long. And Uncle Wolffe said that Father was a tough bastard. He’ll be fine now. He’s safe.”

Well, thank you for that, Commander, she thought wryly of Plo’s right hand. “Yara –”

“And he has us,” Yara continued, looking up at her, “So, he’ll be okay now. Right?”

Oh, if it were only that simple, but she didn’t say that, just graced her daughter with a teary smile. “Of course, my dear, now he has us.”

“Exactly,” Yara nodded.

“Aayla, what’s going –”

She turned and watched Bly stop in the doorway of the foyer with a strange kind of disconnect. She had thought about this moment, and in the last day – when it was confirmed that he was a alive and rescued – she had even dared to plan for it. Needless to say, this was not how she had envisioned it.

(“She’s beautiful.”

Aayla kept her gaze on the bundle that the medi-droid had handed her. Obi-Wan’s voice filtered through her consciousness, but only peripherally. She had never expected to be a mother – no Jedi did – and she had been increasingly frightened the closer she got to her due date. The Order had prepared her for many things in life, but now more than ever all of it seemed distressingly inadequate in teaching her things that actually mattered.

She’d spent the better part of the last few months with everyone from a haunted Obi-Wan to a steadfast Senator Organa to an awed Commander Wolffe telling her that she would be a good mother. That everything would be okay. That she wasn’t alone. But lying here in her recovery bed all of that reassurance died. The platitudes hollowed out like they had been made of air.

She stared at Blayara’s blend of features and skin tones and felt utterly despondent. Bly was warm where she was practical. Patient when her more mercurial moods struck. He would’ve been an amazing father. The perfect temper to her own personality. She had no idea how to do this without him.

Hopefully, Blayara wouldn’t resent her too much for her deficiencies.)

Bly stood stock-still and had his eyes trained on Yara like she was a mirage. One of his hands was gripping the arch of the entry in a white knuckled hold and he didn’t appear to be breathing at all. Quickly, she looked down at Yara and saw their daughter was in a similar state of paralyzed shock.

“He told me,” Bly muttered lowly, “He told me and I still didn’t really believe him.”

Aayla guided Yara over to where Bly was perched. Their normally loquacious daughter just stared. Bly glanced at Aayla, emotions poorly hidden on his stricken face. She smiled encouragingly at him;
though if she were being honest she almost certainly had a similar expression her countenance. He turned back to Yara’s wide-eyed disbelief.

“What’s your name, darling?”

For perhaps the first time in Yara’s life, Aayla watched as she fidgeted. “Blayara.”

“Blayara,” Bly repeated faintly.

“Everyone calls me Yara for short,” she elaborated shyly.

“Well, Yara, that’s a beautiful name. Mine’s Bly; I’m –” he took a deep breath and then said, “I’m your father.”

Yara heard that and after a brief moment of stillness, she threw herself at Bly and wrapped her arms around his waist. The force of the leap threw Bly’s back, but before Aayla could step in to help steady him, he tentatively returned the hug. The look on his face as the seconds ticked by were heartbreaking; a mix of incandescent joy and incalculable sorrow. Yara was muttering something in repetition under her breath, and when Aayla took a step closer to them, she could hear it was a litany of ‘thank yous’ in Mando’a, Ryl, and basic.

Bly looked up at Aayla as she placed her own hand on top of Yara’s head and threaded one of her arms around Bly’s. There were unshed tears lining his eyes and he looked completely overwhelmed. Still, he leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers.

Thank you, he said softly in Mando’a, with such a grateful tone that it almost made her uncomfortable. She hadn’t been the one to brave the New Citadel and save him after all. All she could do in response was squeeze his arm in understanding and leave it at that.

After an indeterminable amount of time, Aayla took a step back and brushed her hand over Yara’s brows to get her attention. “It’s been a long day, Yara. Your father needs his rest right now; but there will be time to talk later.”

Their daughter threw her a mulish look. “You promise?”

“Of course,” Bly answered for her, “I have no intention of leaving ever again.”

“Ohay,” she said, and reluctantly dropped her arms and stepped back to Aayla’s side. She turned to her and spoke in that matter of fact tone that aged her beyond her years, “It’s been a long day, Yara. Your father needs his rest right now; but there will be time to talk later.”

the only hesitation in her words was the waver over the word ‘father’, unused to saying it.

“As you say, daughter.”

She looked back at Bly, expression considerably more timid, “I’m glad you’re here, Father.”

“So am I, more than you can know.

Yara beamed at him, gave both of them flash-hugs and then disappeared around the corner to where her own room was located.

“It was worth it.”

Aayla turned to Bly. “What was?”

“Everything,” he said, “If this is where I end, if this was the finish line, then all of it was worth it.”
She took in the almost content set to his gaunt face and thought about the War and the subsequent tragedies that followed. The years spent fighting and mourning and wondering if the future would ever be a safe place; if tomorrow’s struggles were worth the hardships of the present. Losing the people she loved; watching the survivors die slowly from wounds that weren’t visible to the eyes. Some days it didn’t seem worth the effort it took to get out of bed in the morning.

And other days were days where the love of her life was delivered into her waiting hands and her daughter was given her father back. Some days not even the Empire could touch.

“I missed you,” she said.

His face softened further, if such a thing were possible. “I missed you too.”

She carefully pulled him away from the wall and helped him back into the bedroom. From there, they silently went through the motions of changing him out of his borrowed clothes and into a set of sleep pants that she had scrounged up after hearing of his impending arrival. With only a minute of hesitation, she followed suit and then sidled up to him under the covers of the bed. Almost automatically, one of his arms pulled her into his chest and she laid her head (after pushing her lekku off to the side) down so that she could hear his heart beat.

“Is it strange that this isn’t strange?”

She smiled at the wording, but shook her head. “No, it isn’t.”

“It feels like a dream.”

“Because it is one.”

His chest shook in a silent chuckle. “You’ve gotten poetic.”

Absently, she counted the hint of rib that was peaking through his skin; putting some weight on him would have to be a priority. “You bring it out in me.”

She felt him contort slightly and then his lips grazed her head. “You’re as beautiful as I remember.”

“So are you.”

He scoffed. “I know what I look like.”

For years I imagined the worst. Disease. Starvation. Torture. And yet, here you are. Your heart is beating. Your mind is your own. And you have returned to me in one piece. More or less. It is a gift. A beautiful gift. Do not doubt this.”

“I love you,” he said, “So, so much.”

She pressed a kiss to this chest. “And I love you.”

“I wish –”

“There is no need to wish anymore,” she said, “We have time. And the Jedi are different now; there are so few of us and those that are left…we have molded it into an Order we can be proud of again.”

They stayed quiet as the reality of their situation sank in. She watched his familiar features smooth out and felt his arm tighten around her shoulders. “No regrets?”
She relaxed into his hold. “No regrets.”

(Shetraced the outline of his face with her fingertips. The ridge of his eyes, the swell of his cheekbone, the swoop of his nose. She ended her exploration of his features by sweeping her thumb along his jaw. As she did so, his lashes fluttered open and warm brown eyes caught her own. He smiled tenderly.

“Morning.”

“Good morning.”

He settled his body on the utilitarian mattress with a sigh, one arm tucked beneath the pillow he was laying on and his head stayed turned towards her. She tracked her fingers down his neck and watched – fascinated – as his muscle rippled under her hands as she passed by his shoulders and down to his back. She’d seen men without any clothing on before, most in as good a physical shape as him, and yet...

“Hmm,” his eyes closed, “If you keep doing that, we’re going to miss the debriefing.”

She scratched lightly at the patch of skin her hand was resting on. “That would be unfortunate.”

Without warning, he snapped around and pulled until he was on his back and she was straddling him. She let out a very un-Jedi like noise at the manhandling, but couldn’t even force herself to pretend to scowl when she took in the wide smile crossing his face. He kept one hand wrapped around her hip and the other brushed against her lekku before settling on her lower back. The smile turned into a smirk.

“Well, well, well, I guess Jedi reflexes aren’t as good as advertised.”

She narrowed her eyes playfully. “I was surprised, that is all.”

“Uh-huh,” he said disbelief written in the words, “Whatever you say.”

The hand on her back began a slow, rhythmic glide up her spine that sent a shiver coursing through her body. She leaned forward and balanced her weight as evenly as possible and kept her hands on his chest. The playfulness fell away and in it’s place was an anticipatory tension. His smirk turned into a contemplative, neutral expression.

“No regrets?”

His voice was light, but the depth that she couldn’t see was obviously hiding some concern. She took the question seriously and thought about it. They were in the middle of a war with seemingly no end, (though there were rumors about both Grevious and Dooku’s whereabouts, so maybe a conclusion was not as distant as it seemed), and she was a Jedi – a Master Jedi – and while the war had made the council waver on many things; the idea of attachment stayed entrenched in the forbidden. There were a dozen cases she could refer too to show that she was by far and away not the only such Jedi who had disregarded that notion, in all of its various connotations, but here in her chambers, she felt like the only one. She gazed down at him, at the calm patience he was radiating despite how tense his muscle was. Maybe after the war was over the council would be willing to at least talk about changing how attachment was thought of. Until then, it was her decision to make. And, she realized, she had already made it.

Eyes locked on his, she took both of his hands and slid them over her stomach slowly and then laced their fingers together. Still watching his face, she pushed their connected arms down on the bed; stretching their torsos out and bringing them close to touching from chest to navel. She heard his
breathing pick up and his hands squeezed hers where they were laid above his head. She closed her eyes for a moment and then leaned down until her face hovered over his.

“No regrets,” she murmured, and pulled him into a deep kiss.

They were late to the debriefing.)

“Okay, then,” he whispered, eyes drooping in sleep as the day caught up to him.

“You need to heal. And I intend to make sure that happens.”

“The rebellion?”

“Will still be here when you’ve recovered, and with any luck the Empire won’t be.”

“Will you stay?”

“Yes,” she said, laying her head back on his chest and listened while his breathing evened out into the pattern of slumber, “I’m staying.” She closed her eyes and drifted; at peace for the first time since the first bite of a blaster wound to her shoulder tore her world to pieces.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Firstly, I want to thank everyone for being so patient and for your wonderful comments! I appreciate it, really. Without further adieu, the next installment. This is some filler, necessary filler, but filler nonetheless. I expect things to get kind of crazy after this for awhile - onward to Saleucami!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And Clawler?”

The look of disgust on Poole’s face was accompanied by the rigid stance that made him even more menacing than normal. Cody shifted uncomfortably and watched the nervous Allon flicker his attention between Poole’s sharp disapproval and Vader’s complete lack of reaction. The Sith just stood beside Poole, arms crossed and mask turned towards Allon; the stillness in his large frame was like a mirror of the seemingly supernatural patience that Cody used to see in the Jedi. Unlike the Jedi, though, there was an element of barely contained violence that swirled around the Emperor’s right hand – an anticipation that balanced itself on the proverbial knife-edge.

“His record was less than exemplary, as you were aware,” Allon answered carefully, “that said, there is nothing to say that his betrayal was…expected.”

“What about his family?”

“Staunchly Imperial,” Allon said, eyes trained to the side of Vader’s mask, as if he was afraid that the man had some kind of ability to melt him from eye contact alone, “His parents have followed the Emperor unquestioningly since his ascent to power. Their opinion of the Jedi was low long before the Clone Wars, my Lord. One older sister that was reported missing over a decade ago; never found.”

“How certain are you that Clawler was the traitor?”

Allon frowned. “We can’t be sure, of course, the internal footage at the New Citadel was destroyed by the rebels, sir. But, as an officer he would have had access to technology to communicate with the rebellion, and his presence at the debriefings would have provided him with the information needed to sabotage our missions.”

“Very well,” Vader intoned, he waved away the projection of Clawler’s record from sight, “We will consider the matter closed. For now. You’re dismissed, Commander Allon.”

Allon bowed. “My Lord.”

Vader passed his gaze over the rest of them slowly and then turned towards Poole. “If Clawler is now with the rebellion, we must assume that he has already informed them of our new destination – if Ohnaka hadn’t already. Still, we should arrive on Saleucami well ahead of any rescue mission they may be able to put together.”

“We are at your leave, My Lord,” Poole said, then he paused and stood at such military precision that
Cody felt a twinge of sympathy in his own shoulders and back, “If I may, My Lord, what exactly can we expect on Saleucami?”

Vader stared at Poole heavily for a moment, then swept his gaze over where Cody, Yulish, Forge and a mostly recovered Vequell stood. The silence stretched and then Vader seemed to reach a decision and lowered his arms and spoke. “Do you know of the name ‘Fulcrum’?”

Poole’s scowl softened in confusion. “Fulcrum? I was under the assumption that Fulcrum was more of a myth; an amalgamation of people given one name.”

Vader snorted and Cody felt a strangled kind of amusement at the sound; he wasn’t aware that Vader had any kind of sense of humor. “I assure you Admiral, Fulcrum is a real person. Fulcrum is one of the rebellion’s top operatives.”

“And this Fulcrum is hiding on Saleucami?”

“Yes,” Vader answered with a rough tone to the words, “And not alone. There is an important political fugitive there as well. But Fulcrum is who you and your officers should be concerned with.”

“With all due respect,” Forge said, and Cody was impressed that the man was stupid enough to actually offer his opinion considering the derision and fury that Vader and Poole had, in turns, shown the last time he had done so, “But what could one operative do against an entire –”

Forge’s words died and his face went red; Cody looked back at Vader and found the Sith’s hand clenched enough to cut off the Captain’s airway. The force-strangulation only lasted a moment or two, but it was obviously enough to keep Forge from continuing his complaint.

“I grow weary of your questions, Captain Forge,” Vader said with a dry voice and it made the rest of them keep their eyes on the other man, “I will not be merciful a third time.”

“My Lord,” Forge answered, eyes wide as he hunched in on himself.

“But to address the Captain’s concerns,” Vader sneered, “Fulcrum is not an ordinary enemy. She is a force-user of considerable skill. Very intelligent, very dangerous and a fierce fighter that is capable of massive amounts of damage.”

Cody blinked and worked to keep his surprise off his face at that information. A force-user that even Vader thought of as skilled? He imagined that the only people Vader would’ve seen as a worthy advisory were at least of a Master rank, and how many of them could have actually survived the purge? Though, to be fair, until recently Cody hadn’t known that General Secura was alive, so maybe there were all kinds of female Master’s that were running around. General Unduli, perhaps?

“The Emperor wants Fulcrum brought to him alive; a task that I will be in charge of. I leave the distribution of your forces to you Admiral; with the exception of Commander CC-2224.”

Poole’s brows furrowed and he sent Cody a quick look. “2224, My Lord?”

“Commander CC-2224 will be accompanying me on my task. I expect the most experienced of your stormtroopers to be put under his command.”

Poole was clearly having trouble masking his bald shock at that. To be fair to the bastard, Cody was busy having his own spontaneous heart attack at the information, so he understood the Admiral’s plight. Hastily, the other man was able to smooth his features over into a bland, mildly curious appearance, but Cody knew that no one – and certainly not Vader – were fooled by the facade.
“I’m aware of 2224’s more…extensive experience with force-users, My Lord, but if the operative in question is so powerful won’t he be something of a burden? At the very least he could be used in other areas of the extraction.”

Cody wasn’t sure which part of his shadowing Vader that Poole really objected too. Was it the prestige? Standing next to Darth Vader in the midst of a potentially game-changing raid on the safe house of at least two powerful rebellion members would definitely be memorable; a citation to be proud of in the cut-throat echelons of Imperial ranks. Certainly, the death glare he could feel pointed at the side of his face from Forge’s direction was for that very reason. (Personally, if he was Forge he’d be grateful that some other poor idiot was going to be stuck with Vader, at the rate Forge was going Vader would be as likely to use his lightsaber on Forge as he would be on this Fulcrum person). Was it a lingering suspicion on Poole’s part about Cody maybe having some kind of leftover fondness for light force-users? Maybe it was just that he wanted Cody to lead a larger contingent of troopers now that Clawler was gone.

None of that stopped him from wanting to beg not to be stuck with Vader. He’d rather be forced to make nice with the Hutts than be that close to Vader for any extended period of time.

“Commander CC-2224 is the only one on board this vessel that has any chance of countering any of Fulcrum’s abilities. The only logical place for him is by my side.”

Poole employed his passive face with much more delicacy than he had shown to that point. His hands twitched in agitation at his sides, but none of that crossed his face. Cody was almost impressed. “I admit that 2224 is a skilled hand-to-hand fighter, but compared to your own strengths, My Lord, his pale so as to be non-existent.”

For some reason, that seemed to amuse Vader. The Sith actually laughed. Laughed. Out loud. A part of Cody’s mind – the sane, grounded part that had built his reputation for dependency during the Clone War – curled up in horror. He kept a steady force on his shields and managed to arrange his face into a (hopefully) tactful amount of bewilderment. Beside him, Yulish had actually flinched; which made him feel better about his own reaction to the unexpected sound.

“Admiral,” Vader finally said as his mirth died away in the face of Poole’s incredulous expression, “Did you know that CC-2224 is the only clone to have ever defeated a high-ranking Jedi in a spar? It was quite impressive. So, I hear. Do you remember who it was against?”

Everyone turned to look at him. “I believe it was Skywalker, My Lord.”

“Of course. Anakin Skywalker. The Hero Without Fear. And is it true that you disarmed him before winning the physical spar?”

Cody nodded cautiously. “Yes, Lord Vader.”

“I think,” Vader said, and even though Cody couldn’t see it, he imagined that the Sith was grinning, “that Commander CC-2224 will be an asset on this mission, Admiral Poole.”

“As you say, My Lord,” Poole answered dutifully.

Vader looked at Cody. “You will report to me when we reach Saleucami, Commander. And I expect you to be ready to use your full knowledge and ability once we’ve disembarked, is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll be at Saleucami in just over a standard day. I suggest you use your time wisely,” Poole added, gaze resting on Cody slightly longer than the other three to his right, “Is there anything else we
should know, Lord Vader?”

“Failure,” Vader began, and all traces of his earlier buoyant mood were gone; the unsettling amusement had given away to a more familiar darkness, “will not be tolerated. This is far too important and anyone who does not do as they are directed will have to answer to the Emperor, am I understood?”

Cody had to hand it to Vader; his threats were not subtle, but there wasn’t a one of them that didn’t know exactly how dire the situation in front of them was. Not that he could spare much energy to worry about the potentiality of meeting the Emperor; he had the perfectly adequate threat of Vader for the foreseeable future to fret over. It made the Emperor seem distant and irrelevant.

He joined the chorus of agreements with his colleagues and made sure to keep his eyes on Vader as the other man took one last sweep of the gathered officers.

“Dismissed.”

They all shuffled away from the meeting room and Cody did his level best to disregard the heavy stare of Poole that followed him all the way to the door. In the back of his head there was a ticking clock that was ominously counting down and reminding him that he had had far too many close calls to survive another intact.

He ignored that too.

Or tried too anyway.

(Poole he could deal with; his own instincts were distinctly less easy to handle. He had a feeling that clock was going to get louder the closer they got to Saleucami.)

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If he thought being able to carve out time with his motley crew of brothers was difficult before, he had clearly never anticipated the all-encompassing paranoia of doing so with Vader on board. He went about his rounds on his metaphorical tip-toes, feeling like he was back in the war trying to maneuver through an abandoned minefield. The only thing that kept his obvious discomfort from seeming suspicious was the fact that every stormtrooper he passed moved with a kind of disjointed unease; even the other officers had a sort of blank faced compliance written on their features that could be dutiful purpose, but Cody was sure was actually the coil of tension that made a person retreat to their own mind. It gave the ship an eerie stillness and an atmosphere that made it appear as if they marching to a suicide mission instead of the Imperial bloodbath it would most likely be.

In an effort to be more conspicuous than normal, Cody managed to convince Crys, Sero and Rush to continue on their own rounds and have Walker and Boil tell them the basics individually. Much to their obvious disdain, (Crys gave him the most unimpressed look that he’d seen since the last time Kix realized he’d fought an entire battle with an infected vibroblade wound and a concussion, while Rush looked like Cody had kicked him in the face for no reason at all; the latter was infinitely more effective than the former – if he had a credit for every time someone had given him the ‘what the kriffing hell are you doing now, sir?’ look during the war he’d have been able to afford a mid-level apartment on Coruscant by the time Order 66 was issued) but grudging understanding; none of them actually fought him on the decision.

“Sir,” Walker’s hesitant voice broke the quiet that fell between the three of them after he had finished explaining Vader’s orders, “That’s…not good.”
Cody sighed and dug his fingers into his eyes wearily. “I know, Walker, but I don’t have any choice.”

“Do we have any idea who Fulcrum is?”

“No,” Cody answered Walker’s confused question, “All we know is that she’s female and a force-user. Technically, Vader didn’t even say she was a Jedi. She might not be. In which case we wouldn’t know who she was even if we had a name.”

“But powerful enough that even Vader perceives her as a threat. Sir, with no way to tell her that you’re an agent for the rebellion and standing at Vader’s side…she’s not going to let you live.”

“Thank you, Walker,” Cody said dryly, “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Do you ever feel like the Force is laughing at us?” Boil asked, finally joining the conversation; the livid quiet that had been emanating from him until then had been starting to worry Cody, “Like watching us scurry around and destroying our entire karking lives is just a game?”

Cody eyed Boil. “…don’t think the Force works like that, Boil.”

Boil scoffed. “How would you know? How would any of us know? Maybe we’re all just collateral in some twisted point it’s trying to make. The futility of life or something equally as kripping terrible.”

Cody blinked. “Boil, are you okay?”

“No, I am not okay,” Boil abruptly hissed, “Vader is on this ship and you are going to have be deal with him personally in a battle zone where you won’t be able to control your shields at all times. And on top of that a force-user we may or may not know will be attacking you. What about any of this seems okay to you?”

“Arguing about it is stupid,” Cody said, his own anger sparking, “None of us can fight Vader either physically or mentally. I can’t ask for reassignment without being suspicious as all karking hell, and there’s no way that the rebellion is going to get there before us. We have no choice, Boil. It is what it is. I’m sorry.”

“Surprisingly,” Boil muttered, “That doesn’t actually make me feel better, sir.”

“Vader thinks I can be an asset to him; he’s not going to change his mind.”

“But why? Why does he think that?”

Cody scrubbed a hand over his hair in agitation. “He knows about my fight with General Skywalker somehow; he must know about the training the General gave us. He thinks I’m the only officer that could deal with a force-user and not immediately die.”

“He’s not wrong,” Walker said and then winced at the dark look Boil threw him.

“So, what you’re saying is that I’m right,” Boil demanded. Walker looked between Cody and Boil with confusion and Cody frowned at his brother.

“Boil…”

“Well, how else would Vader know about any of that?”

“Anyone want to explain what you’re talking about?” Walker asked petulantly.
“I’ve always thought that Vader was someone we know,” Boil answered him fiercely, eyes trained on Cody, “Probably a Jedi we fought beside in the war.”

“We have no proof of that,” Cody said steadily, which just made Boil snort.

“Don’t we? Not every Jedi taught their legions how to deal with force-users and if he knows exactly how you are…with all due respect, sir, you weren’t that famous. Even if the General was.”

“Does it matter?” Cody finally conceded, he really didn’t have the wherewithal to argue about Boil’s theories at the moment, “Whether we know the man under the mask or not, he’s still our enemy.”

“But if it is one of the Generals…if it’s someone we might have worked with we might be able to fight him. Pass on a weakness to the rebellion.”

“Maybe,” Cody prevaricated, “If we weren’t killed immediately. There has to be a reason that no one ever sees his face. I doubt anyone who accidentally finds out is going to live to tell anyone else.”

“But –”

“Enough,” he snapped, at the end of his patience for something that he didn’t think mattered, “right now, it doesn’t matter. We deal with the situation in front of us and not any hypotheticals, understood?”

Boil grumbled unintelligibly, but nodded. Cody sighed and then turned to Walker’s cautious expression. “Have you been able to fix the communicators from Mab?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I want the rest of you to use them as much as possible. I won’t be able to talk on them myself, but I want to hear what’s going on. Whoever the political figure there is might be more important than the force-user in the long run. I’d prefer a forewarning. If I make that far,” he explained self-deprecatingly.

Walker gave him a stilted smile. “Of course, sir. I’ll leave it in your quarters before tomorrow.”

“Okay,” he shrugged his shoulders, knew there was nothing he could do about the tension he was carrying, “You both better get back to your stations. No point in loitering and making someone suspicious.”

Walker nodded and put his helmet back on. He looked over at Boil, who waved their brother away and with a quick glance between them, Walker left the armory. Cody didn’t appreciate the closed off set of Boil’s face, but waited for the other man to speak anyway.

“Yes, Boil?” He finally yielded.

“Is that it?”

Cody furrowed his brows at that. “What do you mean?”

“Are you going to tell me what was going on after Celese and the others left?”

Instantly, the tension set his muscles in stone. He felt his heart rate kick into high speed and his confusion died a violent death. “I don’t –”

“Don’t even try it, sir. Something happened. Something important.”
“Boil –”

“Cody.”

He actually flinched and let his eyes drift over Boil’s shoulders to focus on a shelf of blasters on the other side of the room. No one called him by name and Boil was smart enough to use the sound of it like a carefully laid detonation waiting to happen. It was even more effective than Rush’s desolation. Unfortunately, it’s effectiveness didn’t change his answer.

“No.”

“No?” Boil said incredulously.

“No yet,” Cody reiterated, hints of his desperation decorating his voice, “When this is done. If we make it, than I’ll tell all of you. But this…we can’t be distracted. I think Saleucami is important – maybe more so than anything and this is…just trust me, Boil. Not now.”

Boil observed him and slowly his stance faded from confrontation to a weary tolerance. “Fine. I’ll wait. But, sir,” he continued grimly, “this means that you have to survive. I don’t want to have to ask Celese about it.”

Cody slumped in relief at the reprieve. “I’ll try my best, Boil.”

“You should rest, sir,” Boil said and put his own helmet back on, “Vader isn’t going to care if you’re exhausted or not.”

Boil turned and left the armory before Cody could formulate a response to that. He closed his eyes and let the silence of the room wash over him before taking a ragged breath and pulling his own helmet on.

And hoped he hadn’t made a mistake by not telling Boil and the others.

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A few hours later he collapsed on the uncomfortable bed in his quarters so tired he could barely see. He laid there, staring up at the utilitarian ceiling in a kind of stupor. Around him the room was quiet and familiar; even during the days of the Republic, soldier’s quarters were cramped and sub-par – it was one of the only things the Republic and Empire had in common. The goals could be different, the officers nothing alike, and the government polar opposites of one another, but the life of an actual soldier changed little outside of engagements. It was comforting at times, that recognizable slog, but tonight it just meant that there was nothing else to occupy his thoughts. Which left him with dizzying memories of Celese’s last words to him; stirred by Boil’s badgering.

(As he tried to pull away from the hug, her fingers dug into his armor forcibly. He stayed, confused.

“What is it?”

He felt her breath in his ear, and the hesitation before she spoke. Whatever it was, she had to gear herself for it. He frowned and tried to pull back again, but her hold on his armor was unbreakable. He was just ready to say her name again, when her voice rushed forward.

“He’s alive. Obi-Wan Kenobi is alive. He’s with the rebellion and he’s fine. I promise you that he’s alive and as well as someone can be. And I’m so sorry that you’ve lived with thinking otherwise; if I had known who you were, I would have said something earlier. You didn’t kill him, Cody. He’s alive.”)
The words were nonsense. He heard them clearly and yet nothing of it made any sense. Even the cadence of her voice was strange and alien and he didn’t have a clue what was going on. After she finished, she pulled away from him and had an earnest look on her face. Cody didn’t know what to say. Briefly, she dug her fingers harder, scratching her fingernails across the white plates; eyes searching his, as if looking for some kind of confirmation that he had heard her.

He’d heard.

Karking hell, had he heard.

“Contact me later,” she finished and then with a thin smile, she turned and sprinted over to the ship that was parked in the distance.

From a distance, Cody registered watching the rebels leave and felt his feet carry him back towards the New Citadel. The heat of the volcanic planet pressed down on his bare face and made his undersuit and armor near unbearable, but mentally he was millions of miles away. He was hearing himself say ‘blast him!’, staring at a crumpled body falling from a jagged cliff face and wondering how anyone – even a Jedi Master – could survive such a plummet.

It wasn’t until his toes of his boots hit a pillar with a dull thwack and Boil’s concerned voice floated into his consciousness that he realized he’d trekked back to the main entrance chamber of the prison. And it wasn’t until Yulish’s perturbed expression conveyed how he was acting that he pushed the whole episode to the corner of his mind. He didn’t have the time or ability to process that while Vader and Poole were skulking around.

Later. He would deal with it later.)

And now that later had arrived, he still didn’t know what to think.

He knew Celese had told him the truth. She had taken his identity well; had known about the existence of the chips and their role in his brother’s betrayal of the Jedi. She had no reason to lie; and certainly no reason to tell him anything, he had lived all these years thinking the opposite, keeping him in the dark would have been less of a shock now. Which meant that Obi-Wan was alive.

Alive.

It sounded like a dream. A merciful, brilliant dream. Maybe that was the real reason he hadn’t told Boil. Maybe he was still expecting to wake up and have no hope. Hope was dangerous. Potent. It was wonderful and placating and needlessly cruel when it wanted to be. Frankly, he was better without it.

No.

No, that wasn’t true. No pain, no false hope could ever be bad enough to drown out the fact that Obi-Wan was alive. It made the galaxy worth something more; something brighter. Vader became inconsequential in light of that fact.

He drummed his knuckles against his chest without rhythm. Boil wasn’t wrong; if he was going to be in Vader’s shadow all day tomorrow he would need sleep to keep from losing his mind. If he was going to be fighting a hostile force-user tomorrow he would need to be able to focus. He couldn’t have the surprise he had when he saw General Secura for the first time if it was someone he knew; Vader would pluck the incongruous emotion out of his mind faster than he could control it. He couldn’t afford to waver in Vader’s presence; his life, the life of his brothers, the rebellion’s secrets – they depended on him being at his sharpest.
And yet, in the darkness of the dimmed lights, all he could think about was flashes of copper hair and a wicked smile. A swamp of emotions were ricocheting around in his brain, battering at the pockets of sunlight deep in his mind where he stored the memories of his General. He thought of Bly, safely ensconced in Secura’s arms by now, and wondered if this was how he felt when Cody had told him about her survival. This tumultuous wave of exhilarated exultation and nervous dread; a combination that almost balanced out into a rooted numbness.

He hadn’t the faintest idea what tomorrow would bring. Walker wasn’t wrong about the chances of his dying on Saleucami. He’d be a target as long as he was by the Sith; and if they ran into any resistance than he knew exactly where the weapons would be aiming. And unlike Vader, he didn’t have some mystical dark side of the force to protect him from stray blaster fire. The odds were not on his side.

Still.

If only he could see Obi-Wan again. Just once. Just to hear his voice, to see that wry light shining in his eyes. He might even be daring enough to reach out and slide a hand over his pulse; confirm that he wasn’t an apparition, that the warmth of his skin was real. That it meant the blood in his veins was circulating ad feel the bones on his wrist move independent of his own touch. Force, he’d give up a future just to permanently rewrite the echoes of having killed the man he was in love with.

He felt his hand go still and dug his fingernails into his bare chest in a faint imitation of the desperation Celese’s own had used to make him believe her. He closed his eyes and conjured up the image of Obi-Wan’s face. Wondered how it might have changed in the years since he’d last seen it.

Maybe one day it wouldn’t be imagined.

Maybe.

He had hope.

Chapter End Notes

Just in case some of the flashback sounded familiar, it should - I used part of Chapter Nine to round out the new parts. Also, I haven’t the faintest clue how far Mustafar is from Saleucami, so, you’ll have to just pretend it is what I say it is. :}
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Warning: In the wake of the real life violence that has happened since I last posted; I want to say that there is some violence in this chapter. Nothing extremely graphic or disturbing, but I thought it might be a good idea to reiterate it before anyone starts reading. I don't want anyone being triggered by my word choices or descriptions. I'll try to protect my readers if I can.

So. Here's the explanation for why this so late. First, I didn't have access to a computer for two weeks, and then when I did, I had a hell'va time trying to end this chapter. As you can tell, it's significantly longer than the other regular chapters (by over two thousand words) because I never did figure out where I wanted to end it, so I just said 'fuck it'.

Second, I want to say a heartfelt thank you to everyone who reviewed and kudos'ed - you guys are amazing and I want to huggle you all. Which, if you knew me, you would realize is something of a miracle. I've gotten so behind on answering reviews, that I've decided to just mark the ones currently unanswered in the inbox as read (which is the truth, I read every last one with a smile) and start fresh from this chapter onward. Just as a head's up if anyone was wondering why I hadn't answered theirs yet. I appreciate them immensely; never doubt that.

Thanks again and enjoy the chapter! (As an aside: all errors continue to be mine - and with a chapter this long, there might well be a few I've missed.)

Saleucami was a peaceful planet, really. Wide open grasslands, mixed with the periodic thin forest and flat land most of the way through; soft breezes and brilliant sun that waned into surprisingly bright moonlight. Unfortunately, all Cody really remembered of the place was the slog of looking through wreckage, the frustrating chase of Grievous and Obi-Wan’s uncharacteristically transparent anger at the droid-human hybrid’s escape. Even in the aftermath, most of his memory was of Rex’s separate battle that he told Cody about in the infirmary while his lingering injuries were slathered in bacta. To say it wasn’t the fondest of his memories of the war would be something of an understatement.

Sadly, he thought as he molded his mental shields into the equivalent of durasteel as he approached Vader’s still form, he had a feeling this would be even worse than his first encounter with the planet. He’d only gotten short bursts of fitful sleep and the overbearing tense atmosphere of the ship made him more agitated than he would have liked when the day promised to be as potentially violent as this one did.

The brief check-in he’d had with the others had helped to an extent. Walker had given them the rundown on which channel to use on the excursion and then after touching on the salient points of both their own mission and the situation at hand, the rest of breakfast was filled with mostly idle chatter. Sero teased an annoyed Rush who resorted to trying to stab his cackling brother with his fork, while Crys and Boil got into a familiar argument about why it was prudent to actually eat the tasteless rations the Empire provided for its stormtroopers and Walker just smirked at them from
behind his food. The cadence of the conversations was like a balm on Cody’s hypervigilant being and he found himself relaxing enough to concentrate on keeping his sense of self contained and buried enough to hopefully fool Vader long enough to survive the battle to follow. Afterwards, with the siren of the call to arms ringing in his uncovered ears, he wished them luck and took their own worry for him with as good a grace as he was able.

Remember sir, Boil reminded him, voice and face solemn as he rapped his gloved knuckles on Cody’s chest armor when they went their separate ways, you have to survive. I know you hate talking about your feelings, but dying is no excuse to avoid it. He’d mustered a smile for his brother and said he’d take that under advisement.

He breathed as evenly as he could make himself and then stepped up to the side of the black-clad Sith with a crisp salute. “Lord Vader. Commander CC-2224 reporting, sir.”

Vader turned to Cody and after a mind-numbingly long moment of silence, he waved a hand to dismiss the salute. “Commander, is your company ready?”

Cody nodded in affirmation; he’d already spoken to the Lieutenants and Sergeants in charge of the slightly extended company that Poole had assigned to he and Vader before he approached the other man. A mostly unnecessary endeavor; the men were almost all veterans as Vader had requested the day before and they were eager, but resolute in the face of being Vader’s escort troopers. He’d have felt better if they’d been shiny’s; competence was hit or miss in the Empire, but when it hit, it hit hard. He hoped the force-user that Vader so revered was a good as the man thought she was – otherwise this could be even more of a mess than Cody suspected it would be.

“Good,” Vader said with a nod and he turned once again to face where Yulish, Forge and Vequell were all aligning their own commands, “I expect your knowledge and experience to be vital, Commander. Fulcrum is an expert fighter – both in hand to hand and with her lightsaber. Never assume she has been subdued unless she’s unconscious, understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any questions?”

Cody was surprised at the inquiry, but took advantage of Vader’s unusual openness. “Do you expect further resistance beyond Fulcrum, sir? It might be good for the men to be informed about the full extent of who or what they may be encountering?”

Vader made a wordless noise, remained silent for a beat and then answered. “They should see minimal fight back. The rebellion won’t have had the time to localize any of their forces. That said, Fulcrum is intelligent and I suspect their may be traps to thin out our numbers and cause maximum confusion. Inform the troops that they must keep their heads – if they don’t, then Fulcrum will be able to pick them off at will.”

“Understood, sir,” Cody responded and then relayed that information to his subordinates dutifully. Quiet stretched out between them after that, until, improbably, Vader ended it.

“Do you remember the battle of Saleucami, Commander?”

Cody fought – and won – against the flinch his muscles wanted to do. “Yes, My Lord. Some.”

“What do you remember?”

Cody knew that his heart was picking up speed, but somehow he managed to keep his voice steady
and calm. “General Grievous’ ship blew up.”

Vader laughed. Cody wondered if he would become inured to the sound if he heard it often enough. The thought made him want to let out a hysterical laugh of his own.

“That must have been amusing,” Vader said, “I was never fond of Grievous.”

“As you say, sir.”

“Anything else?”

Cody frowned from the safety of his helmet and wondered what exactly Vader was looking for with his questions. If he knew who Cody was then, considering his rank within the Empire, he likely knew the details of his service record during the war. So, what, exactly, did he want Cody to say? Did he want him to talk about Obi-Wan? Maybe if he still believed the man was dead he could have, but the freshness of his General’s resurrection made the idea of discarding any memories of the Jedi for anyone’s perusal - especially to an abomination like Vader – impossible without compromising his position. He shrugged in response to Vader’s query.

“Nothing really, sir. Some of my recollections of the war are fairly hazy. The medi-droids say it may have to do with repeated head injuries.”

“Ah,” Vader said, voice devoid of any cues that Cody could read. Was he disappointed? Suspicious? “That’s unfortunate. I heard it was quite the battle.”

“I shall defer to your opinion, Lord Vader.”

The ship shuddered as it landed on Saleucami’s surface. The doors of the hanger reeled open and the bright sunshine of the planet flooded into the ship, illuminating the grey, white and black interior and bouncing off the stark armor of the gathered stormtroopers. The *Tenacity* had set down in an open area that was dotted with vegetation in the distance and looked like farmland off to the left. It was familiar enough that he half expected Grievous and a gaggle of battle droids to walk out from the nearby wooded thicket.

“Call your men, Commander,” Vader intoned and began moving towards the hanger bay doors, “We’re leaving first.”

“Of course, sir,” he said and gave the orders to his lower officers. He peered out at the identical white faces of the stormtroopers preparing to venture out and hoped his brothers would survive whatever was going to happen. Boil’s sharp voice telling him that he had to survive himself echoed in his head eerily.

He followed Vader.

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The battalion traversed the open dell in front of them quicker then they had on Mab. With clear sight lines, it meant that some of the caution they’d showed on the abandoned mining planet could be thrown to the wind. Of course, it helped that Darth Vader was marching at the front of their fanned out columns. Cody, for his part, felt unbearably exposed in his position beside the taller man. The troopers knew force-users from a distance - like mythical figures from a bygone era, despite being only a decade removed from their destruction - Cody was much more intimately aware of the danger they were facing. Preparing to fight one was near impossible, you simply relied on experience and a healthy dose of luck. Just because the path looked empty didn’t meant it was.
Vader stopped abruptly and Cody held up a hand to halt the march of the men behind them.

“My Lord?”

“There, do you see it?” Vader stretched out his arm and pointed to his right. Cody, who had set himself at the man’s left in a bid to be as far from the hand he used his lightsaber with, had his HUD zone in on the area in question. Just off in the distance, maybe a klick or less away, were a series of buildings. Once he’d focused his binocular’s sensors on the HUD’s screen, he could also make out ragged fields that had been left to rot or fallow. He nodded.

“A farm by the looks of it, sir.”

Without responding, Vader resumed his walking, altering his course slightly to veer in the direction of the seemingly deserted farm. Cody motioned for the men to follow and be on alert.

The closer they got to the area, the more signs of former life that could be seen. Grazing pastures that were over grown, a fenced in stable-like place not a hundred or so yards from the main property, a corn field that had never been properly harvested and had turned parched and dull yellow-brown in color with inedible ears and withered stalks still standing in wait. Once they’d reached the central part of the farm, Vader had them spread out and search the barns. The calm demeanor that flowed around Vader made Cody certain that none of the men would find anything; likely if the Sith had felt something in the force he wouldn’t be nearly so nonchalant. Still, he gestured for Cody to follow him into the main house.

It wasn’t a large living space by any means. Two floors, but cozy; lived in. Scratches of wear were carved into every inch of the place; dents in the dining room table, threadbare chairs in the living room and chips of character in the wooden walls. Cody found himself stopping at the end table in the living room and carefully picked up an overturned holo-snapshot that had been forgotten. He activated it and his breath caught in his throat at the image that lit up. A pink-skinned Twi’lek woman wearing a small smile while two children of middling ages – one female and one male – with darker, more caff colored skin grinned from their place in front of her. Beside the Twi’lek woman, with an arm wrapped around her waist, was one of his brothers; dark hair pulled up and beaming with pride. All of them were wearing simple clothes; a little rough in places from wear and tear, the kind of clothing that would work in farm life. He glanced from the holopicture back to the surroundings of the house with a new, saddened comprehension.

(“His name is Cut,” Rex said, a wry smile on his face, “Fierce bastard, I’ll give him that.”

“A deserter,” Cody said and he tried to wrap his mind around that fact. Despite Slick’s treachery and the grumbling dissatisfaction he’d heard from some of his brothers that were assigned to less caring Jedi or some of the human officers who saw them as expendable cannon fodder, he found it hard to imagine just leaving. Walking away from the war was one thing, but walking away from your brothers was something else entirely.

Rex shrugged. “I know. I thought the same thing, but he had his reasons. And it works for him; he has a family.”

That, too, was difficult for Cody to imagine. “So you said.” And with a Twi’lek woman no less; he made a mental note to never tell Bly any of this.

“I told him that his family was safe.”

“You said that already too.”
“Cody.”

He sighed. “I won’t tell the General. Calm down. You have my word.”

Rex smiled like he had never actually doubted it, but felt he had to make a point of it anyway. Which, to be fair, he probably hadn’t. Cody was a sucker through and through; his reputation would be shot to shit if Rex ever decided to tell anyone what a bleeding heart he really was.

“He’s happy, Cody. Genuinely happy. Can you imagine? Maybe after the war, that’ll be us. Sounds nice, doesn’t it?”

Cody caught a flash of white robes and armor and saw Obi-Wan stop at the bed of one of the 212th’s injured and offer a few words for the brother lying there. He looked back at Rex and offered him an inadequate smile.

“It sounds impossible,” he answered.

Rex, thankfully, didn’t have the painful, slow dawning realization that he might have been stupid enough to fall in love with his Jedi hanging over his head. He hadn’t spent the last two months wanting to alternately claw his own eyes out and backpedaling through his memories trying to remember when everything had gone wrong. Rex, who might be able to have what Cut did some day. He glanced up again and met blue eyes unexpectedly where Obi-Wan was watching them; some of his famed tranquility smoothing back over his features and erasing the failure of today with it.

“But, yes,” he murmured softly to his brother’s rising confusion, “It sounds nice.”

He looked back to the holo in his hand and placed it gently back on the table where he had found it. This had to be Cut’s home. The same place that Rex had described all those years ago. Even in his pre-dechipping days with the Empire, Cody had never liked invading a person’s home; it felt like an unnecessary personal violation. But to do so to a brother’s home? It felt that much more unforgivable. Nevermind, that none of the them were there; it was like trampling on his family’s legacy – spitting on their very existence.

“A clone?” Vader’s curious voice broke him out of his revelry, “How interesting. I wasn’t aware that any of the clones had families.”

“Neither was I,” Cody lied.

Vader had sidled up to Cody while he’d been staring into space and was now inspecting the holo for himself. Cody had the urge to snarl and rip the candid picture away from Vader’s sight – his brother’s privacy was none of Vader’s business. Instead, he stood at half-attention and awaited Vader’s verdict on the homestead.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“No one had been here for some time,” the Sith finally admitted, looking away from the holo, “But there are lingering traces of the light hidden in the crevices of this home. Fulcrum was here; a frequent guest before the family left. We cannot be far.”

“Should I recall the troops, sir?”

“Yes. We’re moving on.”

“In which direction, Lord Vader?”
“The West,” the taller man replied and moved towards the door while Cody followed in his heavy footsteps, “Now that we’re here, I can sense the remnants of Fulcrum in the force moving that way.”

“As you wish, my Lord.”

They resumed their march in the new route and while the stormtroopers fell back into their previous formations, Cody heard the first burst of low sounding background chatter from his brothers in Walker’s auxiliary comms.

“This place hasn’t changed a bit,” Crys’ voice complained in his ear, “I wonder if ‘ol bucket of bolts’ escape pod is still around here somewhere.”

“Probably,” Boil answered with an amused quality to his own voice, “Along with all those powered down battle droids. Hey, shiny, if you see a rusted old clanker, try to charge him with one of your extra power packs – I wanna hear what the kriffing thing’ll say if we tell it that droids fight for the Republic now.”

“I know you’re not talking to me,” Rush responded flatly, “Shiny, my ass.”

Sero’s barking laughter rang through the comm at that.

He didn’t bother to hone in on the rest of the sporadic and often sarcastic commentary; but the drone of it actually helped sharpen his focus – a kind of filter that strangely allowed him to reinforce his shields and even out some of the unruly emotions that the farm had elicited.

Vader’s gait set a brisk pace and they were able to eat at the distance quickly. They were skimming around the tree-line of a thin-branched forest when Vader halted suddenly. Cody did the same and repeated his earlier signal to the men and raised his blaster instinctively at the squared line of the Sith’s broad shoulders.

“Sir?”

“Tell the men to stand on guard.”

Cody complied with the order and opened the secure, company wide comm channel. “Initiate Protocol Alpha.”

A chorus of ‘sirs’ followed his instructions and the subtle buzz of fully charged blasters greeted his ears in response to the relayed orders. He turned down the volume and completely tuned out the private comm and paid close attention to Vader’s movements. He didn’t have the ability to sense people like force-users, so he settled for the next best thing: waiting for the person who could to give some kind of indication that danger was nearby.

Vader scanned the area, but didn’t actually draw his lightsaber. The day was calm and the lack of breeze gave the sparse forest a stillness that was rare in that kind of topography. Behind him, he could hear the barest of shifting from the men; they weren’t used to the sit-and-wait approach that was required when battling someone as otherworldly as a force-user and it was telling how tense the men became as the seconds stretched impossibly long.

Without warning, Vader flung a hand up just across Cody’s sightline and through sheer muscle memory, he found himself dropping into a controlled crouch and pivoted to his left ready to fire only to be greeted by the shine of a flashbomb being detonated a few meters from his position where Vader had managed to keep it suspended in mid-air. The spread of the golden light that would have completely incapacitated much of the forward advance of the escort company had it landed where
it’s trajectory suggested it would have; as it was, it still caused a series of dark starbursts to cross over his eyes and leave him with an instant headache.

“Get down, Commander.”

Cody did as the other man commanded and then watched as the man activated his lightsaber and proceeded to swiftly and gracefully combat a barrage of blaster fire from the forest. The rest of the men followed suite as soon as they saw Cody hit the dirt, and heard him yell into the comms, but not before a few of the slowest reactors fell from the spray of fire. The torrent of directionless shots ended abruptly when one of Vader’s batted blasts caused a minor explosion somewhere in the forest in front of them.

Cautiously, Cody pulled himself to his feet and gingerly walked over to where Vader was standing shallowly beyond the tree-line and staring at where the explosion had occurred. There were billows of black smoke that tendrilled into the air and Cody gripped his blaster with more force. Along the outer partition of the forest, the rest of the stormtroopers were slowly picking themselves up and ventured closer to he and Vader. A couple of the troopers stopped to inspect a tree that had taken several rounds of fire and was shredded as a result. Cody kept his attention on the menace in front of him wearily.

“Sir?”

The Sith inclined his head in vague acknowledgment. “Casualties?”

Cody half-turned towards where they had taken cover and counted the unmoving bodies. “Eight, my Lord.”

“Hmm,” Vader finally looked at Cody, “Acceptable losses. Have someone check the wreckage, Commander.”

“Sir,” Cody said in as neutral a voice as he could and then turned to the nearest troopers and gestured over to the smoke, “Go see what was shooting at us and report back.”

“Sir,” both troopers saluted and then alertly began making their way to whatever had been firing at them.

Vader swiveled and looked for a time in each direction, as if to reorient himself to their path, before settling back into his original placement, facing the forest. Cody shuffled a bit, not wanting to distract the other man, but also wanting desperately to know what the hell was going on.

“My Lord?”

“We’re being watched, Commander.”

The ominous words froze the blood in Cody’s veins. He focused on the sensors displayed on his HUD, but the same benign information that had been scrolling across it since they had touched down on Saleucami continued to run without disruption. If he’d had superhuman strength, he’d have probably crushed his blaster by now from just the vicious anticipation of the mission. With a sense of wry pessimism, he wondered if the force-user would even spare him a glance before she cut him down for so obviously being the one in charge beside Vader. Unconsciously, he took a step away from Vader’s still form.

The taller man glanced over at him, and despite not being able to see his face, he had the distinct impression that he was amused by the action. “Losing your nerve, Commander?”
“Just allowing you space to swing your lightsaber, should you need to do so, sir,” Cody replied with more dryness than he meant too.

“So diplomatic,” Vader answered, but there was that same amusement in the tone and this time it was accompanied by a twist of confusing wistfulness, “I’d forgotten –” He halted his speech so suddenly that Cody blinked and rose his eyebrows inside his helmet.

“Sir?”

Vader turned from him, and Cody saw a tension that had previously been absent snap into Vader’s stance, making the lines of his body unyielding and harsh. Now that he was paying attention to it, Cody realized that Vader had been - not open exactly - but almost accessible before; like the subconscious unwinding that occurred naturally when you were with someone you trusted. On guard, certainly, but loosely so; comfortable. Cody blinked again.

The stormtroopers respected his commands, and they accepted his rank, but in many cases only begrudgingly. Forge’s attitude towards he and other vod’e, was, sadly, the normal opinion of many within the Empire, and as a result, his authority was marginalized whenever someone could reasonably get away with doing so. There was a prevailing, silent consensus from many of those bigoted parties, that clones were not only expendable, but ticking time bombs – after all, they had turned on their Jedi Masters once, who’s to say that they wouldn’t turn on the Empire some day too? Without the knowledge of the chips that forced his he and his brother’s hands – and the Empire had made certain that such manipulations on their part were so buried they’d never see the light of day – he could almost, almost understand the concern.

Vader, though, Vader would know about the chips. No one that high ranking wouldn’t; he’d know the whole sordid story about the clones seeming betrayal of the Jedi. And with it would be the understanding that if clones like he and Boil and Crys and the others were actually managing to hide within the Empire ranks, clones whose chips had failed or been removed, he would be one of their main targets. So, despite the prejudices of the rank and file, Vader would be intimately aware that he was at much more risk surrounding himself with clones than the average Empire flunky. And still, despite that, for some reason, Cody’s presence had heralded a baffling relaxation on Vader’s behalf.

“So diplomatic. I’d forgotten –”

Karking hell. Maybe, improbably, Boil was right. Maybe Vader had been a Jedi. Force, Boil would never let him live it down if it were true.

And now was really not the time to be dwelling on it when he had to be focusing on keeping his sorry self alive.

They both stayed pensively quiet until the troopers Cody had sent to check out the forest arrived. One of them held a piece of machinery in his hand and they saluted dutifully before handing Cody the mysterious object. Cody turned it over in his hands and after a moment of study, he realized it was the broken handle of an old blaster rig – the kind they had used in the war to down hordes of battle droids to thin out their numbers before a full engagement commenced. He handed it to Vader.

“It looked like it was programmed to fire without break,” the stormtrooper who had given him the handle said, “Or, at least, that’s our guess. Most of it’s just in pieces now.”

“Did you see evidence of who might have started it?”

“No, sir.”
Cody spared a quick glance at Vader and then dismissed the troopers. “Rejoin the others, I suspect we’ll be leaving shortly.”

“Sir.”

Cody looked back at Vader, still unsure what to say or how to react to the other man’s earlier slip. “What now, my Lord?”

If Cody didn’t know any better, he would’ve said that Vader flinched at being addressed with such a title. The Sith stared down at the handle and then finally swung back around to face Cody; composure apparently back in place. “She wants to lure us into the forest.”

Cody tapped the side of his blaster thoughtfully. “You said we were being watched.”

“And we are. Just not by her.”

Cody felt his brows furrow. “Sir?”

Vader held up the handle. “This was broken with superior strength; see the indents in the body? The scraps in the surface metal?”

Cody peered at the handle with new eyes. There were sections where whoever had gripped the handle had left actual scratches that would be impossible to accomplish with flesh and skin; even races who had exoskeletons tended to have softer, more malleable hands for more detail-oriented tasks. He slid his hands into the grooves bent into the surface and realized something.

“These weren’t humanoid hands. Droids, sir?”

“Most likely,” Vader confirmed and waved a careless gesture to the land around them “Left over from the Clone War, no doubt.”

Cody gave the area a cursory glance and sighed internally. Why not. As if more memories of the war needed to permeate his present. “Right. And they’re the ones spying on us.”

“I’m sure they’ve been reprogrammed to respond to Fulcrum’s orders. As I said earlier, she wants us to go forward, through the forest.”

“I wouldn’t advise it,” Cody said, unnecessarily, “More cover for us, but too much cover for them. We’d walk into a trap without knowing too easily.”

“I agree, Commander,” Vader said and then did a one-eighty and made his way back to the flatter, more open land, “I will not be manipulated into docilely complying with her plans. She wants to engage us; very well, but it’ll be on a ground of my choosing, not hers.”

_Not that walking out in the open like animals to slaughter is any better_, Cody thought wryly, but he imagined he’d already gotten away with enough talking with Vader on almost equal grounds; questioning his wisdom of leaving the forest completely would probably be pushing it. Besides, as some of his brothers Empire-updated, wartime gallows humor suggested – stormtroopers were there to die, not to have opinions.

They followed Vader.

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Assassin droids. Kriffing assassin droids. It was like that miserable landing on that Rishi moon where
he and Rex went for an inspection and walked into a nightmare all over again. His estimation of the still unseen force-user went up by leaps and bounds even as he cursed out her ingenuity from where he stood in the space, trying to get a grasp on what was happening.

They’d walked from the forest line on quick, quiet feet after Vader’s pronouncement. It was almost treated like a feint of some kind; a way to push enemy forces back and then circumvent them completely by out flanking them. They kept the forest within sight in case the mysterious force-user and her droids figured out Vader’s intentions and attacked anyway, but with the speed and alertness to drop into battle formations once this here-to-unseen perfect layout of land presented itself to their leader.

And it did.

Unfortunately, not moments after they had settled into the series of abnormal, rocky outcroppings, they were disrupted by the appearance of several black armored assassin droids seemingly dropping out of the sky. Cody had barely had the time and wherewithal in his surprise to curse and block the first efficient swing of one of the droids arms that was headed straight for his face. The strike jarred his arm fiercely, but he was able to use his own momentum to push the droid just far enough away to put several hits from his blaster in it; and after the fourth one the droid dropped.

*Karking hell, I forgot how hard it is to take those things down,* he thought savagely; his shoulder ached from where the block’s force had nearly wrenched the damn bone out of socket. The frightened yells of a couple other stormtroopers, made him whirl back into the fray where several other droids had descended on their ranks.

None of them, he noticed in passing, where going anywhere near Vader.

He saw one trooper get impaled on the sword-like blades that the droids were known for and put that droid down while it was still distracted. Once he’d turned back around, he saw one rushing him and managed to duck under that one’s blade, and planted an elbow in it’s back that knocked it off balance very briefly. It caught itself on one hand in the dirt and skidded a couple of feet backwards. It looked at Cody with a vague head tilt, as if surprised that he had been able to thwart its intentions to kill him. The split-second advantage Cody may have had disintegrated quickly and the thing charged him again, but with more movement to its path, making it that much harder to hit. He’d only gotten one shot that hit it’s mark before the droid used a closely situated rock to rebound off of and landed on Cody, knocking him to the ground and planting its blade in the packed dirt just beside Cody’s reeling head.

It crouched over Cody’s body, ripped the blade out of it’s place and Cody got his blaster up just in time to push the blade away from his helmet, though it dug a shallow groove in his arm gauntlet on the way down. His blaster was now in a position to be useful and he fired several times in quick succession at the chest piece of the droid before it could retry for another go at stabbing him and from one shot to the next, the thing splayed outward, it’s yellowed, faux eyes going blank and lightless. With a grunt, he shoved the disabled droid off his body and sat up.

He shook his head and then pulled himself to his feet, blaster up and ready to take on the next contender, when he realized that the sounds of battle had lessened. He looked around; several of the stormtroopers were down and several more where clearly injured; but on the upside, he could also see a number of now useless droids littering the area as well. His shoulder hurt, and now added to that tally was a throbbing elbow, a bruised back and the headache that the suspended flashbomb had given him roared back to life from the un-cushioned fall he’d just taken. The remaining droids – and there were more of them than he would’ve like to have seen – were retreating.

Warily, Cody trudged over to where Vader was standing solitarily. His lightsaber was drawn, and
the slight breeze that had picked up fluttered at the ends of his cape. The Sith was staring out across the contained area with an intensity that had Cody’s frame go even more tense then it already was.

“Sir?”

Vader didn’t say anything for a moment. Cody looked over in the distance and saw the droids lining up at attention; like they were waiting for something. They were in a perfect place to be taken down, but the strangeness of the act and Vader’s stillness stayed him from ordering the combat effective stormtroopers from firing. He glanced back at Vader.

“She’s here.”

Cody flinched. Vader took a few deliberate, paced steps forward and stopped. Cody brought his blaster up to the ready position, and he saw the nearest trooper follow his motions; taking his cue from Cody’s increased awareness and Vader’s obvious tension.

“Darth Vader. It’s been a long time.”

The line of droids parted, and a figure stepped out from behind them. She was tall for a female, wearing boots, plain, simple clothing and a grey cloak with the hood up and obscuring her features from view. Her hands were hanging loosely at her sides where there were two lightsabers strapped to her belt. Her stance was easy, but there was a coiled energy to her that suggested a readiness to fight the moment it was necessary.

To Cody, all of that registered subconsciously. The moment the force-user had spoken, his higher brain functions had lit up in recognition and horror. He knew that voice. He knew that voice. It was a touch rougher, a hare deeper and far more cautious and closed than it used to be, but there was no mistaking it. The sound threw him straight back to Obi-Wan’s gentle pride and then heartbreak, General Skywalker’s fierce protectiveness and impulsivity and Rex…Rex’s exasperated affection; the 501st’s utter and complete loyalty.

(“Sometimes I hate the Jedi,” Rex said, voice clogged with unshed tears and so soft; as if he didn’t really want to be saying it despite the misery spilling off of him in waves.

Cody sat beside his brother awkwardly. The council was fallible, and, at times like this, unforgivably so, and since his General was part of said council, he wasn’t sure how much comfort Rex would want from him. Still, he couldn’t just sit there and watch Rex fall apart. Tentatively, he leaned over and brushed his side against Rex’s, stayed there in case Rex needed something – somebody – to lean on.

“How’s General Skywalker?”

“Apoplectic,” Rex answered promptly, “He won’t speak to anyone. He’s holed himself up in the Senator’s apartments.”

If Rex was willing to talk about his General’s relationship with Senator Amidala openly than it was exactly as bad as it seemed. They sat in silence for a minute and then Rex gave him an unreadable look.

“What about General Kenobi? How does he feel? What’s he said about all this?”

Cody shrugged. “He…I don’t know. He won’t talk about it.”

Which was a lie of course. Or, at least half of one. Obi-Wan wasn’t talking; instead he was ghosting the halls of his ship and the Jedi Temple like a buoy that had been set adrift. He’d attempted to speak
to Skywalker exactly once, and while Cody hadn’t been there to hear the conversation, he’d seen the aftermath of it well enough. At no time during the war – even in its bloodiest, even in the wake of the disaster of Krell’s betrayal on Umbara, or the Jedi trio’s stone-faced reemergence from Mortis’ shadow - had Cody ever seen Obi-Wan look so destroyed. What had he said? Nothing. How did he feel? Well, the lingering anger and disappointment that Cody himself had felt in his General, had been suffocated by the worry he now felt for the other man. He had a feeling that no one hated his General more than he hated himself right now.

Rex seemed to read that from Cody’s face, because he nodded slowly and then looked down at his folded hands without saying a thing. Carefully, Rex leaned back into Cody’s shoulder.

“I miss her already.”

“I know, brother,” Cody said sadly, “I know.”

Commander Tano reached up and pushed the hood from her head. Her montrals had sharpened significantly and had grown longer beside. Even the markings on her face had changed some; the roundness of said face had disappeared and left her visage lengthened and matured. Cody smiled sadly behind his helmet; despite the hardness to her features now, it was like seeing a younger sibling become an adult. He found he was genuinely sorry he’d missed it. And even sorrier for how and why it happened.

And then the careful maintenance of his mental shields collapsed completely.

“Snips. You’ve grown.”

It took a few eternity driven seconds before the words took root, but when they did any hope of his being able to handle the situation with aplomb died. He’d have dropped his blaster if he hadn’t had such a tight grip on it to begin with. All the muscles in his body loosened and his bones seemed to melt. Only long ingrained military discipline kept him from falling to his knees. Peripherally, he saw Ahsoka’s mien curl in disgust; but not, he thought with a strange calmness he didn’t feel, with surprise.

His hands fell, and the blaster along with it, down to his stomach. He turned his gaze to stare – almost unseeingly – at Vader’s back. Everything Vader had said to him since the New Citadel came flooding back to the forefront of his memories. The unconscious flinch that had so confused Cody when he had first been introduced to Darth Vader years ago. The open way he had talked too and been around Cody.

“Commander CC-2224 is the only one onboard this vessel that has any chance of countering any of Fulcrum’s abilities.”

“Did you know that CC-2224 is the only clone to have ever defeated a high-ranking Jedi in a spar?”

“I think that Commander CC-2224 will be an asset on this mission.”

“I was never fond of Grievous.”

“So diplomatic, I’d forgotten –”

“So diplomatic, I’d forgotten –”

“So diplomatic, I’d forgotten –”
Laughter bubbled up in his chest but, thankfully, didn’t escape. He wondered if this was what going crazy felt like. This feeling of free-falling hysteria; as if the foundations of his existence had been wiped away. Oh, the irony; he wished Boil was here to see this. All those hours of arguing and theories and here was the answer. Wrapped up in a large, hulking, black bow.

And why not? Aayla Secura had survived being shot in the back at close range. Bly survived years of torture and neglect in an Imperial prison. Ohnaka too. Obi-Wan survived a cliff fall. Ahsoka Tano had become a full-fledged rebellion asset and agent. In light of all that, why shouldn’t Anakin Skywalker be the most feared man in the galaxy. In light of the clusterfuck that was the fall of the Jedi and Republic, why wouldn’t it make sense that the Hero Without Fear would become the Monster Who Was Fear. Nothing made sense; so, by definition, everything made perfect sense.

From a distance, Cody was vastly aware that he was losing it.

“You don’t get to use that name anymore,” Ahsoka growled, “You lost that right a long time ago.”

“No matter what you say, Ahsoka Tano, you’ll always be my student. Nothing can rewrite history.”

Ahsoka bared her teeth at the mocking Sith and then drew her own lightsabers – white, instead of the more typical blue or green, both of which Cody could remember her having at some point or another – and dropped into her familiar battle stance. He wondered how long she had known that Vader was Anakin Skywalker. From the beginning? Or was it more recent than that; was the betrayal still an open wound or had it partially healed into an ugly scar? He peered down at his hands absently; they were shaking.

“You are not my master. Maybe some part of you – some part buried deep – remembers, maybe you can recite the nicknames and the jokes and the memories, some part not crushed under the dark side, but it doesn’t matter. My master is dead. You’re just the imposter wearing his face.”

Strangely, Cody wasn’t sure he actually believed that. Vader was much different than Skywalker, but there were definitely flashes of the young, headstrong General Cody had gotten used to during the war. Not that Cody blamed Ahsoka for her anger; if he could get over the abject shock of it, he was sure he’d feel the same way.

“Very well,” Vader said, and Cody was sure that he wasn’t imagining the streak of bitterness in the former Jedi’s voice, “Have it your way.” He readied himself accordingly.

The fight began.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

This was a back-breaker of a chapter. I apologize for how long it took to post, but it just went on and on and on. And it's wordy, so I apologize for that too. Your patience is awesome and - as always - your comments and kudos are fuel for the madness!

All mistakes are mine, and there have to be a few - it's inevitable when there's this much exposition.

The first electrifying clash of white on red lightsabers seemed to be some kind of signal to the remaining assassin droids, because they leaped into action behind their mistress almost immediately. Cody had even less time to acknowledge the situation in front of him when the aforementioned droids dropped on top of him the first time. His fellow stormtroopers had begun firing the moment that the attack had started, but in the haze of the last few minutes revelations, Cody took longer to sort himself out and by the time he did the first of the droids had practically gotten close enough to decapitate him.

Thankfully, his years of battlefield experience meant that his arms had pulled up and out to block the swing of the droid’s blade hand before his conscious mind had processed what was in front of him. With his faculties back online, he twisted himself out of the droid’s way and used his strength and the droid’s own momentum against it and brought the blade around to slice the droid’s head off it’s shoulders. So much for being able to assist in taking Fulcrum down.

From there, the fight turned into a mosh of sensory and muscle memory. The droids were relentless in their pursuit of the stormtroopers, so Cody spent most of his time running around and saving his fellow troopers and himself by turns. When he could take a precious moment to look around and assess, his eyes were inevitably drawn to the duel between Vad-Sky-Vader and Ahsoka.

Had it been in any other circumstance, he would’ve held his breath and watched the fight with a kind of awed anticipation. Twirls of light and the unnatural shifting of rock became hallmarks of the duel quickly and occasionally one of the flying projectiles would hit an unlucky droid or trooper who ventured too close to the site of the force-user’s match. Ahsoka, he observed, had perfected her athletic style of battle, and was moving at speeds that he’d never seen in the war (of course you haven’t, he scoffed at himself at one point while he was struggling with a droid, she’s not a karking teenager anymore). On the flipside, Vader was virtually unrecognizable. The Sith wasn’t stationary by any means, but there was a contained economy of movement in his fighting that – now that he was aware of who was beneath the mask – confused him. Ten years removed from the purge meant that Vader was only in his early thirties – about the same age Obi-Wan had been during the war, and for all his General’s bemoaning his proteges theatrics, it wasn’t unlike him to indulge in the same feats of inhuman fighting just to show off (that had been the vod’e’s assumption anyway, what other possible reason could someone have for backflipping off a glass tower, when a flight of stairs, elevator or controlled drop would be less likely to result in serious injury?). Ahsoka clearly still fought that way, but Cody couldn’t remember a time when Skywalker had ever taken the path of least resistance – on the contrary, he used to revel in making a difficult task even more insurmountable just for the hell of it. It’s part of the reason Rex had so perfected the look of long suffering patience – whenever other brothers would complain about their Jedi, Rex used to just stare
at them until they remembered who he was attached to and then, miraculously, Rex would be bought a whole round of condolence drinks by their fellow Captain’s and Commanders.

Cody had never received the pity that Rex had from their brothers. Once, he had made the mistake of wondering about that out loud to Bly and the other man had snorted amusedly.

(“Your General taught his General.”

“So?”

Bly rose an eyebrow at him. “Who do you think he learned his crazy from?”

“And that’s my fault? They were already like this when we found them.”

The 327th’s Commander waved his food filled hand dismissively. “The difference is that you defend your General. Rex just sits there and suffers in silence. It’s noble.”

“That’s because Obi-Wan isn’t as bad as Skywalker, mostly,” he answered, then backpedaled when he realized he wasn’t actually helping his argument, “He’s a different kind of...it’s different, okay? Skywalker’s an explosion of kriffing bad decisions and recklessness. Obi-Wan’s more like a slow bleeding out of distracting humor hiding potential losses of limb and a startling stimulant addiction.”

Bly blinked at him. “Vod, I want you to think very hard about how you sound right now.”

Cody frowned. “It makes more sense in my head.”

“I hope so because in the real world it sounds like you’re attempting to both complain about and defend him. Which,” Bly paused then continued with an unfair amount of relish, “is exactly what I was talking about earlier.”

Cody groaned and put his head down on the table. He felt Bly slap him good-humoredly on the shoulder.

“Buck up, it’s not that bad.”

Cody thought about three weeks ago when he had listened to Obi-Wan lecture a newly minted Jedi Knight about the importance of retaining his lightsaber, despite the fact that Obi-Wan had lost his just two days before in the jungles of a hostile planet in a battle with some kind of hybrid, intelligent crocodile species and Cody had been forced to retrieve it out of a goopy, foul swamp. Skywalker, who had been standing beside Obi-Wan, was silently mouthing along to the entire lecture like he had it long memorized while Commander Tano giggled into her raised fist. Cody, somehow, managed to keep a straight face, even when Rex gave him the galaxy’s most knowing look. He sighed.

“No, it is that bad.”

He shook off the pull of the memory as he watched Ahsoka pirouette around Vader's form. The point was that Skywalker’s style had changed drastically (no karking shit, a voice that sounded like a suspicious blend of Boil and Wolffe’s rang in his mind, he’s not exactly the same Jedi anymore is he?) and he couldn’t understand why. His age shouldn’t be a problem, so, a lingering injury of some kind? Influence from being taught by the Emperor for a decade? It was frustrating. And judging by Ahsoka’s progressively grimmer expression, he wasn’t the only one who thought so.

She doesn’t know how to fight him anymore, he thought and the idea of it gave him a sharp tug in his chest. Ahsoka was still young; probably unused to fighting many force-user’s in real combat anymore and she must’ve thought that her old Master would be familiar. Someone she could wear
down. Instead, she was fighting the force-user equivalent of a durasteel wall; and walls didn’t have cracks that let a person be exploited. As the minutes eased by, Cody, alarmingly, could see that she was tiring. The awe-inducing speed was being pulled back to a level that he remembered from years ago.

This wasn’t good.

He turned back to the droid battle occurring around him and took stock. There were still half a dozen assassin droids, and the stormtroopers were being methodically thinned out. One droid charged at him and he waited until it was close enough for him to put blaster fire into his head. It dropped.

Five to go.

He glanced back at Ahsoka and Vader and felt his heart stop for a moment. Something had happened, because one of her lightsabers was lying, deactivated, several feet from them and her now-empty hand was bleeding. Now they stood facing each other, and Cody could see Ahsoka’s chest heaving as she breathed. She brought her remaining lightsaber around into a more traditional fighting stance and worked to calm her ragged breathing.

_The Emperor wants her alive_, Cody remembered as he stared at Vader’s patience, _but that doesn’t mean much. How badly would he hurt her before she surrenders? Would she surrender?_ He took in her rigid body stance, the determination set in her face and realized no, no she wouldn’t. She was a product of Anakin Skywalker’s worst stubbornness and Obi-Wan Kenobi’s faultful loyalty and even Rex’s grim acceptance; she grew up in war and if her death saved one other life that her living otherwise would have condemned, she would do it gladly.

He didn’t know whether to be proud of her or completely exasperated. Of all the ridiculous things to learn from them, the self-sacrificing stupidity would be the one to stick. And now here he was, trying to figure out a way for her to be subdued without major injury – the less maimed she was in this fight, the easier it would be for her to escape later.

While he frantically tried to think of a way to do so without being totally conspicuous, he was knocked down from behind by the body of one of his fellow troopers who had been flung by one of the five…no, three now, assassin droids. He pushed himself up to one knee and glanced over at the man who had barreled him over and grimaced – make that the headless body of one of his troopers.

He squared himself to the attacking droid, but it stood there and analyzed him. When it did move forward, it was with a calculation that he was unused to seeing in droids. It shielded itself from his fire with a series of clever ducks and rolls that put it within physical striking distance of Cody, then popped up and levered a contained punch at his head. He narrowly dodged the blow and swung his body around, but didn’t anticipate the droid’s short check to the right and it knocked his blaster out of his hands easily.

He cursed and curled his body into a roll of his own to get out of the close quarter bout the droid had pushed him into. The droid rotated on his legs and made a play towards his body again which he just barely avoided by bracing himself behind one of the rocky outcroppings.

_Well, _he thought as he looked down at the blood oozing out of the cut in his upper arm armor, _not such a narrow miss after all._ He looked around the area and cursed again when he couldn’t find anything to use as a weapon, and his blaster was laying behind the droid’s body. _Think, think, think_, he whispered in his mind roughly. He glanced around at the barren immediate landscape and decided that the only chance he had was to get to his discarded weapon; preferably without any major injury to his person. He took a deep breath and kept his body low as he hightailed it from one protection barrier to the next until he could take a page out of the assassin’s own handbook and used one of the
large stones to catapult himself at an angle and tackle the droid to the ground.

The droid went down, and he worked to keep his knee stationed on the droid’s blade hand to stop it from impaling him as he scrambled in the packed dirt trying to grab the blaster before the droid was able to overpower him. He managed to grab the hilt of the weapon and loosed several rounds into it as he was upended from his precarious hovering over the assassin. Cody looked at the downed droid and then collapsed onto the ground in a half-sprawled perch. He didn’t think there was a muscle in his entire body that didn’t feel like it had been pulled through a mine grinder, and there was now a moderate sized pool of blood obscuring the white of his left vambrace and turning it into a tacky, rust red mess. Slowly, he pushed himself to his feet and then swept the battlefield with his eyes and realized that the only ones left standing were stormtroopers – all of the droids had been dealt with. He didn’t even have the time to breathe a sigh of relief before a pained cry broke his concentration and he was forcibly reminded that his was not the only battle raging in the area.

He turned quickly and took in the sight with a laden stomach.

Ahsoka was on her knees and her right arm was hanging uselessly at her side. Irregular hisses of hurt were escaping her almost involuntarily, and the fingers of her left hand were clenching rhythmically. Drops of blood were painting the dirt around her in various, inconsistent splotches and her clothing was tattered and dirtied, but she defiantly kept her face turned towards her advisory.

For his part, Vader stood a few feet from Ahsoka watching her with a wary tilt to his body. The Sith was breathing heavily as well, and his cape had been completely torn to shreds. He watched the man limp over to Ahsoka’s second lightsaber and gingerly pick it up. Both combatants remained in their positions for a few moments before Vader spoke.

“Commander. With me.”

Wearily, Cody trekked over, stopping only briefly to pick up Ahsoka’s other abandoned lightsaber, it had been almost severed into two pieces, before he finished the walk to Vader’s side.

“My Lord.”

Vader cocked his head to the side minutely and Cody wasn’t able to keep from flinching when he realized that a whole section of Vader’s infamous mask had been broken and now had a large piece missing. The sickly golden eye peering out of the fissure stayed locked on his former apprentice with unerring accuracy. He vaguely recalled Obi-Wan once mentioning that the Sith all had yellow eyes, but nothing prepared him for actually witnessing that fact on a face that he could remember having blue ones.

“Commander CC-2224, if you would give these to Agent Tano.”

Vader produced a set of force-null restraints from somewhere in his suit and handed them to him. He looked at the clunky things and closed a hand over them with trepidation. He’d heard of Inquisitors using them before but he’d never actually seen a pair. They looked exactly as uncomfortable as he imagined they would. He took them and approached Ahsoka cautiously. From close up, Cody could see why the other force-user wasn’t fighting anymore; there was a gash on her left arm that looked deep enough to have severed tendons rendering the limb all but useless and one of her legs was clearly broken. He felt bile rise up in his throat, but worse than that was the expression that ghosted over her face as she gazed up at him.

Recognition. Pure astonishment. And then the first inklings of hope.

“Cody?”
The Togruta’s voice warbled with uncertainty, and Cody had to tighten his grip on the restraints to keep his hands from wavering. No doubt, Vader was watching them closely and he couldn’t afford to appear weak or torn about his duty. That didn’t make it any easier to see the confusion glazing over her eyes as it seemed to occur to her that he was still wearing stormtrooper gear and wasn’t necessarily someone she could rely on anymore.

He leaned over her prone body and wanted desperately to reassure her, offer her a comforting word or two, but in the presence of Vader he kept his mouth shut. Despite that, he kept his helmet at face level in a vain attempt to meet her eyes. Her stare bored into the blank face of the mask as if she could see right through to the familiar face beneath. Decisively, he clasped the manacles over her wrists.

She gasped, her whole body contorting into itself for a moment before her eyes rolled back into her head and she collapsed at his feet. The former Jedi stepped up to stand beside Cody’s crouched body and he heard the faint whirr of a lightsaber deactivating.

“Commander Yulish assures me that they have been able to trap our other quarry in a defensible bunker-like structure only a negatable distance from here,” Vader said, tone carefully devoid of all emotion, (and Cody had to close his eyes and center himself because now that his helmet was broken beyond repair, Cody could recognize Skywalker’s voice and it tore at something vulnerable inside his chest) “Tano will sleep for a while still – the null device takes time to be acclimated too and we are needed elsewhere.”

“As you say, Lord Vader,” Cody replied dully past the rush of blood in his ears.

“As you say, Lord Vader,” the other man continued, “And tell him to be careful – she’s damaged enough as it is.”

“Yes, sir.”

Vader lingered for an instant and then moved on. Cody watched the black boots of his commander walk away and he felt a blaze of hatred so intense it seemed to engulf his entire being in a kind of hot rage that raced all through his nerve endings. In front of him, Vader paused for a second, hand twitching at his side. In that moment Cody almost wanted the other man to find him out, to turn around and face him. He wanted to demand answers, to scream and fight and draw blood more than he had ever wanted anything else in his life. His fury was almost a living thing lashing out at Vader with a savagery that frightened the more rational side of him.

But as quickly as the tide of his hurt rose, it ebbed into an exhausted weariness. He felt torn to pieces and totally drained of life. His entire body ached, his heart was ravaged and his head felt almost hallow. His mental shields came to him easily and as soon as they locked into place, he idly noticed that Vader had at sometime continued from his earlier hesitation. There was no way that he hadn’t noticed Cody’s mood – not with how sensitive Vader was to the force – and incredibly, he hadn’t been cut down by a blood red lightsaber.

Strange. Now, if only he could make himself care about it one way or the other. He suspected that when his faculties came back online that he would be cursing himself ruthlessly, but at the moment he was in a state of blissful apathy.

Well, he stood shakily, eyes still fixed on Ahsoka’s passed out body, apathy for himself maybe.

“You,” he gestured to the nearest intact trooper, “Lord Vader needs this prisoner transported.”

The stormtrooper saluted and secured his blaster to his hip before reaching down to pick up
Ahsoka’s form. Her limbs fishtailed out awkwardly and the broken leg flopped painfully against the trooper’s armor. Cody had to fight the urge to grab Ahsoka’s body protectively, but as the lead Commander it wasn’t his job to do something that would be seen as menial. He settled for scolding the trooper.

“Be careful! Lord Vader doesn’t want her to sustain anymore injuries. If any occur you’ll be explaining why to him personally, trooper,” he snapped and then smiled to himself when the trooper’s body froze in fear at just the thought of having to speak to Vader.

From there, Ahsoka was handled like she was made of spun glass.

Cody called the surviving men to move out and follow Vader once again. He attempted to keep his eyes forward and away from her, but every few yards or so, he found he couldn’t help but let his gaze roam over her still form; checking for something he might have missed earlier in his distress. But, thankfully, her breathing remained steady.

_I’m sorry_, he thought on repeat, familiar melancholy anchoring into his own limbs like lead, _I’m so, so sorry_.

Trying to keep himself from breaking down completely, he turned the private comm channel back on to a level he could hear. Yulish and the others had apparently been successful as well, and he wondered if any of his brothers had found out exactly who they had trapped. He thought of Vader’s familiar jawline just visible from the helmet and Ahsoka’s bloodied body and couldn’t imagine how it could get any worse than this.

The first thing he registered once the noise had been brought up to discernible levels, was Boil’s agitated voice saying his name harshly.

“Cody – Cody, damn you –”

“It’s no good, Boil,” Walker said, “He can’t talk to us.”

“Fucking, karking, shit, bastard –”

“Calm the karking hell down,” Sero said in light of Boil’s tirade, but his voice was pretty rough as well.

“Calm?!”

“Boil –”

“Cody,” Crys’ voice shone through and it sounded strange to his ears, like he was containing a whole wealth of emotion, too much to express, “Cody, it’s not good. Okay. You need to know what you’re walking into.”

“Karking shit has gone to all karking hell –”

“Boil, shut up!” Rush’s voice joined the cacophony.

“It’s Senator Amidala, okay? She’s alive, we don’t know how, but she is and she’s here and that’s the political fugitive, it has to be –”

“Karking –”
“If you don’t shut the hell up vod, I will kriffing destroy you the first chance I get, I swear to the force –”

“—and she’s not alone. There’s kids, okay, we saw them before they barricaded the place up –”

“I need to hit something!”

“Shoot that shrub over there, whatever it takes to get your shit together, this is ridiculous, like you’re the only one having to deal with this.”

“—and Cody, Cody, I’m sorry, I really am, but –”

“It’s Rex!” Boil finally burst out with, a growl stitched into his voice, “It’s karking Rex, I know it is. He’s here.”

It was only through sheer force of will that Cody managed to continue walking with only a minimal stutter-step of panic.

_Huh_, he thought hysterically, mind blanking out, _what do you know? I guess it can get worse after all._

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When he and the rest of the dwindled numbers of Vader’s escort company arrived on the scene, they were greeted with a scene of well structured chaos. Yulish and the other high ranking officers had set up a kind of siege parameter and appeared to be discussing what their next move should be. If this was a normal raid on a rebellion safe house, then they would have already broken down the barricade that the would-be prisoners had put together and killed the people deemed unimportant. As it was, none of them knew where exactly Senator Amidala was hidden in the network of the house, so they were left with trying to think of a more delicate way of gaining access.

_(Senator Amidala, of all the kriffing people. He should’ve guessed, the minute he realized who Vader was, it should’ve been obvious; the list of fugitives he would venture to personally capture had to be very short. But like the rest of the galaxy he’d thought her long dead – maybe that should’ve been a clue as well. The dead rising from their perceived graves was becoming a familiar pattern as of late.)_

Their presence didn’t go unnoticed for very long, and they were quickly brought into the fold of the circle of officers. Cody at least got to see the uncomfortable looks of shock that covered their faces when they realized that they could see a glimpse of the famed Sith’s real face through the broken helmet. Forge actually flinched the first time Vader spoke and it became obvious that the suit and mask had somehow covered up his speaking voice with an unrecognizable low bass. That none of the outward trappings were real in the slightest.

There was a metaphor to be had at that; one that Obi-Wan would no doubt love.

But like good soldiers, they ignored the differences and the unsettling strangeness of realizing that Vader was an actual human being and not just some kind of horrible concept that the Emperor had breathed into existence by virtue of his pure malevolence. Yulish managed to bring herself out of her haze quickly, and saluted the man hastily.

“Lord Vader, we have surrounded the area and are attempting to flush the fugitives out.”
“And were you able to count how many of them there are?”

There were some sheepish looks thrown around at that. Again, Yulish answered.

“We aren’t sure exactly. We know that there was a woman, two children and one…” here she trailed off briefly and spared Cody a glance before continuing, more uncomfortable, “…and one clone, but there was enough returning fire that we believe there might be more rebels inside the bunker that stayed hidden.”

Rex, Cody thought sorrowfully, but kept his body language contained at the news. Vader, though, looked as though he’d been struck by lightning.

“Two children? You’re sure?”

Yulish nodded. “A boy and girl.”

Cody, who had found himself standing on Vader’s exposed side, watched the force-user’s visible eye close as if in pain. And it occurred to Cody to wonder whose children they were and when he did, the answer became obvious. That Cody did have trouble not reacting too. Because son of a sith-loving bastard, this impossible situation was becoming even more entangled than he could have ever imagined. Then any of them could have predicted at it’s onset.

A deep-rooted helplessness settled over him. He looked over at the situation with new eyes and didn’t like anything that he was seeing. The troopers were uneasy and many of them looked to be a loud noise away from opening fire indiscriminately, his fellow officers clearly sensed that there was something that they were missing and he could feel Vader shaking from the effort to keep his emotions in check. And just a few hundred yards away, there were people trapped in that bunker that he loved and had grown to care about and behind him another of those people had already fallen in combat. It became very obvious to him as he stared out over the mass of troopers and the uncompromising safehouse that he literally had no idea what to do. This was nothing that they had prepared for. Nothing that could be prepared for.

He took a deep breath and tuned back into the officer’s extended explanations once it filtered through to him that they had begun speaking again.

“—only so much we can do, sir. Unless you authorize the use of force,” Vequell remarked.

Cody looked at the ring of officers and realized that that was exactly what they expected Vader to do. And why not? In what other situation would he hesitate? Still, if he knew Vader – and he didn’t, not really; but he had known Skywalker exceptionally well and for all the differences between the two, the infamous temper was virtually unchanged – then even the suggestion that they put his lover and children in harm’s way was a recipe for a bloody, painful death. The fact that they didn’t know what they were proposing wouldn’t matter one whit to Vader.

Sure enough, the large frame drew itself up to a rigid stance that harkened Cody back to endless disagreements between Skywalker and Obi-Wan about all manner of things that the two fought about. During the war, he and the other vod’e would leave them too it; but here and now, actual bloodshed was bound to happen and Cody knew that – for all that he disliked his colleagues and the man Vader had become – infighting would just muddle already treacherous waters. He needed to stunt Vader’s anger and quickly.

He spotted the trooper he’d entrusted with Ahsoka’s care standing over her prone body nervously a near distance away and the beginnings of a plan began unfolding in his mind. He turned to Vader and kept his voice low and practical all the while ignoring the burgeoning panic that he saw creeping
onto the face of Vequell as he and the others noted that Vader was Not Happy with them.

“My Lord,” he said, “I may have an idea.”

Some of the wind-up in Vader’s shoulders relaxed at just the sound of his voice, and Cody thanked the force that he could use the automatic familiarity that Vader had for him to actually diffuse some of the man’s tension.

“I’m listening,” Vader said menacingly, but he didn’t look away from Vequell’s sweating face.

“We have Fulcrum,” he continued, “The fugitives in the safehouse were probably counting on her to keep us occupied – or even kill us. She and the assassin droids had to be the first line of defense against an attack from someone of your ilk. Perhaps if they were made aware of her capture they might surrender willingly.”

It was underhanded and cruel, but he had a difficult time imagining Rex staying behind safe, barricaded lines if he was confronted with Ahsoka’s defeat and broken figure. Senator Amidala too, if he was honest; he thought they had become friends during the war and he knew that Ahsoka had always admired the older woman. She was principled in a way that the Jedi and the war had never quite managed to tame; her compassion was overwhelming, but it was also a weakness. Vader might be a monster, but even he wouldn’t harm his family (he didn’t think, please, force, let that be true), so aside from her children’s health, he couldn’t see the former Senator just letting Ahsoka suffer alone. And as far as Cody was concerned that was the important thing; if they were going to be captured – and at this point, that was an inevitability, not a vague possibility – then making sure that they were together and as unharmed as was reasonable would make whatever rescue the rebellion could organize that much easier. And hopefully, Senator Amidala would demand Rex’s life be spared in return for her cooperation as well. And Vader had always done what Amidala had wanted when she put her foot down. Hopefully, that hadn’t changed.

There was too much of this plan that lay on hope and the memories he had of a man that may well have been smothered to death under the dark side for him to be comfortable with it, but it was the only thing he could think of that might spare everyone.

Vader’s golden gaze turned to him and he caught the faint corner of Vader’s lips quirking upward. “I agree,” he finally said as he apparently processed what Cody was saying.

Then Vader looked out over the bunker, and to Cody’s horror, he kept talking. “It could be beneficial to remind them who exactly they’re facing. You said that one of the rebels is a clone?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Yulish acknowledged with a wary tone.

“Commander, take off your helmet.”

Cody’s heart stopped in his chest. “Sir?”

“Your helmet. Off.”

Reluctantly, Cody did as he was asked. Once the helmet was in his hands, Vader gestured for it and when Cody handed it over, he in turn passed it to Forge, who looked down at it like it was carrying some kind of disease. Cody couldn’t help the frown that pulled at his face.

“My Lord, what –”

And then he went quiet.
And then, in complete disbelief, Cody watched as Vader reached up and took his own helmet off.

Vader stared at the black mask with a strange, almost blank look on his now bare face and then foisted the broken thing onto a stunned Vequell. He gave an order for Vequell and Forge to look after the helmets, but the words were mostly just background noise that he heard from a distance while his eyes took in Vader’s familiar features.

Vader’s dark blonde hair was cut short enough that it reminded him of the first year of the war, before it turned into the shaggy mess of loose curls it became later, and his eyes were matching pools of gold, but the once healthy glow of his skin was muted and pale (probably from all of that time under the mask). There was a long healed lattice of burn scars that ran along the right side of Vader’s neck and disappeared into the suit. And there were age lines now both on his forehead and around his eyes, that accompanied the scar that bisected his upper face and had faded even further from sight, but it was him. It was undeniably Anakin Skywalker that stood in front of him.

He hadn’t even realized that a piece of him still hadn’t really believed that it could be true until now.

Vader took a deep breath and let it out slowly, savoring the air. “I admit, I miss breathing non-recycled air,” he said with of wry humor and Cody actually felt a pang of renewed sadness that this is what had happened to someone he had thought so highly of once.

“Lord Vader,” Yulish said with almost breathless confusion.

“Commander, make sure that the stormtroopers know not to fire until I give the order to do so,” Vader relayed casually, as if his unmasking was barely worth commenting on, “CC-2224 and I are going to give the rebels something to think about. If anyone disobeys my first order I will not be in a particularly forgiving mood afterwards, am I understood?”

Yulish opened her mouth to respond, then seemed to think better of it and bowed slightly instead. “It will be done, my Lord.”

Vader turned towards Cody and made a ‘follow me’ gesture then strode off in the direction of the trooper guarding Ahsoka. He did so without any real thought, but as he moved behind the former Jedi Knight, he covertly reached up and pulled the auxiliary comm out of his ear and shoved it under his vambrace before the Sith could see and inquire about it.

They stopped in front of the trooper, whose body lines basically screamed his discomfort, and Vader questioned: “She hasn’t woken at all, has she?”

“No, sir,” the trooper squeaked.

“Hmm…2224, bring her; we’re going to the front of the lines. They need to be able to see her condition – and us – unobstructed.”

Wordlessly, Cody secured his blaster to his hip and then reached down and gingerly picked Ahsoka up underneath her knees and shoulders. Once she was evenly distributed in his arms, he looked back at Vader. The force-user had that opaque, disquieting expression adorning his face again; as if he was staring at a ghost that he didn’t quite know how to handle. He didn’t say anything, just swiveled with a flourish and led Cody and his precious cargo through the center of the stormtroopers, who Cody could hear whispering to each other frantically as they passed. When they emerged from the behind the lines, Vader took a few deliberate steps beyond the protection of the battalion, hands out in front of him, as if that made him less of a threat. Cody stopped at Vader’s flank and waited for any
further instructions.

When they weren’t immediately fired on, Cody knew that the Senator had seen who they were carrying.

“Senator Amidala,” Vader’s voice rose over the eerie silence that had blanketed the stormtroopers behind them and drilled into Cody’s mind, “You can’t fight this. We have Tano. We have the planet monitored. There’s nowhere to run too.”

That statement was greeted with only the swirling breeze. Vader huffed out an irritated breath and continued: “This doesn’t have to be painful. Surrender willingly and you and your…friends will be treated accordingly.”

Again, quiet reigned over the open space between the bunker and where he and Vader stood exposed. In his arms, Ahsoka twitched. He glanced down at her, and saw her face twisted into a pained frown, but she remained unconscious. He looked back to Vader, and the man’s face was molded into a grimace, with a bright streak of fury creeping in along the corners.

“Don’t be stupid, Senator,” Vader intoned with a spike of forboding that had Cody’s nerve endings lighting up, “We will break this safehouse of yours open, and I can order every one of your compatriots dead if I want. I can leave Tano here to rot alone and without medical attention I doubt she’ll live long.”

Cody dug his fingertips into Ahsoka’s muscle hard enough to bruise and then had to talk himself into relaxing his grip while offering up silent apologies to the woman. He knew that Vader had orders to return Ahsoka to the Emperor and so he was unlikely to follow through on the threat; knew that it was a ploy to make Amidala give up, but it didn’t make the words any easier to hear.

“It’s up to you, Senator,” Vader ended with, his tone reading that he didn’t care which path she chose to take.

For a few breathless moments, there was nothing. Then the heavy sound of mechanized locks disengaging broke the tense atmosphere. A petite figure stepped out from behind the blocky door and then walked forward until the muted rays of sunlight left in the sky put her into contrast enough to make out her face.

Padme Amidala (Naberrie? Cody had never quite figured out which one was her actual surname) hadn’t changed much more than her former paramour. Her glossy, dark hair was piled into a series of intricate, but functional braids that were gathered and pinned at the back of her head and the regal authority and competence that Cody had always associated with her hung around her like a well-worn shroud. She was every bit as stunningly beautiful as Cody remembered, and what signs of age she did have – faint wisps of silver streaked in her hair, only a hint of lines around her make-up free face – only added to her; gave her a level of gravitas that she had tried to project during the war, but that her youth had made impossible to take at face value. Even the grave, resolute expression she was wearing was familiar from the holonews’ broadcasts of her speeches in the Senate.

She stopped close enough to speak and be heard, but far enough away that neither of them could lay actual, physical hands on her.

“Vader.”

Vader smiled, a razor-sharp glint of teeth. “Padme.”

In the vein of diplomacy and politics that she had once ruled, her face kept its neutral facade as if
being faced with Anakin Skywalker’s alterego meant very little in the long run. “Before our surrender, I would ask for considerations.”

Vader tilted his head and then made a ‘go on’ movement with his hands. “And what might those ‘considerations’ be?”

Her tone managed to be both deferential and dry; it was the exact same one that Obi-Wan used to employ when he was in the middle of tense negotiations, “I ask that my companions be spared; everything they’ve done has been out of loyalty and friendship for me and I won’t have them suffer at the hands of the Empire for such.”

Vader stared at her for a moment and then nodded easily enough. “You have my word; anything else?”

The bitter twist to her mouth showed them exactly what she thought Vader’s ‘word’ was worth, but was forced to agree with it anyway. “My children are to stay with me at all times – I don’t want them alone with your subordinates.”

Or you, he heard in the spaces between her words and judging by the brief, furious look that overtook Vader’s face, he knew it as well. Impressively though, he did nothing else in light of the demand and reluctantly nodded his acceptance of the term.


Amidala casually rose an eyebrow, maintaining her graceful poise and Vader’s petulance made it stand out even more than it otherwise would have. “That’s all. In we are in agreement of the terms?”

“We are.”

“No I formally surrender to you, Lord Vader,” as she said the words, one of her arms raised and she waved it briefly, which was apparently a signal of some kind to the others still in the bunker because the door opened again and several people joined her outside.

His eyes were drawn to one person in particular. Boil was right, Rex was there – the first person who emerged from the bunker actually – and despite the greying beard now adorning his face – he was instantly recognizable to Cody. He was extremely uncomfortable (understandable on all levels, they weren’t used to surrender) and there was a fierce scowl on his face that spoke volumes of his displeasure at the situation, but his loyalty to his former General’s love appeared absolute. A number of – he assumed – rebels followed him with their hands empty and raised, and then two smaller figures darted out from behind Rex’s sturdy body and rushed over to Amidala.

“Mother!” The boy cried as he barreled into her side. He clutched at her clothing with wide eyes, as if to reassure himself that she was unharmed. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, my darling,” she answered him, her face finally softening from its forced diplomacy, and ran her hand through his blonde hair soothingly.

The boy then turned to Vader, frowned and stationed himself in front of his mother in a protective stance. At his side, the girl appeared and held herself with the same bearing that her mother exuded. Neither child was very tall (Bly’s daughter had been taller and all three of them had to be about the same age; they had obviously inherited their mother’s stature), but it was almost eerie looking at tiny versions of Amidala and Skywalker standing there. He glanced at Vader and saw a hastily hid look of complete loss on his face before he rallied; how strange would it be for him, confronted with his children (twins? They must be.) for the first time and know that they saw you as a threat?
“And who are you two?” He asked, keeping his voice calm and measured, Cody watched as Amidala put her hands on their shoulders as if to have a handle to wrench them away from Vader if it was needed.

It was the girl who replied: “That’s none of your concern.”

They were obviously repeated words; something she had no doubt heard her mother say before, but the way they were delivered made Cody fight a grin. Whereas Amidala had probably spoken with a cool disregard like a true politician, her daughter’s words blazed with indignation.

“Yeah!” The boy agreed with his sister and then said something extremely rude in Mando’a that did make Cody snort out loud helplessly.

Vader twitched and then his face fell into a carefully bland expression. “Commander Yulish,” he called and the woman in question jogged over to their group.

“My Lord?”

“Call Admiral Poole and arrange for a transport shuttle to meet us. We need to return to the ship as quickly as possible.”

“Of course, my Lord.”

Yulish did as ordered and wandered away to gather a few troopers to help her with her task and then Vader turned to him.

“2224.”

Cody stood at attention and became uncomfortably aware of the eyes now watching him. “My Lord?”

“Give Tano to them,” Vader said and then made an abrupt turn away from the scene in front of them, “We may as well keep them in one space for now. Then follow me, we have things to discuss.”

As if that wasn’t the most ominous thing that Cody had ever heard in his life. “Yes, my Lord.”

Hardening his heart and spine, he faced the group of rebels with as clear a look as he could. Surrounded by stormtroopers and other Imperial officers, he couldn’t break character overtly to let them know he was their ally. Unsurprisingly, it was Rex who approached him and held out his arms. His brother was watching him closely with grim acceptance, and there was a subtle tremor going through his body. Amidala’s mouth was pressed together tightly, reigning in her own reactions.

“What happened to her?” She questioned.

Cody carefully transferred Ahsoka to Rex’s waiting arms, making sure not to jostle her broken leg more than necessary. He answered the former Queen without looking away from the Togruta.

“Vader happened.”

Rex startled at the anger he couldn’t completely hide in his voice. He eyed Cody warily and pulled Ahsoka’s body close to his chest. “2224?” He asked stiltedly.

“Rex,” he replied lowly.

Rex blinked and took a step toward him involuntarily. “What—”
“Not here,” he verbally waved the confusion away. He glanced over at Amidala. “Senator.”

“Commander,” she acknowledged quietly, but there was a warm undertone to the rank. He knew he could rely on her to be discrete and figure out the more obvious points without further explanation.

He let himself take one last lingering look at Rex and Ahsoka before he spun around and followed Vader away from the troupe of prisoners. He passed Yulish and the group of stormtroopers on the way and made sure to stay focused on Vader’s back and not turn to look at his friends one more time.

He would see them again. He believed it. He had too. It was either that or go insane.

And if there was one thing he didn’t have time for, it was to go insane. There were too many counting on him.

His gaze swept upward when he realized that Vader had stopped a fair distance from the rest of the troopers. Normally it wouldn’t be far enough for real privacy, but with Vader involved he had to believe that everyone was going out of their way to stay away from notice. He stopped his own march and faced the former Jedi. It was the first time facing Vader fully since the revelation and unmasking and it was every bit as disconcerting as he would have imagined it to be if he had had the time to do so. Vader observed him with trepidation, arms crossed over his chest and golden eyes taking in Cody’s face. He waited for the gauntlet to fall.

“I’m going to put you in charge of watching them when we board the *Tenacity.*”

Well. That wasn’t what he had expected.

Vader watched him and he just nodded. “As you wish, my Lord.”

Vader then pinned his stare on Cody with a sharp intensity. “I expect you to take care of my wife and children, Commander. I’m trusting you to.”

Cody couldn’t quite hide his surprise at that. “I—I’m honored, my Lord.” In the confines of his mind he thought, *Wife? When did that happen?*

Vader moved to brush past him and rejoin their battalion, but he stopped by Cody’s side and kept his voice low – just between them – and then murmured with a strange kind of cruel amusement:

“You’re a good man, Cody. Just like Obi-Wan always said.”

Then the other man continued on his walk and left Cody to stand there, dumbstruck.

*What the hell was that supposed to mean?*
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Let me apologize for the wait; guys it's been a hell of a time. I was without a computer at all for basically three weeks and RL decided to be hellish for a while too. Hopefully, this will help in my groveling. As always, your comments and love are my lifeblood!

Almost positive that there are errors here - I'll edit it better later; right now I just want it posted.

Cody did his level best to not stare at Vader’s back continuously as they went with the transport to the Tenacity. He also tried to avoid looking at any of their newly minted hostages. Or any of his brothers.

All in all, it was an awkward ride back.

They were greeted by Poole when they returned and the man’s look of unfettered astonishment at seeing Vader’s bare face and the near catatonic disbelief that flashed over his features when Senator Amidala walked right past him casually, like the whole thing was just a routine boarding, would’ve been amusing literally any other time. Instead, the recognition that Poole displayed for both Vader and their guests make him even more on edge then he already was. Which, up to that point, he hadn’t thought possible – but what did he know.

“I take it the mission was a success?” Poole questioned dazedly.

Vader stared at him. “It was.”

“I’m sure the Emperor will be thrilled, my Lord.”

Vader quirked a brow as Cody tried not to look too invested in where the prisoners were being led away. “Make it absolutely clear, Admiral, that anyone who so much as looks at my family in a way I dislike will wish dearly that they hadn’t.”

Poole’s eyes widened further. “Family?”

“Is that a problem, Admiral?”

“No, sir,” Poole replied instantly, but the bewildered facial expression he was wearing didn’t abate in the slightest, “I can have my best men watch them.”

“No need,” Vader answered off-handedly, eyes already trained on where Amidala had stood a few moments ago, “I’ve already tasked the Commander with the job. I have his full confidence that nothing will happen to them in his care.”

Poole turned to him, but his dark eyes bounced between Vader and Cody and then narrowed abruptly. He bowed, but when he looked back at Vader there was a banked hatred that flared to life briefly on his face that caught Cody completely off-guard. The Admiral’s voice revealed none of this, and his features smoothed over quickly enough that Cody was left wondering if he had imagined the whole thing.
“As you wish, my Lord. If there’s anything I can provide for your family, then I am at your disposal.”

“Chart a course to Coruscant,” Vader said without inflection, paying only the minimum of attention to his subordinate, “The Emperor is waiting.”

“Sir,” Poole murmured, turned and immediately began giving out orders to the nearest of his staff.

“With me, 2224,” Vader said and then followed the path that Cody had watched Amidala disappear too. As they left the area, Cody swore that he could feel the daggers that Poole was aiming at his back like they were made of steel.

The winding trail took Cody to the VIP suites that the Tenacity used to house dignitaries and high-ranking Empire officials when they were sent on ‘diplomatic’ missions. He wasn’t surprised to see that Vader had claimed the most spacious of the suites for himself. Nor was he especially thrilled to find himself actually led to the man’s quarters. The room was sparsely decorated, (Cody’s gaze stopped momentarily on the cache of parts and pieces of machines strewn about on one of the couches; how many times had he seen Skywalker working on various projects in the downtime between missions? He tore his eyes from the familiar sight angrily – how dare Vader still have holdover traits from when Cody knew him) and the main adornment – at the moment – was Amidala herself; figure braced in the middle of the living area with a defiant expression on her face. The children were no where in sight.

“Where are the children?” Vader asked upon realizing their absences. Amidala squared her shoulders and stared him down.

“I gave them the guest room, I hope you don’t mind. It’s been a long day and they’ve been through a lot.”

Vader peered at Amidala then casually pulled off his gloves as he stalked around her stationary body and dropped them onto the glass serving table beside her.

“Do they know who I am?”

Amidala rose her own eyebrow imperiously. “You’re wearing an awful lot of black and have a legion of stormtroopers at your beck and call. It’s not difficult to figure out.”

Vader stopped and faced Amidala with a mutinous expression. “Do they know who I am?”

“They know –”

“Answer me!”

Amidala flinched at the roar and Cody had to curb the involuntary stutter-step that he took in her direction. Amidala recovered her poise almost immediately.

“Of course, they don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” Amidala said incredulously, “You must be joking. I’m not going to tell them that their father is –” She stopped talking.

Vader waited for her to finished the thought and when she didn’t, he took a step towards her’ yellow eyes flickering like hellfire. “Well? Go on. That their father is what?”
“A monster.”

Vader clenched a fist at the matter-of-fact answer. “I am not a –”

“You tried to kill me!” Amidala yelled, her composure finally breaking. With a quick glance at the closed door behind her, she lowered her voice to a fierce whisper, “If it hadn’t been for Obi-Wan, I would be dead. Maybe they would be too.”

“I wasn’t trying to –”

“Months, Anakin,” she interrupted his defensive tone again with a deadly calm, “It took months for the healers to fix the damage you did. Months before I was strong enough to hold my children without fear of dropping them. Before I could feed them myself. I still have nightmares.”

“Padme.”

“I have a difficult time watching Ahsoka train with her lightsabers. Extreme heat can give me panic attacks. I won’t even say how I reacted the first time Luke tried to communicate with me with just the force. You did that, Anakin. Not Palpatine. Not the stormtroopers. Not the Inquisitors. You.”

“They were poisoning you against me,” Vader said, the faintest tremor of emotion running through his voice.

“Who was, Anakin?” Amidala asked, furious, “The Jedi Council? Obi-Wan? Did you know that he knew about us? He knew and he said nothing to anyone. So, who exactly was such a threat?”

Vader looked stunned. “He knew?”

Amidala threw her hands up in exasperation. “Yes, Anakin! He knew – we were not, it seems, the height of discretion.”

Cody very carefully looked beyond both Amidala and Vader after that statement.

“No,” Vader said lowly, and Cody glanced back at him at the thin thread of something that painted the Sith’s voice; those unnerving eyes were darting back and forth in his head as if searching through his own memories for confirmation, “He was just like the others. He wouldn’t have let us be together. Not after the war was done. He wouldn’t have understood.”

Amidala actually rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes, obviously. Obi-Wan couldn’t possibly understand what it was like to be in love.” Here, Amidala flashed her gaze over to Cody, who felt his heart physically stop beating. What? Why was she looking at him? He hadn’t been that obvious, had he? Which, when he thought about it, was probably the exact thing that Amidala and Vader had thought. Karking hell.

Thankfully, Vader was too preoccupied to notice either Amidala or Cody’s reactions. Or, more accurately, Cody’s internal warning klaxon firing at full blast.

“Satine.”

Amidala didn’t answer and he felt himself relax at Vader’s assumption. Still, it didn’t erase his confusion at Amidala’s look. Was that actually meant to pertain to him or was she just glancing at him, trying to gauge his reaction to their talking about Obi-Wan in general? Vader’s face abruptly twisted into a hateful visage that pulled all of Cody’s attention away from Amidala’s curious words.

“Then he deliberately kept us apart. If he knew then he redrew his support on purpose. Out of spite.
Or, or to teach me a lesson. Like when he and the council abandoned Ahsoka.”

“Well,” Amidala’s tone was practically frozen, “At least he never tried to kill her.”

Vader and Amidala stared at each other from the negligible distance of the lounge in a tense quiet. After a long moment in which Cody felt uncomfortably like he was intruding on a private moment and was beginning to wish he would be jettisoned to avoid it; Vader sat back on his heels and his face smoothed out. Amidala’s body tensed at the change of mood, understandably wary.

“What did you tell them about me then?” He asked, bringing them back to the original inquiry.

Amidala lowered the line of her shoulders. “I told them the truth. That their father was a great Jedi. A Hero of the War with the Separatists. That I loved him deeply and that he loved them.”

Vader regarded her with a curiously blank face. “And?”

“And that the Emperor killed him.”

Vader clenched and unclenched his hands in quick succession while working on regulating his harsh breathing. “I suggest,” he said finally, barely hidden fury buried in the words, “That you correct that mistake by dinner.”

“If I don’t?” Amidala bravely asked.

Vader stepped close to her – scarcely a nose away from her face. He leaned in to her ear and the gentle whisper he used to speak was too soft for Cody to make out, but Amidala’s head reared back from whatever it was like Vader had reached out and hit her. Her eyes searched his face for a handful of brief seconds.

“Yes, or no Padme.”

“Fine,” she gritted out.

A razor thin smile chased itself across Vader’s face and he took a considerable step backward out of Amidala’s space. Cody consciously released his grip on his blaster. If he was going to guard the former Senator, he’d have to remember not to be so visibly concerned for her safety around Vader.

“Commander.”

“My Lord?”

Vader turned to him. “Stay here until I return. You remember what I told you?”

Yes, even if I still don’t know what the kriff I was meant to take from it, he thought. “Yes.”

“Good,” the former Jedi glanced over at Amidala and waved a careless hand at the room, “Make yourself at home. It’ll be a while before we reach Coruscant.”

“Of course, husband,” she answered venomously.

Vader sneered and then swept out of the room. Amidala began trembling the moment he left, as if his exit was all she had been waiting for to fall to pieces. The harsh silence of the area broke when she let out a frustrated cry, turned to her left, grabbed the nearest object (an engine part? Cody wasn’t proficient in non-weaponized machinery) and hurtled it at a hanging mirror bolted to the wall across from her. The mirror shattered on impact.
“Bastard,” Amidala’s bleeding voice uttered in the wake of the violence.

He couldn’t have agreed more.

* * *

“Perhaps you should rest Senator,” Cody said after watching Amidala pace the length of the room for the fifth time.

At first, Amidala had collapsed onto the couch in a heap, like all the strings that had kept her battling with Vader had been cut now that she was alone. There she sat for close to an hour; the room layered with a contemplative silence that Cody was loathe to disturb. Then, newly determined, she left the lounge area and glanced into the room that housed her children with a troubled expression gracing her face. She closed the door again, and then began her current pacing.

The woman in question ceased her movement and looked over at Cody. With a barely audible huff, the petite former politician moved over to the chair that put her directly across from Cody and held his eyes long enough to make him distinctly uncomfortable. He made a restless, cut off movement of unease, and it brought a genuine grin to Amidala’s face and she relaxed her body back into the chair.

“It’s been a long time since anyone’s called me Senator.”

Cody grimaced internally. Yeah, he probably shouldn’t be giving her the respect the title offered either now that he thought about it. “What do you want me to call you?”

Amidala’s grin softened at the question. “Padme is fine, Commander.”

“Padme,” he repeated, but he’d obviously made a face at the idea of using her given name because Amidala actually laughed out loud. It was a nice laugh.

“Well, try at least,” she said.

He nodded and then a more muted expression brushed over Amidala’s face and the lightheartedness died away. She took a breath and leveled him with a piercing look.

“Coruscant. That’s where we’re going?”

“Yes.”

“To the Emperor?”

“Yes.”

A terrible resignation clouded over her eyes at the confirmation and she darted a look at the closed door again. Cody wasn’t surprised and he remembered, abruptly, that during Amidala’s rant earlier that she had mentioned that her son had communicated with her through the force; which put a new benchmark in the whole worrying narrative. Considering who their father was, force-sensitivity was probably a foregone conclusion even before they had been born; but what would the Emperor do with one (or two, the girl might be sensitive too) more Skywalker to manipulate? The fear Cody had felt for the family and his friends rocketed into uncharted territory at just how awful this could all turn out to be.

His own fear was reflected in Amidala’s eyes when he met her gaze again.

“Commander,” she began, voice quiet, “is he…I mean, Vader, would he…”
Cody wondered how much information the rebellion really had about Vader. Was it easier or harder for the ones who looked at Vader with the image of Anakin Skywalker in their minds? He thought about the horrified moment of realization he’d had on the battlefield just hours ago; the crushing feeling of desolation and then the overwhelming anger that replaced it when he had a moment to breathe. How had Amidala – who loved him fiercely, enough to hide that love when she refused to hide any of her other beliefs – dealt with watching Vader terrorize the galaxy? How had Obi-Wan felt watching the man he helped raise and loved like a brother, like the only family he had, fall to the dark side and use everything that Obi-Wan had taught him to hurt others? Or Ahsoka, force, Ahsoka…Rex…he almost couldn’t imagine the betrayal.

He had a meeting with Celese once, and she had told him that hope was the foundation of the rebellion. That it had to be with the odds that were against them. That having that faith die would be the doom of their resistance. Any dent that they could put in the Empire’s armor – not matter how insignificant – bought them time and extended that ability to hope for someone out there who might have otherwise lost it. He agreed with the sentiment, but most of the rebellion didn’t know who Vader was. Hadn’t watched one of their own – maybe their most important in raw power and heart – turn against them. How does one retain hope in the wake of that?

What happened to the rebellion if that hope turned to poison and ruined its leaders?

Cody tried to think of a way to answer Amidala without giving too much away. He wasn’t sure how much of the room was recorded, but it stood to reason that it had at least a minimal amount of security to it. Which, in turn, hindered his ability to be completely open with her or her with him.

“I think, ma’am,” he said eventually, voice as dry as he could make it, “that Lord Vader rarely makes threats he doesn’t mean.”

Amidala held his eyes and then nodded. “That’s what I thought. What time is it, Commander?”

“Almost 1900 hours, ma’am.”

“Well, then,” she rose from her chair with a grace that belied the unbalanced nature of her immediate future and he felt a moment of unbridled affection and respect for this woman who could appear this unflappable in the midst of what had to be her worst nightmare, “I don’t have much time left before he returns, I imagine.”

“Probably not, ma’am.”

She walked over to the door and paused beside Cody. They were close enough that if there were listening devices nearby they wouldn’t be able to pick up what they said. Probably. “Thank you, Cody,” she whispered and then gripped his wrist for a moment as if to communicate her understanding of his position and the precarious nature of it.

“Padme,” he returned just as quietly for which he was gifted with the quick bloom of her upturned lips before she drifted past him and over to the guest quarters.

He watched her disappear and then let out a breath.

What a kriffing mess.

* * *

When Vader returned an hour later, Padme was still in other room. He told the other man and watched Vader’s shoulders fall in what might have looked like relief on anyone else. He dismissed Cody with the promise of his return the next morning.
He made his way to the commissary and ate a bland meal with a detached exhaustion. He had just moved to dispose of his tray and the remnants of his food when a hand bit into his arm with bruising force. He frowned and whirled to face whoever it was and was greeted with Boil’s livid face.

“Can we talk, Commander?” His brother said caustically.

Well, this is going to be horrible, he thought, but nodded wearily. “Of course.”

“Right this way, then,” Boil continued then practically dragged Cody out of the room, and through the halls to the armory where he was confronted by all of his brothers wearing various expressions of malcontent.

Boil dropped his arm and then went to stand next to a pale faced Rush. He folded his arms over his chest and when Cody didn’t say anything, he made a rude noise and then gestured with his hand angrily.

“Now is not the time to clam up, vod,” he spat, “Talk.”

Cody sighed and ran a hand down his face. “Where do you want me to start?”

“Maybe,” Crys ventured, and his voice was much more contained than Boil’s, but there was a fragility to it that Cody wasn’t used to hearing from any of his brothers, “at the part where Vader is actually General Skywalker.”

“It was a shock to me too,” Cody muttered, and then launched into the saga of how they had been ambushed, the ensuing fight with Ahsoka and Vader’s unmasking.

“So, it is him,” Rush murmured into the tense quiet that coated the room after he had finished, “I mean, we saw, but I still didn’t really believe…”

“Congratulations, Boil,” Cody said weakly, beyond tired, “You were right after all.”

Boil sent him a look that very clearly said fuck you but didn’t comment further on it.

“Now what do we do?” Walker asked, distraught, “They have Ahsoka. They have Rex. Force only knows what Vader-Skywal-Vader is going to do to them.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” Cody replied with regret, “Except hope that the rebellion catches up to us before we reach Coruscant.”

“That’s a shitty plan,” Boil said.

Cody threw him an unimpressed look. “Very helpful.”

“We’re overlooking the obvious problem,” Sero cut in, an uncharacteristic sober quality to his words and tone, “You said you lost control. That Vader might – right this minute – be aware of our involvement in the rebellion. What’s to stop him from throwing us in the cell next to Rex?”

“I can do one better,” Crys responded, “What’s to stop him from just having us executed for treason?”

“Or torture,” Rush continued.

“This is all lovely,” Walker said, glaring at all of them, “But who karking cares. We knew what we were signing up for. We need a plan to ensure that we don’t compromise any effort the rebellion might make to free them.”
He turned to Cody expectedly. “You said Vader wants to watch over Amidala and his children. Can we use that to our advantage?”

“How?” Cody frowned. “There is no advantage here.”

“They’re important, right? The rebellion will be looking for them. Vader just made sure that one of us is always going to be there, if one of us could get assigned to the detainment chamber –”

“Because that won’t be suspicious,” Boil pointed out, “I don’t think Poole is going to let any of us guard Rex, whether he believes we’re loyal to the Empire or not. Too much of a risk.”

“Why does he want you guarding them?” Sero asked Cody, brow furrowed, “It doesn’t make sense, not if he had an idea that we’re traitors.”

“Because he wins either way,” Cody answered, “If he still thinks I’m chipped, then I’m little more than a loyal toady who wouldn’t dream of disobeying him. If I’m not, then I’ll be even more valuable, because then I’ll care. It’s a lose-lose for us.”

“So, we just…wait?” Rush asked, looking at all of them in turn.

“He’ll probably execute us when we get to Coruscant,” Boil hypothesized with a strangely jaunty tone, “Cody’s right. For now, even if we’re not chipped, there are others here we won’t hurt. It’s efficient to use us until we’re a detriment.”

“Have I mentioned lately how much I hate the karking Empire?” Walker offered.

“We just have to wait for the rebellion to find us,” Cody reiterated, “They’ll be here.”

“You hope,” Crys said.

“Do you think the General knew?” Rush asked, voice low, “That General Skywalker betrayed the Jedi?”

“If he survived, this would have killed him,” Boil answered.

Cody closed his eyes and felt sick. Right, he thought with a hysterical tilt, I knew there was something I forget. He cleared his throat and five sets of eyes turned to him.

“Do you remember,” he started, talking directly to Boil, “what I said before we landed on Saleucami?”

Boil looked at him in confusion for a moment, then his eyes cleared and focused intently on him.

“Now I do. Ready to tell us?”

“No,” he answered honestly and then braced himself for the impact his next words were sure to have, “General Kenobi is alive.”

Nothing. Then Sero laughed. “What? Is that supposed to be funny?”

Cody didn’t answer and the longer his silence went on the more frantic the facial expressions on his brothers became.

“I don’t understand,” Rush said, eyes wide, “Alive? Like alive alive?”

“Celese told me on Mustafar before they left,” he whispered hoarsely.
“Why didn’t you say anything?” Crys asked, all of the color leech out of his skin, “That’s…why?”

“You saw me in the Citadel after,” Cody said to Boil, “I wasn’t…it took me awhile before I could believe it. I was practically sleepwalking.”

“And after that?” Walker said, nostrils flaring angrily, “When that wore off, you just didn’t tell us because it was easier? Or, what, exactly?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, heart constricting painfully at the incredulous looks they were giving him, “I don’t…the time between my believing it and this mission was almost nonexistent and with Vader around; I didn’t want to risk all six of us acting like we had lost it. It’s a poor excuse and unfair, but there it is.”

Rush let out a sob and all of them looked at where he had collapsed in a heap on the armory floor. Despite his rough breathing, there was a beatific grin lighting up his features. He looked up at Cody.

“I didn’t kill him,” he said wondrously, “I didn’t kill him.”

The joy in Rush’s voice broke the tense atmosphere of the room and the other four let out their own relief in a wave of tears and muted yelling. Crys crouched down and grabbed Rush into a hug, while Walker began laughing and Sero’s face split into a wide look of unabashed exhilaration. The righteous indignation that had permeated Boil’s frame fell apart and he looked like the weight of a thousand worlds had lifted from his being.

Cody watched his brothers celebrate. Boil approached him after a few minutes and then pulled Cody into an embrace as well. Cody automatically put his hands up and gripped the back of Boil’s armor.

“You’re an asshole,” Boil whispered and Cody laughed, “But I’m happy for you, vod.”

“I’m happy for all of us,” Cody managed to say.

He patted Boil once more and then stepped away from him. Boil narrowed his eyes and then rapped his fingers on Cody’s chest piece like he had before the mission then he pointed right at Cody’s face.

“Don’t be you about this,” he said.

Cody frowned. “What the kriff is that supposed to mean?”

“We,” Boil stressed, “are going to survive this. We are going to help the rebellion save Senator Amidala and all the others. We are finally going to get out of this karking situation. We are going to see the General again, and Bly, and all of our other brothers who made it.”

“Okay?”

Boil looked at the ceiling of the armory like he was asking for strength; Cody was duly insulted.

“Cody,” he began again, “This is the second chance none of us thought we’d get. This is your second chance.”

“I don’t understand.” Cody could actually hear the whine in his voice; why was everyone around him so karking cryptic.

“General Kenobi is alive. Don’t waste this.”

“I don’t –”
“Oh, for – Cody. We, and by we, I mean the entirety of the 212th, watched you pine – yes, pine! Don’t interrupt me! – for years. It got pathetic. Really pathetic.”

“Thanks,” Cody muttered and could feel himself blushing furiously. Boil continued as if he hadn’t spoken at all.

“—and force knows none of us knew what to do about. There were suggestions. Most of them bad; once Waxer –”

“Boil! Get to the point.”

“What I’m saying is this,” Boil said, and his face softened, “Things have changed. The Jedi Order is dead. The Republic is dead. Everything we were created for, everything we fought for, it’s all gone. How much destruction have we watched the Empire create? How much did we help with that before the chips malfunctioned?”

“Boil –”

“Look at how much Senator Amidala has gone through. How much do you think she’d give to have General Skywalker back, as he was? Obi-Wan is alive, vod, don’t waste that.”

Cody blinked. “Are you actually saying that I should tell him that I…how I feel?”

Boil poked at his armor. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

Cody barked out a laugh. “You’re insane.”

“It worked for Bly.”

“Bly,” Cody hissed, “is not me and General Secura is not Obi-Wan.”

“No,” Boil rolled his eyes, “They’re obviously smarter.”

“This is not up for debate,” Cody said desperately.

“Cody,” Boil’s tone booked no argument, “just think about it. Please. How many of us have a chance at that happiness? It’s an insult to what we’ve suffered; to what Senator Amidala has lost not to try. It’s an insult to Waxer.”

Cody wanted to hit him. That was dirty kriffing pool and he knew it. It wasn’t that easy. If he saw Obi-Wan again, and if they hadn’t changed irreparably, and if all the stars in the galaxy aligned, what were the chances that any of his, apparently pathetic, feelings would be returned? Jedi could love, yes, they were all vastly aware of that, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything to him specifically. If he got Obi-Wan in his life again only to lose him to his own complicated feelings, he’d never forgive himself. He looked at Boil’s staunchly resolute expression and sighed to himself.

“Fine,” he said reluctantly, it was better to at least humor him and hope he would drop the whole thing then continue on arguing about it.

Boil poked his armor with more force. “This isn’t over.”

“Force forbid,” he muttered and then winced when Boil hit him harder than necessary on the shoulder.

“Cheer up, vod,” Boil said, walking backwards to where the rest of their group was still regaling each other with nonsensical happiness, “I have a feeling that things might go our way for once.”
Cody thought about Amidala’s heartbreak and Ahsoka’s new bracelets and Rex’s taut capitulation.

*Hope*, Cody thought sardonically, *may it sustain us in our time of need.* He looked out of the nearest porthole at the black of space and sent up a prayer to the force. Tried to imagine the likely reinforcements that the rebellion had probably already sent to retrieve their cargo.

*Please*, he thought, unashamed of the desperate edge to the word, *please don’t let this end badly.*
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

All I can say is that looking for a new job is kind of making me lose it, so I'm unbelievably sorry that it's been this long. I never wanted to have this long a gap between chapters. So, if there's anyone out there still reading; I apologize.*waves white flag*

You guys continue to be awesome and your comments and kudos warm my blackened heart tremendously. Also a shout out to inqorporeal for reccing this fic on Tumblr! To anyone else; my own tumblr is a little bare and totally hockey-orientated at the moment but if anyone wants to join me there's a link in my profile (reluctantcoppercrowds) and hopefully I'll be giving a head's up there when I'm posting from now on. Thanks again, guys, you're the best!

As always all mistakes are mine.

Cody took a step into the ship’s prisoner hold and had to bite off a curse in his mind.

Poole must have decided that safer was better in the case of Rex and Ahsoka, because when he looked around the brig, almost two days after the initial landing on Saleucami, there was a veritable contingency of stormtroopers stationed around the two cells that they were being held in. Overkill definitely; Ahsoka was pacing her cell like a prowling animal, that fierce expression lining her face and the clink of the force inhibitors when they accidentally brushed one another accompanying her on her stilted journey. Still, the manic energy gathered around her body and barely contained fury was clearly enough to intimidate most of the troopers because they were giving the cell as wide a berth as possible in the limited space. Rex, by contrast, was sitting slumped against the wall of the cell across from Ahsoka. Stripped of his armor and weapons; he had his arms crossed angrily with one hand beating an irregular rhythm against his bicep and legs stretched out in front of him. If you didn’t know him you’d assume that he was almost relaxed. Cody thought he looked like he felt naked; a common occurrence for any of the vod’e when they were stripped in enemy territory.

And the presence of this many stormtroopers meant that he couldn’t just order them on an errand and talk at least semi-freely with either of his old comrades. Which. Just. Fuck his life, seriously.

By the time he had squared his shoulders, the nearest troopers had noticed him and pulled together a hasty salute.

“Commander, sir.”

Cody returned the salute and then let his gaze drift over to where Ahsoka had inconspicuously stopped her march and was pressed up against the wall of her cell, watching him with a grim look on her face.

“The prisoners?”

“Nothing to report sir,” one of the troopers answered promptly, “I don’t think either of them have said five words since they’ve been put in here.”
“Good,” Cody murmured and walked further into the room, measuring his steps so that he appeared as nonchalant as possible, “Lord Vader wanted me to check in with them.”

That, at least, was the truth. As he had left Senator Amidala’s rooms before the tense Skywalker family could sit down for what looked like a painful breakfast, Vader had stopped Cody and told him to go and see Ahsoka and Rex and “make sure they’re where they should be; you know how they can be, Commander. I’d hate to have to track them down a second time.” The dismissive menace in Vader’s tone had been all the incentive he needed to follow his orders as quickly as he could.

“Uh, of course, sir,” the same trooper replied, obviously taking the lead on situation; he was probably the most veteran of those stationed on this shift, “Whatever you need.”

Cody stopped in front of Ahsoka’s cell and briefly met her narrowed eyes before dropping down to peer at the manacle-like inhibitors. They were lit with a blood red activation rune that matched Vader’s lightsaber almost exactly. He remembered how heavy they were when he had snapped them around the former Jedi’s wrists; without access to the force he wondered how much more weighted they felt around Ahsoka’s deceptively delicate looking wrists.

“The inhibitors are holding, trooper?”

“As far as we can tell. I don’t…uh…well, sir, none of us have ever been around the Inquisitors or any other force user, so we don’t really know what to look for? Would we even know if they stopped working? With the cell and everything I mean,” The trooper reached up and rubbed at the back of his helmet.

Cody snorted, he couldn’t help it. “Trooper, if those inhibitors cease working completely – you would definitely be the first one to know. If you could react in time to realize it, anyway.”

“Sir?” He wasn’t imagining the slightly panicked note to the trooper’s voice and the quick glance he sent to Ahsoka who bared her teeth in a gruesome parody of a smile at his look. Cody hid his amusement under the multitude of layers of worry that were constantly on the forefront of his mind and did his best to calm the other man.

“What I meant, trooper,” he said, “is if she’s exhibited any suspicious behavior. Anything out of the ordinary. The inhibitors work well enough on most force users but Tano is…a rare talent. Lord Vader wants to make sure she’s watched with the appropriate amount of vigilance.”

The stormtrooper drew himself to his full height and nodded seriously. “Of course, sir. We haven’t noticed anything so far, but we’ll be sure to watch her closely.”

There was a dull thudding and both Cody and the trooper looked up at where Ahsoka was knocking lightly on the cell wall. Her raised fist uncurled until her palm pressed up against the transparent wall when they had their attention.

“You can watch me better from in here,” She said with a sickly-sweet tone, tapping one finger almost soundlessly, “I promise I don’t bite.”

She was talking to the trooper, who took an involuntary step backward, but she was studying Cody out of the corner of her eyes, he could tell. Her body was angled just slightly in his direction and there was a tension to her frame that belied the breezelessness of her words. Whether it was conscious or not, she was treating him like a threat; someone she had to gauge the danger of.

He frowned in frustration. Ahsoka hadn’t been awake for any of the encounter Cody had had with Rex and Senator Amidala and there was no way for him to give her any indication that he was
dechipped and on her side. The only time she had seen him before was when he was shackling her under Vader’s instructions. He fought the urge to visibly cringe; he wouldn’t trust him either if he was her. Not to mention that as much as the 212th and 501st worked together, Ahsoka didn’t know Cody the way that she knew the vod’s of her own division; she didn’t know how to read him the way she could Rex or Kix or any of his brothers that had been under General Skywalker’s command.

At times like this he cursed his natural affinity for guardedness. It was a boon in combat situations, but personally it kept a distance between him and almost everyone else.

Maybe that was something he could work on when he finally got –

“I don’t have to tell you not to get into the cell, do I, trooper?” He answered with as dry a voice as he was able; cutting off his thoughts ruthlessly.

“Oh, no, sir.”

“Good,” he and Ahsoka watched each other for a few drawn out moments before he turned his body so that he could see the other cell where Rex had clambered to his feet and was regarding them warily.

He finished the about face to return Rex’s stare. His brother’s spine straightened in recognition of the attention. He approached Rex slowly and felt more than heard the trooper following behind him.

He didn’t know how to feel. Like most of the vod’e, Rex’s fate wasn’t anywhere that he could find on the ’net or any archive that he had managed to filter through in the years since the chip failed. And like Obi-Wan, he hadn’t wanted to dwell on it very much; thinking about Rex made him slow – weak – and he couldn’t afford that while he was duping what felt like the entirety of the Imperial Army. So, he’d shoved any thought of his lost brother deep down and rarely polished the memories off for any reason. Now, he looked at Rex the same way he had taken in Bly at the Citadel. Cataloging the differences; the cropped blondish-going-to-white beard, a series of thin scars trailing up his forearm and disappearing beneath the sleeve of his black undershirt; as well as the things that were as familiar to Cody as his own face – the dark calm in his eyes and coiled tension in his muscles that spoke volumes about what he had been doing in the decade since they had last seen each other.

There were a whole plethora of questions he wanted to ask. The hows and whats and wheres that stretched out over the years. Unfortunately for him, he couldn’t even risk saying Rex’s actual name in front of this many Poole appointed stormtroopers. Force be damned, he’d never hated his situation more than he did at that moment.

“7567.”

Rex wanted to flinch – Cody could tell from the minute movement on his face – but managed to stay perfectly impassive.

“2224.”

Okay, I underestimated how that would feel, he thought sourly as he steadied himself from the hurt of hearing his birth designation from a member of the vod’e, no wonder it threw Rex.

“Sir?” The trooper beside him sounded small and uncertain, helmet darting back and forth between Cody and Rex. The man’s hands tightened visibly on his blaster. Cody wondered what was making him so nervous; the obvious tension in their bodies or was it just the realization that not all clones were under the Empire’s spell and the natural course of thought that made it possible to imagine that
Cody and the others could turn against him at some point?

“I assume he’s been no more trouble than the Jedi?”

“No, sir,” the trooper answered gamely, “Admiral Poole ordered a full medical mark-up on him, though. The medi-droids are scheduled to be here tomorrow at 0800 hours.”

Karking shii. The last thing they needed was physical proof of what a brain off the chip looked like. Especially if they dragged him or one of the others to get a scan in an effort to compare and contrast. It was bad enough being in whatever limbo he was with Vader; Poole was an extra complication none of them could afford.

“Hmm,” he hummed thoughtfully, “Be careful then, trooper.”

“We will, sir,” then in a darker voice, “I’ve trained with CT-6059 – I have no intention of fighting a clone that actually wants me dead.”

Cody almost – almost – couldn’t help himself from smirking. He’d have to grab a second helping of whatever that vanilla dessert was in the mess tonight for Sero. He’d be beside himself in glee that his fighting tactics were putting the fear of all hell in the stormtroopers. As it was, he let his mouth tug at the corners briefly, then nodded in commiseration.

Rex, however, furrowed his brows in a familiar facial tick that could’ve characterized a good forty percent of his expressions during the war – mostly in conjunction with whatever harebrained plan his General had decided to embark on – and he glanced from the trooper to Cody quickly. There was recognition on his face, he knew their brother’s designations as well as Cody himself, and there was a shift of genuine surprise that flashed over his face. It must not have occurred to him before this that Cody might not be the only clone on board. Kriffing hell, not being able to communicate was beginning to give Cody a tension headache.

“You seem to have things in control here, trooper,” he finally said when it became obvious to him that there was little more he could do here at the moment, “Lord Vader will be pleased to see his concern was unnecessary.”

The trooper stood taller at the praise. “Thank you, sir. We are at his Lord’s service.”

Cody nodded at him and took a step in the direction of the door before Rex’s gravel-scraped voice stopped him.

“Wait.”

Cody turned and rose a brow of his own. “Yes?”

Rex swallowed carefully, but a determined look was painted on his face. “Senator Amidala.”

“What about her?”

Rex’s frown deepened. “Where is she?”

“I rather think that the former Senator’s location is none of your business.”

Rex’s eyes darkened and his hands clenched into fists uselessly at his sides. “Can you at least tell me if she’s fine? Safe? Her children?”

She’s not, brother, Cody ached at the unsaid words, she’s been forced into a viper’s den and I don’t...
“Safe?” he said instead, faux incredulity in his tone, “Of course she’s safe. Amidala is where she should be; at her husband’s side.”

Rex closed his eyes, looking pained beyond measure. A loud bang thundered around the room and Cody jerked his gaze over to Ahsoka’s cell where the Togruta – who had obviously been listening to their exchange – was looking at him with daggers in her eyes. There was a livid sneer on her pretty face and she punched the cell wall again once she saw that he was looking.

“You bastards!” she yelled, furious, “You give her to that…that…murdering psychopath and you have the nerve to call me the traitor?” This time she kicked the wall with enough force that the whole thing seemed to almost ripple from the impact. The two nearest stormtroopers took a healthy step away from the cell and pulled their blasters into ready mode.

She ignored the reactions of those around her and stared at Cody as if he was only other person in the room. “If one hair on her head is out of place…” she threatened lowly amongst the buzzing of newly charged blasters.

“You’ll what, Jedi?” Cody asked, injecting as much cool disdain as he could into his voice – mostly to keep it from breaking pitifully – trying to calm the amped up atmosphere of the room. “What do you think you can do with those inhibitors on? You’re on an Imperial ship; not a rebel cruiser. There is no one here to help you. No allies. You’re talented, I remember that, but you’re alone. And without access to the force. How far do you think you’ll get?”

Ahsoka’s breathing was heavy and she was digging her fingers into her palm. None of the angry rigidity had left her frame, but she was listening at least. Worse, there was a spark of desolated understanding buried behind the fury in her eyes. Cody hated to put even the smallest thread of doubt there, but right now they were all at a severe disadvantage. The rash decisions that had worked for them during the war couldn’t be relied on anymore. Not with any certainty. They needed back-up. And time. And right now, Cody couldn’t guarantee either of those things.

He understood her horror and frustration. He understood it viscerally. He was the one that had to watch the Senator interact with Vader; the ghost of their past casting such a pall over both of them that even an uneasy peace was basically impossible. And the poor twins, clearly very force sensitive, didn’t know what to make of their new situation. The boy, Luke, was curious about Vader, but wary and often unconsciously took up a defensive stance between the Sith and his mother. The girl, Leia, by contrast, wanted nothing to do with Vader. She had her mother’s canny intelligence, Cody would bet his life on it, and there was none of the conflict that Luke exhibited in their father’s presence. Cody didn’t think she’d said one word to Vader directly since learning of her parentage.

It was a mess. Like watching a pod crash happen in slow motion. And there wasn’t a damned thing he could do about it.

“Do you understand, Jedi?” He reiterated, keeping the plea out of his voice somehow. Please, Commander, he thought, wishing that the force inhibitors were just a tad less effective so that at least his feelings would get through to her, please understand that this is a warning. I can’t watch you die before help has the chance to get here. Please.

Ahsoka didn’t answer him verbally, but she backed away from the cell wall and some of the manic energy left her body. He watched her for a moment and then waved down the guards who slowly retook up their previous positions.

“As I said, trooper,” he said finally, “It would be best to watch her closely.”
“Yes, sir,” the trooper had a waver in his voice that Cody understood completely, despite not being on his side. If he had been in his shoes that would’ve been just slightly terrifying to witness.

He nodded in dismissal and then, with only a momentary glance back at Rex who was looking at him blankly, he left the brig with a confidence that he didn’t feel.

He made it halfway down the hall before he stopped and took a shaky breath. Well, he thought with an edge of hysteria, that could hardly have gone worse. He laughed involuntarily to himself, grateful that the corridor was empty so that no one heard it. He took another breath and then resumed his walk back to Vader’s quarters.

Now was not the time.

Force only knew when it would be.

- - -

As he predicted, the atmosphere of the room when he rejoined the inhabitants was tense. Cody was beginning to seriously wonder if he would ever be truly comfortable again in his life. The way things were going, it seemed like a fever dream more than anything.

“Commander,” Vader said when he noticed Cody’s return, “Report.”

“The prisoners are secure, sir.”

Vader tilted his head questioningly. “The inhibitors?”

“Operating at full capacity.”

Vader’s eyes sharpened on him in a way that Cody really did not appreciate. “What about you, Cody?”

Hearing his name coming from Vader when Rex couldn’t even say it was like the worst kind of betrayal. “Sir?”

Vader rolled his eyes. “Don’t be stupid, Commander. I, of all people, know how close you and Rex were. How are you feeling?”

All Cody heard from that was: how’s your chip working? This precarious game of cat and mouse he found himself in with Vader was going to give him a stroke if it lasted much longer. The emotional ups and downs of the Sith was as infuriating as it was hard to anticipate. Did he actually believe that Cody was still chipped? Did he know he wasn’t and was toying with him for his own amusement? Was there enough of Anakin Skywalker left in Vader that some part of him did care? Some remnant of human compassion? Cody couldn’t trust one damn word that Vader said and he couldn’t trust his own perceptions either because they were clouded with his memories of Skywalker overlaid with what he knew of Vader. He kind of wanted to laugh again; if it wouldn’t make him seem as if he was going insane that is.

“I’m functioning perfectly well, my Lord.”

Vader snorted. “Of course you are. When have you ever been less than perfect?”

Cody blinked, confused by the bitterness saturated in Vader’s voice. “Sir?”

Vader didn’t respond which left Cody more discomfited than usual. In the silence, he glanced around
the room and realized that it was empty except for Vader.

“Senator Amidala?”

Vader crumpled the mystery machinery part that he was working on in his prosthetic hand. He flung the damaged part onto the couch beside him and stood abruptly. Cody reluctantly held his ground in the midst of the violent grace that Vader exhibited.

“Resting, or so she says,” he finally said, the growl plain in his tone, “I need to check in with Admiral Poole about our progress. Watch them until I get back.”

“Yes, sir.”

Vader left without another word and Cody was left standing awkwardly in the middle of the apartments. He sighed. “I’m getting too old for this shit.”

He moved around the quarters for a few restless minutes, checking the rooms out of lack of anything else to do and then finally settled in on one of the bar/kitchen stools with a glass of water with half a notion to think himself to death.

That cheerful endeavor was disrupted by a door opening and Amidala and the twins peering out into the apartments with trepidation. When Amidala spotted him, she relaxed and offered him a tired smile. The one he returned was probably just as rundown.

“Tough morning?”

“You could say that,” she mused and then ushered the kids over to the living room table where a scattered group of holovids, datapads and droid pieces were littering the area. They sat on the nearby couch and Amidala drifted over to his side.

Cody winced. “Bad?”

She shrugged and fetched her own water. “No worse than usual. Just…” she looked at him with an almost blank stare. “Sometimes I…lose track of who I’m with. Anakin or the monster wearing his face.”

Cody frowned. “I’m sorry.”

She took a sip of her water and rubbed a hand wearily over her forehead. It reminded him of the long Senate debates about the war that Obi-Wan occasionally attended or conferred with Amidala when the Republic was still standing. She looked the exact shade of exhausted now as she did in those meetings. The more things change…

“Next week is our anniversary.”

Cody started at the break in the quiet and then blinked stupidly as those words sunk in.

“Anniversary?”

“Yes.”

“That’s…” Cody honestly didn’t know what to say to that, “…horrible.”

Amidala laughed softly and waved an elegant hand in a self-deprecating manner. “It’s not ideal, no. But I’m working through it.”

“I’m sorry,” Cody offered again, feeling useless.
She gave a sad smile. “It is what it is.” She paused and then seemed to shake herself out of the pitying mood that had descended on the room. “What about Ahsoka and Rex? I heard Vader tell you to check on them.”

“They’re alive; relatively safe, over-guarded,” he said.

“Ahsoka’s awake?”

Cody grimaced. “And angry.”

Amidala’s smile grew genuine at that. “Good.”

They were interrupted by Leia appearing at Amidala’s hip. She already carried herself like a politician and the stubborn line to her jaw and brow never failed to make Cody both amused as hell and warily sad. The girl looked at Cody distrustfully and then focused on Amidala.

“Mother, I’m hungry,” she said seriously.

“Alright darling,” Amidala said indulgently, “What would you like?”

Leia looked thoughtful at that. “A sandwich is fine.”

“Okay,” Amidala said and then looked at Cody, “Would you mind helping? Luke will no doubt want one too.”

Cody nodded and pushed himself off the stool and over to the ice-unit where actual, honest-to-force fresh food was stored. Cody stared at it with a kind of resigned indignance. He pulled lettuce, tomatoes, some of those sweet, mint colored, onion-like vegetables from Alderaan that had to be kept cool, the spicy mustard that was favored on Imperial planets and the leftovers from last night’s boar dinner. He laid the food out on the counter and blinked. When he looked up, both Amidala and Leia were watching him.

“I don’t think I’ve had a non-rehydrated vegetable in six months.”

Amidala spared him the indignity of acknowledging the obvious frustration and offense that was in his voice and simply took the ingredients and began assembling the sandwiches carefully. When she was done she handed one to Leia who climbed onto one of the stools and the other to Cody before gently pushing him in Luke’s direction.

The boy was sitting on the couch, lost in concentration as he determinedly put together pieces of the burned out droid that Vader had been messing with earlier. He put the sandwich down on the table and watched as Luke’s face lit up when he noticed the food.

“Thanks,” he said and dug into the ware with gusto.

Cody sat down across from him. “What are you working on?”

Luke, like most kids his age, took another bite and talked around it. “It’s a voice modulator. You know, for accents and stuff. But it’s all burned. The box is in tact so all I have to do is rewire the modulator to the synth-larynx.”

That meant almost next to nothing to Cody, but the enthusiasm that Luke displayed explaining it was endearing anyway. “And you know how to fix all this?”

“Yeah! It’s not that hard. I worked on all kinds of stuff at the farm. It’s fun.”
“That’s impressive,” Cody said and meant it.


“Well, I couldn’t do it.”

Luke looked at his suspiciously. “Really?”

“Really.”

Luke finished his sandwich and then looked at Cody with a scrunched-up expression which meant he was thinking pretty hard. “Mom said that you knew Uncle Rex. And Aunt Ahsoka.”

Cody felt that pang of grief hit him in the chest at the uncertainty in the boy’s tone. “Yes. I know them.”

“Did you know our F—Vader, too?”

Cody nodded slowly. “Yes. Him too.”

Luke fidgeted and then looked at him imploringly with Anakin Skywalker’s eyes. “What was he like?”

Cody frowned and glanced over at Amidala, but she and Leia were talking quietly at the counter, smiling. “Luke –”

“It’s just, Mom won’t talk about it,” Luke rushed on, “And, I mean, he wasn’t always like this, right? Mom wouldn’t have married him if he was.”

Cody thought about not answering or passing it off to Amidala later, but the thin desperation in Luke’s voice made a part of him curl up and die a little inside. Amidala was hurting and probably couldn’t talk about it – understandably – but the kids were just that, kids and they didn’t know what had happened. Not really. He sighed.

“No, he wasn’t always like this. He was…a good man. Brash. Quick to temper. Ridiculous at times, but a good man nonetheless.”

Luke nodded. “Master Obi-Wan once said that the Emperor hurt Vader. That he wasn’t really given much choice; that the Dark Side was allowed to take him because no one paid enough attention. That the Jedi failed him.”

Cody took a moment to breath through the pain that that caused. He tried to imagine Obi-Wan explaining the origins of Vader to his children without actually acknowledging that that was who he was. Obi-Wan tended to take the sins of the galaxy and place them on his shoulders. At times that was an arrogance that Cody wanted to smack out of him, but other times – like this – it was unbelievably heartbreaking.

(“I wasn’t a very good Master in the beginning.”)

Cody looked away from where General Skywalker was lecturing to a grinning and unrepentant Commander Tano. To be fair, Skywalker looked more amused than anything which probably wasn’t doing anything but undermining whatever he was saying to her in the first place. He looked at Obi-Wan who watched them a little wistfully.

“Sir?”
Obi-Wan smiled, but it was a melancholy one, the kind Cody was used to seeing when the General fell into one of his memory induced funks. “With Anakin. I was…harsh, dismissive at first. Woefully inadequate, really.”

Cody tried to imagine Obi-Wan being ‘inadequate’ at anything other than taking care of himself or talking about his feelings and failed spectacularly. Rex would probably tell him that his bias was showing. “I’m sure that’s not true, sir.”

“It is,” Obi-Wan answered immediately, without thought or hedging; a statement of fact, “I had just lost my Master, barely out of my apprenticeship myself and Anakin was unlike the whole of the temple and all of the padawans in it. Certainly different than any I had met before. Older than all of them, destined for great things, so powerful…it’s amazing I didn’t ruin him completely.

Cody looked back at where General Skywalker now had a complaining Commander Tano in a headlock; their playful arguing carrying over to them in tone, but without distinct words. “I think he’s turned out alright, sir. Reckless and incorrigible, but alright.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said softly, “He has. But he deserved better than a bumbling Jedi Knight who didn’t know what he was doing. I think it’s a credit to his own nature that he adapted the way he did.”

“Sir,” Cody began carefully, digging his fingers into the flesh of his palms to keep from reaching out, “Maybe that’s why it worked. Both of you were unconventional. The…mismatched puzzle pieces of the Jedi Order.”

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow at that and favored Cody with a boyish grin. “The mismatched puzzle pieces of the Jedi Order?”

Cody felt his face heat up. “Yes, sir.”

“Hmm,” Obi-Wan tilted his head to the side in thought, “That’s much nicer than just saying that no one knew what to do with us.”

“Sir—”

Obi-Wan waved it away and the smile that graced his face was still wistful, but in a happier, more content way then it had been previously. They stood in silence for a few beats. “I’m proud of who he’s become. In spite of any damage I may have done at the start.”

Cody didn’t know what to say to that and turned back around to watch Skywalker and Tano disengage from their faux quarrel when Rex approached them with barely concealed exasperated fondness highlighting his face. Skywalker looked up and over at them and his smile brightened even further and he waved at them.

“Obi-Wan!” Skywalker’s raised voice cut through the cruiser deck, “Stop lurking and get over here. It’s creepy, just staring like that. I know I’ve told you before.”

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes in response, but he gestured for Cody to follow him. “Shall we?”

“If you think it’s necessary, sir,” Cody answered and was carried to the other side of the deck by the lightness of Obi-Wan’s laugh.)

He pushed away the painful memory and focused on the here and now. “Obi-Wan’s not wrong, but you have to remember that he still had a choice. In the end, the choice was always his. Not the Emperor’s or anyone else’s.”
Luke frowned. “Did he not love Mom enough?”

Talk about woefully inadequate. Karking hell. “I think,” he said tentatively, “that he loved her too much.”

“That’s stupid,” Luke promptly replied, “How can you love someone too much?”

You hurt them and try to convince yourself it’s for their own good; you hurt others and say it’s to protect them and you don’t give them a choice about any of it, he wanted to say, but none of that would make much sense to someone Luke’s age. Besides, that wasn’t actually love. Not any kind that he had ever seen, anyway. Not the kind that Amidala and Skywalker had before he fell. Not the kind he felt for Obi-Wan. Or the kind Bly felt for General Secura. That was possession, fear, greed even, but not love. But that, he supposed, was the temptation and downside of the dark side to begin with – it took all the good a person felt and twisted it until it became a warped reflection of what it should be. Anakin Skywalker loved Padme Amidala and so he fell. And when he fell he ceased to understand what love was. It was a vicious cycle.

“It’s…complicated,” he said at last to the skeptical look on Luke’s face.

Luke mulled over that and then asked: “Do you think he could be good again?”

Cody was at a loss with that one. Traditional Jedi teachings said no, that much he knew, but traditional Jedi teachings also contributed to the fall of the Jedi Order itself, so he didn’t know for sure what was concrete or not. Furthermore, for all his familiarity with Jedi and force-users, he wasn’t one himself. The force wasn’t something he actually understood. And while his instincts said no, there was that voice in the back of his head that sounded suspiciously like Obi-Wan telling him not to disregard the idea so fast.

He looked at Luke. “I don’t know. You’re the one with access to the force. What do you think?”

Luke blinked and then looked down at the pile of parts and scorched machinery on the table. When he looked back at Cody there was a determined set to his face that Cody hadn’t seen before. “I don’t know. Maybe. Leia doesn’t think so,” he said, “But we have to try, right?”

Do or do not, there is no try, he’d heard Master Yoda say and heard Obi-Wan’s surprisingly accurate imitation of it more than once. He thought about repeating it, but as it had never made sense to him, he thought it would mean even less to someone Luke’s age so he didn’t. Instead, he smiled what was probably a fairly pathetic excuse for a smile.

“Well, if anyone could, it would be you,” he said finally around the bright flare of hurt that threatened to collapse his chest totally.

He stood up and left Luke to his modulator and returned to the kitchen where Leia was now intensely concentrated on reading something on her datapad and Amidala was seated beside her, a look of almost serenity on her face. Amidala glanced up when he walked over and her expression slipped momentarily at whatever the hell his own was doing.

Nothing good he was sure.

“Commander?”

“It’s nothing,” he said and then cleared his throat at the croakiness of it, “Really.”

She watched him, but took pity on him and didn’t question further. She did, however, point to the counter in front of her. “That’s for you.”
He looked over and saw a third sandwich sitting there, piled high with the fresh vegetables and meat that he had despaired of earlier. To his horror, he felt tears prickle at the back of his eyes and had to take a deep breath to dispel the moisture before it could fall.

“Thank you.”

“Of course, Commander.”

He sat down unsteadily and ate the sandwich slowly and began to plan.

The sandwich was delicious.

- - - -

After Vader returned hours later and the comfortable atmosphere of the room plummeted; Cody was dismissed and sent on his way to his night patrol. He thought about the meeting he had had the night before with Poole and the other senior officers about their new route to Coruscant; a winding path meant to fool anyone who might be following them and the increased presence of tie-fighters around the old route lying in wait to ambush. He thought about Ahsoka’s caged anger and Rex’s blank face. He thought about Senator Amidala and all she and the twins had been through. And what would be waiting for them on Coruscant. He thought about Luke’s cautious questioning and banked hope. He walked the corridors of the Tenacity and thought himself into knots.

In the end, it was actually a simple decision.

He pulled Crys aside when he saw him and told him to tell the others to meet him tomorrow for breakfast. Crys tried to ask him what was going on, but he just brushed that away and told him that he would tell them tomorrow. Crys narrowed his eyes at him, but as he knew he would, he let it drop and agreed to inform the others.

After that was done, it was a matter of finishing his rounds quickly and carefully. Which he did, and then he went back to his bunk alone; the quiet hum of the ship pushing at him as he retreated to his only sanctuary.

Once there, he took off his helmet and armor and then fell onto his bed. He pulled the small lockbox under the cot out and opened it. Underneath the lid was a secret panel that he pushed out and then reached in and grabbed the device hidden there. It was a slim square with a small screen and keyboard that lit up after he turned it on. He tapped in his password and waited for it to process it. The next screen to pop up had only one question on it:

*Confirm Extraction Point – [Yes] [ No]*

He hit **Yes** with shaky fingers.

It was time for them to get out.
She missed Naboo.

It was an ache she was used to, of course, after long years away in the Senate with only the occasional side trip between the war and the nonsensical infighting of her fellow politicians. The yearning would swell and ebb depending on the rigors of the day and sometimes she would stand outside on her top-level apartment’s balcony and look at the passing traffic and looming high-rises all around her and miss the lakes of her home with such clarity that it stole her breath completely. Once and a while it was just a faint mist of memory; soft and supple and lovely, but nothing more than a cherished note that needed only to be touched briefly to recharge her resolve.

Conversely, there had been days she had refused to take in the city at all. Nights when the clutter and unnatural light would feel so suffocating that all of her senses and the nerves in her body would be trying to claw their way out in desperation; as if Coruscant itself was a living death knell that she had to escape any way she could.

Anakin helped with that.

…used to help with that.

She thought of her life now in terms of parcels of time. Eras. Eons. Each segment interlocking with the one that came before, but with rockier and rockier terrain. This current segment was seemingly never-ending and built on a fortress of mountainous summits that made it practically unnavigable. Living on the farm had been like a purgatory interlude in the hell that was the galaxy and in direct contrast to the slice of heaven she had carved out for herself in the years before the Republic’s fall. Saleucami wasn’t Naboo – not by long shot – but there had been a certain amount of peace achieved there that made it the closest she’d been to it since her ignoble faux death.

Happiness was a tightly hoarded treasure now. It was the brightness of Ahsoka’s rare unguarded smiles, the relaxed sprawl of Bail and Breha’s bodies when they could find a moment or two to visit via holo, Rex actually feeling comfortable enough to shed his armor and blaster voluntarily, the
delighted screams of her children as they ran around with Aayla’s Yara while she, Aayla and Obi-Wan watched them be kids for an hour or two. It was Luke putting a new droid together and proudly showing her the results. It was Leia trying on her old clothes and looking so determined when she tried to emulate one of her complicated hairstyles that Padme had to laugh at her scrunched-up face. It was forgetting – just for a day – that there was someone missing from her family.

*There is no happiness to be had here,* she thought, not for the first time, as Vader stomped away from her and into the master bedroom of the suite.

She sighed and unfurled herself from her seat on the couch with a deliberate slowness that she used to associate with aged senior senators that moved as if even that was a momentous decision that needed to be overthought and under debated. It was much less amusing on a personal note; not least because she was barely in her mid-thirties and no one that young should be so weighed down that their limbs yelled at them just for daring to make them work as normal.

Methodically, she went about putting the food back in the refrigeration unit, and sweeping away the remnants of another disastrous attempt to act out whatever ridiculous fantasy Vader had about family life. Like it was something out of a holovid; pristine and perfect and completely unrealistic.

*What did you expect?* She wanted to scream at him every time that pinched, disappointed expression crossed his face when something – when they – didn’t meet with his unspoken expectations. *You slaughtered younglings, you almost killed me, you betrayed the galaxy and everyone who ever loved you and for what? The confidence of a madman? Because you thought you would lose me? Don’t you get it yet? You already have.*

She couldn’t say any of that, of course. Force only knew what he would do if she did, but it was tempting. Cathartic, like that first night where she had poured all of her frustration out on him. Faced with the man who had shattered her heart, it hadn’t even occurred to her to tone down the insidious anger that had been built up in her chest for the last decade. It wasn’t until he had leaned in and threatened Luke and Leia’s future training with the shadow of Palpatine that it finally registered that she couldn’t treat Vader like she would’ve Anakin. Intellectually, she had known that they were – for all intents and purposes – two different people, but it wasn’t until that moment; his Sith-yellow eyes staring down at her and that dark silk of his voice telling her that he would let Palpatine mold their children’s force education from here on out that those differences solidified in reality. She had no way of knowing whether he was serious or not, but she couldn’t risk it. Not with them.

She had tiptoed around him since.

And her feet were beginning to hurt.

She finished the tidying and looked around the suite warily. It looked normal; if not void of personal touches. The only thing that made it appear lived in was the still strewn bits of droid’s hardware on the clear table in front of the couch. Luke’s repaired voice modulator sitting innocently next to Vader’s half configured TIE-fighter dashboard. She walked over to the parts and gingerly picked up her son’s accomplishment with an all too familiar feeling of saddened recognition – in so many ways Luke was enough like Anakin that occasionally it hurt to even look at him.

“Mother?”

She looked over to where her daughter had opened the door to their room and was giving her a wary glance from just outside the shadows. “Yes, darling?”

“Are you alright?”
Leia was dressed for bed; wearing her sleepwear and dark hair falling down loosely behind her back. She had that familiar serious furrow to her features that Padme was never sure meant she was just more intuitive than most children her age or whether it signaled that Padme wasn’t doing a very good job of hiding her own distress.

For all she knew, she was broadcasting her despair into the force like a battering ram. Ahsoka and Obi-Wan had never mentioned it, but then they had their own demons to contend with and both of them had taken great pains to tell her just how powerful both the twins were in regards to the Jedi arts. Ahsoka, especially, as a spy and agent for the rebellion had to keep her own emotions and her perceptions and manipulations of the force to a minimum much of the time; it might have actually skipped her mind to tell Padme to tone it the kriff down.

She replaced the modulator on the table and gave her daughter a reassuring smile. “Yes, my future queen, I’m fine.”

Leia frowned, but there was a tint of red to her cheeks that always appeared when Padme used her nickname. It had actually been Bail that had first used the moniker when she was a barely a toddler and already ordering Luke and all of Bail’s aides – human and droid alike – around without a care. Ahsoka had loved it and took to bowing to Leia just to rile the girl up.

Leia just stared at her and crossed her arms defiantly. “You don’t look alright.”

Padme sighed and felt her smile become more genuine. “Shouldn’t you be in bed, little one?”

“Mother.”

Padme let the smile grow and moved over to where her daughter had stubbornly stationed herself, gently guided the girl back into the room and closed the door behind them.

Luke was perched anxiously on the plush chair in the corner of the room; he was watching something on a holopad, but his body language was tense and he kept darting looks over at them. His pajamas were sticking to him where he had obviously left the drying unit (and actual, honest-to-force drying unit in the guest bathroom – sometimes the Empire slayed her) before it was finished. When he noticed their return, he lurched to his feet; ignoring the holo completely.

“Stand down,” Padme said with as much amused inflection as she could, “no danger here.”

“Leia was worried,” Luke said hurriedly which earned him a swift punch to the shoulder from his agitated twin, “Ow! Leia! What the kriff was that for?”

“You’re not supposed to say anything,” she hissed at her brother, who just looked at her with that hangdog, wounded face that he was so good at.

Luke may look like their father and had a lot of the same interests and abilities; but never let it be said that Leia wasn’t the one who inherited Anakin’s temper. If she had cared at all about her Jedi legacy and abilities – and she did only in the sense that it allowed her to understand people more; that and she thought lightsabers were infinitely superior to blasters – than Padme might’ve worried herself a little more. As it was, her daughter had already developed such a staunch moral code that Padme couldn’t help being both unbearably proud and a little sad that the whimsy of childhood hadn’t taken root in her.

“She keeps us honest,” Obi-Wan had admitted when she had tentatively asked about it one night when the twins were younger, “But she has you and Luke and Ahsoka and Rex and they’re much finer role models than Anakin had – aside from his own mother – growing up in slavery and then the
Temple. *The war makes adults of us all too early, but you’ve raised her well so far – I don’t anticipate that changing, my dear.*"

“Leia, don’t hit your brother,” Padme admonished.

“Yes, mother,” Leia intoned and Padme turned and pretended not to see Luke stick his tongue out at her.

“And Luke – what have I said about that kind of language?”

“Not to use it,” Luke replied promptly, then added, “But Uncle Rex and Aunt Ahsoka –”

“And what have I said about that?”

Luke sighed and scuffed his foot, but flatly answered. “That they’re adults and I shouldn’t repeat everything I hear adults say,” he stopped and looked up at her suspiciously, “Han says it all the time and no one tells him not too. He’s only a little older than us.”

Force save her from Han Solo and his unmistakable influence on her children. Hondo’s apprentice was a menace, she’d known it the first time the former pirate had introduced the lanky pre-teen to them when he had been dropping off supplies at the farm for them. He’d been sullen and angry, with a large Wookie for a shadow (Chewie was, for a while anyway, the best thing about the sarcastic human) but he had worked his way under her skin by clearly caring deeply about both the twins, despite the now stereotypical teenager attitude which made him act as if he hadn’t a care in the galaxy.

“And?”

Luke sighed again, more dramatically than before. “And Han isn’t your child and I am, so I have to follow your rules,” he paused, “Does that mean I can curse when I’m an adult?”

“We’ll see,” she said with all the authority that being their mother afforded her and Luke quietly subsided at that, “now that everything is settled, how about the two of you get to bed?”

The twins shared an indeterminably look. It used to baffle her, the kind of insular language the two of them had seemingly developed out of thin air, but as time went by she found herself more and more grateful for it. That they would never go through any of their troubles and disappointments alone. As one, they nodded and made their way to the single bed in the room.

She helped them settle in and smoothed the covers over them, while turning off the light and kissing their brows as was their nighttime ritual. Before she could step away from the bed, Luke reached out and grabbed a handful of her dress. Blue eyes looking up at her cautiously.

“What is it?”

“Is…was Vader right? Will we have to meet the Emperor when we get to Coruscant?”

The night’s conversation came back to her, Vader talking about what things would be like when they landed on Coruscant. The airy, ignorant way he had thrown around the Emperor’s name like he was just another person and not a monster that had fueled his children’s war-torn nightmares for as long as they had known who Palpatine was. It was also, not incidentally, the reason for the night’s tense argument – Padme stepping in to cut the soliloquy short as the twin’s looks of horror intensified.

“I don’t know, darling,” she hedged.
“He wouldn’t let the Emperor hurt us, right? I mean, we’re his kids,” Luke continued.

“It doesn’t matter what Vader would do,” Leia contributed with all the sagesness that a ten-year-old could, “Mother won’t let him hurt us.”

_He’ll touch you over my dead body_, was what she wanted to say, but there was an element of potential prophecy to those words that made her lock them up in her chest without looking at them for too long.

“Leia’s right. As long as I’m here, Palpatine won’t hurt you.”

It was the kind of lie all parents told their children on rough days. The bad people will all go away as long as I’m here to protect you. It was a kind lie, but in these times, it had always seemed disheartening to Padme; the fact that she had to tell the lie at all. She’d claw Palpatine’s beady eyes from his skull if it meant saving her children from his gaze; but she couldn’t promise that she’d survive afterward to make sure his fury wasn’t hoisted onto them. And she couldn’t promise that their father would stand up for them. She wanted too; she wanted to believe that the reason he had searched so voraciously for them was because some buried seed of Anakin Skywalker just wanted to be with the people he loved. But like Leia, she had barely been a child when she was one and so those kinds of fantasies rarely comforted her. Practicality superseded sentimentality in ages of war; it had too or good people died as a result. She had lost her husband to that way of thinking in the last conflict.

Her children would not be casualties of it in this one.

“Try to get some sleep,” she said softly, “I’ll be here when you wake up.”

The twins said their goodnights and in a few minutes their breathing evened out into the familiar cadence of rest. She sat there and watched them for a few minutes more, shoring up her own defenses with their innocence and her love of them and then retreated to the chair Luke had been sat in earlier.

She turned the holopad off and sat with only the muted light of a small reading lamp beside her. She thought about Rex and Ahsoka and hoped they would be okay in the holding cells, and about Cody, who she had been so surprised to see and who looked so run-down whenever they spoke; trying to walk a balance between fooling the Empire and being himself. He’d reminded her too much of her allies in the Senate when the difficult debates and bullheadedness of their opposition did its level best to suck all the life out of them.

By now, the rebellion had to be aware of what had happened on Saleucami. She didn’t like to inflate her own sense of importance; but she knew that they would be trying to find them. Obi-Wan and her other friends for more personal reasons, but the rebellion itself couldn’t afford for the twins to be twisted into whatever the Emperor had in store for them. And Ahsoka knew far too much about the intelligence community in the rebellion to be left to the Inquisitors if there was a chance to save her. Likely, Obi-Wan had already sent out a team to find them and all they had to do was sit tight and wait.

She hated waiting.

She thought again about the look on Cody’s face when he had admitted to not having fresh food for a spell and wondered if she could convince him and the others to leave with them if the rebellion did manage to catch up to them before they reached Coruscant. It’d be a gift to both he and Obi-Wan; someone deserved to be happy in this new galaxy.
She closed her eyes and eventually drifted off into a fitful sleep. The peaceful lakes of Naboo running with lava and Anakin’s beautiful eyes turning to molten gold right in front of her face.

Chapter End Notes

As a side note; I have not seen *Solo* yet, so any backstory that may or may not be in that movie is disregarded here. Besides, it's a kind of AU - I do what I want.
Hello, guys, I hope everyone had a great holiday! (If you celebrate it). Once again, I apologize for how long this took. I've been working on my original manuscript so it went a lot slower than normal. But here it is and I hope it doesn't disappoint. *crosses fingers*

You all are awesome and your kudos and comments brighten up a day like you wouldn't believe! All mistakes are mine and I'll probably edit this better at a later time, but I wanted to get it out there asap.

Cody stared at the blinking faces of his brothers. All of them appeared dumbfounded by what he had just told them and the silence that wound around the armory deck was filled with confusion. If he squinted really closely, he wondered if he’d actually be able to see question marks in the air above their heads; like those animated shows that kids watched on the holoscreens in the mornings back before everything went crashing down.

Right. He really needed to get a full night’s sleep.

“‘You want to run that by us again?’ Boil finally asked.

“We’re getting out,” he said, “I contacted them and Celese already sent me the go ahead. This is it. Really and for real.”

Quiet reigned again and then Rush sagged between Crys and Sero’s bulky body and glanced up at Cody with a smile.

“That’s the best thing I’ve heard all year, sir.”

“Karking hell,” Sero added, a pearly grin lighting up his features as well, “that’s the best news I’ve heard all decade. Well,” he added sheepishly to that and scrubbed a hand over his bald head, “next to knowing the General is alive anyway.”

Cody returned their smiles around the tension that caught in his chest at the mention of Obi-Wan. Now that the decision had been made and set in stone, he found that idea that he might be seeing the other man sooner rather than later was both exhilarating and so damned frightening that he’d barely been able to choke down his breakfast that morning. A feeling that had only been made worse after his brief conversation with Celese.

(“That’s done then,” Celese looked back at him through the fuzzy holo connection, “You’re a free man, Commander.”

“No quite,” he said wryly, very aware of just how shit missions like these could go – the war had made him an expert at FUBAR situations.

“No quite,” she reiterated, but the fond look she gave him only intensified under his usual skepticism.)
They stood there for a moment, just staring. Cody didn’t really know what to say. For years, this woman had been the only connection he’d had outside of his brothers. The only person he could really unload his troubles and grievances too. She’d been the person to give Obi-Wan back to him. There weren’t really words that expressed how thankful he was for her friendship.

“It’ll be nice to see you in person; and without all the shooting and running in terror to go with it,” she finally broke the silence.

Cody snorted. “I’ll have you know that I make shooting and running in terror a staple of any friendship I’ve ever had. It just isn’t the same if you haven’t seen a person scream curses at grenades or have marksmanship contests in the middle of a battlefield.”

Celese laughed at that. “I believe it. I’ve heard some of your brothers say similar things before.”

Cody felt a slice of warmth go through his heart at that. It still took some getting used to that he had more than five (six, no, seven) brothers actually alive. That a number of them had never had to live under the thumb of the Empire. “Yeah, we weren’t known for our self-preservation.”

“I’ve heard that too,” she paused briefly, “I’ve also heard that you specifically weren’t great at prioritizing yourself above others. Which I get and appreciate, but maybe think about saving yourself as well as everyone else too this time, huh?”

“Bly tell you that?” He asked, amused despite himself. As if he or any other brother was any better at it than he was.

“No, General Kenobi did.”

The breath stilled in his lungs. He blinked and opened his mouth to say something – anything – but almost immediately closed it because his voice had apparently abandoned him. Celese was watching him carefully, blue eyes staring at him with a strange intensity that he didn’t know what to do with. After what felt like an eternity of them not saying anything at all, Celese finally nodded to herself as if in confirmation of something and then she gave Cody a softened smile.

“You alright, Cody?”

“He –” he licked his lips and tried to get past the dryness of his mouth, “The General said that? About me?”

“He said a lot about you. He wasn’t exactly happy that you had taken the codename Rako. Bad memories, I guess.”

“No krriffing shit,” Cody muttered before he could stop himself and then felt a blush illuminate his face.

“He, well, he was...amazed to hear that you were alive. And dechipped. He was absolutely furious that you’ve been working under the Empire all this time. I think he thought that you were taking unnecessary risks for little gain. Not taking care of yourself.”

Cody was caught between his own sense of happiness and complete and utter anger. “He’s not wrong,” he conceded, to which Celese graced him with a frown, but he continued with a thread of exasperated rage before she could say anything, “but literally the last person in the galaxy that has any karking right to talk to me about taking unnecessary risks is Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

Celese looked at him with big, blinking eyes and then burst out laughing. Cody’s own livid feelings died away to a smolder as he watched her shake her head ruefully. As her mirth faded, she pointed
at him through the holo.

“You two deserve each other, kriiffling hell, it’s like an echo or something.”

Cody didn’t know what to say about that so, he just continued his vigil of the woman as she pulled her professionalism around her again. In the silence, Celese offered him a more contained expression of humor and then gave him an approximate timeline of when the rescue and retrieval mission was scheduled, so that Cody could tell the others when to be ready. They hammered out the details, though Celese herself couldn’t tell them who was going to be on the mission itself—intelligence wasn’t in on that particular meeting.

“My brother volunteered. I know that much because he told me,” she said, shaking her head, “he’s a damned idiot. Force only knows what they’d do to him if he got caught.”

Cody cringed at that as well. It made sense to bring along someone who knew the ship intimately, but as a traitor to the Empire, Clawler—no, his name was Doran, that’s what Celese had called him; he should use it—would be made an extreme example of if they got their hands on him.

“If I see him, I’ll make sure he gets out.”

Celese favored him with a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

They finished up with what she did know and could tell him. She said something to one of the rebels off-screen and then saluted him—actually kriiffling saluted him—and left him with her familiar parting words.

“Good luck and may the force be with you.”

He sighed off and stared into the void of where the grainy image had been and felt the tightness in his chest squeeze around his heart uncomfortably. Less than a day and they would be out. Maybe. Hopefully. Force willing. And waiting on the other side would be Obi-Wan.

He barely made it to the bathroom in time to throw up.)

“So, what’s the plan?” Boil interrupted his memory with a gleeful rubbing of his gloved hands together. “When are we breaking out of this circus of hell?”

“Celese couldn’t give an exact time, but it’s going to happen sometime on the midnight shift.”

“Not a lot of time, then,” Walker intoned.

“No, but that’s not a bad thing. Less time for something to go wrong in the meantime. And no time at all for the Empire to call in any reinforcements, even if they did catch wind of any of this.”

“True,” Crys said thoughtfully, “so we just wait it out?”

“Yes. Who’s scheduled for the midnight shift tonight?”

Sero and Walker raised their hands and Cody nodded. “I am too. So, when it happens, I need you two to be ready. I’m going to need you to go to the brig. Tell the lead Sergeant there that there’s been a breach, and that you’ve been assigned to the brig duty. Boil, Crys and Rush, I need you to be ready to haul ass, find the rebels and help them with whatever they need. They’ll be expecting you—codeword Temple.”

“Aye, aye, Commander,” Sero said with a manic look on his face.
Boil was less enthused. He eyed Cody. “I noticed you didn’t mention what you would be doing in all this. Do I even want to know? Or is it going to piss me off?”

“Boil,” Cody began, “when in the last decade have you ever not been pissed off at my plans?”

“That is a good point and also deflecting as shit,” Boil doggedly iterated, “where are you going to be, Cody?”

“I’m going to get Senator Amidala and the twins out.”

“Look,” Boil said after he took that in, “I know you fought Skywalker once and won, but that isn’t going to work now that he’s a full-fledged killing machine ready to put anyone in his way down.”

“Do you think Vader’s just going to stay out of the action once the ship’s been breached? There’s not a rainstorm’s chance in Tatooine that he’s not going to leave them after the fighting starts. He’s probably not going to be dumb enough to make me one of their guards when it happens and if not, there’s only going to be stormtroopers and non-force sensitive officers there. I can handle stormtroopers.”

Boil grumbled something unintelligible under his breath, but didn’t argue anymore. Cody turned to Walker.

“While you’re in the brig, I’m going to need you to try and power down the trackers they’ve got on Amidala and the others. Make them invisible to the ship’s sensors. All of this will be a lot easier if they don’t have any idea where to look for them.”

“What do the trackers look like? Are they chipped, frequency based…”?

“No idea,” Cody said; seriously, tech had never been his strong suit but after the last few weeks he was almost positive he would have to make an effort to learn some of the ins and outs of it, “but they look like bracelets. I just watched Vader program the damned things this morning.”

“Why now?” Crys asked suspiciously, brows furrowed. “They’ve been on ship for four days; why put transmitters on at this point?”

“Because Amidala went to the mess this morning looking for some kind of juice for the twins. They were getting sick of the iced milk. Vader, apparently, was not happy that she slipped her guards. Or kriff, maybe he just didn’t like that she didn’t ask him for the juice – who knows. So, now, they have brand new jewelry.”

“How thoughtful of him,” Crys said dryly.

“Yeah, he’s a real sweetheart,” Boil growled, “He didn’t…he hasn’t hurt them, has he?”

“No,” Cody said cautiously, “Though, if looks could kill, the one Amidala gave him as he put the damned thing on the twins would’ve melted his bones from the inside out.”

“Right,” Walker said, bringing them back on track, “so likely a chip transmitter of some kind. One that’s programmed into the ship’s sensors. I can probably turn them off, but I won’t be able to completely deactivate them with only remote tools.”

“We can do that after they’ve been saved. I’m sure the rebellion can do that on their own ship or back at their base. We just have to make sure that no Imperial ship can find them before that.”

“Consider it done. What about Commander Tano’s handcuffs?”
Shit. “Is it possible to deactivate them in time?”

Walker shrugged, though the look on his face was grim. “Probably not. Not if I’m wiping out the transmitters first. Force sensitive inhibitors are more complicated.”

“Okay,” Cody rubbed at his eyes tiredly, “The transmitters take precedent. Boil, change of plans, I need you to go to the holding area and get the Commander’s lightsabers and Rex’s armor if you can. Get him a blaster from the armory while you’re at it. Then go and meet Sero and Walker at the brig.”

“Sure thing,” Boil confirmed.

“Good,” Cody looked around at the semi-circle around him and allowed himself tentative smile, “It’s set then. Prepare what you can and try to contain yourselves until it’s time.”

“We’ll be ready, sir,” Sero said, clasping an excitably nodding Rush on the shoulder.

“Alright. As the General would say, may the force be with us.”

He was gifted with five smiles for that and they all slapped him on the back as they left the armory in staggered exits. Boil, as was becoming custom, went last and knocked his knuckles on his breast plate with a wry upturn to his own mouth.

“We’re almost there,” he said.

“Almost.”

“Don’t get yourself killed, Commander.”

“You either, Sergeant.”

Boil cut loose with a toothy smile at that and rapped extra hard on the armor in response before leaving the armory and Cody behind. Cody watched him go, then turned to look at the open space around him with a kind of relief that he hadn’t felt in a long time. Just a few more hours. Just a few more and all of this would be done.

He took a deep breath, put his helmet back on and left without a backward glance.

-

He went about his duties with a lightness that almost felt unearned. He did his rounds, checking inventory, seeing the newest stormtroopers go through the paces under Sero’s gleeful instruction and the finished with a shift guarding Amidala and the twins. Vader was absent, a holo meeting with the Emperor of all things, so the twins were fairly talkative. Luke and Leia both asked for stories about their mother and the Jedi and Amidala laughed at Cody’s no doubt overwhelmed expression dealing with that incessant, earnest questioning. He’d been through interrogations that were less strenuous than that.

The amusement of it all died a quick death when Poole’s harried aide showed up and told him that the Admiral wanted to speak to him.

“Lord Vader assigned me to watch his family until he returned,” Cody said flatly, unenthusiastic about the unexpected summons.

The aide shifted restlessly on his feet, eyes darting around the room without landing on any of its inhabitants. “The Admiral sent his personal guard to watch them. He said you shouldn’t be gone
long.”

There was nothing Cody could argue with in that, so he nodded, picked up his helmet and grabbed his blaster from where it was resting against the back of the couch. Amidala frowned in concern as she watched him leave, dark eyes shadowed, but with the aide there he couldn’t risk trying to reassure her any.

The walk to Poole’s office lasted at least a hundred years and the longer it went on the more his heart raced. It was a familiar trek, and for once he was grateful for the silent, grim faced aide’s that Poole favored because the other man never once looked Cody in the face. When they arrived, the aide just nodded at him and left to fulfill whatever other duties that Poole had no doubt foisted onto him. Cody took a moment to stare at the door for answers (of which the damn thing gave him none) before rapping on it and announcing his presence.

“Come in.”

Poole was seated at his desk and looked up at Cody without a twitch of expression on his face when he approached the desk. He returned Cody’s salute and motioned for the nearest chair. Cautiously, Cody sat.

“You wanted to speak to me, sir?”

Cody hated it when officers started conversations like they had been talking for an hour already and just expected him to understand what was going on and what they were talking about. It had the unpleasant side effect of making him feel stupid despite common sense knowing that it wasn’t his fault that he was lost. On top of that, it always felt like a test when they did it; like it was their intention of catch him flat-footed and in a damning lie.

“Sir?”

“We haven’t had a chance to talk since Saleucami,” Poole said, “so I thought it best to touch base. You were the only one with Lord Vader the whole campaign; I wanted to get your opinion about… everything.”

Calling it a ‘campaign’ was massively far-fetched in Cody’s estimation, but he kept that particular opinion to himself. “What do you want my opinion about, Admiral?”

“Lord Vader.”

Cody’s breath caught in his throat. “Sir?”

“Which brings me back to my original observation,” Poole continued, expression still locked down, “You seemed surprised.”

“About Lord Vader?”

Poole’s eyes bored into Cody’s own. “About his identity.”

Maybe flat-footed wasn’t such a wrong feeling to have this time. Cody watched the Admiral, trying to figure out where he was going with this. “I don’t underst –”

“You’re a clone, Commander,” Poole spoke over him and there was a hint of heat to his voice now,
“You are aware of who Lord Vader is, correct? His true name?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Anakin Skywalker,” Poole said so coldly that Cody almost imagined icicles hanging off the man’s lips, “The Hero Without Fear. The Jedi’s Golden Boy. I remember his face plastered all over the holo-reels growing up.”

Cody was at a loss. “Yes, sir. I remember.”

Poole’s gaze sharpened even more. “Lord Vader said that you beat Skywalker in a fight once. Meaning you beat him in a fight. And now he has you guarding his family –” Poole’s voice was venomous, “—whenever he can. Tell me, Commander – did you serve under Skywalker in the War?”

“No,” Cody said, all of his muscles contracting nervously, “I didn’t, sir.”

“But you were close enough that you sparred with him. That he trusts you.”

Cody swallowed. What did Poole care and where was this anger coming from? “I—my battalion was frequently with the 501st during the war. He knew me from that, sir.”

Poole’s eyes restlessly moved over his face looking for cracks or who the force knew what. Cody felt like he’d stepped into a black hole and no one told him.

“Ahsoka Tano was Lord Vader’s apprentice during the war. The sergeant I have guarding her said that she had a fairly visceral reaction to you. The clone too.”

“All clones know each other,” Cody answered the unspoken question, “It’s in our make-up. We remember. And Tano…yes, she worked with Lord Vader. She was young at the time, volatile. I didn’t know her well.”

“And his family. The long-dead Senator Amidala. Twin children. Did you know about that?”

Cody hesitated and then tentatively answered. “There were rumors about Amidala, but no one actually knew anything. Sir.”

Poole let that linger in the recycled air around them. The dark-haired man then tilted his head curiously and tapped a finger on the desk in front of him almost absentmindedly. Rhythmic dull thumps; one, two, three. If Cody was someone else, he would think it was an unconscious habit – unfortunately, Cody knew Telis Poole as well as anyone could and nothing the man did was ever absentminded.

“Was…there anything else, sir?”

“I don’t like this, 2224.”

Cody resisted the urge to snap back with a neither do I, but here we karking are and straightened his spine from his perch on the chair. “What about the situation is less than satisfactory, sir? If it’s within my power to change it, I will.”

“A powerful Jedi Master let you live despite your alliances. Lord Vader is allowing an alarming amount of familiarity from you based solely on a past that should no longer be relevant. Our prisoner – an operative of such skill and presence that the Emperor himself wants to interrogate her – seems to take your existence here as a personal slight despite your assurance that you ‘didn’t know her that
well’. And, in the interest of full disclosure, Lieutenant Clawler – the man under your direct command – betrayed the Empire on Mustafar and for who knows how long before that. Do you see where I’m going with this?”

Cody did. And he didn’t like it anymore than Poole seemed too. Probably more, considering the circumstances. If he was executed before the rescue showed up, Boil would never let him live it down. It would be a constant barrage of snark and insults in whatever the force came in the afterlife. So. How the kiff was he supposed to get himself out of this? It was only for a few more hours and then Poole could believe whatever he wanted.

“Admiral,” he began slowly, “I can’t speak for Secura’s mindset or what prompted such appalling disloyalty in Clawler; but as for the others…Tano was always a very emotional creature – she was all but kicked out of the Jedi Order for it if I remember correctly. And Lord Vader is the Empire’s first soldier, so to speak, he wouldn’t do anything that might jeopardize its authority in the galaxy.”

He took a deep breath and, when no response was forthcoming from Poole, continued; making sure to keep his voice steady and confident. “I have faithfully served the Empire for a decade and I will continue to do so until my usefulness is no longer deemed important. And frankly, sir, with all due respect, I resent the implication of your tone and words.”

Poole said nothing for a long stretch of time. One pale hand had migrated to his face and was cradling his skull as he watched Cody. Finally, just as Cody’s lungs struggled to take in anymore air, Poole’s face broke out into a crooked smile. It wasn’t a friendly smile; the chill of it almost made Cody shiver from his seat, but Poole wasn’t known of his abundance of warmth, so Cody stayed stock still under Poole spoke.

“Commander, Commander, Commander,” Poole said, silky voice holding a trace of exasperation to it overlaid with a glaze of humor that Cody didn’t understand at all, “What am I going to do with you?”

“Sir?”

Poole sat forward, elbows bracing his upper body on the desk. “I’m never sure where I stand with you, Commander. Sometimes, I think you don’t know where you stand either.”

Cody was ready for this conversation to be over with yesterday. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Admiral.”

“I’m going to be keeping a closer eye on you, 2224. The last couple weeks have shown me that there’s maybe more to you than I anticipated when you were assigned to this ship.”

“If you feel it’s necessary, sir, then I have no objections.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if you did, but it does make it easier if everyone is on the same page,” Poole said, “I’ll let you get back to your babysitting duties, Commander.”

“Thank you, sir.” Cody stood from his seat, saluted and then began moving towards the door.

“And Commander?”

Cody stopped and cautiously looked back at the Admiral whose grey gaze was boring into his face once again. “Yes, sir?”

“You’ll know when you outlive your usefulness, Commander. And that day hasn’t arrived yet; I wouldn’t dwell on it if I were you.”
If I were you, I would’ve jettisoned myself years ago, Cody snarled in his mind. Outwardly, he tilted his head in acknowledgment of the Admiral’s statement and simply answered: “As you say, sir.”

Then he left.

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He was relieved of said ‘babysitting duties’ not long after he returned from his impromptu meeting and before he could say anything to Amidala. He spent the rest of his day in a kind of anticipatory haze; almost a fugue. He picked at his dinner, appetite all but drained and tried to nap for a couple hours before his midnight shift started. By the time 2300 hours rolled around (it was always amusing that the midnight shift did not, in fact, begin at midnight), he was as jittery as someone hopped up on stimulants. He walked his rounds with coiled muscles and a heart that refused to beat normally. He saw Sero once as they passed by the main armory and his brother nodded stone-faced at him, but there was a stiltedness to his walk that told Cody that he was in the same predicament.

It was a long three hours.

And then the starboard side of the Tenacity lurched upward from the force of a loud explosion and the airtight alarms bared as a breach was announced to the rest of the ship.

Cody turned on his heels and ran back towards the suites. He passed streams of white armored stormtroopers – some still pulling on their breastplates and helmets with panicked looks on their faces – and the occasional grey-uniform of the lower officers and technicians. No one asked where he was going in the organized chaos or stopped him for orders.

He rounded corridors with purposeful steps and hoped that Walker was making quick progress with the tracking bracelets and that none of his brothers had been near the initial breach. When he reached Vader’s quarters, he was met with two armored troopers who looked decidedly torn about what they should be doing. Cody smiled grimly underneath his helmet.

“Troopers,” he said; both straightened when they recognized his voice, “I need you to go to the s third deck armory – I’ve gotten reports of rebels moving in that direction. We can’t let them get their hands on more firepower than they may have brought.”

“It is the rebels, then, sir? No one –”

“I don’t have time for a rundown of the situation, trooper,” he said, raising his voice to talk over the slight stammer of one of the men, “We’re being boarded. Is Lord Vader, inside?”

“No, sir, but –”

“I was afraid of that. He told me to protect them at all costs when he initially assigned me here; so that’s what I’ll do. Go. The rebels won’t get past me.”

The troopers exchanged looks. “If you’re sure –”

“Go! That’s an order!”

“Yes, sir!”

The two marched off in the direction he had pointed. The third deck armory would probably be silent. No one ever seemed to use it and it would keep the troopers out of the way of everyone else. The rebels certainly wouldn’t give a damn about it. He sighed and then activated the security lock on the door and walked in.
“Senator, we have to –”

The shot that greeted him, clipped his shoulder and made him drop his own blaster on the floor with a clatter. He hissed in pain and brought his hand up to the scorched armor. Tacky trickles of blood and burned skin flaked over on his glove through the hole that the close-range shot had created. Warily, he turned towards the direction the shot must have come from and stopped dead.

Amidala was on the ground, blood seeping out of a head wound, mostly unconscious, with her children huddled around her; near tears and obviously scared to death. In front of them, one sidearm concentrated on the three figures and one pointed directly at Cody’s head, was Milo Forge. A crazed look in his eyes and a triumphant sneer was stretched across his lips as he looked at Cody.

“Hello, Commander;” he crooned, “nice of you to join us.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry. For everything.

(check the tags)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cody righted himself from the half-crouch that the shot had forced him into and stared at Forge’s manic facial expression. The man was steady on his feet, but there was a gathering storm just waiting to be unleashed from his body. Cody dropped his hand from the sluggishly bleeding wound and kept his eyes trained on the other man.

“Forge.”

Forge’s sneer deepened. “I knew it, I knew you were a traitor. Yulish thought I was crazy, they all thought I was crazy, but I knew it!”

“Congratulations,” Cody said sarcastically; slowly he took two small steps to his left and Forge angled his body to stay facing him. It put the twins out of Forge’s sight, which was what Cody had been hoping for, “Now what?”

“Now, we rectify the mistake that Poole made by keeping you here.”

Cody tilted his head. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Amidala twitch, one hand curling into a fist as consciousness started to filter back in. He stayed focused on Forge. “Killing me, you mean.”

“Of course!” Forge roared, “You’re the reason this has happened! All the close calls and the missions that fell through! It was you – don’t try to deny it.”

Cody took another step to the left; Forge’s back was almost completely facing the Amidala family; the blaster that had been pointed at them was now away from any of their bodies as Forge twisted his own to keep Cody in his eyeline. Cody forced his body to remain lax and easy; the better to move quickly if he had too. On the ground, Amidala’s eyes had opened and he could see her taking in the scene before her with calculation.

“I don’t deny it.”

“You –” Forge stabbed the blaster pointed at Cody forward like an exclamation point, “how could you do such a thing! The Empire freed you! It gave you everything you have!”

Cody felt a sneer of his own unfold on his face. “The Empire destroyed the galaxy and my brothers were caught in the crossfire – unwilling puppets made to feed your fanatical ambitions.”

“The Emperor –”

“The Emperor is a monster.”

Forge looked as if his head had caught fire. His skin had gone aflame and he was sweating. “And
“Lord Vader? You would betray him? After he’s endorsed you so handily?”

Cody rose an eyebrow. “And what,” he said dryly; watching Amidala push herself to her feet, and look around for something to use as a makeshift weapon, gesturing for the twins to stay still and quiet, “do you think Vader will do to you when he finds out that you killed his wife?”

Forge’s face went blank and then confusion crept in along the eyes and mouth. He blinked at Cody as if he was a new species. “What are you talking about?”

“You hit her in the head, didn’t you? There’s a lot of blood.”

Forge scoffed, but there was a now a minute shake to the hand holding the blaster trained on Cody; doubt rising in the way his pupils were contracting down. “The bitch wouldn’t cooperate, so I shut her up; but I didn’t kill her.”

“That was your first mistake.”

Forge, being the shortsighted idiot that he was, actually turned towards Amidala’s voice and was promptly clobbered across the face with one of the spare droid parts that Luke left scattered around the room. He went down, dazed and Cody rushed over and scrambled to get the two blasters out of Forge’s hands before he regained enough composure to use them. The other man fought back as well as he could when he was probably seeing double, but after a brief struggle he managed to disarm the officer.

“Nice timing, Senator.”

“I aim to please,” Amidala said, still a little wobbly herself, one hand resting on the back of the nearby couch, while the twins asked if she was okay with high, worried voices.

Forge slowly sat back up and glared at Cody with hate in his eyes. Cody handed one of the blasters off to Amidala, who checked its readiness with practiced ease, and pointed the remaining one at Forge.

“Well,” the bastard said, “what are you waiting for? Don’t act like you haven’t wanted to kill me for years.”

Cody was tempted. Karking hell, how he was tempted. Men like Forge were the reason the Empire had gotten such a stranglehold on much of the galaxy and one less of them running around wouldn’t be a bad thing.

But…

Amidala had moved to pick up the blaster that Cody had dropped when he was shot, she wiped the blood off her forehead and away from her eyes in efficient movements, uncaring about the stain to her robes and the smear of red still visible on her face. She was directing the twins to gather the small pockets of belongings they would be taking with them and afterward she looked over at Cody expectedly. The twins followed suit, and soon two pairs of brown and one pair of blue eyes were watching him trustingly. The twins had seen enough violence in their young lives; he didn’t want to add to it if it could be helped.

Besides, he had a feeling that once Vader watched the room footage, Forge wasn’t going to last very long anyway.

And he didn’t have time for this.
He walked over to Forge and knocked him out cold with the butt end of his blaster and left him in a heap on the floor. He turned back to the three people watching him and nodded.

“Let’s go.”

- - - -

The ship, once they had left the room, was in chaos. Stormtroopers ran by periodically, but no sign of any rebels was forthcoming as they made their way in the direction of the brig where, hopefully, Sero, Walker and Boil would be waiting with the newly released prisoners. They skulked around corridors while the alarm blared overhead. Almost no one paid them any mind.

“Mama, look, the transmitters are off!”

Cody looked down at where Leia was shoving her now unlit transmitter in her mother’s face. Amidala looked at her own and then glanced up at Cody.

“Your doing?”

“You know me, I’m terrible at machines.”

“Machines are easy; people are hard,” Luke piped up as they all ducked behind a support wall waiting for a harried group of young bridge officers to pass by.

Cody snorted. “Now where have I heard that before?”

Amidala smiled wanly.

They found the brig with minimal fighting – which Cody considered a blessing that probably wouldn’t last much longer, if his luck was anything to go by – and walked into the scene of an argument between Boil and Tano.

“—mean stay here? We have to go get Padme and the twins! Now!”

“And I told you,” Boil said, exasperated, “the Commander is getting them. They’ll be here any moment and we can leave.”

Tano bared her teeth in agitation. “I don’t think –”

“Ahsoka.”

Amidala’s voice cut the chatter in the room immediately. Tano ran over to the shorter woman and grabbed her in a close hug, careful to keep her separated, but still worn handcuffs from hitting her or scraping along skin and then did the same for the two children. Face transformed from dark and foreboding to relieved and open in one quick moment. Boil, despite looking disgruntled, had a small smile twitching at the corners of his mouth at the reunion.

“Cody.”

Cody flinched, but turned toward Rex despite the shame that bubbled in his throat from the memory of their last encounter. Just remembering the words he’d said – meant or not – were enough to make him sick.

Rex stared at him – face blank – and then one pale eyebrow raised mockingly. “You look like shit.”

Cody laughed involuntarily at that. “I do? What about you? When did you grow that dead animal on
Rex brought a hand up to his beard and scratched along the edge of his jawline. “I think it makes me look distinguished.”

“It makes you look old,” Boil said as he passed by them to talk to Walker about something.

Cody and Rex shared an amused glance at that and then abruptly and surprisingly, as neither of them had ever been particularly good at physical affection, Rex pulled Cody into a short, heartfelt hug. He stepped back a minute later and nodded decisively at Cody.

“It’s good to see you as yourself, brother.”

Cody shook Rex’s arm a little in acknowledgment. “You too, vod.”

“We’ll talk more when we get out of this shithole,” Rex then looked at Cody with a deeply suspicious expression, “You do have a plan, right?”

“I have a plan.”

Rex looked unconvinced. “A good plan? Or a kark-it-let’s-just-do-it plan?”

“I got the Senator and her kids, here didn’t I?”

“…Kark it, huh?”

“Basically.”

“One day,” Rex said, shaking his head with a bemused look passing over his features, “I will go into battle with a fully-fledged plan that has a high level of success and goes smoothly from step one to the finish.”

“Good luck with that.”

“I’ve done what I can, sir,” Walker said finally, cutting into the conversation, “The trackers are deactivated and Commander Tano’s handcuffs are partially disabled, but without better tools, I can’t actually completely shut down the null signal on them.”

“We’ll make do, Walker, thank you. Get the others ready to move.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cody looked back at Rex who was watching him with interest. He frowned. “What?”

Rex shook his head. “Nothing.”

He was lying, but Cody didn’t have the time to get into an in-depth discussion about it, so he brushed it aside for a different venue and moved over to the huddled group of non-vod’e. Amidala was poised with her blaster and Tano was twirling one of her sabers ideally, but the sharp eyes didn’t waver from him for a second as he approached.

“We have to go,” Cody told Amidala, “I don’t know how long the resistance can keep up a sustained attack against the ship, but the sooner you’re in their custody the better I’ll feel.”

“I agree,” Tano said almost before Cody had finished talking.
"You too," Cody said, cutting a look over at her. Her eyes widened at the intensity of his tone, but he cut her off before she could object, "You’re too important – Vader may have come for the Senator, but the Empire came for you. You have to get out of here."

Tano scowled, but she nodded her understanding and her body actually relaxed. Amidala patted Cody on the arm.

"Don’t worry, Commander, I’ll make sure she gets on the ship if I have to drag her by her montrals."

Cody snorted at Tano’s outraged squawk and then gestured for their motley group to get ready. Force only knew how bad the fighting was near the resistance’s docking bay.

- - -

Bad. The answer was that it was really bad at the docking bay.

They met pockets of fighting as they moved through the ship, but much of the time they had been able to get the drop on their enemies because they didn’t realize at first that Cody and the others had turned against them and by the time they had, it was too late. Despite not being able to access the full power of the force, Ahsoka moved as if she was uninhibited and used that mesmerizing grace to stun the officers who had never seen a Jedi fight before. At one point, when a stormtrooper had been seconds away from injuring Boil, a stray piece of debris loped off from a previous firefight had gone whizzing by Cody’s head and knocked right into the face of said trooper, giving Sero enough time to step in and eliminate him. Cody had looked back and saw Luke with his arm outstretched from Amidala’s side, the look of concentration on his face melting into joy as he saw that his ploy had worked. Amidala had a cross between pride and worry painted on her face as she looked down at her son. Cody understood the sentiment.

Their luck ended when they reached the deck that the resistance initially infiltrated. Fierce fighting was ill-contained and the chaos of it was coming in loud and clear through the comm he still had linked to the ship’s own. He could hear Yulish wondering "where the kriff is Forge?" and the general discordance and confusion that was rife in close quartered combat.

He couldn’t hear Poole at all. Which was the most troubling thing by far.

"I can feel him," Luke said out of nowhere as they huddled around the edges of the battle, looking for a way around the worst of the fighting.

"Who, darling?" Amidala asked.

Luke’s face scrunched up. "Vader."

Update: That was the most troubling thing by far.

Amidala gave him a grave look. "We need to go. Now."

Finesse would have to wait. Boil pointed out the cluster of resistance fighters that were hovering around a boarding ramp, where, conveniently, the most concentrated fighting was going on. He nodded at his second and then turned to Rex who had the same grimly determined set to his features that all the adults in their little band did.

"You and Commander Tano have to get them to the boarding station. Sero, Walker go with them."

“What are you going to do?”
“Try to distract the forces accumulating here and find Rush and Crys,” he glanced at Boil who gave him a two-finger salute to show his acceptance of the plan. Rex was a little less blasé about the whole thing.

“You’re supposed to be retiring,” Rex said humorlessly, “that’s means you have to be on that ship when the karking thing takes off; not out here acting like a some stupid shiny who thinks they’re invincible.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Rex.”

Rex looked vaguely affronted. “I’m serious! Ass on the ship. As soon as possible. Don’t make me come get you.”

Boil laughed at the aggravated expression Cody was no doubt making. “I missed you, Captain. We could’ve used this years ago.”

Rex patted Boil on the shoulder. “You, too, vod.”

Cody rolled his eyes and returned his attentions to a newly amused looking Amidala and a grinning Tano. “As Rex said, get to the ship as quickly as possible. If it doesn’t look like we’re going to make it, you get out of here regardless. Don’t risk this mission for our sakes.”

Amidala nodded, but there was a spark to her eyes that said she didn’t agree with all aspects of the plan and she’d be damned if Cody and the others weren’t given until the absolute last second to get on that ship. The other thing that kept him from arguing further was the knowledge that despite how she’d feel about leaving them behind, her parental responsibilities would keep her from doing something too crazy or dangerous.

“Walker,” the man in question swung his gaze around to Cody, alert, “can you track where Rush and Crys are. A direction at least?”

“Raising them on the comms would be kriffing amazing,” Boil put in, eyes darting around the fury in front of them.

“Private comms aren’t going to do a Force damned thing in all that,” Walker gestured, “but I should be able to scan for them.”

“Do it.”

Walker immediately started doing something incomprehensible to Cody with his hand-held tech hub while Rex, Sero and Tano mapped out their plan of attack for getting to the ramp successfully. Hours – well, not really, but it certainly felt like it – later, Walker’s face contorted in confusion and worry.

*Great, Cody thought half-hysterically, just what we need.* “What is it?”

“They’re not here.”

“What?”

“I mean they’re on the secondary bridge,” Walker pointed to the opposite side of the deck, “Over there, down the corridor and to the left. They’re not moving.”

Boil began cursing violently and Cody felt his own muscles tighten. He looked back at the others who weren’t paying them any attention and then nodded at Walker. “Go with them; we’ll see if we can find out what’s going on.”
Walker’s troubled look didn’t budge. “Be careful, sir.”

“We’ll see you on the other side,” Rex said as the two groups gathered in opposite directions to complete the mission. Cody waved him on.

“May the force be with you.”

Tano gave him a familiar grin that pushed him momentarily back into the Separatists Wars with eerie accuracy. “That’s my line, Commander.”

Amidala gave him an encouraging smile and then gathered the twins to her sides protectively and Cody waited just long enough to watch them begin the trek across the deck before turning to Boil, who just rose an eyebrow at him questioningly.

“After you, Commander.”

Cody sighed and then the two of them picked their way to the corridor Walker had pointed out. Occasionally firing on stormtroopers, which in turn confused both the troopers and the resistance that were within sightline. When they were probably ten yards from the corridor, they stopped to huddle behind an inspection station and Boil pointed over to the row of fuel cells that were stored in the upper banks of the bay. Cody shot him an alarmed look.

“You can’t possibly be serious.”

Boil shot him a disgruntled look. “What else can we do? It’s near the Empire’s side of the fight – not the resistance.”

Cody resisted the urge to slap Boil upside the head and looked around the area for something else to use as a distraction. He focused, eventually, on one of the ships central communications hubs that was blinking on the ceiling from the ceiling. It would knock out the last of the comms to the Empire’s forces without touching the frequency that the rebels were using. And Yulish would be forced to send her orders without widespread coordination. He took aim and shot at the hub until it exploded in a case of sparks and exposed circuitry. The comm inside his own helmet died with a hiss and the battle around them shut down on the side of the Tenacity for a moment as everyone stopped to figure out what had happened.

Boil looked at him. “That won’t slow them down long.”

“Not the troopers directly around Yulish,” Cody agreed, “but everyone else is going to be a panicking mess. The rebels will be able to pick them off before they get it together. Let’s go.”

The two skittered by the remaining stormtroopers and pushed into the corridor where it was immediately apparent that something was wrong. The natural spill-over that normally accompanied the most heavily concentrated of fire fights was completely absent. There was evidence of past fighting, a few solitary bodies and some blaster marks on the walls, but it was otherwise silent and empty. Cody’s unease went off the rails and by the way Boil pressed just a tad closer, his misgivings were obviously shared.

They moved with the kind of slow caution that holo-horror reel actors did; methodically checking the nearest off-shoot tunnels until they reached the secondary bridge and ventured inside with an unhealthy amount of trepidation. At first, it looked like any other abandoned post. The lights of the consoles were still on, but none of the bridge crew where around. The sounds of their boots echoed in the chamber.

And then Cody saw them.
Rush and Crys were laying on the deck floor, almost peaceful looking; blasters by their sides, unmoving. Next to them were three unfamiliar rebels; just as still. Cody’s heart all but stopped and he flung out a hand to grab Boil, who had come in behind him – back to back – and clearly hadn’t seen anything yet.

“Boil.”

“What?” The words had barely left his mouth when he stopped abruptly beside Cody.

“No,” Boil said disbelievingly, and ran over to their fallen brother’s sides; desperately checking for signs of life. Cody could only watch in frozen, still dawning grief as Boil turned their bodies over to present perfectly rounded holes through their chests. Mind almost blank, Cody approached the scene, throat all but closed and blood cold and dormant in his veins. Once he was close enough to see his brothers faces, he realized that he did recognize one of the rebels. The clothes were different and he had a harsh layer of facial hair, but it was definitely Clawler. The already broken pieces of Cody’s heart shattered further as he remembered Celese’s worried voice telling him that her brother had insisted on going on the mission. The rebels had the same wounds as Rush and Crys. Wounds that Cody recognized all too well.

A lightsaber did this.

Still mostly numb from the unexpected reveal, Cody forcibly pulled a crying Boil to his feet. The man looked at him like he was insane.

“Cody, what the kark are you –”

“We’re not alone.”

Boil was sluggish to understand, brows pinched downward in confusion. “What?”

“We were meant to find this.”

Boil went to respond, but was interrupted by the sound of deliberately loud footsteps coming from their right.

“Very good, Commander. Always a step ahead.”

Both of them turned to face Vader where he melted out of the shadows; a twisted smile highlighting his still handsome face. His lightsaber was already unleashed and hummed with contained energy.

“Now,” Vader began, slinking forward until he was standing directly in front of them, three or so meters away, “I have a question for you: Where,” his falsely calm tone wavered with inherent darkness, “is my family?”

Cody swallowed with difficulty. “Safe from you.”

The smile died and transformed into a wicked fury. “I’m not stupid; I knew back on Saleucami that something was wrong. You reacted so strangely to Ahsoka. But I applaud you, too, your shields kept me from being able to detect exactly what was going on. I couldn’t be sure whether you were still chipped or not. That’s a credit to Obi-Wan, I suppose.”

Cody flinched involuntarily. His blaster, which had dropped to his hips at the shock of finding his brothers, came up to an almost ready position without thought. Vader noted the movement and then took a few casual steps forward.
“But then I saw your brothers here,” he gestured to Rush and Crys without inflection, “helping the rebels navigate the ship and I knew for certain.”

He waved his lightsaber in their direction seemingly without purpose, and he and Boil stepped backward to keep the weapon out of striking range. Vader stopped moving and just stared at them; he cocked his head to side as if listening in on a silent conversation.

“Where are they, Commander?”

Suddenly, the grief and heartache that had permeated his body turned into a spike of blinding anger. His brothers were dead. Dead at the hands of a man they had once trusted with their lives. Dead, hours from the freedom that none of them had ever really tasted. This was their fate? Crys had survived years of the War and the degrading servitude that followed for this? Rush had lived with the guilt of Obi-Wan’s death and Order 66 and still tried to keep a positive attitude in the face of working for a polluted, rotten corpse of an Empire that would sooner see him disposed of than treated equally, for this? Dying in an abandoned bridge, meters from rescue and the rest of their brothers. And Vader had the audacity to act as if he still knew Cody and had the right to speak so familiarly with him, to step over Rush and Crys’ bodies as if they were no more to him than the refuse on the ground?

No.


Cody could feel his entire body shake with a violent rage. He stared at Vader’s bare face, took in the almost nonchalance of his stance. Cody knew what he was thinking; knew that Vader looked at him and saw the good soldier. The calm demeanor. Steady. Predictable. Without warning, he dropped all of his shields at once and projected his feelings outward the way Obi-Wan had once showed him.

Then he fired.

The first shot hit Vader directly in the chest – around his lungs – before the force wielder managed to get a hand up and deflect the rest of the barrage. The yellow eyes that Cody thought he might see in his dreams for decades to come (if he managed to survive that long – he didn’t think his odds were great at the moment) were blown open wide and – for the briefest of seconds – they had shifted to a clear, familiar blue. The shock of his emotion hitting Vader full in the face had given him just that split-second advantage he’d needed to actual hit the man with his blaster fire.

Never underestimate the element of surprise, Obi-Wan’s voice reverberated in his mind as he slid behind a console to keep firing at Vader as the Sith flung one of the unoccupied seats in his direction. Or, Obi-Wan’s voice continued, a more sheepish edge to it now, a Jedi’s inability to process a cascade of emotion aimed directly at them.

Vader was bleeding, and Cody could see that his breathing was uneven which confirmed Cody’s suspicions of possible internal damage. Not, he thought, still caught up in the adrenaline of the moment, that it mattered much when the man could leap long distances and nearly decapitate someone with little effort. Cody (and Boil, who had been smart enough to duck along with Cody as the first shots went off) barely survived the attack – though the console had been split in half.

They wouldn’t be able to hold out forever. Injured or not, neither of them was a match in skill or ability with a fully trained Force user. The sober look on Boil’s face as his second fired back and maneuvered around the fairly enclosed space told Cody all he needed to know about how he thought this would end.
The fight went on for long, drawn out minutes that seemed to last for days. The sleep deprivation, constant battle and stress were creeping into his muscles and reaction time. Boil and he split up to try and divide Vader’s attacks and Cody – somehow – got another hit in around Vader’s shoulder while the man threw Boil across the room before being subjected to the same treatment himself. He landed on his wrist strangely and felt the bones snap cleanly. Vader stood afterwards, silent and waiting – toying with them now more than anything.

*I’m so sorry*, Cody thought again, catching his breath for a moment and staring at the still bodies of his brothers, *I’ve failed you all over again*. He darted a look over at Boil who was crouched on his knees, spitting a gob of blood onto the floor in front of him and nodded slightly. Boil returned it and stood on his feet while opposite him, Cody did the same. He switched his blaster to the other hand; his wrist wouldn’t hold the weight of it with any accuracy.

Vader eyed them, his features almost placid; one gloved hand was hovering over his open chest wound.

“Are you going to answer me now?”

“With the Force’s good graces, your family is already long gone,” Cody said, “and with any luck, you’ll never see them again.”

Vader’s face contorted into the now well-known look of anger. “Do you think you’re going to survive this? Either of you? That you’re special?” The Sith took a step towards Cody, who stood his ground – the time for retreating had passed – and sneered condescendingly, “You mean nothing to me.”

“Then I die,” Cody said, a strange calm washing over him, “but it’ll be with the satisfaction that you’ve failed…Lord Vader.”

Vader let out a cry of pure hatred and lunged at Cody, lightsaber ready to strike. Cody watched the movement as if in slow motion, Force users were too quick to counter when they put the full weight of their abilities behind an attack, so he didn’t bother to do anything other than watch it happen as if time itself had become mired in quicksand. Maybe the distraction of his death would allow Boil to get out – he was far closer to the exit than Cody anyway – and away. It would be worth it if it saved one more of his brothers from an undeserved fate.

And maybe that would’ve worked. Maybe Vader would have been so focused on his determination to cause Cody pain and suffering that Boil could’ve left. Slipped out and distanced himself from the living hurricane that Vader was. Maybe he would’ve told Rex and Sero and Walker all about it on the resistance ship afterward. About Rush and Crys, too. Maybe he’d get to Bly and give him the news as well. Maybe he would have been remembered with a ceremony that they used to do for their fallen brothers during the War and be put away in his brothers’ memories as one of many lost, but not forgotten.

Maybe.

But in this life, none of that happened. In this life, while he waited to die, Vader’s lightsaber was stopped so close to his neck that he could actually feel the artificial heat of it on his skin. As his eyes focused on the scene in front of him, he took in Vader’s stunned expression (another flash of blue? Cody couldn’t be sure; his eyes were trying to make sense of the images) and the fact that the blood red ‘saber had been stopped by the blue of one much more familiar.

The two lightsabers scrapped together and then Cody was gently pushed backwards by the Force while the blades parted with a flourish and Vader skidded away from Cody and his savior.
Cody’s breathing was ragged and his heart was beating so hard that if it were any other circumstances than a near death experience, he’d assume that he was having a heart attack. As it was, once he laid eyes on the man that had saved him, a heart attack didn’t seem so farfetched after all.

It was more of a profile than anything; he was a couple steps to the side and forward from Cody, but the minute Cody had processed the silver touched red hair and loose stance of the figure, half his body had lit up in recognition and the other half nearly shut down in surprise. Nobody in the whole room – Cody least of all – seemed to breath.

Then: the still beloved face turned slightly in Cody’s direction and he could see the blue eyes that he’d never been able to make fade in his memory.

Obi-Wan Kenobi smiled at him, small and tinged with concern, but genuine.

“Cody, it’s been a long time.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't hate me too much, guys.

I am sorry about the wait - it took forever for me to get the gumption/inspiration to write it. As always, typos are all mine and once again you guys continue to be awesome. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!