where the blade twists

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where the blade twists

by independent_variables (cordelia)

Summary

“The Dark *is* fear,” Vos said, some of that fear bright in his eyes, “and it gives you a taste for the fear of others. Your own pain drives you to inflict pain. If this war goes on much longer it is going to break the galaxy to pieces.”

“You said… After Kamino you said this mission would be over soon. You said you were close.” *Close to what?*

Vos heard the unspoken question, and smiled. The same grim smile he’d seen from Kote, from ‘17, when they were right about something they’d desperately wanted to be wrong about.

“Close to figuring out how the Sith plan to kill the Jedi.”

Notes

Cross-posting from AO3 for many reasons, but mostly because I want to be able to re-read my own writing on my own phone at my own convenience.

This story was originally beta read by blabbyshark!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Sometimes, if his squad got their ship inspections and maintenance done early, and if there was extra fuel, and if it was long enough between campaigns to justify the time and expense as training, Davijaan would go flying.

He still loved flying, three years into the war. There was something soothing about being inside a ship, in space. The feeling of weightlessness from the safety of a cockpit. The easy fun of looping around and around a venator or racing Fiddle to the nearest asteroid or bringing his fighter to a standstill and drifting, for a time, in the shine of the white and blue stars.

When he'd taken Piloting and Navigation courses Sergeant Rau had told his class it didn't matter if they loved flying, the only thing that mattered was that they were good at it. He agreed. The higher-ups didn't care if he liked his job, so long as he did it and did it well.

But, '17 had told him if he had to do something for his whole life he might as well enjoy doing it. So, Davijaan let himself love flying. And he was pretty sure that love was due entirely to the rare times he and his squad were able to take their ships out into space without being shot at.

Half his mind was on the pressure gauge he was calibrating and the other half was wondering if today might be one of those times—he and Mitts were ahead of schedule, and there was fuel due in the resupply next week—when his comm beeped.

The sound yanked him out of the stars and back into the ARC-170's cockpit. He quickly finished with the pressure gauge and then rolled back his sleeve to get to his wristcomm. The new message was from Kote, reminding him of their joint briefing at 1100 hours. He checked his chrono. It was 1040.

There hadn't been a briefing when he'd checked his schedule that morning. He hadn't had to attend a formal briefing for almost three months, not since the campaign on Umbara. The sudden addition was… concerning.

"Mitts?" he called, climbing out of the cockpit.

"Yes, boss?" Mitts was muffled, head still stuck inside the engine.

"Something came up."

"Huh?"

Davijaan tugged on his foot until he slid out of the engine, squinting, and handed him the datapad with the inspection checklist. "Surprise briefing. Get Fiddle to help with the rest of them if I'm not back in an hour."

"But, sir—"

“Sorry, I’ve got to be on the bridge in fifteen.” He marched towards the locker room, already striping off his jumpsuit. “Tell Fiddle I’ll take his maintenance shift next week. And, if you get done early, don’t wait for me.”

The door slid shut before Mitts could shout a ‘yes sir’ after him, but that was fine. Davijaan wasn’t a stickler for protocol when they weren’t in the field. Or in the air, as it were. He trusted his squad and they trusted him, and he knew Fiddle would grumble about the shift swap but get the inspection done quickly and completely.

Fourteen minutes later he had his armor on and was striding to the briefing room, trying not to speculate on why he’d been summoned. Maybe whatever this was wouldn’t take more than an hour. Maybe he’d even be back in time to take one of the ARC-170’s out, just for a few loops around the *Negotiator*'shull.

The door slid open just before he reached it, and Kote stepped out into the hall. His helmet was clipped to his belt, giving Davijaan a good look at the grim set of his jaw and the determined curve of his mouth. Unease curled cold in his stomach.

“Commander.”

“Marshal.”

Kote gave a sharp nod, and ushered Davijaan inside.

He didn’t let the formalities get to him. This was a formal briefing, after all. But, Kote had been distant since that mess with the 501st’s rogue ARC. Davijaan didn’t hold his anger against him, but it had been weeks, and Kote knew better than to fixate on a single death or a single betrayal or whatever it was about that whole disaster that still had him distracted; focused on something far away from the 212th, and Davijaan.

Maybe it was just that Rex was still distracted, and Fox wasn’t answering his messages.

“Sorry for the short notice,” said Kote, perfunctory. “The orders were only issued this morning.”

“What orders? What is this about?” he asked, removing his own helmet and glancing around the empty room. “Where is everyone?”

“General Kenobi will be joining us shortly.”

“Just the General?”

“Before he arrives, complete this.”

Kote passed him a datapad with a form already open. He skimmed the heading and almost dropped the ‘pad, and then took a deep breath and read through the whole thing, his grip tightening as he worked his way down to where High General Obi-Wan Kenobi and Marshal Commander CC-2224 had already signed off on the request. Only the line for his number and acknowledgement remained blank.

“I’m being transferred,” he said, flat.

“Only temporarily, but I need the paperwork properly filed so I can properly promote your second. Mitts, right?”

“Kote.” Davijaan set the ‘pad down on the table and met his brother’s gaze, deliberate. “What is going on?”

“I’ll give the General the honor of explaining the situation in full.” Kote’s eyes were bright with fury, tempered with a carefully rationed measure of vicious glee. Whatever was happening, he didn’t like it any more than Davijaan did, but already had some kind of plan in motion to ensure the outcome was to his advantage.

Davijaan glared his best if-you-don’t-stop-with-the-dramatics-I’m-going-to-punch-you-in-the-nose glare.

“In short,” Kote relented, not wanting to be punched in the nose, “you are on loan to General Quinlan Vos for a SF mission.”

The name sounded familiar, but Davijaan’s focus settled on SF. Special Forces. A clone officer was needed for a Special Forces mission, and of all the clone officers in the whole entire 3rd systems army, the one to be yanked out of their comfortable posting and dumped into an SF mess in the making was *Davijaan?* And they wanted him to work with—

“Wait.” He went cold as familiarity resolved into recognition. “Quinlan Vos. The traitor? *That* bastard?”

“You hear that Obi-Wan?” a cheerful voice interrupted. “*That bastard.* I have an admirer already.”

The datapad clattered to the table as Kote and Davijaan both snapped to attention, saluting the two Generals as they entered the room. Kenobi nodded politely to the formality. Quinlan Vos offered a salute of his own, mockingly perfect, and a too-wide smile.

Quinlan Vos, traitor to the Republic. Standing smiling on the bridge of the *Negotiator.*

He’d heard all about what happened when Vos went rogue. To this day Faie wouldn’t say a word, but plenty of his troops spread the stories. Davijaan tried not to gape, in shock or in fear.

Vos was either human or near human. He was almost… disappointingly normal. Or, as normal as Jedi got. He was wearing the plain brown robes Jedi preferred, lightsaber on his belt, locs hanging loose to the middle of his back. A yellow ribbon of a tattoo stretched across his nose and cheeks, a bright contrast to his dark skin. He had an inch or two on Kenobi, and almost a full head on Davijaan and Kote. When he crossed his arms Davijaan saw he was wearing black gloves.

When he dragged his attention from the gloves to look Vos in the eye, he found the traitor looking back.

“Ex-traitor, actually. It didn’t stick,” he said, as if he’d heard that moniker. Or maybe just read it on Davijaan’s face. Stars, he should have kept his helmet on.

“I’ve met the other one, so you must be CC-2237,” Vos continued. “My very own clone commander. Delighted to make your acquaintance.”

His smile was starting to look more like bared teeth. Davijaan swallowed hard.

Kenobi quite possibly saved his life by taking Vos by the elbow and firmly steering him to a chair.

“Honestly Quin,” Kenobi grumbled, seating himself primly. “Leave the poor man alone. You’ll have time to make friends on the trip. Quinlan Vos, Oddball. Oddball, Quinlan Vos.” He gestured between them. “Now, Cody, if you would.”

Kote and Davijaan exchanged a look, and Davijaan had to bite his tongue hard to keep from giggling hysterically as they took their seats.

Ex-traitor.

Davijaan tried not to think about all the implications of that.

Kote and Kenobi jumped right into the mission briefing, working off each other with practiced ease. They started with the failed Ringo Vinda campaign and ended with rumors of renewed attempts at biological warfare. Oddball and Vos were supposed to infiltrate the space station, slice into the databases, and collect whatever information they could find to either confirm or crush the rumors.

It was a necessary mission. Frighteningly necessary. Davijaan had read the reports on the Blue Shadow virus situation and knew with terrifying clarity that if the Seppies managed to produce a virus that specifically targeted clones they could decimate the GAR in a tenday.

It even made a sort of sense for Vos to be assigned to it. Presumably he knew how best to access Seppie space stations and Seppie databases, even if Davijaan personally wouldn’t trust a two-time double-crosser not to double-cross again. Hearing Kote read that part of the plan out loud gave him sudden insight to his brother’s rage.

What made absolutely no sense was why Davijaan was the unlucky officer assigned to watch ex-traitor Quinlan Vos’ back. He could definitely fly Vos to the station unnoticed and fly him back to safety fast, but so could a thousand other pilots in the 7th Sky Corps, and Davijaan was terrible at slicing and terrible at stealth work. His navigation and agility scores had barely been high enough to keep him in command track.

SF missions had the highest fatality rate in the GAR. It would just be him and Vos, no backup. This mission was urgent and dangerous, potentially deadly, potentially disastrous for the whole Republic, and someone had decided Davijaan was the best for the job.

The orders were already issued. The forms were already filled out. He was going to Ringo Vinda with General Vos, and if he didn’t make it back, well. That was what the chain of

command was for. He'd taught Mitts himself, he would be an excellent Flight Squad Commander.

"Any questions?" Kote asked.

Davijaan shook his head and filled in the final blank on the transfer request.

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Vos and Kenobi left as soon as the briefing was over. The door slid shut, and Davijaan pounced.

Kote was expecting it, or maybe resigned to it, and allowed Davijaan to take him by the shoulders and shake him good and hard.

"I cannot believe you," he hissed. "No warning?"

"I told you." Kote shrugged him off, face set like stone. "The orders—and Vos, for that matter—were unexpected. And urgent."

"Not even a note. Not even a damn note. The least I deserve is a warning when I'm marching to my death."

Kote was void of compassion. "If I can survive Kenobi, you can survive Vos. I believe in you."

Davijaan threw his hands up in defeat. "I hate you."

"I love you too."

"Can't believe I've kept my nose clean for three years only to be court-martialed for murdering my brother."

Kote's mask cracked, and a sliver of a smile slipped through. Something caught in Davijaan's throat, wondering if this would be the last time he saw it.

Don't think about it.

He cleared his throat and tried for a more playful tone. "Maybe I can survive Vos, but I don't know about the mission. What idiot decided a Flight Squad Commander would be just the officer to have on a SF job?"

"Me," said Kote.

Davijaan blinked.

"You see," said Kote, mild and false as the Coruscant sky, "our resident ex-traitor is not supposed to be on the field."

All of his earlier unease came flooding back, cold and heavy and smothering. “I couldn’t make that part make sense,” he said, low. “Why would they trust someone like that with a mission like this?”

“There hasn’t been a sighting of Dooku for over a month now.”

“Yes?” They’d lost track of Seppie Generals before, but never Dooku, and never for this long. It was making the rank and file nervous. “What does Dooku have to do with anything?”

“Apparently, Vos killed him.”

It took a moment for the full meaning of that statement to process.

Dooku was dead. Vos had killed him.

If Dooku was dead—

What that meant for the war was not lost on Davijaan, nor, he could see, on Kote. What came out of his mouth was, “I can understand how that would improve his standing, yes.”

“The Separatists are keeping this under wraps. I have no idea why the Republic decided to follow suit.” The Supreme Chancellor had the final say on what stayed need-to-know and what could be widely distributed, and Davijaan sometimes wondered if the man really understood that power. “Vos came crawling back to the Order a month ago. He had enough of playing Sith, and thought Dooku’s head would be an appropriate apology. He’s technically on probation. The only reason he’s on the field and not in a cell, as far as I understand it, is that the GAR is running short on Jedi.”

“Ah.” Comforting.

Kote acknowledged the implications with a grim nod. “I didn’t hear any of this from Kenobi. I got most of it from Wolffe, because General Koon’s been involved in the rehabilitation process. Kenobi won’t speak a word against Vos,” he said, lip curling slightly, disgusted. “They’re still friends, even now.”

Davijaan knew, even if his brother would die before he admitted it, that Kote didn’t give a damn about the Republic. But he very much gave a damn about betrayal.

“Vos caught up with us this morning with orders directly from the High Council. The mission objective, and also an order for Kenobi to assist in any way Vos requested. He requested a temporary commander. Kenobi told me to pick someone I trusted.”

Davijaan took that in for a moment. Turned the thought around in his head, trying to make it make sense. Slowly, he shook his head. “You trust me, sure, but—”

“Who else?”

“Someone with applicable training! Someone who can provide backup!”

“If Vos actually does his job, he won’t need backup! He was one of the most skilled Jedi in the Order, before he went rogue. He doesn’t need backup. He was assigned this mission solo, and he requested a temp commander of his own volition.” Kote tipped his chin up and met Davijaan’s eyes, as inescapable and unrelenting as the Kaminoan sea. “If he wants a watchdog so bad, then I’m going to damn well give him one.”

And with that, it made sense, and Davijaan’s throat went so dry he couldn’t swallow. “You want me to spy on a Jedi.”

“I want you to spy on a former Separatist officer and Sith apprentice who is potentially spying on us.”

Davijaan took a deep breath, and reminded himself about orders straight from the Jedi High Council. About the transfer form he’d just filled out and submitted. About the gleam in Kote’s eye that meant he already had a plan in motion.

“Alright,” he said, because he couldn’t say anything else. “Alright. I’ll keep an eye on Vos.”

Some of the tension eased out of Kote’s shoulders, and he looked almost apologetic. “If I had anyone else… I need Crys and Gregor here with me more than I want them out there with Vos.” Which was polite shorthand for, ‘you are expendable, they are not.’ Which he already knew. But it still stung, coming from Kote.

“It will be a short mission,” Kote said.

“I know.”

“All you have to do is keep an eye on who he’s in contact with. Don’t leave him alone between jumps. Don’t try to confront him either, if it comes to that, just relay what you see straight to me.”

“Got it.”

Kote reached out, and then drew his hand back, hesitant. He knew exactly what he was doing and exactly what he deserved—or didn’t deserve—but abruptly Davijaan didn’t care. He surged forward and gathered his brother up in a hug.

Both of them melted into it, holding on tight, and now Davijaan was glad he’d taken his helmet off because now he could bury his face in his brother’s neck and pretend this was just another ‘just in case’ hug before a battle. For all practical intents and purposes, it was.

After a time, Kote sighed, and pulled away. “Better go get packed. You’re leaving in an hour and thirteen minutes.”

I don’t want to, Davijaan didn’t say.

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Shoving his armor maintenance kit, hygiene kit, and spare undersuit in a pack took less than a minute. He knew Kote had given him the hour to say goodbye to his squad in person, and

issue his final orders.

Instead of racing back to Hangar 7, he sat, and set his wristcomm on his desk.

He knew better than to fly into this blind. He had access to Vos' old mission reports and he had GAR-wide rumors, but he wanted something more than that. Vos had been the General of the 120th for six months, early in the war. There were records. And, more than formal mission reports, there were eyewitnesses.

He hadn't spoken to CC-3990 since… Since command track, actually. They'd been assigned their first posts in the 3rd and 5th System Armies, respectively, so their leave never lined up, and they hadn't been friendly enough back on Kamino to keep in touch.

Still, Davijaan had his contact information saved, the same way he had all his former classmates' contact information saved. Just in case. And he'd never imagined this particular scenario in his mental list of 'just in case' scenarios, but he'd take discussing the living over discussing the dead any day. He found the link for a private comm-line and made the call.

In a flash of blue, 3990 appeared. He'd wanted to be called Faie back in command track. Davijaan did his best to smile, and hoped that preference hadn't changed. "Hello, Faie. It's been a while. How are you?"

Faie's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Oddball? Why are you contacting me?"

So 'Faie' was fine then. Asshole. "I just said it's been a while, maybe I'm checking in."

"It's been three years. And Kote is the one who checks in. Why are you contacting me?"

Davijaan bit his tongue on his first response. And his second. He debated throwing his comm across the room, but he really did want whatever info Faie had. He widened his smile. "You worked with General Vos, right?"

"You know the answer to that."

"What was he like?"

Faie regarded him in silence for a moment. "Have you got Neyo or someone standing behind you taking notes?"

Davijaan groaned and tipped forward to bury his face in his hands.

"Listen," he said, muffled, "this is not for a prank or blackmail or—or anything. I'm…" Like Dooku's death, Vos' return to the Order was not public knowledge. He wanted to discuss this openly, but it seemed he wasn't going to get anything he wanted when it came to this assignment. "The details are confidential, but I've been transferred to another post and my mission involves Quinlan Vos. I just wanted to ask you—what was he like to work with?"

"Hm." Another few seconds of suspicious squinting, and then the firm line of Faie's mouth softened just a bit. "About time you got a real command post, Odds."

“Flight Squad Commander is a real post! That is a real position! That I have held for three very real years!”

“Sure. So, what? You need info? Most of the details were on my reports.”

“I need the stuff you left off the reports. I was serious, asking what he was like to work with.”

“That’s it?”

Davijaan nodded.

Faie smirked. “Well. In a word, frustrating.”

Damn it.

“He always had something to say about GAR structure, or SOP, or clones. He was weird about clones. I didn’t realize it until after I started working with Yoda, but Vos never let himself be alone in a room with more than a squad at a time. Preferred one-on-one meetings to bridge briefings. Or maybe that was just part of his usual paranoia.”

“Paranoia? A Jedi?” Granted, he’d only ever worked with Kenobi and Skywalker. They weren’t paranoid so much as they were dutifully pessimistic. He would have thought it would be hard to be paranoid when you were one of the most powerful beings in the galaxy.

“Vos was the most paranoid person I’ve ever known. Though…” Some of Faie’s sudden good humor faded. “The more I think about it, the more I think he had reason to be. You know he was some kind of Jedi SpecOps before the war? He was dangerous. Not the way most Jedi are dangerous; the way we are. The way you have to be when you live your whole life waiting for that one lucky shot.”

He shrugged, hummed noncommittally.

“You should know that, if you’re going after Vos.”

Davijaan flinched. “I’m not—”

“Don’t,” Faie cut him off, sharp. “I know Vos is a problem. As long as he is working with the enemy we’re all at risk. I understand.” Some of the smile came back, sour. “I don’t know what kind of team they’ve put together, but you should all be aware Vos likely doesn’t trust his new friends any more than he trusted his old ones. He’ll be expecting to be stabbed in the back.”

“I… I’ll keep that in mind.” And, it did make a certain kind of sense, for someone who betrayed his people to expect to be betrayed by them in turn.

“He wasn’t a bad General,” Faie said, defensive. “He complained about SOP, but he followed it. Didn’t know what to do with a battalion at first, but it only took him one battle to figure it out. Don’t underestimate him.”

“I won’t.” Thinking about being stuck alone on a ship with a paranoid bastard who was weird about clones for a week, or two weeks, or however long this mission lasted was starting to make him feel—so he didn’t think. It was always better to have the info than to not have the info. Always.

The question the entire GAR had been speculating on for the last two years was still unasked. Davijaan hesitated, because as far as he knew nobody had been able to get even speculation out of Faie, but he was leaving in less than an hour. He had to try.

“Do you have any idea why he went rogue?”

Faie regarded him in silence, the sharp blue lines of his face severe.

“The Jedi call it Falling,” he said. He shook his head. “No, I don’t. I never spoke to Vos about anything other than the war. And, when it happened, I wasn’t close enough to hear what Dooku said to him. I tried to follow when their fight moved off the field, get in range to take a shot, but one of them pinned me with the Force. Stuck my feet to the ground.”

Something angry and aching twisted his features. “I don’t recommend pissing off a Force user. It felt like being knee deep in cold stone.”

Davijaan held himself very still, and did not shiver.

“I thought, when Vos Fell, he was going to kill us all. He could have. But he didn’t. He just left, with Dooku, and the droids all stopped shooting and marched away behind them. And that was that.”

Between the reports and the rumors, Davijaan knew Vos hadn’t fought many battles during his time with the Separatists. When he had, he’d led from the rear. He’d disrupted supply lines and spied on GAR movements and kidnapped politicians, but he hadn’t gone after clones with the same glee as Ventress and Maul.

Vos had hunted Jedi. Even managed to kill a few. The death of General Krell had almost cost them Umbara, and Davijaan didn’t want to know what would have happened if the 327th hadn’t arrived in time to provide support.

Maybe Vos preferred the challenge of an enemy who could fight back.

Davijaan cleared his throat. “So he doesn’t kill for the fun of it? That is reassuring, thank you.”

Faie scoffed.

“If the best that can be said about Vos is that he won’t stab me on sight, I’ll take it.”

“Only if you sneak up on him.”

“Same rules as with siblings, then?”

Faie didn’t laugh, but he stopped sneering long enough to roll his eyes, and Davijaan counted that as a win.

Reluctantly, he shifted his focus from the comm to the chrono. “I’ve got to be on a ship in twenty,” he said, standing and taking the comm with him. “Thank you for the help.” However begrudgingly it had been given.

“Hm.” Faie frowned, and then sighed. “Don’t die.”

“I’ll do my best.” He exchanged a nod with his former classmate, and ended the call.

Throwing the comm and his personal ‘pad into the pack, he took inventory of what was left of his quarters.

The bunk, the desk, and the closet. The packs of cards and dice Wolffe periodically gifted him that sat untouched on one side of his desk. The book Kote had borrowed from Kenobi about passenger ships that he’d sort of skimmed. The extra ration bars he kept in a drawer.

A bright woven band was coiled next to the cards. Fiddle had made it for him out of orange and yellow and green and blue thread. Davijaan thought there was supposed to be a pattern, but he’d never been able to make it out. He wasn’t sure what the point of the thing was, but he’d worn it wrapped around his wrist under his vambrace for every battle since he’d received it.

He’d just as soon toss the cards and dice as use them, gifts from Wolffe or not, and Kenobi would track down his book eventually. Rations were rations and could go to whoever got this room next.

He took his left vambrace off and wrapped the band around his wrist twice, tucking in the ends and closing the vambrace over it. He hefted his pack and left.

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By 1300, Davijaan was working his way through Hangar 3 to where Vos’ ship was docked. The transfer notice would be waiting for Mitts when he got off shift, along with a personal message with his final orders and advice. Pick a good second, mostly. Having someone you trusted to watch your back meant everything in a fight. He had no doubt that the first thing Mitts would do with his new power would be to promote Fiddle.

Theoretically, he might be back at his old post in a tenday and this would have been a whole lot of disruption for a whole lot of nothing. But that thought was staying firmly theoretical.

Vos’ ship wasn’t hard to find. It was a light freighter, a VCX-00 or VCX-100 it looked like, with a little VCX series auxiliary fighter docked between the main engines. Something for travel, and something for stealth. Perfect for this mission.

The hatch was open, so he made his way up the gangplank. Standing just outside, he called, “General Vos?” His voice echoed faintly in the empty hold.

No response. He’d better wait until Vos got here to board.

He turned around and ran smack into a broad chest, where it had appeared soundlessly directly behind him.

Davijaan managed to strangle his instinctual shriek, took a stumbling step back, tripped over the lip of the hatch, and fell flat on his back in the hold, armor clattering hollow against the metal floor.

“Did you need me for something, Commander?” Vos asked, ever so sweetly. Apparently he wasn’t just a traitor, he was also the kind of CO who liked to make his subordinates jump. Noted.

Davijaan scrambled to his feet with as much dignity as he could manage, hefting his pack and scowling at the inside of his helmet. At least he’d learned that lesson quickly. “No sir. Ready for departure when you are, sir.”

Vos brushed past him and made for the cockpit. Davijaan followed.

Sprawling comfortably in the pilot’s chair, Vos got to work on the pre-flight checks with a focus Davijaan found somewhat reassuring. When he tried to take the copilot’s chair he was waved off. “You can go,” said Vos, mild. “Pick an empty cabin, settle in, relax. It’s going to be a long flight.”

Davijaan blinked. It wasn’t far to Ringo Vinda, only two jumps, somewhere between twelve and thirteen hours. If that was long to Vos then Davijaan wanted to know what he thought of the typical travel time between campaigns. “You don’t… want a co-pilot?”

“Not really. I may not have a genetically modified brain, but I can calculate a jump just fine.”

Davijaan wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he retreated from the cockpit to find the cabins.

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He picked the cabin farthest from the one Vos had claimed, stowed his kit, and wandered around the ship, familiarizing himself with the layout. It was indeed a 100 series model, he discovered when he stuck his head into the engine room. The latest on the market.

Takeoff was smooth, but the jump to hyperspace rattled through a ship this small. He felt odd sitting in his cabin through the whole process, but technically a copilot wasn’t necessary for a VCX. Just, recommended. But maybe Vos just didn’t want an unknown in his cockpit. Davijaan could understand that. Maybe he had an astromech stashed under the console he preferred to work with.

Or maybe ‘weird about clones’ was an understatement.

Once they were in hyperspace and he wasn’t waiting for Vos to change his mind and order him up to the cockpit, Davijaan relaxed. He ate a ration bar, and made up the bunk, and for lack of anything better to fill the time re-read the mission brief. It held the same orders it had that morning.

Maybe Vos would let him stay in the ship, and go into the station alone. Though, he reminded himself with a grimace, Kote wouldn't like Vos going anywhere alone. He couldn't exactly send coded messages while they were in hyperspace, but alone in a Seppie station? If Vos told him to stay on the ship he'd have to try and come up with an excuse to follow inside.

He spent most of the afternoon sitting in the cabin, pondering possible excuses and despairing over his suitability as a spy, annoyed with Kote and annoyed with himself and especially annoyed with Vos for causing this mess in the first place.

In the early evening the ship shuddered again, vibrations buzzing in his back teeth as they entered realspace. Again he waited to be ordered to the cockpit, but after ten minutes the ship shuddered its way back into hyperspace.

After that he gave up. He stripped out of his armor and lay in the bunk and stared up at the ceiling, mind carefully blank, and waited to fall asleep. They'd arrive at Ringo Vinda in another eight hours. He could worry about Vos when he actually had to deal with him.

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Davijaan woke in the middle of the night with the lurch of the ship dropping out of hyperspace. He blinked a bit, and rolled onto the cold side of the pillow.

And then sat straight up in his bunk, panicked.

The jump was supposed to last eight hours; the blinking chrono on the desk said it'd barely been five. Either another ship had pulled them out of hyperspace or something was wrong with the hyperdrive. There should be an alarm going off. Vos should be yelling for him to get his ass to the guns or the engine room.

He scrambled out of bed and shoved his feet in his boots, not bothering with armor.

When he came crashing into the cockpit Vos looked up from the console, surprised. No lights were flashing that should not be flashing. There was nothing but stars visible through the viewshield. A starmap was open and the console computer was on, everything ready to start calculating a jump.

"Oh, hi again. Did the shaking wake you? Sorry about that." Vos winced in sympathy. "You can go back to sleep. We've still got a few more jumps to make, we'll probably get there tomorrow around 1700 hours. I'll come find you when we're an hour out."

"Sir…" Davijaan swallowed hard. "It's only two jumps to Ringo Vinda."

Vos' eyes flashed; his lip curled. Davijaan flinched, but just as suddenly as Vos' face had twisted up it smoothed out, erasing his anger like it had never existed.

"My mistake," he said, calm. "Must have gotten turned around somewhere. You know how it is. All it takes is reading one starmap upside down." He chuckled, smiling at Davijaan like they were both in on the joke. As if reading a starmap wrong and getting so far off course it required several extra jumps to correct could ever be a joke.

Davijaan smiled back. *I hate it when Kote is right.* “I can plot a new course for you, no problem.”

“That won’t be necessary, Commander. I’m sure I can manage.”

“If you say so, sir.” He gave a crisp salute, turned on his heel, and marched out of the cockpit.

The doors slid shut behind him, and Davijaan ran.

They were in realspace. The next jump hadn’t been calculated yet. He didn’t have much but he did have time. He had time. He just had to—

Vos caught him in his cabin, as his hand closed around his comm. He didn’t waste breath on screaming; braced himself as he was hauled away from his pack and slammed into the wall, Vos’ shoulder and forearm pinning him with bruising strength. He tried to force his trembling hand to work, to at least turn the comm on—

“Oh, come on. Don’t do that.”

Vos took a step back and for a second Davijaan could breathe again, the weight across his chest gone, and then—

He choked as something cold curled around his neck; a steady invisible pressure coiling down around his torso and spiraling along his shoulders and arms and hands, forcing his fist open. He tried to kick and the pressure rushed down, encasing his legs, and Faie was wrong. Faie was wrong this wasn’t stone this was ice, a current of cold water flowing smoothly under his skin, freezing him solid inch by inch.

The comm drifted up and out of his hand, hovering in the space between his desperation and Vos’ fury.

“I was hoping we could have this conversation when we arrived, but you just had to poke around the cockpit, didn’t you. What, you don’t trust me?” Vos’ eye twitched, and the comm crumpled like wet paper. Davijaan bit his tongue to cut off a sob.

Vos was going to kill him. Vos was going to kill him right now and throw his body into space and he’d always known he was going to die in this war but he thought he was going to be with his siblings he was supposed to die in battle with his siblings and he didn’t want—

“Listen. Are you listening to me?”

Davijaan opened his mouth and no sound came out. He swallowed. Forced out a low, “Yes.”

“Good.” Vos’ brown eyes were as cold and unforgiving as the ice in Davijaan’s lungs.

“The Ringo Vinda mission is a cover. Our real mission is off the record. We are operating under a communications blackout. That is all you need to know. And all you need to do, is follow my orders. Can you do that? Can you be a good clone and follow orders until this is over?”

A hot spark of rage cut through the chill of his fear. Killing him was one thing, but expecting him to shut his mouth and go along with this shit?

“Fuck you,” he spat. “I am not a fucking *traitor.”*

Faster than he could follow, Vos lunged and grabbed the neck of his shirt, shoving him hard into the wall. *“Neither am I.”*

Davijaan tried to breathe, tried to look anywhere other than Vos’ face, tried to make *neither am I* make sense.

“You Fell,” he said, a question or an accusation he didn’t know. “You killed Jedi. You fought on the other side of this war for two years. What part of that wasn’t betrayal?”

For a split second Vos’ eyes flickered yellow, the same bright shade as his tattoo. He laughed, harsh and humorless. “Good question. I’ll get back to you when I have an answer. Smarter than you look, aren’t you?”

Davijaan grit his teeth. He didn’t have the courage to glare, but he held Vos’ gaze.

“Everything I do, I do on behalf of the Jedi Order. On behalf of *my family,”* he said. “This mission is for them. Every mission is for them.”

Faie had said something about Vos being a Jedi SpecOps. About the way he expected to be stabbed in the back.

And, Kenobi was still his friend. Even now.

The enormity of what he’d been dragged into crashed over him like a wave. “You were…” He wanted to scream. He wanted to kick and hit and scream and fight his way out of this crushing cold. “You were spying on the Separatists.”

Vos raised an eyebrow, neither confirming nor denying. “I was doing my job. I *am* doing my job, and I’m trying to do things the nice way for once. It’s going to be really damn annoying if I have to lock you in the brig and kidnap a different clone.”

Maybe he wasn’t going to die. Maybe he could follow orders and get through this mission and go back to his brother and back to his squad and back to his stolen time in space. He let himself go limp; breathed slowly in and out. “What do you want a clone for, sir?”

“Oh believe me, I don’t. I *need* a clone.”

“Please, I just want to know—”

Vos shook him, one sharp jerk before he was shoved back against the wall. “I’ll tell you what you need to know when you need to know it. You don’t trust me? Well I don’t trust you either, soldier,” he sneered. “Especially not with this mission.”

Davijaan held Vos’ gaze, steady, and watched the shift from disdain to calculation.

“There is something wrong with you,” he said at last, grip on Davijaan’s collar tightening. “With all of you clones. Something cold and creeping in your minds, your souls. The rest of the Order prefers to ignore the fact that you're weapons because you bleed red like the rest of us, but *I* know you were created for a purpose.”

Abruptly, he let go. The cold encasing Davijaan receded in a rush, and he fell to his knees, gasping.

“Now, Commander. Are you going to follow my orders?”

Davijaan kept his head down, and nodded, and didn’t say, *I don’t want to.*

***

Vos kept a heavy hand on the back of his neck all the way to the cockpit. He shoved him into the copilot’s chair and thrust a datastick into his hands. “You want to fly this ship so bad? Here. Calculate the next jump.”

Davijaan plugged the stick into the console computer, read the coordinates, and cold washed over him all over again.

“Sir, why… Why?”

“Because,” Vos slumped into the pilot’s chair, brow furrowed and gaze distant, “the answer to our biological warfare question is not on Ringo Vinda.”

Davijaan swallowed down his fear and plotted a course for Kamino.

Chapter 2

Vos kept him in the cockpit through the next two jumps. He had Davijaan help him navigate through the asteroid field, but only spoke to issue curt orders. While they were in hyperspace they sat in silence, Vos checking the autopilot every hour or so.

Vos was still angry. Or maybe scared. He sat still as stone, eyes straight ahead, but he was aware of Davijaan the same way Davijaan was aware of him. Shoulders tense, body angled slightly forward, ready to run or fight at the slightest excuse. Davijaan focused on breathing, on staying still and quiet and not giving him that excuse.

A few hours into the second jump he levered himself out of his chair and grabbed Davijaan's arm to yank him out of his, and escorted him to the gally. They brought ration bars and water back to the cockpit, and ate bathed in the blue-white glow of the blurring stars. Davijaan kept his conscious thoughts to a minimum and ate and drank what he was given.

When they were two hours out, Vos checked the autopilot once again and stood, reaching over to drag Davijaan out of his chair as well.

It wasn't until they were in the hold, the airlock looming, that Davijaan planted his feet and hauled them both to a stop. "No! No, I said I would follow your orders! I said—"

Vos growled and picked him up by the collar and sat him down hard on a crate. "Calm down. And sit still."

Davijaan calmed down and sat still, stealing one last glance at the airlock before he forced his focus back to Vos. He was digging around inside another crate, grumbling under his breath, and pulling out… armor?

Davijaan watched wide-eyed as Vos laid out a full set of Phase II clone armor, painted with the standard slate grey pattern of the Kamino Security Force, the logo clear and crisp on the pauldron. "Put this on," he said.

Davijaan put it on, trying not to speculate on how Vos had got it and if it had come off a dead body or a spare rack. No telltale off-white patches, and it didn't smell like blood or rot, but the stench might just be covered over by the paint fumes. There were scratches and scuffs like the armor had been worn, but the paint was definitely new.

Fully kitted out, he sat back on the crate, helmet in his lap. Vos looked him up and down and gave a sharp nod. They did a quick communications check of the helmet comm and HUD, and then Vos sat down cross legged on the metal decking and emptied the contents of a belt pouch into his lap.

"You are going to do two things for me. You are going to access the computer network," he said, handing Davijaan a code cylinder, "and you are going to plant some bugs in some offices."

He showed Davijaan the tiny circular bugs, how to attach them and turn on the masking, and then gathered them back into the bag. Davijaan tucked the cylinder and the bag of bugs into his own belt pouch, watching Vos discreetly as he did.

The General was still tense, still on edge, but not angry. Serious and focused like even the most volatile of soldiers got before a battle. This mission was important to him. Davijaan couldn't risk ruining it.

"Sir?" he ventured, cautious. Vos raised an eyebrow. "Sir, I'm not—I'm not a slicer. I never had any counterintelligence training. I don't know—"

"Don't worry about that. I'll be giving you step by step instructions the whole way. Just do what I say, and you'll be fine."

He swallowed his protests, and nodded. Something amused and exhausted crossed Vos' face. "Believe me, if I could do this myself I would. Do you know how annoying it is to have to outsource a job like this? It's pretty damn annoying. Unfortunately, this facility is one of the special few in the whole galaxy that incorporates bioscanners into their standard security setup. Even if I could fool the bioscanners, I can't misdirect that many people for that long. Speaking of."

He rose and went back to the armor crate, and lifted out a small white chest, similar in shape and size to an armor cleaning kit. Davijaan didn't get a look inside but Vos dug around and pulled out a thin silver bracelet, with a flat black something attached in the middle. Looked almost like one of the bugs.

"Left wrist," he demanded. Davijaan hesitated, and then held out his left arm.

Vos removed his vambrace and rolled up the sleeve of his undersuit, and—and abruptly his hands stilled, and he stared down at the woven band, orange and yellow vivid against Davijaan's brown skin.

He looked up and met Davijaan's eyes. Surprised, and maybe a bit guilty. Davijaan kept his face blank and stared back. Vos opened his mouth, and closed it. He looked back down at the band and brushed a finger over an unraveling thread.

Davijaan wanted to tell him not to fucking touch it.

Gently, Vos untucked the end and unwound it from Davijaan's wrist, fastened and tightened the bracelet, and then re-wound and re-tucked the band exactly as it had been. He graciously let Davijaan fix his own sleeve and vambrace.

"To scramble your tracker," he said, sort of soft, sort of defensive, when everything was neatly concealed once more. He scratched the back of his neck. "We'll be coming out of hyperspace soon. I need… A few minutes. Alone." He pointed Davijaan to the ladder.

He went straight back to the cockpit and strapped himself into the copilot's chair, uncomfortable in his borrowed armor, already sore across the shoulder blades from the way a new set pulled. That was fine. Nothing he couldn't work through.

***

Vos was gone for longer than a few minutes. They were just about to enter their window for the jump—Davijaan weighing the pros and cons of going to find him or just making the jump himself—when he finally slumped into the pilot's chair.

The tension had bled out of him completely, leaving him eerily calm. Like Kote, actually, after a long day of hard fighting. Maybe he'd spent that hour alone in the hold punching something.

"What's your name?"

Davijaan twitched. "What?"

"Your name," repeated Vos, staring straight out the viewshield. "It's Odd—something?"

"My name is Oddball."

Vos glanced at him, eyes narrowed. "Don't lie to me."

Davijaan grit his teeth, and fought to keep his voice even. "You may call me Oddball, or '37, or Commander. Sir."

"Huh." Vos studied him for a moment, suspicious, and then turned his attention back to the viewshield. "Fine, Commander," he said, and took the ship out of autopilot.

***

They left the VCX in orbit on the dark side of the planet and took the auxiliary fighter down through atmo. It had been heavily modified, and fitted with a high grade cloaking device. Davijaan very much wanted to ask about the cloaking device, and if that was maybe possibly something that could become GAR standard in the near future, but didn't dare ask Vos about anything other than the mission.

In a fighter this small a copilot would just get in the way, so Davijaan sat in the back and watched the grey clouds part around the nose of the ship, and listened to the thunder over the hum of the engine. They reached the surface with the rain.

He hadn't been back to Kamino since he shipped out to Geonosis. He'd never expected to be back. Watching the storm and the sea from inside this little ship felt odd, but familiar. Like staring at trickling raindrops through the window in his common room, except the window was too big, and too close.

They skimmed over the waves for barely a minute before Vos brought the ship under the water. Davijaan took a deep breath as the last of the sky disappeared, looking away from the viewshield and focusing on the interior of the ship. There was a surprising amount of seating in here. Could probably transport a whole squad.

He took a few more deep breaths and then put his helmet on, double checking the waterproofing seals. Just in case.

Vos dropped him off at an abandoned landing pad at the north side of the cloning facility. None of the cameras were broken, but one had been knocked askew by a storm and never fixed. An uncharacteristic oversight.

Davijaan did not run on the rain-slick duracrete. He made it across without any alarms going off, plugged in the code cylinder, and stepped inside before the hissing doors were fully open.

He was standing in a white hall. It was empty, but apart from that it could have been any other stretch of white hall he had marched through as a cadet. He shivered, glad Vos couldn't see him.

"*Take a left,"* said the voice in his ear. Davijaan took a left, pulling up the facility's blueprints on his HUD and finding himself in the miles and miles of glowing halls. Vos had the same blueprints open on the ship's console, and the feed from the helmet cam, and as Davijaan advanced towards the center of the facility he received a series of directions, suggestions, and instructions.

Some were appreciated, some were not. Davijaan knew how to walk in camera blindspots, thanks. But he would have missed the first bioscanner if Vos hadn't told him it was coming up.

It took about ten minutes to get out of the disused wing and into the central hub of the building. The first trooper he passed was in the same Kamino Security grey. They exchanged a nod, both walking with purpose. He nodded to a few more KSF troopers and to one nervous shiny who hesitated to return the gesture. When he got close to the main thoroughfare Davijaan came to a halt and hovered, listening to the rhythms in the thud of passing boots.

"*Getting close. It's the middle of the changeover, so if you want to wait—"*

It wasn't an order yet, so Davijaan ignored Vos and slid out of the hall to fall in behind a platoon of KSF. They were just coming off shift, so their formation was just that slightest bit sloppy; their focus on getting to their mess hall and their barracks and not on their straggler.

"*Good,"* said Vos, surprised. *"That was good. Now, for the next turn—"*

Vos offered suggestions until he realized his poor dumb clone did at least know how to get around crowded areas unnoticed, and then he shut up and let Davijaan focus on attaching himself to one group after another. It wasn't hard, he just found a platoon or squad heading in the right direction and assessed the mood and matched it, dragging his feet with those coming off shift and marching sharply in step with those going on. He didn't have to open a single door himself.

Nobody said a word to him. That part he'd forgotten about; the part where clones didn't speak in the public areas of the facility. In command track things had been a bit more lenient.

When he split off down the hall that led to the office wing he crossed paths with his first Kaminoan. A lab tech, focused on the 'pad in their hands. Davijaan's stride didn't falter. The tech didn't so much as glance at him.

For the first time, it occurred to him that Vos' plan might actually work.

These halls were empty. It was the middle of the night on Kamino, and while the facility never slept, the Kaminoans did. Davijaan passed another lab tech and a secretary, both too tired and in too much of a hurry to leave to pay attention to him. Afterall, if there was a clone in here, then obviously it had security access for reasons above their pay grade.

Vos directed him through the maze, and Davijaan was just starting to get the logic of the layout when he turned a corner and found himself standing in front of the unassuming door of a private office. The plaque on the wall read, in both Kaminoan and Basic: Doctor Nala Se, Chief Medical Scientist.

"*Here we are,"* said Vos, pleased and anticipatory.

It took everything Davijaan had not to choke on bile.

He took a deep breath and forced his feet to bring him right up to that door. It slid open for the code cylinder, and, mind carefully blank, he stepped inside.

The office was large and bare and plain, the walls and floor the same shades of white and grey as the rest of the facility. It was dominated by a desk and console. The lights were still on, stark and white and blinding.

There were no cameras. He hadn't known he was looking for them until he didn't find them.

"*Just turn on the console and plug in that cylinder. I'll do the rest."*

Davijaan did as he was told, taking a step back from the desk as soon as the green light on the end of the cylinder stopped blinking. Vos hummed, satisfied. Suddenly he could breathe again.

He stood a ways back from the desk and watched the hall through the open door while Vos muttered on the other side of the comm. He didn't know how long this would take. Surely no more than a few minutes.

He shifted his feet. Took another look around the office. The open door was making him uncomfortable. What was the point of leaving it open anyway? Anybody could walk past. Stupid mistake.

He closed the door, wincing at the noise. He walked a circuit around the perimeter, watching the light and shadow shift across his boots. Vos' muttering was becoming increasingly agitated. Maybe that meant he was almost done. This armor was going to leave bruises on his shoulder blades.

Maybe Vos would let him fly on the way back to the fleet. He'd never flown any of the VCX series. Corellian freighters were pretty well known for having speed on par with Republic fighters, and—

"*Do you need suggestions for where to put the bugs?"*

Davijaan twitched, and bit his tongue hard. “No sir,” he managed after a second, and dug the bag of bugs out of his belt pouch, mentally berating himself. Then again, Vos hadn’t explicitly said which offices he was supposed to bug.

He wasn’t sure how many offices he had in his future and didn’t want to interrupt the renewed muttering, so he shook about a quarter of the bugs into his hand and placed them carefully around the desk. Spots that weren’t touched often, but still close enough to where Dr. Se would presumably sit to get good readings.

“*Well, shit.”*

He paused as he tucked the pouch away. “Sir?”

“*Could there be a separate network? But why would they… Damn. Alright Commander, we’re done here. Tidy up and clear out.”*

The cylinder went back in his belt pouch, the console was turned off, and Davijaan stepped through the hissing door and back into the maze of white halls. Only it was worse now because he knew where he was going, and he was having a harder and harder time thinking about something other than getting caught. He couldn’t focus on anything other than where he was and what he was doing because then he would miss something important, but he couldn’t focus on where he was or what he was doing because then he would start laughing and probably die.

And really all this just went to show he was the worst possible pick for a mission like this because he was so stuck in his own head that when he rounded the corner outside Chief Medical Officer Dr. Nala Se’s office, he ran smack into the doctor herself.

She made a low sound of outrage, neck arching. He took a stumbling step back and snapped to attention, executing a perfect salute. “My apologies, ma’am,” he said, voice even, and then turned on his heel to march in the opposite direction.

The lights were on. The lights in her office were still on, and if anybody in this facility was going to work late it would be—and he hadn’t—*Vos* hadn’t—

“Stop.”

Vos was static in his ear. He stopped, and turned.

“Ma’am?”

“Who authorized you to be in this wing?”

“... Captain CC-7721, ma’am. I was delivering a report to the research lab.”

Her eyes narrowed. He didn’t blame her, he wouldn’t have believed him either.

“The research lab closed two hours ago. Identification, clone.”

Mechanically, he offered up his left arm. She unhooked a small scanner from her belt.

“*What are you doing?*”

Dr. Se gripped his arm, angling the scanner over his wrist.

“*Run!*”

Davijaan shoved her off and ran.

From a distance he registered her furious shout, his focus on the rapid directions Vos relayed. A right, and a left. Another left. A long hall of curves but no corners. Third door, and he burst out of the office wing and back into the central hub. A platoon of KSF was already sprinting towards him.

Shift change was over. The halls were empty except for the advancing platoon. But he had a head start, and the voice in his ear, and Davijaan was good at running. He was very *very* good at running, and terror always lent him new speed.

“*Get outside. Just get out of the facility, and I’ll find you.*”

Vos didn’t let him retrace his steps. Vos steered him down a direct route to the closest exit, voice calm and even and grating, KSF less than a hall’s length behind him.

He wanted it to be Kote in his ear, or Wolffe, or even Mitts. But maybe if Vos got him out of this alive Davijaan could forgive him for being him.

The halls blurred. The stamp of boots and the static of the comm mingled with his own harsh breath. They were shouting for him to halt and surrender. He would have laughed if he’d had the breath to spare.

He gained some distance with shortcuts; narrow halls that bottlenecked the platoon. He never checked over his shoulder but they never got close enough to grab at him. He didn’t realize he’d reached the doors until he was slamming the code cylinder into the dataport and lurching outside into the rain.

He was on the south side of the facility. A small but well lit landing pad with a shiny little skiff docked. Some higherup’s personal dock. No Vos.

He stumbled to a stop as it hit him just how stupid it was to expect Vos to be waiting.

“I’m outside,” he said, hoarse, standing frozen in front of the open door. The shouting behind him abruptly cut off as they realized they had him trapped. “I’m outside, what do I do? What do I—”

“*Get to the edge. I’m almost there.*”

Skirting around the skiff, ignoring the renewed demands for his surrender, Davijaan forced his feet to bring him to the edge of the landing pad.

The sea was as grey as the sky. As grey as the rain, as grey as the duracrete. He stood on the edge and he watched the sea and he watched the sky and he shook rain off his visor and he

waited, and waited, and waited, each second dragging longer than the last, until the first damming screech of armor against metal as the platoon reached the skiff.

“They’re going to catch me,” burst out, unbidden, and he hated his inability to hide or control his own panic. “Vos, they’re going—They’re going to—”

“*Can you swim?”*

“Can I—What?”

“*Can. You. Swim.”*

He swallowed. “Yes sir.”

“*Go over the edge.”*

“What?”

Vos growled. *“I said go over the edge. Now.”*

“But—”

“*Jump, Commander!”*

Davijaan jumped.

‘17 had known it was dangerous how much he hated the sea. When they learned to swim in their kit he made Davijaan go in first and get out last; made him swim past the buoys marking the boundaries of safe water. His punishments were always swimming laps. Kote had gotten into a screaming fight with ‘17 the first time Davijaan had been shoved off the edge of the marching ground and told to tread water until the training session was over.

‘17 had won that fight, like he’d won all of his and Kote’s fights, and every time they’d had a session outside Davijaan knew there was a chance he’d spend it treading water.

As he sank, he was grateful for every minute of the hours upon hours ‘17 had forced him to spend in the sea. He closed his eyes and relaxed and let his breathing even out, pushing his panic away to deal with later. He was fine. It was just water. He could swim for hours if he had to. He might have to. That was fine.

He didn’t try to swim to the surface. They would be watching, back on the landing pad. That was fine. His helmet was sealed, the waterproofing of his undersuit would last a few minutes. He could drift with the current until he was under the facility.

As his armor dragged him down and the cold pressed heavy against him, Davijaan reminded himself he was going to get a hug after this. A very long, very warm hug.

Except he wasn’t, because Kote wasn’t here.

Kote wasn't here. Wolffe wasn't here. His squad wasn't here. It was just Davijaan, sinking alone into the sea. Because there was no way for Vos to locate him with his tracker signal scrambled.

With that realization, his eyes snapped open. He started kicking, frantic, a sudden surge of desperation pushing him towards the surface, the first trickle of water working its way under his collar and down the back of his neck. The world beyond his visor was a grey so dark it was almost black; the sea was grey and the sky was grey and his armor was grey too and even if he was treading water at the surface would Vos be able to see him?

Vos said he would find him. Vos said all he had to do was get out of the facility and he'd find him, but what if—What if—

Something warm wrapped around his waist. It felt solid and steady, like being held in someone's arms, like that hoped for hug, and he thought maybe he was imagining it until he started rising.

Swiftly he was drawn up and out of the sea. He gasped as he broke the surface, and then kept rising until his feet were dangling over the waves.

Lightning flashed, bright enough to cut through the grey. In the white-blue blaze he saw Jedi General Quinlan Vos, hovering parallel with him, arms outstretched towards him.

Davijaan was drawn forward and set gently on a solid surface in front of Vos. The warmth abruptly released him, leaving him trembling. They weren't hovering, they were standing on the auxiliary fighter, the cloaking perfectly reflecting the sea except for the open overhead hatch.

Vos shoved him through the hatch, jumping down after him and throwing himself into the pilot's chair. Davijaan strapped himself in for the flight back to the VCX, muscle memory taking over as he realized he had both hands free. He'd lost the code cylinder. Maybe it was still sinking down to join his batchmates.

Vaguely he was aware of the fighter docking with the VCX, and of climbing down the ladder and being guided to sit on a crate, but most of his mind was still stuck on the code cylinder. Trying to remember when he'd lost it, and trying not to wonder if there would be consequences for losing it.

And then a warm hand released the helmet seal and pulled it off his head and all the panic he'd been holding back flooded his body because he needed—he needed that helmet he was going to drown without his helmet he—

"Hey, calm down. Just helping you get this off. Hold—"

But he wasn't in the water he was in the VCX, and Vos was *touching his armor*—

"Don't fucking *touch me,"* he snapped, shoving Vos off. And then ducked, biting his tongue hard enough to taste blood.

… It occurred to him, warily watching Vos sit on the floor in the far corner, laying his open hands on his knees, that his new CO hadn’t actually hit him the night before. Hadn’t even threatened to. His back was sore from being shoved into the wall, but what were some sore muscles to a broken nose?

Slowly, he stripped out of the rest of the armor, stacking it neatly on the floor. He would let it dry and then pack it back into the crate. His undersuit was damp around the cuffs and collar and he wanted to change out of that too, but Vos was still here, watching Davijaan as nervously as Davijaan was watching him.

He cleared his throat, straightening his shoulders. “I’m fine, sir. Helmet was sealed properly, I didn’t even get my face wet.”

Hesitant, Vos nodded. “Can I get you anything? Something hot to drink?” Deliberate, he rose to his feet, keeping his hands visible. “I’ll poke around the galley while you get changed.”

“Why?”

Vos froze, halfway to the ladder. “Because it will help warm you up. And… And because you’re upset.”

“Why do you care?”

“Why shouldn't I care?”

Reasonably sure he wasn’t going to get hit, he said, “You didn't, before.”

“Ah.” Vos winced. “Yeah, well. That was, uh. That was a Force thing.”

“A Force thing?” General Kenobi had never done any such thing to any of his officers, blamed on the Force or not.

Vos’ shoulders slumped, sudden shame and exhaustion lining his face. “I wasn’t listening, before. I… The longer you focus inward, on your own emotions, the harder it is to focus outward, on the emotions of others. You can get—locked into a sort of echo chamber, where the only thing you can hear is your own fear.”

He regarded Davijaan evenly, silently, taking in the distance between them and the way he was not quite shivering in his undersuit, unwilling to pass Vos to get to the ladder. “I scared you pretty badly, didn’t I?”

Davijaan didn’t bother to give any kind of response.

“I’m not trying to—If I get like that again, I…” His eye twitched, frustration overtaking exhaustion. “It’s not anything to do with you,” he said at last.

And Davijaan knew it didn’t really matter in the end, whether it was anything to do with him or not, because he would have to deal with it either way. But he nodded and smiled a reassurance all the same.

Vos turned to the ladder. “I’ll be in the galley. Come find me when you’re ready, even if you don’t want that hot drink. We need to discuss a change in the plan.”

***

Davijaan hurried to get cleaned up and changed. He was sore, and if he stopped moving he was going to fall asleep on his feet. He felt the ship shudder its way into hyperspace while he was drying off and picked up his pace.

When he finally slipped into the galley Vos had four separate datapads spread out on the table, a steaming mug of caf barely balanced on the edge. There was a second mug placed directly opposite him.

Davijaan sat in front of the mug and contemplated the caf and the headache he knew he would get if he drank it. He decided he already had a headache coming on, and didn’t care. Took a scalding swallow.

Vos let him enjoy his free headache for about half a minute.

“So,” he said, and laid his hands on the table, drumming his fingers against the top. He wasn’t wearing his gloves. It was the first time he’d seen Vos without them.

“We sliced into the mainframe and bugged Dr. Se’s office. Good for us. I was hoping we’d also be able to tag Prime Minister Su and the lovely Senator Burtoni, but eh, I’ll take two out of four, considering the mainframe was our primary objective.”

At least Vos wasn’t angry. At least he wasn’t asking about the code cylinder, or the rest of the waterlogged bugs. Though the good cheer and the liberal use of ‘we’ and ‘our’ were more than a little frightening. Davijaan sipped his caf, wide-eyed.

“Unfortunately, I did not find what I was looking for in the mainframe, which means I have to look for it somewhere else. And what is truly unfortunate is that ‘somewhere else’ is starting to look like Coruscant.” He gestured to one of the datapads, and when Davijaan craned his neck to see, slid it across the table.

It was a fatality report. Davijaan set the mug aside and skimmed it, and then looked up from the ‘pad, confused. But maybe questions were alright, for now. “This mission still has to do with the whole, biological warfare thing, right? The virus? You’re still investigating all that?”

“More or less. How much do you know about the circumstances behind ARC-5555’s death?”

Davijaan shrugged.

He’d been on ferry duty that day. Leave or no leave, officers still needed to get back and forth between Galactic City and the Open Circle where it loomed in the void. Not to mention other incoming GAR ships.

He and Fiddle had picked up a CG squad and flown them to the transport that had reached orbit from Kamino, and picked up three passengers. There had been no return trip, at least not before he got off shift.

The reason he remembered that trip was because he'd had a Jedi and a Kaminoan on his ship at the same time, which had been nerve wracking, and because he'd gotten to fly so close to the Senate Dome. And because later, when Kote told him what happened with Rex's ARC, he made the connection to the unconscious trooper he'd glimpsed.

"He tried to assassinate the Chancellor. He was stopped and killed."

Something calculating gleamed in Vos' eyes. "That's the bones of it, but the real meat of the situation is that the dedicated Dr. Se insisted the reason ARC-Fives attacked the Chancellor was because he'd removed his inhibitor chip."

Davijaan blinked. Vos leaned back in his seat, hands flat on the table, studying his face. Analyzing his reaction for—something.

He tried not to squirm. He laid his left hand on the table, offering his wrist up for inspection. "You mean the tracker?"

"No. The inhibitor chip. The one in your brain."

The one in his brain.

Huh.

"Huh." He left his hand where it was, eyes locked on the yellow and green edge caught in the space between his black sleeve and his brown wrist.

So. There were two. Maybe there were more than two. Maybe all his insides were chips and wires and programming and he'd never find out how much of him was metal and how much of him was meat until he got blown to pieces.

He cleared his throat. "What does that one do?"

"Presumably, it inhibits dangerous levels of aggression. Or, you know. Inhibits clones from taking out their aggression on their superiors."

That made a certain kind of sense. Why restructure a whole brain when you could just put a chip in to turn off one small part?

Vos was still staring at him. It was getting harder not to squirm. He grabbed for the mug to have something to do with his hands.

"You really didn't know," said Vos, shocked.

"No." Why would he?

"Why didn't you?"

He was going to bite straight through his tongue if Vos kept saying stupid shit. "Well. I didn't need to know about them before this mission. Sir."

The shock was swiftly replaced by—something. Vos opened his mouth, but Davijaan was faster.

“My apologies if I’m misunderstanding something, but what do the inhibitor chips have to do with biological warfare?”

Vos cleared his throat, and sat up straight, and Davijaan thought maybe he was a bit relieved to be back on topic. “That’s the mission, actually. We don’t know yet.”

He slid another datapad across the table, and it was another fatality report. For a Jedi General.

“The Jedi—and ARC-Fives—discovered the chips because of this mess. CT-5385’s chip degraded, causing him to attack and kill Master Tiplar.”

Another bit of gossip Davijaan had heard in passing, from Bolts in the mess and then from Wolffe, who’d been friendly with Doom.

“The prevailing theory, supported by the good doctor, is that the degradation was caused by a virus. ARC-Fives requested to speak to the Chancellor regarding a Separatist plot. Fives and CT-5385 were friends, they were both on Ringo Vinda at the same time, Fives accompanied him to Kamino for the initial medical investigation. It’s not a lot to go on but it’s enough to start asking questions.”

Davijaan was starting to follow the logic, at least enough to confidently nod along. Though he had no idea why Vos was bothering to explain this to him. “Will I be accompanying you to Coruscant to continue to assist with this investigation?”

“Yes. Yeah, you’re with me until this is all over.” Vos scratched the back of his neck. “If I’d been… in a better state of mind, yesterday, I would have explained more up front.”

Davijaan hummed, noncommittal. “Is the communications blackout going to last the whole mission, or is there a chance I can contact—When will the blackout be over?”

“Well that’s the thing, see, is we’ve kind of been declared dead.”

For a few shattering seconds, Davijaan forgot how to breathe.

“The ship’s hyperdrive was sabotaged, we blew up the second time we tried to jump. There was a distress signal, lots of debris. One of the better fake deaths Obi-Wan and I have staged, actually. I think you were in your cabin for most of it.”

Vos was staring at a spot over his shoulder, drumming his fingers against the table again, and if Davijaan didn’t know better he’d say the man looked guilty. “I don’t know who all you left behind, but this will be over soon. We’re close. We’re so close.”

Davijaan was not close to many of his siblings and this shit right here was exactly why.

It was fine. He was fine. Kote could destroy a few training droids and be fine, and Wolffe could cry on his general’s shoulder and be fine, and when this was all over he’d find them

and explain and everything would be fine. This was the whole reason Kote had made him do that transfer paperwork.

“I’ll plot a course to Coruscant,” he said, and left his caf on the table.

Chapter 3

The flight to Coruscant took twenty-one hours. Davijaan spent most of it in his cabin. He wasn't avoiding Vos, exactly. He was simply staying out of the way.

After being threatened with the brig one day and then given apology caf the next he wasn't sure what to expect from this General. He was used to dealing with the mercurial moods of the natborn officers he worked under, but none of them had the power to freeze his limbs solid and choke him to death on a whim.

Vos spent most of his time in the cockpit, as far as Davijaan could tell. Now that he was trying to be nice, or maybe even friendly, he called Davijaan up to help with the jumps. He kept his head down and ran the calculations and nodded along as Vos tried to make small talk, not sure what kind of response was expected from him and determined to play it safe.

He didn't get slammed into more walls, but he didn't get more caf either.

There were moments, as he worked, when silence fell, and he felt a chill on the back of his neck. He would glance across the console, not sure what he was looking for but always surprised to find Vos staring resolutely out the viewshield.

***

They came into atmo on the dark side of the planet. Vos dived through the glittering skyscrapers and Galactic City traffic and took them down a ventilation shaft and into the undercity. The grimy metal walls of the shaft, broken up by branching shiplanes and valves and eerie blue lights, stretched down and down into clouds of steam. Something about sinking down into the grey made him shiver.

Davijaan had only ever flown over L5127, with its artificial blue sky and yellow sun, the Senate Dome and the Jedi Temple dominating the skyline, but he'd never been lower than L4577 either. Clones weren't welcome on the upper levels, and they didn't have much time to explore the lower levels.

They passed L4500, and Davijaan tried not to squirm in his seat. L4000. L3500. L3000. The blue lights were gradually replaced by dim yellow and white, rust staining the grey metal brown. L2500. L2000. L1500. He knew there were people living on every level—there was steady traffic up and down the shaft and through the shiplanes that opened into it—but the glimpses down those dark openings through steam and iridescent gas were not reassuring.

After L1000 the ships dwindled to droid staffed maintenance transports and the odd privately owned transport or freighter that looked one hyperspace jump to away from shaking to pieces. At one point they passed a limping Dynamic-class freighter. He almost broke his neck twisting to follow its path, eyes wide.

Vos chuckled. "All sorts of relics down here. Used to bring Aayla down, and we'd sit in a tunnel mouth and I'd quiz her on the class and model of passing ships. Good way to get

familiar with outdated tech more common in the Outer Rim."

Davijaan hummed an acknowledgement, trying to figure out if he was supposed to know this person. Aayla. Probably a Jedi, if Vos spent so much time with her…

Bly called his General Aayla, sometimes. General Aayla Secura.

He chanced a glance at Vos. He wasn't great with natborn ages but he was pretty sure Vos was older than Secura, he had thin lines around his eyes the same as Kenobi. If he'd been quizzing her, maybe he'd been in charge of teaching her? Like Kenobi and Skywalker. And Tano, before. Maybe General Secura had been his padawan.

He hadn't thought about what Vos meant when he said was doing this for his family. He didn't need to know why an order was issued to follow it. But now he thought of every rule '17 had quietly broken and every rule he had steadfastly enforced for the sake of his cadets, and maybe he understood some of Vos' desperation.

Finally, they reached L500. The ventilation shaft came to an abrupt end and they plunged through the last billows of purple steam and into the purple glow of the power grid, in the foundations of modern Coruscant.

Vos pulled the VCX out of its dive and skimmed over the whirring generators, weaving between the vast pillars that supported the thousands of levels above. The heat was oppressive, even within the temp controlled ship, and Davijaan wished Vos would let him do something to help fly.

A gap in the duracrete along the top of a pillar led them back up into L501. The shiplane they emerged into was empty, hot and loud from the generators below but cloudy with dust stirred up by their engines. The flickering overhead lights were the red of a dying star.

They flew for miles down the shiplane. Vos ignored the many lanes that diverged from it, until they came to a tunnel entrance. It was dark, but Vos confidently steered them in and set them down gently, well back from the entrance and any lingering red light.

"Pack your bags, Commander," he said, cheerful, powering the console down. "We're going for a hike."

***

He put his armor on. It'd been nice to walk around in his undersuit for a few days, but he wasn't stepping foot outside this ship without it. He knew he wasn't any safer wearing it than he was without it, but he still wanted something solid between his skin and the dark.

Technically he was required to wear his armor when he was on duty, but Vos hadn't exactly given him time to grab it when he'd been dragged to the cockpit the first time, and hadn't said anything when he'd arrived without it the second. And it was always a relief to be out of armor; to be able to move with just that little bit less weight and restriction.

Vos was waiting for him at the hatch, a heavy brown cloak over his robes and a second in his arms, handed wordlessly to Davijaan.

The cloak turned out to be more of a blanket with a hole in the middle. Poncho? Whatever it was, it was huge. It would have been long even on Vos. It hung past his hands and past his knees, and covered every inch of gleaming white armor except his boots.

“That thing have air filters?” Vos gestured to his helmet. He adjusted the seals carefully while Vos put on his own mask, and did not ask how often the air scrubbers were repaired down here.

The air outside of the tunnel was dry and heavy. Dust puffed up with every footstep. Breathable, but only barely. He watched Vos set the ship’s alarm system and cloaking and did not think about being miles deep in this city with no way to fly out. He was sweating under his armor and poncho, but as he marched away from the VCX he felt cold down to his bones.

Space was fine because he was inside a ship. Water was fine as long as he was inside a ship. Deep dark tunnels that led nowhere? Would be fine, if he was inside a damn ship.

He kept his breathing even and followed the blue glow of Vos’ lantern into the dark.

The tunnel wandered, narrowing until Davijaan’s shoulders brushed both sides, and he had to hold a memory of stars in his mind to stave off panic. After a time the thrum of the generators receded, and the only sound was the muffled thud of their boots.

Finally Vos came to a halt, and set the lantern down to fight with a rusty grate. It shrieked its displeasure, but did open, and at last they climbed out of the tunnel and into—a storage room?

It was huge, as big as one of the warehouses that had been converted into clone barracks. Grey duracrete floor and grey duracrete walls and grey duracrete ceiling, the white lights now the dim grey-green of an evening storm.

The whole room was stuffed with stacks of trash. Just, rubbish. Piles and piles of dry-rotted wood and cloth and rusted metals and shattered glass and plastics. Some of them had tipped over, mounds of dust blocking grey entryways that probably used to hold grey doors.

Vos tugged his mask down around his neck and took a deep breath of the filthy air, releasing it in a contented sigh. He clapped Davijaan on the back and gestured expansively at the mess. “Behold, the heart of our Republic! Or, its basement, at least. One of its basements.”

Huh. Senate building basement. Presumably not accessed at any time within the last few centuries. Was it even on the blueprints still? Fox would know. And if he ever wanted to get his face chewed off, Davijaan could ask.

“I know the view’s lovely, but the hike’s not over yet, Commander.” A firm hand on his shoulder steered him forward into the mess.

They picked their way through the trash and to the back wall, their cloaks now more grey than brown. As they got close Davijaan realized Vos was aiming for the doorway high overhead, the only one that remained unblocked. Though not necessarily accessible. Red-brown rust marks on the wall were complimented by a twisted pile of orange-red metal struts on the floor.

Vos bounced on his toes and glanced over with a grin, and it was a grin Davijaan had received from several of his siblings and meant Vos was about to be a huge show off.

Vos sprinted down an empty stretch of floor, and jumped, and just—flew. Thirty feet straight up in the air like it was nothing, like gravity let go of him for just that moment. He did a flip and landed lightly inside the doorway, cloak fluttering around him, not even breathing hard. Still grinning.

And, Davijaan had heard stories. He'd watched vids, back on Kamino. He even got glimpses of Ahsoka Tano in action on that chase through the Industrial District. But seeing it in person was so much more…

He stood in the middle of the floor, gaping, until Vos laughed, and leaned over the edge with his hands braced on his knees. "Want to climb, or can I give you a boost?"

… What the hells. Climb on *what?* "Um. Boost, please?"

Nothing happened for a second, and then the same warmth that had lifted him out of the sea wound around his torso, and Vos drew him up off the floor with an outstretched hand.

It'd been a very long time since he'd last flown with a jetpack, but it felt a little bit like that. Rising swift and steady into the air, the weight of his body of no consequence. He stumbled as he was set down, not quite muffling his gasp as the warm pressure suddenly ceased.

Vos steadied him with a hand on his arm. "Dizzy?"

"No, sir." He cleared his throat. "Just felt… Different, from before."

"Yeah, you were pretty disoriented coming out of the water."

In his silence, Vos' good humor faded. "Ah. You meant in the cabin." He let go of Davijaan's arm and took a step back. He smiled again, but there was something forced about it Davijaan recognized. "Well, good. Feels different because it *is* different. Means I'm not drawing on the Dark."

He had no idea what that meant, but it sounded… Not good.

Vos lit his lantern and led the way down another dark and dusty tunnel, this one at least a consistent width. Just a nice, spacious, void-black hallway.

The silence only lasted until they were out of sight of the entryway, and then Vos asked, "What do you know about the Force? About Jedi and Sith?"

He'd attended lectures on the Jedi since he was a cadet, but he'd realized early in his passing acquaintance with General Kenobi that the lectures had been heavy on the power and politics but light on the philosophy.

“The Force is what gives you both your powers. Jedi have blue and green lightsabers and fight for the Republic, and Sith have red lightsabers and want to kill everyone.”

Vos tipped his head back and laughed, and Davijaan felt some of the tension ease out of his shoulders.

“That’s actually not a bad summary,” Vos said, once he’d regained his breath. “Most of the galaxy would give similar answers.” He didn’t stop walking, but his pace and his tone shifted to something measured and calm.

“The Force doesn’t give us ‘powers.’ It’s an energy field—literally a force—that connects everything in the galaxy. Force sensitivity is simply sensitivity to the way the Force moves, through us and through our surroundings.”

Not very creative with names, the Jedi. Though it wasn’t like Oddball could say much.

“It’s a bit more complicated in reality, but both Jedi and Sith philosophy conceptualize the Force as Light and Dark. The Jedi draw on the Light, the Sith draw on the Dark. It’s not some kind of—‘two halves of the whole’ situation. The Light is the Force as it exists naturally, and the Dark is a corruption of it. So, when you draw on the Dark, eventually it corrupts you.”

The quiet resignation of those words sent a chill down Davijaan’s spine. Vos stiffened, and glanced over his shoulder without breaking his stride. “I got out before my insides started to rot. I’m fine.”

Perfectly fine. Of course. Absolutely.

“I’m not telling you this to scare you.” He dropped back to walk next to Davijaan, their shoulders brushing, brown eyes serious. “I’m telling you this so you understand what we’re up against. This war isn’t about the Republic and the Confederacy, it’s about the Sith and the Jedi. And, you weren’t wrong about the Sith wanting to kill everyone.”

The Sith hadn’t come up much in their lectures. Davijaan knew the Jedi and the Sith were historically on opposite sides of galactic conflicts, and that was about it. Maybe Vos was overstating the importance of this philosophical clash.

Or maybe the Jedi who’d spent two years successfully convincing everyone in the galaxy he was a Sith—including all the other Sith—knew what he was talking about.

“The Separatist leadership had some good talking points at the start,” Vos continued, “but as soon as a Darth Lord took over their army the goal changed from a clean split to destruction. There were cracks, before. Fissures. But after three years every support structure, every treaty, every bond of faith, has been shattered.”

The blue glow of the lantern revealed a sharp corner ahead; the hallway branched. Instead of starting down either path, Vos came to a halt, and turned to face Davijaan fully.

“The Dark *is* fear,” he said, some of that fear bright in his eyes, “and it gives you a taste for the fear of others. Your own pain drives you to inflict pain. If this war goes on much longer it is going to break the galaxy to pieces.”

As a cadet Davijaan had soaked up everything his trainers had told him about defending democracy and restoring peace to the galaxy and serving the noble Jedi. In command track he’d realized none of that mattered. He’d thought if the GAR had been commissioned by the Sith instead of the Jedi nothing would be different about his life except the types of ships he flew.

Maybe he’d thought wrong.

“You said… After Kamino you said this mission would be over soon. You said you were close.” *Close to what?*

Vos heard the unspoken question, and smiled. The same grim smile he’d seen from Kote, from ‘17, when they were right about something they’d desperately wanted to be wrong about.

“Close to figuring out how the Sith plan to kill the Jedi.”

***

It took almost an hour of long dark halls to reach their destination. Another duracrete box that probably used to be some kind of maintenance storage room, from the sink in the corner that miraculously still worked. The room had been outfitted with a cot, a generator, a work bench, and a console. And a very thorough security system.

“Welcome to my humble lair.” Vos shook the dust off his cloak and tossed it carelessly over the cot. “It’s not much, but it’s going to be home for a while.”

They spent what remained of that first day checking the security system, making sure nobody had come poking around in the two or three or however many years it had been since Vos last visited. Once he was satisfied nobody had bugged his lair, Vos got the computers running and did much the same with his network.

Once he was sure Vos was absorbed in the computers and wouldn’t need him any time soon, Davijaan took his helmet off and stashed it with his pack under the cot. He ate a stale ration bar and drank from the sink, and then sat on the floor to watch Vos work.

He kept his gloves on, even while typing. That had to be uncomfortable.

Vos hadn’t asked for the poncho back, so Davijaan wrapped it around himself and leaned against the wall, careful not to scrape his armor.

There was a contained intensity to the way Vos held himself that reminded Davijaan of Wolffe. Even sitting, every movement was deliberate, confident, precise. He didn’t fidget

when he was focused. Maybe the drumming fingers in the galley had meant he'd been relaxed. Or maybe it'd been for show, to get Davijaan to relax. That was something Wolffe used to do, when he would realize that everybody else was on edge because he was on edge.

He fell asleep like that, leaning against the wall, watching Vos and missing Wolffe.

***

He woke to metal screeching against metal and sat up straight in a panic, prepared for a hull breach or damaged equipment, and found himself locked in combat with the poncho.

He didn't realize he'd been moved to the cot until he fell off it. When he finally managed to wrestle the thick cloth off his head Vos was leaning against the now open doorway and smirking at him. "Light sleeper, huh?"

Davijaan stood stiffly and brushed the dust off his armor. "Are you coming or going, sir?"

"Back from poking around the Senate proper." Vos closed the door with another screech, and tossed a datastick to Davijaan. "Couldn't get inside the Chancellor's medical bay, not without more planning, but I did get the security vid feeds for the last three months."

Davijaan blinked down at the datastick. Vos picked the poncho off the floor and shook it out. "Get that downloaded, and I'll show you how we're going to sort it."

As he started the download Vos came up behind him and draped the poncho over the back of his chair. "This would probably be more comfortable to sleep in than that plastoid stuff," he said, and then sat next to Davijaan and opened a facial recognition program.

Patiently and clearly he explained how to run the vid through the program, and what they were looking for in the dataset. He didn't get frustrated with Davijaan's hesitation or questions. He seemed like he was used to explaining things, or maybe used to coaxing people along as they figured things out.

Davijaan thought of General Secura—ruthlessly competent and terrifyingly beautiful, one of the few Jedi known and celebrated by the public, with a campaign record that rivaled Skywalker himself—and tried to picture Vos quizzing her on ship models.

***

The days fell into a pattern. In the evening Vos would travel up through the thousands of levels of basements by some means he never disclosed to Davijaan, and make preparations to break into the Chancellor's private wing. In the early morning he would return more determined than when he'd left, with security vids or financial records or call logs for Davijaan to sort through.

He never explained straight out what he thought he was going to find in the medical bay where ARC-5555 had tried to assassinate Chancellor Palpatine. Or explained what exactly his theory was on the virus, and the inhibitor chips, and the assertion of a Separatist plot. If this

was really a Separatist plot—*Sith* plot—Davijaan thought they'd have better luck with the original mission of breaking into a Seppie base.

"Wouldn't it be easier to just ask for a meeting with the Chancellor?" he'd asked on day three, and Vos had looked at him like Davijaan was the crazy one.

"He probably has our fatality reports gathering dust on his desk. Right now four people in the galaxy know I'm alive and I'd like it to stay that way."

In command track they'd had a series of lectures on how to work with Jedi. Most of the advice could be reduced to 'stay out of the way.' If all Vos wanted was someone to do the grunt work, then he could shut up and do the grunt work.

Analyzing data wasn't the worst thing he could be doing. It wasn't like he wanted to be back-flipping his way through dusty basements with Vos. Sitting in front of a computer monitor was similar to sitting in front of a ship console, just different kinds of math. He was fine.

So Davijaan stayed out of the way, and did the grunt work without complaint. Vos made it clear he didn't care about SOP as long as he got what he wanted out of the data, and also made a point of telling Davijaan he was doing a good job. After a week passed without any incidents Davijaan started to relax.

On the seventh day, he finally gave up on wearing his armor to sit at a computer and type for a twelve hour stretch. Vos didn't say a word.

On the ninth day Davijaan decided he would indeed survive Vos. He was so relieved to come to that conclusion he even decided not to be mad at Kote for being right.

By the tenth day, he was confident there was not going to be a repeat of the cabin incident.

***

Davijaan flinched at the sudden cold on the back of his neck. He went utterly still, the click of the keys cutting off into silence.

Vos wasn't due back for three or four hours. He would have heard the door screech if he'd arrived early. Nobody else was supposed to be down here. His pistols were with his armor in his pack under the bunk. Fifteen feet across the room.

Slowly, he stood, hands hanging empty at his sides, and turned.

Vos was standing in the open doorway. He was tense and intent, balanced on the balls of his feet, studying Davijaan. In the stark white light his yellow eyes glinted.

"He knew," said Vos, soft and accusing. "Two weeks of work, wasted. He knew I was coming."

Davijaan blinked, and Vos was across the room, one ungloved hand around his neck.

He didn’t squeeze; there was none of the feeling of being frozen from before. He just tipped Davijaan’s head back and studied his face, palm cold and dry under his chin.

Davijaan stayed still, blank. He breathed. Vos wasn’t going to kill him. Vos hadn’t killed him last time and he wouldn’t kill him this time.

Seconds stretched into a minute. Vos glanced away from Davijaan to the computers, and his eyes flickered brown.

“No,” he said, something amused breaking through fury and fear. “You’re not a traitor, are you?” He let go of Davijaan’s neck and took a step back. His hand flexed.

“You should leave, Commander. Take the evening off.”

Davijaan did not run until the door slid shut behind him.

***

When he finally burned through his fear he walked. When he thought he was far enough away, he wandered.

Vos’ rooms were somewhere between L515 and L517. Davijaan hadn’t been paying attention anymore by the time they’d arrived. He was pretty sure it used to be an office building some several hundred years ago. The hallways were laid out in a neat grid, with ten rooms opening off each. It was all so precise and utilitarian it would have reminded him of Kamino, if it hadn’t been so achingly empty.

Enough of the lights worked to cast the grey halls in grey shadow. In his tenday down here he’d never bothered to explore, just traveled the ten steps between Vos’ computer lab and the fresher set up in an adjacent room.

Vos had said to leave, but there wasn’t anywhere to go. He was trapped down here, drifting in the grey.

He poked his head inside the few open doors, looking for a distraction. He discovered the remains of ancient pieces of furniture and piles of dust to rival the ones that had blocked the doors in that first basement. He walked for hours down identical halls past identical room after identical room full of identical trash and slowly felt himself go numb.

When he found a room stacked floor to ceiling with modern, intact crates, it took a moment to register they were real.

He nudged the lid off one, cautious. Nothing jumped out at him. It was full of expired packs of field rations, the kind that could be reconstituted with water. From the dates they couldn’t have been sitting here for more than twenty years. Maybe something Vos had stashed and forgot about.

He opened crates until he found ration bars similar to GAR issue, and ate two standing up, coughing on the second one. There was no sink in this room, but a crate near the back held hundreds of shriveled water bulbs and two bottles of high-end Corellian brandy.

Davijaan contemplated the brandy. It took a lot to get a clone drunk. This probably wouldn't be enough. And he didn't like drinking by himself, either. But drinking definitely counted as a distraction.

It was cold in this room, away from the heat of the computers. He hadn't stopped to grab the poncho when he'd left. It was thicker and warmer and softer than the blanket from the cot, than any blanket he'd ever used in his life. He wanted that poncho.

He sat down in a gap between two stacks crates, and opened the first bottle.

***

Davijaan tried to open the door quietly, but it was heavy and rusted and his hand slipped off the handle. He stumbled and smacked his shoulder against it. He cursed under his breath, and then the door was sliding against him—being opened from the inside—and he took a step back just as Vos appeared in the doorway.

He looked exhausted, but settled in his skin. The same way he had in the cockpit when he'd asked for Davijaan's name: like he'd gone ten straight rounds on the mat and won every round, but still wanted nothing more than to sleep for a week. Davijaan tried to look over his shoulder to see if anything was broken.

"Welcome back. I was starting to think you'd gotten lost," Vos said, a strange roughness in his voice.

"No sir." Vos stepped aside to let him in while he was still trying to think of how to explain what he'd been doing. "I…"

Vos hadn't been breaking things. He'd been cleaning.

There was not a single speck of dust left in the room. Everything had been scrubbed and shined and reorganized—the crates of rations stacked where the computers used to be, and the computers and desks and other accompaniments reconfigured along the far wall. The cot was now to the left of the sink, made up with military precision, their packs tucked underneath and the poncho folded at the foot. The only things out of place were the datapads and keyboards and other electronic odds and ends laid out in a neat circle on the floor.

He gaped at the state of the room for a good long while. Vos closed the door, and nudged him further inside with a careful hand on his back. When he stumbled, Vos caught his arm. "Are you—"

Davijaan tried to pull away but Vos was bigger and stronger, and he was… maybe closer to drunk than tipsy. Maybe. Maybe sitting in a bottle in the dark for twenty years increased the potency of brandy to clone levels. He'd have to ask if ever got to see another clone again.

Vos' exhaustion was rapidly exchanged for surprise, and then he laughed. "Found Obi-Wan's stash, did you? I'd forgotten about his siege rations. Would have dug that stuff out earlier if I'd remembered." He let go of Davijaan's arm, only to take his shoulders and steer him to the cot.

It was easier to let himself be manhandled, so Davijaan let himself be manhandled into sitting down, and having his boots removed. The poncho was draped over his shoulders. Both of Vos' hands were bare. He had a gold ring on one thumb.

After being saved from the sea he could have forgiven Vos for not being one of his brothers. In this moment he hated him for it, in the dull distant way he let himself hate a lot of things when he was drunk.

The hands finally released him, and Vos retreated from his field of vision. He hunched into the poncho.

The sink turned on, and off.

"Here."

A cup of water floated to hover in front of his face.

"I'm not *that* drunk."

"No, but you wish you were," said Vos, cheerful.

Davijaan cringed, and drank his water.

Vos reappeared to sit cross legged in the center of the odds and ends, his back to the cot. His shoulders straightened. As one, the datapads and keyboards and code cylinders rose into the air to form a ring around him.

Davijaan sipped water and watched, wide eyed, as little specks of dirt and dust detached themselves from metal and plastoid and gathered in a cloud over Vos' head. The ring started spinning slowly, and every once in a while something would dip low and Vos would reach out to run a bare hand over keys or a screen or a handgrip.

Vos had never taken off both his gloves before. Sometimes he would slip one off for a few minutes, but he was careful of what he touched with his bare hand. He always waited until Davijaan had touched something—a cup or a chair or a keyboard—to touch it himself. Like he needed someone to test it first.

Davijaan watched Vos trace the keys he'd been typing on earlier, and thought of the cold hand on his neck. Maybe the gloves were to keep the whole room from frosting over.

As he downed the dregs, Vos sighed. The cloud raced to deposit itself in the trash chute, and the electronics floated sedately back to their places on the computer desk and workbench.

Davijaan's cup drifted out of his hand and into Vos'. He stood, turning the cup over, contemplative, and then sent it drifting back to the sink. Davijaan almost asked Vos to pick him up too; wrap him in some of that remembered warmth. Being lifted out of the basement during their trek up here was the closest he'd gotten to a hug since he'd said goodbye to Kote.

He definitely wasn't drunk enough to let that slip.

“I’m sorry.”

Davijaan blinked and found Vos had sat down again, this time on the floor in front of him, something sad and ashamed tempering his calm. “What?”

“I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have to deal with me while I’m dealing with this. That wasn’t the job description.”

He was pretty sure the whole entire clone soldier job description was to do whatever the Jedi needed them to do. Specifically fight the war, sure, but not limited to that. If Vos needed to terrify someone every few weeks as a side effect of almost getting his insides rotted by corrupted magical energy, well. It wasn’t like Davijaan had signed up to fight the war either.

“It’s fine, sir.” He cleared his throat, sat up straight. “You don’t need to apologize. You didn’t hurt me.”

“Driving someone to drink is generally considered having an adverse effect on their health.”

“That didn’t have anything to do with you.”

“No? It had nothing to do with being transferred out of the 7th Sky and declared dead and spending a tenday holed up in here with me while I slowly went mad?”

... Maybe it had a little to do with Vos.

“I…” He shrugged, not wanting to put this feeling into words. “I miss my brother.”

Vos glanced at his left wrist. Davijaan resisted the urge to stick the whole hand behind his back, wishing Kote had given him something like that bright woven band, wishing they’d given each other something to hold on to besides memories. Wishing he’d bothered to keep a pack of Wolffe’s stupid, useless cards.

“Well. That I understand. I miss mine, too,” Vos said.

And that shocked Davijaan out of his own head enough to blurt, “You have a brother?”

He may have been under the impression that Jedi simply appeared in the aether.

“Guess I wouldn’t call him a brother, exactly, but I have an Obi-Wan. He’s been my friend for —Stars, must be almost thirty years now.” A grin broke through the regret. “Our beds were next to each other in the initiate dorms.”

Davijaan remembered curling up with ‘38 and with Tapper and with Kote in their too small pods, and suppressed a smile.

“Obi-Wan and I found this place together, back when we were senior padawans, sneaking around the lower levels doing stupid shit. Spent almost a year setting it up. Getting the right equipment, hauling it all down.” He shook his head, fondly amused. “Obi-Wan was worried one of us would get trapped down here and starve to death, hence the entire room of rations.

He’s also the one who insisted on the cot. I’m older, but he had more field missions under his belt at the time, and never let me forget it.”

“It’s a very nice lair, sir.”

“It is.” Vos looked around at the results of his cleaning spree, satisfied, and then turned a careful consideration to Davijaan. “You and your brother ever do anything like that?”

Davijaan bit his tongue hard enough to taste blood.

He knew what this was. When Bolts had been transferred to his squad Davijaan had spent weeks attempting conversations just like this, trying to coax Bolts out of his head and into the group. It had worked, eventually.

“No,” he said, firm. Maybe it would work on him too, eventually, but right now he was not willing to be coaxed. “You didn’t have to tell me all that.”

“Maybe not. But it helps, when you’re dealing with—” Vos gestured to the room, the crates and the computers and the sink in the corner *“—this,* to remind yourself that somewhere out there are people who love you.”

“If you say so, sir.”

Instead of getting annoyed, Vos grinned, a flash of teeth there and gone. “When I agreed to the undercover mission I agreed on the condition that Obi-Wan be involved. He ended up becoming… Not my handler exactly. My anchor. If I ever felt I was slipping too far, I had a secure comm, and I could contact him. Very important in this kind of work. I probably should have used it more than I did. But, the more often you break character the harder it is to get back in.”

Right now he couldn’t care less about Vos’ damn undercover mission, but an opportunity to switch the topic was an opportunity to switch the topic. “Who else knew? Knows?”

“Master Windu. Master Yoda. I report directly to them.” Vos exhaled in a slow sigh. “Aayla, my former padawan, she suspected. She knew I did Shadow work, though I never told her the full extent. Some of my old friends probably suspected. It’s hard to lie about who you are to people who’ve known you your whole life.”

Some of his exhaustion came creeping back onto his face. Davijaan abruptly felt awkward, listening to Vos’ woes. Maybe he wasn’t trying to coax Davijaan into talking about himself. Maybe he just hadn’t seen his family in so long he was desperate to talk to somebody, anybody, even his not-so-randomly assigned clone commander.

“Mostly, I had Obi-Wan,” he said, soft. “He is the reason I didn’t Fall.”

Huh.

“I thought… You did?” Faie wouldn’t have lied to him.

“Not quite.” He laughed, hollow, and stood. “Not yet, at least.” He stretched with a groan, carefully rolling out the tension in his neck and shoulders from sitting so straight for so long.

“To Fall is to surrender completely to the Dark.” His hands fell limp to his sides. Instead of floating them over, he walked slowly to the desk and picked up his gloves, brushing his thumb over the black leather. “There are ways to draw on the Dark for a time. Use it, or let it use you, and then let it go. But it never wants to be let go. I keep thinking I’ve let it go completely, and then…”

“And then you think somebody is about to stab you in the back,” Davijaan finished, bitter, and too tired to care if it showed.

Vos glanced over with a grin; a grin like weeks ago in the briefing room. Like when Fox grinned. Bared teeth. “Something—or some*one*—tipped off our dutiful Supreme Chancellor that a break-in was imminent. The security systems have been completely reset, the guard shifts swapped around.” The grin became a grimace. “I would have known if you’d left, or tried to tamper with these computers. Sorry that didn’t save you from suspicion.”

“Are we starting over tomorrow, then?” His limbs were heavy. He wanted to roll over and bury his face in the pillow and sleep and stop having to listen to Vos talk. He settled for pulling the poncho more securely around himself.

“I could start over, but he’ll be on guard now.” He pulled on his gloves with practiced care, gaze distant the same way Kote’s got when he was trying to puzzle something out, and was starting to think faster than he could speak. “I’ve read the reports a hundred times over. Master Ti told me everything, even let me see her memories. Obi-Wan was able to question Anakin and his Captain for me.” He started to pace, stalking back and forth in front of the computers.

“That damn doctor is never in her damn office. If she has a partner off Kamino she doesn’t contact them from in there. She’d already wiped all the documentation from the system by the time we sliced it. If it was ever there to begin with. I’m running out of leads.”

“The guards?”

He gave Davijaan an approving nod. “I did think of that, actually. The two guards who were inside the medical bay with the Chancellor were both dead within a week of ARC-5555. A riot in the lower levels. Very tidy. Though…” He stilled.

Davijaan watched the idea hit Vos like a physical blow.

“I haven’t been giving the CG it’s due, have I?” He turned to Davijaan, eyes gleaming. “It’s not much of a lead, but it’s *something.* Get some sleep, Commander. We’re breaking into the Coruscant Guard building bright and early tomorrow.”

Chapter 4

In the early hours of the morning the halls of the Coruscant Guard Headquarters were at half-light. The orange-yellow glow made the new red paint on his armor look like old blood; dark and sticky.

They were going to get caught. Davijaan knew with cold certainty they were going to get caught. He was terrible at this spy stuff. He didn't know why Vos had insisted he come. He'd gotten caught last time, and the time before that. He was going to get both of them caught.

A pair of CG troopers marched stiffly in step along their patrol route. He stepped aside to let them pass with a sharp salute, heart in this throat.

Fox ran a tight ship, but the guards didn't ask what he was doing on this floor at this time of night, or to scan his ID. Maybe after three years in this hell Fox was loosening his grip. Maybe he would be fine.

Ha.

The guards returned the salute and turned the corner in silence. Davijaan peeled away from the wall and continued down the hall, his distended shadow following perfectly in step.

Another hall. A flight of stairs. The hall at the foot of the stairs was empty, and Davijaan smothered a sigh of relief. If he glanced over his shoulder he could see Vos clearly, wrapped in a grey cloak so dark it was almost black, hood pulled low over his eyes. As confident as Vos was in whatever Force nonsense he was doing to make himself invisible Davijaan much preferred just dodging the patrols.

They turned a corner into another stretch of grey, empty hall, and came to a halt. He was getting sick of duracrete.

Ignoring the looming presence behind him and insistent unease in his gut, he took a deep breath and mentally repeated the door code he'd memorized. Maybe for reassurance. Probably to stall.

He was fine. He had backup this time. And the chances of being killed when caught were significantly lower. Never zero, when it came to Fox.

"Third door," Vos reminded him. He did not need reminding.

With trembling hands, Davijaan punched in the code, and the door to the office of Commander CC-1010 of the Coruscant Guard slid open soundlessly. Davijaan ducked inside and shut it firmly behind himself and Vos.

He flicked on the lights to reveal a small windowless room, dominated by a metal desk bolted to the floor. Six open crates filled with odds and ends lined one wall. Two empty ones—extra seats—were stacked in a corner. The surface of the desk had been polished to a shine but a

thin layer of dust had been allowed to accumulate in corners. The ceiling tiles were starting to come loose.

“It doesn’t have to be anything specific,” Vos reiterated, detaching himself to walk the perimeter. “Just something he uses every day. Preferably something he touches with bare hands. Armor or a weapon or a datapad.”

Helmet cams and standard issue wristcomms were wiped at the end of every day, and would be in the barracks besides. Davijaan headed for the desk and its stack of datapads.

Everything was neat and orderly, the desk bare except for a few paper files and the aforementioned datapads. “One of these work?” he asked, taking the one off the top to show Vos.

“Let’s find out.” He abandoned his bug sweep to approach the desk, tugging at one of his gloves.

A cold draft hit the sliver of bare skin on the back of his neck. Davijaan and Vos froze in the same moment. Vos’ eyes locked over Davijaan’s shoulder just as he felt the edge of the knife against his throat.

“Nice try with the paint, but you’re not one of mine,” said Fox. “And *you* are not GAR.”

Vos took a careful step backwards, hands up and open in surrender, eyes darting from Fox’s blank visor to his knife. Fox gripped Davijaan’s shoulder and pulled him back against his chest. “You have five seconds to tell me who you are and who sent you before I slit his throat.”

Davijaan was tired. So tired. “Hello, 1010,” he drawled. “It’s a pleasure, as always.”

Fox stiffened. “Oddball? You’re dead.”

“Not yet.”

“... Pity.”

He expected to be released, but the hand on the hilt held steady. The hand on his shoulder squeezed tight. Davijaan forced himself to be still and wait.

Fox had carried a handmade shiv on Kamino, and had pinned him like this once in an empty locker room. He hadn’t cut Davijaan, for the same reason Davijaan never told anybody about the incident. If one of their teachers had discovered Fox had a weapon outside of the training halls he would have been removed from command track.

Technically they still weren’t supposed to have weapons outside of GAR issue, but he supposed with no direct Jedi supervision Fox did what he wanted.

A quick assessment of the placement of the knife, and Vos let his gaze settle on Fox. They studied each other, separated by the bare expanse of the desk and by the gleaming blade against the gap in Davijaan’s unsealed helmet.

Slowly, Vos reached to push his hood back, straightening to his full height. “Commander 1010. Nice office. Bit plain, though. I would have put some pictures up myself.”

“You’re Quinlan Vos.”

“Good guess.” A flash of teeth, there and gone. “Good hiding place, too. Thought you were on the floor above us.”

Davijaan glanced up, and—yes, one of the loose ceiling tiles had been removed, revealing a gaping hole to the left of the desk. “What were you doing in the *ceiling?”*

“Waiting for somebody to break into my office.”

“Oh? Were you.” Vos was all polite inquiry; even and calm. Dread curled cold in his stomach and Davijaan opened his mouth, to say something, to stop—

Vos’ hand shot out, fingers curled into claws. Something warm flooded the thin space between him and Fox. The knife wrenched away. Fox was forced back and up, hauled roughly into the air with a strangled curse and a kick that caught Davijaan’s back before Vos froze him solid.

“Got a tip, huh?” said Vos, in the same even, calm tone, outstretched arm unwavering. “You complicate things. You clones are good at that, aren’t you?”

Davijaan took a stumbling step away from Fox, towards Vos, mouth dry and heart pounding. “What are you doing?”

“With him? I don’t know yet.”

Fox hovered a meter in the air, rigid, and Davijaan didn’t know if it was from anger or from fear or from the hold Vos had on him. Fox still had his knife held tight.

“It will make my job a lot easier if I pull his memories straight out of his head,” Vos said. “Take the information I need, take any trace of our presence. Too bad I’m trying to do things the nice way.”

There was no chill in the air; Vos' brown eyes did not flicker.

“Put him down,” Davijaan said, even, calm, fighting to match Vos’ tone and fighting not to make it an order. “Please put him down.”

“He was going to hurt you.”

“No he wasn’t! Just, put him down.”

Fox swore, the hand with the knife trembling. “You’re actually working with that traitor?”

Vos laughed.

“No! I’m—Yes? He’s not a traitor.”

“That’s funny, coming from one of Palpatine’s pawns,” Vos spat. “You’re the force destroying the Republic from the inside. All I'm doing is trying to save it.”

Fox scoffed. “You sound like every small-time terrorist I’ve ever arrested. Isn’t that what you spent the last few years doing? Blowing up supply lines?”

Vos’ eye twitched. Fox choked.

“Stop!” Davijaan burst out, panicked, feet rooted to the floor. There was nothing he could do but he had to—he had to— “Stop it, he’s not—Palpatine’s pawn?”

Vos’ wrist twisted, and Fox’s fingers uncurled one by one from the hilt. And as the knife fell Davijaan reached and caught it and wrapped his shaking hand around the hilt.

Vos’ attention slid slowly from Fox to Davijaan. “You should put that knife down.”

“You should just ask him! Whatever information you need, he’ll tell you.” Maybe. Probably. Surely not even Fox would choose his secrets over his life. “I know there’s some kind of Sith plot happening, I know…”

Pieces were starting to fall into place. All the things Vos had said and not said, his insistence on breaking and entering instead of asking. Davijaan swallowed hard. “I know you think the Chancellor is in on it, but I swear on my life 1010 is not.”

Fox was selfish and stubborn, but he wasn’t a traitor. Davijaan knew him better than he wanted to, and knew above all else Fox would never risk his own skin betraying the Republic.

“He shot and killed the key witness in the ongoing investigation. The witness he was explicitly ordered to capture alive for questioning. And Fives wasn’t the first. Dozens of political dissenters have been murdered, or arrested, or disappeared. The CG’s been keeping Palpatine in power since the start of this war.”

Davijaan grit his teeth. “You think he had a choice? In any of that?”

“There is always a choice.”

“He was doing his job.” A hot spark of anger gave him the courage to say— “The same way you were doing your job when you killed Krell.”

Vos' expression hardened, but he didn’t toss Davijaan up into the air to struggle and suffocate.

He didn’t set Fox down, either.

“Ask,” demanded Davijaan. “Ask before you—before—” *before you hurt him.* “Please.”

“He’s going to lie.”

Davijaan wanted to insist that Fox wasn’t a liar, Fox never lied, Fox was many many things but he would never *lie*—but Vos probably wouldn’t believe him either. Instead he watched

Vos watch Fox, calculating and cold, heartbeat loud in his ears.

Slowly, Vos set Fox on his feet.

He stumbled. Davijaan took a step around the desk and grabbed his arm; braced himself and held Fox upright as he took one harsh rasping breath after another.

Impassive, Vos asked, “Is that the armor you were wearing, the day you killed Fives?”

Davijaan’s grip tightened on the knife. Fox’s shoulders rose and fell as his breathing evened out. “... Yes.”

“Give me a piece of it.”

“Why?”

“Because you will lie to me. The memories you made in that armor will not.”

Fox stiffened, body as rigid as it was in the air. Vos had the nerve to roll his eyes. “Calm down. I’m not going to reach into your mind, I’m—It’s a Force thing. The memories are in the armor, that’s where I’m pulling them from. This is the least invasive way for me to do this.”

Vos’ bare hand on the table, on the keyboard, on his cup. Cold around his neck. Vos’ gaze broke from Fox to flicker over Davijaan, brief and guilty. Davijaan tasted bile.

He swallowed it down and squeezed Fox’s shoulder, pressure in the gap between his pauldron and cuirass buckle. “Just let him. I guess he’s been doing it to me for a while now, and I didn’t even notice.”

The only response he received was a slight tilt of Fox’s helmet.

If Fox refused it wouldn’t change anything. Vos would haul him up into the air again and get his hands all over his armor anyway. Giving in was easier. Giving in and giving Vos what he wanted without a fight was easier, and faster, and safer. Surely Fox would see the merits of giving in.

“Please, Fox,” Davijaan said, soft enough Vos wouldn’t hear across the room. “Please don’t turn this into a fight. It’s going to make things worse if you fight.”

The silence stretched thin.

Finally, Fox straightened; shook off Davijaan’s hand. Brisk and efficient he stripped off one of his gauntlets and threw it down on the desk. Black synth-leather and red painted plastoid hit the polished metal with a clatter. His bare hand, knuckles pink and silver with scarring, clenched into a fist against his side.

Two quick steps brought Vos to the desk. He picked up the gauntlet in both hands and turned it over and around. And then he tugged off one of his gloves.

As bare skin touched the backing he flinched. His eyes slid closed and his jaw clenched, as if in pain, as if the press of his fingertips against cold plastoid was enough to wound. Davijaan wanted to scream at him to put it down. He settled for biting his tongue hard enough to taste blood.

It only lasted seconds. Ten seconds, fifteen seconds, and then Vos' eyes snapped open and he dropped the gauntlet back on the desk like it burned.

Fox lunged for it.

Vos opened his mouth, stricken. "I—"

"*Don't.*"

Fox yanked the gauntlet back on. Davijaan started to take a step away but Fox's hand snaked out and latched onto his wrist, and he pried his knife out of Davijaan's cramping fingers.

"What were you going to do with this, eh?" He brandished the knife in Davijaan's face. "You can't even hold it right."

Davijaan sputtered. "It doesn't take a genius to figure it out!"

"That's not—"

"No, *no!* What was *I* going to do with the knife? What were *you* going to do with the knife! Against a Jedi!"

"How was I supposed to know it was going to be a Jedi?"

"You—"

"You should have told me you two were friends," interrupted Vos, subdued and maybe the slightest bit apologetic.

"We're *not,*" they spat back.

Fox glanced between Vos and Davijaan as he disappeared the knife into the gap under his thigh plate. He shifted to face Vos, putting Davijaan slightly behind him. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "You didn't tell him much, did you."

Vos pulled his glove on, eyes on his hands and not on them. "I told him what he needed to know."

Fox scoffed. "It would complicate things if he were allowed to have opinions on what you're doing, is that it?"

Davijaan shoved him. "*Stop.*"

Fox ignored him. "What did he mean by 'Sith plot?'"

Vos continued to fiddle with his glove.

“You and I both know the Chancellor made some kind of deal to keep himself in power,” Fox continued, as if that was a totally fine and normal thing for a clone soldier to say and not a treason charge in the making, “but what makes it a Sith plot, and not a Separatist one?”

“The Sith, the Separatists, the Confederacy of Independent Systems.” Vos shrugged. “Call them what you like, they’re—”

“Not the same thing. Answer me.”

Vos looked up, teeth bared in a facsimile of a smile. “It’s a Sith plot because nobody but the Sith know the details.”

“You’re not funny.”

“I’m hilarious. It’s my audience that’s lacking.”

When Fox didn’t immediately respond, Davijaan started edging around the desk. They had what they came for, and now they needed to leave. The longer they stayed the longer Fox had to turn this into a fight. If he could get Vos’ attention—

“What were you looking for in my office?”

Davijaan was going to break Fox’s nose.

“Is this an interrogation?”

“This is a chance for you to pay me back.” Fox slammed one armored fist down on the desk. *“What were you looking for in my office?”*

A moment of stubborn silence, and Vos capitulated. “Something like that,” he said, gesturing to the gauntlet. “Something I could pull memories from. Anything to do with the new security in the Chancellor’s rooms, anything to do with Fives.”

“Found more than you expected.”

Vos looked away, and if Davijaan didn’t know better he’d think he was ashamed.

“We weren’t going to steal anything,” Davijaan added. “We were just going to touch all your stuff and leave.” He’d assumed Vos was after passwords or patrol routes or something. Though he supposed he was, in a way. Now that Davijaan knew what touching all of Fox’s stuff entailed, maybe theft would have been kinder.

They had what they came for, and now he wanted to leave. He simply wanted to leave. He wanted to grab Vos’ arm and drag him out the door.

Fox tapped his knuckles against the desk. “I want to make a deal with you.”

“*What?”* Davijaan gaped, horrified. “No!”

“Huh.” Vos tilted his head, intrigued. “What kind of deal?”

“You’re trying to end the war, right?”

“Trying to *win* the war.”

Fox said, “Help me remove Palpatine from power, and I’ll help you investigate your Sith plot.”

“You?” Vos eyebrows shot up. “You help *me?*”

“Any information you need to get into the Chancellor’s rooms, any memories you need to build your case for conspiracy. Anything.”

Vos considered, and Davijaan fumed. Surely Vos would see this was a stupid idea. Surely he would reject the offer out of hand.

Slowly, Vos shook his head, and Davijaan smothered a sigh of relief. “Palpatine’s corrupt, he’s prolonging the war, but he’s not a priority. He has so much power that removing him from it would destabilize the Republic. Right now the Order can’t afford that. I need to know what he knows, yes, but I can’t waste time on something that would do more harm than good.”

“I have three years worth of treason charges documented and cross referenced. You don’t have to waste time on this. You don’t have to do the work. It doesn’t even have to be a priority, it can wait until the war is over. All I need is for you to get my file to someone who will take it seriously.”

“*Three—*” Davijaan choked on his own outrage. “Three years worth?”

“You’ve just been sitting on this? For three years?” Surprise was slowly shifting to suspicion. “That’s a little too convenient for me.”

“What did you call me? Palpatine’s pawn?” Scorn and frustration sharpened the words. Fox spread his hands wide, encompassing his office and his position in it. “Nobody will believe me. Nobody would ever believe a clone who brought a treason charge against the Chancellor. But they’ll believe you. Jedi General Quinlan Vos. Ex-traitor, sure, but that means you know the enemy better than anyone else. They’ll believe you.”

Understanding banished the suspicion and resolved into satisfied amusement. “I get your information and you get my recognition. Tempting.”

“So take the deal.”

“I don’t want to involve—”

“I’m already involved. And you need to know what I know. Unless you’re going to rip the information out of my head, you have to work with me in some capacity.”

Vos winced, but didn’t deny it.

“I’m a witness. I know too much. You either kill me or use me, Vos.” Fox leaned forward, bracing one hand against the desk. “Which is it going to be?”

Vos hesitated, deliberated. Davijaan opened his mouth, not sure what to say but knowing he had to say something, he had to—

“Fine.” Vos extended a hand. “It’s a deal.”

Fox and Vos shook hands across the desk, glove in gauntlet, and Davijaan despaired.

***

Fox was going to die. That was the inevitable end to this disaster. He was going to say something horrible and Vos was going to kill him. Or Vos would upset him and he would take his chances with the knife and Vos would kill him. Or he wouldn’t be able to help the way Vos wanted him to help—wouldn’t be able to hold up his end of the deal—and Vos would kill him.

Whether Davijaan would be killed by Vos trying to save Fox’s miserable life, or by Kote when he eventually found out that Davijaan hadn’t tried to save Fox’s miserable life and had instead stood off to the side and laughed, remained to be discovered.

Instead of getting right to business Fox chased them out of his office. He led them down flight after flight of stairs with the odd hallway thrown in, avoiding the patrols with the ease of someone who had designed the route.

As they kept pace with each other through an empty hall Vos nudged Davijaan’s shoulder. “So you *can* talk.”

“Shut up,” he muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, sir.”

A soft laugh escaped from under the hood, and Davijaan scowled under the safety of his helmet.

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As it turned out, Fox had his own lair in the CG building basement. Shabbier than Vos’ but bigger, taking up an entire empty storage room, the walls still lined with empty metal shelves. There were no signs of long term habitation. Only two obviously scavenged and repaired computers and a table made from a broken door balanced on empty crates.

Davijaan all but collapsed on the floor beside the table. He sat still and stiff and thought of all the things he wanted to say that he wasn’t going to say.

Vos marched straight to the computers. Fox intercepted him. They eyed each other up and down.

Finally, Fox broke the silence with a sharp gesture at the whole setup. “You don’t touch those computers without my permission.”

“If we’re sharing resources—”

“*No.* My building, my computers, my evidence.”

Vos’ eye twitched. “Fine.”

“Your gloves stay on when you’re in this room.”

“Gloves stay on. Got it.” His lip curled. “Any more orders, Commander?”

“I’ll let you know.”

With a mocking half-bow, Vos retreated from the computers to sprawl on the floor next to Davijaan. “I’ve got to get into the Chancellor’s floor of Grand Medical, or his wing of the Senate. Or both. Preferably both.”

Fox stayed rooted to the ground next to his secrets. “Why?”

Davijaan groaned.

Vos raised a brow. “Why does it matter? I need to get inside and you’re going to help me.”

“Is your plan to get your mitts all over Palpatine’s things and pull memories from them? Is that kind of evidence even going to hold up in court?”

“I’m after some physical evidence, actually,” Vos drawled. “And whether or not it will hold up is irrelevant, because I will not be bringing any of this to a formal court of law. This is going to the Jedi Council, along with your treason charges. Are you going to hold up your end of the deal or not?”

Fox leaned back against the console table, arms crossed over his chest, considering. After a moment, he said, “If you’re looking for those tissue samples, they’re gone.”

Vos sat up straight. “How—”

“I checked. He’s destroyed them, or sent them somewhere.”

“Palpatine showed you?”

“No. I checked.”

“He means he broke in,” Davijaan interjected, flat, familiar with Fox’s habit of slipping away for a few hours and returning with trinkets from the trainer’s wing, or information on upcoming assessments. Some things didn’t change.

From the tilt of Fox’s helmet he knew he was being glared at. He flipped him off behind Vos’ back.

“You were the tip,” said Vos, soft, comprehension imbued with glee.

“I didn’t take anything.” Fox moved to rap his knuckles against the desk, caught himself, and forced his hand still. “He doesn’t have any kind of cameras or motion sensors or anything set up. I don’t know how he knew someone had been in there.”

“You must have missed something. Something small that only he knows is installed.” Vos settled crosslegged, elbows resting on his knees. “It would still be useful, to get in there and pick up some memories. Exactly what Fives said to him, or what he said to Fives.”

“But the real priority is the chips.”

“… Yes,” said Vos, even.

“Why?”

Vos said nothing.

“Just tell him!” Davijaan snapped, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “This isn’t going to work if you don’t answer each other’s questions!”

Vos’ head jerked around. He stared at Davijaan, shocked, and—and maybe a bit pleased.

“You sound like Cody,” Fox remarked. “Hm. No, Cody wouldn’t yell at a strange Jedi.”

“He’d be too busy kicking your ass.”

Fox scoffed. “He could try.”

“I need to know what the inhibitor chips do,” said Vos, cutting off Davijaan’s retort in its tracks.

… Huh.

“I thought you said they inhibit aggression? It’s kind of in the name.”

“No, that’s what Dr. Se said. She failed to provide any documented evidence in support, and when we looked, the records didn’t exist.”

“ARC-5555 claimed the chips would make the clones kill the Jedi. That’s what he’s so worried about.”

Now it was Fox’s turn to be stared at as if he’d just displayed an as of yet unheard of ability for a clone.

Vos broke first. “That was a classified report.”

“*You* read it.”

“This is my mission.

“And there’s one of those chips in my head.”

“Wait, wait.” Davijaan waved to get both their attention. “Kill the Jedi? Isn’t that… Just the aggression thing? You take the chip out, or it gets disabled somehow, and then the little voice in your head that tells you how much trouble you’re going to be in if you take a shot at your bastard CO is gone.”

“Fives didn’t attack anyone.”

Fox snorted. “Yes he did.”

“He didn’t attack any Jedi,” Vos clarified, annoyed. “He was chased by Master Ti and confronted by Anakin, and didn’t attack either of them. He wasn’t in his right mind but he wasn’t unusually aggressive.” He pulled himself to his feet. Fox stiffened, but all Vos did was pace a circle around the table. Kote did that, when he was thinking hard.

“There was no autopsy. For either Fives or CT-5385. Their bodies were destroyed. The tissue samples that contained the chips are missing, likely destroyed. Dr. Se and Palpatine must have made a deal—they have some kind of agreement to cover this up.”

All the things Vos had said and not said. All the things that ARC had supposedly said, or maybe not said. Davijaan swallowed hard.

“So.” He looked between Fox and Vos. “The chips are the Sith plot?”

Vos regarded him evenly, calmly. “Yes.”

“And when you told me about them, you already knew that.”

“Yes.”

Davijaan nodded, absorbing that.

It didn’t matter. Vos had been very clear about only telling him what he needed to know to be able to help. Davijaan knew better than to ask questions he wasn’t going to get answers to. The discovery of yet another bit of tampering didn’t mean anything, any more than it meant something to discover it wasn’t only the Kaminoans who’d been tampering. He wanted to laugh. “And you knew the Sith had hijacked the chips because—because?”

“Because the Sith didn’t hijack them. They paid for them.” Vos took another turn around the table, ignoring or not seeing the way Davijaan and Fox had both gone still like hunted things. “Tyranus—Dooku—killed Sifo Dyas and took over the project, poured money into it. There are no records of any requested modifications to the original contract, but all that means is there are no records.”

Davijaan focused on breathing. Evenly. Calmly. “Sifo Dyas? Am I supposed to know who that is?”

Vos blinked. “You don’t?”

“Of course he doesn’t. Why would he?” Fox shook off his fear and turned to Davijaan. “Sifo Dyas was the Jedi who placed the order for the GAR.”

Commissioned by the Jedi, but paid for by the Sith.

Jedi or Sith, his life was pretty much the same after all.

Vos eyed Fox. “You knew.”

“I know a lot of things I’m not supposed to.”

“Why let me believe there was a virus?” It came out too soft, even through the helmet. Davijaan cleared his throat. “Was all of that a lie? Or a cover, or whatever?”

“I didn’t lie. Dr. Se claimed there was a virus that degraded the chips. But Palpatine claimed it was a parasite, and had the gall to suggest an inoculation. Neither of them offered any kind of physical evidence to support their claims.” His expression soured. “Palpatine didn’t even give us the name of the supposed parasite.” He came to a halt next to Davijaan, looking down at him with something like regret and then away, back to Fox.

“They don’t care that we know the Sith are out to kill us, because the Sith have always been out to kill us. They don’t care that we know the chips exist. What they can’t let us find out is what the chips do. How they are activated and deactivated. Who controls that process.”

“There is a very simple solution to your problem." Fox tilted his head. "Take one of ours out.”

The silence was sudden and shocking.

Vos broke it first with a firm shake of his head. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

“You think we're going to attack you?” Fox sneered. “What? You think you won't be able to defend yourself against two clones?”

“Let me rephrase.” Vos’ eyes narrowed. “I don't think removing a biochip from your brain—a chip that was implanted before you were born—without more research, and some kind of recovery plan or medication or something to help with the side effects, is a good idea.”

“I agree,” said Davijaan.

“You *agree?* He's a Jedi. He doesn't have one of these in his head.”

“Maybe Dr. Se is right. Maybe they are inhibiting something. Regulating something.”

“Maybe Se is wrong. If she’s being paid off to cover this up then lying about how dangerous they are to remove seems pretty obvious to me.”

“Both clones who had their chips removed died,” Vos reminded him.

“Not from natural causes.” Fox stepped into Vos’ space. “Or don’t you remember?”

Vos glared down at him, and Davijaan lurched to his feet and latched on to Fox's shoulder. "Why would you go through all the trouble of brain surgery for something that might not need to be removed?" he said, all in a rush, maybe to placate, maybe to distract.

"That might not need to be removed," Fox repeated, flat.

"Did you miss the part where we don't know how these things work? They might not need to be removed. It would be faster, easier, safer, if we can just find a way to disable whatever activates them. Or deactivates them, or whatever."

"If it can be disabled, it can be repaired." Fox tried to shake him off, but Davijaan held on tight.

"Don't turn this into a fight," he said, low, urgent. "We'll figure out how the chips work, and if they can be removed we'll find a way to remove them."

"I know where to get a droid that can handle that kind of surgery, if it's necessary," added Vos.

Fox looked between the two of them. He was outnumbered, and Davijaan could see he knew it in the shift of the set of his shoulders. "Fine," he said.

And that was that.

Davijaan allowed himself to be shaken off at last, and Fox turned to face Vos with his arms crossed once more, chin tilted up. "Then what's your lead, if you won't follow this one?"

Vos held his gaze. "Grand Medical. No physical evidence, sure, but picking up some of Palpatine's memories is bound to yield interesting results. We take what we can get and go from there."

"Fine. Grand Medical."

Uneasy silence settled. A decision, a direction to move in, but not one Fox liked, and maybe that was how he was going to die. By being an ass about having his plan rejected.

Instead of starting a fight, he pushed past Davijaan towards the door. "I have a shift. I'll be back to get the planning started when it's over. You two can sleep in the next room, if you want."

"That would be good," said Vos, catching up to him in a few long strides. "Save on travel time."

Davijaan took a deep breath and followed.

***

The next room was another storage room, this one full to bursting. Crates and boxes lined the walls, and towering metal selves of all the supplies necessary to keep a battalion running marched in straight rows across the floor.

Fox jerked his head at shelves. “Oddball, with me.”

They left Vos staring blankly at an open box of floor cleaner and worked their way deeper into the aisles, passing more cleaning supplies, armor repair supplies, and shelves stacked with armor. Chestplates and vambraces and helmets all lined up in a row. Just past the last stack of gleaming white pauldrons were spare undersuits, boots, and neatly folded grey uniforms.

As soon as they were out of hearing range Fox grabbed Davijaan’s arm and spun him around, and slapped a comm into his hand.

“Talk. To. Kote,” he growled. “He’s going mad, and he’s driving me mad in the process.”

Davijaan shoved the comm back with a scowl. “I’m supposed to be dead!”

“He knows you’re not dead! He’s not stupid! He knows Kenobi would have been way more broken up about his long lost lover returning to the Order only to die via untraceable sabotage months later if any of this was *real.”*

Not a brother, exactly.

Maybe Vos was like Fox. Not a liar, but pathological incapable of telling anybody the whole truth.

Davijaan stared at the comm in Fox’s hand. He just wanted to sleep. He didn’t want to have to think about any of this anymore. He didn’t want to have to feel like this anymore. “What has he been saying?”

Fox’s hand tightened into a fist. “He’s been trying to get me to investigate for him. As if I don’t have enough of my own work to do.”

“And you’ve been telling him to forget about me and move on.”

Fox shrugged.

“I can’t, Fox. I just…” He shook his head. “I can’t.”

Fox returned the comm to his belt pouch. “What do you want me to tell him?”

“Nothing.” He felt a little bit like he was underwater. Like he was surrounded by something cold and crushing. “We wait until this is over, and I tell him myself.”

Without a sign of acknowledgment Fox turned on his heel and continued down the aisle.

The bedding was next to the uniforms. White sheets and black blankets, the Republic cog printed in grey in their sharply folded centers. The whole aisle stank of bleach.

“Why did you do that?” he asked, picking absently at a corner of a sheet while Fox ignored him to count out blankets. He tugged two sets off the shelf and smoothed them over his arm. “Hey. Fox. Why did you make a deal with him? You have a death wish?”

Fox shoved a stack of blankets into his arms. “Somebody has to make sure he doesn’t try that suffocation shit on you.”

Davijaan winced.

Fox stilled, and turned back to the shelf. “Too late for that?”

“He didn’t hurt me. And it feels—the Force doesn’t always feel like that. I don’t know what it felt like to you but it feels good sometimes. Like a hug.” He pressed the pile of cloth close against his chest. “He’s not cruel to be cruel. He’s desperate. He’s doing this for his family.”

Fox’s back was rigid, his movements sharp as he stacked and re-stacked the blankets. “He could have killed me.”

He will *kill you.* “He just wants to win the war.”

“Win, not end.”

“Is there a difference?”

“One requires significantly more work.” Two pillows joined Davijaan’s pile, and then Fox was off down the aisle again. Davijaan blinked and followed at his heels.

He stopped paying attention and let Fox lead him through the storage room, focusing on the fact that he would get to sleep soon.

Fox came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the aisle and Davijaan almost ran into his back. “Having something in your head regulating what you feel, what you think, what you do… That doesn’t bother you?”

Davijaan shifted his feet, shifted the bedding in his arms. “… I don’t know.”

Turning to the shelf on his right Fox snatched up a small can of paint stripper and dumped it on top of the bedding.

“Take that red off. It's an insult,” he said, and strode down to the end of the aisle.

“It wasn’t my idea!”

Fox ignored him, and disappeared around a corner.

Chapter 5

Davijaan woke to a warm hand on his arm. Not shaking, squeezing gently. He blinked, and found Vos looking down at him. He closed his eyes with a groan.

Vos laughed.

“On your feet, soldier,” said a flat, dry voice that was definitely not Vos, and then Fox kicked him in the side. He shot out of his pile of blankets with a yelp, the events of—yesterday?—morning coming back in a rush.

“Hey!” Vos sounded very indignant on his behalf. How nice.

Fox said something sharp in return, but he decided it was safe enough not to pay attention. He had no idea what time it was. He must have slept through the day. Maybe early evening?

He caught the ration bar Fox chucked at his head with one hand, rubbing at his eyes with the other. “When did you get off shift?”

“Eighteen hundred. Didn’t come straight down though. It’s closer to twenty-one hundred.”

He crammed the ration bar into his mouth and his feet into his boots, and considered his armor. The paint stripper had taken off what little orange he’d had on his helmet under the red, as well as some of the white finish. He’d had to go hunting for another can of that on his own. The patches he’d touched up before he’d collapsed onto his pallet were dry. He was going to pretend they weren’t for a little longer.

Fox and Vos were standing on opposite sides of the doorway, eyeing each other. From the set of Fox’s shoulders Davijaan could see he wasn’t angry or afraid, simply annoyed. Vos was the one still on edge.

“Careful,” he said, conspiratorial, moving to stand between them with a nod to Fox. “He bites.”

Fox punched him in the arm. Just over the spot he’d bitten hard enough to break skin in a fight four years ago. Davijaan hissed and rubbed at the sting.

Vos looked at Davijaan, and looked at Fox, and looked back to Davijaan.

“I'll keep that in mind,” he said, and led the way out of the storage room.

***

“Palpatine put me in charge of updating his security after the break in. It’s mostly in place. I did leave a few blindspots for myself, just in case.” Fox rapped his knuckles against the blueprints spread out on the makeshift table. “The problem with the Chancellor’s floor, is there’s no security inside the actual medical bay.”

Vos raised an eyebrow. “None?”

“None. It’s all focused on the halls. Entrances and exits, that sort of thing.”

Davijaan frowned at the blueprints. No security was almost worse than fancy complicated security. No cameras or audio or heat sensors or bioscanners or anything like that meant no way to tell if anybody was on guard inside, ready to hit a panic button at the first sign of an intruder. “It’s not CG in there?”

“It’s Palpatine’s personal bodyguards.”

“The red hooded bastards?”

“The very same.”

“Is there a way to get at their records?” Vos asked.

“I had their records, before this whole mess,” Fox grumbled. “Now their patrol patterns are different and I haven’t had time to either steal their schedule or piece it together.”

“Ok. Senate Guard patrol route and schedule.” Vos nodded once, as if making a note to himself. “What’s next?”

***

The hours passed, and Vos’ list of necessary information and equipment grew. It was extensive, but not intimidating. Getting into Grand Medical wasn’t going to be complicated, only time consuming. Like Vos’ first attempt. But this time Davijaan knew what they were looking for, and this time they had Fox.

The preliminary work was split between coordinating schedules and cracking security systems. Davijaan was handed most of the schedule related problems, since he didn’t need any kind of special training for that, only the ability to compile and analyze raw data. Pretty much exactly what he’d been doing for Vos.

Fox and Vos were the ones who had to figure out a way past Grand Medical’s security systems and what little security was set up on the Chancellor’s floor. Even with the ins Fox had left for himself, he wasn’t in charge of everything, and didn’t want anything traced back to him.

It had not been suggested that Davijaan join them for the actual break in. He was content to keep it that way.

Their planning session didn’t end until the early hours of the morning. Final details decided, Fox shut his computers down and Davijaan piled up the papers and datapads they’d spread over the table. He would help clean up this once, since Fox probably hadn’t slept in the last two days. He hid it well, but he was going to need every minute of rest he could get in the four hours before his shift if he wanted to be useful later that night.

“The longer this takes, the longer the war drags on. But we can’t rush it and risk getting caught either,” Vos said, soft, to himself. He sounded more tired than frustrated, gaze gone distant. “If you hadn’t broken in when you did…”

Fox tensed, but Vos shook his head, brow furrowing as he focused back on the room. “And you don’t have any idea how Palpatine knew someone had been in there?”

“No.”

“Pressure plates? Something infrared?”

“Whatever it was, it wasn’t wired to an alarm. I got in and I got out, and I thought I was clear. A day later he had some kind of appointment, and when he arrived back at his office he just knew. Called me up immediately to start investigating the breach.”

Vos raised an eyebrow. Maybe skeptical, maybe impressed. “He had no idea it was you.”

“None that he let on.” Fox hesitated. “The most likely explanation is that I moved something and didn’t put it back correctly.”

“Except you’re too practiced to make an amateur's mistake.”

Fox inclined his helmet.

Vos stood. “Well. We’ll keep our eyes open, but even if he does find out someone broke in, at least he won’t know it was us.”

Finished with his computers, Fox left without acknowledging either of them, apparently tired enough to trust Davijaan to get the Jedi out of his lair in his absence.

Vos watched him go. “Not very polite, is he.”

“No, sir.”

“Huh. I guess he doesn’t have to be polite to get his job done.”

That was exactly what Fox said every time Wolffe told him to be careful who he pissed off. Davijaan barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes. But when he glanced up at Vos to see how annoyed he was, he found the man smiling.

***

After a long day’s rest, Davijaan left a sleeping Vos in the storage room and wandered into Fox’s lair.

Fox’s shift had ended an hour ago, and he was probably submitting reports and checking in with his second and doing all the little things a CO had to do at the end of a shift, but Davijaan didn’t have anything he could work on until he got his ass down here and turned on the computers.

He spread the copy of Grand Medical's blueprints across the table and idly traced the notes around the edges. He could read Fox's handwriting fine, but Vos' looked like somebody had taken the pen and repeatedly stabbed the paper.

For a time he sat on the cold floor, focusing on the blueprints and not the grey walls and the silence. Between one too loud breath and another he felt eyes on him. He looked up to find Fox sitting across the table, visor flat and blank and aimed straight at him.

He raised an eyebrow. "Can I help you?"

The helmet tilted, considering. "Why are you here?"

"Because Kote told me I had to be."

"What are you here to do?"

"Spy on Vos."

"And in the process you're helping him spy on me, and on the Chancellor."

"Behold," Davijaan spread his arms wide, encompassing the room and their plan and their mission. "Kote's genius."

Fox rose smoothly to his feet and stalked over to the computers. Davijaan went back to his blueprints.

***

He still expected the tension between Vos and Fox to escalate into a fight—for Fox to intentionally escalate it into a fight—but during that second evening together they settled into something like understanding. They still watched each other, wary, when they thought the other wasn't looking, but they also gave each other space to work. With supervision, Vos was even permitted to use one of the computers.

As he was mapping out a route through the building's staff access only stairwells, Vos asked, "Do you get copies of Grand Medical's building-wide maintenance reports?"

It took Fox a second to answer. Probably mentally separating the reports he was supposed to have access to from the ones he wasn't. "No."

"Last month's would be handy, if there's an easy way to get ahold of it."

"I have a recording of the maintenance staff meeting held last week."

"You don't get the report, but you get a recording of the meeting?"

Fox shrugged.

Understanding manifested as a slow grin. "You have a bug in that conference room."

“No. I sliced the cameras.”

Vos raised an eyebrow. “Show me.”

He sounded curious and not accusatory, so Fox came to stand next to him and pulled up the program he used to monitor the audio and visual feeds. Some were bugs, but many many more were simply making use of existing cameras.

Vos blinked as he took in the sheer number of feeds, neatly labeled and organized. Surprised, but more than a bit pleased. “This is good. This is really good. They taught you this on Kamino?”

Fox hesitated. “Theoretically.”

“Learning on the job, huh?”

He did not deign to answer that.

Vos hummed, turning back to the monitor. “What model are your bugs?”

“Standard GAR issue. With some… modifications.”

“I’ve got a case of my own I could bring up. They’re pretty high end, wider reach and better masking.”

“Mine get the job done fine.”

“Not to replace yours, just to have. For new rooms, or for when yours break, or for when the cameras reboot and kick you out of the system. You’d get better use out of them than I would, and that way you won’t have to worry about someone taking a second look at your requisition forms.”

Davijaan thought he was going to refuse out of hand, of course he was, why would he trust an offer like that—but after a moment Fox said, “Show me one first.”

***

Davijaan and Vos slept in the storeroom, and stayed there when Fox wasn’t around. Vos could sense when someone was coming down to collect something, and he would chide Davijaan up the side of the metal racks to lay flat on the dusty top shelf, out of sight of anyone on the ground. It was usually a rank-and-file or three sent on a collection errand by their CO. None of them lingered.

Vos made a few trips between his lair and Fox’s to bring up the equipment he’d agreed to provide and the necessary documents from his own computers, but once it became apparent they were going to be living in the CG basement for the foreseeable future he went down one last time to collect their gear.

He didn’t bring Davijaan. Which was fine, because Davijaan had no interest in being that deep underground ever again in the whole entire course of his limited life, but he felt…

uncomfortable with the idea of Vos being alone with the contents of his pack.

There was no reason to be uncomfortable. There was nothing personal in there, and Vos had already picked out whatever memories he'd wanted long before Davijaan even knew that was something he could do. Still, he caught himself feeling along his wrist to make sure the woven band was wrapped around it. He was grateful the only time Vos had touched it he'd had gloves on.

Vos announced his return with a loud, "Hey, Oddball!" from the doorway of the computer room.

Davijaan startled, and turned away from his camera feeds to face him, wide-eyed.

"Well I can't exactly call you both Commander." Vos crossed the room in measured, purposeful strides and deposited a brown bundle in Davijaan's arms. "Left your pack in the storage room, but I also brought this up for you."

It was the poncho.

Davijaan shook it out and stared at it, not sure what to say.

"It gets pretty cold down here," Vos prompted.

It didn't get that cold, but unlike Vos, who wore layers, and Fox, who wore armor, Davijaan had spent the last three days in his undersuit. He stood and pulled the poncho over his head, and immediately felt warmer as folds of thick brown wool gathered at his knees.

"Thank you, sir. This is…" He cleared his throat. Smoothed out a wrinkle. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Vos swung a pack off his back and started unloading the contents onto the computer desk. A 'pad, a handful of code cylinders, a portable scomplink. "That thing comes in handy. It's been a blanket, a disguise, part of a temporary shelter. I keep it in my emergency pack. Used to be Obi-Wan's."

His shoulders tried to curl in and he forced them straight. "Is he going to want it back?"

"Ha. It's been fifteen years, he probably forgot he lent it to me."

"No he hasn't," said Davijaan, with the certainty of a brother.

Vos just laughed. "Keep it as long as you want to," he said, and without looking tossed a bundle of wires over his shoulder to land perfectly in the center of the makeshift table.

With that reminder, Davijaan tactfully took over the job of putting away the equipment and respectfully maneuvered the Jedi out of Fox's computer room, and then went back to his camera feeds. He hadn't realized how cold he'd been until he could tuck his hands into the folds and huddle through the rest of his work.

That day he slept bundled up in the poncho. When Vos woke him, he was almost happy to see his stupid smile.

***

Fox was not nearly as appreciative of the poncho as Davijaan. Fox took one look at him sitting all bundled up in the corner of the storage room and spat— “Where did you get that?”

Davijaan maintained eye contact as he finished his bite of ration bar. “Vos,” he said.

“Why is he giving you things?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. He’s just—he’s being nice.” He took another bite.

“But why is he being nice? What does he want? What does he get out of being nice? He’s perfectly capable of threatening both of us into compliance, why waste time being nice?”

He shrugged the folds of the hood higher around his shoulders. “Leave me and my poncho alone.”

Fox’s eyes narrowed. He watched Davijaan finish his ration bar, intent and almost accusatory.

When he’d finished his meal and stuffed the crumpled wrapper into a pocket, he met Fox’s gaze, deliberate. “Do you need me for something?”

Instead of answering Fox sat on the floor next to Davijaan, set his helmet aside, pulled his knees up to his chest, and crossed his arms over them. Sitting like he had as a cadet in their common room.

“He’s doing it to me too,” he said, low. “All that ‘let me show you how to run your very illegal surveillance systems more efficiently’ and ‘let me give you some of my own expensive and valuable equipment so you can run your very illegal surveillance systems more efficiently.’ It’s strange. And suspicious. You brought a suspicious stranger into my building.”

As if Vos was in any way more strange or suspicious than Fox. He rolled his eyes. “Yes, I did all of this on purpose because I hate you and I want you to suffer.”

Almost absently, Fox punched him in the arm. Hard, but somewhat cushioned by the layers of wool. “Maybe that’s it. He thinks if he can make us like him, he can manipulate us better. Set us against each other.”

“That is not it! We’re all working together on this mission, we can’t be against each other or the whole plan falls apart. Why would he waste time on something that would do more harm than good?”

“Then what’s your theory?”

He hesitated, not really wanting to put this into words. But Fox wouldn’t let him get away with saying nothing. “I think he’s lonely.” He shrugged, looked away. “He misses his family. He’s been a Sith apprentice so long, I think he misses having people to be nice to. It’s not anything to do with us, it’s just. We’re here.”

Fox stared at him like he’d lost his mind. “That’s stupid.”

“It would sound that way to you, wouldn’t it.”

“He misses being nice? Do you hear yourself?”

“You wanted my opinion, I gave you my opinion.”

“No wonder Kote finally sent you off to die if this is the quality of your analytical skills.”

“This is not about you!” Davijaan straightened with a snarl, squaring his shoulders. “He doesn’t care about you, you self-centered ass! The only thing he cares about is making sure his family survives this war. Which should be a familiar mindset to you, actually, and just because he’s a Jedi and not a clone doesn’t make his motives impossible to understand!”

Fox did not respond. Davijaan got his breathing under control and slumped back against the shelves, scowling.

Vos hadn’t shown any signs of another suffocation incident. Then again, he hadn’t really shown signs before either. It had simply happened. But, he’d been steady these last few days. Movements measured in a way that was natural and not forced. Focused in a way that was anticipatory and not desperate.

Maybe something would happen and he’d go after one of them in a fit of magic induced paranoia, or maybe he’d simply needed to be around others to function properly. Even if those others were clones.

Fox rapped his knuckles against the duracrete. “You know he’s not telling us everything.”

“I’m not an idiot.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“If you try to follow him back to his lair, or snoop around in his files, or anything like that, he will know. And he will kill you.”

“Not as long as I’m useful he won’t.”

Davijaan's attempted elbow in the side was skillfully fended off.

“I’m not going to, I’m just saying. We do have some leverage here.”

“We?”

“Clearly he finds you useful in some capacity.”

Davijaan grit his teeth. “You’re the one who made a deal with him. Forced him to make a deal with you. What are you worried about?”

Fox went quiet. “I wasn’t expecting him to be… like that.”

Letting his head fall back against the metal edge of a shelf, he breathed out in a long, slow sigh. “Me either.”

They let the silence settle. It was familiar, and almost comfortable, sitting on the floor with another clone and trying to assess a CO. He and Kote had spent several evenings early in the war discussing Kenobi’s angle, and he’d walked in on more than one conversation of 212th troopers trying to figure out how their Marshal Commander’s brain worked. It was important to understand what those in charge of you wanted from you.

As far as he could tell, the only thing Vos wanted was for his family to be safe. Davijaan and Fox were a means to that end, but he wasn’t the type of CO who caused pain or frustration for the fun of it. He was like Kenobi—or maybe Kenobi was like him—and preferred to be on friendly terms with his officers for the sake of an efficient working environment.

Maybe Faie would mock him for that assessment too.

“We’re already against each other,” he said, successfully elbowing Fox. Gently. “He doesn’t have to make us like him to exploit that, so your theory is out whether you agree with mine or not.”

“We should stop acting so—” Fox gestured vaguely between the two of them “—around him.”

Davijaan blinked. “Stop acting so what?”

“Like ourselves.”

It took a minute for that to register, and when it did, he had to choke down a laugh. “Are you serious right now. You want us to—what? Stop fighting?”

“Stop being obvious about the fighting.”

“So we can present a unified clone front?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“No, I understand.” He snorted. Shook his head, awed by the sheer audacity, something hot and angry settling in his chest. “Call a truce so the Jedi will stop being nice to us and freaking you out. I get it. Sure. Fine. We can do that. Whatever you want.”

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“I'm going to drown you,” Fox hissed. “I'm going to fill a bucket with water and hold your head under until you die, and I'm going to tell Kote and Wolffe you tripped into it, and they’re going to believe me because you're a clumsy, useless waste of oxygen and always have been.”

As Davijaan opened his mouth, Vos stuck his head around the rack of shelves. “Ok, that's enough. Even *I* felt that in the Force. Can you two come out into the open so I can do my other job and mediate galactic unrest?”

Davijaan lurched, breaking Fox’s grip on his collar, and stumbled to Vos. Fox followed slowly, grumbling under his breath about being an officer and an adult and running a military police force single handed and not needing to be meditated at any time for any reason. But he did follow.

Vos settled back on the floor in front of his pile of bugs, picking up the one he’d been in the process of rewiring. Davijaan sat down beside him. In a rare display of restraint Fox ignored both of them, and stomped his way out of the storage room and to his lair.

After a moment of silence, wherein Davijaan rediscovered how to breathe, Vos asked, mild, “What did you do?”

He sputtered. “What makes you think I did anything?”

Vos gave him a look.

He scowled. “… I put salt in his canteen.”

“Ah.” A smile flashed across Vos’ face. “One time I stole a rice cake off Obi-Wan's plate and he told me my nurse should have smothered me as a baby. Both of us had to speak to our clanmaster. Good times.”

Davijaan tried to imagine that; tried to imagine Vos and Kenobi, cadet age, pranking each other and getting into fights in the mess. When he tried to imagine the clanmaster all he could think of was ‘17’s grim disappointment whenever he broke up one of Bacara and Neyo’s brawls.

Vos kept his eyes on his work. “You know he's going to get you back for that.”

“I know.”

“What if I were to suggest a preemptive strike?”

“You mean, prank him before he gets a chance to prank me back for pranking him?”

“Why not. It would be fun, a team building exercise. We could paint his armor orange or something.”

“No!” Davijaan sat up straight, his horror overriding his good sense. “You don't mess with anyone else’s armor, that's—No.” Armor was life-saving gear, and you didn’t mess with someone’s life. Especially not for something as silly as paint.

Not that putting salt in someone’s canteen was all that much better. Davijaan justified himself with the knowledge that the chances of Fox getting shot were significantly higher than his chances of being stranded somewhere without access to water.

Vos glanced up, concerned. “Ok, no armor. Got it.”

Fox hadn’t taken any part of his armor off in front of Vos since the three of them had started working together. Davijaan hadn’t put any part of his on. He would rather be cold than

encased in that stuff when he didn't have to be.

"It doesn't have to be armor," Vos added.

Davijaan picked at a loose seam at the hem of his poncho. "He's not actually going to hurt me."

"You keep saying that, but you don't believe it."

Early on Fox had learned whatever he did to Davijaan, Kote would do to him. That wouldn't stop him from murdering Davijaan outright if he had a good enough excuse or escape plan, but after six years it had stopped being an active threat and started being a distant inevitability. If he didn't get blown up in space, then Fox would knife him. At least he knew he had a quick death in store either way.

"He's had it out for me as long as we've known each other." He carefully pulled the thread free and wound it around his thumb. "That's not going to change, but it's not going to escalate in a way that endangers this mission."

"How do you know him?"

Because Vos sounded genuinely curious and because Fox was probably out of earshot, Davijaan answered, "He's my brother's brother."

"Your *brother's* brother." Vos repeated. "But not *your* brother?"

"No."

"I thought all clones were brothers?"

Davijaan looked at him with utter disgust. "Absolutely not."

There was a sense of responsibility among all of—or at least most of—the clones. They were a family of blood and battle, as '17 had often reminded his class. They were the only family they had. The only community they could rely on. They had a duty to stick together, and take care of each other. But that didn't make them all *brothers.*

That faint smile was back. "So your brother has a brother who is not your brother, but is still family in a distant, obligatory way?"

Davijaan shrugged. Not really, but sure.

"I get it." Vos was clearly amused. "Within the Jedi Order, we're all a family, but you also have a lineage. The person who taught you, and the person who taught them. All the people they taught, and all the people you teach. You have your friends from the creche and your initiate clan and those relationships can be really close, but it's different, with your lineage. Even if you don't all get along, those are the people who are always there for you. Who you can always go home to."

His hands never stilled as he spoke. Davijaan watched him expertly open one thumbnail sized piece of tech after another with nothing but a flick of his fingers, and swap out a threadlike grey wire with a bit of the red one from the spool next to him. That part did require help from a tiny soldering torch, also steadied and directed by the Force. The ease of the movement reminded him of disassembling and cleaning blasters.

Vos talked a lot about Kenobi, and Secura. He'd never mentioned anyone else. "So you've got your padawan and you've also got—your teacher?"

"My master was killed, early in the war."

Ah. That… should have been easy to guess.

Davijaan winced, but Vos didn't seem particularly upset by the reminder. "I was his only padawan, and I only have one padawan. My lineage isn't very typical." He set down the last of the bugs and sat up straight with a sigh, rolling his shoulders and twisting his neck, systematically working stiff muscles.

"It's funny how things turn out," he said, bending once more to tidy his patch of floor. "Master Tholme told me I'd better have half a dozen students to make up for his deficit. Aayla was very vocally opposed to the idea." He smirked, winding the rest of the red wire back onto its spool.

"I used to tease her, say just because she was my first padawan didn't mean she was going to be my favorite. She threatened to lightsaber off various bodily extremities if I ever tried to play favorites with her and her half a dozen hypothetical future siblings. But now, I don't think…" The smirk faded into something small, and sad. He set the spool carefully into his crate of supplies. "It's not going to be a good idea for me to teach, after this. I guess she'll get her way. She usually does."

Vos finished packing up his things. Tools in cases, unused parts in containers, rewired bugs into a bag. With everything neatly in the crate, he stood, taking it with him. "I'd better go check in with your not-a-brother, let him know I've finished with these."

And maybe because he hadn't been trying to coax or maybe because he had been trying to understand, Davijaan blurted out— "Cody and I are the ones who are brothers."

Surprise drew Vos up short. He turned away from the door and looked down at Davijaan, intrigued. "Obi-Wan's Commander?"

"Yes. He's—Yes." He forced himself to maintain eye contact. "He and 1010 had a class together our first year of command track. They became brothers before the class was even over, I think."

Vos set the crate down, and sat back on the floor. It felt a little easier to speak without the Jedi looming.

"I had a class with 1010's other brother, Wolffe. We became friends. So. The four of us aren't all close, Cody and Wolffe don't talk much, but we're… We try to keep in contact." Vos

nodded, absorbing that. And because Kote and Wolffe weren't here to be annoyed with him, Davijaan added, "As far as I know, 1010 doesn't have any friends. Cody and Wolffe are the only ones who tolerate him."

Vos hummed, neither approving or disproving. "He has his charms."

Davijaan scoffed. "He definitely has ways to make himself useful, that's for sure."

"Does he have a name?"

That question didn't surprise him as much as it would have even a week ago.

"Not yet," he said, because that was usually easier to say than trying to explain that the clone in question preferred their designation, or only used their name with close siblings and friends. "Just call him 1010. Or Commander. If he wants you to call him something different he'll tell you."

For a split second his brow furrowed, in confusion or suspicion Davijaan couldn't tell before it smoothed out again. "Ok. And, Oddball's still fine?"

"Yes, sir."

Vos stood, hefting the crate once again. "You know, you don't have to call me sir anymore. We're more or less equals on this mission."

Davijaan shrugged, and nodded, and figured it was easy enough not to call Vos anything at all.

Vos seemed to take that as agreement, and gave him a grin before he left.

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"I didn't even type it up wrong! I just didn't type it up with your specific formatting!"

"Which means it's *wrong!"* Fox thrust a threatening finger into his face. "If it doesn't fit with the rest of the documents, how am I supposed to find it!"

Davijaan crossed his arms over his chest. "It's *one single document.* Reformat it yourself."

"Or you could do your damn job right the first time."

"This isn't my job! I'm a pilot, not an analyst!"

"So you admit you're useless?"

"I'm not the one who got shuffled off to Coruscant before the war even started."

Fox punched him in the arm.

"Ow! You—stop!" He rubbed at what was slowly becoming a bruise, scowling. "If you don't stop hitting me—"

“You’ll what?” Fox sneered. “You’ll comm Cody and tell on me?”

Davijaan opened his mouth to say he just might, and comm Wolffe too while he was at it, when Vos stood abruptly from his seat at the computer. Something scalding wrapped around his waist and he saw Fox go rigid as both of them were yanked backwards, out of arm's reach of each other.

“Both of you, stop! I can’t believe I have to say this, but, no more hitting. And no more yelling.” Vos made a sound of disgust low in his throat as he released them. “Stars, you two are worse than Anakin and Aayla.”

“… General Skywalker and General Secura?” Fox asked, cautions, shoulders still stiff but hand moving away from his hidden sheath.

“Those two were menaces. Obi-Wan and I couldn’t take them anywhere together.”

“Skywalker can be kind of standoffish,” Davijaan informed Fox.

“Oh, no. Aayla used to bully him. Relentlessly. She would lock him in closets so he wouldn't follow her around like a lost puppy.”

Through the visor Davijaan met Fox’s eyes, both of them remembering the time Fox had locked Rex in the fresher.

Vos cleared his throat loudly. They returned their attention to him. “Oddball, how long is it going to take you to reformat the document?”

“… Three minutes.”

“Fix it please.” He turned to Fox. “If you’re going to have an annoying filing system then expect people to be annoyed.”

“Nobody’s supposed to use it but me,” Fox muttered under his breath. Vos pretended not to hear.

He removed himself to the second computer, where he’d been interrupted in his programming of two code cylinders. He was better than Fox at muffling his muttering, but Davijaan thought he heard ‘damn kids’ and ‘whose damn idea’ and ‘no damn wonder they drafted the Jedi.’

***

By the fifth day—or night, or however they were measuring time down here in the dark—everything was ready.

Almost ready. Mostly ready. Ready enough Vos vanished without a word halfway through their work session, sending Fox into a paranoid panic, only to reappear an hour later in the storage room with a bag of food.

“We’ve been working our asses off, we’re ahead of schedule, and we won’t have another opportunity like this once the break-in happens. So. We’re taking the rest of the night off,” he announced, empty crates sliding across the floor to arrange themselves in an approximation of a table and chairs. He set the bag down on the crate in the middle.

“You broke out of my building for *food?”* Fox grit out. Davijaan inched closer to see if he could read the label on the bag.

“I’m getting tired of those sawdust bars. I’ve had better slop in Separatist prison camps.”

“You could have been seen! You could have been caught!”

“Aw, were you worried about me? That’s sweet.” Vos flashed him a smile, and winked. “Worry not, Commander. I’ve been sneaking around this city since before you were born. The shadows are old friends.”

That shut Fox up long enough for Vos to finish setting everything up. Three paperboard containers of what looked like noodles and vegetables in a thick brown sauce, and another box of little round red bread things. They looked very soft. Davijaan had tried all sorts of civvy food on leave, but nothing similar.

He sat where Vos pointed him and accepted his container of noodles with thanks that was probably too eager, if Vos’ amusement was anything to go by. He could feel Fox’s glare and happily ignored it.

The first bite was too hot to taste, and he almost spat it out. Once his mouth adjusted he realized some of the heat was the spice in the sauce. It was rich and sort of stung his mouth, but not bad. Maybe even good.

Vos collected his own container, and glanced pointedly between the remaining one and Fox. “You should eat with us, 1010.”

“I know what you're doing.”

“Is it working?”

“I look just the same as any other clone.”

“Oh come on. Competent, intimidating commander like you? You've got to have some kind of scar to scare the rookies with.”

Fox huffed and took his helmet off.

Neither Fox nor Davijaan had made any attempt to customize their face. Next to each other they were virtually identical. No tattoos, no scars. Same regulation haircut and same bland expression.

Vos seemed very put out by this refusal to comply with expectations. “Both of you are boring,” he grumbled into his first bite.

Fox set his helmet aside and sat, and held his hand out expectantly. The container floated into it. He met Davijaan's eyes over the edge and smirked, the corner of his mouth curving up in a way Davijaan's could never manage, the lines across his brow that Davijaan didn't have smoothing. Fox's sweaty hair was a mess of frizz, a quarter inch too short to curl like Davijaan's was starting to as it grew out.

Davijaan didn't smile back, but for a moment he wanted to.

None of them talked while they ate, and for that he was grateful. He could focus on figuring out if he liked this new food without trying to manage a conversation.

Sitting and eating in the comfortable quiet made him miss the sounds of his squad like he missed the stars.

They had eaten together every meal, every day. For three years and through half a dozen deaths, reassignments, and promotions, the core of his squad of thirty-six had remained himself, Mitts, and Fiddle. He never felt like he had to manage moods, with them. Once he got Mitts going he could sit back and laugh with everyone else. Throw something in here and there to let whoever was telling a story know he was paying attention.

He shut down the flood of memories. There wasn't any point in thinking about his squad. He focused on the shelf just over Vos' shoulder. Medical supplies. Boxes and boxes of bandages, large and small, thick and thin.

His attention slid from the shelf to a bright spot of red in the grey.

Fox had set his helmet on the floor next to the crate Davijaan kept his unused armor in. The chestplate was the only piece visible, sticking over the edge enough the lid didn't fit. He'd taken it out twice to clean, a habit more than a necessity. There was something soothing about removing dust and smudges until the white gleamed.

His armor had remained unpainted long after any other clone he knew. Paint was a quick way to tell troopers apart, and he'd eventually given in to Fiddle's pestering and added some orange to his helmet for that reason, but the full-set designs that were so popular were impractical. He understood wanting to make it your own, wanting to make something standard issue into something personal. But, the armor would be damaged or the paint would chip, and the artist would have to do the work of differentiating themself all over again.

Fox' helmet was red. A bright, bloody red. His armor was the brightest thing Davijaan had seen in these last weeks in basements.

There were no shinies in the CG. Every trooper from the scared kids straight off Kamino to the veterans of Geonosis kept their armor painted exactly the same. Only Fox and his officers broke the template. Fox didn't paint his armor because he liked the way it looked, he painted it red like the bullseye of a target because that's what it was. Davijaan could respect that.

He chewed slowly, no longer tasting the stinging sauce. His armor, neatly stacked in a crate, as white and shiny as it had been when it was first issued. Fox's helmet on the floor. Red like blood, like a bullseye.

The clone he'd taken to Grand Medical all those months ago had been in white armor. A shiny's armor. ARC-5555. Fives. The clone Fox had shot in the chest. He never would have known he was an ARC if Kote hadn't told him.

Armor. White and red and empty.

"What happened to that ARC's armor?"

As one, Vos and Fox went still.

"Well." Fox placed his utensil back in the container, set the container down on the crate. "My squad took the corpse back to our morgue. I wasn't there but standard procedure is to strip the body before cremation and reuse or recycle what we can. Undersuit was probably repaired and put in rotation. The chestplate would have been recycled, but the rest of the armor…" He shrugged. "Cleaned and shelved for the next trooper who needs it."

Vos dropped his utensil on the floor with a clatter. "Fucking stars."

"It would have been scrubbed and repaired. Probably re-painted," Fox warned.

"You can't wash off or paint over memories." He shot to his feet. *"Where."*

Fox was already sprinting into the aisles, Davijaan close at his heels.

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In a frantic rush they gathered every piece of gleaming white armor from the shelves and piled them on the floor, and Vos knelt right down in the middle and tore off his gloves.

"Start with the pieces that rest against skin," he ordered, and Fox gave him a helmet. He turned it around in his bare hands, wincing, and then shook his head and passed it to Davijaan, who started a separate pile.

One by one Fox passed helmets and gauntlets to Vos. One by one he grimaced his way through checking them, deemed them unhelpful, and passed them to Davijaan. One pile shrank as the other grew.

When they'd worked through all the helmets Vos ignored the gauntlet Fox offered him and staggered to his feet, breathing hard. Both clones tensed.

"Are you alright, sir?"

"I'm fine." Vos waved away Davijaan's concern. "I just need a moment. Most of that armor… It's used."

"You mean most of it had somebody die in it," said Fox, flat.

Vos took a deep breath, leaning back against a shelf and meeting Fox's eyes. "Your troops like it here," he said, calm, serious, sweat beading on his brow. "They like you. Most of them are terrified of you, sure, but you take good care of them. They know that. They know there

are things that happen that are out of your control. This—" he gestured to the dozens of scattered sets of empty armor, "is not your fault."

Fox flinched, taking a full step back and almost dropping the gauntlet. Davijaan watched his expression shutter, and cleared his throat.

"How does that work?" he asked Vos.

Slowly, Vos turned his attention away from Fox. "It's a Force thing."

"Yes, but, you don't get every memory, do you?"

"I can't control what I pick up. I touch something old and a thousand years worth of memories force their way into my head." His eyes slid closed, pained. "I know how to control what I focus on, what I pull out of the chaos and make clear."

Must make everyday objects like cups hard to get usable data from. "Doesn't sound… Nice."

"Not really. But, they're not my memories, so technically I only remember the ones I bother to remember."

That made a certain kind of sense.

Another deep breath, and Vos lowered himself to the floor once again. A glance at Fox confirmed he'd regained his balance, though his expression was blank in a way that meant he was missing his helmet.

Vos took the gauntlet, and their assembly line started up once more.

"What do we do if some poor shiny is walking around in that armor," Davijaan asked Fox, low.

"I sign off on every requisition form that originates in this building. We'll find it," he answered, grim.

They turned back to Vos in time to watch him drop the gauntlet, lurch forward, and vomit.

Davijaan was at his side in seconds, getting an arm around his waist and pulling him up and out of the mess. "Don't lose that one," Vos gasped, pointing to the limp white and black glove. "That's the one. We found it."

Chapter 6

Fox lunged for the gauntlet. Davijaan steadied Vos.

For a moment the three of them stood frozen in the wreck of white armor, the acrid tang of vomit mixing with the sharp sting of bleach, gaze darting between each other and the gauntlet clutched in Fox's hands.

Davijaan laughed. He couldn't help it, the noise forced its way out of his body, high and cracked and maybe a little hysterical.

Fox shot him a glare that would melt steel, and he slapped a hand over his mouth, choking the rest of it down. His throat burned.

Vos cleared his throat, and cleared it again. He was squeezing Davijaan's shoulder hard enough to bruise. It was a little terrifying, the way submerging himself in the memories of a few dozen dead clones had affected him.

"I didn't—I need to see it again," he said, rough. "Only caught enough to see it was Fives. Or, to see it was someone you killed." He jerked his chin at Fox.

The backing plates creaked in Fox's grip. "I don't go around shooting my troops in the chest."

"I know." Vos released Davijaan's shoulder and straightened; meet Fox's eyes without the shield of a visor. "Give it to me."

That didn't seem like a good idea, at the moment. "Sir?" Davijaan stepped a little closer, putting himself slightly between Vos and Fox. "I can get you some water, and you can sit down, you don't have to—"

"I said. Give it to me."

He swallowed hard and took a step back. Vos ignored him, intent on Fox, on the gauntlet.

Fox's eyes flicked over Davijaan's face, but he offered up the gauntlet. Vos took it in both hands.

Davijaan watched him turn it around and around, studying smudged white and matte black, jaw clenched. The gold of his ring glinted in the stark overhead light. A sharp inhale hissed through his teeth. Davijaan watched every line and curve of the Jedi's face twist into a warning, and caught the flicker of yellow in the corner of a brown eye as fingernails scraped against plastoid.

Wordless, he grabbed Fox's wrist and dragged him out of range, out of the armor, out of the aisle. Fox allowed it until Davijaan dragged him out of the room, and then yanked them both to a halt in the hall.

“Why are we leaving him alone?” he demanded.

“So he can throw things around with the Force that are not us.”

“So he can destroy my storage room?”

“So we don't get strangled!”

Fox raised a single unimpressed eyebrow. Davijaan took a deep breath and reminded himself that Fox thought he was invincible, and Fox hadn’t seen Vos when he was drawing on the Dark. “Leave him alone for now. He'll clean it up whatever mess he makes. Probably.”

Fox twisted his wrist out of Davijaan’s grip and turned on his heel.

“If you scream, I'm not coming to save you!”

Fox flipped him off and walked past the storage room entrance, to his computer room. Another deep breath, a glance at the shadowed entrance, and Davijaan followed.

***

“He's not destroying anything,” said Fox, sour, flicking through camera feeds. “He's sitting. The gauntlet is levitating in front of his nose but that’s it.”

Not what Davijaan had expected, but as long as he left the storeroom intact, whatever Vos did was fine. He picked at the splintering edge of the broken crate he’d sat himself next to. “Can you see his face?”

“No. Not angled right.”

Probably too far away to see what color his eyes were, anyway. And there was always a chance they were closed.

A cut off sound of surprise drew Davijaan’s attention to Fox. Fascination was quickly overtaking scorn.

“What’s he doing?” Davijaan asked.

Not so much as a twitch in acknowledgment. Davijaan hauled himself to his feet and stomped over to the computer desk.

Vos sat on the floor crosslegged, back to the camera. The gauntlet was indeed levitating in front of him, but it had been joined by every other piece of armor they’d scattered around in their search.

For a moment Davijaan thought that was the end of the storage room, but, as they watched, helmets and vambraces and pauldrons detached one by one from the floating mass and stacked themselves neatly on the shelves, exactly where they’d been swept from.

Davijaan scoffed. “You’ve been watching him levitate things all week.”

Fox elbowed him in the side. And, he was right. Moving a crate across a room wasn't the same as precisely re-shelving thirty full sets of armor. Still.

Davijaan returned to his crate, slouching down on the floor in a huff. "Told you he'd clean up after himself."

"No, you said—That's the last piece. He's putting on his gloves. He's standing." Fox closed out the camera feeds. "Unless he's planning to leave the building he's headed here."

Vos appeared in the open entryway as Fox finished shutting the computer down, brown eyes clear and shoulders slumped. Davijaan and Fox both straightened to attention, but he strode past them and laid the gauntlet carefully down on their makeshift table.

"It's mind control," he said, voice still rough, but measured. "The biochips are mind control."

Mind control.

Mind control?

Davijaan blinked. "We... already knew that?"

"Explain," Fox demanded.

"I don't know everything." Vos would not meet either of their gaze. "Fives didn't know everything. He was drugged on the transport down, but he was focused enough to—Palpatine is more involved than I thought. The chips aren't regulating hormones. They aren't even active. When activated, they—" he broke off, hand clenching into a fist. Something almost pained, almost guilty, weighed his features.

"They inhibit the ability for higher thought. For decision making. For self-control," Vos forced out. "They make it impossible to refuse an order. The Sith activates these chips and the whole GAR will be unquestionably under their control."

Silence, shattering.

Davijaan felt another laugh building in his chest. "That's it? That's the evil Sith plot? Mind control?"

Beside him, Fox had gone still. Shoulders curved, balanced on the balls of his feet. "They're not currently active?"

Vos still wouldn't look at them. "No."

"But you thought they were."

"I thought… I thought Dr. Se was telling the truth. Some of the truth."

"You thought clones were so bloodthirsty we had to have part of our brains switched off so we wouldn't go around murdering Jedi."

Davijaan flinched.

Finally Vos turned to face them, abrupt and anguished. “Every clone I’ve ever met has had this—this violent intent towards me, towards other Jedi. I’d almost convinced myself it was paranoia, and then I started investigating the Sith connection with your creation, and then Tiplar was shot point blank by a clone with a faulty chip.” He spread his hands, pleading. “As soon as I got the report on Fives’ death my initial theory fell apart, I knew there was something more going on, but—”

“But you still thought we were in on it.”

“The highest ranking officers, at least. It was the only explanation that fit what I knew. The Sith bought the clones and gave them to the Republic, to the Jedi. The Sith want the Jedi dead. How could you not be in on it?”

Once, Davijaan had been shot out of an orange and yellow sky, and the release for his viewshield had jammed. He’d been trapped inside the cockpit as his ship spun down to the surface for eleven breathless seconds before he kicked the glass out. Whatever he was feeling now was a lot like whatever he’d felt then; weightless and numb and utterly helpless.

Fox’s voice cut through the memory, poised to draw blood. “It never occurred to you that some of that violent intent is because you *own us?”*

Heart in his throat, he grabbed Fox by the cuirass and dragged him out of Vos’ face. *“Stop.* Don’t turn this into a fight. Please don’t turn this into a fight.”

Fox shook him off. “I want that thing out of my head.”

“Yes.” Grim, Vos turned to the entryway. “We’ll get them out. I’ll be back in two hours. Is it possible to access your medbay?”

“There will be a room ready.”

Vos left.

Fox stood in the center of the room and breathed, rage sharp in the line of his shoulders, in the set of his jaw.

He kicked the table over. The door crashed to the floor and splintered down the middle, the crates scraping against duracrete as they scattered.

He turned on his heel and stalked into the hall, beckoning Davijaan after him.

***

Once more Davijaan found himself sneaking through the dim halls of the CG building in the early hours of the morning, this time trailing Fox as he dodged his own patrols. This time there were too many thoughts whirling through his head to focus on any one of them.

Medical wasn't bustling, but it wasn't empty either. Fox lurked outside the open doorway until a clone in scrubs passed too close, and then darted forward and caught the poor medic by the arm and hauled him into the hall. The medic didn't so much as stumble.

"Commander," he said, mild, as he uncurled Fox's fingers from his upper arm. "Good morning. How can I help you?"

"I need a room. A bed, surgical supplies, and a window."

The medic gave Fox a quick once-over, raised an unimpressed eyebrow, and gave Davijaan the same treatment. "Are you going to tell me what for?"

"No."

"Hm. Exam room three is empty. You know where the supplies are. Keep your voices down."

The medic offered a sharp salute that conveyed casual disregard for his CO's casual disregard of his person, and stepped back into the controlled chaos of medical.

Fox waited for a break in the flow, and led Davijaan into and through the crowd. They wove through curtained off cots to a supply closet and collected bandages and sheets and a sterilization solution.

The closet was the first of a long row of doors, flimsi labels denoting offices and exam rooms. Fox slunk into room three and locked the door behind Davijaan. Instead of grey, the walls were the stark white of every exam room he'd ever been inside. No cameras, and Fox's quick but thorough bug sweep came up empty.

They set their supplies on a counter, and Davijaan went to work sterilizing the exam table. "How long?" he asked, nose wrinkling from the smell.

"He's got an hour and a half left, if he bothers to come back."

The single window was high on the wall and sported a yellowed shade, a wide sill, and three locks, two of which were recent additions. Fox unlocked it but left it closed.

Davijaan was no medic, but he'd gone through the standard first aid training. He knew how dangerous brain surgery was. He knew how dangerous field surgery was. He wanted to ask if Fox knew what the fuck he was doing but Fox had gone through the same training. Fox probably knew better than he did.

Vos came through the window five minutes shy of the two hour mark, a powered down medroid wrapped tight to his back. Shiny and spindly, a surgery specialist by the look of the hands. The thing wasn't too happy when it woke up to realize it had been removed from the Jedi Temple.

"Jedi Vos," it whined, high and pitched to set Davijaan's teeth on edge. "I have patients to attend—"

"Come on S, this will only take a few hours, and you owe me."

The droid met the Jedi's pleading gaze unblinking and unfeeling. "Jedi Vos. This is a breach of our agreement. You were informed—"

"That I had to give you two days notice, yes, I know, but this is an emergency. Please, S?"

The droid's thin glinting fingers clicked menacingly, but apparently its programming was up to standard. "What procedure do you wish me to perform, and on whom?"

"You're going to take a chip out of my brain," Fox cut in, and the droid's attention swiveled to him.

Davijaan cringed as long silver legs stalked across the room, but Fox stood his ground.

"You are the patient?"

"Yes," said Vos and Fox in unison.

"Very well. Sit down, and I will begin preparations."

Fox sat on the edge of the exam table, not taking his eyes off the droid. A chest panel opened and a scanner extended, positioned over his head.

Vos watched. Shifted his weight. "If you need—"

"Get out," Fox ordered.

He climbed back onto the window sill. "I'll be around," he threw over his shoulder, and between one second and the next he vanished into the dark.

Part of Davijaan wanted to follow, to leave this white room before it started to smell of bleach and bacta and blood.

"Don't let Vos in here until I'm up."

"What?" He blinked back to himself to find Fox staring straight at him, scraping his knuckles against the table.

"Don't let Vos come back in here until I can stand," he said, hard.

"What if something happens?"

"This bucket of bolts will be able to do more than Vos can. Or would."

The droid tried to poke him and Fox caught its arm with a snarl. *"Don't."*

"I suggest you refrain from insulting the surgeon about to cut into your thick skull," it said, and if droids could be annoyed, this one would be.

Davijaan closed and locked the window, knowing thick glass and new locks would do nothing against a determined Jedi. The illusion seemed to make Fox feel better, some of his tension easing as Davijaan pulled down the shade.

Fox removed his upper body armor and grudgingly let Davijaan set it on the counter. From the back of the droid's head, a thin wand extended, casting a harsh blue sterility field over Fox and the table.

"Lie down, please."

With one final assessment of the door, the window, and the droid, Fox lay back, his gaze flicking to Davijaan before he closed his eyes. The droid pressed a hypo to the side of his neck, and he went limp. Not unconscious, not for brain surgery. Paralyzed.

The surgery lasted minutes. Davijaan forced himself to watch, knowing Fox would never forgive him if he didn't. Vos' droid worked smoothly, steadily, and precisely. He focused on what he was seeing—razor across skin, scalpel through flesh, laser through bone—and let the rest of the sounds and smells of surgery fade into the white space closing in around him.

He caught a glimpse of the chip as it was placed in a sample container. It looked like any other particle of brain matter.

When Fox's head was stitched up and the boneknitter was doing its work, he inhaled, suddenly lightheaded. He gripped the edge of the table, and he hadn't noticed himself stepping closer but now he stood at Fox's feet, studying him for signs of life.

"Your friend's oxygen levels, blood pressure, and body temperature have remained stable," the droid said, folding away its knives and needles. "Do not be concerned."

"I'm not."

The droid made a low buzzing noise that almost sounded like displeasure.

The paralytic wore off all at once and Fox lurched upright, eyes wide. The droid caught him before he fell off the table. Fox shoved it away. The particular panic on his face was so familiar it was almost a comfort, if not for the strangeness of it over Fox's features.

Cautious but quick, Davijaan sat beside Fox and took his wrist and squeezed. "You didn't die. You're fine."

He didn't get punched in the nose or pushed off the table for his efforts. Concerning, but a concern that could wait. The droid stayed out of reach as the boneknitter finished up, and Davijaan kept a tight hold on Fox's arm as it taped a bandage over the stitches and did a final vitals check.

A scraping sound at the window; a boot against stone. The droid ignored it, busy packing up. Fox straightened, grimaced, and removed his arm from Davijaan's hands. "Pass me the vambraces."

Only when he was armored up to the neck and standing, braced against the table, did he nod for Davijaan to open the window. Vos slipped inside with an eerie grace and slid the window shut behind him.

Davijaan stationed himself next to the table, not sure if he intended to prevent Fox from trying to walk or Vos from trying to get close. To his relief, Vos hovered in front of the window.

“The surgery was successful?” he asked, glancing between his droid and Fox, brow furrowed. “I can feel…”

The droid buzzed a “Yes,” as Fox snapped, “Stop that.”

Vos winced. “Shouldn’t you be laying down?”

“Jedi Vos. You will return me to the Temple and to my patients.”

“Soon, S.” If a droid could pout, this one most certainly would. “How are you feeling, Commander?”

“Fine.”

“Liar. Are you dizzy? Nauseous? Enraged?”

“No more than usual.”

“Good.” Vos hesitated, and squared his shoulders. “And. I’m sorry.”

Fox ignored that. Vos nodded to himself, accepting the dismissal. “How long do we have this room for?”

“Until I give it back to my CMO.”

“Excellent. Oddball?” He turned his full attention to Davijaan, uncomfortably differential. “Do you want me here for yours?”

Davijaan startled. “Mine?”

“Your surgery. I can wait on the roof again, if that would make you more comfortable.”

“Why do I need to get the surgery?”

Silence.

All at once the attention of the entire room was on him, stunned and disbelieving. He resisted the urge to shuffle his feet. “What?”

Fox’s lip curled in disgust.

“Did you not hear the bit about mind control?” Vos asked, intent and a little bit frantic. “The Sith activating your chip and forcing you to follow their orders?”

“We don’t even know how they activate.”

“Which is why we shouldn’t take chances!”

Panic wrapped around his ribs like ice, like that first taste of the Dark. “You didn’t say I had to get the surgery! You never said—”

“I *assumed—”*

Fox took a step forward, leaving the stability of the table to snarl, “You’re a liability if you don’t get it out.”

“A liability?” He scoffed. “A liability for *what?* What is your brilliant plan to end the war? What role could you possibly have for me? What does any of this change?”

Fox opened his mouth, but Vos cut in. “If the Sith discover we’re on to them, then—”

“They could make me turn on you? As if I’m any kind of threat.”

“This isn’t about threats or liability! It’s about your control, your choices,” he insisted, all earnest concern. “You really want to run the risk they could be taken away?”

“My choices? My choices.” Davijaan was struck by a sudden and intense desire to punch Jedi General Quinlan Vos square in the jaw. “You are an idiot.”

For a split second Vos gaped, shocked. Something viciously satisfied sparked in Davijaan’s chest, and—and then the General collected himself; jaw snapped shut and eyes narrowed. “Oddball.”

And that low tone was a warning, that clenched fist was a threat, but he was too angry to care. He’d take being choked over being—

“I don’t want surgery,” he said, desperation making him loud, making him reckless. “I don’t want—” *my head cut open and sewn back together, I don’t want pieces of my brain removed and examined, I don’t want that droid anywhere near me, I don’t want* “—to have the surgery. I don’t want to! I don’t want to get brain surgery! Mind control.” A laugh or a scream forced its way out between clenched teeth. “That is the stupidest possible thing—fucking *mind control.* What difference does it make?”

Fox took three heavy steps across the room and gripped his shoulders, teeth bared. For a moment he thought Fox was going to rip his throat out. “You know as well as I do it makes *every* difference.”

“An order from a being with a lightsaber is an order from a being with a lightsaber.” No clone needed a damn control chip to ensure they followed orders. Whoever had the power had the control, and if the Sith had as much power as Vos feared, well. Mind control chips were a waste of a perfectly good plot.

“There is a difference between following orders from a superior officer and being an empty body for a Sith to puppet.”

“What difference? You’ve never made a single choice for yourself. None of us have. None of us can.”

“I chose not to kill you.” Fox sneered. “It was a pretty significant choice at the time.”

“And if you were ordered to kill me? Ordered to kill anyone?” Davijaan pressed his hand against the red center of Fox’s chestplate. “You would choose not to, and that would be that?”

Fox released him with the abruptness of a flinch. He stumbled, but suddenly Vos was across the room, not touching but holding him upright with an open hand.

“If it doesn’t make a difference, then get the surgery,” Fox demanded.

“No.”

“You’re getting that thing out if I have to hold you down myself.”

“*No.*”

“Yes!”

“No,” said the droid.

The attention snapped from Davijaan to the droid. It stood next to the table, observing.

Davijaan’s relief was swiftly replaced by suspicion, but the little metal thing whirred, and drew all of its arms together in front of its chest, almost as if it were crossing them, defensive. “I will not perform an invasive and unnecessary procedure on a patient who does not consent fully. Jedi Vos, you will return me to the Temple now.”

Vos studied the thing for a long, aching moment, and then turned to study Davijaan.

He tried not to tremble under the weight of that gaze. It felt like being looked through. Not the way a natborn looked through a clone as if they didn’t exist, but intent, knowing, like Vos was looking inside him. He breathed, and held steady, and tried not to think about everything the Jedi was probably sensing from him right now.

“Alright, S,” Vos said, mild. “Let's get you back to your ward.”

Fox hissed. “You’re not going to make him?”

“No. No, I am not.”

Slowly, carefully, with every dip and sweep of his hands visible, Vos lifted Fox a few inches into the air. Fox tensed, but Vos only floated him across the room and sat him gently on the table.

“You should get some rest, Commander.” A cupboard opened, and a stack of sheets drifted out and settled themselves by Fox’s hand. “Probably not a good idea to be walking so soon.”

“*This* is the line you won’t cross,” asked Fox, flat and disbelieving.

“I guess so. S?”

The droid walked primly across the room and allowed Vos to fold it up and tuck it into the wrap again, making a noise that sounded oddly like a long suffering sigh.

Half inside and half out, Vos paused on the window sill. “When I get back, we’ll discuss where to go from here. Until then,” he glanced between the two of them, seething in their separate corners, a smile or a grimace twisting the ribbon of his tattoo, “try not to kill each other.”

Vos left, and Davijaan stood with his back to the door and breathed and breathed and breathed and felt like he couldn’t get enough air. He felt like he did after a battle, surprised and triumphant and so exhausted he wasn’t sure how much longer he could stay on his feet. He felt—He wanted—

Fox shoved the sheets to the floor, stood, snatched up his helmet, and stalked out of the room without so much as a tremor, shouldering Davijaan aside.

Davijaan stayed in the quiet and kept breathing, and breathing, and breathing. Eventually his legs gave out and he ended up on the floor, still breathing.

If Vos had agreed with Fox about the chip being a liability, then—

The door hissed open behind him, and he jerked, stumbling to his feet. He turned and found the medic Fox had snagged. The CMO?

“Saw the Commander slip out, but didn’t see you,” the maybe CMO said, stepping inside and letting the door slide shut behind him. “You alright, soldier?”

Davijaan cleared his throat. “I’m fine.”

He didn’t look like he believed Davijaan, but that was fine, too.

“First shift is starting soon,” he said, apologetic. “If you’re not using it, I need the room back.”

“Of course.”

He tried to slide past, but the maybe CMO caught his arm and drew him to a halt. “Do you need anything? You don't look so good."

“No. Nothing.” He twisted his arm out of the loose grip. “I said I'm fine.”

“I can find the Commander for you? If you don’t know your way around, this place can be a bit of a maze.”

“I know where I’m going,” he lied, and marched out of the makeshift surgery suite and back into the grey.

Chapter 7

Davijaan made it to the basement with no memory of the journey.

He checked the computer room first. The broken table and overturned crates hadn't been touched. In the storage room the congealed remains of the fancy noodles had been left out for anybody to find.

He couldn't bring himself to throw the food away, so he ate the rest of it, the remains of all three boxes along with the red dough lumps. It tasted like dust.

Fox wasn't around. Or if he was, he wasn't showing himself.

Davijaan's poncho was folded neatly on top of the rest of his bedding, where he'd left it before their meal. He pulled it over his head and sat in the corner he usually slept in, and waited.

***

He woke to warmth, and a hand on his shoulder.

"Oddball?"

Vos.

Davijaan forced himself to uncurl, to sit, Vos backing away to crouch across from him.

"Yes, sir?" he said, throat dry and sore. He wasn't ready to meet the Jedi's eyes.

A sigh. The scuff of boots against duracrete as Vos settled. "1010 and I are getting ready to leave."

He blinked. "Leave?"

"We're doing the break in, as planned, to see what we can pick up about contact with Separatists, and Sith. We decided…"

At the hesitation, cold curled in his chest. They hadn't woken him up for whatever discussion they'd had, so. They'd decided they didn't want his help.

And, really, they didn't need his help. His pre-determined role had been to monitor comms and cameras, and with nothing to monitor once they actually got inside the medbay his involvement had been a precaution more than anything.

Liability started echoing around in his head.

He swallowed. "I understand, sir."

Vos sighed again, and this time he sounded annoyed. Davijaan tensed, concealed by folds of thick brown cloth.

“Listen, Oddball, I understand your fear over the surgery—”

No you don’t.

“—but none of us know what this chip is capable of. We don’t know—”

“You do know,” Davijaan cut in. The words came out harsher than he’d intended but he abruptly did not care. “You said it was mind control. What do you mean you don’t know?”

Vos rocked back on his heels, but his surprise at the interruption was quickly erased by frustration. “We don’t know the full extent of what you could be ordered to do, or not do. Palpatine implied there was no limit, but I’m having a hard time believing him, for some reason. We don’t know—”

“Why does it matter?”

“Why doesn’t it?” Vos demanded. He reached out, and before Davijaan could fling himself away Vos caught his chin in a grip like a vice; forced Davijaan to meet his gaze. “Can you not imagine the ways you could be manipulated? The lines you could be ordered to cross?” His eyes were hard, but there was something almost pleading about them, too. “I can.”

Davijaan jerked his chin free. “You don’t want us to turn on you. That’s the only reason you care that this chip doesn’t do what you thought it did.”

“I care because I know what the Sith are capable of. I lived that hell for years and I know how they use their power.”

“And the Jedi are so different?” Kenobi had always been polite to him, kind even; had saved his life once. Skywalker had a GAR-wide reputation as protective. Wolffe respected Koon enough not to gossip about him. None of that changed the fact that Davijaan had spent the last three years flying straight into enemy fire. “Being ordered to die is being ordered to die.”

By now he trusted Vos wouldn’t kill him, but there was still some part of him expecting cold, invisible pressure around his neck. He breathed, and watched the Jedi’s face carefully.

Not a flicker of yellow. Only brown eyes, boring into Davijaan. That same sense from the exam room of being looked through.

“You’re saying if a Jedi ordered you to kill yourself, you would?” Vos asked, even. “No hesitation. No protest.”

Davijaan smiled. “I jumped when you told me to jump, didn’t I?”

Vos flinched. “You did,” he said, heavy, and looked away. Davijaan wanted to be satisfied by that admission.

But, then, Vos said again, “You did.” He sounded thoughtful. He looked back to Davijaan. “And immediately afterwards you hit me, and told me not to touch you. Not to *fucking* touch you, actually.”

“I—”

“You say no to me all the time.”

Davijaan managed to bite back his first instinctual *no I don't*, but from the way Vos smirked the bastard could see it all over his face. That's what he got for not wearing his helmet.

“You told me in no uncertain terms not to hurt 1010. Not to mess with his armor.”

“That was just—That wasn’t—”

“On the ship, when I cornered you.” Vos raised an eyebrow, and recited: ‘“Fuck you. I am not a fucking traitor.”’

Every molecule in his body ignited with fury. *“Fuck. You.”*

The damn fucking Jedi had the damn fucking audacity to *grin.* “There you go,” he said, cheerful. “That exact glare.”

He levered himself up, briskly dusting off his pants and stomping his feet. He met Davijaan’s eyes again, and said, “You wouldn’t have jumped if you hadn’t trusted me to catch you.”

With that, Jedi General Quinlan Vos strode out of the room.

***

Davijaan couldn’t move, he was so angry. He sat on the cold grey floor and shook and shook and shook until he couldn’t stand to sit anymore and shot to his feet, body moving without conscious thought, simply needing to be far away from this corner and this storage room and far away from the site of that—*that.*

He wasn’t the kind of idiot who talked back to his superiors. Except apparently he was, when he didn’t have anything to lose.

Vos wasn’t in the computer room, which was good because he had no idea what he would say or do when he saw Vos again and didn’t want to find out yet.

Instead, Fox was in the computer room, removing his armor. The bandage was still in place, a patch of white almost lost in his dark hair. He glanced up as Davijaan stomped inside and then back to his armor. “Vos told you,” he stated, mildly disgusted.

Davijaan came to a stumbling halt in the middle of the room. “You weren’t going to?”

He made a sweeping gesture at the computers. “Don’t touch any of that. If you do, I’ll know.”

“You weren’t going to tell me before you left?”

“You’re not a stupid as you look, *Davijaan,”* he sneered, all but shoving his cuisse into the crate at his feet, “but you’re a coward.”

Davijaan opened his mouth but could not form words; everything angry inside him crawling up his throat and threatening to choke him, to kill him when so many other things had not.

“I thought the way you followed Kote around was a good survival tactic,” Fox continued, “but turns out, you won’t even risk your skin to save your skin.” He slammed his greaves into the crate and slammed the lid over them. “I don’t want you anywhere near my operations.”

“This chip isn’t going to kill me.”

“Might as well be dead if you won’t choose to live.”

Davijaan wanted to shake him the way a trainer might shake a cadet. Shake some sense into him. “Maybe if you’d spent a single day of this war actually fighting it, you’d understand none of us can make that choice.”

Fox stiffened, but he didn’t stop whatever he was doing; kicking the armor crate under the computer desk and drawing a second crate out with his boot. “I chose not to kill you,” he said. “I chose to kill every reporter and politician and activist whose name Palpatine put on my desk. I chose to kill that ARC.”

“That was following orders.”

“That was choosing to live.”

“So, what you’re really worried about is being forced to stop killing people to save yourself? Forced to stop killing other clones?” Davijaan laughed, bitter. “If I’m a coward, you’re a selfish murderer.”

Too fast for him to react, Fox was across the room, a hand fisted in his collar. *“My selfishness is the only thing I have.”*

He gave Davijaan one good shake, teeth bared and eyes wild, and then abruptly released him. Took a step back. “You think I’m trying to end this war because I care that clones are dying in it? Because of that clone solidarity shit Kote and Wolffe go on about? Fuck no.” Fox turned his back and kicked the lid off his crate. “Every clone in the galaxy could drop dead tomorrow and I wouldn’t care.”

Davijaan pressed a hand to his throat and breathed.

That was a lie. Davijaan knew it was a lie because Fox had held a knife to his throat twice now and hadn't so much as nicked his skin. Because he let himself be called by a name Wolffe had given him six years ago. Because of the way he’d gone still when Vos told him the deaths of his troops weren’t his fault.

It was a lie, but it was a kind of lie Davijaan recognized. A lie you tell yourself over and over hoping one day it will be true.

“I’m doing this because I want to get off this rotting planet alive,” Fox said. “I want to see the stars. And if the only way I’m going to get that chance is if I end the war myself, then I’m going to damn well end the war myself. And I’m not letting you or any other clone get in my way.”

The crate was full of civilian clothes. Davijaan watched Fox swap out heavy GAR issue boots for a pair in soft synth leather. Perfect for climbing, for walking soundlessly. A brown jacket with a high collar. Gloves.

As he pulled on the gloves Davijaan caught a glimmer of silver at his left wrist. There was an alert when a battalion commander’s tracker went offline, but even as panic rose he pushed it down. Obviously Fox had tampered with the alert, if he hadn’t done something about his tracker signal years ago.

The telltale white GAR utility belt was replaced with a black one. Davijaan watched Fox carefully fill the black belt’s pouches with the contents of the white ones, and said, soft, “We’re already dead.”

Fox stilled. Davijaan couldn’t see his face but he could see the way he turned something thin and silver around and around in his hand. A knife.

“No,” he said. He flipped the knife into the air, and caught the blade between two fingers. “We’re not dead. Not yet.”

The memory of terror when he’d thought Vos was going to toss him out the airlock came back to him; the way he’d planted his feet and said no. It felt like a betrayal, now, the way his body had fought even for those few seconds.

“Do you have a weapon?”

Davijaan blinked back to himself. “What?”

“Do you,” said Fox, pointed, “have a weapon on your person?”

“No.”

Fox grunted, and Davijaan watched him slide knives into sheaths inside his boots, at his belt, up his sleeves.

When Fox was dressed any clone would be able to tell what he was under the civilian clothes, but Davijaan could admit that in the dark, from a distance, without the armor silhouette, it would take a few seconds.

He replaced the lid on the civvy clothing crate and shoved it under the computer table, next to his armor crate, and finally turned to face Davijaan. But he didn’t look at Davijaan, he looked past him, to the door.

Davijaan turned and found Vos leaning in the doorframe, arms crossed loosely over his chest, glancing between them with concern. A second of silence, and his gaze fell heavy on Fox. “Ready?”

Fox gave a sharp nod, and strode across the room. As he brushed past Davijaan he pressed a sheathed knife into his hand and said, “If all you see yourself as, is a walking corpse, that’s all the use you’ll be.”

Before Davijaan could find a way to respond to that, he was gone.

Vos straightened, but lingered in the doorway. “You’ll be alright, by yourself?”

Davijaan swallowed, set the knife carefully beside the computer. He forced out, “Yes, sir.”

“Shouldn’t take more than an hour and a half, at the most.”

“I know.” He’d been a part of the planning. He hadn’t forgotten any details simply because he wasn’t involved anymore.

“I know you know. Just—” Vos rubbed the back of his neck, seemed to realize what he was doing, and let his hand fall loose. “We’re so close. This is almost over.”

“I know.”

***

Vos and Fox left, and Davijaan stayed.

For a time he paced, walking a circuit through the computer room, into the hall, to the storage room; back through the hall, back through the computer room. When he got bored of walking he sat in his corner in the storage room and tried to sleep.

He wanted to be angry with Kote for being the reason he was here, for being the reason he’d had to survive everything he’d survived in the last weeks, but all his anger had sputtered out when he’d been left behind. Now mostly what he wanted was to not think.

He wanted to sleep, but after an indeterminate span of time spent laying on the floor he realized was too scared to sleep. He wasn’t sure when Vos and Fox would get back, wasn’t sure what else about his world would change when they did, but he wanted to be awake for it this time.

With that realization, he dragged himself to his feet and made his way to the computer room.

They weren’t back yet. He hadn’t noticed how concerned he’d been that they would come back and not come find him until that concern was alleviated.

With nothing better to do, he moved the broken table to the side and stacked the crates neatly. The crates were all uniform, sturdy, the Republic cog pressed into the plastoid sides. Probably re-purposed from supply deliveries.

That done, he started pacing again. Might as well keep moving, if he couldn’t sleep. Focus on breathing, on taking one step after another. It was boring, but it was a good way to not think.

As he passed the computers he glanced at the chrono next to the monitor, and his heart skipped a beat.

It had been almost three hours. Vos and Fox had been gone almost three hours, and he hadn't noticed.

Firmly he set aside both his disgust with himself and his panic. There were all sorts of complications that could have caused a delay. Surprise locks or cameras, staff staying late, even speeder trouble.

The comm originally designated for his use was on the computer table. Next to the knife. He fiddled with it until he found the frequency they'd decided on.

Static.

He checked a handful of frequencies. Nothing but static.

Unease curled cold in his stomach. Resigning himself to Fox's wrath, he started up the computers.

There were three entrances to Palpatine's fancy private medbay: The landing pad for the surgery suit, the main hall, and a staff stairway. Each covered by cameras and sensors, with their own complicated accompaniment of locks and alarms. Fox and Vos had decided to use the stairway. Fox had stuck that camera on a loop, and the feed was still dutifully looping the same five minutes of empty stairs.

The landing pad was deserted, so was the main hall. Davijaan played back the footage of the landing pad in sped-up increments, searching for any hint of activity behind the heavy black doors. Nothing.

He switched to the hall. Back five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, and—

Davijaan watched, frozen, as the door slid open and a squad of CG troopers marched out of Palpatine's medbay.

Well. That would certainly explain the delay.

He didn't know for sure they'd been caught. Maybe they'd been discovered, but escaped, and this squad was sent to track them down. Or maybe Palpatine randomly had a headache and needed to go all the way to his medbay in the middle of the night and took CG with him because he could. The squad leader had been a commander, from his personalized paint. Wings on the helmet. Maybe Fox had recruited some of his trustworthy troops to help with the break in and hadn't bothered to warn Davijaan. Maybe—

A small red alert appeared in the lower right corner of the monitor display.

He didn't allow himself to hesitate, just opened the alert. A new camera feed showed a slice of hallway and stairway, the flat grey of the CG building. A squad of CG in full kit had reached the stairs. He watched them march down.

They were moving… oddly. Platoons drilled for thousands of hours to march perfectly in step. It was muscle memory so ingrained it might as well be instinct. Marching was as natural as breathing. The sharp, precise steps of this squad were certainly uniform, but not smooth enough to be natural.

He switched to the next feed, and—in the front right, the commander had wings on his helmet. It was the same squad that had left Palpatine's medbay fifteen minutes ago.

Marching *down* the stairs.

Definitely caught, then. Fuck.

He shut down the computers. Standard protocol was to destroy them, but he didn't have time. It was possible they were looking for Fox's lair and not for a co-conspirator. Either way, he needed to not be in the basement when that squad made it down.

The squad had come from ground level; the level with the hangar. They had two barracks levels to get down to the storage rooms. Fox's little alert system had given him about three minutes.

They were marching. He grabbed the comm and the knife, and he ran.

As he flew through the hallway he yanked the poncho off and bundled it up around the comm, around the knife, clutching it to his chest. The long grey hall passed in a blur. The thud of his boots made him wince but it was too late to take them off.

He took the stairs three at a time and stumbled as his feet found the small landing. He punched the door controls and didn't wait for it to slide open fully before wedging himself into the gap and shoving his way into the lower barracks.

Another long grey hall. The wall to his right was set with three wide openings. Three barrack entrances. An identical stairwell door to the one he'd come through marked the far end of the hall. As he watched, the door began to slide open.

With careful, deliberate nonchalance, he slipped into the first barrack entrance as the winged commander stepped into the hall.

It was dark. The high ceiling allowed for dozens of rows of bunks stacked six high, and most were empty. The third shift barracks, then. In the far corner, illuminated by a carefully angled bucket lamp, a squad off-duty were playing sabacc. One glanced up at him, and then back to his cards.

He didn't go to the first empty bunk. He picked one halfway down the second row, not too close to the squad, out of sight but within hearing distance of the entrance. He toed off his boots and threw himself down on it with a sigh.

On his back in a strange bunk, Davijaan forced himself to relax. If anyone from that squad got a good look at him, they would be able to tell if he was tense. He had no idea if the CG was large enough a stranger would go unremarked on, or if bunks were assigned or shared

depending on shift schedules. He tried not to think about all the ways he could be caught, and instead listened.

The squad marched steadily down the hall. Davijaan breathed in time with their rhythm. When they reached the barracks entrance his breath caught in his throat, but then they were past, and then he heard the faint hiss of the door sliding open, and then the hall was quiet.

He lay there for a handful of heartbeats, waiting for the door to hiss again, for the squad to come charging in and drag him out of the bunk with a blaster to the back of his head.

No hiss. No squad.

Finally he sighed, and sat. Put his boots back on and adjusted the rolled up poncho under his arm.

“Not much of a nap, brother,” called one of the card players.

Davijaan laughed, and threw over his shoulder— “Half a minute out of those damn boots is all the break my shift allows,” and as casually as he’d wandered into the barracks he wandered out again.

He couldn’t run anymore, now that he was out of the basement. There were CG troopers around who would see, who would make note of his lack of armor and his bundle of brown wool. The only thing that reassured him was the silver bracelet around his left wrist, hidden under his woven band and his sleeve. That was one way he could not be found out.

That squad may or may not be looking for him. He doubted Fox or Vos would have given away his involvement, but he didn’t know for sure, and it was safer to assume the worst. It was safer to get out, as fast as possible.

He walked with purpose, up stairs and through grey hall after grey hall. It was third shift, too early to be morning, so the building was all but empty. When he did pass the odd trooper he nodded, face fixed in a bland smile that gave nothing away. Evidently there hadn’t been any kind of alarm sounded. Yet.

He made it all the way to medical and didn’t let himself feel the relief of that until he had Fox’s CMO by the wrist, dragging him out of the chaos and into the hall.

“Yes?” said CMO, annoyed, looking not at Davijaan but behind him; looking for Fox. “Can I help you?”

“Exam room three. Is it empty? Can I go in there? Only for a few minutes, I need—”

“Slow down, soldier.” The CMO twisted his wrist out of Davijaan’s grip, annoyed. “Yes, it’s empty. Yes, you can go in there if you need to.” He glanced suspiciously down either side of the hallway. “Where’s the Commander?”

Davijaan smiled. “Confidential, sir.”

The CMO scowled, but from the way the corners of his eyes creased Davijaan knew he was worried. “Hm. Fine.”

He turned on his heel and led Davijaan through the crowd right to exam room three, pausing before the open door with a scowl that was distinctly less worried and distinctly more annoyed. “When you see the Commander, tell him covering for him is one thing, covering for all his little friends he wants to sneak in and out is another. Got it?”

“Got it,” said Davijaan, cheerful, and all but slammed the door in his face.

He went straight to the window. Just as he’d thought, the alarm was still disabled.

He kicked off his boots and stuffed his things in them, wrapped the poncho around them. Clambered up onto the sill, eased the window open as quietly as he could. Medical was half the third level, so there weren’t many windows close to this one, but if he made a stupid mistake now Fox would have his kneecaps. If and when Fox was in a fit state to remove said kneecaps. But he wasn’t thinking about that.

The wrapped up boots hit the ground with a muffled thump, and he allowed himself a moment of satisfaction as he climbed out after them.

It was hard to shut the window while clinging to the frame, but he managed. It’d been a while since he’d climbed down the side of a building, but he managed that too. He was only three levels up and the wall was stone and mortar, plenty of holds to be found in the gaps. His body remembered the careful shifting of balance, even if he was slower than he wanted to be.

Davijaan jumped the last four meters to the ground, shoved his feet into the boots, and kept running.

***

He was out. He was under a sky again for the first time in almost a month, even if it was as false as the simulated battlefields on Kamino. All that mattered was that when he tilted his head back and looked beyond the neon glow of Coruscant nightlife, he saw a black vastness that could have been space.

He was out, and he had no idea where to go next.

Davijaan didn’t stop moving because standing still was an easy way to die, but he was starting to shake. He slowed enough to tuck the comm into his waistband and the sheath into his boot, to put the poncho on properly, and that didn’t help but it didn’t hurt either.

Vos and Fox had been caught trying to break into Palpatine’s private rooms, and Palpatine was in league with the Sith. If they weren’t already dead they would be soon.

Officially Davijaan was still dead, he still had his signal jammer, but this whole captured by a traitor to the Republic situation went way beyond the original mission objective and parameters and with Vos out of commission who cared. He didn’t care. He needed help and he didn’t care.

He couldn’t break into Grand Medical to stage a rescue. He could probably figure out how to get in, but it would be a useless effort with the CG and the Senate Guard and the Red Guard all standing between Palpatine’s prisoners and what minuscule threat a single clone posed. He needed to find someone who could break in, and fast.

He could go to ‘79’s and see what battalion was on leave this month, see if someone would lend him a comm so he could contact Kote. Kote would know what to do. But if the CG was looking for him, the clone bars were the first places they’d check. He couldn’t go to the barracks for the same reason. That squad would know to check all the usual places a clone would go to find other clones, to find help.

When he was on leave he kept his distance from civilians, unless they were in the same bar looking for company. He knew some clones had friends on Coruscant, but he definitely didn’t and definitely wouldn’t be able to make use of anyone else’s.

Or maybe, he realized, catching a glimpse of brown wool poncho in a storefront window: Maybe he didn’t need someone to help him break in. Maybe he needed someone who could walk right through the front door.

The Jedi would rescue Vos. They would rescue him if Davijaan could convince them Vos was still a Jedi and not a traitor, and if they rescued Vos they’d have to rescue Fox, too.

He needed a Jedi. And—he looked up, through a gap between the skyscrapers to the pale temple towers that could be seen from hundreds of miles in any direction—he knew exactly where to find one.

***

He pulled his hood up and kept his head down, and stuck to the shadows as he wove through narrow streets. The poncho would hide him from civilians, but there were CG patrols on the main roads, and any clone would be able to tell what he was.

He ran when an alley was isolated enough he could get away with it. He couldn’t pay for a taxi and he couldn’t risk stealing a speeder, but the Senate—and by extension the CG building, and Grand Medical—were close to the Jedi temple, and he covered the distance fast.

Clones didn’t go to Jedi for help. Not with internal problems, or incidents with civilians. Clones went to other clones for help, and if the issue couldn’t be resolved among themselves then a delegated officer would get a trusted Jedi involved.

It wasn’t that the Jedi wouldn’t help, they usually did when they were asked, it was just… You could never be sure the Jedi would take your side. Especially when it came to civilians.

But this wasn’t an inter-battalion squabble or anti-clone sentiment boiling over, this was a Jedi spy who’d been captured and needed rescue. Davijaan simply had to explain. They’d believe him, because who could make up shit like that? And if they didn’t believe him, then they could read his mind and see for themselves.

Either it was already too late, or it wasn't. Panic would not change anything.

He didn't try to get to the main doors, because he didn't know how. He ran until he was in the shadow of the temple, and kept running. Eventually the crumbling Coruscant buildings gave way to an empty expanse of stone paved street, and across the wide street, the temple wall cut into the sky.

Davijaan turned left for no real reason and picked up his pace, following the wall. Golden light shone from a handful of windows set high above street level, spilling over on the dirty stone. Likely entire floors higher. Surely there was more than one entrance to the temple. If he followed the wall long enough—

Rounding a corner, his attention snapped to a recess in the wall a bit further down. Relief was instant and brief. He'd found a way, but he wasn't inside yet. As he got closer he saw the recess held metal doors, tall and heavy and ancient in design, guarded by masked figures.

Davijaan slowed to a walk, observing the two guards shadowed by the doorway. They stood in something like a relaxed attention, facing outwards, ignoring him. Oh, they'd noticed him, from the way the shorter of the pair's hand twitched on their weapon—and that was definitely a lightsaber of some form, they were definitely Jedi—but they expected him to pass by.

He swallowed, pushed his hood back, and marched right up to them.

The white and gold masks were less expressive than a clone's helmet, but their gaze lay heavy on him as he came to a halt directly in front of the two guards. He tried to mirror their relaxed posture with hands loose and empty at his sides, visible, free of the folds of his poncho.

He smiled, and hoped they couldn't feel what he was feeling the same way Vos could. "Hello, sirs. Slow watch?"

The shorter one, the one on his right, shifted slightly. In training maybe, unused to standing still and impassive for so long. Neither of them spoke, or gave any further sign they'd heard him.

Well then. "I understand, you're on duty, you're busy." He cleared his throat. "Speaking of. Any chance you'll let me through that door?"

The taller one spoke, and he barely managed to keep from flinching. "This is not an entrance, this is an exit. If you would like to enter the temple we suggest you go around to the front."

Another endless stretch of time running around the foundation, plus stairs, plus however long it took to talk his way past the front door—

Panic would not change anything.

"It's an emergency, sir." He let some of his desperation bleed into his voice. Maybe he did want them to feel some of what he was feeling, if it would speed things along. "I don't have time. I need to speak to…" Yoda and Windu, Vos had said. And Kenobi. "General Yoda."

Silence.

“Can you at least tell me if General Yoda is on planet? Or General Windu? I’ll even take General Kenobi.”

The taller guard didn’t move, but there was a sudden sense of being disapprovingly loomed over. “We are not at liberty to give out information of that kind to strangers.”

“Stranger?” He glanced down at himself and back to the guards, disbelieving. It wasn’t that dark, not on Coruscant. “Haven’t you seen a clone before?”

The shorter guard scoffed. “Not dressed like that.”

Davijaan wanted to scream. “Please, I need to see—any one of them. All three of them. I need to get a message through if nothing else.”

With a note of resignation, the taller guard asked, “What is your message?”

He opened his mouth, and instead of screaming he said, as calm and controlled as he’d been trained to be— “I know where Quinlan Vos is.”

The shorter guard visibly stiffened. “Master Vos is dead,” they spat.

“Not yet.” Either it was too late, or it wasn’t. “He’s alive, he’s here on Coruscant, he’s been captured.”

The sense of disapproval from the taller guard increased. They straightened, making use of the full breadth of their shoulders, formal and foreboding. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you—”

“*Please.”* His voice cracked, his half step forward only stopped by the shorter guard’s tightening grip on their lightsaber. “Please can’t you—touch my arm or something, and see I’m telling the truth?”

The shorter guard scoffed. “That is *not* how the Force works.”

“What? Yes it is?” Well. Now that he thought about it, he had no idea if Kenobi could do the ‘pulling memories out of objects’ thing. “I’ve seen at least one Jedi do that.”

“Jedi don’t waste time on party tricks,” they sneered.

“And as it happens,” said the taller guard, measured, but with an edge of surprise, “Master Vos was one of our few true psychometrics.”

The younger turned to their elder, their own surprise visible in every line of their body until a firm hand on their shoulder reminded them that they were still technically on duty. They both relaxed back into their formal posture, and then two empty masks turned simultaneously to Davijaan.

The hair on the nape of his neck stood on end. He breathed, and let them study him for seconds that lasted an eternity.

He was getting tired of being looked through. But, maybe every Jedi did this to everyone.

Finally, the elder let their hand fall from the younger's shoulder, and said, “You certainly know something. Very well. I will pass on your message.”

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Beyond the metal doors—held open for him by an increasingly grumpy and increasingly obviously padawan-sized guard—was not the courtyard he was expecting. Instead, a tall and narrow room bisected by a tall and narrow hallway. The thick stone walls were hollow, apparently. At least at this level.

Windu was waiting at the center of the room, the elder guard who had gone to get him standing off to the side. Davijaan came to attention and saluted, as precise as he could manage when out of armor.

He’d never met General Windu, but he’d seen him from afar a handful of times. He didn’t look like he’d been woken up too early to deal with a crisis, he looked like he did on the battlefield—intense, focused, steady. A point of reference, and he held himself as if he knew it. As close to a monument as any living being could get.

Without preamble, Windu said, “You know where Quinlan Vos is?”

“Sir.” Davijaan spoke clear and clipped, as if giving a formal report or issuing orders. “I last saw General Vos almost four hours ago, when he left the CG basement to attempt to break into Chancellor Palpatine’s private wing in Grand Medical. I suspect he succeeded in getting inside, but was caught and captured. I have been unable to contact him. He missed his return time, was not observed leaving Grand Medical, and an hour ago a CG squad was dispatched to search their building’s basement.”

Windu raised a single brow. Davijaan could not begin to guess if that was a gesture of shock or of skepticism. He kept his chin up, and met Windu’s eyes. “What can I do to make you believe me?”

“I believe you,” he said.

“Wait, really?” Davijaan blinked. “Just like that? You’re not going to read my mind or anything?”

“Now I definitely believe you’ve spent time with Quinlan Vos.” For a split second, Windu’s perfect posture slipped, revealing worry and exhaustion. A split second, and then gone. He gave Davijaan a considering once-over. “Commander Oddball, I presume?”

“Yes, sir. That’s me.”

Brows slowly drew together into a frown. “And you didn’t have any role in the break in?”

“No, sir. He had another clone with him. For backup. A CG commander.”

If Palpatine was going to hurt either of them, it would be Fox. A Jedi he could sell to the Sith, or even, if he thought he could get away with showing his hand, ransom back to the Order. A clone? And not only a clone, but one of his own officers, who had betrayed him?

He’d been trying not to think about that.

He shook his head, shook those thoughts away. “I don’t know how often he reports back to you, but—”

Windu cut him off with a raised hand. “I haven’t heard from him since that show he and Obi-Wan put on.” He was still frowning. It was a little menacing, even if it wasn’t directed at Davijaan.

“Broke into the Chancellor’s private rooms…” A deep, full body sigh. “Palpatine is well within his rights to arrest Vos. I can request he be released into Jedi custody, but that would require Palpatine to make the arrest public. Which, if he chooses to do so, could take days.”

It was hard to breathe, all at once, for the cold in his chest.

Davijaan fought to keep his face under control as Windu’s frown shifted to worried contemplation. “You would not have come to us in this way if you did not have cause for urgency.”

Urgency was one way to put it. “We—” He coughed. “That is, General Vos has reason to believe Palpatine is playing both sides of the war.”

Windu did not look surprised by that. He looked resigned, and Davijaan would be a lot less angry about the last three years if Windu looked more surprised by that.

“Playing both sides of the war, how?”

“Sir. After investigating the Chancellor’s cover-up of the chip incident, General Vos speculated he had made a deal with Separatist leadership to ensure the war dragged on as long as possible, to enable him to expand his power over the Senate. And…” Carefully, measuring each word, he said, “there were signs he’d been in contact with a Sith.”

Windu did look surprised by that. Somehow, the surprise was worse.

“Signs of what nature? And is that truly speculation, or is there proof?”

“Sir—”

“I’m not asking because I doubt you,” said Windu, firm. “I’m asking because I need evidence before I can accuse the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic of treason.”

Davijaan needed to tell Windu about the mind control. He knew he needed to. It was evidence. He needed to give a complete report. Windu needed to know the situation in full.

But, he did not know what Windu would do, when he found out the Sith intended to use clones to kill the Jedi.

He didn't have time. This was urgent, he could feel this was urgent, even Windu could. Something about the static, about the way the CG squad had marched so perfectly and so wrong, about how every piece of evidence they'd found in their investigation could be traced back to Palpatine.

Vos could spill the whole plot to Windu and Yoda and Kenobi and all the other Jedi after—*after.* It was Sith stuff anyway, it wasn't relevant to rescuing a Jedi from a traitorous politician.

"There's a file," he said. "Evidence gathered against Palpatine by the CG. That's why their commander got involved, he made a deal with Vos to make the file public through the Jedi after Vos' investigation concluded. I know where to find a copy."

Fox kept those computers where they were for a reason. Even if the CG squad had found them, had wiped them or destroyed them, copies would be hidden all over the building. If you knew Fox, and knew where to look.

Windu nodded, grim. "That will do."

Sweeping relief almost sent Davijaan to his knees.

Over his shoulder, Windu addressed the guard. "Send a message to Master Yoda and Master Drallig, tell them to meet me at hangar three." Turning, he strode into the hallway. "You're with me, Commander."

"Yes sir," said Davijaan, rough, and fell in three paces behind and to the left of the General.

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Windu let Davijaan fly. He didn't even have to ask, Windu simply waved him to the cockpit of the Eta-class shuttle and told him to get them to Grand Medical.

"There is a chance he won't be there," Windu admitted as he strapped himself into the co-pilot's seat, as General Yoda and General Drallig settled in the passenger area. "But at the very least, we have reason to believe he is, and we can use that excuse to look for Vos and his commander. Though, I have a feeling…"

The artificial dawn had not yet begun. The ship lanes were blue-lit, and he directed the shuttle up into the bright night. He'd flown low over Coruscant a handful of times on ferry duty, but he'd only flown to Grand Medical the one time. The route was burned into his mind.

It was a flight of minutes—silent, tense minutes—and then he was bringing the shuttle down on the landing pad beside Palpatine's Nubian skiff.

The docking codes had not been changed from three months ago. That was just sloppy.

Windu took one look at the skiff and nodded, suspicion—feeling?—confirmed.

“Wait for us here, have the shuttle ready to leave,” he ordered, standing. “If something goes wrong, go back to the temple, and find Master Billaba. I informed her of my errand, and of your identity.”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you have some way to communicate with us?”

Davijaan opened his mouth to say no, and then thought better of it, and fished out the comm in his waistband as unobtrusively as he could manage. The knife in his boot shifted with the slight shuffle of feet.

Windu adjusted the comm to a frequency and returned it. “I’ll have my own on that frequency when we’re inside. I’m anticipating…” He frowned, and did not clarify what he was anticipating.

The three Jedi left without another word.

Davijaan sat and breathed and listened to the grey crackle of static. He filled his mind with it. Either it was too late or it wasn’t. Either they were fine or they were not.

He surprised himself, with how much he wanted them to be fine. It would be awkward to explain Fox’s death to Wolffe and Kote.

Static. Static and his own heartbeat. Static and the way the comm dug into his palm, the way the knife pressed against his ankle.

He didn’t know why he’d taken the knife. He’d wanted a weapon when he ran, but Fox was right, he didn’t know what to do with it. He was going to have a bruise on his ankle. He—

—Static crackled into echoing footsteps, and his breath caught in his throat.

Footsteps, and more footsteps, and the tap of Yoda’s stick. A murmur as they passed someone.

The Chancellor did not own the only private wing, only the largest. He had his own surgical suite, with its own landing pad, where Davijaan had ferried that wayward ARC. Probably Windu and the others were aiming for the office. He tried to visualize the blueprints so he could locate them, but all he could think of was the way Vos and Fox had taken turns marking them up.

More footsteps. And more footsteps, and—a door hissed open, and than a faint, aged voice said—

“*Master Windu. Master Yoda.*”

A voice he recognized from newsreels and radio and Senate approved messages. Chancellor Palpatine.

He shivered.

“*To what do I owe the pleasure of this invasion?”*

Windu didn’t hesitate. *“In the name of the Galactic Senate of the Republic, you are under arrest, Chancellor. Commander, you and your men are ordered to stand down.”*

A clone squad was in there?

For half a second he was surprised, and then the thrum of a lightsaber sent every thought scattering, his heart pounding.

“*Are you threatening me, Master Jedi?”*

“*The Senate will decide your fate.”*

Silence. Painful, aching silence as he listened, every muscle in his body tense, for the scrape and clack of trooper armor.

Palpatine broke the silence with a sigh. *“I must say, it has come to this sooner than expected,”* he said, and if his voice was not so faint Davijaan would have thought he was disappointed.

“*Commander Thorn, Execute Order 66.”*

A burst of blaster fire, a scream, and Davijaan’s body abruptly became distant.

Chapter 8

The Jedi were traitors.

The certainty of it, the rightness of it, settled over him like battlecalm. Of course the Jedi were traitors. Quinlan Vos was a traitor. He was plotting against the Supreme Chancellor, plotting against the Republic; plotting the destruction of everything the GAR had been created to defend. Vos was a Jedi, and loyal to the Jedi. So of course the Jedi were traitors.

Davijaan was a traitor too. He'd gone through so much trouble to rescue Vos, when the right thing to do would have been to leave him to his fate.

The Supreme Chancellor knew exactly how to handle traitors. But, Jedi were hard to kill. A squad of six loyal soldiers against three traitor Jedi were not good odds.

To prove his loyalty to the Republic—to right his wrong—Davijaan needed to help his brothers kill the Jedi.

Before that realization fully resolved he was standing, leaving the shuttle, marching across the landing pad. As he stepped out of the wind and into the climate controlled lobby Davijaan registered that he felt the weight of his boots but not the impact of his footsteps.

Inside Grand Medical the blueprints came back to him, clean and precise. Through the comm still in his hand came the faint zing of blasterfire and buzz of lightsabers. Someone was laughing. Someone was screaming. He could not feel the comm. He knew he was holding it by the sound traveling with him, the pressure against his palm, the space it took up in his fist.

The halls of Grand Medical were not white. They were pale yellow and pale green. They were as straight and uniform as the halls of Kamino. They were empty. He marched steadily from yellow to green to yellow and he could hear the thud of his footsteps and the hiss of his breath but he could not feel his legs rise and fall, could not feel his lungs expand and contract.

A crackle of electricity through the comm, and then it cut to static.

He was marching into a firefight. He didn't have armor. He didn't have a weapon, aside from the knife Fox had given him.

His body jolted to a halt. His view of the hall shifted as he crouched, and thick folds of wool pooled around his feet. The poncho would prove cumbersome in a fight. Restrict his movements. The weight across his shoulders lessened as he drew it over his head and discarded it.

Limbs free, he removed the sheath from his boot, and the knife from the sheath. When he stood he did not have the comm in his hand.

The hilt of the knife was a weight and shape unfamiliar to him. He held it like he'd seen Fox hold knives, clenched in a fist. The metal blade shone silver in the stark overhead lights.

He marched, and gradually the yellow and green were overtaken by grey. His attention was split between the blueprints, the hallway, and his fingers wrapped around the hilt. He adjusted his hold over and over and over. His hand was steady. He'd never killed anybody but it wasn't any different from disabling a droid. Aim for the central processor. Aim for the heart.

An alarm went off. It grew louder as he approached the Supreme Chancellor's wing.

Davijaan rounded a corner. At the far end of the hall an office door slid slowly open, smoke billowing out. In the grey-red haze figures moved. At least one was a clone. His pace picked up.

Before the door was fully open two figures charged out of the smoke, carrying a third between them. Fox and Vos, carrying Windu. They didn't so much as glance at him. They set the unconscious traitor down against the wall, out of the smoke, and wordlessly rushed back inside.

If Fox was working with Vos, then he was another traitor to kill. If Fox was working with Vos, if they were free to rescue the rest of the traitors from the fire, then his brothers had failed.

Again Fox and Vos forced their way out of the smoke, carrying a soldier in battered and blackened armor. Davijaan was close, now. Close enough they both noticed him at the same time. Shock eclipsed Fox's anger, Vos' pain.

They staggered to a halt. Davijaan advanced.

"Oddball?" Vos ventured, voice rough from smoke or screaming. His eyes skipped from Davijaan's face to his knife.

Fox had been stripped of his civilian clothes, down to his undersuit. Vos was missing his gloves. His gloves and his boots and most of his shirt. The remains of it hung open, exposing his chest.

Aim for the heart. From the corner of his eye he saw his hand raise the knife. Vos shuddered, twisted, and Davijaan drove the blade into the traitor's shoulder.

Vos did not scream. Fox did, a sound of rage so sharp it cut through the alarm. Davijaan's hand was steady as he tore the knife from Vos' shoulder and adjusted his aim.

Vos shoved the soldier into Fox's arms, sending them both toppling with a crash and a curse, and kicked Davijaan in the stomach. Davijaan felt his breath leave his body but caught the traitor's leg; slashed at his thigh.

"Oddball. Oddball, let go of the knife," Vos demanded, breathless, slipping his leg free of Davijaan's hold and dancing backwards. "Let go!"

Davijaan opened his mouth to tell him to fucking *shut up,* and no sound came out. He lunged again for the traitor's heart.

Davijaan stabbed and slashed. Vos dodged and re-directed. Davijaan managed to draw blood again, on his arm, but the traitor would not hold still and he would not strike back. Any time he touched Davijaan it was to push him away.

It wasn't until they were circling each other halfway down the hall Davijaan realized Vos was leading him away from Fox, from the other traitors. But, he was starting to falter. He was bleeding from three places now, half his chest a vivid red. His breath hitched and stuttered. He reeked of smoke.

Davijaan darted forward. Vos leapt back. And then Vos stumbled, and coughed, harsh. Once he started he could not stop. He kept moving, unsteady, feet dragging, lungs heaving, eyes glazed with panic.

Forcing himself in close, Davijaan forced Vos back and back and back until he hit a wall. Davijaan wasn't big enough to pin him, but he didn't have to be. He only had to bury this knife in the traitor's heart.

Vos threw himself to the side, but not fast enough, not far enough, and the blade sunk in under his clavicle. The fight left his body with a low groan.

Instead of freeing the knife—and risking Vos freeing himself—Davijaan braced an arm and shoulder against the traitor's chest and dragged the knife down. Widening, deepening the wound. It would be slow, and painful, but this duty would be done.

"Please…"

At the softness of that sound Davijaan glanced up from the knife, up to the traitor's face. Brown eyes met brown eyes, wide with terror. Something about those eyes and something about that terror made him feel—

A buzz, a click, and burst of heat against his hand. His grip on the hilt broke, the force of the shot sending him reeling. The clatter of metal against duracrete, and then sudden warmth against his back, around his neck, catching his left wrist and pinning it across his waist. Before he could get his feet under him he was hauled backward.

He had to get free of Fox and kill him, kill Vos, kill Windu and the other traitor clone. Davijaan knew he was fighting from the way his view of the hall shifted; his view of Vos, slumped against the wall, breathing hard and bleeding steadily. He had to get free. He had to kill the traitors.

He couldn't grip anything with his right hand, it slid uselessly against the arm around his neck. He couldn't make the back of his head connect with Fox's nose. The solid warmth of Fox's limbs held firm, all tangled up with the void where Davijaan's body used to be.

A deep, shuddering breath and Vos straightened, one hand braced against the wall and the other curled into a fist. Davijaan felt Fox's breath catch.

“A little help?” Fox snapped, and he sounded angry but Davjaan knew he was scared. He should be. Davijaan wanted to tell him he was going to die for this betrayal, but he couldn’t make his mouth work either.

When Vos lifted his head his eyes were hard, but they were still brown, and that meant he was still a traitor.

“Hold him *still,”* the traitor demanded, and Davijaan writhed.

Fox lurched as Davijaan’s boot came down on his bare foot. “I can’t!”

A muscle in Vos' jaw twitched. The fist opened and closed. “If I try to—I don’t know—”

“Dark or Light, does it matter!”

Vos snarled, and flung out a hand, and—something scalding coiled up from Davijaan’s ankles to his neck; burning pressure cupping his nape like a brother’s hand.

Fox’s hold went slack, and then tightened. Not restraining, bracing. He heard his breathing pick up.

Vos left the wall and advanced, leaving red footprints on the grey floor. He raised one hand and pressed a red palm to Davijaan’s forehead, and the burning seeped through his skin and flesh to his bones. Fox adjusted his hold again and Davijaan knew his body was shaking.

Vos’ lips moved in a soundless mantra. His eyes slid closed.

In his head, something *snapped.* A burst of pain bright behind his eyes, and Davijaan fell back into his body with a scream.

Everything burned. Every muscle, every joint. His *hand—*

Vos sank to his knees, gasping, and Fox and Davijaan followed.

Davijaan screamed until he remembered how to stop. Then he rolled off of Fox onto his hands and knees and choked up bile. The alarm was still going off, shrill and urgent and it *hurt,* it hurt his ears and the smoke stung his eyes and his throat was raw and he wasn’t sure if the wetness on his cheeks was Vos’ blood or his own tears.

Before he could collapse face-first into his sick Fox looped an arm around his waist and hauled him up and more or less upright, and more or less into his lap.

“You *idiot,”* he hissed, clutching Davijaan to himself, fingernails pinpricks of pain on his side and arm. “You absolute fucking *moron.* I told you. I *told* you! You hollow-chested, empty-bucket, shiny-ass—”

“Wasn’t any worse than surgery,” he said, muffled into Fox’s chest.

Fox’s grip tightened. “I’ll kill you,” he said, conversational.

Davijaan giggled, high and hysterical. “That would take care of the problem, wouldn’t it?”

“I’ll cut it out of your head myself.”

“Should have aimed higher, put us both out of our misery.”

“Nobody is killing anybody,” Vos interrupted. “Nobody is dying. That is an order.”

He did not want to look at Vos.

Carefully, slowly, he eased himself out of Fox’s arms. Fox let him go without resistance. It hurt to move but he could kneel. He could stand, if he had to. He did not want to look at his right hand either, but he caught a glimpse of the charred remains of his trigger and middle fingers on the floor as he sat, leaning against the same wall as his General; as he settled the mutilated hand on his thigh. He’d never been so glad to be in pain.

Vos was still bleeding. As Davijaan watched from the corner of his eye the Jedi breathed in, and out, and the blood trickling down his chest from around the hilt slowed, and stopped.

Vos opened his eyes and he did not look at Davijaan. “Fox,” he rasped. “The fire.”

“Fuck.” Fox shot to his feet, and then hesitated. He glanced between Davijaan and the smoke-dark doorway to the office. *“Fuck.”*

Davijaan braced his good hand against the wall and managed to lever himself up. “I can—”

“Sit.” Fox shoved his shoulder and broke his concentration. His tailbone hit the floor with jarring agony. “You,” he jabbed his finger at Vos, “watch him. And *you,”* he shook his fist at Davijaan, “watch *him.* Watch each other.”

Fox turned on his heel and charged down the hall, away from the fire and the wounded and towards help. Davijaan watched him vanish around the corner and breathed.

He still couldn’t look at Vos, not directly, and he could tell Vos wasn’t looking at him.

He swallowed. Forced his mouth to open, forced his lips to form words. “I’m—”

“Don’t. Please.”

Davijaan nodded, blinking as the walls blurred. He was crying again. Or maybe he hadn’t stopped. He wasn’t sure when he’d started.

“The bleeding?” he asked, tentative.

“I’ve got it. Just takes some concentration.”

He nodded again.

Inside the office something shattered. Something creaked and groaned and crashed. The roar of the fire was starting to make itself known over the blare of the alarm. Davijaan wanted to

ask if Palpatine was dead, or if he'd escaped. He wanted to ask if there had been more survivors his attack had prevented them from saving.

Davijaan sat just out of Vos' reach and shook. He pressed his good hand against his side and felt his ribs curl around his lungs, under his skin, savored the grey and bitter taste of smoke on his tongue, and waited.

***

Fox returned with buzzing security droids and frantic medical staff and almost a dozen Jedi, terrifying in their grim intensity as they swept down the hall towards him.

Vos was levitated onto a cot, and pressure was put on his wounds. Davijaan did not pay attention to what was done to Windu or the clone, or how the fire was put out, or to Fox.

When he stumbled outside, out on the landing pad, leaning heavily on the arm of a strange Jedi, the false sun was rising. It was the first star he had seen in a month.

***

Palpatine was dead. Vos had killed him.

***

That first day Vos, Windu, and Fox's salvaged CT spent submerged in bacta. Fox almost got dunked too, but argued himself into bedrest and an oxygen mask instead.

Davijaan received a standard post-combat check and a brain scan, and then watched closely as a Jedi medic cleaned and treated and properly bandaged his hand, annoyed the lost fingers hadn't been recovered and could not be re-attached. Probably some maintenance droid was cleaning up roasted clone fingers that very second.

It had taken a full three years to get something shot off. He'd started to think he would be one of the lucky few. At least it was only fingers. He still had most of his hand. He could still fly.

***

The first night, Davijaan and Fox were assigned a shared room in the Temple. Neither of them spent more time inside than it took to wash and change into the soft brown tunics they'd also been provided with, both marching straight back to the medbay as soon as they were clean.

Davijaan didn't know what had happened to his poncho and didn't know who to ask; was too ashamed to ask.

***

The second day Windu was awake and aware and asking for reports, and Fox insinuated himself into sorting out the aftermath, as wary and sharp with Windu as he'd been with Vos.

Davijaan gave his report. Formal and in full this time, numb, half-expecting to be charged with treason for lying by omission, for knowingly endangering the life of his commanding officer, for attempting—for any of the choices he'd made in the last three days. But, when he finally came to the end of it, Windu only dismissed him with a tired wave of his hand.

***

The second night, as they both gave in to exhaustion and collapsed into the too soft bunks in their room, Davijaan realized Fox had not spoken a word directly to him since they'd arrived at the Temple.

***

The third day, Vos came out of bacta.

The only one in the recovery room was Davijaan. The medic wasn't due for a vitals check for another hour. He froze as Vos' breath hitched, as he blinked, fingers curling into the white blanket. When Vod had been placed in the cot the medic had slipped thin cloth gloves on his hands, a brown a few shades darker than his skin.

For a time Vos stared at the ceiling, breathing labored, gloved hand flexing. The monitor beeped steadily. Finally Vos groaned, and dragged the hand up to his chest to feel over the bandage covered stitches. Seemingly satisfied with their state, he braced the hand on the cot and levered himself upright, clear brown gaze skimming over the monitor, the pale green walls, the door, the window, and landing squarely on Davijaan.

"Hi," he said, voice scratchy and strained.

Davijaan cleared his throat. "Hello."

At least the General didn't seem disgusted or angry to find Davijaan here. He'd stay until he was told to leave.

There was a glass of water on the little table between his chair and Vos' cot. The medic had left it for Davijaan. He hadn't touched it. He nudged the glass closer to Vos, who stared at it, uncomprehending. After a moment he frowned and picked it up, hand trembling. He drank the water slowly.

He tried to float the empty glass away, but his concentration broke, or something. Davijaan jolted and caught the glass before it could shatter, setting it gently back on the table.

Vos grimaced. Moving stiffly, he adjusted the pillows against the headboard and leaned back with a sigh. "How is Fox?"

Davijaan managed not to squirm. "He's fine."

"Really?" Vos' brow furrowed in concern. "He's not in bacta?"

"No. He's fine," Davijaan said. And he was fine; he was back to his usual paranoid and horrible self.

“Alright… And how are you?”

Davijaan had his misshapen hand tucked in a pocket and intended to keep it there. “I’m fine too.”

“Good.” Vos’ eyes fell to where Davijaan’s wrist disappeared into folds of fabric, but didn’t linger. “How long was I out?”

“Two days.”

He nodded, taking that in. “I assume it’s hit the news, then.”

“What has?”

The hand resting on the blanket clenched into a fist. “Palpatine’s death. The fire. The whole Sith Lord thing. How is it being spun?”

“Windu has a team managing everything. 1010 is involved.”

“The chips? The GAR? The war?”

“Haven’t been informed.” He’d stationed himself in Vos’ room to keep watch, and for the most part he’d been left alone. The only thing he knew for sure was that the war was not over. Lingering in the hall after giving his report he’d heard something about contacting officers, new strategies, new efforts for peace, and then something about testing the chip’s activation parameters. That was when he’d left. “1010 is involved in all that too.”

“Well if Fo—1010 is taking charge, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Definitely not.”

He wanted to ask what had been done to them, in those few hours Palpatine had them, for Vos to come to know Fox’s name. He could guess, from the electric burns across chest and shoulders Fox had re-bandaged the previous evening, pretending not to notice Davijaan staring. He wanted to ask why Vos didn’t have any.

Vos sunk deeper into his pillows, loose black locs slipping across the white covers, wheezing slightly. Davijaan was supposed to alert the medic if he woke up, a buzzer placed on the table beside the now empty glass. The medic would have more information, or be able to summon someone who did. But, when the medic arrived he might be asked to leave. He wanted to stay.

Before the silence could become heavy, he asked, “Can I apologize now?”

Vos groaned. He shifted onto his side to look Davijaan in the eye. “You don’t need to apologize, Oddball. This is not your fault.”

“It is,” Davijaan insisted, low.

Vos’ eye twitched. “Did you want to stab me?”

“I wanted to punch you, most of the time.”

“Oh I know. I deserved it.”

“That’s not why it’s my fault.”

At that, Vos went still. His eyes moved from Davijaan’s face to the side of his head. “You haven’t…?”

“... No.”

The first day, after the brain scan, Fox had tried to argue one of the medics into sedating Davijaan and just—doing it. She had flatly refused and almost threw Fox out of the medbay entirely when he kept insisting. That was about when Fox had stopped looking at him.

“What I did... I didn’t destroy it. Only isolated it. It has to come out,” he said, soft, almost apologetic.

Davijaan grit his teeth. “I know.”

The surgery was safe. He’d watched it happen. If Fox could go through with it, so could Davijaan. He would be fine. It wouldn’t kill him. It wouldn’t even hurt. He’d had surgery before, more than once. Clones usually had several growing up, some routine and some for repair. He’d survived it then and he could survive it now.

It would be easier if Vos would make it an order. If somebody would tell him: “This is going to happen to you,” so he wouldn’t have to think about if he wanted it to happen or not. And maybe he hated Vos, for deciding this was the line he would not cross. Vos, and Windu, and the medic. Because it wasn’t about what Davijaan wanted at all—it was about what the Jedi wanted from him.

But, Vos didn’t say anything more about it. He let his eyes slide closed, let his body go limp. Davijaan watched his chest rise and fall, listened to the monitor beep. After a moment he said, “I’m supposed to get the medic to check your vitals.”

Vos shrugged, one shoulder sliding up and down the pillow. “Not in a hurry to get poked and prodded.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

His eyes remained closed, but the corner of his mouth twitched up. “I don’t mind if you stay.”

That was not a yes or a no, but it was closer to a yes than a no, so Davijaan stayed.

Vos did not fall asleep again. He lay on the cot and every twitch of his eyelids and shift of the blanket and blink of the monitor insisted he was alive. Davijaan’s palms were damp and he knew it was only sweat but he had to fight the urge to check and make sure he hadn’t smeared red all over the pale wood chair.

“It’s Sidious' fault, if it’s anybody’s fault,” Vos said, and the abruptness of his voice shocked Davijaan back into the present. “My fault, a little bit, for being naive enough to believe I’d gotten away with betraying the Sith. For believing I was safe on Coruscant. The consequences always come when you stop expecting them.”

Maybe he would never be told what had happened during the hours they’d been in Palpatine’s hands, but he was starting to get an idea of a trap within a trap; a plot within a plot. Davijaan swallowed. “Were you ever—controlled, like with the inhibitor chip, when you were with the Sith?”

Vos’ eyes fluttered open, but he didn’t look at Davijaan. He stared up at the ceiling. “No,” he finally said. “Sith don’t take apprentices because they need puppets, they take apprentices because... Because the same reason they do everything. They want to cause pain.”

Davijaan hadn’t been hurt much, really. If Fox hadn’t shot him he would have come out of it entirely intact. When considered as a modification for expensive, perfect soldiers, the inhibiting aspect of the chip was not a terrible idea. A soldier that could not feel pain would be impossible to torture. And, removing pain from the battlefield would be useful. Pain was one of the few human weaknesses clones retained.

He used to be jealous of Kote’s ability to go out of his body when he didn’t want to be aware of what was being done to it. Now, thinking about not feeling something as it happened was —

Was not something he wanted to think about.

“Why did you agree to the undercover mission?” Davijaan asked. “You weren’t ordered. You could have said no.”

“Would you have said no, if your family was on the line?”

“I don’t know.” He hesitated, but probably he owed the full story to Vos, at this point. “When I said I wasn’t a traitor… I guess I meant it about my brother.”

Admitting that out loud was a quick and easy way to get executed for treason, but Vos smiled. “Cody?” he asked.

“Cody,” he confirmed. “He assigned me to your mission because he didn’t trust you, and he trusted me to keep an eye on you. I was supposed to find a way to warn him if you turned traitor. But he didn’t ask, he ordered.”

The GAR was operating under a partial comms blackout. Essential transmissions only. Even if he’d been able to, he wasn’t sure he was ready to talk to Kote yet. There was—too much.

Or maybe he was a coward.

Vos’ smile faded, and Davijaan’s stomach twisted. But, instead of demanding why Cody had felt entitled to go behind Kenobi’s back and spy on him, Vos sighed, and said, “I’m sorry we dragged you into this mess.”

And with that, all traces of fear vanished.

“What an utterly pointless thing to say.” Davijaan glared. Apparently three days of worry were sufficient to forget how annoying Vos was, especially when he wasn’t trying to be annoying. “I wasn’t dragged into anything, you absolute—It’s your job to issue orders. It’s Cody’s job. It’s my job to follow them. That’s how rank *works.* I’m not saying—I just don’t know what I would do, if I had a choice about any of this.”

Vos blinked, and opened his mouth to say something even more annoying, and—

“Don’t bother,” said Fox.

Davijaan almost fell out of his chair.

“You can’t argue with that kind of stupid,” Fox continued, and Davijaan managed to twist around enough to direct his glare to where Fox leaned in the half-open doorway.

Vos sat up—too fast, judging by his muffled hiss—and looked Fox up and down with open relief. “Oddball says you’re doing fine?”

“I’m always fine.” Before Vos could ask the questions he clearly wanted to ask, Fox turned his attention to Davijaan. “The medic is on her way. I would leave if I were you, unless you want to get yelled at.”

He stood without thinking, mostly from the shock of being directly addressed after days of silence. And then hesitated. Jedi medics didn’t seem to yell much. Sure, he’d been given very clear instructions and had not followed them, but he could always blame Vos.

“It’ll be a standard post-bacta check-up,” Vos said, easing himself back down into his pillows. “Been through a dozen of them. You don’t have to stay.”

That was a dismissal, even if it wasn’t direct.

“Not sure how long I’ll be in here, but you’re welcome to visit,” Vos added. “You and—Both of you.”

Davijaan nodded, not sure if he wanted to visit or not when Vos was awake but not wanting to refuse outright.

His escape was blocked by Fox, still stationed in the doorway and now staring Vos down. Davijaan glanced between them and discovered it wasn’t only Fox. They were staring each other down; Fox’s eyes narrowed and Vos’ wide and hopeful.

Davijaan took a careful step back.

After several tense, silent seconds Fox rolled his eyes. “Fine. You can call me Fox.”

Vos’ pitiful attempt at pleading disappeared in a wide grin. “Well in that case, Fox, you should call me Quinlan.”

“Hm.”

Fox snagged Davijaan’s wrist and dragged him out the door and down the hall as footsteps began to approach from the other direction.

Once they turned a corner Fox released Davijaan’s wrist. His pace slowed as he reoriented himself, thinking through the shortest route back to the assigned room. To his surprise, Fox’s pace slowed to match. Instead of vanishing he seemed content to keep step with Davijaan back to their room.

Out of the corner of his eye he studied Fox as they walked, passing the odd Jedi but for the most part quietly making their way through pale brown halls. If Fox was in pain, he was hiding it well.

Davijaan was pretty sure the reason he’d been allowed to know Fox’s name was because Kote and Wolffe hadn't liked the way they fought. It had been a gesture towards civility for their brothers more than anything to do with Davijaan. And, Fox had been a bit more open about his name in the early days of command track. They all had. It had been the first time they’d been able to use them outside of the barracks.

“Palpatine knew my name,” Fox said, shattering the easy silence.

Davijaan stumbled. *“What?”*

“He was waiting for us.” Fox didn’t look at him, didn’t slow down. Now Davijaan was the one adjusting to match his pace. “Trapped us in a ray shield. Congratulated us on getting as far as we did, and called me Commander Fox, and that was when I knew we were fucked.”

“Huh.” If he’d had to guess which one would share bits and pieces, he would have guessed Vos. But, Fox wasn’t sharing for the sake of sharing. It was almost as if... “You could have told Vos not to use it. He might not understand, but he’d listen, probably.”

Fox did not respond. Davijaan huffed. “Do you even have anybody in the CG who uses your name? Anybody at all beside Kote and Wolffe?”

Fox did not respond to that either, and for a moment Davijaan thought he was going to be ignored all the rest of the way back to their room. But then, without a pause in his step or a shift in his voice, he said, “Thorn.”

“Thorn?” The name sounded familiar, he knew he’d heard it recently. Probably someone Fox worked with closely, probably an officer, maybe even a commander—Oh.

He returned his focus to walking. Neither of them spoke again.

The Jedi Temple was massive, all long halls of brown stone and arched windows, but because it was massive some attempts had been made to reduce travel time. They took a lift, walked down another hall, and were at their outdated wooden door.

Pushing past Davijaan, Fox strode inside, going straight to his bunk and collecting a brown bundle from atop the neatly folded blanket. Davijaan had barely stepped past the doorway

when Fox shoved the bundle against his chest. “Here.”

Davijaan sputtered, fumbling to catch it with one hand. “What are you—What...?”

It was his poncho.

Carefully, slowly, he slid his right hand out of his pocket and got a two-handed grip, and shook out the folds of wool. It smelled faintly of smoke, but it was whole.

“Fox...” He couldn't ask how Fox had found it. “Thank you.”

When he looked up from the poncho he found Fox looking at his bandaged hand, face blank. “Fox?”

“I couldn't risk you pulling the knife out. Or shoving it in deeper,” he said, defensive.

“I understand.”

Fox nodded, a single sharp jerk of his head. And that was all the apology Davijaan was going to get.

The corner of his mouth curled up in a smirk. “You don’t have to be nice to me because you feel guilty.”

Fox punched him in the sternum.

Davijaan doubled over, wheezing and laughing so hard he almost dropped his gift on the floor.

Fox stalked to the door. Before he could disappear, Davijaan pulled himself together and called, “I touched your computers!”

“I *noticed.”* The door slammed.

Davijaan collapsed onto his bunk with the poncho in his arms and laughed himself to sleep.

Chapter 9

A week after Palpatine's death the *Negotiator* came into orbit over Coruscant.

The presence of the High General and Marshal Commander of each system army had been requested by the Jedi High Council for a "what do we do now" meeting, but Davijaan was pretty sure Kenobi and Kote were the only pair who had decided to attend in person. Whether this was because they were close enough to make the journey or because they were more personally involved than any of the other officers, he did not know. He did not ask.

He did not meet the 3rd RSA representatives when they arrived at the Temple. Maybe he was a coward, for that.

***

Davijaan arrived at the briefing room early. It wasn't anything like the briefing rooms on a Venator, but he wasn't sure what else to call it. A high ceiling, walls of carved brown stone and reinforced windows. The round room was dominated by a round table, projectors and chairs spaced evenly around it. It was odd that such an important meeting regarding the war would take place in this light, open space.

He was in his armor, for the first time in weeks. Fox had brought it up from the basement, left it on his bunk, stark white and gleaming. It was a familiar weight; a familiar restriction. His hand hadn't healed enough for a gauntlet yet, and hung limp and bandaged at his side. He'd clipped his helmet to his belt. Jedi preferred to see clones' faces.

Even so little of his skin exposed to the sun and to the scrutiny of the High Council felt like too much. It was going to be a long meeting.

Fox slunk in soon after, soundless, also in his armor. And helmet. Davijaan doubted he'd take it off even if requested. He graced Davijaan with a nod and went from window to window, methodically checking seals and shielding.

Fifteen minutes from the appointed time, the Jedi started to arrive. A few members of the High Council, a few Jedi with medic's emblems on their tabards, two masked guards—including the elder of the two who had almost prevented him from getting word to Windu.

Kote arrived with Kenobi and Vos.

Davijaan hadn't visited Vos in the medbay. Maybe he was a coward for that, too. The relief at seeing the General well—moving slowly, but strong enough to walk under his own power—made his throat burn.

He'd missed the reunion, but he could guess how it had gone. Kenobi and Vos walked through the door side by side, each with an arm around the other's waist, talking quietly, smiling. Happy. It was the most at ease he had ever seen Vos. Kenobi too, for that matter.

Finally, Davijaan turned to Kote.

Marshal Commander Cody was polished to a shine: sunburst freshly touched up, back straight and shoulders set, helmet at his belt, and not a hair of his regulation trim out of place. He paused inside the door, and his eyes met Davijaan's.

Kote peeled away from his General—not that he noticed—and strode across the room, practiced professionalism giving way to something open and intent. Davijaan braced himself.

As Kote came to a halt he saluted, with his left hand. "Marshal."

Kote flinched. In armor it was imperceptible to anyone but a clone. Guilt warred briefly with anger.

Guilt won. As he lowered his hand and opened his mouth to take it back, to apologize, to reach for his brother and damn the witnesses—

Kote's expression shuttered closed, and he offered Davijaan a matching salute. "Commander. Well met." His eyes dropped from Davijaan's face to his right hand. "I was not informed you'd been injured."

Davijaan shrugged. "I can still fly." He'd gotten permission to test himself in one of the temple's shuttles. He was stiff, his grip was weak, he didn't have the control he used to, but he could adapt. He could improve.

"Good." Kote dragged his gaze back to Davijaan's face and let him see the anger and the relief. "That's good."

As Kote studied Davijaan, Davijaan studied Kote, looking for signs of change in the last month, everything he wanted to say sour on the tip of his tongue. Before the guilt could force him to speak, Kote sighed, and took a step back.

"Good," he said again, and retreated across the room to the window Vos and Kenobi had stationed themselves under. Davijaan watched him go, and ached. He should have been there to meet him on arrival. They should have gotten this over with before the stupid meeting.

When Kote joined them, Vos noticed. He glanced between Davijaan and Kote, brow furrowed, but didn't leave Kenobi's side.

Windu arrived with Ponds, exactly one minute before time, and switched on the holoprojectors. Eight pairs of Generals and Marshals flickered into existence. The in-person attendees took their seats—Fox slipping into the chair beside Davijaan only after Kote sat—and the meeting was brought to order.

Instead of getting right into things Windu surveyed the table, and said, "As we gather on behalf of the living, so we gather for the sake of our dead." The Jedi stood, and after a moment of hesitation so did the clones, and then Windu led the Jedi in reciting something. A prayer, maybe.

Davijaan had known Windu and Fox's CT were the only survivors, besides Vos and Fox himself, but it hadn't fully registered that General Yoda and General Drallig were dead until he heard their names listed along with Commander Thorn and the rest of his squad.

Death, yet the Force. It seemed to comfort Vos, whatever it meant.

The meeting proper began with a brief account of the events of Palpatine's death. Davijaan could feel eyes on him during the part where he'd run to the Jedi for help, and did his best to ignore the attention. Thankfully, Windu skimmed over the part where he'd been mind controlled into attacking his own Jedi.

"I was not Sidious' end goal," Vos said, towards the end. "He wanted a new apprentice, and I was convenient; I was already half gone, I'd already killed Tyranus. But, I don't have the power he was after. I think…" A glance at Kenobi, guilty but determined. "I recommend questioning Knight Skywalker about the nature of his relationship with the former Chancellor."

Kenobi went pale. Kote stiffened. Beside him, Fox scoffed. Windu pinched the bridge of his nose and breathed out in a slow, frustrated sigh.

From there, the meeting mostly consisted of the Jedi discussing politics and the war. It was all up-coming elections and potential peace talks and how to shift from the mindset of waging the war to winning the war. Ending the war. Without Palpatine pulling strings on both sides, the GAR had the upper hand. If they could remove General Grievous from power through either political or violent means, the Republic and the Confederacy could be negotiating peace within a matter of months.

Months.

Ten years of training for it, three years of fighting in it, and the war could be over in months.

The biggest and most difficult obstacle to victory, or peace, or possibly both, was the GAR itself. Considering the whole… mind control chip thing.

"Were you able to resist its hold over you?" Windu asked, addressing Davijaan directly for the first time, serious and polite. "Would you have been able to break free yourself, given more time?"

"I didn't…" He cleared his throat. "I didn't try to resist it. I don't know, sir."

"I see."

"Is this even a real concern, with Sidious dead?" Vos asked, and he tried to come off as curious but Davijaan could tell he was concerned. "The chip didn't respond to any Jedi's orders. How do we know he wasn't the only one who could activate them?"

Windu waved to one of the medics, a Mirialan woman who hadn't said a word so far. "Padawan Offee, if you would share your findings."

She turned on a datapad and handed it, coldly, to the man next to her. Her voice was cold when she spoke. “The inhibitor chips are voice activated.”

Voice activated. Davijaan was going to tear his hair out.

“It’s only programmed to recognize and respond to two voices,” she continued, the datapad making its way around the table. “Chancellor Palpatine—Darth Sidious—and Jango Fett. Or, the standard vocal register for a clone. Any clone could activate it.”

Huh.

Vos’ eye twitched. “He didn’t want anybody else to be able to kill him and take over his army, but he also couldn’t be bothered to give individual orders to each clone.” He bared his teeth in what could be a smile or a snarl. “Perfect. Wonderful.”

“This is a problem, yes,” Windu agreed. “But it is one we can solve before it becomes exploitable, if we act quickly.”

Too many emotions crossed Vos’ face for Davijaan to follow, finally settling on shock. “We can’t make chip removal mandatory.”

“We can’t afford to leave it voluntary either,” countered Windu. He didn’t look at Davijaan, but the urge to throw himself into a black hole was overwhelming. “The Kaminoan government was in league with the Sith, there may be more to the chips than we know. And, clones have turned traitor before.”

“Mace. We can’t force millions of men to undergo brain surgery because of our own paranoia, we—”

“Inhibitor chip removal will be mandatory,” Kote said, cutting off the argument with the finality of an order.

The room fell silent. Every Jedi tensed. Every clone relaxed.

Davijaan was tired. He was so tired.

The silence lingered, but if the Jedi were waiting for Kote to explain his reasoning they would be waiting the remainder of their lifetimes. Face hard and set as stone, Kote ignored the rest of the room and addressed Windu. “Would it be possible to allocate Temple resources to resolving this issue? Healers, or surgical droids perhaps.”

“Of course.” Windu leaned back in his chair, considering. “It might also be prudent to purchase more medical droids, or to hire civilian surgeons on a temporary basis.”

The discussion moved to how best to organize the mass de-chipping of the entire GAR, not to mention the troops and cadets on Kamino.

Davijaan wanted to not be in this room. He’d contributed the little he had to contribute. He wasn’t of use anymore. He wanted to leave and go—somewhere. His room in the Temple. His quarters on the *Negotiator.*

Hidden by the table, he pressed his right thumb against the seal of his left gauntlet until it came undone, and he could slide his thumb against the woven band wrapped around his wrist, the texture a soothing reminder of thick wool and Fiddle's worry.

He didn't have the tracker scrambling bracelet on. He'd left it in his quarters, not sure what to do with it now he wasn't officially dead anymore.

Fox shifted beside him. Probably wanted to leave as much as Davijaan did. Or maybe he was pleased Kote had taken his side, unknowing.

Allowing the rise and fall of voices to wash over him, Davijaan watched Kote and Windu discuss logistics. Two hours into the meeting and Kote was still holding himself perfectly straight, speaking perfectly politely, but once he had made up his mind he was immovable. Every clone would have their inhibitor chip removed and the Jedi could help or stay out of his way. It was good Windu wanted to help.

One of the medics joined in, an older Twi'lek woman, who spoke evenly and at length and with much gesturing to the various clones in the room. With her prompting the sullen Mirialan contributed short, sharp sentences. Generals and Marshals in holographic form spoke loudly, rough through the static.

Fox didn't speak up. Neither did Vos or Kenobi.

They were holding hands under the table. He didn't have to see to know, they were sitting too close to be doing anything else. Kenobi was pretending to be unaffected, but the tension that usually accompanied a debrief was totally gone. Vos wasn't even pretending, listing closer and closer to Kenobi's shoulder as the discussion dragged on.

He wanted to be grateful Vos was still trying to give him a choice in this, but it was a bit late in the war to be worried about ordering millions of clones to risk their lives. It was a bit late in this mission for Vos to be worried about ordering Oddball to risk his life, trust or no trust.

Vos should have ordered him, before, and Davijaan was going to be angry about that for as long as he had the memory of those few formless minutes.

***

Holograms winked out one by one across the surface of the projectors, Jedi signing off with a bow and clones with a salute.

Davijaan stood as Vos and Kenobi stood, and skirted around the crowd to get to his General before he could leave with Kenobi. They weren't holding hands anymore, and they walked far enough apart to keep up appearances.

Vos saw him coming and paused, turning to Davijaan expectant. "Yes, Oddball?"

"General Vos." As he came to a halt Davijaan straightened to attention, more out of habit than necessity. "If you no longer require my assistance, may I request a transfer back to the 7th Sky?"

“Of course.” He glanced at Kenobi, confused. “I mean, yes, obviously my mission is over, but it’s not up to me—”

“We’d be pleased to have you back with us, Oddball,” Kenobi cut in, and he looked like he meant it. “In fact, I believe Cody has the paperwork ready.”

Relief that might have been exhaustion settled in his bones. “Thank you, sir.” He took a few steps back, clearing the way for them. Vos gave him an odd sort of grimacing smile, and they left.

Davijaan remained standing in the middle of the room as the rest of the Jedi and their commanders trickled out the door. Kote lingered, too.

Fox was the last to go, looking slowly between them and shutting the door silently behind him.

Alone for the first time in a month, Davijaan breathed deep and faced his brother. “Hey, Kote.”

“Davijaan.” Kote was already striding across the room, and this time he did not stop out of arm's reach but gripped Davijaan’s shoulders like a lifeline. “Davi, I’m sorry.”

Now they were alone he let the Marshal Commander fall away, and underneath Kote was just as exhausted and just as guilty as Davijaan. It was always so much harder to be angry with his brother.

“Eh, don’t be.” He tried to smile. “It’s over. I didn’t die. I’m back to the 7th Sky as soon as the paperwork is filed.”

“If I’d known—”

“You didn’t.”

Davijaan had known something was going to go wrong. Both of them had known. If either of them had had a clue as to what, would anything have changed? Would Kote have sent Crys or Gregor instead of him?

He knew the answer.

“I thought you were dead.” Kote’s grip tightened. “Turns out you were sneaking around with Fox.”

“Technically, Fox was sneaking around with me.”

“Davijaan.”

“I wanted to tell you,” he relented, meeting Kote’s eyes. “Vos wouldn’t let me.”

Kote’s expression twisted into something bitter and furious. “I thought you were dead. I didn’t want to believe it, I couldn’t fully believe it, but—”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easy.”

“Stop!” Kote shook him, hard. “Stop. Davijaan. *I thought you were dead.”*

They’d never found out what happened to the rest of their batch. It had been the two of them since they were seven, Kote and Davijaan, somehow still beside each other.

Over Davijaan’s years of waiting, watching for them, Kote had never shown outward signs of missing their batchmates. He used to wonder if Kote would even miss him, when he died. Here and now his brother’s anguish laid bare only made him ache.

“I thought I was going to die,” he admitted, soft. “I thought he was going to kill me.” All the fear of the last month, all the uncertainty, all the anger, came surging to the surface. Davijaan let himself slump forward, the ache catching in his throat, voice breaking. “I thought I was going to die, Kote. I thought I was going to die.”

His brother caught him. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

Davijaan tucked his face against Kote’s neck and cried. Kote let him, and didn’t say anything.

He’d never seen Kote cry, and he didn’t cry now, but he clung to Davijaan as tightly as Davijaan clung to him, and together they shook.

***

Davijaan and Kote entered the hangar as unobtrusively as they could. Unnecessarily unobtrusively, because Vos and Kenbobi were at the far end, standing in the warm pool of light from the open bay doors, wrapped very tightly around each other. Probably Davijaan could have stabbed Vos again and he wouldn’t have noticed.

Fox was nowhere to be seen. Probably he’d left the Temple entirely, to avoid all the heartfelt goodbyes.

As they crossed the hangar, Vos and Kenobi untangled themselves, leaning in for one last brush of faces that could be shared breath or a kiss. Davijaan felt more than saw Kote twitch at that. The corner of his mouth curled up in a smirk, imagining what Kote would have to say in private about his horrible Jedi and his horrible double-crossing traitor of a lover.

Kenobi saw them first, pulling away from Vos completely and offering Davijaan a crinkly smile.

“We have a schedule,” Kote muttered under his breath, firmly placing his helmet back on his head. He picked up his pace, effectively abandoning Davijaan in the middle of the hangar to go remind his Jedi that there were *standards.*

Adjusting his pack, Davijaan slowed, and then stopped. It was fuller than it had been, when this whole disaster started. If Vos ever wanted that poncho back he could come all the way out to the *Negotiator* and retrieve it himself.

Between one breath and the next, Fox appeared beside him.

Davijaan did not jump. He finished fiddling with the straps. “If you’re trying to avoid Kote, it’s not going to work.”

“I’m not.”

“He’s not going to cut your fingers off.”

“I’m not avoiding him.”

If he did not want to be found, Fox would not be found, but Kote was persistent.

Fox watched him straighten the pack out. He did not have his helmet on, and it struck Davijaan, with a pleased surprise, that there was a reason Fox had come and found him here at the end of things.

Evenly, he regarded Fox. Suspiciously, Fox regarded him.

“I’m not going to miss you,” Davijaan said, matter of fact.

Fox’s eyes narrowed. “And?”

With a sigh, Davijaan leaned forward and draped himself against Fox’s front, looping his arms loosely around his waist.

Fox went utterly still. *“What.”*

“I want a hug. You owe me.”

In answer he received a strangled sound that wasn’t clear enough to be interpreted as either protest or outrage. Since Fox didn’t immediately shove him off, he decided it was bafflement.

“Oh, are we doing hugs?” asked Vos, from directly behind Davijaan. “Can I have a hug?”

Fox’s arms came up around Davijaan’s ribs. “Fuck off.”

“Aw, come on, I give great hugs!”

“Step on a detonator, Jedi.”

Davijaan snorted, but Vos laughed. The sound shocked him off-balance enough for Fox to slip out of his hold.

Free, Fox stepped out of arm's reach. One hand curled into fist before he forced it open.

Vos smiled, fond. “I take it you’re leaving as well.”

“Unlike you two, I have a real job.”

“Will I see you again?”

One eyebrow went up, and then down, the rest of his face carefully indifferent. “Maybe.”

“I’ll take maybe.” The smile spread into a big, smug grin, and then Vos bowed at the waist, smooth and formal. When he straightened, he said, “May the Force be with you, Fox.”

Fox blinked. Scowled. And then he turned on his heel and vanished back into the maze of docked ships.

And that was that.

“Well, Commander.” Vos turned to Davijaan, smile softening. “I bet you’re relieved to be back in steadier hands than mine.”

Past Vos’ shoulder he could see Kote waiting, probably counting seconds until their departure time, standing at ease beside a serene Kenobi. “Your *friend*, eh?”

A hum, noncommittal. “Obi-Wan and I are a lot of things.”

Davijaan raised an unimpressed eyebrow. Vos’ grin got even bigger and smugger, if that were possible.

He tried to reconcile the calm, joyful Jedi with the paranoid and unpredictable sort-of-traitor he’d been introduced to. It wasn’t quite coming together in his head. He wondered if Kenobi, if any Jedi, had ever been scared of Vos the way he’d been scared of Vos, those first weeks.

Probably the ones he’d killed. But, probably, considering—*everything*, there was more to those deaths than Davijaan was allowed to know. He asked, “Are you back to the front, when you’re recovered?”

Vos sobered. “No final decision, yet. Windu is split between putting me on the Shadow roster or sending me back to the 120th.”

For a moment he deliberated, but he did sort of trust Vos, now. At least with this. “Don’t tell him I told you, but Faie thought you were a good General.”

Recognition shifted to disbelief. “Really?”

“He had a lot of respect for you, even after you turned traitor.”

Vos grimaced. “So, don’t screw it up again?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Didn’t have to. But, don’t worry, I won’t. A lot has changed since I last worked with him.” His gaze became distant, unfocused. “The war will be over soon. We’re close.”

And where had Davijaan heard that before.

Still, he nodded. Months or years, the war would end eventually. Everything ended eventually.

Abruptly Vos focused back on him, brow furrowed. Davijaan froze. “You're not a coward because you're afraid,” he said.

Damn empaths. Davijaan hated that. Hated it hated it hated it.

Vos winced. “I'm not reading your mind. That's not how that works.”

Davijaan carefully crushed his hate into a tiny speck of annoyance.

Vos’ face did something interesting. “That's terrifying, actually. Good... job?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He hesitated, opening his mouth and closing it, and then glanced behind him to where Kote and Kenobi were still waiting. His eyes were soft when he faced Davijaan again. “It was a pleasure to work with you, Commander,” he said, and bowed, the same formal gesture he’d given Fox.

When he straightened, Davijaan looked him right in the eye and said, “Liar.”

Vos tipped his head back, his laughter loud and rich and belly-deep, his whole frame shaking. “May the Force be with you, Oddball.”

***

Davijaan did not need to fly back to the *Negotiator.* Someone with 104th grey teeth painted on their helmet was on shuttle duty. Davijaan stowed his pack under the bench and strapped himself in next to Kote.

Take-off was smooth. They left atmosphere slower than he would have liked, but there was heavy traffic on the shiplanes near the surface and getting free of it took some maneuvering. The pilot was good. Steady. But then, to wear that grey he would have to be.

He missed Wolffe.

Once they were out of atmosphere and in space, Davijaan relaxed. There was a porthole directly across from him, and his attention shifted from the cockpit to the view of Coruscant, drifting in the emptiness.

Space was more colorful than he’d thought, as a cadet. There was always something burning in the void; gas or debris wreathed in flames of green or blue or orange or yellow. White light so bright it cut through his visor shading. Grey clouds of dust and ice and stone. All against a black so infinite it terrified him.

He was scared of space. He always had been. Even with planets and stars to guide him, it was so easy to be lost, alone in the vastness of it. He missed flying, but more than flying, he missed being a part of a squad. Being surrounded by siblings made facing that emptiness easier.

Probably his theory had been correct, and it was the same for Vos. He'd needed to be around Jedi again to function properly, to face his own emptiness.

He watched Coruscant fall away, right thumb pressed against his left wrist, until only a golden curve was visible through the porthole. Maybe, when the war was over, he would have time to take Kote flying.

End Notes

Thank you for reading :D

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