Amalgamate Part I

by flamethrower

Summary

Everything must coalesce, must merge together, to bring about what is yet to come.

Notes

This universe has become awfully damned big lately. Thank you to all of you who are still reading, still holding onto this roller coaster with both hands. The ride isn't over yet.

Beta provided by the lovely Norcumi, who managed it even while horrifically sick, because she's amazeballs.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Republic Date 5212: 6/4th
Jedi Temple, Coruscant
First Month of the Outer Rim Sieges

“Please do reconsider.”

Depa bowed her head at the passing set of Padawans, who both gave her short, gratingly correct bows in response. The two began whispering the moment her back was turned, as if Depa Billaba’s hearing had been damaged along with the rest of her. She refused to let it bother her, and did not slow her steps. There was another who would settle the matter.

Their whispering silenced immediately as the Padawans realized who had been following her. “I think, perhaps, the two of you should consider meditations on judging others,” Obi-Wan Kenobi said in a soft voice, one that almost caused the fine hairs on her skin to rise in protest. That was the voice of a Jedi General, one who expected to be obeyed.

Given the Outer Rim Sieges she had awoken to, and Obi-Wan’s role in fighting them, it was a wonder he was in-Temple at all, but the Chancellor and his requests were not to be denied. The reminder of the Order’s tenuous political situation was almost enough to mar her serenity, but she had seen madness. She would persevere.

“Er, yes Master Kenobi,” one Padawan squeaked in a high-pitched rush. The other Padawan, Depa suspected, had limited their agreement to a mortified bow.

“Unpleasantness abounds, on the battlefield and off of it,” Obi-Wan murmured when the two had gone. He had caught up to her quickly, almost surprising her, because she had heard no excess of sound. “I must leave soon, or I’ll miss my departure window, and then there will be several thousand people rather upset with me. Now: About our conversation…”

“No, Master Obi-Wan,” Depa said, her voice as serene as her expression.

A denial was not enough to sway him. “I will literally buy you a planet if you take back your Council seat.”

“How in all the stars would you acquire the funds to buy said planet?” Depa asked, intrigued.

“I would bloody well figure something out,” Obi-Wan replied.

Depa had not quite been able to believe it when she’d been told that her seat on the Council had been given to Obi-Wan Kenobi after her Fall, both physical and mental, on Haruun Kal. At that point, yes, he had been of an age with Depa when she had first been asked to sit in one of those illustrious chairs. Yes, he had been named a Master—unofficially, but still acknowledged—long before Anakin Skywalker’s Knighting. He had also been stubborn, willful, and defiant, traits that could easily clash with the other Councilors and create more problems than enlightenment. In this time of war, however, it seemed as if willful defiance was the order of the day.

“If even half of the tales I have heard since my recovery are true, I have no doubt that you and Knight Skywalker could manage it.” Depa smiled and turned to face him. “I do not want a planet, Obi-Wan. I want a Padawan.”
The two and a half years since their last meeting have aged him, which brought her a sharp pang of sympathy. One still so young should not look so bowed by responsibility that it was a burden rather than a calling. It bleached the brilliant copper from his hair, carved lines around his eyes and along his brow. No doubt more lines lurked around his mouth, hidden from view by his beard.

For a moment, her certainty wavered.

Then Depa saw the intensity of wisdom and strength in his gaze, and set aside her concerns. Bowed, yes, but far from broken, proved further when his eyes widened slightly in realization.

“You’ve Seen something. It was no mere chance recovery,” he said.

Depa nodded. “I dreamed, though I have been told that it was impossible for me to have done so.” Foolish droids and Healers both—her brain might have been inactive, but it was only a part of the physical shell. The spirit knew no such limitations.

“Tell me,” Obi-Wan invited. A fragment of memory from before came to her then, of a much younger Padawan Kenobi, struggling through the curse and gift of true Prescience. If anyone were to understand her certainty, it would be Obi-Wan.

Depa considered her words. “I often dreamed of a young boy, an Initiate of our Temple. He wished to fight, but never neglected his studies. He wished to do more to assist the war effort, and spent his extra time learning what he would need in the field, things that even the Order had not yet thought to teach. He asked questions, but did not doubt the wisdom that answered him. He wished to be a Padawan with all his heart, but never begrudged those he watched exit the crèche to begin their new lives as apprentices.”


“I am indeed fortunate,” Depa agreed, “but that is not all I have seen.”

The smile faded, but did not quite leave his eyes. Recognition and preparation without cynicism. “Go on.”

“I know that I must be in place to save his life,” Depa said, her voice softening. This, she did not wish to share with others. “That my presence will be vital, and his survival is of utmost importance. My Padawan’s path will not be kind, but it is one he must live to walk.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes darted around, assessing the nearness of others, before he spoke, as quiet as she had been. “You do not believe that you’re going to survive that moment.”

“That, I do not know,” Depa said honestly. “My own fate is uncertain, but my Padawan...no matter if he were my Chosen or Council-assigned, my Padawan is far more important than I am.” She hesitated. “I am sure that you, of all people, understand my feelings in this matter.”

Depa didn’t expect him to flinch, but she wasn’t certain as to the cause. “I do,” Obi-Wan said. His gaze flickered around the room again, but she thought it was less assessment and more a delaying tactic. “What else did you see, Master Depa?”

She had been prepared for that. “I did see an end to the war, Master Obi-Wan, and while the future is always in motion, I foresaw yours and Anakin’s survival.”

Depa watched his expression ease, his eyes brighten. “The future is always in motion,” he agreed, smiling, and bowed to announce his departure. Depa returned the bow, feeling a heartache she did
not expect.

Then he stopped only a few steps distant. “When your pivotal moment has passed, and this war is over…will you consider taking this damned Council seat back?”

Depa smiled. “I will consider it.” Obi-Wan gave her a look of polite, amused irritation, recognizing the wordplay for the evasion it was, and then went on his way.

The moment he was gone, Depa’s smile died. “Oh, my friend,” she whispered, feeling the ache spread from her heart through her entire chest. “I am so sorry, but some things cannot be altered. To do so would create results far worse than what you will soon see.”

Survival, as Depa well knew, did not necessarily mean good fortune.

Republic Date 5212: 8/22

Star Destroyer Redeemer II

Bothawui Orbit, Both System

“I cannot kriffing believe we’re defending this planet again,” Jesse muttered. When the ship lurched from another impact, he put out his hand and caught himself on the nearest console out of habit.

Why the entire hell was he in command of a ship? This was a stupid damned idea.

“Jesse! How’s my ship doing?”

Right. It was General Skywalker’s stupid damned idea. That’s why he was standing on a bridge. “Your ship’s fine, sir,” Jesse replied, trying not to wince when Twenty-Three reported a hull breach just in time to be picked up by the mic. “Well, mostly fine.”

“Not for much longer, not if we all stay here!” That was Rex; the lucky bastard was at least out in a fighter, shooting at things. Turbolasers just weren’t the same, especially when he didn’t even get a turn at firing them. “Suggest we leave, General!”

“Doubling down on that suggestion—dammit, we just fixed that section of the ship, you kriffing shit vulture droid bastards!”

“Eel, the ship can be fixed!” Skywalker jumped in. “What’s your status?”

“Fucked, sir,” Eel reported, sounding kind of happy for a man who was probably about to die. “Only down about a quarter of our turbolaser mounts, but shields are at twenty.”

“Please do not explode in the next forty seconds. Reinforcements are coming in,” Skywalker told them.

Jesse didn’t breathe again until an entire group of capital ships dropped out of hyperspace, pulling one of Skywalker’s stunts and landing all but on top of the Seppie ships. “You went back to Bothawui, and you didn’t invite us?”
Kenobi. Well, at least the 501st wasn’t going to have their last stand in a truly ridiculous location.

“I figured you were probably sick of the place, Obi-Wan.” Skywalker had to be smiling; you could always hear it in his voice. “But we’re all very glad to see you guys.”

“Extremely damned glad,” Eel said. “Admiral, I would be very grateful if you could get these vulture droids off my ship’s ass long enough for us to get the shields back up.”

Jesse started to smile. “Requesting the same!” Maybe this day would be fun, after all. Gods all knew there hadn’t been a lot of that in a while.

That killed the smile. Fuck, he’d been doing so well.

You are not allowed to dwell on your dead boyfriend in the middle of a space battle, Jesse told himself sternly. Kix would never have let him live down dying in such a stupid way.

“Assistance is on its way, gentlemen,” Yularen reported, adding, “Might I suggest that the 501st stick to ground battles, and leave the naval fights to those of us who are actually in the navy?”

“Please, actually, can we?” Attie begged. “Forget what I said last week! I’d slog over the surface of twenty planets not to do this shit again!”

Kenobi sounded wry. “Captain Rex, your officers are whining.”

“I’m aware, General.” Rex’s fighter popped up near the bridge long enough for Jesse and Rex to trade frustrated looks.

Jesse nodded in response to what hadn’t been said; Rex peeled off again. “There are still a hell of a lot of Seps crowding our space, sir. The odds are better, but not great—hey, you on the third gun mount! Are you blind? Shoot the kriiffing vulture droids before they land, not after!”

“Sorry, sir! Least I hit the bastard.”

“Without also shooting us,” Jesse admitted. “Good job, Neatfreak. Now please keep shooting the rest of the fuckers.”

“Yes, sir!” Now there was a Speedie with some real enthusiasm for their job.

“We really need to pull back,” Skywalker said. “We can come back in with the 212th and the 118th, maybe a three-prong attack to gain some control over the situation, but we need time to get some repairs in. None of us are in good shape, Obi-Wan.”

“I agree with you, but we can’t leave,” Kenobi said, his voice turning clipped and harsh. “The word from High Command is that we remove the Separatist forces from Bothawui space, or die trying.”

“Are you kriiffing kidding me, sir?” Eel asked, outraged. “I love Bothans as much as the next man —”

“Really? You’ve gotta tell a brother these things,” Attie teased.

“—shut up, asshole. Command wants us to toss three entire portions of the Fleet at this, when Bothawui may well have Seps jumping in a damned week from today?”

“Then I guess you’d better stop whining and give the Seps a reason not to come back!”
Jesse grinned. “Commander Cody, sir, you’re not allowed to shoot at Eel just because you have to clean up his mess.”

“When else am I gonna get the chance?” Cody retorted. “On your left, Commander!”

Shit. Jesse spent the next ten minutes with eyes for his crew only, pulling every dirty trick he knew to keep their shields up and turbolasers firing. Life support was coming in at a distant third, but at least they were all still breathing.

“Okay, now how is my ship doing?” Skywalker asked.

Jesse wiped his face, surprised by the red streak on his hand. He was sliced across the forehead, and he had no idea when it had happened. “If everyone else is doing all right, we’ll survive, sir. Lost a power plant.”

“And you stuck with the important priorities,” Rex said, gruffly pleased. “Gravity?”

“Got it because we’re hovering over a planet,” Jesse reported, gesturing for Twenty-Three’s section to strap in when they seemed too slow at it. It wasn’t the best gravity, and jumping was not advisable, but it did the job. If they picked up speed while remaining in the same area, that would help, too. “Still in the game, General.”

“Good man,” Kenobi said. “Hold that line; we’re backing you up.”

Back up meant Rex, Cody, Oddball, Tin Cup, and Pinstripe conspiring with their flight groups before coming back around in a solid wall of firepower. Jesse watched in utter appreciation as a Seppie cruiser gutted flame, surrounded by the mess of hundreds of vulture droids.

“Now the odds are better,” Kenobi said. “Is everyone ready to kick the Separatists the hell out of this system once more?”

That earned the General a chorus of happy, vicious agreement. Jesse turned away from the flaming wreckage, starting to issue orders to get the *Redeemer II’s* nose pointed in a different direction. There was another cruiser in their vicinity, and it needed to burn.

“Sir.”

Jesse whirled around based on the tone of Twenty-Three’s voice alone. “What is it, Captain?”

Twenty-Three glanced up at him, a grey cast to his skin. “There’s another ship coming in, sir. It’s… pretty big.”

“Gotta be just a cluster of them,” Draigon muttered, and then glanced up in shock from his terminal. “Shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

“Not reassuring,” Jesse started to say, and then the ship dropped out of hyperspace. “Holy kriffing stars.”

“What the hell is that?” Skywalker demanded. “Shit, Tremor, you need to get clear—fuck!”

Jesse shook his head as one of the 118th’s ships cracked in half like a split egg. If that cruiser went down when it wasn’t beat to hell, then the second *Redeemer* was fucked.

“They didn’t have a chance!” Attie shouted.
“If you’re anywhere near that thing, pull back!” Cody ordered. “That is a massive kriffing turbolaser, and half of you don’t have the shields to handle a single blast!”

“No, we don’t.” Skywalker was definitely pissed off. “Admiral Yularen? Obi-Wan?”

“We don’t have a choice, General,” Yularen said. “Gods wept.”

“We can’t let the Separatists hold this system.” Kenobi sounded like he was grinding his teeth. “They have an entire war machine ready to fly, and they’ll use Bothawui as a launching point into the Inner Rim!”

“They knew what they were doing. We’re penned in, sirs,” Eel reported, exhaustion leeching into his voice. “We’ll hold this side, but I can only give you five minutes before we’re going down.”

“Dammit. I’ve got maybe six,” Attie added. “They went after our shields first. All of us. They knew that big kriffing bastard ship was inbound.”

“This fight isn’t over yet, gentlemen.” Yularen didn’t seem bothered, but after nearly three years of war, it took a lot to phase that man. “All groups: Release the second stage of fighters!”

Jesse kept half of his attention on the sensors, and the other half watching the chaos beyond the transparisteel viewscreen. The screen developed a hairline fracture from top to bottom after one hit, making everyone nervous, but it was holding.

He wasn’t navy, no, but even Jesse could look at the numbers on-screen and know that they were going to lose this battle. Gods.

Jesse cut the comm’s outgoing signal. “Twenty-Three, I want you to coordinate with only our fighter groups,” Jesse ordered, low-voiced but still heard by every man on the bridge. “Take us about. Use that flaming wreck of a Seppie ship for cover. I don’t want that giant ugly kriffing ship to know we’re coming until it’s too damned late to do anything but watch the show.”

Twenty-Three just raised an eyebrow, bless the bastard. “Sir, are we going to ram ourselves a Seppie ship?”

Jesse nodded, glancing around the bridge. The handful of Shinies on bridge duty looked nervous, but not fearful. “We’re down a power station, and if we take another hit, we’ll be dead in the water. We can’t let these Sep bastards kill our brothers. If we take that giant fucker out of the equation, they have a chance.”

“Didn’t think we’d go out by ramming another ship in the ass,” Starker said, lopsided smile on his face. “I love the 501st.”

Jesse smiled. “So do I, and that’s why you’re all abandoning ship. Only person who gets to drive Skywalker’s second Redeemer up that Sep cruiser’s ass is me.”

“Sir!” Twenty-Three blurted. “You can’t!”

“Hey, go big or go home,” Jesse replied, lifting his arms in a wide shrug. “Today, you guys are the ones going home. The moment we get around that flaming mess, you’re all evacuating. That’s an order, by the way,” Jesse added, when Twenty-Three opened his mouth to protest again.

Twenty-Three looked at Jesse as if he’d just canceled shore leave forever. “Sir,” he whispered, before he started barking out orders to get the Redeemer II on the right course.
“And don’t think about staying because you think I need a pilot,” Jesse said quietly. “I can handle a single stick. Been doing it for years.”

Twenty-Three glared at him. “I wish Major Kix was still here, if only to tell you how entirely appropriate that was.”

Jesse smiled. “Tell ya a secret: Kix loved my horrible jokes.”

“Zero-G,” Twenty-Three replied. “Even the Major had limits, sir.”

“Yeah.” Jesse wiped his eyes before any of the other crewmembers could notice. “Cheap shot, Twenty-Three. Get off this boat, survive the war, find a nice person, have some kids. Pass on your utter lack of appreciation for my horrible jokes to a new generation of crazy people. For me, okay?”

“I’ll consider it,” Twenty-Three said, and turned back to his station with a frustrated, angry glare on his face. “Ship’s lined up,” he reported two minutes later. The fiery wreck of the Sep cruiser was to their spatial left; to Jesse, it was like the fire was close enough to burn his skin. “As long as she doesn’t take a direct hit, you’re on course, sir.”

Jesse nodded. “Noted. Give the evacuation order, and get off this bridge, Captain. I want all of you at safe distance before I make that massive bastard explode.”

Twenty-Three hugged him, which was a surprise. It wasn’t that brothers didn’t hug so much as Twenty-Three had always been seriously displeased by casual touch. Jesse gave him a hell of a squeeze and let go before Twenty-Three could panic or regret the act.

“Go.”

No one else in the Fleet noticed what he was up to until the ship began spewing escape pods.

“Jesse! What’s your status?”

“Status is approaching critical, General Skywalker,” Jesse reported. If this was going to be last call, he was going to do it right. “Just thought I’d take your ship on a bit of a walk.”

“Jesse? Jesse, what the fuck are you doing?” Rex shouted. “Talk to me!”

“I’m buying everyone the chance to survive,” Jesse said, sitting down at a terminal to begin the shield-shuffling dance required to keep the second Redeemer alive long enough to do its job. “Also, I get to make a really big explosion.”

“Jesse, I am kriffing ordering you to get off that ship,” Rex growled.

Jesse rolled his eyes. “Since I’m acting captain of the second Redeemer, you can’t order me to do shit, sir. Besides, gotta make sure she hits what I’m aiming at.”

“Do you think you can do it, Jesse?” Skywalker asked.

“Yeah.” Jesse took a deep breath. “Yes, sir. One less big ugly Sep ship in the galaxy.”

“You fucking bastard,” Eel whispered. “We’ve made it this far, dammit!”

“And you and Attie, Dice and Rex—you’re all gonna keep going,” Jesse grinned. “Make everyone we fight remember what it means to fuck with the 501st.”

“You can’t,” Attie protested. “Like Eel said, Jesse—we made it this far!”
“You bastard.” Rex sounded like he was choking. “Make us proud, Jesse. Light up the kriffing sky.”

“Jesse.”

Jesse lifted his head automatically, even though it was just a voice on a comm. “General Kenobi?”

The General’s voice was soft when he spoke. “May the Force be with you.”

Jesse swallowed down a hard, terrible lump in his throat. “Thank you, sir,” he replied, and then turned off the comm. He couldn’t take any more farewells like that one, or he was going to break down and sob his way through his own death. That wasn’t how he wanted to go out—he’d rather get to see the first gout of flame from that ugly damned cruiser.

When he hit a certain distance, the shield dance didn’t matter anymore. The second Redeemer was too close for the Sep’s massive turbolaser to get a bead on him. The other pilots and ships had engaged the big fucker, keeping it occupied with defending its own turbolaser mounts and shield generators.

Jesse smiled in gratitude and then shut down weapons and life support. He just needed working shields…and to throw all other available power to the sublight engines.

All he has to do was stand on the bridge and wait for it to be over.

A lot of Jesse’s brothers didn’t think about what death meant. The ones that did consider spirituality ascribed to Jedi or Mando’a philosophy, or to some really strange reincarnation ideas about living your next life as a sofa. Or something. It was probably more reverent than that, but Jesse had gotten as far as next-life-as-inanimate-object before noping out.

Jesse never bothered with the philosophy. He just knew, in his mind and heart and his stubborn gut, that there was more. There was more than this, and Kix was somewhere out there. Jesse was going to devote the entirety of his ghostly existence to finding him.

Then Neatfreak turned up, and pretty much ruined Jesse’s peaceful attempt at suicide.

“What the entire hell are you still doing aboard ship?” Jesse roared, outraged and half-terrified. The window for escape pods was practically gone. “I ordered you to get the hell off the Redeemer!”

“Oh, I heard you, sir,” Neatfreak replied, standing next to Jesse at perfect parade rest. Every single thing about him was always spot-on, so his defiance of orders was drastically out of character.

“Then get the hell out of here!” Jesse shouted.

Neatfreak didn’t even blink. “No. I won’t be doing that. I’m not leaving this ship unless you do.” He paused. “Sir.”


Neatfreak smiled. “Not without you, Commander.”

Jesse ground his teeth and clenched his fists in frustration. He was learning too late that there were stupid perils in finally wandering around, allowing people to address him by his actual rank. Eel, Attie, and Dice—they’d had the right damned idea. “Gods blast it all, Ensign, you have to!”

“Sir.” Neatfreak looked like he was hesitating. Jesse considered the battle won until he heard what
the man had to say. “I know I’m young, and I haven’t seen much. I know the war’s been hard on my older brothers. I know you’ve lost…friends. But you still have friends out there, and they don’t want to lose you, not yet. So, no, sir: I will not be leaving this ship.”

Jesse felt an emotional fist take hold of all his internal organs and squeeze them. Fuck. Kriffing hells.

*Fives, you were a terrible influence, and I miss you so much.* Fives had given Jesse one hell of a soft spot for people doing the right thing, regardless of orders.

“Okay,” Jesse said, clasping his hand onto Neatfreak’s shoulder. “You’re…you’re right. We’ll have to run for it, though.” There wasn’t much time left—he wasn’t even sure it was possible to evacuate the ship at this point.

“One escape pod left, rear aft side of the ship,” Neatfreak reported, and then his mouth quirked up in a smile. “Last one to the pod has to swab out the vomit from the acceleration spin!”

“Oh, hell no!” Jesse bolted after Neatfreak as the first great shudder of impact sent vibrations all along the ship. “You can vomit into a bag, Speedie brother!”

By the time they get to the pod, Jesse thought it was a literal miracle they’d made it at all. The entire ship was groaning and screaming, metal folding in from front to rear as the second *Redeemer* did a fabulous job of shoving itself up a Seppie ship’s ass.

Jesse threw himself at the pod’s controls while Neatfreak sealed the hatch. “You’re on swab duty if you miss the bag,” Jesse said, and launched the pod the moment the sensors turned green for the seals.

“Yes, sir,” Neatfreak started to say, and then something slammed into their pod from the side. Jesse was flung to his left, striking his head against the control panel that crawled up the sidewall. Things went gray and fuzzy; another strike tossed him back onto the ground and then there was fire, he was *burning*—

“SIR!”

Jesse bolted awake, feeling battered and half-fried. The scent of electrical fire in the air was competing with the foulness of the chemical fire retardant spray. “The hell?”

Neatfreak was sitting next to him, one hand still gripping a retardant canister with a dial reading empty. “Sir.” He gasped for breath a few more times, swallowed, and kept speaking. “Sir. The pod took at least two hits. We had a fire; you’ve been out for about ten minutes.”

“How bad?” Jesse asked, and then winced as his face let him know that he must have been one of the things on fire.

“Transponder’s down. They’ll have to find us by life support sweeps,” Neatfreak said. “It’s just…we’re in a huge debris field.”

“They might never find us.” Jesse pondered that idea for a while. “Sooo, I guess you wanted slow suicide instead of fast, flaming death, huh?”

Neatfreak eyed Jesse, scowling. “I can still beat you to death with this canister, sir.”

Jesse smiled, refusing to wince again when it hurt. “Might be an option to keep in mind. Dunno how much oxygen we’ve got to survive on.”
“True.” Neatfreak pondered it. “At least I didn’t vomit, sir.”

“See? Bright side to everything,” Jesse said, and closed his eyes. A moment later he felt the sharp sting of a hypospray at his neck. Painkillers took effect immediately; Jesse released a long, tired sigh as he became a boneless heap on the floor. “You’ve got command of the pod, Corporal.”

“Sir.”

When Jesse finally fell asleep, he dreamed of a shining red desert under a golden sky.

He didn’t wake up in Republic company. No medics prodding him; no Kix and his half-smirk of, “You deserved it, and you know it.”

It took three more attempts at consciousness before he even remembered that Kix was dead.

That was the pain-fueled adrenaline rush that got him past the worst of the groggy hurdle. Jesse sat up in careful increments. He could smell bacta, but only in trace amounts, not the high stench of some recent treatment.

Jesse’s face still hurt, and so did his left arm. He steeled himself before looking down; his skin was mottled and red, healing from what must have been one hell of a burn. The room he was in looked like it pulled double duty as a medical station and storage.

One of his brothers came into the room in only his blacks. No armor, no distinguishing marks other than how damned young he seemed. “Hi, sir. Good to see you awake.”

“Hi,” Jesse replied, and rubbed at his forehead. It was a good thirty seconds before he could remember the Speedie’s name. “Neatfreak. Where the hell are we?”

Neatfreak grimaced and leaned against the wall. “They missed the pod, sir. We, uh—we ran out of oxygen before a salvage team picked us up.”

Jesse blinked a few times, trying to remember what the hell that meant. “We were…dying?” He remembered dreaming of red sand and yellow lightning, but not dying.

“Actually, you were both a lot closer to dead,” a woman announced as she entered the room. She looked full human except for her ears, which were ridged and not quite human-shaped. Her hair was silver-twisted gray, and the lines around her golden-brown eyes told Jesse that she was at least in her fifties, if not older.

“I’m Kyler Bree,” she said, snapping Jesse out of his empty-headed stare. Her skin was the same color as her eyes, and the two kept trying to blend into each other. “Nice to meet you, Commander.”

“Uh, it’s just—just Jesse,” he replied, still trying to shake off what he desperately hoped was drug-fugue. “Nice to meet you, too, ma’am. What are you…” A moment’s concentration gave him the right term. “What are you ransoming us for?”

Kyler rolled her eyes before glancing at Neatfreak, who ducked his head, a blush on his cheeks. “Is that what all you soldiers think us civvies are going to do with you?”

“We’ve run into a lot of pirates,” Jesse said, thinking of Hondo and a whole host of other assholes. War was good business for piracy.

“Jesse, honey, I’m not that kind of scavenger scum, and neither is the rest of my crew.” Kyler gave him a careful onceover that reminded Jesse of Zed from the 212th, who was months dead. Decent
medic, but he’d never been able to get past that blatantly obvious inspection of his patients. Kix could figure out what was wrong with you almost without looking.

No; could have figured out—great fucking gods, why didn’t the stupid escape pod and oxygen dep kill him?

Then Jesse glanced at Neatfreak, and felt nausea and guilt coil together in his belly. Maybe he wanted to check out, but he wasn’t taking anyone else with him.

“We’re keeping you both around for a while,” Kyler said, which made Jesse look at her in alarm. “Relax. We’re not kidnapping you, or holding out in hopes of money. My sense of morality won’t let me send two men back into a warzone when they’re not fully healed. Once you rate one hundred percent, we’ll take you wherever you think you need to go.”

“All…all right,” Jesse agreed, and then frowned. “Can I tell my people? They’ll be…concerned.”

“They’re going to have to stay worried for a bit, yet.” Kyler walked over to hop up on the bed next to him, giving Jesse a bad start. “Sorry,” she apologized, but didn’t move away.

“Oxygen deprivation makes you jumpy,” Neatfreak reported, and winced when Jesse stared at him. “Sir. It’s certainly been that way for me.”

“The moment we can safely contact your people, we will, but right now we’re deep in Sep territory,” Kyler told him. “Any signal that goes out talking about Republic officers is going to get us nothing but a host of droids trying to chew their way through the hull of my ship.”

“We were—weren’t we in Both space?” Jesse thought he remembered that being true. Then again, a lot of battles had blurred together in the last few months.

“We were, but we had to get the hell out fast when the Seps came along to do their own cleanup.” Kyler shook her head. “I don’t even know why the Republic bothered. You can’t keep droids out of that damned sector.”

“Okay. I get it,” Jesse said, not wanting to get stuck on Bothans and Seppies. There was a sour feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he couldn’t figure out if it was emotional leftovers or not. Things didn’t…none of this felt right. Jesse was pretty sure that Kyler was legit, but something else was definitely trying to catch his attention. He was just too damned brain-zorched to figure out where, though, or even what.

Jesse could at least remember his damned manners. “Thank you, Kyler. For saving our lives.”

“Thank your friend, there, too,” Kyler replied, tilting her head at Neatfreak. “He kept you on the emergency oxygen reserves when the pod’s air went bad.”

Jesse glanced at the Speedie—at his brother. “Thanks. That was…you didn’t have to. You could have—”

“Saved just me?” Neatfreak shrugged. “Then what would have been the point, sir?”

Recovery was a slow, torturous process. The early aphasia went away, but other problems lingered. Jesse wandered the corridors of Kyler Bree’s ship, the Nebula’s Razor, his hand glued to the wall. If he tried to walk without some sort of support, he fell—over and over again. His equilibrium was fucked from the damage caused by oxygen deprivation. Maybe damage from unnoticed depressurization, too. Either way, he wasn’t getting mobile in a hurry.
Neatfreak was good on balance, the lucky bastard, but other things were harder for him. His hands didn’t want to obey commands; he dropped things unless he was devoting almost all of his focus to staring at whatever he held. Neatfreak also kept spacing out mid-sentence, as if he was remembering something else, and then he would forget to come back. The crew had to work at getting Jesse’s brother to snap out of it; some days were easier than others.

Jesse knew that if it wasn’t for his and Neatfreak’s altered biology, Kyler’s scavengers would have found a pair of corpses in that escape pod. Jesse and his brothers were good at surviving, even when all the odds said they should have been exceptionally dead.

“Brain damage,” Jesse muttered over his caff one morning. “Just our fucking luck, right?”

“Temporary brain damage, at least,” Neatfreak replied. He was bright-eyed and alert, even without the caff—a sign that he was probably going to have a good mental day.

“I know, but…they need us.” Jesse felt the itch to get back to the 501\textsuperscript{st} in his sleep, and often woke up half out of his bunk, convinced he’d heard the combat alert and it was time to suit up and go after some Seppies.

He missed shooting droids. Helping Kyler’s crew with scavenger work gave Jesse and Neatfreak something to do, and he appreciated not being bored out of his skull, but sorting Seppie droids for viable, sellable parts offended some Kaminoan-programmed part of his head.

“They need us capable of being good soldiers who can follow orders,” Neatfreak told Jesse. “We’ll get to them, sir. We’ve got time.”

“It’s been months,” Jesse emphasized, feeling his gut clench. “We have no idea what the hell’s going on, Freak.”

“Neatfreak,” his brother corrected him tartly. “Freak is 118\textsuperscript{th}, and Neat is 687\textsuperscript{th}.”

Jesse smiled. “You’ve got it, brother.”

On 15\textsuperscript{th} of twelve, they found out: The HoloNet was practically ablaze with the news of the Separatist invasion of Coruscant space, the kidnapping of the Chancellor, and the battle raging just above the planet.

“7\textsuperscript{th} Sky’s in,” Neatfreak said, his sharp eyes catching the flight group’s mark on a starfighter.

“Which means Cody.” I hope, Jesse thought, feeling queasy for no good reason. Cody had survived the entire damn war; he was there. So was Oddball, and everyone else in that particular battlegroup.

“I don’t see 501\textsuperscript{st},” Neatfreak reported. “You?”

“No, no sign,” Jesse replied, aware of the fact that Kyler’s crew was treating both of them like news commentators. “There might be ground-fighting that the ’Net isn’t reporting.”

“They’d leave that out?” Virm asked, chewing on a thick wad of something with his flat teeth. (Jesse had no idea, and did not want to know. Virm was always, always chewing.)

“If they thought it would incite panic? Hell yes, they’d leave that off the official channels until the fighting was done and the battle won,” Jesse said. “They’ve done it a lot.”

Getting news that Dooku was dead? Awesome.
Finding out that the Chancellor had just declared the Jedi Order to be traitors, and had all of the military-serving Jedi executed en masse? Horrifying.

“Oh, gods, gods, gods, gods,” Neatfreak was muttering, over and over, all but rocking back and forth in his seat. “They can’t, they can’t, they *can’t*!”

“Calpha, I need HoloNet access,” Jesse begged her. “Even if it’s just temporary, even if it’s an access path you can never use again. I need the damned military channels.”

“Jesse—” Calpha began in a gentle tone.

“Don’t!” Jesse gritted his teeth. “I’m not calling in to announce us. Right now I’m looking for two things: a casualty list—kriffing hells, they’ll probably be calling it a Confirmed Kill list—and a listing for AWOL soldiers.”

“No vocalizing, though,” Kyler said, looking at him. “Right?”

“No, no comm channels. Not until we know—” Jesse bit back what would have been a wail of anguish and put his hand on Neatfreak’s shoulder. “Those lists are a start. That’s going to tell us what Neatfreak and I have to do.”

“Stay the hell away from a government that would declare an entire group of people to be traitors without giving them a trial, that’s what,” Ghim murmured.

“That, too,” Jesse agreed. “Aw, gods.”

Calpha had to wave him off a few times. “I’m sorry. Give it some time. The lists are updating so frequently—I have to keep logging out and back in to keep anyone from noticing my cypher in the system, Jesse.”

Jesse swallowed back bile and nodded. “Okay. Okay, just uh—bring them to me when you think the lists have stabilized. Please.”

Three days after the Empire’s formation, Calpha brought him two different digital lists. One of them was very, very long; the other was terrifyingly short. “I am so sorry,” she said.

Jesse nodded, speed-reading his way through the AWOL list. He slumped in relief when he saw Rex and Eel listed, along with Wolffe, Gregor (212th, he thought) Hero, and nine other clones who went AWOL out of Kamino.

“Shit. The Kaminoans went AWOL, too?” Jesse asked, looking up at Calpha in surprise.

“I doubt the correct term is AWOL, but that is what is being reported—that the planet of Kamino is empty of Kaminoans.”

“Shit.” Jesse wiped his nose and eyes with his free hand. “This other list—you embedded a search function, right?”

Calpha gave him a sad smile. “I would be very bad at my cataloging job if I had not done so. I included missing-in-action personnel, as well.”

“Jedi that aren’t confirmed dead,” Jesse translated. “Thank you.”

Kenobi’s name showed up on the unconfirmed list. That was nice.
Skywalker’s name didn’t show up on either list. That wasn’t nice, that was gut-wrenching. He had no kriffing idea what that meant.

He tried to scroll through the confirmed list, but it was too much, too massive, too many. He hit the MIA list directly, which was a bit more reassuring: Kenobi, Yoda, Vos, Saa, Muln, Vin, Avarin, Fieff, Hal’aam, Dume, Leem, Rhia, Piru, Taanzer, K’Kruhk, Trudin, Seddwia, Sitra, Haleyon, Hett, Brand, Jusik, Kerr, Jil-Hyra, Breschu, Tholme, R. Solusar, K. Solusar...

“I don’t know a lot of these names—these have to be kids,” Jesse said, looking up at Calpha. She has been joined by Zephyr, and both of them were giving him sympathetic looks that have to mean bad news. “What?”

“The Emperor declared all Jedi to be traitors of his Empire,” Glyph said. “Your legion performed a cleansing of the Coruscant Temple.”

“What—no. No, we wouldn’t—we wouldn’t,” Jesse whispered. He felt like he couldn’t breathe from the sudden, crushing weight on his chest. “We wouldn’t.”

“I’m sorry, Jesse. I don’t know what changed while you were away, but...it was the 501st,” Calpha told him, and lowered her eyes. “I am so very sorry.”

“What the hell do we do?” Neatfreak asked, after he’s spent an hour staring at both lists in shock.

“AWOL clones are getting terminated. We can’t stay here and endanger these people,” Jesse started to say, but then Kyler coughed to interrupt him.

“You’re actually safer with us than you would be trying to go roaming off into the galaxy,” Kyler said, while Calpha and Ghim nodded agreement. “Working with us in a civilian capacity is going to keep you off the Empire’s radar longer.”

“And what about if we do attract the Empire’s attention?” Neatfreak asked, looking at Kyler in dismay. “We’d—we can’t endanger civvies, Captain!”

“Kyler,” she corrected Neatfreak again. “‘Captain’ is for formal dinners and dances, Neatfreak.”

“The two of you are civvies now.” Zephyr says, crossing two of his four arms over his chest. “You’re not just AWOL. You’re not soldiers anymore.”

Jesse tried not to bang his head against the table in frustration. “Hard to stop being that.”

The only bright spot he had in all of this was the fact that Kix was not around to witness this...this kriffing nightmare.

“It’s your ship, Kyler,” Jesse said, looking over at her. “If you’re keeping us around, what do you want us to do?”

“Learn to be civvie crew,” Kyler said, while Vim and the other crewmembers leaned around her to observe. “I know it’s not your favorite pastime, but we don’t yet know what the Empire’s policy regarding scavengers is going to be. I haven’t seen any laws hit public record that would make us criminals, but we also don’t know what a stormtrooper’s response to us is going to be, either.”

Neatfreak made a sound pretty close to a whimper. Jesse almost copied him; he didn’t want to face his brothers, not that way.

“Fortunately, you’re allowed to be armed civilians,” Kyler pointed out. “Grunt work most of the
time, but you’re both trained to fight. Keep myself and my crew safe, and we’ll call it good until circumstances change.”

*          *          *          *

Circumstances didn’t change. Jesse had no way to contact any of the AWOL group, and by the same time next year, that AWOL list had gotten shorter as the Imperials confirmed execution of rogue brothers.

Rex, Wolfe, Gregor, Lichen, Boil, Eel. It’s a godsdamn short list, but it’s still a list, damnit!

Jesse was surprised when Kyler and Neatfreak somehow ended up in a relationship. He wasn’t jealous; they just didn’t strike him as compatible people. Kyler was a walking disaster when it came to clutter and giving no fucks, while Neatfreak despaired and spent a great deal of his time teaching Kyler’s crew that you could actually have a system for storage that was easy to learn. It worked, and then they didn’t have to climb over shit in the hallway.

Okay, so maybe that was why Kyler and Neatfreak wound up sleeping together. Kyler liked it when people made her life easier, and Neatfreak liked that she was letting him do it.

Then, five years in to their new role as civilian bodyguards to scrapmongers, Kyler got pregnant.

“Fucking how?” she wailed, sitting down in the galley with her head in her hands. Neatfreak was sitting across from her, looking guilty. The rest of the crew just kept giving them shit about not using birth control.

“I’ve been through menopause, you crude fucksticks!” Kyler shouts back at them. “I shouldn’t be able to get fucking pregnant!”

“My brother has magic sperm,” Jesse said in a sing-song voice, and then ducked when Neatfreak threw a datapad at him. “Shit aim when he’s throwing with his arm, but apparently when he’s aiming with other limbs—”

“I WILL END YOU!” Neatfreak roared, and chased Jesse throughout the ship for a solid hour and a half. Jesse almost got caught three times because he couldn’t stop laughing.

He reflected later (while hiding from his brother) that it was the first time he could remember laughing since Kix died. It made him feel sad and nostalgic, but at least he was no longer actively suicidal. Too much shit to do, too many people to protect.

Kyler was pissed because pregnancy meant that she had to stay on the ship during jobs. Jesse felt bad for her, but none of them could find body armor that would actually deflect a blast from a standard-issue stormtrooper rifle. Calpha pretended to be the Captain, Neatfreak growled at anyone who so much as went near the ship’s loading ramp, and Jesse pretended to be stupid so that he could listen in on the conversations among other scavengers and buyers. Most of what he heard was godsdamn awful.

Kriffing hells. It had not taken long for the Empire to turn the galaxy into a shithole.

Jesse was worried about his brother, too. He was still aging two years for every one, but Neatfreak was aging ten years for every single year that passed. Jesse was eighteen and looked to be in his
mid-thirties. Neatfreak was seven and physically seventy, though he appeared to be a really well-preserved fifty.

“Age doesn’t show as much when you don’t have the wear and tear and travel to go along with it,” Ghim said one day, when they caught Jesse staring at his brother’s silverying hair in dismay. “Human average is what, one hundred fifty?”

“One hundred seventy, used to be, if you kept out of trouble and had access to some good medical juj,“ Jesse answered. He used to despise the Speedies for what they represented, and how some of them behaved. Now he just hated the Kaminoans for doing this to people. No one deserved this shit.

Ghim nodded. “Without complications, he’ll make it to the physical two-hundred mark. Twenty years isn’t a great span of time, but fuck, we could all die tomorrow, Jesse.”

“You are so fucking cheerful,” Jesse replied, a resentful smile on his face. “Asshole.”

“That’s me,” Ghim agreed. “We’ll just do our best to make sure that Kyler’s child gets to spend as much time with their father as possible.”

Jesse tilted his head. “Medical supply theft?”

Ghim bumped fists with Jesse. “Like you would not believe.”

Kyler gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Neatfreak was granted the task of naming their daughter.

“Skive?” Calpha was appalled. “Just, really: Skive?”

“Why not? I like Skive,” Neatfreak replied, holding his daughter and smiling down at her like he’d just found the greatest treasure in the universe. “Got a good ring to it.”

“Do you know what it means?” Calpha asked crossly. “It means to avoid duty, Neatfreak!”

Neatfreak glanced up at Calpha. “That’s kind of what I’ve spent the last six years doing, Calpha.”

Calpha shut her mouth with a snap. “Well. Yes. I suppose...I suppose that’s true. I can’t...you are logical at the worst possible times!” she exclaimed, and stomped off.

Jesse snickered. “I like her name, brother.”

“Good. You’re her uncle, after all,” Neatfreak said, and handed Jesse the infant.

Jesse froze, staring down at tiny features that were staring right back up at him. Skive had Kyler’s golden eyes, but a brother’s darker bronzed skin and curling black hair. There was only a tufted hint of it, but Jesse knew that hair. He’d seen it through the windows of a hell of a lot of incubation tanks.

“Hi there, kiddo,” Jesse said, and earned himself a yawn and a wave of one tiny fist. “Yep, there is my heart, melting down into a puddle of goop on the floor.”

“Mine, too,” Neatfreak said, smiling at his baby girl.

Jesse never said a word to Kyler, and neither did Neatfreak, but they both observed Skive like paranoid hawks, watching for any hint of accelerated aging. They had no damned idea if the Kaminoans had taken clone breeding into account when they fucked around with their genetic structure.
It wasn’t until Skive hit her first birthday that Jesse and Neatfreak tentatively admitted—in private, only to each other—that Skive was aging at a normal rate. Ghim confirmed that she hit all the proper baby accomplishment milestones at all the right stages. If anything, she was a bit small for her age, but she was walking around all right and babbling like a Kowakian monkey lizard who’d gotten into the spice.

“Oh, thank the Force for that,” Neatfreak whispered. Jesse nodded agreement.

None of them were quite sure how they wound up with the Rebels. For the most part, they were doing the job Kyler’s crew was doing when the Republic still existed, but more and more often, it also became a case of stealing shit and shooting Imperials for fun and profit.

Kyler joined in first, needing some stress relief after pregnancy and baby and baby-now-getting-into-everything. Jesse and Neatfreak gave her lessons in their free time, teaching her how to be damned good with a blaster, not just proficient. Basic tactics. How to know when things were going to go to shit and make the call to retreat. How to know when your enemy was faking a strong position, sneak in, and obliterate the bastards. Ghim, Vim, Calpha, and Zephyr eventually joined in on the Alliance-based jobs. Skive got bigger and started demanding lessons of her own.

Skive did inherit one thing from the Kaminoan genetic fuckery: Swift learning and speedy adjustment to shifting parameters. Adaptation.

“We can’t let a six-year-old go out on a raid!” Jesse found himself yelling.

Neatfreak glanced at his daughter. “She shoots better than we do, Jesse.”

“She’s six!” Jesse shouted again.

“Yeah, well, I was two, asshole,” Neatfreak pointed out dryly.

“I can shoot!” Skive declared, patting the customized blaster she was allowed to carry on her hip. “It’s not like it’s hard. All our targets are wearing shiny white armor!”

Kyler shook her head. “Sweetheart, you save that for emergencies,” she said, and leveled a glare at Neatfreak and Jesse. “I get that your childhoods were strange, but I can settle this right now: It’s child endangerment under Imperial law and Alliance rules. She has to be twelve.”

“Okay,” Neatfreak agreed, just as Skive shouted, “Dammit!” and ended up grounded for the next two weeks.

When they officially went Alliance military, the cell they met up with sat Jesse and Neatfreak down in an empty room. Jesse, feeling leery, signaled to Neatfreak to use their code-names. He had no idea what the Alliance wanted with just the two of them; might as well sit on what intelligence they could.

They got one single officer, who sat down across from them with a weary expression on his aging face. “I need to speak to you about your inhibitor chips.”

“What about the chips?” Jesse asked, baffled.

“There was an...instruction, one that was sent out by the Emperor.” The officer looked grim. “Did you receive that instruction?”

“No. We were already with Captain Bree’s crew,” Neatfreak answered. “We were beat to shit during the Third Battle of Bothawui. Scans missed our escape pod; her scavenger team didn’t.”
“Too fucked up to go back to the front right away, so we hung out, healed up, and were about ready to return when everything went to shit,” Jesse added.

“I’m General Jan Dodonna,” the man introduced himself, and Jesse sat up.

“Hey, yeah! I remember you—or at least I remember hearing about you. Regular enlisted corps. Kickass soldier, from what I recall.”

Dodonna smiled. “Thank you. Gentlemen, I’m afraid you’re going to have to go under the knife to have those chips removed.”

Finding out why made the bottom fall out of Jesse’s stomach. He hunched over the table, trying to breathe. Neatfreak skipped out on that step and just vomited into the waste bin.

“I am sorry, but...we have gotten volunteers among your brethren as the chips failed. Not as many as I would like, but you have surviving brothers in different cells. We practice isolation to keep other parts of the Alliance safe if we are captured, so for now, that is all I can tell you.”

Dodonna sighed. “Gentlemen, as sorry as I am to be giving you such news, I am also very grateful you’re here. The Alliance needs all the help we can get. Do you feel confident enough in us now to actually identify yourselves by your old names and ranks?”

“CT-5597, Jesse, Regimental Commander of the 501st Legion,” Jesse said, and Dodonna’s eyes widened.

“You are not the only member of the old 501st in the Alliance. I’m glad to have you,” Dodonna said solemnly. “And you, sir?”

“CZ-889-14-1847, Neatfreak, Corporal, Damage Company, 501st Legion.”

“Two of you. Better and better. We need men in our Reconnaissance & Evaluation Division, and the two of you have the training to fit right in,” Dodonna said. “You’ll need a team—”

“We have one. Kyler Bree, Ghim T’zar, Calpha Cal-Phala, Zephyr Starr, and Vim Treesong,” Jesse told him. “Yes, they’re trained. They’re used to working at being overlooked. We know them, and they know us. You start Neatfreak and I over with a different team, it’ll just waste time when we have to learn how to work with a new set of people all over again.”

“Captain Bree has a daughter.” Dodonna frowned. “Are you certain—”

“That’s my kid,” Neatfreak replied in something close to a growl. “Trust me, not only can we look after her, she can look after herself.”

“It is against my better judgment, but...we do not exactly have babysitters,” Dodonna returned wryly. “I will have to trust you both in this. Congratulations, welcome to the Alliance, and go log in for surgery. The sooner that is done, the sooner I have another team out scouting for Imperial weaknesses.”

Jesse came out of surgery with a new scar; Neatfreak had a matching one. Even with bacta, the surgical incision from chip removal refused to fade. It was a mark that set them apart from the brothers they still had in the Imperial Stormtrooper Corps and the Imperial Navy, and it was a hell of a fast way to pick out an Alliance-friendly clone.

Jesse struggled with depression for months after formally becoming an Alliance officer. Hell, the
crazy bastards made him a general, and it took him a while to wrap his head around that, too.

His brothers were dead, randomly Imperial, or so far off into the boonies of the galaxy that he had no way to find them. The GAR’s entire purpose was likely a plot from the start, given what the fucking Emperor did to the Jedi, and to the army.

He looked at Kyler, Neatfreak, and Skive, who were bending over their latest map delivery, poking at it for clues. Neatfreak and Skive both had a talent for finding shit, one that fascinated Kyler. Ghim, Zephyr, Vim, and Calpha were standing in a loose semi-circle around them, adding in their own commentary.

Jesse took a deep breath, let it out, and stood up. Life was shit, but he had a team to lead, a family to look after, and a hell of a lot of Imperials to kill.

He still dreamed about the desert: shifting orange and red sands, undulating waves flowing across the desert plain, and beautiful lightning storms of yellow and green. It was pretty, but he didn’t understand why his brain focused on desert so much.

He’d been fighting a war for over ten years now, though. Maybe his subconscious thought he needed a break.

About two weeks before they become stranded on Wivvelinnt II, Jesse started to dream about a beautiful green Twi’lek instead. She was always nice, always armed, and had a smug grin that reminded him of...of someone, someone he could never remember upon waking.

Jesse had her likeness etched onto the smooth metal stock of his blaster rifle.

Fuck, why not?

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Imperial Year 27: 1/30

Alliance-observed Old Republic Date 5239

The day was like any other: Another diplomatic meeting, another planet to court in order to add to the strength of the Alliance. Leia roused herself from bed thinking only of what work awaited her that day, nudging Han when he didn’t stir.

“Sleeeeep,” Han whined.

Leia smiled. “We missed our first alarm as it is.”

“Five more minutes, Han grumbled, and determinedly rolled over. Leia smiled again and left him to it; Han excelled at waking himself up exactly when he meant to. It was a holdover from smuggling, not to mention the harsh stages of fighting that had followed Endor because of the Empire’s destructive Operation: Cinder.

Leia had showered and dressed, and was sipping a dark, blood-red tea when the chime to her quarters rang. “Come in!”
To her surprise, no one entered. In fact, Leia was starting to suspect that there was no one at the door at all.

“All right, then,” Leia murmured, grabbing a blaster from the table and going to the door. She could handle trouble, if there was trouble to be had. No need to interrupt Han’s shower.

Leia crouched down and opened the door, but again—no one stood there. No waiting attacker, no messenger from the Advisory Council.

The only thing that was out of place was a long tube, lying on the deck plating in front of her door. It was capped at one end, and had a strap attached so that it could be carried over one shoulder.

There was a word branded into the side of the case. It was Alderaani script, one of the ancient and proper alphabets used at court.

Leia bent down and touched it, tracing the lines. She knew the word, and it gave her a chill, made her stomach feel sour.

*Penance.*

Leia brought the case inside, shut the door, and placed on the kitchen table. Then she sat down and tried to figure out how to do one of the calming exercises Luke had taught her.

“Hey, who was at the door?” Han asked, coming out of the ’fresher while pulling on his shirt.

“No one,” Leia answered, running her fingers along the thick, leather-crafted case. It was the length of Han’s extended arm, but aside from the scripted word, it had no markings or decorations or any sort. The case was worn, the strap fraying, which meant it was either very old, or had seen a lot of harsh recent use. Small latches on either side of the cap held it in place, kept the tube’s contents from escaping.

“There was only this on the floor when I answered the chime.”

Han’s smile turned into steely frown. “Should we have it checked out?”

Leia slowly shook her head. She felt…almost like…

Bespin. The sensation reminded her of Bespin.

“I think I already did,” she murmured, and pulled the cover off of the tube. Inside the cover was a note, folded into a narrow strip that curled around the inside of the cap. She looked at it, trying to keep her heart from racing in terrible anticipation.

Leia held out the cap and its contents. “Han?”

Han nodded and gently pulled out the paper, which, now that Leia could see it, was of an expensive, heavy weight. According to her education, the cost of the paper was meant to emphasize the importance of the writer’s intentions.

Han unfolded the paper with the gentleness of movement that many assumed he did not possess. His eyes followed what must have been text before he handed it over. “I think this is definitely for you, sweetheart.”

Leia swallowed down fluttery nerves and took the paper between her fingertips, feeling the softness, the craftsmanship that had gone into such a simple thing as this sheet of paper.
The message itself left her on the verge of tears, and she had no idea why.

*My Dear One,*

*I cannot return to you what you have lost, even if I wished for it and worked for it with every fiber of my being. For that, I am so very sorry. I know those words are not enough, and will never be enough. I can only hope to prove my intentions in the future by this act of penance.*

Leia drew in a sharp breath. It was confirmed, then. Someone wished to begin the Ritual of Forgiveness, one that was her choice to continue, or to ignore.

*I cannot give you what I wish to, and the strength of that wish…I know you understand what it feels like to beg for what can never be received.*

Thus, it comes down to a small token, one that is trivial in the grand scheme of things, but for me is a representation of all I knew to be good in this universe. *It will be as great a treasure to you, while Bail Organa might have told you about her, he did not tell you why she was so important, and there were no pictures for him to share.*

*I give you the one thing I can, dear Princess—your mother. Treasure it or return it, but please don’t destroy it. The galaxy has seen too much needless destruction of things beautiful.*

*All my love,*

*Seeker*

“What is it?” Han asked.

Leia realized her hands were trembling as she put the letter down on the table next to the tube’s round cap. “It’s…it’s a ritual, one used by the Royal Court of Alderaan for centuries. *The Petition of Forgiveness.*”

“Sounds fancy, and maybe a bit terrifying,” Han said.

Leia nodded, trying to smile. “It could be.”

Han studied the case before running his fingers along the Penance glyph. “So, someone thinks they royally screwed up, and this is the start of an apology.”

“Yes,” Leia said, choosing to ignore the awful pun. “There are four steps, and the first is…the Seeker must give me a gift that we both treasure.” Leia brushed her hands over the paper, encouraging it to lie flat. “If I put this back outside, sealed, it means I am turning down their chance for forgiveness.

“If I accept the gift, the ritual continues, and at the end of it, I make a decision.”

“Huh.” Han had always been intrigued by Alderaani traditions, once they’d gotten past each other’s strange hurdles regarding their wildly different cultures. “What’s the decision?”
“The Seeker, the petitioner—they kneel before me, and I decide whether the ceremony ends in forgiveness or death.”

“Wait, you guys actually did this?” Han asked, glancing at her in wide-eyed surprise.

Leia felt her mouth twist in distaste. “I saw it performed in court at home several times, but it was… it was posture and gesture. Court machinations in attempts to gain favor. They didn’t *mean* it. I don’t think it had been properly observed in a long time.”

Han gazed at her in sober concern. “And you think this person does.”

“Han,” Leia began, feeling that terrible flutter of nerves again, “I’m certain that this petitioner firmly believes I’m going to end the ritual by killing them.”

“Oh, that’s a great start, then,” Han muttered. “Well, might as well see what’s inside before you toss it out the door.”

Leia put her hand inside the case before noticing printed instructions just inside the lip. “Oh.” She ran her fingers along what appeared to be a natural seam in the leather, and the case popped open, revealing a rolled up painting wrapped in several protective layers of transparent synth-silk.

“Nice,” Han said, though he still seemed wary. She didn’t blame him; too many assassination attempts. She’d grown used to them, but Han took it as a personal affront. “Not sure how a painting of Queen Breha is going to be the right kind of petitioner’s gift. I mean, there are still several in existence.”

“And I have one stored safely away,” Leia said, frowning as she pulled the roll of canvas out. The Seeker had specifically stated that Bail had no pictures to share. “Move the case, would you?”

Han picked up the leather tube and cap, giving Leia the space to unroll the painting with careful, cautious hands. To her delight, the canvas immediately flattened itself, another sign of expense and well-made artistry.

“Oh, this is lovely work,” Leia crooned, watching as the moving swirls of color were revealed as the canvas began to illuminate itself. “My father—Bail, he had several paintings like this, but the artists who worked in this style, they just…stopped.”

A smile was lifting the corner of Han’s mouth. “I’ve never seen one of these in person before. Damn, that’s nice.”

Leia stepped back in order to view the entire painting. In the next breath, she had her hand over her heart, gasping and trying not to sob.

“Leia?” Han gave her a concerned look, resting his hand on her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s…it’s her!” Leia gasped out, her throat tight, her eyes burning. “He wanted me to know her. Han, I modeled half of my political career on her!”

“Senator Padmé Amidala,” Han read at the bottom of the painting, glimmering text that faded out, showing the artist’s name, before switching back to the title of the painting again. “Sweetheart…this is your mother?”

“I didn’t know. Luke didn’t know, he didn’t…” Leia covered her mouth with both hands.

“She’s beautiful,” Han murmured, putting his arm on Leia’s shoulders and pulling her in close.
“You have her eyes, sweetheart.”

Leia gave in and cried, resting her face against Han’s broad chest when he wrapped his arms around her. She had only vague memories of her mother, beautiful Queen Breha and her sad smiles. Breha had already been dying of an incurable illness when Winter was adopted into the household, and she was gone before Leia’s fourth birthday.

Leia sniffed, drying her eyes as best she could, and looked at the painting again. The Senator captured in the painting was young, but there was steel in her eyes that reminded her of someone.

“Huh,” Han said, tilting his head as he regarded the painting. “I know you share the brown hair and the eyes, but…that’s the way Luke looks at people.”

“You’re right,” Leia said, smiling at the realization. “That’s…that’s amazing.”

She already knew that she could not give this up. This was the only link she had to a mother she’d never known.

All right, Seeker, Leia thought, letting her fingers dance over the painting, just shy of touching preserved paint and canvas. I will hear your Petition.

* * * * *

Han stood next to Leia in parade rest stance, not even aware he was doing it. The uniform always prodded him into remembering habits that he otherwise never bothered with, and a general’s pips always made the actions seem emphasized.

He was never truly comfortable in it, though. Han did it because it was necessary—no, Han did it because Leia believed it was necessary.

Leia fought with her conscience a lot on that front. They needed a famous hero in a uniform during these diplomatic ventures, and General Han Solo fit those qualifications. It was also an excuse to travel together that they otherwise would not have.

She still felt guilty over the necessity of it, though, especially on days like these.

“Well, that was a miserable failure,” Leia said dryly.

Han smiled. “Hey, some people just don’t like visitors.”

“I know.” Leia glanced around the bridge of the Sentinel of Grace, a captured Star Destroyer that was slowly being refitted to look like an Alliance vessel on the inside as well as the outside. “It would have been nice if they’d at least have been willing to speak to us.”

[Give them a few years,] Chewbacca suggested, coming up the stairs from the crew pit to join them. [Fear often lingers longer than it should.]

Leia smiled and nodded at him. Sometimes she could understand Shyriiwook perfectly; other times, Chewbacca might as well have been howling nonsense.

“Captain, we might as well move along,” Leia said to Burgemontt.
Burgemontt gave her a brief look of concern. “Yes, Princess. It will be a few minutes until we’re ready for hyperspace; I prefer to be further out from a planet’s gravity well before engaging. Also, you...do not look well.”

Leia frowned. “I feel fine, Captain. Thank you for your concern.”

Han sidled in closer. “She’s right, though. You okay, sweetheart?”

“I don’t—” Leia started to say, and then she felt it, a pressure wave building under her skin and in her ears like the atmospheres that brought on great and terrible storms. She’d watched so many storms from the safety of the Royal Palace on Alderaan, letting the pressure build and build until she swallowed to pop her ears.

Why had she thought of that just now?

“Leia?”

Leia blinked several times, feeling like a fog was descending over her head, muffling sight and sound. Han was staring at her with his brows furrowed, using an air of confusion, as always, to mask the true concern he felt.

“Leia.” Han put a gentle hand on her arm when she didn’t answer. “What’s wrong?”

“Someone’s...someone’s in trouble,” Leia said, and knew that no amount of popping her ears would end this storm.

“Luke?” Han asked, his voice lowering as he kept his sudden alarm from the rest of the ship’s crew—from C-3PO in particular, who would bleat it for all parties to hear.

“No, not Luke. Luke is—” Not fine; he was feeling this slow, awful build as well. “It isn’t Luke in trouble.”

The palace again, the gardens she’d run wild through as a child, one of the few safe places she and Winter could play without fear. The scent of *paelos* lavender fills her nose, a plant extinct, but the memory was so strong she could have been holding the flowers in her arms.

Why. Why there, why this, what is—

Leia flashed on a man, one she knew to be a friend of her father’s.

No. More than a friend. Someone Bail Organa had treasured as dearly as his lost Queen, as dearly as Leia herself.

He looked so tired, and so sad. Even then, she knew the white in his reddish-blond hair was not supposed to be there.

*Are you a bad man, Ben?*

The heartbreak in his eyes was partially hidden by the soft, gentle smile that spread across his whiskered face. *I don’t think so, little one.*

“No,” Leia whispered, feeling pain steal through her limbs. “Ben?” she gasped, and then was somewhere else.

The transition was so swift, so entirely unexpected, that for long moments, Leia only stood in place, her heart hammering in her chest. The *Sentinel of Grace* was a large ship, but had no hydroponics,
and definitely no replica of the garden of her childhood.

Had she died? Was this the beginning of the afterlife, starting in the last place she’d thought of?

No. Leia was no Jedi, but she knew with absolute certainly that she wasn’t dead.

Leia reached out with one trembling hand, brushing her fingertips over the soft blue of *paelos* lavender blossoms. “Why?” she choked out. “Why here?”

“A memory, it is,” a peculiar voice answered.

Leia turned around slowly, uncertain what she was going to see. Instead of a threat, she found a tiny green being, less than a meter tall, sitting cross-legged on a stone bench. He had smooth, olive green skin, large eyes, and long, pointed ears that jutted out from a headful of sleek greyish-blue hair.

“A memory,” Leia repeated, suddenly incensed. “Why would you root around in my memories and present me with this place?”

The tiny being’s brow wrinkled in puzzlement. “From my own memories, this came. Here was held the last meeting of the Jedi Council, three sad survivors from what once were thirteen.”

The description was not quite right—he was so *young*—but Leia knew who she was speaking to now. “You’re Master Yoda.”

Yoda smiled and dipped his head in a polite, abbreviated bow. “A wonderful thing it is to see you again, dear one.”

“Again? But we’ve never met,” Leia said...and then was bewildered to realize that she had to be wrong. She had a vague memory of an ancient, wrinkled face, of the careful touch of a claw-tipped hand.

“Very young, you were.”

“Where am I?” Leia asked, trying to decide if she should flop down on the grass, sit beside the Jedi Master, or stand her ground and yell at him in fury.

“Still aboard your vessel, you are,” Yoda answered promptly. “But sleeping. When the Force has been so disrupted, dreams are easier.”

“Dreaming.” Leia felt some of the tension leave her shoulders. “All right.”

Yoda’s right ear lifted. “So accepting, you are.”

“Do I have a choice?” Leia countered.

“Yes.” Yoda frowned. “Awaken now, you could, but feel all of what is being broadcast through the Force, you would. Such suffering you have endured already; another’s suffering, you need not endure.”

“I was thinking of this place.” Leia sat down on the ground, too hard. It should have bruised her, but it was just like the soft, springy grass she remembered.

For a brief second, she recalled shrieking laughter, chasing Winter in circles around three figures lounging on the grass—her parents, and the man who was not bad, who had not minded at all when Leia and Winter co-opted him as that day’s toy.
When Leia looked up at Yoda again, he hadn’t moved, but was watching her in patient stillness. He was so unlike the irritable old Jedi that Luke had told her of that words simply poured forth. “My father—Bail—he told me that Obi-Wan Kenobi had helped defend our ship against boarding Imperial agents. He said that Master Kenobi saved my life. I was very young, and I didn’t…I didn’t remember that I met him afterwards.”

She remembered the attack on the *Tantive IV*, though, if not the faces of those involved. She dreamed sometimes of hiding in darkness, alone and terrified, while something evil hunted her.

Yoda nodded. “A terrible day, that was. Lost a good Jedi, a good Healer, that day, and almost…almost, another was lost.”

“You mean…Obi-Wan,” Leia guessed. “Is what I felt—is that some strange echo from the past?”

“No. The past it is not.” Yoda’s ears lowered; she caught a short, startling glimpse of the aged creature he had been at his death, and then his youth returned. “Happening now, that is.”

Leia frowned. “But he can’t be alive. I was there. I witnessed his death.”

“There you were, and here you are now. Dead, this place is, and yet it lives now in this moment, yes?”

Leia steeled herself. “Dreams are moments that can lie.”

Instead of irritation, Yoda looked pleased. “A fine Jedi, you would be.”

“No thanks.” Leia grabbed fistfuls of grass between her fingers, but didn’t rip it free. She had no wish to…chance anything. She knew her temper.

“Fear yourself, you should not,” Yoda said softly. “Fierce is your anger, but tempered it is by love, by your desire to protect others. So like your father, you are.”

“I am *not* like Darth Vader!” Leia snapped. “I’m—”

Yoda’s chuckling interrupted her. “Darth Vader, your father was not. Anakin Skywalker is your father.”

“What’s the difference?” Leia asked, trying not to grind her teeth. Luke tried explaining this to her often, but she didn’t want to—she didn’t understand *why* she should consider them different. Vader might have saved Luke’s life, but that was after he had destroyed the lives of countless thousands. One life against a multitude didn’t balance the scales.

“Once, considered them the same person, I also did, and…” Yoda bowed his head, grieved. “A grave mistake, that was. Quick was I to presume, to judge, and wrong was I.

“A great Jedi Knight was Anakin Skywalker.” Yoda peered at her, sadness reflected in his eyes. “Darth Vader was a creation of the Emperor, not a willful choice your father made.”

Not a willful choice? “I don’t understand.”

Yoda drew in a breath and released it as a long sigh. “Plan for this, we did not. Here, they are not supposed to be, and yet…” He smiled. “Cannot be alive; wrong, that is. *Should not* be alive; correct, *that* is.”

Leia had a disturbing feeling she knew where this was going. “The painting.”
Yoda beamed at her. “Priceless, it is.”

Oh, there were so many terrible implications trying to cram their way to the forefront of her mind. Leia bit her lip and pushed most of them back. She’d escaped a Death Star, helped command a battle, and arranged for recognition of all those who’d died in service, as well as for those few who’d survived, before ever taking a moment to grieve Alderaan. She was used to shuffling her priorities to fit the situation.

“If someone is…if someone is hurting Ben, then we must—” Leia began, but Yoda shook his head.

“Seeing to that, others are, and…” Yoda tilted his head and half-closed his eyes, as if listening. “Successful, I believe they will be. Your current priority must be that of your new Republic.”

Leia was thrown for a moment by the change from reversed syntax to normal Basic, and it took a moment for his words to register. “I thought you wanted me to be a Jedi,” she said dryly.

Yoda giggled, a delighted sound that echoed through the garden like it belonged there. “More to a Jedi, there is, than lightsabers, battles, and wars, and ever has it been so. Peacekeepers, we are. A peacekeeper, you are, are you not?”

Leia had to give the tiny little troll that one. “My father’s stories were always of the war.”

“Because war was the last thing we were known for,” Yoda said, which made perfect sense. “Warriors we were, in defense of others, yes. But also teachers, scribes, archivists, negotiators, and diplomats were we.”

“A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defense,’” Leia quoted, and felt goosebumps break out on her skin.

“Indeed.” Yoda sobered again. “Had certain events not come to pass, learn of this now, you would not, but…” Yoda’s brow furrowed.

Leia leaned forward, concerned by the sudden pause. “What is it?”

“Always in motion is the future,” Yoda said, his head turned as if he was watching something in the distance. “A maxim, this is, but not always. Moments, there are—certain times when the future glimpsed is not chance, but truth, so true-seeings, we called them. One of those moments is coming soon, and it involves the government you wish to form.”

Leia’s mouth went bone dry. “How bad?”

“Bad?” Yoda seemed to ponder that. “Bad. Hmm. A relative term, that could be, but this moment?” Yoda’s ears twitched. “Change everything, it will.”

*          *          *          *

Leia awoke to dim lights overhead, and Han, leaning close to her bedside. “Hi there, sweetheart.”

“Am I—am I in the med bay?” Leia asked, bemused.

“You passed out for no reason anyone could figure, and wouldn’t wake up for anything,” Han said, and traced the line of her cheek with his knuckles. “Only thing that kept Chewie from panicking
was the fact that your vitals were all fine.”

Chewbacca looked up from the chair he was seated in and gave vent to a very stern diatribe about what Han was and was not allowed to blame him for. Also, Han did panic.

“Tattletale,” Han muttered.

Leia swallowed to moisten a dry mouth and throat, blinking a few times as she thought about what she’d dreamed of. “All right; now I really do understand why Luke says it’s weird.”

“Oh, are we doing sibling Force hoodoo now?” Han asked, lopsided smile on his face.

“We’ve been doing that already,” Leia replied, smiling back. “No, this was…this was really different.”

“How’s that?” Han asked.

Leia considered it, and though she didn’t want to discuss it at all—ever—she didn’t think she had much choice. “I know who began the Petition. I know who gave me that painting of my mother.”

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“Sir, I have a high-priority signal coming in from Intelligence,” Lieutenant Fane announced.

Arram Ghulam turned away from what he was doing, one eyebrow raised. “Colonel DeSoto, I take it?”

Fane’s eyes widened. “Er—no, sir. General Madine. He is…he is requesting that we contact him immediately to discuss our retrieval of, uh, missing mystical allies. Priority Level One.”

Arram felt his heart skip a beat. “Colonel DeSoto assured me that she would only be discussing the Commander’s retrieval, if Command started poking their noses into this.” It had seemed like the wisest course of action, given their potential retrieval of dead Jedi. Even Knight Skywalker had been able to offer no guarantees prior to their journey to Byss.

“As you informed me previously, sir.” Fane pushed her mane back from her eyes when it fell forward as she leaned closer to the monitor. “But this is very specific. I think the gundark has left the cave.”

“How the hell do they know?” Arram asked, eyes narrowing. “My orders were clear: Communications blackout. No one is supposed to be sending messages of any sort.”

“I don’t know, but if the leak came from our end, I’ll find it, sir,” Fane promised.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Arram ran his hands over his face, feeling the prickle of hair beneath his fingers. He needed to shave, he needed this uniform to be presentable—

He needed everything in perfect order, because that was the best way to spite Crix Madine that he’d
ever found. Perhaps it was unseemly for one officer to take such a petty disliking to another, but
gods above, he could not stand that man.

“Lieutenants,” Arram called, gaining the attention of his four junior officers. “Ready the formal
briefing room. I need Knight Skywalker, Commander Naasade, Commander Tano, Commander
Antilles, and Commander Wolffe in attendance.” Arram hesitated, considering the possible
implications of stacking the deck. “Does anyone know Commander Rex’s status?”

“Well in medical, same as, uh, Kenobi,” Barnes told him, flinching as he said the man’s name.
“Commander Wolffe reported in that someone lied about how serious a knife wound actually was.”

“Of course,” Arram said, unsurprised. “Very well. Send a response, Lieutenant Fane. We will be
ready to speak with the General in thirty minutes.”

“That’s a serious delay to put on a Priority One communication,” Fane warned him.

“But not actually unacceptable,” Arram said, and straightened his shoulders. “Get to work,
gentlebeings. The Tatius will give proper respect to Command.”

* * * *

“Thirty seconds,” Lieutenant Fane said, tapping a nervous staccato with the blunt ends of her claws
on the table. Wolffe shared a look with Tano, who had a wry smile on her face. They were
probably about to get into a hell of a lot of trouble. Wolffe couldn’t be court-martialed, not when he
didn’t have an official rank in the Alliance military, but Tano was a different story, as were Ghulam,
Skywalker, and Commander Antilles. Cody was the only one of them who had been working an
officially sanctioned mission.

“I can always resign,” Tano said, her expression turning sad. “My priorities are probably about to
undergo a dramatic shift, anyway.”

“Can’t think of why.” Wolffe glanced over at General Skywalker’s kid. Luke was sitting next to
Commander Antilles, putting on a damned good show of Jedi serenity. Kid had to have gotten that
from his mother. Wolffe didn’t think Anakin Skywalker knew the meaning of serenity, then or now.

Skywalker noticed Wolffe’s attention and smiled at him, reaching out to pat the astromech at his
side. “I confess to nothing. We’re hooked up to a translator and ready, Captain.”

“Here’s to no one being court-martialed today,” Antilles said, just as Fane announced, “Incoming
transmission!”

The blue hologram emerged and formed, revealing the image of General Madine from head to waist.
“General,” Captain Ghulam greeted him.

“Commanders. We received a very interesting coded transmission from the Tatius about four hours ago.”

“You were not supposed to receive any such transmission,” Ghulam said smoothly, a hint of
irritation on his features. “My orders to the Tatius’s crew entailed a ship-wide communications ban.”

“I see. Why is that, Captain?” Madine asked.
“The situation is unusual, and it seemed wiser to wait for more information before submitting a full report.” Ghulam’s voice and posture were so military perfect, it was almost giving Wolffe flashbacks.

Madine eyed them all, projecting his presence strongly enough that he might as well have been in the damned room. “It is my understanding that Colonel DeSoto authorized a rescue operation for one of her agents—” Madine offered Cody a slight nod “—but only Captain Ghulam and the Tatius, Knight Skywalker, Commander Antilles, and three flight squadrons are formally appointed to this operation. Commander Tano, Agent Wolffe: Are you not supposed to be on Lothal at the moment?”

Wolffe clenched his jaw; it wasn’t a slight. It was the closest thing to a title he had in the Alliance. “We were on Lothal, General,” Wolffe said, “but then the situation changed, so we altered the parameters of the mission.”

“Altered the parameters.” Madine looked like he’d started chewing on something sour. All right, maybe it had been a little bit of a slight. Asshole.

“The Spectres remained on Lothal to continue to assist the population after a successful and final defeat of occupying Imperial forces.” Tano’s voice was a blend of half-trained Jedi serenity and a blooded field commander’s quiet fierceness. “When one of the leaders of the Lothal Rebellion was kidnapped by other Imperial agents, we joined the rescue effort to ensure the operation’s success.”

“And the leader who was taken by Imperial agents…was Obi-Wan Kenobi.” Madine’s sour expression was getting more pronounced.

Tano inclined her head. “Yes.”

“Who is still alive,” Madine said, looking at Skywalker.

“That isn’t quite the way I’d put it.” Skywalker had a wide-eyed, faux-thoughtful expression on his face, one Wolffe would lay money on had fooled a lot of people into thinking he was stupid. “He did die, General. This is more of an...unplanned resurrection.”

“Unplanned resurrection,” Madine repeated, voice rising in disbelief. “You’re telling me that Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi are both alive. Do you have any idea how utterly unbelievable this sounds?”

Cody made a derisive sound. “Yeah. We’re living it, General.”

Madine turned his head, conferring with someone not visibly participating in the briefing, before facing them again. “Very well. I am going to be blunt: Are you certain of whom you’re dealing with?”

“Absolutely certain, General,” Cody replied, not a trace of humor on his face.

“I would know them anywhere,” Luke said in a quiet voice.

“So would I,” Tano added. “It’s hard to fake a Force presence, General.”

Madine gave Tano a sharp look. “I’m sure it is. Is there anything more concrete that you can use to convince me? I notice that neither of our dead Jedi in question are a part of this briefing.”

“Kenobi was injured during the retrieval,” Antilles put in, before Wolffe or Tano could answer. “He’s in a bacta tank.”
“And the…other?” Madine asked, his expression settling into grim displeasure.

“My father passed out on a bunk in their freighter and hasn’t moved for the last three hours.” Skywalker’s expression was stone-dry, but he was definitely amused. “As to something concrete… well, I found and rescinded an old order in R2-D2’s memory banks, and he’s been supplying me with a lot of information that we could conceivably use to verify their identities—if you want to sit down and ask them hundreds of questions, anyway.”

“That would take a great deal of time.” Madine’s lips curled down in irritation. “I’m told that due to certain contingency measures in the early days of the Alliance, we have the genetic profiles of both Skywalker and Kenobi. The opinion of other parties is that genetic testing would be able to confirm genetic matches, but I am staring at two clones from the old war. It is my opinion that such testing would be useless.”

“Actually…” Skywalker was peering at his datapad, eyes flickering back and forth as he read a sudden influx of information from the astromech. “It would be a certain confirm. R2-D2 says that my father can’t be cloned. Obi-Wan can’t be, either, but for a different reason.”

“What?” Tano turned her head to stare at Skywalker. “How do we know that?”

“After you went to go spy on the Seps, Count Dooku got it into his head that he needed a new Apprentice that wasn’t also a bucket of crazy,” Cody told her. “It wasn’t the greatest bit of news.”

“Ventress wasn’t crazy,” Tano protested. “She was just…highly irritated.”

Wolffe shook his head. “No, you’re saying that Dooku did want a bucket of crazy for an Apprentice, if he was trying for a genetic copy of Skywalker or Kenobi.”

Cody’s mouth twisted. “Well, none of us ever said that Dooku was all that smart.”

“We’re digressing,” Madine snapped, calling their attention back to his hologram. “Please explain to me why Anakin Skywalker cannot be cloned.”

Luke was still reading from the datapad, a frown line between his eyes. “Well, according to this… oh, that’s—I really need to get a good explanation for that. My father doesn’t have paternal DNA. Something about that lack creates a genetic lockup that Dooku’s geneticists couldn’t copy.”

Wolffe frowned. “Kid, my brothers and I—none of us had maternal DNA. Didn’t stop the Kaminoans from making us.”

Luke shook his head, looking uncomfortable. “I know, just—that’s the only scientific explanation that Artoo could get. Though, he does say that there was actual screaming recorded in the laboratory audio logs when the geneticists couldn’t get it to work.”

Madine’s shoulders slumped, as if he was giving up on disbelief and resigning himself to unsettling reality. “Why is General Kenobi also an exception?”

“Something to do with Rhen’s Disease—oh, wait, I see. The offspring of Rhen’s patients have damaged gene sequences. It doesn’t cause any life-altering problems beyond sterility, but…” Luke gave R2-D2 an odd look before glancing back down at the datapad. “Apparently, those damaged gene sequences can’t be repaired; they have to be replaced.”

“And once you do that, you don’t have an exact copy anymore,” Cody said. “Not a lot of people know that about either of them—the Jedi Council sat on that info pretty damn hard once we found out. We raided the facility before Dooku got back to check on his scientific progress, so it’s possible
even he didn’t know.”

Madine turned his head and frowned. “I don’t think—ah. Very well.” He stepped out of range of
the holo’s camera, and Mon Mothma took his place.

“Gentlemen, ladies,” she greeted them. It was the first time Wolffe had heard her speak aside from
holographic recordings or speeches, and he was surprised at how quiet the former Senator was.
Seemed an odd quality in someone who was holding the Alliance together with spit, bailing wire,
and sheer determination.

Tano gave Mon Mothma a partial bow without rising from her seat. “Chief of State Mothma.”

“Chief Mothma,” Ghulam echoed, his chin lifting in preparation for whatever the head of the
Alliance had to say.

“I have been briefed on the situation, so I will dispense with any repetitions about its unusual nature,”
Mon Mothma said. “I am more concerned about the initial transmission. Do you have a source,
Captain?”

Ghulam glanced at Fane, who winced and frowned. “Not yet, Chief Mothma. That was our next
priority.”

Mon Mothma’s eyes flickered to her right before she looked at them again. “I’m glad to hear that,
Lieutenant. The message we received from the Tatius used an Imperial encryption.”

Wolffe straightened in his chair. “Shit.”

“Indeed.” There was a hint of amusement, translated by the holo as a brief flicker, but Mon
Mothma’s voice remained grave. “Worse is this: There was a second message buried within the
first, one that used our own communications system to continue on to its destination of Imperial
Center.”

“Isard. We have a spy aboard the Tatius.” Ghulam was grinding his teeth, and the sound put
Wolffe on edge. “That is unacceptable, and the spy’s identity will be discovered before the end of
this day.”

“We do have suspicions—” Mon Mothma tried to say, but Antilles cut her off.

“Ma’am, if you blame Tycho Celchu for this, I will resign, and I will take every single one of my
pilots with me.”

“I know you are certain as to Lieutenant Celchu’s loyalty, Commander.” Mon Mothma’s gaze
hardened. “But there is a reason why Intelligence has not stopped looking in your squadron’s
direction.”

Antilles closed his eyes, shoulders dropping. “Because Intelligence has confirmed that it is one of
my pilots.”

“Yes. I’m sorry; I know you and Knight Skywalker have dealt with this issue before.” Mon
Mothma waited for Antilles to look at her again. “If the true culprit has not been found by the time
the Tatius returns to the 2nd Fleet, you and I both know that Intelligence will assign blame where it
may not belong.”

“Understood, ma’am,” Antilles said in a clipped voice.
Ghulam’s eyes flickered over to Antilles, then back to Mon Mothma. “Our orders are to rejoin the fleet, then?”

“They are.” Mon Mothma paused, as if gathering herself. “I would very much like to speak to your guests when you arrive.”

Cody frowned and shared a brief look with Wolffe. Wolffe nodded back; it was a politely worded request, but he knew an order when he heard one.

Tano leaned forward, her expression a careful, neutral blank. “I don’t know if either of them will agree to that.”

“It will only be myself and a few others from Command,” Mon Mothma assured them. “If the details of this message were accurate, they have both been keeping a low profile, and I see no reason to change that beyond what damage has already been done.”

Tano frowned, but gave in. “All right. I will tell them, but if they bolt, I refuse to be held accountable for it.”

“Of course, Commander. I will see you all tomorrow,” Mon Mothma replied, and a moment later the signal disconnected.

There was about three seconds of silence before Ghulam started swearing. “Fuck the scorched and pitted hull of a thrice damned shite piece of scumsucker’s leaky spaceship. Lieutenant Fane, you will trace the source of that transmission immediately.”

Fane blinked a few times in amazement. “Uh—yes, sir,” she blurted, and all but fled the room.

Antilles did a good job of not looking gutted, but Wolffe had seen that betrayal burn in the eyes of too many people not to recognize it. I’m going to go check in with Celchu, Janson, and Klivian. Maybe they noticed someone disappear for a bit too long.”

“I’m going to poke around a bit, too,” Skywalker announced, standing up. “Maybe talk to a few people.”

The moment they were gone, Ghulam sighed. “The rest of you are all Intelligence agents, so I assume you are trustworthy. What about Jade and Solusar?”

“Mara Jade is Obi-Wan’s current Padawan,” Tano said. “I believe that clears her of suspicion.”

“An apprenticeship is not always a guarantee, Commander,” Ghulam returned, eyes narrowed. “I was on the ground during the Bpfassh debacle.”

“Kenobi vetted Jade months ago,” Wolffe said, before Tano’s temper could spark. “Jade was with Kenobi on Lothal, and it wasn’t just his ass on the line. If she was a sleeper or an active Imperial agent, he’d know. Pretty sure the Lothal had a habit of leaving Imperial spies in shallow graves.”

“Ah.” Ghulam paused. “Active Imperial. You mean she was formerly Imperial.”

Wolffe nodded. “Yeah. Pretty high up on the food chain, too.”

“As I myself am guilty of defecting, I suppose I cannot throw that stone without seeing it returned,” Ghulam said ruefully. “If I’m willing to admit that Kenobi is legitimate, then I had best put proper stake into his abilities. What of Solusar?”
“He’s essentially a rescued prisoner,” Tano answered. “Aside from his status as a former Jedi Padawan, he passed out about an hour after we left the Beshqek system, and one of us was with him at all times to make sure he’d be all right. I stole one of your lieutenants to keep watch over him so that I could be here.”

Ghulam’s lips twitched. “As long as you return my lieutenant when you’re done borrowing them. Will Solusar be requiring psychiatric assistance?”

“That’s up to him,” Cody answered, his opinion of the Alliance’s shrinks blatant on his face. “This spy—they’re either trying to convince us that Celchu’s guilty, or they fucking panicked.”

“Celchu’s from Alderaan,” Wolffe said. “If he actually is an Imperial spy, I’ll eat my fucking armor and smile about it.”

“I think Lieutenant Celchu’s homeworld is one of the only things that have kept Command from acting on their suspicions before this time.” Tano rubbed the bridge of her nose with two fingers, irritated. “It’s not common knowledge, but Commander Antilles told me that Tycho Celchu went through Lusankya Prison. Celchu admitted that Isard’s people tried to turn him into a sleeper agent, but claims the process didn’t take. He escaped when he was transferred to a different facility. That’s all Command has needed to keep suspicion alive.”

“It doesn’t matter if Celchu’s imprisonment is a secret or not. The sheer number of sleeper agents turning up in ranking Alliance positions is making everyone paranoid,” Ghulam said.

“Oh, that’s complete shit,” Cody growled. “The point of being a sleeper is that you don’t fucking know about it. If Celchu was a Lusankya plant, he wouldn’t remember the damned prison at all.”

“We had three sleepers turn up on Lothal six days ago—three ex-Imperial stormtroopers from the same squad,” Tano said in a gentle voice, giving Cody a sympathetic look. “They had no idea.”

Cody scowled for a moment longer. Then he nodded at Tano. “Poor bastards.”

“I really hope that we’re not dealing with a sleeper now, or we may never find them.” Ghulam stood, smoothing out his uniform. “You have my full permission to investigate the Tattius in any way you see fit, Commanders.”

“We’d be doing that, anyway, Captain,” Cody said.

Ghulam’s eyebrows lifted. “You did mention that you outranked me, but the last I checked, a captain in the Alliance navy outranked a commander in the Starfighter Corps.”

Cody smirked. “That’s because I’m not actually a commander.”

Tano clapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide and bright with sudden humor. “Oh, you didn’t,” she said through her fingers.

It took him a moment, but when he got it, Wolffe rolled his eyes. “Oh, you asshole. You let them do a direct ranking translation from High Marshall Commander.”


“Technically, they were calling me by name,” Cody said. “Some Core-raised asshole in Resources insisted that I had to have two names in the Alliance’s system. So, I went with it.”

“Al’verde Naasade.” Wolffe looked at his brother in what he hoped was complete disapproval.
“That’s awful,” Tano said, still swallowing back laughter. “You have to tell Obi-Wan. He’ll love it.”


“Please don’t,” Cody answered, his smile turning into a grimace. “I really prefer to avoid it. Lost my taste for saluting about ten years back.”

Wolffe felt his gut clench; both he and Tano looked at each other at the same moment. The Battle of Taas had been an epic clusterfuck that he still had nightmares about, but he’d gotten the people under his command home alive. Rex had come back with the ragtag remains of three different Alliance squads, empty-eyed and broken after facing Cody on the opposite side of the battlefield.

*          *          *          *

“Wedge.”


Luke walked forward and wrapped his arm around his friend’s shoulder. “It’s not your fault.”

“Still had to say it anyway, huh?”

Luke smiled. “Well, if I can annoy you into a better mood, then that’s the weapon I’ll choose. It’s not, though. It is not your fault. It wasn’t the last time this happened, or the time before that. We’re famous, and we make tempting targets.”

Wedge tried to smile, but it just made him look tired. “I wasn’t ready to restock on a pilot yet, especially with the bacta shortages turning up. We’re going to need everyone soon.”

Luke let his vision blur as he listened to the eddies in the Force. “Yeah, there’s something coming down the space lanes, all right. But not yet. One problem at a time, okay?”

“One at a time.” Wedge straightened, chin coming up in a jut of determination. “Plan?”

“I know the other Intelligence agents are going to be poking around.” Luke paused, considering the idea that had flashed through his mind. “You know, it might not be amiss to go among our pilots, bitching about how Command is wanting to send Tycho up for yet another review with Intelligence.”

“Our spy thinks we’ve taken their hasty bait, so they might relax their guard.” Wedge nodded. “On it. Give me two clicks on the comm when we’re ready to move on this.”

“Right.” Luke waited until Wedge was gone and the corridor was clear before leaning against the nearest bulkhead. Ten pilots, once they discounted Wedge and Tycho. Ten possibilities. Dammit. He hadn’t wanted to go through this again, either.

It didn’t make him feel any better to know that the Alliance had been so concerned with sleeper agents that the presence of an outright spy hadn’t occurred to any of them. Not to Luke, Wedge, the grunts in the lower ranks—not even to Intelligence and Command.

Luke chose to distract himself, using the excuse of a necessary chore to go visit the medical bay,
letting thoughts percolate in the back of his head. Sometimes his subconscious was smarter than he
was.

Jade met him at the door to Medical, which became an intriguing standoff masked as polite
conversation. By the time she decided it was okay for him to go inside, Luke thought maybe he had
a better idea about who Mara Jade really was. It would be fun to find out more, especially if all of
their conversations were going to involve picking his way around verbal minefields.

Mara was defensive about her role in the Empire, too. Even without details, Luke was convinced
that her job hadn’t been very nice. He countered Mara’s wariness with the fact that his father had
been Darth Vader, and he didn’t judge.

There had been a bright flare of humor in Mara’s green eyes that she hadn’t been able to hide. Luke
considered that a win.

The mention of the spy, though, created a shift in her behavior that was all business. “Go in, then,”
she said. “I don’t want the door open any longer than it has to be, just in case.”

Luke found Rex standing in front of the bacta tank with his arms crossed over his chest. The old
commander had already finished his time in bacta after Medical discovered that his “minor” stab
wound had done serious damage to a few internal organs. He wasn’t armored up yet, though—just
wearing a form-fitting, short-sleeved shirt and a loose pair of pants that looked borrowed from
Medical’s stock.

Rex was gazing at the man in the bacta tank, the expression on his face somewhere between
sympathy and hollow-eyed worry. That gave Luke pause; he’d seen Leia stare at Han in the same
way after he’d taken a bad wound in combat.

Huh.

doing?”

“I’ve probably been better. Definitely been younger,” Rex said, smiling. “I’ll live, Kid. How’re
you?”


Rex glanced back up at the tank. “Good and bad. Good, because the bacta is helping, and he might
escape the worst of the nerve damage the fucking Adepts caused. Bad, because he’s getting
twitchy.”

“Twitchy, huh?” Luke walked over to stand next to Rex. Even through the cloud of bacta, he could
see that Obi-Wan’s eyes were moving back and forth, his fingers twitching—dreaming, most likely.
“What will that mean?”

“He’ll either get past it and settle, or...” Rex sighed. “Or we’ll have a situation.”

“Ah,” Luke said in understanding. “Guess I’ll hang around for a bit, then.”

The moment Obi-Wan’s head jerked back, Luke knew it was definitely going to be the latter. It was
just a matter of time.

“What’s up, Kid?” Rex asked. “You’re Jedi-tense.”

“Your father, and your...uncle.” Rex paused, shaking his head. “Shit, that’s weird. Anyway: If they got the scent of trouble on the wind, you could always tell. It was this look they had, and the way they stood.”

“That’s...kind of neat, actually,” Luke said. He had no idea he’d developed any traits like that. “And you’re right. There is a problem on the ship.” He gave Rex a brief rundown on the spy’s presence, and the current plans to unmask them.

“I don’t suppose you know where the spy is.” Luke smiled. “It would sure save us some time and trouble.”

Rex smirked and jerked his thumb over his shoulder to point at the wall. “That way.”

Luke’s smile widened. “Most of the ship is that way. Doesn’t exactly narrow it down.”

“You’re asking the wrong person, Skywalker. The Force doesn’t really work that way, anyway.” Rex gave him a level look, weight and wisdom in his eyes. “Trust your instincts. Those are a lot more useful when you’re searching for a traitor.”

“Instincts,” Luke repeated softly, and then closed his eyes, bowing his head. “Dammit.”

“Figured it out, huh?” Rex sounded sympathetic.

“Yeah.” Luke looked up and rubbed his face with one hand, feeling the faint hint of new bristle scratch his palm. “I didn’t like her. I just thought it was the creepy flirting.”

“I’m sorry, Kid.” Rex reached out and gripped his shoulder. “I’ve been there, too. That’s never an easy place to find yourself, but it sure as hell tells you what you need to do.”

“Yeah.” That part wasn’t going to be difficult, just upsetting, especially for the other pilots.

“So, what’s the other bad news?” Rex asked, just as the door opened and the Commander stepped inside.

“Hey,” Cody greeted them. “How’s the General?”

“Twitchy,” Rex replied.

Cody’s expression went tight and unhappy. “Yeah. I’d be more worried if he wasn’t.”


Cody sighed, resting one hand on his hip and the other on the butt of his blaster pistol. “I was infiltration,” he said, and looked away. “I had to watch.”

“Aw, gods,” Rex murmured. “Cody—”

“I’m fine, Rex,” Cody snapped back. “I got him out, and that base is a fucking crater. That’s what I’m focused on, all right?”

Rex held up both hands in a passive gesture. “Hey, I believe you. When you’re ready to talk, though, there are actually some of us around who can listen who aren’t Alliance shrinks.”

Cody flashed a brief, tired smile. “Offer’s appreciated, but we still have our own shit to iron out,
Rex, not to mention the newest line from Command.”

“Fuck, what do they want?” Rex asked.

“Because of the spy, High Command got word of Obi-Wan and my father’s presence aboard the Tatius,” Luke answered. “Mon Mothma has requested that they come and speak to her when the ship rejoins the 2nd Fleet.”

“Requested?” Rex shook his head. “There’s no such thing when it comes to Command.”

“I’m just worried about who that woman wants to have in the room with them—”

Luke lost the rest of Cody’s sentence to a wave of panic. It swamped him, drove him to his knees, hands over his head to shield himself from an enemy that wasn’t there before he could realize that he wasn’t the one panicking.

Yep, that’s our cue,” Rex said. He helped Luke to his feet while Cody shouted for the medic on duty. Luke was trying not to gag, still half-buried in memory of torture and separation—

“Get him out of the damned tank!”

* * * *

He was confined, his hands striking against an unyielding surface. The air he breathed smelled close, plastic and too hot, and he couldn’t get enough to satisfy cramping lungs. He tried to kick and it was like gravity itself was holding him back.

Cold assaulted his skin just as sound hammered into his ears: “Get him out of the damned tank!”

Not a familiar voice, but it grounded him. Bacta, had to be, he’d certainly spent enough time in it—

“The patient’s vitals are spiking dangerously, sir.”

That was all it took for panic to come screaming back, blacking out his vision. He was scrabbling at nothing, heels sliding on slick floor. The air no longer smelled like a mask, but sticky-sweet and cloying, turning his stomach into a knot that made him gag.

He had no idea how long it took before a voice pierced the fog. It was a quiet rumble, one scarcely loud enough for his own ears to hear, let alone another’s.

“—Nu ibic pel’jorad, o’r ibic aay’han—”

Words. Language. He knew that language.

“Ke tengaanar gar’au’re gar chaab.” Then, tentatively, “Obi-Wan?”

It was his name that finally unsnarled the mess of his thoughts as much as the words.

Obi-Wan lifted his hand and gripped at Rex’s arm, his fingers wet and sliding along bare flesh. He was being held, his back warmed by the solid heat of Rex’s chest. He tried to speak, but couldn’t get the words past his stubbornly clamped jaw.
“Bal vën’mihi vencuyanir at’slanar,” Rex murmured. “‘Ke’dummir gar’au’re, bah shukur gar...’”

Obi-Wan swallowed back a manic desire to giggle as the war chant continued. No, he had not allowed that to happen, thank you very much.

He could feel Rex’s amusement, touch-based translation that he’d never quite figured out how to shut off where the Captain was concerned. “Finish it with me, bur’cya,” Rex ordered softly. “Ni kar’taylir gar’liser.”

“Gar’vaim mar’eyce.” His voice was a broken, wobbling whisper, his throat raw despite the bacta. Gods, had he been screaming?

Rex nudged him. “K’staabi jii, gar. ‘Nu echoy’la cuy gaanla—’”

“Atin Alor’ad,” Obi-Wan muttered; Rex chanted the words with him. “‘Bah jorhaa’ir, gar’shi linibar, bah susular.’”

By the last line, Obi-Wan realized he was digging into Rex’s arm with his fingernails and made himself stop. Rex squeezed his other hand; their fingers were laced together, the grip so tight on Obi-Wan’s part that his joints were beginning to ache.

Obi-Wan took a long breath and released it slowly, trying to convince his pounding heart to calm the hell down. “Interesting choice.”

“Choice?” Rex snorted. “Kenobi, it took four of the chants to finally get your attention.”

“Four?” That startled him enough that he fought the gummy crust of bacta enough to open his eyes. Details poured in with stark, too-bright clarity: medical wing, definitely ship-board; one draining bacta tank, overseen by a medic who looked to have seen a recent emergency.

Obi-Wan was lying on the floor, half-naked and still literally dripping bacta. “Oh.” The recent medical emergency had to have been himself.

Mara was seated on the floor in front of him with her blaster in one hand. She wasn’t aiming it at anyone, at least, but her eyes were full of the glimmering fierceness she used to disguise worry.

Luke Skywalker knelt close to Obi-Wan’s bare feet. His eyes filled with the same sort of empathic concern his mother had excelled at.

Obi-Wan looked at him in utter confusion. “When did…?”

“Byss,” Luke supplied. “I was part of the Alliance-based extraction crew.”

“You were still high,” Mara added, her mouth set in a peculiar, flat line.

Stim tabs. That part, he remembered, and it made him want to wince and possibly hide under the nearest bed. “Ah,” he said, latching onto that bit of normal to try and ground himself. “Did I say or do anything interesting?”

Luke’s expression went blank and unreadable. “You were shoving biologically engineered soldiers off of rooftops, claiming it was for science.” Mara’s lips thinned out as the flat line got progressively worse.

Obi-Wan stared at them in bemused horror. “I did what?”

“Exactly what the kid says you did.” Obi-Wan turned his head to find Cody perched on an
unoccupied bed at his right. He also had a blaster out, which struck Obi-Wan as odd.

Obi-Wan swallowed, trying not to make a face when bacta bloomed over his tongue. “Did I say why I was doing that?”

“You said that you wanted to see if they could fly,” Luke informed him. The mask slipped enough that the corner of his mouth turned up. Mara was now biting her lip in concerted effort not to smile. “For the record? They couldn’t.”

“I’d…I’d really like to be able to say otherwise, but that does sound like something I would do,” Obi-Wan admitted. Mara averted her eyes, put one hand over her mouth, and started snickering. Luke just smiled.

Rex squeezed his hand again. “Better.”

“Yeah. Getting rid of the medical droid helped, too,” Cody said. “Should have thought of that first thing, not last.”

“You could have maybe not shot the droid, also,” Rex suggested.

Cody shrugged. “I missed the memory circuits. It’s not dead, just needs a new body.” The medic near the bacta tank turned around and glared daggers at Cody, who pretended to ignore him.

“Shot the—” Obi-Wan tried, but he couldn’t condemn the act, not when it had made the black-out panic go the hell away. “Vor entye.”

Cody rolled his eyes. “N’entye, asshole.”

Obi-Wan ignored the refusal. He’d find a way to thank Cody properly, regardless. “Two questions: What day is it, and what is it with the unholstered weapons in a medical wing?” Gross; the bacta flavor was getting worse.

“It’s the 11th,” Luke answered, which was a relief. That was only a day out from Byss and his temporary slide into stim-tab-induced insanity. He’d had longer bacta dips.

“And there is a spy for Imperial Intelligence on board,” Cody said, holding up his blaster long enough to sight down the barrel before he returned it to his lap. “We’re all feeling a bit paranoid.”

“Excuse me.” The medic wandered over from the emptying bacta tank. If they hadn’t changed the Alliance’s ranking pips, the Gand was a lieutenant—not chief medical officer, but still ranked high enough for his word to carry weight. “I’m pretty sure I can’t convince you to let me put you back in there for another full cycle—”

“No.” It was a pathetic squeak of a refusal, but it did the job.

The lieutenant nodded. “I didn’t think so, not when you did such an excellent job of trying to destroy the tank. With your fists,” the man added, giving Obi-Wan several narrow-eyed blinks of utter disapproval. When Obi-Wan said nothing, the Gand huffed and continued. “You need another full cycle of sedation, at the very least, for some of the nerve repairs to have a chance at completion, but you do not seem to react to standard humanoid levels of sedatives.”

“Not lately, no.” Obi-Wan tried to remember the last dosage required to make him sleep after being injured during a Lothal raid, and gave it up as a lost cause. “Try thirty milligrams of tarroffinial,” he suggested. “Maybe forty.”
“Fuckin’ forty?” Rex repeated, appalled. “What the hell did you do, mainline sedatives for six years?”

“No, Rex.” It had been more like three months, but those were not details Obi-Wan could even begin to fathom explaining right now.

The Gand crossed his arms, unimpressed. “Ten is considered the max humanoid dose.”

“No, it’s considered the standard,” Obi-Wan corrected, annoyed. “Besides, two years ago my standard dose was fifty, so thirty is definitely an improvement.”

“Fifty?” the Gand sputtered. “Are you completely insane?”

“Yes,” Mara muttered.

“Kriffing hells, Kvuttinei!” Cody glared at the medic. “You asked the man’s opinion, and he gave it to you. Now either give him the dose, or go be useless somewhere else!”

Obi-Wan smiled when the medic growled under his breath and went to go prep the hypo. “I did miss military efficiency.”

“No, you missed Mando’a efficiency. Totally different thing,” Cody said.

Luke was doing a poor job at hiding another smile. Then again, hiding the smile had never quite seemed to be the point with him. “I’ll bring you some clothes when you’re awake again, all right?”

“Yes, that’s…” Obi-Wan frowned. “Oh, that is sort of necessary, isn’t it? I don’t really have anything here.”

“You don’t have anything left that doesn’t have holes in it, regardless,” Mara interjected, scowling.

“Just the blacks, the coat, and the boots,” Rex said.

Cody grinned. “Dare ya to go around in just the coat and the boots.”

Mara made a choked sound, her cheeks turning flame-red. Luke ducked his head, laughing in silence.

Obi-Wan glanced at Cody, amused. “Not for free, I won’t. How much?”

“Well, I—”

“Cody, no,” Rex growled.

“Hey, I’ve got six years in military pay that I’ve barely touched,” Cody protested. “What the hell else am I going to spend it on?”

“Find yourself a normal expenditure, like dancing girls and strippers,” Kvuttinei snapped, and then jabbed a cold hypo against Obi-Wan’s thigh.

“Hey!” Obi-Wan slurred in protest, and blacked out to the sound of Cody sputtering something about inappropriate assumptions.

* * * * *
Luke waited until he was sure that Obi-Wan was both unconscious and calm. “I’ve got to go check on Wedge and our plotting. Be back soon.”

Rex nodded. “Yeah, we’ll be around, Kid. Let us know if you need help.”


The moment the kid was gone and the door was sealed, Rex let go. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fucking hells, fuck the fucking fuckers!”

“Same,” Cody said, shoulders slumping. “Fuck, I’m tired.”

“Go catch a nap,” Rex suggested. “Even an hour is better than nothing.”

Cody shook his head. “Not until this spy shit is dealt with. I’m going to go out to the lounge, though. Spent too much damned time in Medical a few years back, and I can’t stand this place for long.”

“Yeah, go on.” Rex smiled. “I’ve got watch inside, and Jade’s got watch on the outside. She’s terrifying; you’ll like her when you get to know her.”

Cody frowned, looking at Rex out of the corner of his eye. “You know, she looks an awful fucking lot like Kenobi.”

“Yeah, but he can’t have kids,” Rex replied.

Cody glanced over at Kenobi before looking back at Rex. “Rex. You remember what he said about trying to take on the Emperor, and when that happened.”

“Yeah...”

Cody leaned in close to him. “An obsessed man with cloning technology, trying to clone an individual with damaged DNA sequences that prevent a perfect copy, Rex. How old is Jade?”

Rex leaned back, glancing at the closed door on instinct. “Cody, if you’re right, they don’t know. Neither of them know.”

“No.” Cody clasped Rex on the shoulder. “And I’m not saying a word.”

“Same,” Rex agreed. He didn’t want to deal with the fallout of even suggesting that kind of incident, let alone seeing it confirmed or not. “Let’s just...I’ll walk you out. Spy bullshit to deal with.”

“Yeah.”

Rex was still in the hallway outside Medical, too much of everything whirling around in his head, when he realized that Anakin was trudging down the hallway to greet him, a mug of caff clenched in his hands.

“Hey.”

“Hi. Don’t break that,” Rex reminded him. “You’re not wearing padding on one of those hands.”
Anakin gave him a bleary look before glancing down at his bionic hand, which was starting to crack the outermost glaze on the caff mug. “Shit,” he said, loosening his grip. “Where’s Obi-Wan?”

“Is that what woke you up?”

“Fuck, yes,” Anakin replied, giving Jade a nod as they went into Medical.

Anakin stared at Obi-Wan for a while, watching his old Master’s drugged slumber. “Panicked in the tank?”

“Yeah.” Rex blew out a long sigh. “Got the impression from Cody, that up close? That shit the Adept’s did was even worse than what you experienced.”

“Great.” Anakin sipped his caff and made a face. “I need to talk to Cody, anyway. Where is he?”

“Lounge up the aft side—you know what? I’ll go with you. I need air that isn’t bacta-laden,” Rex said.

“Heading out?” Jade asked in a mild voice.

“Just for a few. I really don’t think anyone’s getting past your guard, anyway.” Rex smiled at her. Jade nodded, her lips curling up in a smile of agreement. “Back in a bit.”

They arrived at the lounge to find Cody already on the comm with someone else, a perplexed expression on his face.

What they heard blew all of their plans out of the water, and changed everything.

Imperial Year 27

Republic Date 5239: 2/11th

Wivvelinnt II, Velinnt System

Imperial Space, The Colonies Region

Nights on Wivvelinnt veered towards chill, but never cold. It was one of the few positives about the planet that Jesse had found in ten damned years, and meant that none of them had frozen to death. Discomfort, disease, hunger, irritation, depression, and homesickness, yes, but no freezing cold.

Jesse was sitting on the ground outside of the decimated Imperial base, keeping one eye topside for incoming traffic. He had his comm set aside, broadcasting on a single frequency for the signal trace. Their rescuers would find them, and then things would be awesome and so very, very awkward.

He was still wearing most of his gear, just in case the Imps turned up first. He was tired, though, both from the weight of wearing that bullshit, and from the weight of what he’d been carrying around in his soul for so damned long.

The ground was cold, and his ass was going numb, but Kix was using Jesse’s thigh as a pillow, so moving was not an option. Kix was stretched out on the ground in the boneless slumber of the completely exhausted.
Jesse kept running his fingers through Kix’s hair, which was only just starting to curl at the ends, a sign that he was about a week overdue for a trim. He still had the same lightning bolt patterns in his hair. Same fucking tattoo; Jesse wondered if that had caused any awkward moments between Kix and Alliance-loyal droids.

The only real change Jesse had been able to find was a slightly pinched look, a faint line at the edges of Kix’s eyes—like his three months of experience with the Empire hadn’t been all that great. Jesse could sympathize. Twenty-six years of that shit hadn’t been all that great, either.

Jesse tried to spend the wait thinking, to legitimately consider his team’s next move, but mostly he just stared at his not-dead boyfriend. He would kiss the universe, the Force, and every single god in existence—well, maybe not all of them, some of them were weird—to have this moment, but he hadn’t done a damned thing except survive long enough to see it.

He heard the sound of a ship in-atmosphere and looked up to track the incoming transport. It came close to the base and landed where the Imps usually parked their shuttles, but that was no Imp ship.

Jesse checked his chrono. They’d beaten the Empire’s timetable by forty minutes. Awesome.

He traced his thumb over Kix’s cheek, feeling several days of rough stubble. “Hey, crazy person. Time to wake up.”

Kix scowled in his sleep. “No.”

Jesse grinned, his heart aching. Oh, gods, he’d missed that irritable grumbling. “C’mon. Gotta move. Cavalry’s here.”

Kix jerked away and sat bolt upright. Jesse didn’t draw away—he couldn’t.

Kix’s hand had clamped down on Jesse’s arm with enough strength that he would find bruises there later.

“Hey. What’s wrong?”

Kix blinked a few times before his grip eased. He reached up and rubbed at his eyes and face with his free hand. “Sorry, I just—I was suddenly convinced I was going to wake up to find that you weren’t real.”

“I’ve been afraid to stop touching you for the same reason, so I guess we’re even,” Jesse replied, earning a heartbroken look from Kix. “Hey. I’m still here, so are you, and apparently, so are a bunch of other assholes who are supposed to be dead. Let’s go say hi, okay? Otherwise we’ll probably just sit here and lose our shit.”

Kix glanced in the direction of the landing pad, which was illuminated now by the transport’s exterior lighting. “Not-dead General,” he said, climbing to his feet. “How is that going to keep us from losing our shit?”

Jesse stood up and dusted off his fatigues. “No idea,” he admitted, and held out his hand. Kix wrapped his fingers around Jesse’s in a secure grip that was just shy of too-tight.

“What do you want to do, Jesse?” Kyler came to ask him. Skive was riding her mother’s six while chewing on her lower lip. Calpha, Ghim, and Zephyr were on point behind them; his entire team was geared up and ready to go.

“Can you guys give us a minute?” Jesse asked, tilting his head in the direction of the transport. “There are...some people that we need to see.”
Kyler gave him a nudge. “Go on, then.”

“Hoo boy,” Jesse muttered, and led the way.

The transport was small, built for speed, quick retrievals and quicker exits. Its boarding ramp was already lowered; the light from inside the ship cast out a path that split the darkness.

Waiting next to the transport were three people Jesse had believed—had fucking known—he was never going to see again.

Commander Tano’s funeral had been fucking awful even when compared to Kenobi’s fake-funeral-Rako-Hardeen bullshit. She was only a few centimeters taller than she’d been as a kid, and stood with the set poise of one hell of a leader. There were lightsabers at her belt, too, even if the hilts weren’t the same.

Someone had gone to the trouble of getting Rex into proper Mandalorian beskar’gam. It was a good look for him, one he carried better than how he’d worn their old Phase II armor.

General Skywalker was younger than Kix. That...that was entirely fucked up.

Jesse had also just discovered that he had no damned idea what to say.

Kix was staring at Skywalker in bafflement, his head tilted to one side. “What in the entire fuck, sir?”

Skywalker let out a surprised snort of laughter. “That’s uh—well, I was going to ask you, first, but fair is fair. It’s weird Jedi shit, Kix.”

Rex glanced up at Skywalker, a dry expression on his face that hadn’t changed a bit, old or not. “Oh, so we have the summary down to three words now, huh?”

Skywalker shrugged. “It’s still accurate, though.”


“You know, you don’t have to call me—”

“It’s been three months for me, General!” Kix yelled. “No offense, but that habit isn’t exactly going to kriffing ditch right away!”

“Three months. Aw, gods,” Rex muttered. “Seps?”

“Motherfuckers,” Kix declared in a vicious snarl.

Jesse winced. That explained a lot about the efficient depopulation of that Imp base. If the Seps had tortured Kix, and some Imperial had been dumb enough to try for round two in less than three months...

Fuck, now Jesse wanted to go kill a bunch of fucking Sep bastards, and they didn’t even exist anymore.

Rex was nodding, but the way the side of his face had twitched upwards in a brief, teeth-baring smile told Jesse that he’d had the same kind of response. “When?”

Jesse tried not to whimper when the bones in his fingers started to grind together. “About two minutes after we last spoke, sir.”
Rex’s expression went flat, hard, and cold. “Two minutes. They knew—they fucking knew—”

Jesse felt his eyebrows climb as he listened to Rex swear. He had no idea what language Rex had just lapsed into, but it must have had some damned satisfying vocabulary.

“Monitoring the military channels.” Skywalker just looked depressed. “Yeah, that makes...I’m sorry, Kix.”

“I really don’t think it was your fault, General,” Kix replied, which made Skywalker flinch and Tano look uncomfortable.

There was a raw smile on Skywalker’s face. “Kix, you have no idea how much I appreciate hearing someone say that. I’ll even explain why, but I think it should wait until everyone’s in the same place.”

What the fuck? “Heeeeeeellllpp,” Jesse whined. “I want context!”

“We’re still waiting for him to come up with a version of the explanation that doesn’t take two days,” Tano said, her mouth quirking upwards in a brief, tired smile.

“Still no context,” Jesse grumbled. “Hi, good to see you all, glad you’re not dead, even though two of you are supposed to be.”

“That reminds me.” Rex turned and gave Jesse the narrow-eyed glare that usually resulted in a Shiny needing clean britches. “Suicide by fucking Star Destroyer.”

“Hey!” Jesse spread his arms. “I would very much like to point out that since I am standing here, fuckin’ old, and oh, yes, talking to you, that I obviously did not suicide via fucking Star Destroyer!”

Skywalker had another one of those raw, gut-punching smiles on his face. “When did you change your mind?”

“Oh, about a minute too late to safely abandon ship,” Jesse answered, aware that Kix was subjecting him to a distress-fueled, angry glare. “Fun ride out on the escape pod, though, and by fun I mean fire,” he said, gesturing at the part of his face that was missing a large section of tattoo.

Skywalker went pale; Rex and Ahsoka both looked unhappy. “Fire isn’t fun,” Skywalker muttered. “Context?” Jesse requested in a faint voice. He was pretty sure there wasn’t going to be context until this mysterious long-winded explanation happened.

To his surprise, he did get some of it. “He dropped a fucking building on my head!” Rex snapped.

“Context?” Jesse asked, aware that Sky was repeating just to get a rise out of each other.

To his surprise, he did get some of it. “He dropped a fucking building on my head!” Rex snapped.

Skywalker rolled his eyes. “It was a balcony. That is still not a building!”

“You still buried me alive!” Rex retorted.

Weird. Jesse was picking up on actual anger from Rex, actual regret from Skywalker, but it was more like something they were repeating just to get a rise out of each other.

Like Point Rain on Geonosis, the high wall of that Separatist base, and Rex’s introduction to flying via Skywalker and the Force.

The grip on Jesse's hand went slack. He glanced at Kix in surprise and saw that his boyfriend had gone about as pale as Skywalker had when fire was mentioned. “Fuck. Fucking kriffing hells, fuck, fuck, that's what Pulsar meant, oh, fuck.”
“Kix?” Tano gazed at him in concern. “Are you—”

“The chips, the fucking chips,” Kix whispered. “You were fail-safed out of them, the chips wouldn’t recognize you as a target—dear fucking gods, the Emperor is dead, right? If not, I’m going to fucking kill him myself.”

Skywalker actually took a step back. “Yes, I absolutely swear, the fucker is dead.” Then he hesitated. “Well, he's dead here, at least.”

“Sooolo,” Jesse began, bothered by the weird, thick, damned odd silence that followed that statement. “Why aren’t you dead?” he asked Tano.

Tano’s voice was dry amusement. “Protective custody so that a Sith wouldn't try to kill me during my recovery.”

“Gotcha,” Jesse said, squeezing Kix’s hand before letting go. “Do dead Jedi Commanders like hugs?”

Tano’s eyes lit up. “Yes. Yes, we do,” she said, and that's how Jesse wound up with an armload of adult Togrutan badass.

Tano took her next hug to Kix, who clung to her like he was worried about drowning.

“Sir,” Jesse said, grinning at Rex.

Rex shook his head. “You asshole,” he whispered, wrapping his arms around Jesse and holding on tight enough that Jesse knew there was going to be armor-edging bruises to go with his bruised arm and fingers. Still didn't care.

The surprise was being hugged by Skywalker. The Jedi hadn't really done hugging, or much touching of any sort unless it was a hand on the shoulder.

Okay, Jesse was convinced that Kenobi and Rex had done way more touching, but that was different and mostly not his business.

“Hi, General,” Jesse said. Kix was right—some of those habits were not going to die so easily, and he'd had a long time to grow out of that one.

“Commander Jesse of the 501st, I am so glad to see you alive,” Skywalker said in a quiet voice. “You utter shit. You saved all our lives.”

“Good to know the bumpy ride was worth it, then,” Jesse replied.

“You were Alliance,” Tano said, after Jesse introduced the rest of his team and Skive started shoving people at the transport. “What branch? I never knew about you.”

Jesse shrugged. “Not that you necessarily would have, what with the isolation bit. They were still hitting that hammer pretty hard when we got stuck here.”

Tano inclined her head. “Maybe, but I got around. I'm Intelligence. AI-100-02-19.”

Jesse grinned. “Our girl went spy!”

Tano glowered at him. “I will pay you never to say that again. Skyguy does not need the encouragement.”
“Sure. I'm broke; I could use the money.” Jesse was also quietly impressed. The AI-100s were the first, an elite group. They were the founders of Alliance Intelligence, and the highest ranking officers in the military aside from the admiralty and the marshals.

“I’m army. AM-CT-5597, Brigadier General Jesse, Recon & Eval, at your service.”

Skywalker made an amused noise. “Someone made you a general?”

“I think the Alliance was in the habit of making anyone a general if they proved they could stay alive in active combat longer than three months,” Jesse replied.

“Three months, huh?” Kix seemed thoughtful. “I want a promotion, then.”

“What would you do with a promotion?” Jesse asked, curious.

Kix shrugged. “Same thing I’ve been doing—keep yelling at Echo to stop running into fucking blaster fire.”

“Fucking ARCs, man,” Jesse said, grinning.

Rex eyed him. “You are an ARC, dumbass.”

“Yes, and so are you, and we're all fucking nuts!” Jesse declared.

Kix glared at Jesse. “You did not—the moment I'm not around, you ran off for ARC-training?”

Jesse winced and glanced away. “Seemed like a nice distraction at the time.”

“Chop chop, people.” Skywalker waved his hands towards the open hatch of the transport. “It’s time to finish loading up. If your Imperials are on schedule, they're only about twenty-five minutes out.”

“And on the way up, please tell me how the hell Echo is alive,” Rex ordered.

Kix gave Rex a faint smile. “Yes, sir.”

They found an empty seat on the transport big enough for both of them. Jesse tucked himself in against Kix’s side, glad that Kix's armor was sane and sensible and flexible, and wouldn't leave more bruises on Jesse just because he wanted to be clingy.

“Hey,” Jesse said, smiling. “You made it.”

“Yeah.” Kix swallowed and pressed in close. “So did you.”

Jesse grinned. “Fucking miracle.”

“I love you,” Kix whispered.

Jesse closed his eyes when tears immediately blurred his vision, burning like the fire that had taken part of his tattoo. He wrapped both arms around Kix and buried his face against Kix’s neck, trying not to sob.

“You dork. I love you, too.”
I have a paypal.me! It's under my AO3 pseud if you would like to contribute to the mad fund of spare change that keeps me financially afloat so that I can write lots of shiny fic for you all. <3

(Mostly it pays for hospital bills and food that I can eat without getting really sick.)

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