Lost in the Echo Part IV

by flamethrower

Summary

"He tried not to think about the others if he could help it; he couldn’t afford to be that consciously depressed.

He rested his right hand on the leather cuff on his left arm, tracing the pattern of the text underneath by memory. Two years, five months, and fifteen days.

He was still no closer to figuring out a way to go home."

Notes

Betabetabeta credit to Norcumi, who I should send a lot of awesome presents to because I broke her. Which uh--you guys may want to have flashback tissues handy.

Republic Date 5212: 5/3rd
Jedi Temple, Coruscant

“Ahsoka.”

Ahsoka Tano turned around to find Master Obi-Wan standing behind her. She hadn’t even noticed his approach—she was too wound up, worried about the upcoming Council meeting. Her reinstatement couldn’t come fast enough, not after the terrible week she’d just had.

“Yes, Master?”

Obi-Wan smiled, but even to her, the expression looked tired. Maybe a bit forced, too. “Come with me, please. I need to speak to you before they call you in.”

Curious, Ahsoka followed her grand-Master into the private antechamber next to the Council Chamber. There was a small ring of seats in the room, like a mini-representation of the Council’s chairs.

Obi-Wan sat down in a backless chair, leaning forward to rest his arms on his thighs, hands clasped together. “Please.”

“Now you’re worrying me.” Ahsoka tried for a bright smile as she sat down, but it wilted when she saw the concerned set to his face. “What’s wrong, Master Obi-Wan?”

He looked down at his hands. “Before I tell you this, I want you to know that I voted against it. Not because I don’t think you capable, but because…” He glanced up at her. “Because you deserve better.”

Ahsoka felt her heart seize in her chest. “Am I being cast out permanently?”

“No.” Obi-Wan shook his head. “But to others, it may soon appear that way.”

That was still better than never coming home. “Tell me, Master.”

“When you go before the Council with Anakin, you will be given a very unkind speech,” Obi-Wan said, and grimaced. “It’s supposed to be part of the deception, but it’s still fucking infuriating.”

Ahsoka reared back in surprise. “Obi-Wan!”

He smiled at her again, but this time it looked more genuine. “You’re five months away from seventeen Standard, Ahsoka. It’s time you realized that your grand-Master has flaws. Most of us do,” he added, smile vanishing.

“Padawan Tano, you are going to be given a choice. When you go before the Council, you may accept the terms of reinstatement, as…gilded…as they may be, and return to your Master’s side. Or, you may publicly reject the Order and leave this Temple.”

“But it wouldn’t be true.” Ahsoka frowned. That certainly explained her grand-Master’s level of discomfort. “What do they want me to do?”

“The Council is asking you to go into Separatist space. To all outward appearances, you would be a disenfranchised Jedi Padawan, one who has turned her back on both the Order and the Republic after suffering humiliating treatment at the hands of both.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “We don’t have very many surviving spies, at least not ones that are capable of
reporting in. Your circumstances are considered a prime opportunity for us to rectify that lack.”

“I’ll have the perfect backstory.” Ahsoka realized. “Ex-Jedi, bitter about the military and the Order…” She shivered. “I wouldn’t have to do much to be convincing, would I?”

“After everything that’s happened?” Obi-Wan shook his head. “No. Please bear in mind that we are also lacking spies for a reason. What is being asked of you is exceptionally dangerous, even for a war-trained Padawan who is capable of keeping up with Anakin Skywalker.”

She smiled at the compliment, but the mention of Skyguy was a stark reminder of who was missing from this meeting. “What about my Master? Does he know about this?”

Obi-Wan said nothing, dropping his eyes.

Ahsoka stared at him in disbelief. “They’re not going to—you’re not going to tell him?” All at once, she was angry. “Obi-Wan, Master, no. You can’t do that to him, not again, not after that Rako—”

Obi-Wan held up his hand, a troubled expression on his face. “Ease down, Padawan. Save your anger at injustice for those who deserve it.”

Ahsoka bit her tongue, glaring. “We all promised, remember? No more secrets like that.”

“Yes.” Obi-Wan sat up straight. “Officially? No, Anakin is not to know.”

“Unofficially?” Ahsoka prompted.

“Unofficially, I’ll tell him the moment an opportunity presents itself. Hopefully that will be this evening, but your Master sometimes responds to things of this nature in unpredictable ways.”

Ahsoka’s eyes widened. “You mean he might walk out with me.”

“He might.” Obi-Wan looked thoughtful. “If he does, you can feel free to inform him as to the true nature of the assignment when you’re in a safe, secure location. I hope he doesn’t, though.”

“Why?” Ahsoka thought that company would be nice, especially her Master’s company. Being a lone spy didn’t sound pleasant.

“Because I’d probably follow right along after the two of you.” Obi-Wan gave her a wry smile. “The Republic can’t afford to lose all three of us at once. Like it or not, we are competent military commanders.”

“Competent is not the word I would use.” Ahsoka grinned. “Inventive. Ingenious.”

“Insane,” Obi-Wan said dryly, and Ahsoka giggled.

“One more thing.” Obi-Wan surprised her by reaching out to touch the first link in her silka beads. “If you choose to take the assignment, leave this with Anakin.”

“What? Why? Is it because I’m supposed to be rejecting the Order?”

“Well, traditionally, I’m not supposed to tell you this, but fuck tradition.” The expression on Obi-Wan’s face was equal parts defiant and proud. “This assignment is your Trial, Ahsoka Tano.”

It took a moment for his words to sink in, and at first, she was certain that she’d misheard. “But—but Master! Like you said, I’m not seventeen yet. I’ve barely been a Padawan for two years now!”
Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes. A Padawan in war time, one I have watched grow into an admirable, capable young Jedi. One who has learned the ways of the warrior, the diplomat, the leader, and the teacher at an astounding rate while refusing to bow or break under the immense pressures placed on such young shoulders.”

Ahsoka felt her face warm at the compliment, and was very glad that Togrutan blushes were invisible to humans. “Thank you, Master.”

“You are correct, though. If your apprenticeship had been normal, this conversation would be almost unthinkable at this point in your training.”

Ahsoka winced. “Yeah, I guess ‘normal’ doesn’t really apply.” She hesitated. “You said you believe me capable. Do you really think I’m ready?”

“For the Trials? Oh, yes. I have no doubt that you will succeed, though it may be a lengthy assignment.” Obi-Wan smiled. “I just think the Trial being insisted upon is a load of shit.”

Ahsoka snickered. “That is really going to take some getting used to, Master.”

“Just don’t ask anyone in the 501st or the 212th what my other nickname is.”

Imperial Year 27: 1/29th

Alliance-observed Old Republic Date 5239

_The Ascendancy_, Outer Rim

Ezra Bridger bounced on his feet. Kanan kept riding his ass about being a decorous senior-Padawan-almost-Knight, but Ezra was smart enough to know that decorous wasn’t really his thing. He could use the Force, he could fight, he could get the job done—but if Kanan had wanted diplomacy and visual serenity from his student, he’d found himself the wrong Padawan.

“Stop bouncing. You’re twenty-five, not twelve,” Zeb grumbled.

“Don’t be such a stick in the mud,” Ezra shot back. “Go shoot at Chopper again if you’re cranky.”

Zeb rolled his eyes. “I’m not cranky. I’m just not in any hurry to go back to that pit of a dustball you call your homeworld.”

“It’s a little bit of a pit,” Ezra admitted. “But it’s _my_ pit.”

Zeb’s expression went soft. “Yeah. I get that.”

“Big wuss.” Ezra punched Zeb in the arm before they both became depressed wrecks. There’d been enough of that going around.

When the _Ghost’s_ ramp finally lowered, Ezra had to stop himself from flinging himself at his Master and Hera. They’d been gone a full week longer than expected, and with every year of the war that passed, Ezra got more paranoid about losing his adopted family. He coped well enough, and he’d mourn and keep going if he had to, but he still didn’t want to lose them.
He was such a shoddy Jedi. No wonder Kanan was waffling on his Knighthood.

“Hi, guys!”

“Hey,” Kanan said, slinging his and Hera’s bags over his shoulder. “Miss us, kids?”

“Not at all. It was quiet without all the bickering and the make-up sex,” Zeb said, and then winced when Kanan delivered a Force swat to the back of his head. “Ow!”

Kanan grinned. “Be nice.”

“What’s going on?” Hera asked, palming the hatch shut. “You’re bouncing, Ezra. It must be good news.”

“We’re gonna get to go shoot things,” Zeb announced, at the same time that Ezra blurted, “Lothal’s in confirmed full rebellion!”

Kanan’s eyebrows went up. “It is, huh?”

Hera took her bag from Kanan. “I guess those rumors were true, after all.”

Kanan was shaking his head. “I doubt they’re all true. What do we know, Padawan?”

Ezra felt a warm glow. Kanan didn’t call him that very often, but they’d been together over ten years now, and it was just as nice, every time. “Ahsoka says that it might be some old Alliance Intelligence operative. She’s not one hundred percent on that—Cypher sent back the right response to an encrypted message, but the Alpha Eight is old enough that it’s possible the Imps finally cracked it.”

“Cypher.” Hera was frowning. “What about the Jedi rumor?”

Ezra grimaced. “Well, that’s the thing. Ahsoka says that Bail Organa confirmed for her years ago that Cypher—the original Cypher—was a trustworthy source and a former Jedi, same as she was. But nobody’s heard from Cypher since Alderaan, so he could be dead and this could all be a trap. But if it’s a trap, it’s a really, really weird one, because Lothal is running a coordinated, successful rebellion against the on-planet Imps, and we’re pretty sure that this Cypher person is working with them.”

“Anything else?” Hera asked.

“The twins showed up,” Zeb said, which made Hera and Kanan glance at each other. It was still strange, hearing the clones referred to as twins and not triplets. “They heard the rumors, too. One of the names the rumor mill spat out used to be attached to a Jedi.”

Ezra could tell that Kanan was leery. They’d swallowed that bait before, and it had almost gotten everyone killed. “It’s worth the look, but I hope we’re going in subtly, not with guns blazing,” Kanan said.

Zeb scowled. “That’s not near as much fun.”

“Dying’s not that fun, either,” Kanan said, and looked at Ezra. “I trust you’re here because we’ve got a briefing.”

“Twenty minutes from now, in the briefing room,” Ezra confirmed.

“Just enough time to unload,” Hera said, and then darted forward. “First shower’s mine, Kanan!”
“Hey!” Kanan bolted after her. “Back in fifteen!”

“They can’t really manage shower sex in fifteen minutes, can they?” Ezra wondered.

“Shut up,” Zeb grumbled, shoving at Ezra’s head. “I don’t want to know.”

“I mean, those ‘freshers barely fit one person at a time.”

"Please shut up.”

Sabine was standing in the corridor just off the briefing room when Zeb and Ezra made their way over. “Good morning!” Ezra said cheerfully.

Sabine gave him a level, groggy stare of disdain. “Morning people are evil.”

“Should’ve gone to bed before fourth hour, then,” Ezra replied, leaning forward to kiss her cheek. He half expected to get swatted for it, and was relieved when she didn’t. Sabine was tetchy in the mornings, especially when morning began before eighth hour.

“No respect for an artist’s schedule,” Sabine muttered.

“Sure I do, otherwise I wouldn’t bring you this,” Ezra said, and held out the caff he’d been hiding behind his back. “A half-gallon of cream, enough sugar to create insulin shock, and a sprinkle of that chocolate powder they keep around.”

Sabine made grabby hands and took the cup from him. “I knew I liked you for a reason.”

Ezra considered it while Sabine sucked down caff at an appalling rate. Yeah, he could sort of understand why “delivers caff” might be near the top of the list of Reasons Why Ezra Was Tolerable.

“There are some damned nice benefits to running with a larger crew. Civilized caff, food that doesn’t come with a wrapper, bunks that are wider than the span of my hands…” Zeb shook his head. “We are spoiled rotten, you know that, right?”

Ezra put his hands in his pockets, shrugging. “Well, we’re about to go to Lothal, and they haven’t had decent supplies in ten years. I’m sure we’ll get over being spoiled real fast.”

Hera and Kanan returned in fresh clothing and a definite lack of travel grit. “Have fun fighting over the ‘resher?” Ezra asked, trying to look innocent.

Kanan sighed. “She won,” he said, and Hera looked smug.

Ahsoka was already waiting for them, her “I’m in charge” mask firmly in place. Ezra really wanted to know where she’d learned that—Kanan couldn’t manage to keep a straight face for that long, Hera just shifted between “Mom” and “Badass,” and Sabine couldn’t stop smiling when she was blowing shit up. Neither could Zeb, for that matter.

Kanan shook hands with Rex and Wolffe, that full-arm grasp thing that Ezra’s Master only did for the two old soldiers. “This has to be good, if you two are tagging along.”

Rex grinned. “It’s always more fun to go into a fight with crazy people at your back.”

“Don’t listen to him, his commanding officers were fucking nuts,” Wolffe said. “Some of us had normal military commanders.”

Ahsoka’s mask broke apart long enough the Togrutan to roll her eyes. “Thanks a lot, Wolffe.”
Ezra wasn’t sure what they were waiting for, but then a squad of pilots turned up. They were already dressed in their bright orange jumpsuits, the ones the twins called “Find Me and Rescue My Ass” suits. Ezra had yet to figure out if they were mocking the idea, or thought it was sheer brilliance.

Ahsoka ran them through the little they already knew, though everyone paid as much attention as if they were hearing it for the first time. “We’re going in as a single small group. We’ll recon on the ground, and depending on what we find, report in to High Command with recommendations.”

“Wait.” Blue Squadron’s leader, Commander Webb, leaned forward, frowning. “We don’t have mission clear from Command for this?”

“No,” Ahsoka said bluntly. “We don’t.”

“Huh. All right,” Webb leaned back. “Volunteer only, then.”

“Yes. Does anyone want to back out?” Ahsoka asked. No one raised their hands. They were all kind of used to crazy, and it was a lot easier to ask forgiveness than permission.

“I just want to know why we’re not asking for a Go,” Webb’s lieutenant asked. Ezra was wracking his brain, trying to come up with the woman’s name.

“The blockade,” Kanan said, answering for her. “It’s eight Star Destroyers strong—”

“Eleven,” Ahsoka corrected.

Kanan whistled; the pilots exchanged nervous glances. “That’s quite a collection.”

“Eleven Star Destroyers. Orbiting Lothal.” Ezra stared at Ahsoka. “Geeze, they must really be pissing off the Empire.”

“That will be fun to run through,” Hera said, smiling.

Ahsoka smiled back. “There’s no one else I want at the helm for that, but we don’t have to run the blockade unless someone botches the code delivery. We managed to pick up one of their very recent transmissions, and unless they swap out right before we arrive, the code will get us down to Lothal on a resupply for one of the garrisons.

“Our priority is to discover the extent of the Lothal rebellion, determine its chance of success, and submit to Command whether we should divert Alliance resources towards eliminating the Lothal Blockade.”

“Why not just take out the blockade anyway?” Ellie asked. At least Ezra wasn’t spacing on all the squad member’s names.

Wolffe was shaking his head. “Doesn’t do much good to take down a blockade if the planet behind it isn’t prepared to defend themselves. Maybe we get rid of the Imps, yeah, but that blockade also keeps out the rest of the assholes, too.”

“Learned our lesson on that one,” Zeb muttered, flexing his hands around the railing that circled the briefing room. “Took months to clean up that mess.”

Kanan still looked doubtful. “It wouldn’t be the first time the Empire tried to use a Jedi rumor to trick the Alliance, but I don’t think we can afford to ignore this, either.”

“If there is a Jedi on Lothal, we’ll find them,” Ahsoka promised. “If someone is pretending to be a
Jedi on Lothal, we’re at least going to hear out the reason why. If it’s Cypher…well, then we do our best to convince him that it would be nice to have one more Jedi in the Alliance.”

“I’ve never heard that name,” Webb’s lieutenant said, and Ezra finally remembered her name—Ginia Ooros. “I know of Targeter, Fulcrum, Wraith’s Head, Gnome, Psychic, and Queen, but not Cypher.”

“Cypher was an extremely independent operative, even by Alliance standards.” Ahsoka crossed her arms. “Bail Organa was his primary contact; I only spoke with him a few times, always by encoded text transmission. Never voice, never imagery.”

“Paranoid,” Ellie muttered.

“With good reason,” Ahsoka countered. “It didn’t matter if you claimed to no longer be a Jedi. Discovery would still get you killed, or worse. Jedi concern aside, Cypher wrote a great deal of the Alliance’s early data encryption. We’re still using four of those codes and their keys—it’s been at least ten years, and the Empire’s slicers still haven’t figured them out.”

“It’s not just recon, then,” Wolffe said, after exchanging looks with Rex. “If Cypher’s confirmed, then we have to make sure the Empire never gets their hands on him.”

Ahsoka nodded. “I’d rather not have Cypher’s abilities used against us. Our job is hard enough.”

“I have yet to encounter a problem that can’t be solved by violence,” Sabine put in. Ezra grinned at her. Maybe they weren’t in love, maybe they were, but he still had one hell of a crush.

“The sad thing is that I still haven’t found a way to disagree with you,” Ahsoka replied dryly. “Back to business: Blue Squadron, you’re not going in with us directly. I want you to wait for us on Kamino. Remain on stand-by—you need to be able to fly at a moment’s notice.”

Webb nodded. “Not a problem.”

“Kamino’s still in Alliance hands?” Wolffe asked, surprised. “I thought the Imps would have tried a hell of a lot harder to get that back.”

“No, it’s been in our hands since…since, well.” Ahsoka grimaced.

“It’s fine, Commander,” Rex said in a gruff voice.

Zeb was an asshole, but he was also really good at picking up on when there was a desperate need for a change of subject. “Do we have any other means of finding this Cypher of yours? I really doubt he’d be using that name out in the open.”

“Coy Val-Dar,” Wolffe said, when Ahsoka glanced at the twins. “But we’re pretty sure it’s actually Cuy’val Dar. It’s Mando’a—Mandalorian.”

“What’s that mean?” Ezra asked. This was why he only spoke one and a half languages—he couldn’t hear any difference between the two names.

“It was the name used by our first teaching group,” Rex told him. “It means ‘Those who no longer exist.’”

Zeb snorted. “Cheerful.”

* * * * *
“It’s kind of an odd choice,” Sabine was saying.

“Not when paired with the Jedi rumor,” Ezra shot back. “If you think you’re the only one left…”

Rex glanced over at Kanan, who was frowning. “I have to give him that. I thought I was the only one left until we met Ahsoka.”

“It also fits if you consider the other ident rumor I picked up near that sector of space,” Wolffe said. “Tehkemiren Shus’huk. That one’s Mando’a, too.”

Ooros scowled. “How the hell does one contact generate so many rumors?”

“The Imps don’t know a damned thing about who they’re dealing with, is what my contact told me,” Wolffe explained. “Every time they get a new hint, the Imps are filling the air with comm chatter, trying to figure it out. They haven’t even narrowed it down to a single person. It could be we’re getting a list because it’s group leadership, not an individual.”

“A group of which Cypher could be a part of,” Ahsoka added.

“So we’ve got three possible idents—” Wolffe started to say, but Ahsoka shook her head.

“Six. After we started paying closer attention to that sector, more aliases popped up.”

Rex lifted his head. Six. Huh. That struck a chord, for some reason. “Give me your pad, Wolffe.”

Maybe it was nothing, but he wanted to see all of those names together.

Wolffe fished out his datapad and handed it over. “I want that back, Rex. You broke the last one.”

“The last one got shot,” Rex muttered, inputting the first three names on the keypad.

“Broken is broken, brother,” Wolffe replied, and then looked up. “Let’s hear them, Commander.”

“Tanno’baijii,” she said, and Rex stopped typing as he looked up at her in surprise.

“What does it mean?” Hera asked, leaning forward. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost, Rex.”

Rex finished typing it in, if only to give himself a moment to put his head back on straight. They were getting a lot further away from coincidence. “Married to the Jedi.”

“Huh.” Kanan looked thoughtful. “Now I really want to meet this guy.”

When Rex gave her a nod, Ahsoka rattled off the other two idents. “Drake Oharen and Ioan Ibbenikow.”

“That’s not Mando’a,” Wolffe said. “Rex?”

“They’re not Concordian, either.”

“I think those are just names,” Ezra said, frowning. “Ioan’s a girl’s name.”
“Not a quarter-century ago, it wasn’t.” Hera gave the kid a fond, frustrated smile. “I keep telling you that names don’t have gender. Back before the Empire, you could find that name in a lot of cultures, and none of us cared very much what gender you were.”

Rex cursed when his fingers slipped. Tiny kriffing damned keys. He’s mistyped Drake and gotten Rakeo—

He stared down at the datapad screen. “No. No way.” It only took him a few seconds to visually transpose letters. “You scrawny son of a bitch.”

“Rex?”

“Those last two are anagrams.” Rex looked up at the Commander.

“They’re not aliases. It’s a message.”

Republic Date 5212: 11/15th
Kamino, Wildspace
Month 7 of the Outer Rim Sieges

Bed rest was kriffing boring. Rex could only read for so long before he craved some other kind of stimulation, but there was nothing. His companion in the small room was still unconscious, recovering from something bad enough that he’d slept for all three days since he’d been brought in. The Kaminoans thought he would recover, it was just...slow.

“Can I kriffing well get out of this bed yet?” he asked Giri Ta, the next time she entered the room.

Giri Ta regarded him with pale wide eyes that were almost the same shade as her skin. “No. It will be at least one more day, Commander.”

Rex sighed. “Captain.”

“Do not be ridiculous. I am aware of your rank, Commander,” Giri Ta replied.

His companion awoke the next day, announcing his return to conscious with a snarled, “Oh, fuck me sideways.”

Rex grinned. “Hi, Wolfe.”

“Where the hell am I?”

“Kamino,” Rex answered. “You've been out for three and a half days that I know of, but it's probably been longer than that, given bacta time.”

“Fuuuuuuck.” Wolfe groaned and turned his head. “Rex. What in the hell'd you do to wind up here?”

“Got blown up,” Rex answered. “You?”

Wolffe frowned, and then winced as it pulled at the dressing still on his head. “Pretty sure I got spaced. General Koon is never going to let me hear the end of that.”
“Least you’re alive for him to do so,” Rex said, and then grimaced. “A lot of us aren’t.”

“Rex?”

“Torrent got wiped out, Wolffe. There’s five left of my original company.” He'd gotten word of Tuft's death a day ago. “Ghost in the 212th is down to eighteen. The ranks will get restocked, but...” Rex looked away. “Won't be the same.”

“Ah, gods. I'm sorry,” Wolffe said, and Rex nodded. If anyone knew how he felt, it was the leader of the Wolfpack, decimated down to five soldiers near the end of the first year of the war.

Giri Ta let him get out of bed that day, but it was a decision he almost regretted. The floor rocked and tilted alarmingly under his feet, even though he knew it was doing no such thing. It was like being out on a damned boat.

“Can I get out of bed?” Wolffe asked plaintively.

Giri Ta treated him to an incredulous look. “Absolutely not. You just awoke from a partial coma caused by oxygen deprivation. You will remain there until I allow you to move. If you try otherwise, I will strap you down and sedate you.”

Wolffe glowered; Rex sat back down on his bed. “I think I've changed my mind about getting up.”

“That is too bad,” Giri Ta said, ruthless. “You need not stay on your feet, but I expect you to at least get out of bed now to attend to your own personal needs.”

“You're an awful fucking bitch, y’know that, right?” Wolffe grumbled.

Giri Ta nodded. “You are still recovering, Commander. If you call me that again once you have done so, you will discover what kind of ‘bitch’ I can be.”

Wolffe snorted. Rex waited until Giri Ta had gone, then said, “Don't tempt her. Fives told me that she fights dirty.”

It took a full month before he could stay on his feet all day without feeling woozy, or needing to sit down every five minutes to catch his breath. His only consolation was that Wolffe was in the same condition. It meant he had a steady companion, what with all the back-and-forth of men arriving and leaving the medical station. It also meant that they could bitch nonstop about being parted from their Generals and be certain of a sympathetic audience.

There was only one more steady presence in the station aside from the Kaminoans. Gregor had crawled his way in from the Rim about three months ago, and the Kaminoans had been sitting on him since.

“Why haven't they let you go back out?” Wolffe asked.

Gregor sighed. “Brain damage,” he said, pointing at his head. “They're trying to fix it, but some days I still wake up and don't know who the hell I am.”

“Ah, therapy,” Wolffe said. “They got an ETA for you, yet?”

Gregor nodded. “Two months, if I keep improving. You guys?”

“Another kripping month,” Wolffe grumbled.
“Same,” Rex said. “Giri Ta has accused us of being fragile.”

“Raging bitch,” Wolffe muttered, after making sure the medic in question was nowhere in sight. “Torturous, terrible, evil doctor.”

One of the only things that kept Rex from losing his mind from boredom was freedom of movement, and the steady reports that still came in from the Sieges. Both of his Generals were still alive, but “tired” was a word that came in more and more often from Rex's surviving lieutenants. Appo never said anything in his reports that wasn't strictly military, the prick, but Eel kept Rex apprised.

Then Eel turned up on Kamino with a scowl on his face and his head wrapped. “The fuck happened to you?” Rex asked, running out to meet the transport the moment he had word.

“I got kriffing shot in the head,” Eel said, scowl deepening into a truly magnificent glower. “I told them if I could still fucking talk, then I was fine, but Skywalker told me if I didn't let them ship me out and come check on you, he'd demote me.”

Rex grinned. “Aw, he shouldn't have.”

“Out of the way, please,” Vix ordered. “I'd like to go dump this asshole in bacta, now.”

“Hey, no, wait—” and the rest of Eel's complaining was cut off by the door sliding shut.

Eel came out of bacta with his sulk intact. “Send me back out,” he demanded before his bed had been fully parked in a recovery room.

Ginia Ta and Feyo Re both gave him equally disdaining looks. “Do not be foolish. You are not yet recovered from a dangerous injury. We do not yet even know if your chip is intact.”

“Oh, fuck the chip!” Eel retorted. “This may be the last campaign of the Sieges, and I need to be there!”

“That is too bad. You will have to cheer from the sidelines,” Feyo Re said primly, before both Kaminoan medics left the room.

Eel crossed his arms. “Fuck.”

“Yeah, that's about our sentiment.” Wolffe grimaced. “There's a bunch of rookie assholes shadowing my General.”

Eel sighed. “Well, Cody's still watching Kenobi's ass, so that's something. Appo is doing a good job of keeping an eye on Skywalker, but that brother is a right prick. You couldn't have let me take the legion?”

Rex shook his head. “You get scattered if you're thinking tactically about more than one platoon, Eel. Maybe in another few months you could handle it, but you weren't ready yet.”

Rex got a missive from Skywalker at the beginning of his second month on Kamino. [The Sieges are done. I'm coming out to see you the moment we get this shit cleaned up. Take care, Rex.]

Rex balled up the 'plast printout in his fist. Dammit. Damn this injury, his recovery, and that kriffing idiot who’d botched the coordinates. He should have been there.

He was on the second week of that month, worried about the extended silence, when he got another message from General Skywalker. [I need to keep my mouth shut. Now we have to go clean the
drek out of Coruscant orbit. Give me another week and I'll come pick you up when your rehab's done.]

Rex sighed and folded the 'plast. “You'd damned well better.”

Rex, Wolffe, Gregor, and Eel had been released into the wilds of the regular troop barracks on Kamino when the news came in about Dooku and the Battle of Coruscant. A massive cheer went up from all three hundred-odd assembled brothers in the commissary.

“Can we drink?” Eel asked.

“I think Giri Ta would strangle us all,” Wolffe said. “Let's save it for after we get full medical clearance, not this tentative shit.”

Gregor was watching the revelry, a distant look on his face. “What is it, man? Isn't this good news?” Eel asked him.

“Yeah. Sure.” Gregor turned back to face them, pensive. “Does this mean the war's over?”

“Nah. There's still Grievous, not to mention the rest of the Sep higher-ups,” Rex said, and Gregor's expression eased back down into relaxed. Rex felt bad for his brother; the poor bastard had been sidelined due to injury for most of the war.

“Even if the Seps surrendered tomorrow, it wouldn't be the end of our usefulness,” Wolffe said. “The galaxy's a mess. There's cleanup that could take years, there will probably be pockets of resistance...”

“It would be kind of nice to be a well-paid cleanup crew for a while.” Eel rested his chin on his hand. “I might actually have time to get a girlfriend.”

“You're too damned ugly,” Wolffe told him, grinning when Eel reached over and slapped him on the back of the head.

[We're going after Grievous,] Obi-Wan sent him via comm text the next day. [Wish me luck.]

Rex considered things, reckoned that the encryption attached to the system was strong enough, and wrote back, [Blow job in it for you if you can manage to kill him without winding up in medical.]

He had a response within five minutes. [That's the best impetus I think I've ever been given. See you soon.]

The next day, things were more or less back to professional standard again, though a few brothers looked desperately hung over. Gregor had to be snapped back to reality after being caught staring into space a few times, but that was happening much less often than it had been a month ago. Even Gregor was taking heart in that, though he was still discouraged about missing the potential end of the war. Hell, they all were.

“We should be out there,” Wolffe grumbled.

“We all should,” Rex agreed.

“We could steal a transport and join up anyway,” Eel suggested.

Rex snorted. “They’d dub us AWOL, you idiot.”

Eel spread his hands outwards. “Hey, it was just a thought.”
The facility’s announcement system kicked in with a monotone demand for their attention. Gregor looked up in alarm. “Are we under attack?”

“No, we’d get the klaxon for that,” Rex said, just as a gravelly hiss of a voice overrode the droid monotone.

“Execute Order Sixty-six.”

Rex felt a nudge in his head, and had actually stood up before he started trying to shake it off. He didn’t even have any damned idea what Order 66 was—

Good soldiers follow orders

Rex grimaced. What the hell?

Good Soldiers Follow Orders

There was sharp, increasing pressure in his mind, and the longer Rex fought against it, the louder the kriffing voice became.

GOOD SOLDIERS FOLLOW ORDERS

Rex was on his knees, hands clamped to the sides of his head. “I’m not fucking killing my Jedi!” he shouted—

Killing my Jedi.

Order 66 was the execution of every Jedi in the Order.

“No,” Rex whispered, and then the voice ramped up to impossible levels.

GOOD SOLDIERS FOLLOW ORDERS

GOOD SOLDIERS FOLLOW ORDERS

GOOD SOLDIERS FOLLOW ORDERS

Fuck you, he snarled back. Mental attack, something like it, had to be. He did the first thing he’d been trained to do in that situation, and mentally shouted, Skywalker!

The voice went silent.

Rex opened his eyes. His face was wet; his head ached. What the hell was going on?

The moment he lost the mental image of Skywalker, the voice came back.

GOOD SOLDIERS FOLLOW ORDERS

GOOD SOLDIERS FOLLOW ORDERS

GOOD SOLDIERS FOLLOW ORDERS

Rex was sobbing in pain by the time he managed to conjure his General’s face, his General’s name again. The voice silenced.

He could fucking well take a hint. Whoever the asshole trying to manipulate him was, it didn’t want Skywalker dead. Small kriffing favors.
“Rex?” Eel was trying to haul him to his feet. “Oh, gods, Rex—are you all right?”

“Eel?” Rex swallowed down the thick feeling in his throat and looked at his lieutenant. Eel was half-panicked, but he didn’t seem to be in pain. “What happened?”

“I don’t know!” Eel shut his eyes, visibly composing himself, before he continued. “You went down, and everyone else stood up and fucking left!”

“What?” Rex looked around the commissary. It was empty except for the two of them. Chairs were lying on their sides where they’d been pushed back to fall over, unheeded.

“That fucking announcement. What did it say?”

“Uh.” Eel blinked a few times. “Execute Order Sixty-Six—”

Rex was driven right back down to his knees before he could fight off the fucking voice, using his General’s name like a talisman against evil. When he could breathe without gasping, he said, “Try not to say that again, all right?”

“Sure.” Eel hauled him back upright when he held up his hand. “Seriously, what in the hell is going on?”

“You didn’t hear it?” Rex asked in disbelief. “The voice?”

“I haven’t heard a damned thing aside from you shrieking, not since the order came down about three minutes ago, sir,” Eel reported, tone going formal as he recognized the combat situation for what it now had to be.

“Shit. Okay.” Rex sniffed back what tasted like a nasty mixture of snot and bile. When he went to wipe his face clean, his hand came away streaked with blood. “Shit!”

“Bleeding’s mostly stopped, sir,” Eel told him. “Whatever you’re doing to keep your mystery voice quiet, it’s working.”

“Skywalker,” Rex said, taking a breath. “If I’m thinking about him, the voice is silent.”

“That’s weird.” Eel jerked his chin in the direction of the doors. “I don’t know what that order is, but maybe we should go see if anyone else is fighting it, Commander.”

Rex didn’t have the energy left to complain about his rank. “Yeah. Let’s go, Lieutenant.”

They found Gregor out in the hall, about ten meters down from the commissary. Their brother was on the floor, rocking back and forth with his hands over his ears. “Gods,” Rex whispered, and dropped down next to him. “Gregor. Captain!”

Gregor stared at him, the whites of his eyes too prominent to be healthy. There was blood trickling from his nose. “Good soldiers follow orders,” he whispered, and then started rocking again.

“FUCK,” Eel whispered. “That’s the same thing you were shouting about.”

“Gregor!” Rex grabbed Gregor by the face and held his head still, forcing the man to look at him. “I want you to start saying a name. You got that?” Gregor nodded, but his answer still came out as a repetition of that fucking voice’s instruction. “Skywalker. Concentrate on that word. Skywalker.”

Gregor mouthed the word over and over until he wasn’t rocking any more, but he was still moaning. Rex stared down at him. He had a bad damned feeling about this.
“Why Skywalker?” Eel asked, staring down at Gregor in horror. “What the hell is going on, Rex?”

“I don’t know,” Rex said, to answer both questions. All he knew was that right now, his General was saving him from doing something unforgivable. “We’ve got to keep looking. Gregor, you just keep saying that word, and you’ll be all right. Got it?” Gregor gave him a single nod, but otherwise didn’t move—Rex suspected that he was too exhausted to do anything else.

They found Wolffe just outside the door that led to the first hangar bay. He was kneeling on the floor, bent over so that his head was pressed down against the polished durasteel. There was blood on his face, tears pouring from his eyes, and his jaw was locked in a furious snarl.

Rex knelt and put his hand on Wolffe’s shoulder. “Wolffe?”

“Good soldiers follow orders,” Wolffe snapped back, turning the phrase into a verbal “Fuck you!”

There was one more brother in the bay, stretched out in a sprawl. Rex nodded for Eel to go check on him before bending down closer to Wolffe’s ear. “Wolffe, you know my General’s name,” he said in a low, intent voice. “Concentrate on that. Skywalker. Do it.”

Wolffe opened his eyes a few seconds later. “Fuck, why is that working?” he asked in a strangled yell.

“I don’t know. Keep at it. If you lose focus, the fucking voice comes back,” Rex said, and had another spike of terrible pain when he mentally flashed on Kenobi instead of Skywalker. The implications of that were not good, but he couldn’t afford to dwell on it. Not in any sense of the word.

*It’ll be fine. Cody’s with him,* Rex thought, and then felt cold all over.

Eel came back. “Sir, he’s dead,” he reported, his eyes wide. “Aneurism, maybe. I think the strain of fighting that voice was too much for him.”

Wolffe pushed himself up from the floor, letting Rex pull him the rest of the way to his feet. He only doubled over once before straightening. “What the hell is going on?”

Rex glanced back and forth before making a decision. “We’re going to the armory. We’re going to load up, and then we’re going to search the city for anyone still alive.”

“Why do we need—oh,” Eel whispered, paling. “Rex, we can’t.”

“We won’t if we’ve got a choice,” Rex said, his voice harsh. “But if any of our brothers are trying to obey that order, it’s our duty to stop them.”

“They’d thank us for it, Eel,” Wolffe rasped. “That fucker wants us to kill the Jedi. All of them.”

Rex felt a spike of pain and held on to his mental image of Skywalker. He had a pounding headache, but he’d carried out missions in worse shape than this.

“Let’s go.”

They found twenty brothers still on station. Three were dead, like their brother in the hangar bay. One attacked them, screaming that damned litany. Wolffe put him down with a shot to the head.

“Didn’t want him to suffer,” Wolffe said in a quiet voice, staring down at their dead brother. “I think he broke.”
There were fifteen still living brothers, their original group of four included. Some of them had more trouble keeping Skywalker’s name or face in their heads than others, but they were all still alive, if fucking traumatized.

Rex tried to smile and failed. He was pretty sure he needed to put his own ass in the traumatized category. This was the worst thing he could ever imagine.

Gregor had to be sedated. He could keep focused on Skywalker, but he couldn’t stop moving, rocking back and forth like a metronome.

Reports were coming in, just like they would for any other military operation. They kept the casualty reports (execution count, by the fucking gods) in a different room, away from briefing. Very few of his remaining brothers could see the names or images of other Jedi without hearing that fucking voice.

Rex stared at the casualty lists on the viewscreens, hearing a roaring in his ears.

Thousands. There were thousands of dead Jedi.


GOOD SOLDIERS FOLLOW ORDERS

“Fuck you,” Rex muttered, and concentrated on his General’s face until his head stopped hurting.

He went back to the barracks lounge. It felt the most like neutral territory, since it had been empty when the announcement came. Too many places in Tipoca City still showed evidence of where his brothers had literally dropped whatever they were doing to go obey that fucking order.

When he stepped inside, it was to find Wolffe, Eel, Go, Lichen, Hero, and Tabb waiting for him. “What?” Rex asked, unnerved by the grim, wary expressions on their faces. “What’s happened?”

“The reports updated while you were checking the casualty lists,” Wolffe said in a quiet voice. “It’s pretty bad, Rex.”

“Then someone better tell me now, and stop beating around the bush,” Rex snapped back. Whatever it was, it couldn’t be nearly as bad as what he’d just been staring at—

“The 501st marched on the Temple, Rex,” Eel said in a choked voice. “They’re confirming it a clean sweep.”

“No.” The bottom fell out of his stomach, and the roaring in his ears surged to almost deafening levels. “No, they’re non-coms. They can’t be part of that kriffing order.”

Goodsoldiersfollowordersgoodsoldiersfollowordersgoodsoldiersfollowordersgoodsoldiersfolloworders

“Skywalker?” he asked, both for the strength of the name and because of his sudden terror. His General would never have allowed the 501st to attack the Temple. Skywalker was an asshole, but he wasn’t going to let anyone march into his own home and slaughter non-coms.

“Nobody knows,” Tabb said, and then let out a high-pitched laugh. “I know we keep asking this, but what the hell is going on!”

The door hissed open again. Rex turned his head to find Giri Ta entering the room. The Kaminoans
on base had either chided them for disobeying orders or commiserated, depending on the day or the individual, so Rex steeled himself for more of the same from the medic.

Giri Ta bowed her head. “I am so sorry to come to you in such a terrible time, but I must speak with Lieutenant Eel.”

“You can say it here, Giri Ta,” Eel said, raising his chin. “We’re all kind of leery about being alone right now.”

“Understandable. I must ask you questions.” Giri Ta folded her hands together. That bit of Kaminoan body language either meant intense concentration or near panic. “Have you been feeling any undue aggression since your release from medical?”

Eel grimaced. “You mean aside from the fact that I’m fucking pissed off and horrified about our brothers killing Jedi?”

Rex narrowed his eyes and thought about Skywalker until the voice shut up.

“Yes,” Giri Ta said. “Aside from that.”

Eel looked down, considering it. “No. Can’t say that I have. There definitely wasn’t anything before this shit happened.”

“Have you felt any other unusual impulses?”

Eel gave her a curious look. “Am I supposed to?”

Giri Ta unclasped her hands and slowly lowered her arms to her sides. “Nep’tae buht chusa!”

Wolffe snorted. “I didn’t even know you lot knew how to swear.”

“Indeed,” Giri Ta replied, but when she tried to resume her species’ serene appearance, it was marred by a deep frown. “This is what I feared. I know why Lieutenant Eel has not heard the voice that the rest of you speak of.”

“We’re all ears, Doc,” Hero said.

“Lieutenant Eel’s inhibitor chip is inactive.”

Rex stared at the Kaminoan. “The chips are just aggression inhibitors. You’ve told us that yourself.”

“I said that to you because that was what I was also told about their function and purpose,” Giri Ta snapped. “With the Lieutenant not suffering the same plight, Feyo Re and I had…suspicions. We undertook to confirm those suspicions.

“There is no aggression inhibition. The chips are meant to ensure that the cloned soldiers of the Republic military will follow the orders given by the Supreme Commander of all forces.”

“The Chancellor ordered us to kill the Jedi?” Lichen was horrified. “Did we wake up in a fucking alternate universe? That doesn’t make any damned sense!”

“Why the hell would he do that?” Go whispered. “They’re our…they’re Jedi! They’re our fucking commanders, our allies!”
They had their answer before noon the next day. The HoloNet was flooded out by a priority broadcast from the Republic Senate. Rex stared at the hooded image of the man who’d given the order, and thought that he’d never wanted to kill someone so kriffing badly in his life.

“An Empire?” Wolffe was shaking his head, fury painting his features. “It’s a fucking coup!”

“And they’re eating it up.” Eel was staring at the secondary images of the Senate floor in shock. “They’re applauding. There are thousands of Jedi dead, and they’re cheering!”

“I always knew politicians were scum, but this is too fucking much,” Lichen said, the scar on his face pulling as he bared his teeth at the display.

“Wait, there’s Alderaan’s pod,” Wolffe said, using the remote to move the secondary image onto another full-size viewscreen.

Rex felt a perverse sort of gladness. No one in the Alderaan pod was that fucking stupid, at least. That included Senator Amidala, who was seated next to Senator Organa.

“She doesn’t look like she’s grieving for a lost boyfriend,” Eel pointed out.

“No.” Rex froze the close-up of the two Senators. Senator Amidala was somber, and looked damned tired, but she didn’t look grieved. Neither did Senator Organa, who was doing a good job of being politely infuriated. “That could mean he’s safe, but it could also mean that she just doesn’t know.”

Rex went to find Giri Ta the moment the new Emperor had finished his asinine speech about traitors and safety. “You said it’s the chips,” he said bluntly, once he had the medic’s attention.

“Yes,” Giri Ta replied hesitantly. “It is.”

“Take mine out.”

Giri Ta reared back, blinking several times in deliberate, appalled fashion. “Commander Rex, the risks—”

“It’s brain surgery, so I know there’s a damn risk. But there’s also a risk if I leave this place. If I stumble across a surviving Jedi, and that chip starts shouting—” Rex gritted his teeth and went on. “If that chip starts shouting, and I kill a Jedi, the next thing I’m going to be doing is chewing on a rifle barrel. I think surgery is a hell of a lot less risky, don’t you?”

“Are you sure?” Wolffe asked, when he told the others.

“We need to know.” Rex tried to ignore the nauseating flutter of nerves. “I’m not looking forward to it, and I’d rather not be a vegetable, but survivors may need our help. We can’t help them with the chip screaming at us.”

“Fine.” Wolffe looked up at Giri Ta. “I’m going in with him. Do us both.”

“That can be arranged,” Giri Ta said, pleased. “Two surgical experiments will tell us whether it is a successful venture, whereas a single one might prove to be a fluke upon replication.”

“That wasn’t fucking reassuring,” Wolffe muttered the moment she’d gone.

Rex woke up from surgery with a dull ache in his head, too-heavy limbs, and Eel grinning at him like he was trying to break his face in half. “Good morning, Commander!”

“Fck’you,” Rex slurred, and then swallowed. “Asshole. What time is it?”
“Really damned early, sir,” Eel said. “Kenobi.”

Rex flinched, waiting for that damned voice to start shrieking…

…and there was nothing.

“Nice and quiet, sir?” Eel asked, still smiling.

Rex sighed and relaxed. “Yeah. That’s a hell of a lot better. Now tell me why you’re so cheerful.”

“Well, we still don’t have any news about Skywalker,” Eel said, some of his cheer fading. “But, we did pick up something new, and you definitely should see it.”

“Do I have to move?” Rex asked. He was pretty sure the anesthetic hadn’t worn off yet.

“No, I’ll bring a projector,” Eel said, and went to fetch the item in question.

“Rex. Sir!” Eel shook him, which told Rex that he’d fallen asleep again.

“I’m awake, dammit,” Rex grumbled. “What’s so important?”

“Well, up until noon yesterday, the Temple beacon on Coruscant was broadcasting that damned all-clear-come-home signal,” Eel said, and Rex grimaced. He could guess who’d set that up, but there hadn’t been a damned thing they could do about it. The beacon was hard-wired to the Temple—you had to be present to reset it.

“We were all too busy swearing about Palpatine, but during his speech, the beacon changed.” Eel held out the projector. “Be prepared to thank me, sir,” he said, and activated it.

[This is Master Obi-Wan Kenobi] the hologram spoke, resolving into a complete image capture of Rex’s General. Rex sucked in air so fast he almost choked trying to catch his breath.

[I regret to report that both our Jedi Order and the Republic have fallen, with the dark shadow of the Empire rising to take their place.]

“Gods, no fucking kidding,” Eel muttered. Rex gestured madly at him to shut the hell up.

[This message is a warning and a reminder for any surviving Jedi: Trust in the Force. Do not return to the Temple. That time has passed, and our future is uncertain. Avoid Coruscant. Avoid detection. Be secret, but be strong. We will each be challenged: our trust, our faith, our friendships. But we must persevere, and in time I believe a new hope will emerge. May the Force be with you, always.]

“Do you think he’s still alive, sir?” Eel asked, once the holo had shut down.

Rex wiped his face dry with his hands. Gods, but his General was such a fucking Jedi. “That’s our General, Eel. If Kenobi got into the Temple to change the beacon, he can sure as hell get back out again.”

“And then what?” Eel asked quietly. “What happens after that?”

“I don’t know.” Rex tried to ignore how much his heart clenched at the thought of losing his friend. “I forgot to ask—how’s Wolffe?”

“Still asleep, but Giri Ta says he’s fine, so Tabb, Hero, and Go have already volunteered to go under the knife,” Eel said. “The others are standing guard. I’m going in with the next set. My chip might not be working right now, but I’d like to make sure it stays that way.”
Eel placed the holoprojector into Rex’s hand. “I thought you’d like to keep that, sir, given your, ah, feelings.”

Rex glared at him. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Eel laughed. “Sir, you don’t have to be so damned miffed about it. Fives and I already knew you and the General spent a hell of a lot of time together.”

Rex frowned. Thinking about Fives and the rest of Torrent still hurt too damned much.

“I doubt anyone else really noticed. You both were always so damned professional.”

Rex wrapped his hands around the projector, feeling the edges bite into his palm. “He wasn’t my kriffing boyfriend, Eel. We were just…friends. Really good friends.”

Eel nodded. “Discretion it is, sir.”

“Thanks. Bring me a comm with text capacity and damned good encryption built in.”

“Sir,” Eel said, and retrieved the device in question.

Rex waited until he’d shaken off the worst dregs of the anesthetic before typing a message. It took him three tries to figure out his wording, but the final result was going to have to be good enough.

[Sir. No idea if you’re going to receive this, but I’m trying anyway. 66 is the fucking chips in our heads. 14 out of 12,053 were able to resist orders and survive. Not good odds, so stay the fuck away from any soldier you see that’s still on his feet wearing white.]

Obi-Wan probably was well aware of that necessity, but at least now he would know why. [There are 15 of us de-chipped, 1 previous to 66.]

He stared at the message and shook his head before intentionally mimicking the beacon. [Avoid detection. Be secret. Be strong.]

He almost didn’t add the last part, but finally decided it was worth it. It might well be the last thing he ever said to his General.

[You are a brazen son of a bitch. Your Captain.]

Rex held out the comm. “The signal might be traced anyway, but no sense leaving anything for anyone to find. Go toss this in an incinerator, would you?”

Eel took it, but hesitated. “You don’t want to wait for a response?”

Rex shook his head. “There won’t be one, Eel. It’s too much of a risk. And Eel,” he added, before his last surviving lieutenant could leave the room. “Thank you.”

Eel smiled. “Sir.”

The first squads started returning to Kamino two days later.

Rex and thirteen brothers were all on their feet, de-chipped and recovered. Their unit of fourteen went out to greet their guests, armed and in full battle dress. Gregor wanted to come with them, but their brother still had a bad tendency to stare off into space and repeat the voice’s litany, even without the chip.
“What is this?” the first sergeant barked upon seeing their welcoming party. “What are you lot still doing here?”

“Well, someone had to keep the lights on,” Tabb quipped. “Where the hell have you all been?”

“Following orders,” the sergeant growled.

“Not any sort of order you should have been following,” Rex said, flipping the safety off on his rifle. *Please do not make me do this.*

The sergeant pulled his helmet off and sneered at him. “You don’t outrank the Supreme Commander of the Imperial Navy.”

The sergeant of the second squad had joined the first. “You don’t get a say in what kind of orders we should and shouldn’t be following.”

“Order Sixty-Six was the execution of our allies and friends, you stupid fuck,” Wolffe growled.

Rex forced himself to stop grinding his teeth. “It’s got nothing to do with rank. We’re not murderers, Sergeant!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Captain. I didn’t realize you thought you were too good to follow orders and kill traitor Jedi scum with the rest of us.”

Rex raised his rifle and shot the unmasked sergeant in the face. “That’s Commander, you asshole,” he retorted, and then everything went to shit.

By the time the firefight was over, there were six squads of soldiers on the floor with smoking holes in their armor. Tabb was dead; Eel was limping.

“I have never before regretted being so damned good at my job,” Hero said, staring down at the corpses. “Gods. What in the hell’s happened to us?”

“Rex.” Rex turned his head to find Wolffe staring at him. “We can’t do this again, Rex. This is—this is everything that you said was wrong with Umbara.”

“No.” Rex shouldered his rifle and stared down at his fallen brothers. “This is worse than Umbara.” What he felt then wasn’t grief, or anger, but a terrible, tired sadness.

It went against everything he stood for, but when he made the decision, he knew it was right. “Fuck this. I’m defecting.”

“Rex?” Wolffe looked shocked. “I—” He lifted his rifle, scrubbed his face, and sighed. “Shit. Me, too.”

“Listen up!” Rex yelled, gaining everyone’s attention. “Those idiot sergeants were right—we didn’t obey the order, and that makes us traitors in the eyes of this new fucking Imperial military.”

“More like we’re the only ones left who aren’t traitors,” Notch said in a terse voice.

Rex nodded to concede the point. “We can’t stay here and wait for more of our idiot brothers to show up. We’re going to strip this place fucking bare of supplies, and then we’re bugging out.”

“Where the hell will we go?” Break asked, looking up from folding Tabb’s arms over his body. “We won’t just be considered traitors, we’ll be deserters. They’ll never stop hunting for us.”
“We’ll have to move in smaller groups,” Wolffe said. “There are fourteen of us. With these two transports here, that gives us three armored and armed transports.”

Eel nodded. “Groups of five, then. That puts us almost at squad capacity. Better to have the numbers than not.”

“Whoever takes Gregor should be the group with just four.” Hero grimaced. “That’s going to be like taking care of two brothers for the price of one.”

“I’ll take him with me.” Wolffe grinned. “Rex could use a break from crazy people.”

“Not really,” Rex said. He could really use the company of his crazy-ass Generals right about then. “But Gregor likes you, so that will work.”

“We’ll sort it by rank, men. That means me, Rex, Eel, and Hero,” Wolffe announced.

Eel sighed. “Man, now I’m never going to get the chance to run a legion.”

“Yeah,” Break said, looking grim. “Now we’ll just be running from them.”

Go raised his hand to catch their attention. “How are we going to keep in touch? We can’t risk anyone tracking us by comm signal.”

“We’ll meet somewhere. A year from now.” Hero looked around at his brothers. “I know that’s a long time to work as individual units, but we’ll be running dark. Think of it as the shittiest long-term infiltration assignment you’ve ever had.”

“A year should give us enough time for the heat to die down,” Notch said, looking thoughtful. “They’re turning our Republic into an Empire, and not everyone is going to roll over and play nice.”

“You don’t think they’d use our brothers to put down civil unrest, do you? Lethally?” Io asked, and then gulped when the others nodded. “Fuck. All right, then.”

“Where do we meet?” Arrow looked worried. “Any place that’s actively Republic—I mean, actively Imperial, is probably not a good idea.”

“Neither’s Sep space,” Break said. “They’d shoot us on sight just as quickly as our idiot brothers will.”

“Tatooine.” Rex listened to an entire collection of dismayed groans. “Yeah, I know, but my other General was there a couple of years ago, so I’ve got decent intel on a good meeting spot. In the port of Mos Espa, there’s a junk shop owned by a bastard blue Toydarian. The next street west from his shop, there’s a shaded outdoor café. The local pilots tend to gather there to swap stories, and since it’s a port, it’s a mashup of sentient beings.”

Wolffe nodded. “Tatooine it is, then. One year from today. Synch it up, boys. You don’t want to miss out on the reunion tour because you calculated the date wrong.”

“We’re leaving, too,” Giri Ta told them, after they’d finished stripping the armory bare.

“Medical’s bugging out?” Tabb asked. “Good for you.”

Giri Ta gave a slow shake of her head. “No, Sergeant. All of us. All Kaminoans. We are all leaving ourhomeworld.”

“Why the hell are you doing that?” Wolffe asked, but Rex suspected he knew.
“There are concerns that we may become the target of vengeful wrath,” she said in a low voice. “We created you, and your brothers. Your brothers slaughtered their revered peacekeepers. For now, the Senate cheers under its new banner, but not everyone will be so quick to believe in the righteousness of that decision. You and your brothers may soon be in grave danger from retribution on all fronts. As your creators, we share in that danger.”

“Shit,” Eel said, as that sank in. “Where will you go?”

Giri Ta’s head lowered in a gentle bow. “That, I cannot tell you, Lieutenant. I merely came to inform you that Kamino will no longer be a safe refuge, and to wish you all well.”

“Yeah.” Rex moistened his lips. He’d felt parched all day, ever since he’d fired his rifle on a brother. “Good luck, Giri Ta.” She smiled at them and departed.

Rex took Go, Break, Io, and Arrow under his wing. Go and Break were experienced soldiers, but Io and Arrow were so young that they hadn’t yet gone into combat. Their training was up to snuff, but gods. This was a terrible new galaxy, and it wasn’t a good place to be a Shiny.

“I always heard that you were the commander that liked being called Captain, Commander,” Break said, when they were safely in space.

Rex watched as the last transport winked out of existence, disappearing into hyperspace. “Not anymore.”

They did all right for their first eight months. There were plenty of planets who’d never aligned with the Republic or the Seps, and didn’t give a damn who landed where so long as they didn’t leave fire and destruction in their wake. Munitions stayed solid, since there wasn’t much use for them beyond hunting down meals. Medical supplies took a hit when Io got himself bitten by a nexu, but it was nothing to panic about. Io panicked enough for all of them, anyway. Their food stores they tried not to touch until they had no choice. Rex estimated they had about six months left if they could keep matching their hunting skills with local, edible wildlife. It meant their remaining credits could go towards the things they couldn’t find or steal, like keeping fuel in the ship.

It took almost that long for Rex to adjust to civvie gear. It was a hell of a lot harder to stow a miniature armory on your person when you didn’t have any damned storage to speak of. At least lawless worlds didn’t give a damn about open carry. He kept a pistol strapped to his thigh, his rifle slung over his back, and at least two thermal detonators at all times. There was a knife in both boots, but Rex only pulled the one on the left when he needed a solid, heavy blade. The one on the right was a throwing dagger, and not one of his. He had no idea when Obi-Wan’s knife had wound up in his small kit, but he wasn’t ditching it. Aside from his armor and his rifle, it was the only thing of his old life that he had left.

The ambush on Ruuria nearly broke him, in more ways than one.

Rex didn’t even want to go in the first place, but they were low on fuel. “Not much choice,” he told the others.

Go just shook his head. “Latest scuttlebutt on the airwaves says they withdrew from the Republic. The Empire probably wants them back, but so far, no one’s reporting an Imp presence there.”

“It might not be safe,” Io ventured.

“It’s not any less of a risk than running out of fuel in the middle of uninhabited space,” Arrow said, unimpressed with his brother’s logic. “I want to get the hell off of this tin can for a day.”
“I’m seconding that,” Break said, rubbing at his face. “I’d like to drink someone’s terrible, watered down alcohol, and try to pretend I’m not a wanted fugitive for a while.”

“At least we look a little bit different,” Io said, giving in. He’d grown his hair out until it was a curly mop that was just shy of being too difficult to cram into a helmet. Rex still kept his head shaved; Break had a short cut that he kept shaving lines through to make stripes; Go had shaved off everything but the fringe hanging over his eyes; Arrow refused to grow hair because it covered up his tattoos.

Ruuria’s smallest port was still large enough to give them a decent price on refueling the ship. They’d traded the old Republic military craft to a disreputable fucker months back in exchange for a transport that at least had two bunks they could rotate out of in shifts. It was dinky, it had only one gun mount, and its hull was unarmored and pathetic, but at least it didn’t draw Imperial eyes.

“Shit,” Rex hissed, the moment he saw a flash of white. He grabbed Arrow by the arm and yanked him back into the meager cover of an awning while signaling danger to Break, Io, and Go.

“Imps,” Break muttered, shoving his chin into Rex's shoulder in order to see around him. “Fuck, why now?”

“It's just the one patrol,” Io whispered, right before two more squads appeared to follow the first. “Never mind.”

“We need to get back to the ship, now. We've got fuel, and I’ll eat rations for a month solid if it means avoiding those indoctrinated fucks,” Go said.

“Alcohol,” Break sighed in regret, and then signaled for Arrow to partner up. Io stuck to Go like glue, and Rex followed behind them, itching to pull his weapon and not quite daring to. They hadn't drawn any undue attention yet, there was no sense in—

“There they are!”

Rex sighed, turned around, and shot the first Imperial stormtrooper at the same time as a rifle blast scorched the wall next to him. Rex rolled his eyes, shot the second trooper, and then yelled, “Move it!”

“Do you think they got word out?” Io asked, about three seconds before they all had to slide to a halt as a full patrol filled the street up ahead.

“Please keep your fucking mouth shut,” Go told his brother in exasperation.

“This way.” Break shoved Arrow into a narrow passageway between buildings. Rex waited for Go and Io to follow, and then resumed rear guard position.

They spilled out of the passage and into a wide alley. The horrible odor of rotting food dominated, provided by two massive dumpsters parked near the walled end of the street. There were strings of drying clothes overhead, the laundry of poor tenement residents with no sonics to speak of.

“Shit!” Arrow drew both of his pistols. “Fucking damned Imps. They're like rodents!”

Rex shook his head and shoved Io towards the dumpsters, away from the Imperial patrol that was already clogging their only exit. “Take cover!”

Dumpsters, it turned out, made fabulous cover. If you could ignore the smell, the thick walls kept out every single laser blast. “We need an exit route!”
“Way ahead of you, Commander,” Go said, the words followed by the stark pop of a cutting torch igniting. “Hold them off for three minutes, and we can continue our smelly tour of Port Ghur.”

Rex stopped firing long enough to glance down. “Sewers. Thanks, Go.”

“I can’t tell if you mean that sarcastically or not, sir,” Go replied, and then started torching his way through the sealed grate.

At two minutes and twenty, Arrow shrieked and went down, a bad wound in his side. “Shit!” Rex pulled his rifle. “Go, you cut that damned grate and you get it done right now!”

“Thirty seconds!” Go yelled back, just before an odd hush fell over the alley. The Imps had stopped firing to make way for a new figure.

“What the hell is that?” Break asked, staring at the black-armored bipedal in disbelief. “Are they breaking out all the stops for intimidation value, or what?”

Rex just stared. There was no way to see features, not through the solid black eyes of the man's helmet...but Rex knew a Sith when he saw one. He'd followed along behind two crazy Sith-killing Generals, and he’d had his fill of Dooku, not to mention that insane Zabrak.

The firing started again. Rex ducked down and strapped the butt of his rifle to his arm, giving himself the extra support for one-handed firing. “Leave. All of you. Right now. That's an order.”

Go kicked out the sewer grate. “Sir, we are not leaving you,” Break growled.

Rex looked at his men, his brave brothers. They seemed so damned young in that moment, but they were utterly without fear.

“Break. That's an order, Captain,” he said, which made Break flinch. Field promotions were never kind. “Our brothers are your responsibility now. Keep them safe.”

Io looked like he was going to start crying. “You utter bastard, Commander.”

“Yeah.” Rex smiled. “Thanks for that.”

The moment that Break and Go had lowered Arrow through the narrow opening, Rex took a breath, counted to three, and let it out. Then he turned and strode out from behind cover, both weapons up and firing before the fucking Imps wearing their perversions of his brothers’ armor could so much as raise a rifle.

It was only seconds before he was standing in a hail of blaster fire provided by twelve different soldiers. Except for one blast that passed close enough to his arm to scorch cloth, nothing was hitting him.

“You're all lousy fucking shots!” he yelled. He’d gotten three for their zero.

He took a hit in the shoulder and a glancing wound to the leg, but fuck, he was not going down without taking out everything he could set his sights on. It seemed like every time he nailed an Imp, another popped up in its place, but if they wanted to provide a shooting gallery, Rex wasn’t going to turn them down. The only disappointment was that the Imps pulled their wounded and dead back so efficiently that he didn’t have a clear idea of the body count.

Fuck, but military quality had gone downhill in a hurry. He had four non-fatal blaster wounds and he was standing out in the fucking open.
Rex fought through pain, raised his rifle, and nailed four more stormtroopers in succession before the charge of his rifle finally died. His pistol went next, and he threw it down in disgust.

All at once, the Imps stopped firing. When the smoke cleared, Rex saw six remaining stormtroopers, rifles aimed. The Sith was standing to one side, arms crossed, like he was judging a fucking competition.

He unstrapped his rifle from his arm, chest heaving for breath, and wondered what the hell everyone was waiting for.

“Oh, that's what you lot were doing,” he said, as a fresh horde of stormtroopers came in to replace the dead ones. He considered bolting for the open grate, but knew he wouldn’t make it.

When the Imps were done taking position, the alley quieted enough for him to hear the regular hiss and release of a mechanical respirator. That explained the full suit and sealed mask on the Sith.

“Will you surrender?” the Sith asked. His voice was deep and even-toned, like a vocorder on a bass setting.

“Sorry.” Rex grinned for the delight of pure fucking defiance. “Pretty sure I never learned the meaning of that word.”

There was no sound, no change in the Sith’s posture, but Rex could tell that his answer was disappointing. Well, too damned bad.

“A pity,” the Sith intoned, and gestured.

Rex felt a solid force plow into him from the side, slamming him against the stone wall of the closest building. He hit the ground, sparks dancing behind his eyes, and coughed out blood. Shit. Broken ribs, had to be. Maybe a concussion, considering he felt like he was going to pass out at any moment.

There was a rattle above him. Rex opened his eyes just in time to see the contents of four balconies, including the balconies themselves, break free from the wall.

“Aw, fuck,” Rex muttered, and managed to get his arms up over his head just as it all came down on top of him.

Rex came to, aware of crushing weight on top of his legs. He was remarkably not dead, but he had no idea how long he was going to stay that way.

“Start digging this one out,” a filtered voice ordered.

“Leave him.” That was the Sith’s deep, modulated voice. “Find the others. Kill them.”

Rex cracked his eyes open, blinking away dirt and debris. He was buried under rubble and household items. Someone’s old, wooden chair had hit just right, and was doing an admirable job of keeping a large chunk of stone from crushing his head.

He heard the sounds of many running feet as the Imps ran after his brothers. Then there was one more set of steps, heavy on the ground.

“Goodbye, Captain,” Rex heard, and then those heavy, deliberate steps walked away.

Rex managed to smile. “That’s Commander, you fucking bastard,” he rasped, and then passed out.

The weight coming off of his legs was enough to bring him around. Rex opened his eyes to find
empty air and twilight sky over his head. Then the sky was replaced by the thin face of a girl. “Hold still,” she told him in a stern voice. “If you move, we might get it wrong.”

“Get what wrong?” Rex asked.

“Moving this shit,” someone else answered. “There, that’s got it. You lot, pull him out!”

Rex had his upper arms seized by two different sets of hands. They yanked him free of the rubble and kept pulling until he was back on the solid surface of the alleyway.

It took him a minute to decide that yes, he could probably sit up. He could feel all of his limbs and wiggle his toes, so his spine wasn’t damaged. He didn’t even think his legs were broken, which was a damned miracle.

Rex sat up. His stomach heaved, his head swam, and every single one of his joints screamed in protest. “Oh, that’s definitely a concussion,” he whispered.

“We’ve got to get him out of here,” the girl said, looking to an older woman. She had the deep wrinkles of someone who’d seen at least ten decades, and had a bright, colorful scarf wrapped around her head.

“Have you got a way out of the city, soldier?” That was one of the men who’d yanked him free. His heart skipped a beat as he took in the brothers. Not his brothers, but blond-haired twins who looked to be composed mostly of muscle.

“Dunno,” Rex said, and then pressed his hand to his head. “Maybe. Has my ship been seized?”

The old woman frowned. “Not heard of any ships in our port being seized, but we’ll have to wait until morning. Even if the damned Imperials haven’t left by then, the portmaster is my misbegotten whelp of a grandson. He’ll listen to Nana and get you to your ship, or he’ll regret it.”

Maybe it was on his face, and Rex hadn’t realized it, but the girl smiled and patted him on the arm. “It’s all right. Clones like you saved our port two years ago. There’s not a person native to Ghur who would turn you in.”

His brothers. Oh, gods. “Please. I was here with four of my brothers—”

The old woman sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” Rex breathed. “No, it can't be all of them.”

“Fucking Empire,” one of the blonds spat.

“They rounded up three of them for public execution,” the other twin said. “Said they were deserters from the Imperial military, and that was what they did to deserters.”

“Three. Not four,” Rex said hopefully, but the girl shook her head.

“I was close enough to listen to the troopers’ gossip.” She looked so damned sorrowful, Rex could actually believe the emotion genuine. “The other died in the sewers.”

Rex had to grit his teeth against the denial he wanted to voice. It wouldn’t do anybody any damned good, especially him.

“We need to move,” the old woman said, and looked at the twins. “Help him up.”
Rex wasn't happy to find that no, he really couldn't get off the ground without help. The moment the twins had him upright, he had to lean over and sick up whatever he'd eaten last.

*Damned concussions, I hate the fucking things,* he thought, and blacked out.

He passed a night of almost complete obliviousness in the old woman's basement. The one time he woke up, the girl was sitting in a chair by his bedside with Rex's pistol in her lap, a fresh charge in place.

Rex woke up at dawn on instinct, and found that his wounds were bandaged, if not bacta-treated. He could tell that they wanted to feed him breakfast, but he couldn't stomach the idea of food. Not yet. He accepted tea and sipped the bitter black, thinking of his other General with a dull, weary ache.

“I'm—” Rex, he tried to say at one point, but the old woman shushed him before he got his name out. “Don't tell us your name, same as we aren't saying ours,” she said, and then smiled at him. “If the Imps come asking, I want to be able to say honestly that we didn't know who you were.”

“Understood, ma'am.”

Nana had to slap her grandson the portmaster before they could get a clear, unobserved path back to the transport. The old woman gave him a bag that had hot food. The girl hugged him like he was family going off on a long trip.

Rex got back into space, but it was habit more than conscious choice. By the time the viewscreen was painted by the blue-violet kaleidoscope of hyperspace, he couldn't remember a fucking thing about the flight.

His four brothers had things scattered throughout the ship. Arrow's holdout blaster. Break's vambraces—he'd still been trying to scrape his old company insignia off. Go had left his kit out to restock. Io's only spare shirt was still draped over the top bunk.

Rex sat down on the bottom bunk, letting his hands dangle between his bent knees.

All his brothers. All at once.

He'd failed all of them.

He leaned forward and then all at once he was racked by harsh, dry sobs that made his heart ache just as much as his fucking head. He'd lost his brothers, his company, and every single friend he'd ever had.

He fell asleep at some point, pain, exhaustion, and grief forcing him down when not much else would have. The hyperspace proximity alarm woke him up.

Rex staggered out to the cockpit, reversed back into realspace, and stared at the void. He didn't even have any fucking clue where he was—he'd input coordinates on the same kind of autopilot that had seen him up into orbit from Ruuria.

The navcom gave him answers when his own brain couldn’t. He was on the edge of the Unknown Regions. There were no stations or planetary systems nearby; the closest port was at least fifty lightyears away.

*A fleet meeting point, maybe,* Rex thought distantly. That would explain the emptiness around him. Either way, the chances of anyone finding him out here were so slim as to be almost impossible.
His rifle was gone, crushed by the mess that had fallen on him. Rex stripped his lone pistol down, cleaned it on autopilot, and then reassembled it before sliding the fresh charge back in.

He stared at the weapon in his hand. For a long time, he did nothing more than ponder the merits of chewing on its short barrel.

“Your Generals would be so pissed at you, if you did that,” Rex finally said, and winced at the harsh, grating quality of his voice. Gods, he sounded like a wreck. Probably looked like it, too.

He spent a week in empty space, recovering from the Empire's attempt to literally crush the life out of him. It only took about a day for him to realize that being alone was not to his fucking taste.

He'd never been alone. Not once. Never in his entire life.

Always before, there had been a brother or a Jedi at his side. The few times it had been neither, at least there had been another living creature in his presence. An eopie. A bantha. Animals that were domesticated enough to consider humanoids a friend.

The ship was empty and silent except for the noise of his own breathing. Not even the 'Net feeds were available to stave off the intense quiet. Fuck, but if he didn't find a safe port full of people soon, he was going to crack.

Rex pulled out the holo-projector and played the message until the unit shut down in protest to recharge. It didn’t matter that they were the same words he’d first heard after Sixty-Six, that he had them memorized to the point where sometimes he dreamed Kenobi was chanting the words in his ear.

Be secret. Be strong. Persevere.

Four months, he thought. You can make it four fucking months. The others will be waiting for you on Tatooine, and if you don't show up, they'll never know what happened to their brothers.

He almost got nailed by Imperial patrols twice in those four months. Not because they were looking for him, specifically, but because they were looking for any clone without armor.

He'd pulled the helms from every single member of the dead squad of Imps he put down on the ground. Two were clones, which made Rex feel nauseous, but the rest were standard human.

Tatooine was a fucking miserable shithole.

Rex slogged his way through the heat that was trying to bake into his brains, unimpressed and sort of appalled. His General had grown up in this disaster of a desert? That really explained what had made insects so appetizing.

Rex had to stop in the shade of an alley to breathe, in and out, refusing to let the heat and his own stupid emotions get the better of him. The Empire hadn't announced any new Jedi deaths recently, and so far, none of those names had been Skywalker or Kenobi, but his worry was feeling more and more like delayed grief.

He found the junk shop easily; the proprietor was outside, beating up on half of a droid with a hammer. Rex grimaced and moved on. Poor droid.

The café was crowded. Rex pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes to shade himself from the sun, not to mention disguise his features.
He didn't see anyone, at first. He had a terrible moment of paranoia, wondering if he'd gotten the date wrong, after all.

Then he found Gregor. His brother was sitting at a table near the back of the café, hidden from the sight of anyone looking in from the street.

“Brother,” Rex said, his voice just loud enough to be heard over the din.

“Brother!” Gregor looked up, a wide smile on his face. “It's very purple of you today!”

Rex blinked a few times as his brain desperately tried to interpret that. “What?”

Gregor sighed. “I got it flowers again, didn't I?”

“Wrong. Yeah,” Rex said. That one was a bit easier to figure out. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Gregor's face screwed up. “It's...it's ancestor. No! It's—”

A hand came down on his shoulder. “Aphasia.”

Rex let out a relieved breath. “Wolffe!”

He wound up buried in a hug that smelled strongly of Bantha. “Your coat is fucking awful,” Rex said, stepping back.

“Nobody looks twice at a man wearing a Bantha,” Wolffe replied, unconcerned.

“Where are everyone’s butterflies?”

Rex thought maybe he was getting used to interpreting already. “There isn't anyone else. Just me.”

Wolffe's smile died. “Fuck. I'd hoped you were just scouting ahead.”

Rex took in the stunned look on Wolffe's face. Gregor's eyes were leaking tears.

“Oh. Oh, gods. We're it, aren't we?” Rex whispered.

“Maybe not. The others could be late,” Wolffe said, but even as he spoke, Rex could tell he didn't believe it.

“Our brothers are never frozen,” Gregor said sadly.

Never late. “No. We're not.”

A full cycle on Tatooine confirmed it, even if they hadn't already been certain. There was no one else coming.

“What happened to you?” Wolffe asked. For them, it had been a trap laced with explosives, five months in. Gregor had dragged his brother from flaming wreckage and kept them hidden until Wolffe could move.

“There was an ambush on Ruuria,” Rex said, and scrubbed his face with his hands. He was so fucking tired, and he needed to shave in the worst way. “Squads of stormtroopers, and a new damned Sith Lord, a tall fucker in black armor.”
Wolffe just shook his head. “I've heard a rumor about someone like that, but I was hoping it was fear talking. How'd you escape?”

“I didn't,” Rex said, shoulders slumping. “I was covering our brothers' exit and fired until I ran out of charge. He stripped the side of a building and buried me.”


“Didn't feel all that lucky at the time,” Rex said. “Some days it still doesn't.”

Wolffe sighed. “Yeah. We're suiciding, you know—the rest of our brothers in the military. Those that haven't deserted are eating rifle barrels in scores.”

Rex felt doubly guilty about those brothers in stormtrooper white he'd killed, and then swore and told himself not to. They might have been brothers once, but not a damned one of them had hesitated on the order to fire on him. He hadn't heard a single noise of protest.

“We need to go to Alderaan,” Wolffe said, after making sure Gregor was asleep. Their brother was loyal, but he was also deteriorating. There was no telling what the Empire would be able to torture out of him if he was captured.

“Oh, good. I spent a year evading capture, and you want to go take a jaunt to a Core World.”

“We'll be safe,” Wolffe smiled. “Probably one of the only planets beyond the Inner Rim we could visit and say that about.”

Wolffe's contact on Alderaan gave Rex such a bad jolt, he honestly wondered if he was having a heart attack. “Commander?”

Ahsoka Tano's hands flew up to her face. “Oh, Force. Rex!”

Rex had an armful of overgrown not-dead Padawan before he could blink. He put one arm around her and stared at Wolffe. “Am I hallucinating and hugging the air?”

Wolffe grinned at him. “Nope.”

“Oh. That's good,” Rex said, and finally wrapped both arms around the Togrutan. “You have a hell of a lot of explaining to do, Commander.”

Ahsoka laughed. “I know. I promise, I did not break all our mutual vows and fake my death. Master Windu did it while I was comatose.”

“Oh. Well.” Rex swallowed. “Good. If he were still alive, I'd only shoot him a little bit for doing that.”

The Commander took them to see Alderaan's Senator, Prince Organa. As if this day couldn't have any more surprises.

“We're calling ourselves the Alliance,” Organa explained, as Rex and Wolffe downed liquids at what they hoped was still a relatively civilized rate. Gregor stared off into space while playing with a fork, but at least he was remembering to eat and drink on occasion.

“We started organizing before Sixty-Six.” Organa winced and looked at the two of them.

“It's fine, Senator. We're de-chipped.”
Organa's face morphed into a thunderous frown. “It's the chips?” Wolffe gave a cautious nod. “Gods fucking damn it!”

Rex smiled. “Nice to know a Prince can swear.”

Organa was shaking his head. “I learned the worst sort of filth from her grandmaster,” he said, meaning Ahsoka.


“Our original goal was...well, it was probably going to wind up being a necessary coup.” Organa sat down heavily in a chair. “Myself, Mon Mothma, Fang Zar, Amidala, Taneel. A few others. Most of them are dead now.”

Rex nodded. He'd heard about Senator Amidala's death at the hands of so-called Jedi insurgents, and he would eat all of his own armor before he bought that line of shit.

“Then Sixty-Six came, and Palpatine gained himself an Empire with bloodshed and pretty words.” Organa was scowling again. “I'd attempt to assassinate that bastard myself if it wouldn't get my family killed.” Rex was really starting to get a good idea of why Kenobi had liked the Senator, and it was making him nostalgic as all hell.

“Since then, we've been creating cells, one at a time,” Organa said. “Each is independent of the other. Only certain operatives, like Fulcrum here,” Organa nodded at Ahsoka, “have contact with more than one cell. Those agents are contact points, meant to pass along information from single cells to the necessary endpoints. Sometimes that endpoint is me; other times it might be one of the small military outposts we’ve established in classified locations.”

“Sounds like refreshment,” Gregor mumbled.

“He means fun,” Rex interpreted. “How can we help?”

Tano glared at him. “By not dying!”

“I hate to admit it, but she's right,” Organa said apologetically. “At the moment, you three are not safe, not when the Empire is working to purge rogue clones from the galaxy with as much prejudice as rogue Jedi.”

Wolffe grimaced. “There were fourteen of us, originally. Believe me, Senator, we've had that impression hammered in.”

Tano's face softened. “I can put you somewhere remote, out in the Rim territories. The three of you would compose a single cell of the Alliance, with me as your sole contact. That would...you would still be in a position to help without being at risk all the time.”

“We like risk,” Wolffe muttered.

“Fine. Let me put it a different way,” Organa said, straightening. “Right now is not the time to fight. Now is the time to be secret, to marshal our forces. Fighting will come later, when we have enough strength to be a true threat to the Empire.”

I've heard some of that before, Rex thought, and it was enough of a reminder that he had to ask, right then. This Alliance stuff could wait. “When we left Kamino, we didn't have confirm. Is Skywalker —”
Organa was shaking his head before he could finish. “I'm so sorry, gentlemen. Anakin Skywalker died the day after Sixty-Six was issued.”

It should have been another shock. Instead, Rex just felt numb. “Senator Amidala. Did she know?”

Organa raised an eyebrow, as if surprised that Rex would ask. “She did, yes.”

Rex and Wolffe turned to look at Ahsoka, whose head was lowered, her arms crossed. “I knew. Bail told me about both of them, when I made my way here after I woke up.”

“You didn't wake up until after Sixty-Six came down.” Wolffe sounded horrified, which echoed the way Rex was feeling. Living through it was fucking bad enough; he couldn't imagine waking up to it.

“About two weeks afterwards.” Tano tried to smile. “Being dead probably saved my life, so I can't really be all that angry at Master Windu.”

“I'm so sorry, Commander,” Rex said. Ahsoka met his eyes and nodded.

He had to goad himself into asking. “Kenobi?”

Organa looked cross, which was a good sign. Kenobi couldn’t be frustrating someone to that extent if he was dead. “Our idiot friend is still alive, yes.”

Rex sighed in relief. Two out of three—not the two he thought, but he’d take it.

“Obi-Wan has been doing much as Ahsoka has in the past six months, but on a far more independent level. He travels alone, running dark with no itinerary. He creates a cell, and then tells them to find their own safe base and report in to a different agent when it’s done.”

“That sounds paranoid, even by our standards,” Wolffe said, after looking at Rex.

“Obi-Wan believes that someone is following him.” Organa rested his head against his hand, fingers splayed along his temple. “Given our new Emperor’s religion, I can’t in good conscience tell him that he’s wrong.”

“Religion?” Gregor turned his head to look at Organa. “What does fairies have to think ships?”

“What does religion have to do with anything?” Rex interpreted, and the stymied expression on Organa’s face eased, but the pensive cast didn’t leave his features.

“Emperor Palpatine is the Sith Lord Sidious,” Organa said.

Rex stared at the man. “What?”

“That fucking bastard,” Wolffe hissed.

Rex was discovering that there was a sensation beyond numb, and that was numb horror. “I always thought that man was a complete asshole, but that’s really not what I meant.”

“It wasn’t just a coup. It was assisted genocide, and gaining an Empire was a side-benefit,” Wolffe snarled, leaning back in his chair. “Fucker!”

“Where were you guys when Sixty-Six happened?” Tano asked, giving Rex a sad, sympathetic look. “Did you—”
“No,” Rex snapped, and then grimaced in apology. “I would have eaten a rifle barrel first, Commander.”

“You fought the chip, and the order,” Organa surmised. All at once, he seemed a lot more comfortable in their presence. Rex could understand that; it would be hard to forgive potential Jedi killers, no matter the circumstances.

“There were twelve thousand fifty-three of our brothers stationed on Kamino,” Rex said, and if his voice was quiet, they would just have to listen that much harder. “One of us was de-chipped already, by accident. Eel’s chip burnt out when he took a headshot, and he was still being harassed by Medical about replacing it when Sixty-Six came down. Twelve thousand and thirty-three brothers got on transports and obeyed the order. Nineteen of us, not including Eel, fought the fucking thing. Five of that group of nineteen died in the first few minutes.”

“Point twelve percent were capable of fighting Sixty-six.” Organa looked ill. “Those are terrible odds, gentlemen. Is that what…” He hesitated and tilted his head at Gregor, who’d gone back to intensive fork study.

“He had brain damage that the medics were working to repair,” Wolffe said, giving Gregor a pat on the shoulder that Gregor ignored. “Sixty-Six and the chip just made it worse.”

“Sixty-Six was hard on everyone, especially Jedi that survived the initial purge. They could feel it, you see,” Organa said. “It wasn’t just the order itself. Obi-Wan told me that he felt the death of everyone who was killed in those first few minutes.”

There had to be a point at which things stopped being horrific, but if there was a limit, Rex wasn’t finding it. “Fucking hells, Tano. I’m glad you slept through that.”

Ahsoka nodded. “The Healer who saved me thought that maybe it was the echo of all of those deaths in the Force that woke me up. I’m glad I don’t remember it.”

“In typical Jedi fashion, Obi-Wan would not give me a name, but he told me that at some point this year, a Captain was going to come and visit me.”

Rex’s heart skipped a beat. “Yeah. That’s me.”

Organa tilted his head. “You need to be a commander to run a legion.”

Rex smiled. “Long damned story, Senator.”

“I will confess, I did sneak a peek at its contents,” Organa admitted, before handing it over. “I am responsible for the lives of every sentient being in my system, so for security…” He waved his hand. “I was just wondering if you could shed some light on the context.”

Rex gave Organa a wary look, but he flipped open the ’plast. He stared at its contents in disbelief before he bent over and started laughing. It was the first time he’d laughed in over a fucking year, and it was verging on hysterical giggling, but he’d take it.

Written on the ’plast was a single line in his General’s elegant script:

*You owe me a blowjob, Sima’laicee Tanno’baijii*
Imperial Year 27: 2/2

Alliance-observed Old Republic Date 5239

The Warren, Lothal

[Incoming. Requesting directions to the party. Fulcrum.]

Obi-Wan studied the message. He hadn’t given it much thought to Fulcrum’s identity over the years, but now he was definitely curious.

That did not, however, mean that he would stop being cautious.

[Please advise number of incoming guests and mechanicals. Cypher.]

“How many is too many?” Black asked.

“And how few is too few?” Grey added.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Obi-Wan said. The response was already being decoded. He’d learned the lesson of Alpha Eight and programmed in the other three remaining encryption-decryption sets he’d written.

[8 guests, 1 mechanical, 1 boat. Cut back? Fulcrum.]

“More than I expected, but not too many,” Obi-Wan said, and then sent an answer. [042.127.397.001.075.004.313.012.]

“What the hell is that?” Black asked, frowning.

“A simpler method of scrambling coordinates to keep them from immediate translation if encryption fails,” Mara told him. “The first three are longitude, skip the center set, and the second three are latitude. The last set is the expected meeting time in minutes. The zero-zero-one indicates the swap.”

“It’s really basic, but it still amazes me how many people get it wrong. They’ll swap the coordinates but forget that the time is also scrambled.” Obi-Wan turned away from the display. “Listen up!”

The younger two Greene siblings went straighter in response, as did Bret, out of old habit. Silver, Hival, and Turkey regarded him with steady calm that would rival any Jedi.

“If you didn’t get it from the coordinates, we’re doing a mountain run. Black, I want your sniper teams moving out now. Get there fast and get set up—I want cover in case things turn sour.”

“On it.” Black shouldered his way out of the small crowd and went to collect his friends in long-distance mayhem. His arm wasn’t quite healed, but he’d spent the last three days proving he could fire one-handed with nearly the same level of accuracy.

“Man, I really hope it doesn’t,” Turkey said. “The snipers will have more fun if it does.”

“There is always the possibility that we’re dealing with well-versed Imperial Intelligence,” Obi-Wan said. “Turkey, you’ll be on the ground with us out in the open instead of lurking. If it’s a trap, I want to introduce you properly.”
“Boss,” Turkey acknowledged him, a huge grin on her face.

“Hival, get the shadows for our snipers out the moment the snipers exit the Warren. I don’t want anyone getting the drop on Black’s team while they’re occupied.” Obi-Wan paused. “It’s our stormtrooper defector’s first night out, right?”

Hival nodded. “It is. It may still be the wrong decision, but we cannot let them molder in these tunnels for much longer or risk their defection back to Imperial ranks out of boredom.”

“Send them to me and let me speak to them before they go.” Obi-Wan turned to Silver. “I want you to be lead on the ground. They’re looking for Cypher, but Cypher is feeling paranoid. I’ll be in the greeting line with you, Hival, Turkey, Grey, Mara, and Bret, but not recognizable.”

“Awesome, it’s mask time. Do I get a disguise?” Grey asked, smirking.

“The last time I did that, you complained about it itching the entire time,” Obi-Wan shot back. “Bret, bring fireworks, all right? If we need a quick exit, I am not above having you make one.”

Bret inclined his head. “No problem, Ben. I’ll bring a flash, too. If our guests are just stupid, I’d rather them be incapacitated than dead.”

“Are we outing ourselves?” Mara asked.

“Not unless we don’t have a choice. I don’t know a damned thing about Fulcrum, and I’m not up to date with Alliance policies regarding Jedi. I’d rather not attract that kind of attention.” Obi-Wan glanced at each of his Seconds, and saw nothing but the icy professionalism of soldiers who were all too aware of what they were being asked to do. “Let’s get to it. The ground team will head out in thirty minutes.”

Mara gave him a sharp nod and went to go raid the armory. She still had her favored hold-out blaster, but was fond of arming herself to the teeth in the face of the unknown. The fact that this was a potential Alliance meet just made the tendency worse.

Hival brought him the squad of ex-stormtroopers, who were each still growing out their buzz cuts. Three of the men were bronze-skinned; two had skin as dark as Silver’s; the last had the paleness of someone who was terrified of sunlight. Corporal Temsh almost didn’t need his armor to be stormtrooper white.

“Sir,” Sergeant Traavail said, throwing a salute.

“I don’t currently have an officer’s rank, so that’s not necessary,” Obi-Wan said, but the other five were already mirroring their sergeant. “Are you and your men prepared to act on behalf of Lothal?”

Jones immediately developed a huge grin. “You’re letting us out to play? Outstanding. Who are we shooting, sir?”

Obi-Wan tried not to sigh. The moment Grey had let it slip that he’d once been a General, they’d latched onto the sirs and the saluting like the acts were lifelines to sanity. “We are hoping that you’ll shoot at no one. This is a potential Alliance meet; you’ll get a signal on your comms if we need to bug out with covering fire. If the Imperials come in…” Obi-Wan frowned. “I know you still have friends in the garrisons. I won’t ask you to fire on the Imperials unless you don’t have a choice.”

“Thank you, sir,” Fjori said in relief. The youngest trooper had a brother still stationed in the Academy Garrison.
“And now, one last thing.” Obi-Wan smiled. “This is an act of trust. If any of you betray the Lothal, I will slice off your testicles and force you to eat them.”

Travaill winced. “That doesn’t sound very Jedi-like, sir.”

“I’m a Jedi Shadow,” Obi-Wan said. “Our morality is, by necessity, a bit more flexible.” Calling himself a Shadow was a hell of a lot easier than trying to explain “Sith” or “fogbank.” It was even technically true, thanks to MonMassa and her rabid insistence.

Obi-Wan waited until the ex-stormtroopers departed before letting his smile die. He tried not to think about the others if he could help it; he couldn’t afford to be that consciously depressed.

He rested his right hand on the leather cuff on his left arm, tracing the pattern of the text underneath by memory. Two years, six months, and fifteen days.

He was still no closer to figuring out a way to go home.

Yoda appeared next to him in the tunnel, unnoticed by the bustle of the Warren’s population. Even though no one else could see the troll, they still walked around him.

“Worry not,” Yoda said, a playful smile on his face. “Welcome presences, your guests will be.”

Obi-Wan eyed the Force ghost. *Someone I knew?*

Yoda nodded. “Three, there are.”

“Hmm.” Obi-Wan accepted a fresh set of power packs for his blasters from Mara when she joined him. *Did I actually like these people?*

Yoda chuckled and vanished. Mara rolled her eyes. “I’m really glad you don’t pull that secretive, giggling nonsense.”

“I think Yoda is a prime example of what happens if you’re bored out of your mind for twenty years.” Obi-Wan felt a flare of hope, wondering if it was Anakin finally turning up, and then quashed it. Shielded or not, he would know if Anakin Skywalker was nearing Lothal. He’d spent too much of his life devoted to keeping tabs on his Padawan.

“Please tell me that you do not have a bad feeling about this,” Mara said, giving him a narrow-eyed look. “The last time you uttered those words, I got shot, and that’s your area, Tanno’baijii.”

“No, I don’t, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything.” Obi-Wan took the time to change out each blaster’s pack for the fresh ones, tucking the half-used ones into his belt, just in case.

“I hope Yoda’s right. I don’t want to kill anyone today.”

Republic Date 5212: 11/8th

Klahbast Sector, Outer Rim

Month 7 of the Outer Rim Sieges

Cody watched as his General strode down the medivac ship’s ramp. He stepped down onto the
ground, paused, and wiped his face with both hands, glassy-eyed. Cody clenched his jaw, forcing
himself to wait, to give Kenobi that one moment. There had been so gods-cursed few of them. On the
battlefield, he was still the 212th’s beacon, and no Sep would ever think Kenobi was anything but
freshly-unveiled destruction, but his General was tired. There was a dejected slump to his General’s
shoulders that was showing up more and more often.

“Sir.”

Kenobi shook off his exhaustion and walked over. “What is it, Commander?”

“I didn’t want Skywalker to say anything in front of Rex.” Cody’s eyes flickered over to the ship.
“Will he live?”

“The future is always in motion,” Kenobi said, just as his eyes went distant. “But I think so, yes.”

Cody breathed out. Now he could give his report in a frame of mind that was calmer, though still
about a tic away from homicidal rage. “We found the source of the botched coordinates, sir,” he said
in a low voice.

Kenobi’s head came up, a false mask of calm on his face that didn’t do a lot to hide the chill in his
eyes. “Who?”

“A squad within the 212th,” Cody said, and bowed his head. “I’m sorry. That makes it my—”

“It does not,” Kenobi interrupted him, before Cody could claim responsibility. “Where were they at
the time?”

“About fifty kliks east of us, sir. Phantom Company was mingled up with the 501st’s Ruin.”

“Because they ruin everything.” Kenobi repeated the old joke with a brief smile. “Three years on,
and it still amuses me that you named all of your companies for hauntings, and Rex named all of his
for breaking things. Where is Phantom now?”

“Reported in about ten minutes ago, light casualties.” Cody narrowed his eyes. Nothing like the
casualty list he was putting together for Ghost. “Sergeant Trip’s squad. Most of them are Shinies.”
They were also Speedies, but Cody was still holding out hope that the Kaminoans had gotten that
right, that these new brothers were ready and built for war. It just seemed wrong, to grow a brother to
fighting age in a two-year span.

Kenobi nodded, slow and thoughtful. “Lead the way, Commander.”

Cody gave him a curious look at the continued formality, but shrugged it off. If they were about to
go arrest some asshole, formal was probably a good idea. Then again, if he had the opportunity to
shoot the fuck, he’d take it and spend a week in the brig with a smile on his face. At least that brother
would have the chance to heal; too many had not.

Phantom’s Captain jerked his chin in the direction of a squad of brothers near the back of the
company’s camp. Cody was scowling with all his might before they were even halfway across the
field. The troopers were laughing about something, all of them, to a man, and Cody was damned
well aware that the mistake had been reported.

Kenobi drew even with Cody. His right hand was hidden behind the long hem of his tunics, which
made Cody think he’d already palmed his lightsaber. He shifted his rifle down from his shoulder so
that it rested in both hands. There was no reason for this to be a fight, but hell, better to be prepared
than not.

Which one. Not a question, but a flat request.

Cody resisted the urge to scratch the side of his head. Damned telepathy always tickled. Carve. CZ-9620.

“CZ-9620,” Kenobi said in a soft voice. Cody’s chin came up. Fuck, he knew that tone.

The brother in question turned around, glaring. “I have a name, sir.” He didn’t salute, nor did he look at them in a way even resembling respect.

Cody flipped the safety off. Right; now he was going to shoot the man just on principle for his fucking appalling manners. Then he was going to find out which idiot training master had cleared this asshole for fighting.

Sergeant Trip, at least, had better sense. “Salute your superior officers, Corporal, or you will be cleaning every ‘fresher in the barracks with your damned tongue!”

Carve treated them to the most grudging salute Cody had ever seen in his life. “I still have a name, sir.”

“Not right now, you don’t.” Kenobi’s gaze was flat and unimpressed. “Not until you’ve finished reciting the names of every single one of your brothers who are dead today by your hand.”

Carve flinched. “It wasn’t me—I mean, it was an honest mistake—”

“And yet, you don’t seem all that broken up about it,” Kenobi snapped. “If anything, I’d say that you were…”

Cody didn’t think it was entirely his imagination when the temperature seemed to drop several degrees. “Sir?” he ventured.

“You’re pleased,” Kenobi murmured. “You didn’t make a mistake. It was deliberate.”

“No one in my squad is going to deliberately kill—”

“Look, I really don’t—”

“Quiet,” Kenobi said in a low voice, and that was all it took for both officers to shut up. “WHY.”

Shit. Cody thought even a null would have sensed the strength in that Force-laced command. Hells, he wanted to confess, and he hadn’t done a damned thing.

“Because I was tired of getting passed over!” Carve blurted, and then looked both appalled and seven shades of infuriated.

“What the hell did you just say?” Cody barked in disbelief. Passed over? He really wanted that statement to be recanted—he had not just seen most of the men from the two best companies in the damned military die because some little shit was whining about not having a higher rank!

Gold, he thought, feeling his lip curl up. Commander Gold had been the oversight for Phantom, and he’d died with most of Ghost. This was what he got for not taking the time to vet his fucking Shinies, Sieges be damned.

“Two hundred sixty-two lives, all for a petty grievance.” Kenobi’s voice had gone soft again. “And
no remorse that you killed so many, even though your actual target survived.”

Cody was about to volunteer to shoot the stupid bastard when Kenobi did it for him. His General raised his right hand and fired the pistol Cody hadn’t even known he was carrying. The single shot nailed Carve in the forehead and sent him over backwards.

“Sir,” Cody whispered, trying not to wince. That was a hell of a lot more brutal that he’d expected.

Kenobi lowered the blaster in a slow, deliberate arc. The camp had gone utterly silent; Trip looked like he was worried about being next.

“My first field execution.” Kenobi sighed and tossed the pistol into the dirt. “I really hope it’s my last,” he said, and walked away. Half of the encampment stared after him, while the rest looked down at Carve.

No. CZ-9620. Cody wasn’t going to give a name to a man who thought so little of his brothers.

Trip had gone pale, but he swallowed and straightened up. “Sir. He was one of mine, that makes it my responsibility—”

Cody shook his head. “No, Sergeant. If Kenobi says it isn’t my fault, then it damned well isn’t your fault, either. Just vet the rest of your squad, and then send the digital files up for me to sign off on so that we can fill the gap in your ranks.”

“Sir,” Trip said. His salute was shaky, but better than none at all.

Skywalker pushed his way through the crowd of soldiers. “What in the hell happened?” he asked, both eyebrows going up when he saw the body.

Cody picked up the blaster. “I think we just came about a tic away from my General losing his shit.”

Skywalker studied the blaster before lifting his head, eyes tracking Kenobi’s retreating form. Then he looked down at CZ-9620, and his expression hardened into the cool ruthlessness that had kept scores of Cody’s brothers alive throughout the majority of the war.

“That’s who botched the coordinates for the bombing run?”

“They weren’t botched. It was deliberate, sir,” Cody told him.

Anakin shook his head. “Then Obi-Wan was a hell of a lot kinder than I would have been.”

Cody wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but morbid curiosity won out. “What would you have done, sir?”

“I would have made the fucker bury them all. By hand,” Anakin said, and then rested his hands on his hips. “Then I would have sent him to the Citadel the moment it was back in Republic hands.”

Cody tilted his head and looked up at Skywalker. “Sometimes my General is way too fucking nice, sir.”

Anakin nodded and smiled. “Thank goodness one of us is. See you in about fifteen at the medivac site, all right?”

After Skywalker had gone to find Kenobi, Cody turned to the remains of Trip’s squad. “If any of you assholes gives me another problem, no matter how small, I’ll let General Skywalker send you to the Citadel in CZ-9620’s place.”
“I do not have a problem, sir,” the youngest-looking of Trip’s four remaining Shinies said. The poor kid was green around the gills.

“Should we, uh. Should we bury him, sir?” the next Shiny in line asked.

Cody spat in the dirt. “I don’t bury traitors,” he growled, and stalked off after his Generals. If he could help it, there weren’t going to be any more Speedies joining his ranks, either. That kind of petty unreliability was not acceptable in the field.

There was a skirmish not long after the medivac transports cleared out, all of them full up. It lasted until long past dark, but their losses weren’t bad. Not compared to earlier in the day, at least.

The six survivors of Torrent were still with Skywalker. Those brothers all had grim, determined looks on their faces that promised serious retribution upon any Sep droid, fighter, or general that dared to cross their paths. Cody was already down to eighteen men for Ghost. Three-Sixty had died of his injuries from the damned bombing run, and Spartan took a fatal hit to keep his commanding officer from dying. Cody was fond of being alive, but not at that kind of cost.

When the all-clear was announced via comm, it was after midnight on…on…whatever world this was. He’d lost track twenty-three days ago, and it hadn’t seemed to matter very much.

Cody found his General sitting on a rock that overlooked camp. “Sir.”

Kenobi looked up, his eyes red-rimmed with exhaustion. “Cody.”

“I’m not nearly as effective at making your ass go and sleep as Rex is, but I will sit on you if it’s required, sir.”

That earned him a faint, rueful smile. “If things progress to that point, then by all means, Commander.”

“They progressed past that point about three months ago,” Cody said flatly, sitting down next to his General. “Now tell me why you’re sitting on this cold damned rock instead of bundled up on a cot with the rest of our men.”

“I did a quick review of CZ-9620’s service since being put on active duty,” Kenobi said. “He had not yet been in line for any promotion.”

Cody turned to stare at him in surprise. “Then what the hell was that, earlier?”

“I don’t know, Cody.” Kenobi frowned. “What I do know is that he believed it, like it was a truth written in stone. Lieutenant Gold was not his primary target, either. You were.”

Cody felt a chill that had nothing to do with the smoky breeze. “You’re saying that someone convinced CZ-9620 to assassinate me.”

“It does seem that way.”

“What the hell for?” Cody asked. “Not to sound defeatist, but my life expectancy isn’t all that great as it is.”

Kenobi nudged him with his elbow, hard enough that he felt the impression of it through his armor. “So far, so good. Don’t invite further trouble; we have plenty enough already.”

Cody smiled. Sometimes it was still a bit weird to realize that his commanding officer liked and
respected him, even beyond their role as commander and subordinate. “Then I’ll refer to the trouble we’ve already got. Was he argued into believing that his CO needed to die, or did someone make him think that way?”

“I didn’t sense any sort of manipulation, but with two Sith on the loose, that doesn’t necessarily negate anything.” Kenobi glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “Be careful, though. If this is assassination, and not a further sign of trouble with the Speedies, then the event could repeat itself.”

Cody grimaced. He’d spent the last hour reading up on the Speedies’ first few months in the field, and hadn’t liked what he found. They had a tendency to suffer from breakdown much faster than their older brothers. Their skills were often sub-par, or those skills deteriorated to the point of nigh uselessness within a few weeks of harsh fighting.

“Sir, I honestly can’t decide which option is worse.”

“Your death is unacceptable.” Kenobi turned his head to give Cody one of the most quietly intense stares that he’d ever been subjected to. “You are going to survive this war, Commander.”

“Sir,” Cody said, which was the most neutral answer he had. Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn’t. He was a soldier, and he would do his duty.

As it turned out, Kenobi was right, but it would be a long damned time before Cody was capable of wishing otherwise.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!