hope has bloody knuckles

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by independent_variables (cordelia)

Summary

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He snorted. “I’ll be sure to file a complaint with the manufacturer on your behalf.”

“Shit! That was unbelievably rude,” she sputtered, cheeks flushing, waving her hands as if to fan away her words. “It just slipped out, I’m so sorry! I promise I usually think before I speak, it’s just been a really long week. I’m– I’m Loren.”

“I go by Odd Ball.”

She relaxed a bit, and her smile returned. “Nice to meet you, Odd Ball.”

“Pleasure’s all mine.”

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Davijaan discovers mountains, thinks about the war, and maybe falls in love.

Notes

Once again cross-posting for my own benefit, but also I hope you like it :D

This story was originally beta read by blabbyshark!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Davijaan woke to the scent of burning.

Rough hands were grabbing at his arms, yanking him up and out of the wreckage of his ship. His head spun, and he opened his eyes expecting to see the blue and white of 501st troopers– they should have gotten off the ridge General Skywalker had said they were off the ridge but who else was close enough– and found himself blinking in the glare of the Umbaran Militia's illuminated visors.

Lovely, he thought as he was hauled to his feet, and then a wave of dizziness and nausea pulled him under.

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He woke up again as two Umbaran soldiers dragged him by the arms down a set of stairs. He'd been stripped of his armor and weapons, and each thump of his legs against stone sent jagged bolts of pain through his head. He grit his teeth and forced himself to breathe.

"Hey, it's awake," said a voice from over his left shoulder. "Shift around."

He was hauled onto his feet and frog-marched down the rest of the stairs and into a dimly lit hall. He tried to get a look around but the brightness of the ray-shields after the dark stairwell made it difficult to make out more than the spacing of the cells and the looming shape of a guard.

"What's this?" the guard asked.

"New prisoner," responded the voice on his left. "One of the Republic's clones. The Colonel will want to talk to it, but for now we need to stash it."

"Don't have an empty cell, but I–"

"Then find one that isn't as full, bugs for brains!"

"Hmph. No need to be snappish. This way."

The frog-marching started up again, but he couldn't keep his feet under him, and the bastards started twisting his arms up in knots trying to get him to move faster. He was tempted to tell them they might as well tow him by the ankles for all the difference it made, but he was pretty sure if he opened his mouth he'd throw up.

Stars, he hated crash landings.

They came to a lurching halt, the buzz of a ray-shield fizzed into nothing, and he was thrown on his face on cold, hard stone. A flash of sky-blue caught in the corner of his eye before the world went dark again.

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When he woke for the third time, he was arranged on his side on something soft. He lay still for a long while, eyes closed, trying to remember what had happened and where he was.

The Umbara campaign. Bombing the ridge. Shot down just as he cleared it by one of those damn hover tanks. Not dead. Captured by the local militia and taken… somewhere… and shoved in a cell. A Colonel was going to come "talk" to him at some point.

That was fine. Absolutely fine. Kote would come as soon as he realized his shadow was missing.

Might take him a minute, what with storming the Umbaran capital. But he would come. Davijaan was an officer and a damn good pilot; someone had to come. If they didn't…

Don't think about it.

Cloth rustled on the other side of the cell.

Davijaan rolled up into a crouch before he remembered that he'd fallen out of the sky a short while ago and his body wasn't happy about it. And right, he hadn't been put in an empty cell. Freezing absolutely still so he didn't do something ridiculous like throw up or pass out yet again, he studied his cellmate.

The natborn civilian sitting against the far wall studied him back.

She– maybe? he wasn't great at guessing gender but "she" seemed a safe bet– was of a similar height to him, and sturdy built. She was Pantoran, with her dark blue hair and light blue skin, and the row of three interlocking gold rings tattooed across each of her cheekbones. She wore some kind of matching jacket and pants outfit that looked like it had started out nice but was now rather worse for wear.

As his stomach settled he sat, surprised to find the soft thing he'd been lying on was a worn pallet. Thoughtful of those bastards to toss him on the pallet instead of the floor. Except he remembered hitting the floor…? Eh, he'd probably been too out of it to register details.

The cell was small, maybe three meters by three meters, stone except for the ray-shield that acted as a barrier to the hall. It was dimly lit, which was a relief for his eyes. There was a bucket in the corner, the single bare pallet he was sitting on, and an empty tray that must have held food at some point. All in all, not the worst place he'd spent time in.

Once he was settled he forced his face to relax into a smile. Tentatively, the civilian smiled back.

Kote would come eventually. And in the meantime, Davijaan wasn't alone.

Which was just fantastic, actually, because that meant instead of sulking in a corner and baiting the guard by turns he was going to have to keep up what Kote called his "civilian smile."

Most clones had learned quickly during their first leave that civilians were– if not outright terrified– highly suspicious of clones. Things had changed a bit as clones became a more common sight in the lower levels, either bar hopping on leave or patrolling the streets in Corrie Guard red, but the underlying fear was still there, if better hidden. Most clones had learned just as quickly that the best way to put civilians at ease was to smile.

Davijaan had lots of practice smiling.

Which was going to come in handy, because he really needed this particular civilian to be at ease around him considering the length of time they would potentially be sharing this cell.

“Hello, ma’am,” he offered, trying to sound friendly and non-threatening instead of grumpy and disoriented. “Sorry about all that. You just startled me.”

She rewarded him with a wave, and didn’t correct the “ma’am,” so that had probably been a good guess.

“Hello. Um. That’s ok.” She tilted her head, taking him in. “Are you…?”

“A clone? Yes.” He batted his eyelashes. “Whatever gave it away?”

She blinked. “Well I was going to ask if you were alright– you were out for a long time– but. That’s good to know.”

She sat up from her slouch against the wall, studying him more intently. He braced himself. “Huh. The only footage in the news has you all in full armor. You're shorter than I expected.”

He snorted. “I’ll be sure to file a complaint with the manufacturer on your behalf.”

“Shit! That was unbelievably rude,” she sputtered, cheeks flushing, waving her hands as if to fan away her words. “It just slipped out, I’m so sorry! I promise I usually think before I speak, it’s just been a really long week. I’m– I’m Loren.”

“I go by Odd Ball.”

She relaxed a bit, and her smile returned. “Nice to meet you, Odd Ball.”

“Pleasure’s all mine.”

He scooted off the pallet and leaned against the wall, the cold stone against the back of his skull doing wonders for his head. “Long week, eh? Seems like a bit of an understatement.”

Something in her face shifted, the lingering embarrassment and concern disappearing in favor of indignant frustration. “Oh, you have no idea.”

Aha. There we go.

Civilians loved to talk about themselves. All he had to do was ask questions and supply the correct listening noises and he could just sit still and regain his equilibrium until she talked herself out.

“I’m sure it’s quite the story. You seem like you’re a long way from home.”

Apparently that was all the nudging she needed, because she threw her hands up, furious. “So I’m with the Coruscant News Network, see? And as soon as we got news of Senator Deechi’s death– and we get news like that immediately, in my office– my boss told me to get my ass to Umbara and report on the senatorial election, and work on a spec piece about planetary and galactic political overlap, and I figured I’d spend a day wandering around in the dark and whip up twelve hundred words of war-related drivel and be done with it! But no! Because just as we entered atmo we got news of the election results and the withdrawal and the Separatists fleet!”

Davijaan coughed, trying to stifle a laugh. She wasn’t a half-bad storyteller. A passionate one, at least. Maybe it came with her job.

She shot him a mock glare, hands on her hips. “Do you think this is funny?”

“A little bit.”

“Well, it’s not,” she said, decisively. “Because apparently, according to my esteemed pilot, it was too late to turn back– he had some ridiculous notion about refueling– and we had to land. So we landed. And we hadn’t taken two steps off the damn ship before we were arrested! On charges of *espionage!* Do I look like a spy to you!?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I have a press pass!”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Anyway.” She slumped back against the wall with a huff. “I’ve been here for a week, I think. Stuck in this cell. Just. Waiting.”

He nodded, and when it became apparent she’d said what she wanted to say he switched tracks. “Are we in the capital?”

If they were in the capital, then the 212th was already outside the gate, and it was just a matter of waiting.

“Yup.” Well then. That was one problem solved. “We docked at the landing port just outside the city proper. That damn pilot is probably in one of these cells, goddess bless him.”

“Wow. Damn him and bless him in the same breath.”

“I have a fickle heart.”

Davijaan did laugh at that, though it sent new spikes of pain through his temples, and she smiled grimly from her corner of the cell. “I have nothing against him. He was perfectly lovely for the whole flight. I just wish I’d been able to convince him to turn around.”

“Well,” he cleared his throat. “If he needed to refuel before he made another jump, he probably didn’t have a choice.”

“I know. But I could have told him how to jerry-rig his hyperdrive to get the most out of the remaining fuel. Maybe it wouldn’t have been enough to get us back to Republic space, but maybe it would have.”

“A reporter *and* a mechanic? I’m impressed.”

“Oh, hardly. My mother’s a pilot, that’s all. I grew up around ships.”

“Huh.”

He’d never met a civilian pilot, but all of a sudden the concept felt a bit more real. Loren’s mother was a pilot. Somewhere in the galaxy was a woman who maybe had blue skin and gold tattoos and was a pilot. Not because of the war, just. Because.

He cleared his throat, focusing back on the situation at hand. “So you’ve been here for a week. What kind of schedule do the guards keep?”

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The rest of the afternoon passed like that; Loren sharing what she’d observed of the schedule and the guards, and then with some prodding describing the article she would have written about the situation if she hadn’t been arrested. She asked once more if he was alright, but Davijaan waved her off. By the time their evening rations were dropped off he was feeling as well as he figured he ought to be, and happily ate his portion. It tasted just about the same as GAR rations.

The lights never dimmed, but Loren started flagging shortly after they’d finished the rations, and he insisted she take the pallet and try to sleep. She gave in eventually. He spent the night dozing in the farthest corner, his undersuit keeping him plenty warm.

The morning started much the same, with divvying up rations and attempting to get her started talking again.

In stark (and baffling) contrast to the day before, she put up steady resistance.

“It isn’t very interesting, and besides, I spent hours talking about myself yesterday,” she said, sheepish, in response to a question about her work. “And I *am* sorry about that. I was nervous, and I tend to ramble when I’m nervous, and– Oh shit, I’m doing it again. Anyway. How did *you* end up in here?”

For a moment all Davijaan could do was gape at her, and he was saved from having to either come up with an answer or redirect a very direct question by the arrival of two guards.

“The Colonel's very excited to see you,” Bastard No. 1 sneered as he tightened a set of cuffs around Davijaan’s wrists to the point of bruising.

He bit his lip to keep from laughing. “Is that supposed to be an intimidation tactic? No wonder the GAR’s walking all over you if this is the best the famed Umbaran Militia has to offer.”

No. 1’s face twisted in fury, and he balled up a fist that was clearly intended for Davijaan’s nose, but Bastard No. 2 caught his wrist.

“Wait,” he said, cold and inevitable, and Davijaan barely hid his flinch.

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As he was forced to kneel and let them chain his ankles loosely to the floor in the center of a musty room– a handy drain just behind him– he did a very good job of not thinking about the various objects laid out on a table. Mostly because the Colonel was the most terrifying thing in the room.

He was taller than Bastards 1 and 2, and wore the standard black Umbaran armor like it was a second skin. His face was as unreadable as the helmet he’d set aside as he stood in front of Davijaan, looking at him but not really looking at him.

Davijaan breathed deep and even and regarded him calmly. He’d known exactly what was going to happen. He’d trained for this. He could face this.

The Colonel didn’t speak until the Bastards finished and settled at attention on either side of their prisoner. His voice was scratchy and thin and set Davijaan’s teeth on edge.

“I know from the ship you were in and from the markings on your armor that you are an officer, and so I will assume you can respond intelligently to questioning.”

“Thanks,” said Davijaan, dry.

“I am not concerned with the GAR’s strategy, and don’t have time to waste,” he continued in the same steady tone, not even registering the interruption. “So I will keep my request simple. I need you to tell me what the GAR knows about the settlements surrounding our capital city.”

“No can do, unfortunately. That questions’ a bit too complex for my tiny clone brain to respond to intelligently.”

The Colonel raised a brow, surprised. The corner of his mouth twitched. “Hm. Yes, I believe it might be.”

He gave a sharp nod. Bastard No. 1 punched Davijaan in the mouth, and his head snapped to the side.

Head spinning, pulse thudding in his ears, he forced himself to face forward and met the Corporal's gaze, and smiled; slow and bright and bloody.

“That’s what you’re starting with? I’m disappointed by the unoriginality, sir, really,” he said, and braced himself for the next blow.

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The Bastards brought him back to the cell, eventually, minus most of the skin off his back. But that was alright. That was fine. He was still alive, and still conscious even.

Loren gasped and dropped to her knees beside him where he'd been thrown on his face, hands sort of fluttering over his back. Even the movement of the air stung, and he had to suppress some hysterical giggles. Wouldn't do to scare the civilian any further, no sir.

"Are you– are you–"

"Alright? Um. Not really. I think I'd better–" he tried to get his arms under him and bit his tongue as white-hot pain flared from his shoulders to his hips.

"Need to sit," he managed to force out.

They hadn't bothered to take his uppers off properly, just cut right straight through to the skin. It dulled the edge of the blade. Infection was more or less inevitable, but staying in the same sweaty, grimy undersuit would absolutely make it worse.

She reached for him again, hands steady this time, and didn't shy away from the blood as she helped him up. Once he was sort of situated, sitting cross legged with one hand braced against the wall, he plucked uselessly at the hem of his uppers, fingers too stiff to get a grip.

"Do you– do you need to get that off?"

He stilled. "...Yes."

Her hands were cool and smooth– so different from a clone's calloused palms– as they carefully slipped his uppers over his head, guiding his arms out of the sleeves and pausing every time he winced. She kept up a whispered litany of some kind, but he was too out of it to pay attention.

When the tattered remains were tossed unceremoniously in a corner, he gathered himself enough to ask, "Water?"

"A little. I was saving it for– Are you thirsty?"

"Need to wash it. Or. Try."

"Oh, right. Ok. Ok, I can do that. Give me a moment."

Davijaan closed his eyes and focused on breathing. He heard cloth rustle, and tear, and water slosh around, and then something damp and rough pressed against his back and he grit his teeth to keep from screaming as Loren carefully wiped away the blood and dirt.

He couldn't exactly see it, but he could certainly feel it; the wide shallow cuts and then the welts and bruises on top of them, the odd patch of skin torn away entirely. Definitely more than one cracked rib, as well as the bruising on his face and wrists and the strain in his shoulders. But nothing he couldn't heal from in the long run.

That was probably a bad thing. That probably meant they intended to keep him here for a while and didn't want him too broken to talk back after the first round. But then again, they hadn't given him any kind of medical treatment. If you wanted your prisoners to last you gave them *something.*

Don't think about it, he told himself, stern. *You're alive. Don't think about anything else.*

"There's nothing for bandages, sorry, but you could put this on. It's clean. Sort of."

Davijaan blinked until his vision cleared and he saw Loren was offering him a shirt. She still had her jacket, so it was whatever she'd been wearing underneath it, so probably it was clean. Ish. One of the sleeves had been torn off, but it wasn't his arms that were an ugly mess of open wounds.

Cleaning him up was one thing– she still had to look at him after all– but taking clothes from a civilian felt like it was crossing some kind of line. He glanced up, a refusal on the tip of his tongue, and got a good look at the stubborn set of her jaw. He swallowed it down. Too much time and effort. "Sure."

"Hope it fits. You're quite a bit, uh, muscly-er than me."

He managed a half-smile at that.

She helped him put her shirt on much the same way she'd helped take his off. The fabric rubbing against the cuts stung, but if he held still it wasn't too bad. The pain was starting to level off into a steady throb now that the injuries weren't being aggravated, and his head was starting to clear, and as she knelt in front of him to do up the buttons he realized she was crying.

"Hey, you alright? They hurt you?"

"I'm–" she choked on a sob, hand rising to cover her mouth. He shifted his gaze on the floor to give her some privacy.

"What if– What if you die? What if–"

"Oh, don't think too hard about it," he interrupted, trying to keep his tone light. "Right now, I'm alive. I'm alright."

"You are *not!* " she snapped. "You are *not* alright, and your back is going to get infected, and they could come in here right now and kill you if they wanted, or kill me, and–"

"Hey. Look at me."

It took her a second, and then damp yellow-gold eyes met his, flashing with anger and fear and helplessness.

"Do not think about it," he said. "No, stop. I'm serious. Don't. It makes it worse if you think about it. I'm alive, and you're alive, and that's what matters. Nothing else matters. Whatever

happens– if my back gets infected, if you get hurt, if one of us gets killed– we'll face it when it happens. If it happens. Alright?"

Shinies got like this sometimes, when they got a taste of their own mortality. He'd faced death too often on Kamino to be phased by it in war, and he'd been surprised (and a little annoyed) to realize that was not the case with the majority of his siblings.

Oh, every batch lost one or two. That was normal. But watching someone disappear down a white hall and getting their blood and guts all over your hands were two entirely different experiences. He'd been lucky enough to face the blood and guts bit early.

"What the fuck am I supposed to think about instead?" she demanded, glaring, finally composed enough to respond.

"Anything," he said, hoping she was too wound up to hear the exhaustion and pain he couldn't keep out of his voice anymore. *"Literally anything else."*

He didn't think he had the brain power left to joke around and ask questions and distract her or entertain her or whatever. All his reserves had gone into that little speech and he wasn't sure what was going to come out of his mouth if he opened it again. Still. If that was what she needed to keep from totally breaking down he'd at least try.

But when he focused back on her face something in her expression had shifted.

"Come here," she said, voice steady, and with a careful grip on his arm and around his waist she helped him stand, and walk to the pallet.

"Can you lie down on your stomach, or is that–"

"Yes."

She got him settled, and then sat near his head. "Do you want me to talk or be quiet?"

"... Don't care."

As long as he didn't have to steer the conversation he was fine with her talking. Background noise was great for not thinking.

Instead of either talking or sitting quietly, she started humming.

He kept his breathing deep and even and didn't try to pay attention to the tune, just let the rich sound wash over him. After a minute he felt a tentative hand on his head, brushing his curls back. He sucked in a breath, surprised, and the hand stilled, then started to pull away.

"Wait. 'S nice," he said, and the hand returned.

He was in too much pain to sleep, but he dozed, listening to Loren hum a song he'd never heard before and focusing as much as he could on the sensation of her cold hand in his hair.

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He had no idea how long they stayed like that, but at some point she helped him sit and drink the water that had been delivered with their evening rations. He forced himself to eat his portion of the food, and was able to make use of the bucket without help, which was a small relief. Afterwards she got him to lie down again, but he didn't let himself get comfortable this time.

Very shortly Loren's humming started to be interspersed with yawning. Slowly and carefully, he got his hands underneath him and tried to sit.

Her song cut off abruptly. "What are you doing? Do you need–"

"You're tired."

"I'm– yes?"

"Have to get up."

She helped him stand, frowning, and caught his wrist when he tried to walk away from the pallet. "Where are you going?"

"Find– find a place to lie down."

"The pallet seemed like a perfectly good place to me."

"Your turn."

She tugged him around to face her, her jaw set once again, stubborn and more than a little annoyed. "You will not sleep on the floor," she said firmly. "We'll share."

"Eh. Got to lie on my stomach. Not enough room."

Letting go of him, she marched back over to the pallet and sat down in the center. "Come here, you silly man," she said, patting the spot next to her.

Davijaan took a single step forward, and then stopped. His head was very foggy but he was aware enough to know this was skirting a line.

She frowned. "If you're really, truly uncomfortable, I'll take the floor. But you will *not* lie on the cold stone all night in the shape you're in."

She made to stand, and he quickly took another few steps forward. "No, no! Stay there. I'm coming."

Apparently he was too tired to make good decisions. But he'd slept curled up around others before. Quite often as a younger cadet, actually. It shouldn't be a big deal.

Never with a civilian.

Well. He'd been in more than one civilian's bed, he'd just never been invited to stay the night.

But this was a totally, completely different situation and should not be thought of along the same lines at all, he told himself sternly as he knelt on the pallet.

Once they got themselves situated it was actually pretty comfortable. She lay on her back as far to one side as she could go without falling off, and he lay half on top of her and half on the other side of the pallet. His position didn't pull at his back too badly, and while she wasn't exactly warm he could admit this was much nicer than the floor.

"There," she said, freeing a hand to awkwardly pat his head. "That's not so bad."

"Mhm."

"Good night, Odd Ball."

"Night. Loren."

His last thought before he drifted off was that this was the first time he'd slept all tangled up with someone since he'd been assigned officer's quarters a month into the war.

Chapter 2

The Bastards took him again early the next morning; pulling him up and off Loren by the arm before he was awake enough to hold in his scream as every wound in his back tore open.

Before the ray-shield went back up he caught a last glimpse of her face, terrified and furious.

I'm not dead yet, he wanted to tell her.

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They returned him to Loren with four fingers on his left hand broken, and still without whatever information they thought he had about local settlements.

He had no doubt the session would have continued at least through his right hand if the Colonel hadn't been called away suddenly. That could mean any number of things, but the messenger was anxious, and the last he'd seen of the GAR, the 212th and 501st had been in the process of flanking the capital.

Thinking about it was a waste of time. He would face whatever happened when it happened.

The Bastards had taken Loren's shirt– *after* they'd made a mess of his hand, and with several less than polite remarks on how close they'd gotten so quickly– so there was a dearth of clean cloth in their cell. Loren still insisted on at least wrapping the hand in the remains of his uppers, and cleaning his back as best she could.

He wasn't sure how he felt about letting her clean him up. On one hand it was easier than doing it himself, and on the other hand it kept her focused on something besides impending doom. All in all it was a win, but it still didn't sit right in his gut.

"I don't understand," she said, quietly, wiping blood and water away with the inside of her jacket sleeve. "Why would they do this?"

Davijaan snorted. "Why not?"

"What do they have to gain from hurting you?"

"Less than they think they do." He started to shrug and thought better of it. "It's fine. I was expecting this. It's just. Part of war." They'd spent two months on what Kote had cheerfully called their "don't snitch" training. That had been the most grim he'd ever seen '17, and a handy reminder that war wasn't just about killing and waiting to be killed.

She waited for him to elaborate, and when he didn't, she said, "In holofilms it's always… the bad guys torture people for information, or for fun, because they like causing pain. It's just evil." Her hand stilled, and her voice took on a hard edge. "How is this any different?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slow, mind racing.

She was a civilian. She didn't know anything about war because she didn't need to know anything about war. The whole point of the clones was that they faced the war while the civilians went on with their lives.

But she was facing war, now. And for all the aspects of war he didn't like to think about, he knew ignorance only made them worse. Hell, he'd already given her the scared shiny speech last night, because she'd needed to hear it, and because he'd been too out of it to think of all the reasons he shouldn't. Might as well keep her informed.

"They *are* after information." He cleared his throat, glad she couldn't see his face, glad he was alert enough to mask his pain. "I'm… I'm an officer. Low rank, but still. But they don't even want to know anything about the GAR, they want to know what the GAR knows about them. So they'll probably leave you alone. You're a civilian. You don't have to worry."

"Oh." The hand resumed. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault."

They lapsed into silence that wasn't quite comfortable. She was upset, and he didn't think any of the usual things he had to say would be a comfort.

When she deemed his back as clean as she could get it she tried to get him settled on his stomach again, but after spending the better part of two days sitting or lying down he was restless. He walked a few laps around the cell, disaster hand cradled to his chest and right hand braced against the wall. When the ache of movement became too much to ignore he gave in and sat on the pallet next to her.

"You're not wrong," he offered, cautiously, glancing at her face and away. "About causing pain for the sake of causing pain."

She didn't say anything, but when he looked over again he found her looking back, steady and serious. Waiting. He swallowed.

"The Colonel's probably realized that even if I was going to say anything, I don't have anything to say. I think… Part of it is that I'm here, in their power, and they can hurt me and I can't do anything about it, while the rest of the GAR is making a mess of their militia just outside the city walls."

She nodded slowly, and if she was surprised or shocked by that she did a good job hiding it. "So the GAR *is* here?"

He blinked. "The GAR is sitting right in front of you."

"No, I mean the whole army. They're here? They're through the blockade?"

"Last I knew the 212th was marching on the capital from the south, with the 501st moving to join them from the north." And maybe he should have mentioned that sooner, if the look of relief on her face was anything to go by. She was stuck in a cell waiting for rescue too.

Kote is coming to get me.

“I knew there was enough of a to-do around the withdrawal and the blockade for the GAR to get involved. And of course you’re here, but…”

“It’s good to have confirmation?”

“Yes,” she sighed, shoulders slumping. “I would have asked, but I was trying not to think about how far away they might be.”

He snorted. “First rule of not thinking about things is to know which things you can actually get away with not thinking about.”

She rolled her eyes dramatically, and he grinned as wide as he could manage, and the ensuing silence was much more comfortable than before.

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She talked him into sleeping on the pallet again with her that night. He could have argued or insisted, but he’d already given in once, so he figured the line had been truly and thoroughly crossed already and he could worry about it if they got out of the damn cell. He slept much better than he expected to, at least, what with his expanding collection of injuries.

When he woke up, most of his back was red and swollen, and a fever had set in.

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When the Colonel was called away urgently only ten minutes into the third session– lots of intense questions and lots of punching, very little actual torture– Davijaan knew he would not be in the tender care of the Umbaran Militia for much longer.

Something had shifted for the worse on the Umbaran side. With defenses, supply lines, casualty rates. Something. They didn’t need anything from him anymore. He was either going to die in his cell or be retrieved by the GAR.

The infection and accompanying fever made every muscle in his body ache, and once he was back in the cell it was all he could do to lay still on his stomach and breath. Loren sat by his head again, and he thought she might be humming, but really it could just be the static behind his eyes.

He tried to turn his head towards her and groaned as his split lip and bruised cheek rubbed against rough fabric. The noise stopped.

Well. That was one way to confirm his suspicion.

“Need anything?”

“Face hurts.”

“Not surprised. You look like one giant bruise.”

“Feel like it.”

“Is there anything else I can do to help you get comfortable?”

Maybe, but she was already doing so much more than he would have ever dared ask for. “... No.”

The humming resumed, and he lay still and listened and burned from the inside out until the promise of even temporary relief was too much.

“C’n you… touch my hair again?”

“Hm?”

“Hands ‘re cold.”

“Oh! Of course.”

And then there were five pin-points of blessed cool against the side of his face, and when he finally fell asleep he dreamed of the moment near the end of a storm when the thunder finally stops and the cold rain gentles.

***

He woke up shortly after their evening rations were dropped off, and forced himself to lean against the wall and eat and drink, the hand he was trying to pretend didn't exist resting gingerly on one thigh.

“Don’t think they’re coming for me again,” he said, and explained what he suspected of the battle outside.

“So we might not be here much longer?”

He grimaced. As much as he didn’t want to quash her hope, if worse came to worst and the capital was placed under siege… “Wouldn’t bet on it.”

Her face fell, but he kept talking, fumbling in his foggy head for what she needed to hear.

“There’s a chance! The 212th’s good at everything. 501st gets the job done. They’ll get through the capital’s defenses. With time.”

Neither of them voiced the fact that without some kind of medical attention, he likely didn’t have time, but he could see the thought in the worried crease of her sky-blue brow.

“Even if they don’t,” he continued. “I’m sure you’ve got– people. Who would push for rescue, or pay ransom. Your boss. Your family. You’ll get out of here.”

She snorted. “I doubt my boss could pick me out of a crowd. But you’re right.” Something in her face softened, but it seemed sad. “My family will find a way to get me back, if word of my arrest actually gets to Republic space.”

“Even if it doesn’t, they’ll notice you missing.” He couldn’t imagine she’d be easy to forget.

She looked up at him, sun-gold eyes bright and steady. “Someone will notice you missing too, Odd Ball.”

He mustered a weak smile, and turned away.

Kote is coming to get me.

***

They settled together on the pallet for the third time with surprisingly little fuss considering all the injuries they were trying to accommodate. On top of that, Davijaan knew he was a sweaty, disgusting mess and probably uncomfortably hot to the touch, but Loren didn’t so much as wrinkle her nose. Instead, she slipped her hand into his hair again, her cold fingertips a welcome counterpoint to the burning in his blood.

“What’s the first thing you’re going to do when you’re out?” she asked, soft.

And it was questions like that, to Davijaan, that illustrated the point of the “don’t think about it” rule. Because if you thought about maybe living when you knew you were probably dying that made facing death a whole lot harder.

But he swallowed down his annoyance, and offered a trite, “Don’t know. I’ll be in medical for a while. Maybe hug my siblings.”

Hugs were nice. Grounding. He didn't get many of them as an officer, but he knew he’d get at least one if he left this cell alive. He held the memories close in the meantime.

‘17 had given him a hug, once. He couldn’t remember why anymore– if he’d asked or if ‘17 had just given it to him– but he remembered it had been warm and solid. A hug from anyone felt nice, but a hug from someone that much bigger than you felt safe. That was a good memory.

The cold hand left his hair, but he didn’t have more than a second to miss it before an arm settled over his shoulders, careful of the worst of the mess.

“How’s that for now?”

“Nice.” He swallowed. Time to re-direct. “How about you?”

“Oh, probably the same thing. Get out of the hospital and hug my parents. My siblings if they bring me cake. Eat my pa’s cooking. Wander around the tundra for a bit.”

“There’s tundra on Coruscant?”

“On Pantora.”

“Oh. Sounds...” Odd, but intriguing. “Good.”

“Maybe… Maybe I’ll wake up early one morning, before the stars have set, and climb to the top of the tallest mountain.”

Something in her tone had shifted, but he couldn't place it. "In the dark?" He pushed.

"Oh I'll bring a light, don't worry. I know the trail like the back of my hand, but I'm not dumb enough to walk up a mountain in the dark."

"Glad to hear it."

"I'll turn off the light once I get to the peak. And then I'll sit on the rocks by the cliff edge, and wait. And the stars will fade and the sky will brighten and once I've sat there long enough for time to slow down, the sun will rise."

Davijaan could almost see it, if he focused on the rise and fall of her voice.

"The sun will be a brilliant orange splotch– a glow on the edge of the horizon. And then as it peaks over it's going to send out streaks of pink and peach into the clouds, and purple if I'm lucky, which I will be. And then, once the sun is over the trees, the light is going to turn golden, and shimmer as it burns away the mist."

And suddenly it was hard to breathe as old memories surfaced; memories of sunrise burning over the Kamino sea and of sunrise caressing the curve of a planet and of sunrise fracturing through the sparkling skyscrapers of Coruscant. Of one particularly precious sunrise rendered in bright orange paint.

"I'll be able to see the whole valley, all lit up from overhead. The village. Speeders on the roads and animals on the slopes. The way snow and rock turns to grass and scrub turns to pine trees and the riverbed. The whole world, ready for the day."

He breathed out in a long, slow sigh. "That sounds… peaceful."

"It is," she whispered, and he wondered for a moment if she was going to start crying again.

They lay in silence, their breath falling into the same rhythm, trying not to lose their grasp on those memories.

Before he could fall asleep, Davijaan summoned his courage. "I… Thank you."

"Hm? For what?"

For helping with my injuries. For making sure I sleep comfortably. For the humming, and the hand in my hair, and telling me I would be missed. For sharing your sunrise with me.

He just shook his head.

For not making me face this alone.

***

Davijaan dreamed of lying still in a lab, white lights bright in his eyes and durasteel table so cold it burned, voices all around him but no-one in sight, and he tried to sit up but he couldn't, he was frozen solid, ice creeping up his arms and legs and around his chest–

– and weighing him down as he sank into the black depths of the sea, shadows circling and waiting for him to take in that damning breath of water, but he couldn't, no matter how badly his lungs burned behind his ribs he couldn't open his mouth and the burning crawled up his throat–

– and through the rest of his body, and he was burning as he fell, the controls dead in his hands and the escape hatch jammed and blue sky and brown earth whirling into each other through the viewshield as he spun out of control, but he couldn't do anything except scream as his flesh melted from his bones–

– and he was shaking, but he couldn't tell if it was from impact or the cool hand gripping his arm or the voice in his ear begging–

"– ease wake up. There's something happening, someone is screaming and I don't know–"

– and then the cold hand was replaced by a warm one and he wasn't shaking anymore he was rising, a voice as steady and familiar as his own saying–

"– hang in there, soldier. We'll get you settled and taken care of as soon as–"

Oh.

Kote did *come to get me.*

He managed to open his eyes. He was being carried into a hallway crowded with white and orange painted soldiers, but no sunrise in sight. A flash of sky-blue caught in the corner of his eye and he turned towards it, and watched Loren disappear down the hall.

***

After Yikes had cleared him from medical and he'd gotten his hugs from Kote and his flight squad– Mitts and Fiddle had tag-teamed a tackle hug that he was a hundred percent certain had not been medically advised, but it was good to know he'd been missed– he tried to put some of his thoughts in order about Loren.

He wasn't very successful.

***

Davijaan wasn't involved with the end of the war. Kote was, because wherever there was chaos Kote could be found in the thick of it.

No, Davijaan heard about the end of the war after the celebrations had already started. After the Supreme Chancellor had been killed and the Separatists droids shut down and every medic in the GAR sent the information they needed to start removing bio-chips.

As the highest ranking officer in his flight squad, he'd been first called up for the surgery. He hadn't felt any different afterwards. He'd attended one of the parties in the common area after he was released from medical, and had been surprised by the joy and excitement of his

siblings. He wasn’t sure what he felt about the end of the war. All the rules of what to and what not to think about had been upended.

Eventually he’d left and found Kote sitting on the bunk in his quarters, and sat down next to him, and they’d sat in silence together for hours, Kote with nothing to say and Davijaan with too much.

***

Now that they didn’t need the GAR, the Republic wasn’t sure what to do with it.

As his first act as Supreme Chancellor, Bail Organa pushed a Clone Rights Bill through the Senate, granting the clones full citizenship, veterans benefits, and custody of their younger siblings still on Kamino. That was all well and good, but neither Davijaan nor any of his siblings knew how to be civilians, and Coruscant wasn’t exactly welcoming her new influx of immigrants with open arms.

There wasn’t enough space in the on-planet barracks, so most of the GAR stayed on the venators they’d lived the last three years of their lives on, orbiting Coruscant from a safe distance. Davijaan went planetside every day he could.

He had nothing in particular to do, so he explored. Wandered through alleys and market places and parks and dared to spend some of his severance pay on new foods and trinkets. He’d spent most of the war in space, in starships of various sizes, and being free to roam a city was something he didn’t think he’d ever grow tired of. Civilians especially were fascinating to watch and converse with when he had the chance.

Though he didn’t often have the chance, because while some found him as interesting as he found them, the vast majority would rather he didn’t exist. It was somewhat grating, after a while. Really put a damper on his outings. It was better to go with another clone so he'd have someone to talk to. Jesse or Hawk from the 501st were usually a good bet, or Sinker from the 104th. Gregor never needed much convincing either.

Kote never came.

When he was alone Davijaan usually found a bench in a park and spent the day with his head tilted back, trying to get a glimpse of the artificial sky.

***

“We need to get there earlier than I thought,” Kote called through the open door of the tiny fresher attached to his quarters. “We’re meeting Fox and Wolffe.”

Davijaan looked up from where he sat in the desk chair fiddling with the buttons on his shirt.

“... Oh.”

Kote finally stuck his head out of the fresher, eyebrow raised. “What was that for?”

“What was what for?”

“The little… the ‘oh.’ Thought you were excited to see them again.”

“I am. I just…” He shrugged. “I thought it was just us tonight. You said we were meeting up with them tomorrow.”

“We were,” Kote moved to his equally tiny cupboard, pulling out the jacket Davijaan had bought him. “But I commed Fox and asked if we could move it to tonight.”

He said it so casually, back turned to Davijaan, the tension in his shoulders almost invisible if you weren’t looking for it.

“So, what?” Davijaan straightened, trying to match his casual tone but unable to hide an edge of bitterness. “So you can get all your brotherly obligations done and over with?”

Kote stiffened. “That’s not–”

“Have you even left the ship since we got here? Because–”

“I’m leaving now!” Kote turned, slamming the cupboard door shut. “We’re leaving in ten minutes–”

“– as far as I can tell you haven’t even left this room!”

“I leave–”

“To get food, and then you come right back!”

Kote glared at him, jaw stiff and back straight. “What’s the point of going planetside,” he said, low and hard and furious. “What’s the point of spending hours every day wandering the city without any sort of– of reason, or plan? I got my fair share of that on leave, thanks, and I–”

“The *point* is to be around other people! Is to be *outside!”*

Kote scoffed. “I’m around you!”

Because I hunt you down.

“I just spent three years running every which way across the galaxy, I think I’m allowed to sit in my quarters and– and breathe for a damn minute!”

That’s not what you’re doing. I don’t know what you’re doing but that’s not it.

“And you don’t get to come in here and tell me off for not being around people or leaving the ship when we’re about to go planetside!”

For the first time in a month.

When Davijaan didn’t respond, Kote looked away and took a deep breath. “We need to go,” he said.

Davijaan stood, offered him a smile, and opened the door.

***

Fox and Wolffe had known something was wrong immediately, but Kote was determined to ignore it, so they ignored it too.

It'd been a while since they'd all seen each other. They'd changed so much over the war, and seen each other so seldom, and Davijaan for one wasn't sure where he stood with Fox or Wolffe anymore. All in all the evening was stiff and awkward and nobody even got drunk.

Kote was silent on the transport back to the ship, and didn't say anything when Davijaan followed him into his quarters and sat on the bunk.

He started to change, but Davijaan patted the blankets next to him and said, "Come here."

Kote glanced over and away. "I can't do this right now."

"Yes you can."

"I don't want to."

"Too bad. Sit."

So Kote sat, and allowed Davijaan to hold him and run a thumb over the sliver of uncovered skin on the back of his neck. It took him a while, but eventually he relaxed enough to hug back; shifting around until he was clinging to Davijaan, trembling.

Davijaan didn't try to say anything, because there wasn't anything he could say.

We're not dead yet. And I don't know what that means anymore.

Whenever CFS-7 had worked directly with the 212th– and directly under Kote's command– Davijaan had always found Kote before the battle got underway and hugged him. Because you never knew, really. You always had to be prepared, because you never knew. And if Kote died–

If Kote died, that was it. He would be alone.

Oh, he had friends. He and Wolffe had been close during command track. He had drinking buddies in the 212th and 104th and 501st, and there was always CFS-7. And, scattered among millions of other clones, were the rest of his and Kote's batchmates. He'd always had the clearance to find them in the GAR databases. Never the courage.

But the thing about Kote, was that Davijaan had been following his lead and watching his back since they were decanted, and through luck and carefully pulled strings they'd managed to stay beside each other their whole lives. Not close beside each other– the Open Circle was a big fleet, and his and Kote's command postings were on opposite ends of it– but within reach. Close enough to find each other and hold each other for a few minutes, or even just a few seconds, before their next battle began.

The war was over, but it didn’t feel like it was over, and Davijaan had no idea what the next battle would be but he knew he didn’t want to face it alone.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” he whispered.

After a moment, Kote cleared his throat and asked, “Where’s here?”

This ship. This room. This moment. Orbiting a planet that won’t let me land safely.

He shook his head.

“Hm. Well. Where do you want to be instead?”

And Davijaan…

Davijaan hadn’t seen much of the galaxy, for all he’d flown all around it. He couldn’t even remember the names of half the planets he’d been to. But he’d been given a memory of a memory of peace, once, and he’d carried it with him through the last months of the war.

“Pantora.”

Chapter 3

Davijaan didn't tell Kote his criteria for picking the village they moved to, because then he would have had to explain it out loud, and then it would have sounded dumb to his own ears and he wouldn't have been able to follow through. Thankfully, Kote didn't ask.

Kote didn't take any interest, really, but that was fine with Davijaan as long as he didn't back out at the last second.

They arrived at the town of Kyurem's tiny spaceport on the last flight of the day with two crates of luggage between them, and rented a speeder at the desk. The trip through the tundra and into the mountains took almost an hour. Davijaan's annoyance disappeared once the road started to twist and turn through ponds and small lakes and he could see for himself how it would be hard to safely land larger ships out here.

The tundra itself was all dark greenish-red scrub stretching away to the horizon, a towering mountain range rising abruptly from the rolling plains in the distance. There were herds of antlered animals grazing far back from the road, and drab waterfowl in the ponds. The cold wind across Davijaan's face smelled sweet and spicy and alive.

It was late, but the sun was just starting to set when they arrived at the village. Kote recounted the directions he'd memorized as Davijaan navigated through narrow streets and around the center square and past the outskirts to a house set on a slope far back from the road, among outcroppings of jagged stone.

The house itself almost looked like another outcropping. It was a cylindrical two story building, with a steep domed roof. The first level was partially carved into the slope and had only one door, the second level boasted several windows and the front door, and had a narrow wooden porch with a narrow staircase propped up on stilts to access it. A large stone shed was built behind the house, further up the slope.

It had been abandoned for a few years, and they'd bought it from the village council rather than the previous owner. The representative Davijaan had been in contact with had wanted to meet them first, and asked all sorts of questions about their jobs and why they wanted to move, but when she realized they were prepared to pay the asking price up front she said to message her when they arrived and she'd meet them at the house with the door codes.

Mrs. Chen was waiting in her speeder; a tiny Pantoran lady with lots of grey in her dark purple hair. Storm cloud hair.

"Welcome to Amaura, Mr. Cody, Mr. Odd Ball," she said as she exited the speeder, with a prim smile, a bow, and an accent he'd never heard before. Davijaan wasn't sure if she meant the village or the mountain.

"Ah, thank you, ma'am," said Davijaan, awkward.

"We're happy to be here," Kote added.

“You boys must have had a long trip so I won’t take up too much of your time. Here are the door codes.” She handed a piece of flimsi to Davijaan. “There’s also instructions for changing them. I took a quick look around earlier, and aside from a few loose shingles everything seems to be in order.”

“Thank you,” he said, again. Her smile tightened.

An uneasy silence fell over them, neither Davijaan nor Kote sure what to say and Mrs. Chen evidently waiting for one of them to say something.

“Well, then,” she broke the silence, brusque. “Electricity’s been turned on, but water won’t be delivered until tomorrow. If that’s it, I’ll let you get settled in.” She skeptically eyed the two crates of luggage strapped to the back of their speeder, but didn’t say anything as she climbed back into her own vehicle and left.

Davijaan gripped the flimsi tight, trying to figure out what she meant about the water. He supposed they’d find out tomorrow.

The door code worked, though the door itself was a little stiff. The upper level was wide open, empty except for a small kitchen area in the back and a railing around a set of stairs leading down. The lower level consisted of a hall with the stairs and exterior door, with doors opening off into a fresher and what must be a bedroom. A trap door under the stairs led to yet another empty underground level. They stacked their crates to one side of the bedroom, and that was all the unpacking they had to do.

There was so much space, and all of it was empty, and Davijaan had no idea what they were supposed to fill it with.

They were nearing the end of the twenty-one hour day cycle, but the sun still hadn’t fully set. It didn’t matter– soldiers learned to sleep through anything, and there weren’t any windows in the bedroom besides– so Davijaan and Kote pulled their blankets out of a crate and curled up next to each other on the stone floor, and tried to sleep.

Just about as comfortable as an Umbaran cell, Davijaan thought, pressing his cold nose into the back of Kote’s neck and earning himself an elbow in the stomach. *Except worse company.*

***

Davijaan woke early– though apparently not early enough to see the sunrise– and ate a ration bar sitting on the porch. Kote was still sleeping.

There were things that needed to be done. They needed to return the rented speeder and buy one of their own, purchase more food, find out what was up with the water that still wouldn’t turn on. Not to mention figuring out what to fill their empty house with. Davijaan started his usual mental checklist but didn’t get very far before he realized he had no idea where to start with crossing any of them off.

Back to basics, he reminded himself as he thumped down the porch steps to the speeder. *Scout out the terrain, and* then *form a plan of attack.*

Rather than waste time trying to get Kote up Davijaan left a message on his comm and took his own comm with him. He was used to going out alone by now. He drove slowly, making note of the sparse pines scattered across the lower slopes of the mountain and the dry riverbed that ran beside the road for a ways.

The village itself was a collection of stone and wood buildings constructed within the valley between Amaura and one of her sister peaks. Davijaan's rough estimate was a thousand interconnected structures; three fourths residences– with a similar circular two story design as the house they'd just moved into– and one fourth… Everything else a village needed, he supposed.

He left his speeder in the public lot just outside the village proper and walked down the wide main street, reading the signs on the buildings. A grocer, a tailor, the village office, a library, a hardware store, a bar, a radio communications office, a salon of some kind. Most of the same kind of shops and offices and things he'd seen on Coruscant, and on the rare occasion he touched ground during a campaign, just smaller and less glittery.

There were plenty of people walking around to observe as well. Overwhelmingly Pantoran, but he did spot a Twi'lek parent and child going into the library, and a Wookie outside the hardware store securing a stack of lumber to their speeder. Davijaan himself was getting quite a lot of looks, ranging from startled to curious to knowing, and he hoped it was because he was the only human and not the only clone. Either way, he kept his shoulders back and his chin up and his expression pleasant, and nobody tried to stop him or speak to him.

Just as he was about to turn off the main street, a scrap of sky-blue caught in the corner of his eye. He stopped, and turned, and found himself standing in front of an office with a blue and gold painted sign that read, "Yang Family Shipping and Transportation."

Shipping and Transportation. Huh.

Davijaan walked inside.

It was a small office; a large desk with two chairs in front and two behind took up most of the space, with two more chairs set against the far wall in a sort of waiting area. The stone walls were decorated with bright cloth hangings. From somewhere in the office a bell rang as the door slid shut behind him, and an older Pantoran man with a shock of vibrant maroon and silver hair and the same accent as Mrs. Chen emerged from a doorway behind the desk.

"Sorry, sorry, lost track of time, I'll be right with you– oh." The man blinked. "You must be one of the boys just moved into the old Lin place. Welcome to Amaura!"

Davijaan froze, his hastily slapped on smile already starting to slip.

"Excuse me?"

“I’m Dhanse Yang,” he said, dipping his head briefly and coming back up smiling. “Nice to meet you, ah..? Samra didn’t tell me your name, just said you’d be moving in some time this week.”

“Samra?”

“Samra Chen? She said she’d been finalizing the purchase details?”

“Ah.” Davijaan swallowed down the urge to break into hysterical laughter at the idea that everyone in this village knew exactly who he was and where he lived. “Yes, I’m– my brother and I just got here last night. I’m Odd Ball.”

He awkwardly tried to mimic the head dip, and Mr. Yang’s smile brightened, the row of interlocking diamonds tattooed across his cheekbones crinkling up around his eyes.

“Welcome, Odd Ball! Welcome,” he said, moving around the desk to pull out one of the chairs. “Sit, sit! Tell me what brings you north! Not many humans on this part of the moon. Too cold for them. You and your brother looking for work at the quarry? Always hiring up at the quarry. Pays well, but hard on the body. Though you like you’d manage just fine.”

Davijaan didn’t so much sit as collapse into the chair, scrambling to come up with some kind of response. “Didn’t know there was a quarry, but I’ll keep that in mind, thanks. Um. No particular reason for moving here, just looking for a change of scenery.”

“As good a reason as any! That’s why my wife moved up here, in fact. Got tired of flying over marshes and decided she wanted to fly over mountains. Nothing beats the view in the summer months.”

“I can imagine.” Davijaan relaxed a bit, the conversation turning into territory he was familiar with. “Though the currents around the peaks can’t be easy to navigate.”

“No, no. Not at all. I suppose in some ways it does balance out, the beauty and the struggle. But such is life around these parts. You spend so much time working to keep your blue bright that you can hardly spare a second to look up from your hands to the sky.”

And Davijaan thought maybe Mr. Yang could indeed spare a second, but something about the way he’d phrased that thought sent it spinning around his mind.

“You know a bit about flying, then?”

“Yes, sir. I–” *was?* “– am a pilot.”

“Hm.” Mr. Yang’s eyes twinkled. “Not looking for work, are you?”

Whatever curiosity or desperation or hope had led Davijaan to walk into this little office flared. He straightened. “Depends on if you’re hiring, sir.”

Mr. Yang leaned back in his chair. “You see, son, we’re a small business and mostly work with established customers in a handful of other villages scattered through Amaura’s sisters. My eldest girl and I handle the customer service and flimsiwork and all that nonsense. My

wife's a pilot– and a damn good one at that– and deals with the practical aspects of shipping and transportation. But neither of us are getting any younger. We've recently started looking for someone to take over the longer flights."

Davijaan tried mostly successfully to hold in his excitement. "Well, sir, I've been flying since I was a child." Probably better not to put an age on that statement. "Fighters, and– and the like. Ships of all sizes, but most under a fifty meter wingspan. I've successfully piloted more than one sixteen-hour flight. Mostly spaceflight, but plenty of experience in atmo and through extreme weather conditions, as well as emergency landings."

Mr. Yang looked surprised, and maybe even a little bit pleased. "Well I doubt we'd have need of you for anything longer than seven hours, but that's quite impressive. Where have you worked before?"

He smiled, and wished he was any good at lying. "I flew in the war."

"Ah." Mr. Yang raised an eyebrow. "You're a clone, then?"

"Yes, sir. Is that going to be a problem?"

"No, no problem." He shook his head, thoughtful. "One of our girls met a clone once. Said he was a polite young man."

"Glad to hear it." Davijaan knew several of his siblings who would not under any circumstances be described as polite, and was immensely grateful that this particular clone had had the sense to make a good impression.

"Well," Mr. Yang continued. "That solves the problem of contacting previous employers– from what I've seen on the news you boys are damned spectacular at what you do– but you'll need to get your local piloting license of course, and all the payroll and procedure flimsiwork in order, and my wife will need to see you fly one of her ships, but if we get the process started today you could be an employee by the end of next week."

An employee. A civilian pilot, shipping goods and transporting locals around the mountains. "That sounds…" he cleared his throat. "That sounds good, sir."

"Excellent, excellent!" Mr. Yang practically jumped to his feet, and made his way around the desk to rummage in a very loud drawer. "I know I have a few copies of an application somewhere, just give me a moment–"

"Hey, pa?" a voice called through the open doorway behind the desk. "Where do you keep the spare–"

And then Loren walked into the office.

She looked better. Clean, the shadows under her eyes long gone, dressed in a plain tunic and trousers with her hair up in a bun. And she looked– nice. Very nice. Now that they weren't in a dimly lit cell on a dark planet he could almost count the freckles dusted around her gleaming gold tattoos.

Her eyes skittered over his face, wide with shock. “Odd Ball?”

He realized abruptly that his jaw was hanging down somewhere around his knees, and closed his mouth with a click. “Ms. Loren?”

“Ms.?”

He flushed. “Well, I–”

“What are you doing here!?”

“I’m just–”

“How did you–”

“Hold it, hold it!” Mr. Yang cut in. “Lo, this is the fellow you met?”

She nodded, not taking her eyes off Davijaan.

“Well, well. That puts a new spin on things.” He turned to Davijaan and looked him up and down once rather sharply before turning back to his daughter and giving her a gentle shove. “Go on then, get! Out of my sight, silly girl.”

“But pa, I–”

“No buts. Sounds like you and your friend have a lot to catch up on.”

Loren huffed, but she made it out from behind the desk and grabbed Davijaan by the arm. “Your lunch is on the counter, pa, and put mine back in the conservator!” she called over her shoulder as she tugged him towards the door. “And you’ll have to find your own fork, because Minle’s been into the cutlery again!”

“Wait!” Davijaan dug his heels in and managed to stop her forward momentum with a jerk. “Wait, sir, you said you had an application?”

Mr. Yang grinned. “Come back tomorrow morning with your identification, and my wife and I will be happy to get you sorted out. You two enjoy your lunch. And, Loren?”

“I know, pa!” She snatched a large bag off a rack by the door, and tugged at Davijaan’s arm again, and this time he allowed himself to be pulled out the door.

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Davijaan didn’t even taste the spoonful of soup he tried, he only registered that it was too hot and put the spoon down before continuing to try and explain.

“I promise I’m not trying to hunt you down, or– or anything! I just haven’t been planetside much since the war started, and I grew up on an ocean planet, so I figured mountains would make a nice change from stars and seas!”

“Mhm.” Loren sipped her water, watching him flail with a single raised eyebrow.

“And how was I supposed to know you lived by the tallest mountain on Pantora!?”

“I did say ‘the tallest mountain–’”

“But you didn’t say it was *the* tallest, it could have just been the tallest in your local mountain range! There are tons of mountains on Pantora!”

“Alright, I’ll give you that.”

“And your family! They run a shipping company, and I’m– I’m a pilot! That’s the only thing–”

“Sure.”

“So you see–”

“Of course.”

Davijaan heaved a sigh, and went back to his soup. It was still too hot. This time it also tasted bitter. He must have made a face, because Loren almost choked on her water laughing.

He wasn’t even sure what was in it, other than it was purple, and apparently bitter. He’d just ordered the same thing as her and then sat in increasingly awkward silence waiting for it to arrive. The restaurant she’d dragged him to was circular and stone like all the buildings he’d seen so far, but there was intricately carved wood paneling over most of the walls to study, and plenty of other people besides Loren to watch.

Not many families out at the lunch hour, but plenty of couples and the odd group of friends. Some were speaking accented Basic, but most were conversing in a language he’d never heard before that must be Pantoran. The source of the accent. He wondered why Loren didn’t have it.

Trousers with either a loose tunic or poncho seemed to be the outfit of choice, and as well as many different styles of headdress. He wondered if, on a planet relatively untouched by the war, his Coruscanti style shirt and pants said more about him than his borrowed face.

“It’s fine, Odd Ball,” said Loren, setting her water aside. “I wasn’t upset, just surprised. And it’s actually really, really good to see you. And to see that you’re ok. By the time they got us out you weren’t very– and I didn’t know– and there was no way for me to find out, so–”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s… It’s good to see you too.” Because, to his surprise, it was. Because there hadn’t been any way for him to find out, either, other than to take Kote’s word for it that she’d been safely returned home long before he got out of medical.

She smiled weakly, and took a sip of her own soup. He stirred his in a vain attempt to cool it down.

He had no idea what to do. Or say. She'd shocked the "civilian smile" right off his face and he knew technically he was a civilian now too, but that just meant the rules of engagement had changed and he hadn't had a chance to study up yet. What did a civilian do when they were dragged out to lunch by another civilian they hadn't seen since sharing a cell six months ago?

"So. You're up in the old Lin place? You and your… brother?"

Talk about literally anything except that time they shared a cell. Got it. "Yes."

He could see her trying to puzzle that out, but rather than push she nodded and took another sip. He breathed a silent sigh of relief and desperately tried to come up with something to steer the conversation away from him. "I thought you said you worked out of Coruscant?"

"I do. I moved there several years ago, actually. For university, and then I stayed for work. But I get a tenday off every third month, and when I can afford it, I come home to visit."

"Oh. And how– how are things?"

"If you mean how's work, terrible." She wrinkled her nose, disgusted. "The war ended before I could publish my big exposé."

"Ah, yes," he said, dry. "The war ended. Tragic."

She sputtered, flushing indigo. "I– that's not– Of course it's a good thing the war ended, I only meant–"

Davijaan laughed. "It's alright. It's different for civvies, I know."

"No, no, that was insensitive of me." She groaned, hiding her face in her hands. "It's just– I didn't–"

She looked up, gaze hard. "I wouldn't write about Umbara. It was too much, and my boss wasn't very… Understanding. So I was on thin ice for about a month after I started work again, and I kept saying I would write something about it eventually, but there's less interest now in big sensationalized stories like 'Reporter Held Captive By Umbaran Militia for a Tenday,' so…"

"Huh." He didn't understand why anyone would want to read about that kind of thing, but he supposed it was different if you knew you were never going to have to face it yourself.

There was a basket of thickly sliced and slightly grey bread on the table that he'd ignored until now, but she grabbed a slice and started shredding it into her soup. "Anyway, enough about my terrible job. I promised my parents I wouldn't worry about work while I was home." She flicked a crumb at him. "How come you never told me you were a pilot?"

He shrugged, and tentatively reached into the basket. "It didn't come up."

“I spent entirely too long complaining about that poor pilot who flew me right into the hands of the Umbarans for you to claim the subject of pilots never came up!”

“Didn’t seem… relevant.” He took a big bite of the bread. It was soft, and to his surprise had a sour aftertaste. But he didn’t mind sour as much as bitter.

“Hmph.” She leaned back in her seat, arms crossed over her chest. “Well. I hope you get the job. They’ve been looking for someone for ages, but we don’t get many newcomers up here.”

“I hope so too. It would be– interesting.”

“Different from what you were doing in the war?”

“Very different.” He hesitated. “Everything about Pantora is different. I haven’t even been here a full day and it’s already so much more than I was expecting. Is it just me or is the air… kind of tangy?”

“Oh, that’s the Pantoran tea! Smells wonderful, doesn’t it?”

“Pantoran tea?”

“It grows on the tundra. It really does make good tea, fresh or dried. You’ll have to try some.”

“Huh. So, do I buy it somewhere?”

“You could, or you could pick it yourself.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere! When we’re done eating, we can go for a walk and I can show you a good spot for it a little ways beyond my parents house.”

“Sure.”

She nodded, satisfied, and dug into her soggy bread and bitter soup.

Davijaan watched her eat in horrified fascination for a few seconds before turning back to his own food. He made a few more attempts on the soup, but mostly focused on cleaning out the bread basket for the rest of the meal. He’d only had bread a few times before, and it had been the crunchy, crusty kind. The soft kind was so much nicer to eat.

She finished while he was still polishing off the last slice, and waved the waiter down for the check.

He swallowed the last bite a bit too fast. “I can pay.” Having credits was a novelty he didn’t think would ever wear off.

“No, I’ve got it.” She was shuffling through her bag rather loudly, and Davijaan resisted the urge to lean over the table and get a glimpse of whatever was making the rattling and crunching noises. “Besides, I’m the one who invited you.”

'Invited' was an interesting choice of word. “Oh. Right.”

She glanced up with a hint of a smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “You’re just going to have to invite me out sometime, and then you can pay.”

He blinked. “You want me to?”

“Well, actually,” she sat up straight, suddenly concerned. “You’re probably busy, getting settled in and everything, and I’m only in town for another two days– oh goddess I should have asked before I suggested we go running off to pick tea– but if you don’t have time–”

“No, no! I mean– yes! That would be, yes. I have time. Now, to go pick tea. And also later. To go out again. Absolutely. That would be… nice.”

Because it would be, to spend time with someone who wasn’t a sibling and wasn’t weird about clones and who wanted to show him how to pick tea. It would be nice, and there was no reason to say no because he was a civilian now, too, and the rules of engagement had changed, and they’d just had lunch together and it hadn’t been a disaster. And really, he had nothing *but* time.

Her whole face brightened when she grinned, her tattoos scrunching across her cheekbones and her eyes lighting up from the inside. “I think so, too.”

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The front door slid open and Davijaan took a single step inside and then just stood there, several dozen stalks of a spiky-leafed plant that smelled of what he was starting to recognize as tundra held loose in one hand, the events of the last few hours suddenly too much to process.

Kote glanced over from where he was cautiously poking at the rusted stovetop with a metaphorical stick, and then did a double-take.

“Are you alright?” he asked, abandoning the stovetop to cross the room in a few long strides and pull Davijaan out of the doorway, glancing curiously at the plants.

“I– Maybe?”

Kote raised an eyebrow.

Davijaan took a deep breath. “Alright, so. Remember when I got captured on Umbara?”

His eyes narrowed. “Yes.”

“And shared a cell with that Pantoran lady?”

“With the nice hands?”

“Shut up. Yes. Anyway…”

“... Yes?”

Davijaan swallowed. “She’s here. She, um. This is her home village.”

“Ah.” Both of Kote’s eyebrows were inching diligently towards his hairline, but he looked more contemplative than anything else. “Did you know?”

“Did I–” Davijaan sputtered. “*No!* You think I would have come within a thousand miles of this place if I’d known!?”

“Hm.”

“Get that look off your face.”

“What look?”

“The ‘I’m trying to put together a puzzle but I'm missing a piece’ look. That look.”

Kote rolled his eyes. “Is this a bad thing or a good thing, Davi!”

“... I don’t know. She, um. She said she wanted to see me again. We’re going hiking together tomorrow afternoon.”

“Huh. Well. Good,” said Kote.

And Davijaan hoped he was right.

“And what the fuck is in your hand?”

Chapter 4

Loren's mother, Mrs. Ereno Yang, stood tall and slim next to her short and stocky husband. She had similar dark blue hair and light blue skin as her daughter, and a circle overlaid by three curved lines tattooed on each cheek. She was also unnervingly quiet, her piercing gold eyes momentarily sending Davijaan back to Kamino, cowering in front of Skirata and awaiting condemnation.

But after the initial once-over her gaze softened. "My husband says you flew in the war," she said, and then bowed her head. "Thank you for your service."

Davijaan had been told that by a surprising number of civilians. It always left a sour taste in the back of his mouth, but at least she sounded like she meant it. And maybe, as a fellow pilot, she did.

"In the air first," she said, firm, and led the way out of the village and up the slope to a tiny hangar perched on the edge of a cliff. Inside were two ships, a modified G9 Rigger and an antique HWK-290 undergoing repairs. Mrs. Yang walked right to open hatch of the rigger, and Davijaan followed.

As he sat in the pilot's chair and got his first look at the controls, Mrs. Yang sitting still and silent in the copilot's chair, Davijaan realized he was nervous. Probably for the first time since he'd started working with real ships instead of sims. He even caught himself holding his breath as he got his headset on and safety harness secured, and started working his way down his take off checklist, familiarizing himself with the controls quickly and efficiently.

He forced himself to breathe. He was not going to panic. Absolutely not. He'd only panicked once– when he couldn't shake the Vultures tailing him on Teth, and General Kenobi'd had to save him– and all in all it had been the most embarrassing moment of his life and he was not going to repeat it. It was just that it'd been a few months since Utapau, since he'd actually piloted a ship himself. He just needed to get back into the right–

"Her name's *Glimmer,"* Mrs. Yang said, and Davijaan jerked his head up in surprise.

"Oh! Should have asked, sor–"

She shook her head. He swallowed down the rest of his apology. "You need to focus. But you also need to know who you're working with."

Davijaan had flown everything from Larties to ARC-170s to Venators, but he'd never gotten attached to a particular ship. He'd been familiar with several, but different missions called for different ships, and they were often destroyed– usually while he was in them– and replaced, and there was no guarantee you'd be assigned to the same one twice anyway. A starship was just a machine. A tool. Like a clone.

He reached out and brushed a cautious hand over the console. "Hello, *Glimmer.* Um. Looking forward to working with you."

Mrs. Yang nodded once, satisfied, and settled back in her chair.

Take off was roughly the same no matter the ship, and Davijaan'd had these protocols memorized for over half of his life. Nervous or not, his hands never hesitated. The hangar doors slid open with a hiss, and Davijaan took the rigger up and into the sky.

It was so… open. No Vulture droids, no Republic fighters, no cannon fire or explosions or screams in his comm. Just the wide blue sky and the sun.

And Davijaan, the engine humming under his feet and the yoke warm in his hands, rising up and up into the blue until the rest of the world fell away.

And Mrs. Yang, who made herself known once again by clearing her throat. Davijaan blinked back to himself and relaxed his grip on the yoke, leveling out to skim over a mountain peak.

"Take her down into the valley," she said, and for the next hour Davijaan followed her concise instructions and flew over and around mountain after mountain, and landed and took off from various cramped and unlikely locations. She even directed him down a slope and out of the range to fly over the tundra. She had him maintain a low speed, and gave her instructions far in advance.

It was too easy. And it was by far the most relaxing flying he'd ever done. He actually couldn't remember the last time he'd flown without being shot at, not even in a sim.

By the end of the hour Mrs. Yang turned to him, lips curving slightly in a smile that reminded him oddly of '17, and said, "Good."

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With the issue of suitability settled, there was flimsiwork to deal with. Davijaan was familiar with flimsiwork. But maybe not exactly this type of flimsiwork.

There were questions about availability and contact information and past employment that were easy enough to fill out. There were some questions he couldn't answer, like birthdate and surname, but there was enough diversity within the Republic that neither were required. He signed everything with his officially recognized name, Odd Ball, and copied out the new ID number he'd been issued along with his citizenship. Natborns made such a big deal about names, and Davijaan had laughed and laughed when he realized the Republic numbered their citizens too.

"And you *will* have to go down to Kyurem and get your local piloting license– I'm afraid there's no way around that, for insurance reasons you see– and of course get an account set up at the bank, but if my wife is satisfied–" Mr. Yang looked expectantly at his wife, seated next to him behind the desk, and she gave a sharp nod. "– then I'm satisfied."

He stood and bowed briefly, looking up to meet Davijaan's eyes with a grin. "Welcome to Yang Family Shipping and Transportation. I am very much looking forward to working with you, Odd Ball."

Davijaan rose and started to offer a hand before he caught himself, and bowed as well. “I am too, sir. With both of you. That is…” He straightened. “I’ll do my best.”

He wasn’t sure what he was feeling. Nervous, absolutely. Terrified, maybe. And he was already adding the trip down to Kyurem and the trip to the village bank to his mental checklist. But underneath all of it he felt light enough to fly on his own.

“Excellent, excellent!” Mr. Yang moved out from behind the desk and patted him on the shoulder. “Come back when you’ve got that license and we’ll put you on the roster straight away!”

Behind them the front door opened, a bell ringing in the back. Loren walked in, bag slung over her shoulder and hair covered in a bright yellow scarf. Davijaan swallowed.

Her father scooped her up in a hug and kissed her forehead before she’d even said hello, but she just laughed and hugged back. “Hey, pa.” She waved over his shoulder. “Hey, ma.” Mrs. Yang waved too, that slight smile appearing again.

Davijaan stood awkwardly off to the side, unsure what to do with his hands.

Eventually she was released, and straightened out her tunic as she studied the mess of loose flimsi on the desk. “I take it everything went well?”

Mr. Yang responded enthusiastically and drew her into a one-sided conversation about the trouble with finding reliable help that, judging from her politely amused expression, she’d already heard.

Mrs. Yang emerged from behind the desk and stationed herself next to Davijaan, watching him watch Loren until he caught himself and gave her his attention, embarrassed. Before he could apologize she said, “You’re friends?”

“Um.” Were they? Did Loren think they were? Had she told her parents they were? “Did she say that?”

“Not in so many words. She said you’d gotten to know each other very well.”

“Ah.” Well. He couldn’t argue with that. “What did she tell you… about me…?” *Please don’t ask how I’m recovering.*

“Not much. That you were a clone. That you were kind.” She tilted her head, considering. “Where did you two meet, again?”

Davijaan blinked. Kind? And where did they meet!? He glanced towards Loren and found her standing alone, looking back. “We met–”

Loren shook her head sharply.

“ – uhhh... We met… when Loren was on assignment?”

She nodded encouragingly. Well then. He was pretty terrible at lying but he'd give it his best shot. "On assignment. To. A safe planet, where my flight squad was stationed."

Mrs. Yang frowned. Whoops.

"Not for a campaign! For–"

Loren stepped around her mother to stand beside him, laying a hand on his shoulder and cutting in smoothly with, "They were cleaning up in the aftermath of a campaign, but there was no danger. I was there to interview the locals and write a piece about how the Republic dealt with refugees and similarly displaced people."

Mrs. Yang raised a brow, but before she could say anything Mr. Yang emerged from the back and presented Loren with two heavy thermoses that disappeared into her bag with a clatter. "All set, my dear. Though I know we have a dozen more of those up at the house."

She shrugged. "Maraso and Videnka took the kids up to the peak, so I couldn't find any left that were big enough. Thanks pa! I'll bring them back!"

"I know you will." He chuckled. "Enjoy yourselves. Be sure to be back in time for–"

"For dinner, I know," Loren marched across the room. "You have *something* planned, though it's really not necessary." When she got to the door she turned and regarded Davijaan, head tilted, considering. She had the same eyes as her mother.

"Well," she said. "You're coming, right?"

He wasn't entirely sure where they were going, but he was at her side in seconds.

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"My sister and her wife took their kids up Amaura for the day, so we're going up the first sister, Darumaka!" said Loren, making her way up the almost vertical dirt trail as though it were a paved road, without so much as a hitch in her breathing.

"Oh," was all the response he gave.

It wasn't that he couldn't keep up, it was just. He was a pilot. He'd maintained a physical training routine because it was expected– and there wasn't anything else to do in space, really– but he hadn't run laps since he'd graduated command track. He'd be fine. He just… wasn't interested in talking right now.

A voice in the back of his head politely informed him that '17 would be disappointed in him. He politely told it to shut the fuck up.

"Not all the way up," she continued. "The trail's a bit long to start this late in the day, but there's a really nice lookout spot we can get to in time for a late lunch."

"Sounds nice. Um. Was I supposed to bring food?"

“Oh, no. I brought something for both of us. Are you allergic to anything?”

“No.”

“Oh, good. I packed mostly the same foods we ate yesterday lunch just in case."

He didn’t respond to that at all, and they lapsed into silence. As it zigzagged its way up the side of the mountain the trail leveled off somewhat, and as they left the sparse tree cover behind a gust of cold wind hit Davijaan in the face. He took a step back, gasping. Loren turned to him, eyes squinted against the stinging force of it.

“It’s rather sudden. Exciting, I used to think. Want to take a break?”

He hesitated, and then nodded. Without further ado she plopped down on the short scrub next to the trail, her back to the wind, and dug around in her bag for the thermoses. Davijaan didn’t sit, but he took the one she offered him gratefully. The water smelled tangy, like–

“Is that the tea stuff? Pantoran tea?”

She sipped and swallowed with a hum. “It is! Pa must have put a few sprigs in.”

Davijaan took a cautious sip of his own, and then drank deeply. It was better than he’d expected. Spicy and rich. He’d have to use the stuff they'd picked the day before.

He sat next to Loren and handed the thermos back. It disappeared into the depths of her bag once again, and then she turned her attention from him to the stretch of trail they’d just climbed.

“There are roads and paths and trails all over these mountains,” she said. “It’s good to be familiar with them if you want to get anywhere, and they’re fun to explore. This might be a bit much for your first hike but I wanted to get you started. I never liked exploring alone.”

Oh. “I… thanks. I wouldn’t have known they existed.”

“Someone else would have pointed them out,” she shrugged. “They’re not exactly secret.”

“Still. Glad you took the time, before you left.”

She offered him a tight smile, and turned back to the trail.

After a moment of silence, he cleared his throat. “So… Your parents don’t know about Umbara?” Obviously they didn’t, but getting the details of what she had and hadn’t told them would be good, just in case it came up in conversation again.

She stiffened, and then visibly relaxed her shoulders. “No. I wasn’t in the hospital long enough for it to be a big deal.”

Turning to face him, she tipped her chin up, eyes hard. “And how am I supposed to tell them? Sit them down and say, hey ma and pa, just so you know I spent a tenday in a terrorist’s prison cell waiting to be executed for spying and patching my fellow prisoner up after torture

sessions. Sorry I didn't tell you when it happened, six months ago. It was only, you know. The most terrifying two weeks of my life." Her voice cracked at the end, and he winced.

It hadn't been, for Davijaan, because of so many weeks and months and years he'd somehow lived through before. But she was a civilian– *and so am I, now*– so of course it was different for her.

"By the way, how's your back?" She looked down to her lap; picked at her tunic hem. "And hand? I forgot to ask yesterday."

And he'd half hoped she'd keep forgetting, but he supposed you had to have a good memory for unanswered questions to be a reporter. And she'd helped patch him up. She deserved to know the results of her handiwork.

"Fine. No pain." They'd been pretty bad, but not as bad as they could have been, according to Yikes. Once the infection was dealt with his back healed well, though the scarring made it stiff. His fingers had had to be broken again and reset, but they weren't damaged enough that he couldn't grip a steering yoke, and that was all that mattered.

She nodded slowly, and looked back up at him. "I never got to say thank you."

He blinked. "For what?"

"For helping me stay calm. You were hurt, and probably just as scared as I was, but you kept me from panicking. So, thank you."

"Oh, um. You're welcome." He shrugged, offered her a smile. "It wasn't a big deal. I wasn't scared."

She tilted her head, studying him. "Why not?"

Abruptly he turned away from her to look back down the trail, into the trees and rocks and scrub. Umbara was over and he really didn't want to think about it again. But he was the one who'd brought it up in the first place, and she'd been carrying the conversation for a while now and he couldn't keep giving half-hearted responses. He owed her that much at least.

He sucked in a breath and let it out, slow. "What was there to be scared of? In a situation like that, you either live or you die. That's all it comes down to, in the end. They either kill you or they don't. Either way, it's out of your hands. You just brace yourself for whatever comes. Everything short of death you can survive, right?"

"Hm." She pursed her lips. "That's a very morbidly optimistic way to look at things."

He snorted. "It's honest is what it is."

They lapsed into silence again, and this time Loren broke it by standing with a sigh and adjusting her bag. "Almost there," she said, and if her smile was a bit hollow, who was Davijaan to point that out?

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Around early afternoon they reached the lookout, a spot where the trail widened and flattened before continuing to wind up the mountain. Several waist-high boulders had been arranged as a barrier against the steep drop off the side. It wasn't very impressive, until Davijaan finally stopped wondering how the boulders had gotten up there and looked out over them into the valley.

The wind was strong, pressing against him where he stood between two of the boulders, stinging his eyes and almost forcing him backwards. He didn't move an inch. He could see for miles, see the grey-green side of Amaura across from him and the red-green tundra stretching beyond. He couldn't see the village, but he could see trails crisscrossing Amaura's slopes, and when he looked down, he saw the trail they'd just climbed winding its way upwards.

And he could see the sky. Big and blue and open, just as it'd been that morning. It was like staring out over the wide expanse of the Kaminos sea, except instead of drowning, he was flying. He could almost step out into it, it was so close.

"Worth the climb?" Loren asked at his shoulder.

He could only nod.

They settled behind the boulders, which did a wonderful job of blocking the wind, and Loren dove into her bag once again. This time along with the thermoses she retrieved half a loaf of bread, a container of berries, and another of jerky.

Davijaan was not expecting positive things from the jerky. He knew better than to get his hopes up with anything field-ration adjacent. Which is why he could not be held accountable for the noise he made when he grimly sunk his teeth in and *the damn jerky was actually good.* Not just edible, but *good.* Spiced with something he didn't recognize and soft enough to chew and just. Good.

When she stopped laughing Loren announced for absolutely no one to hear that she was going to have to stop drinking water when he was trying new foods.

The bread had the same tang as the kind in the restaurant, and the berries were sweet and mushy, and together with the miracle jerky it was one of the best meals he'd ever had.

"How's the bread?" Loren asked as he tore off another chunk.

"It's really nice! Like the stuff from the restaurant."

"Ouch. Thanks. Glad to see the mass produced stuff already has you in it's grip."

"Wait," he looked up at her, eyes wide. "You made this?"

"Well, me and ma. Pa's the cook, ma's the baker. We like to do a batch together when I'm home."

Kote had dared to turn the stove on the night before and they'd burnt the bottom off the only pot they owned trying to boil water. Davijaan was going to have to be content to settle for

restaurant bread for the foreseeable future.

Loren popped a few berries in her mouth and took a bite of her jerky at the same time. He tried not to grimace.

“So,” she asked, taking a sip of water, much too casual to be believable. “Do you… do you have someone? That you were able to tell about Umbara?”

Did she? “I have my brother, but he was leading the op that got us out, so.”

She looked up, curious. “The one who moved here with you?”

“Yes.”

“He’s a clone, then?”

Davijaan snorted. “What else would he be?”

“I don’t know! How does a clone get a brother!?”

He laughed. “You really haven’t met other clones, have you? That clears some things up.”

“Excuse me?”

“I was wondering how you’d recognized me, but if I’m the only clone you’ve ever seen–”

“No, no!” She threw her hands up, exasperated. “I’ve seen a few more since I met you, now that I know to look! You just– you have that scar on your cheek from– and the way you hold yourself. And, I don’t know. Lots of little things. I just knew it was you.”

“... Oh.”

She sighed. “And you don’t have to explain about your brother, it’s none of my business, and–”

“We’re– we…” He caught himself, took a breath. She didn’t know. She’d just been asking. And it wasn’t some big secret, he could tell her if he wanted to. “All us clones consider ourselves siblings. Some relationships are closer than others, but we’re all brothers in a way.” Brothers of blood and battle, ‘17 had always said. Honor twofold.

She had her head tilted again. “So it’s like having a twin?”

“I guess. Except there’s three million of us, all different ages.”

“Huh. My younger brothers are twins. They’re menaces, the pair of them.”

“You have brothers?” Mr. Yang had mentioned daughters. How many kids could a natborn family possibly have? From what he understood acquiring them was a much longer and more painful process than cloning.

“Just the two. They’re younger than me. One older sister and two younger brothers. I’m right in the middle, the odd one out.”

“Oh.” And Davijaan hadn’t been quite in the middle, but he knew the feeling. “That… Is that a lot? That seems like it would be a lot.”

She huffed. “Depends on who you ask. On Pantora, especially outside the cities, big families are normal. Maybe four to six children? On Coruscant having more than two or three is… unusual.”

From her sour tone he guessed “unusual” wasn’t the word she heard most often.

“Anyway,” she sniffed. “I *like* having lots of siblings. I don’t particularly want children myself, but if I ever change my mind, I’m having more than a measly *two.”*

“Seems like a smart plan. Be pretty tragic to force a child to grow up with only one sibling to torment. How are you supposed to gang up on each other?”

“Exactly!” She planted her hands on her hips, grinning. “See, you understand. Being lovingly bullied and taking gentle revenge are formative experiences, and I would *never* rob my child of those. I don’t know who I’d be without my siblings.”

His chest felt tight all of a sudden. “Me neither.” He cleared his throat. “Though I don’t know what you mean by “loving” and “gentle.” When Cody gets it into his head to be an ass he doesn’t let anything as silly as love hold him back.”

She giggled. “Maraso one time broke a chair by jumping on it, and when Ma asked who’d done it she said it was me. I would have gotten in *so* much trouble, except Mari felt guilty for lying after about three minutes and confessed it was her. She still can’t lie to this day.”

Davijaan’s lip twitched. “Something happened like that, once. Except I actually did break something, and Cody decided to take the blame for it.”

The trigger on his blaster had gotten jammed halfway through a sim battle, and in his panic he’d slammed it against a rock. He had no idea why. Percussive maintenance. Except that only worked on engines. Needless to say it had not worked on his very poorly constructed training blaster.

“He looked ‘17 dead in the eye– that’s um, he was our trainer– he looked ‘17 in the eye and said he’d done it. But ‘17 knew he was lying, and Cody knew ‘17 knew he was lying, and really the only reason Cody said it was him was because he wanted to see what ‘17 would do.”

“And? What did he do?”

“About the broken blaster?” He snorted. “Nothing. He gave the whole class a lecture about what to do if your weapon stopped working in the middle of a firefight, and that was it. About the lying?” He grinned. “Cody had to run double laps for a week. ‘17 said it was all well and good to lie to your CO, as long as it wasn’t about something as stupid as replaceable

equipment. Cody was furious that he hadn't picked something better to lie about. Like murder probably."

Loren burst out laughing, and after a moment Davijaan joined her, and for a moment it felt like being back in the barracks, sharing stories and telling jokes and mocking each other. Lovingly.

***

"There's no water. It has to be flown in. And delivered to each house."

"Well, there is groundwater under the tundra. It's just frozen year-round."

"Water has to be flown in," he repeated.

"Yes, it does."

"There's no water."

"No unfrozen water."

Davijaan just shook his head, eyes glued to the descending trail, still reeling at the idea of having to fly water up and over and around the mountains because otherwise. There was no water.

"What about rivers and lakes and oceans! There's a river down the other side of the mountain!"

"Not close enough to be useful." Loren was too calm about this. And way too amused. "Most of the water that gets shipped out does come from the lake at the head, though. It's just a lot easier to fly it over the mountain than pipe it."

"It has to be *flown in."* At least he had job security.

"So–" he made the mistake of looking up and immediately tripped on a rock. She caught his arm just in time. "– what did people do before ships?"

"People didn't live in one place before ships. They were nomadic. It wasn't until the quarry was founded that people started to settle here year round. Though most families– like my pa's family– were living in these mountains for generations before the quarry or the village or technology or anything."

"Huh."

They stood still for a moment so they (Davijaan) could catch their breath. Climbing up a mountain was all well and good but climbing down one was even more annoying.

"Not many new people move up here, you know," she said, releasing his arm with a smile. "People come in the summer to work at the quarry but few of them stay. My ma's still considered a marshwoman, for all she's lived in these mountains for thirty years."

“Do many people leave?”

She went quiet. He waited.

“No,” she said, finally. “Not many. And of the ones who do, most come back.” She looked over at him, mouth drawn into a thin line. “My parents are convinced I’m going to get tired of Coruscant and move back here any day now. My pa especially. Everytime I leave after a visit he cooks a whole elaborate goodbye dinner and makes a whole to-do about how much I’ll be missed.”

“Isn’t it good to be missed? Means you’re important.” He wondered sometimes if his batchmates missed him.

“You have a point,” she conceded with a sigh. “It’s better than not being missed.” Her eyes brightened. “Speaking of–”

She pulled her bag off her shoulder and buried one hand inside, muttering under her breath. “Do you have your comm on you?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Um. Yes?” He wasn’t going to leave Kote with no way to contact him, no sir. Not when he was gone for the second day in a row.

She emerged from the bag triumphant, a comm in one hand that she held out to him expectantly.

“We can exchange frequencies, and keep in contact. If you’d like to.”

If he’d like to.

Would he like to? Talking over comms was different than… whatever this was. Wandering around the tundra and the mountains and eating new meals and maybe sort of getting to know each other.

He must have hesitated too long, because Loren’s face fell, and she pulled her hand back. “Just because of– of everything, doesn’t mean we have to be friends, I know. But I was hoping…”

She was hoping they could be friends. She wanted to be his friend.

He felt a little bit like he was back on the lookout, standing on the edge of the incline, where one step forward would take him out into the blue.

Slowly, he reached out and took the comm. “I think I would like to.”

***

When he arrived home, he had two unread messages.

Hello! It’s Loren :)

It was so good to see you, and I hope we can meet up again when I come back.

Chapter 5

There was so much sky on Pantora.

It was so close, you didn't even have to be in the air to brush your fingers against it. It was vast the same way an ocean was vast, the same way space was vast. Stretching taunt across the mountain peaks and curving beyond the horizon, never ending and all consuming. Blue, blue, blue. Davijaan got the feeling sometimes that if he tripped over his feet he'd fall into it and float away.

***

Davijaan dragged Kote along for the trip down the mountain and across the tundra to Kyurem so he wouldn't have to travel under the cavernous sky alone. Knowing his brother was just outside made walking into the licensing office feel less like flying blind into enemy territory.

The written test was laughably easy– question after question about the technical aspects of piloting, and the galactic and planetary laws that governed spaceflight. He'd known most of the answers since he was seven, and he'd memorized the planetary laws he hadn't known before he'd even considered moving to Pantora. Out of curiosity.

The flight test was a little more stressful, but after Mrs. Yang it was impossible to be intimidated by the instructor, a Mr. Feng who couldn't have been that much older than Davijaan.

"I know I've got a babyface, but I swear I'm fully qualified," Mr. Feng joked as he strapped himself into the copilot's chair, datapad in one hand. "Been flying since I was walking, my ma likes to say."

He hadn't been allowed to fly real ships until he was in command track, but he still remembered the awe and joy of his first simulated lift-off when he was barely four years old. When he glanced over at Mr. Feng ("Oh, call me Aron, we're the same age I bet.") *Aron,* as he leveled out after take-off, there was a good bit of that familiar awe and joy hiding in his eyes as he took notes on the datapad. And after that, Davijaan relaxed into the relief of going up and up into the open sky as everything else fell away.

His license was a piece of laminated flimsy a bit too big to hold comfortably, and he didn't let go of it all through returning the rented speeder, buying a used one, and the trip back up the mountain.

***

Three days a week Davijaan woke up early– not before the sun, it was impossible to be up before the sun on Pantora– got dressed and ready, scrounged around the kitchen for something edible, and then took the speeder to work.

The trip took all of five minutes, and they were the most fantastic and uncomfortable five minutes of every day. He'd never spent so much time outside in his life, and he had to get used to it again every morning. Glancing up to find the bright sun hovering just overhead made him feel exposed, achingly aware of how much open space surrounded him. The occasional pine tree that grew along the road between his house and the village didn't offer any substantial cover. He could see for miles in every direction, and that meant he could be seen. He had to remind himself every day as he traveled to work that it didn't matter who saw him anymore.

There was always wind blowing, cold and sweet against his face.

***

Davijaan had been well and truly terrified his first day of work, but if the Yangs had noticed they hadn't said anything, and once he was in the air everything was fine.

It was a pretty simple job, compared to literally everything else he'd ever done, and his days quickly fell into a pattern. Drive to the Yang's hangar. Say hello to Mr. Yang, nod to Mrs. Yang, tentatively wave to Mrs. Maraso if she was around. Load up *Glimmer* with everything being shipped out of Amaura. Fly down to Kyurem. If Aron was working at the warehouse instead of the office he usually tracked Davijaan down and said hello. Unload the Amaura goods. Load up whatever was being shipped out of Kyurem.

And then Davijaan and *Glimmer* spent the rest of the day flying between the villages tucked into valleys and perched on cliffs and nestled into canyons all throughout the sister mountains, delivering food and water and miscellaneous goods.

He had a specific route and timetable he stuck to. He was always expected. He got to know the shape of each village from the sky, and the names and faces of the people who met him at the hangar to unload the cargo and sign off on the delivery. Mx. Shao at Lapras, who signed the datapad with intense concentration and the tip of their tongue sticking out; Ms. Zhou at Walrein, an overly polite woman who'd caught him by surprise when she shook his hand Coruscanti style; Mr. Liang at Darumaka, who bounced on his toes as he entered the cargo hold like an eager cadet. Some villages were so small they didn't even have a hangar, just a flat stretch of cleared ground for a landing pad, and there was always a crowd around the edges, waiting for him.

Not him specifically, he knew. Just the cargo. But still. It was nice.

***

He wasn't sure what Kote did all day when he was at work, but he would come home each day to find things cleaned or rearranged or fixed. Sometimes the remains of a cooking attempt. When he suggested they spend a day checking over the roof for the damage Mrs. Chen had mentioned, Kote said he'd already taken care of it.

When Davijaan was home, Kote spent a lot of time sitting on the porch, in the sun. Not doing or saying anything, just sitting. Davijaan supposed that was better than lying in bed in the dark.

***

Davijaan was paid every tenday. Not a great deal of credits, nothing compared to the huge lump sum every clone vet had received as their severance pay and back-pay. Even after buying a house and a speeder he and Kote had more saved than they knew what to do with.

But for all they had saved, when he finally got around to doing the research and buying furniture and kitchen supplies and pre-made food, Davijaan preferred to spend the credits he'd earned working for the Yangs. They'd been earned with sweat, not blood.

***

He'd been given a comm for work purposes along with the standard safety gear. He still carried his personal comm everywhere he went. Mostly because of Kote, but also because of the hellos and how are yous he received randomly throughout the week from Loren.

***

He didn't go down to the village often. Mostly because people would stop him and ask him if he was the boy living up at the old Lin place, and how he liked working for Dhanse and Ereno, and how he was settling in, and if his brother was looking for work, and where they'd lived before, and–

Davijaan didn't spend more time there than necessary.

He wasn't sure how he felt about being recognized by civilians as himself and not as a clone. And he wasn't sure how to navigate conversations with civilians about himself that weren't centered around being a clone. And maybe with Kote beside him it would have been easier, but Kote hadn't really left the house yet and Davijaan wasn't sure what to do about that or if there was even anything he could do, so. That option was out.

The Yangs were easier to deal with.

Mr. Yang was a talker. He could ramble for hours about life in the mountains, local gossip, everyone in his family from his children to his distant cousins. Davijaan learned more about the village, Pantora, and Loren's childhood than he'd thought it was possible to know.

Unfortunately he had the same annoying habit as his daughter of asking questions he seemed to genuinely want answered– *and what was it with everyone in these damn mountains and questions*– about how Odd Ball and Cody were settling in, and how they were eating, and if they needed help with anything. Davijaan's answers were usually stilted and designed to deflect. Mr. Yang stopped asking as often, but never stopped entirely.

Mrs. Yang didn't talk much, but when she did it was to offer bits of piloting advice or quiet praise. Mrs. Maraso usually worked in the office in the village, but she came up to the hangar often enough to become familiar. She had her mother's calm presence and her father's warm smile, and all in all Davijaan found her the easiest of the family to be around.

Mr. Bereth and Mr. Evreth came around to help load and unload cargo on their days off. The twins were young men even taller than their mother, funny and focused and loud. Identical except for their hair styles and facial tattoos– and wasn't that a fascinating distinction to see on natborns. They worked at the quarry over the summer and usually stayed at the barracks there.

The Yangs were… interesting. Curious, but not pushy. Friendly, but not always because they wanted something. It was fascinating to watch them interact with each other; the open affection they had for one another, the rhythm they fell into when working together. It wasn't all that different from the way a platoon or a squad functioned, just. Odd to see in a natborn family. He thought it was something he could get used to.

He could see a bit of Loren in all of them– in Mrs. Yang's steady gaze and steady hands, in Mr. Yang's stubbornness, in the whole family's propensity for teasing and easy laughter. Or maybe it was them he'd seen in Loren.

***

The Pantoran sky was so quiet. Empty. Nothing but Davijaan and *Glimmer* and mountain peaks and blue, blue, blue.

Peaceful.

***

Davijaan and Kote had moved to Amaura in the middle of summer, and summer was short and sweet in northern Pantora. They'd lived there about two months when Davijaan started to notice a chill in the mornings. The mist lingered in the ditches along the road, and the wind in his face was biting and smelled faintly of rot. The sun started to set earlier, and rise later.

At the end of a work day, after he'd gotten *Glimmer* checked over and shut down for the night, Mr. Yang approached as he was putting away his flightsuit and collecting his jacket.

Something was off in his smile, but Davijaan didn't know him well enough to know what, yet.

"Good work today, as always," he said, tone light, the lines around his eyes deeper than they'd been that morning. "My wife says you've caught on to the tricks of these mountain currents quick as anything."

It was easier to pay attention to things like current fluctuations when you weren't being shot at. "Thank you. It's been… an adjustment."

"I can imagine," he chuckled weakly. "Not nearly as exciting as what you were doing before."

Davijaan smiled. "Do you need something, sir?"

Mr. Yang's smile fell away as if it had never been there. "I have a favor to ask, son," he said, soft, shoulders slumping. "You see, Loren is coming home."

He blinked, frowned. “To visit? In another three weeks, right?”

“She’s not coming to visit. She’s moving back.” He cleared his throat. “It’s all rather sudden. Usually Ereno picks Lo up in Kyurem herself, but she has a passenger flight scheduled tomorrow, and it’s too long a trip for Lo to make by speeder with her luggage, and I know you have the day off, but I was hoping you’d be willing–”

“Absolutely,” he said, some of Mr. Yang’s concern settling in his own chest. “What time should I leave?”

The smile Mr. Yang gave him was small, but real.

***

Loren was waiting on the edge of the landing pad, standing straight and stiff next to a stack of crates taller than she was. She smiled when she saw him, but it was tight and distant the same way Mr. Yang’s had been.

They loaded the crates into the cargo hold in silence; strapped themselves in and took off in silence. The flight was all of twenty minutes, and the first five were spent in silence.

Finally Davijaan cleared his throat and opened his mouth to say something, to make a joke or ask a question, to get her laughing and talking and focused on anything other than whatever was putting that look of frustrated defeat on her face, and–

“Please don't do that.”

He coughed; tried to cover it up by clearing his throat again. “Do– do what?”

“Try and make me feel better.”

Her voice was low, resigned. He didn’t speak again for the rest of the flight.

As he circled Amaura’s peak in preparation for landing, Loren spoke up, eyes straight ahead and grip tight on the bag in her lap– “Do we have to go straight there?”

Wordlessly, Davijaan brought *Glimmer* up high over the mountains. They could drift for a half hour at most before Mr. Yang would start comming him, wondering about the delay. He engaged autopilot and leaned back in his chair, keeping his own gaze firmly on the console.

Sometimes Kote would let himself be talked out of his head and sometimes not. Either way, Davijaan had gotten used to sitting quietly and waiting for a bad mood to break.

The engine hummed under his feet. Lights blinked at him, gauges flickered. A cloud floated past the viewshield. Davijaan breathed.

Loren said, “I don’t want to go back.”

He gave it a few seconds before he looked over to her. “Back to Amaura?” he asked, cautions. “Or to your family?”

“Both. Neither. Back to my old life, I guess.”

“Your old life?”

Her face was hard, the stubborn set of her chin familiar. “Amaura will always be home, but I don’t know… I’m not the same person I was when I left. But that’s who my parents expect me to be.” A bitter laugh clawed its way out of her throat. “My parents. They’re going to be so– they’re going to be–” She threw her hands up, furious. “They didn’t believe I could do it! And I couldn’t! They were right and I was wrong and they’re going to be insufferable about it!”

He shrugged, as casual as he could make it. “Your pa was really upset. I don’t think they’ll go the whole I-told-you-so route.”

She stared grimly out the viewshield, silent once again.

But if she was willing to talk, it was just a matter of asking the right questions.

“Why did you leave?”

“... Because I couldn’t stay.” Her expression softened, and she turned to him with the barest hint of a smile curving her lips. Davijaan felt his face heat.

“My ma used to tell me stories about living in the city,” she continued. “My pa was born here, his family’s lived in these mountains since before there was a village, but my ma grew up in the capital. She was a pilot for an intersystem passenger flight company. She told me all about the people she met and the stories she heard, and I always knew someday I was going to leave the mountains and live in the city and meet people and hear their stories.”

“Huh. You seemed really happy, in the mountains. Picking tea and hiking.”

“I love Amaura. Leaving was hard, but... Inevitable, I think? Ma says I’m pa’s girl, because I’ve got rock dust in my blood. But pa says I’m ma’s girl, because I’ve got stars in my eyes.”

He leaned forward despite himself, to get a better look at her face. “Look more like suns to me.”

She smiled, small but real, yellow-gold eyes glowing in the afternoon light. “Well that’s all a sun is, right? A star close enough to touch.”

“Makes sense.” He swallowed hard. Time to redirect. “Why– Why Coruscant? Why not a city on Pantora?”

She heaved a sigh that morphed into a groan, slumping back in her seat. “Because that’s where everyone goes. If you want to make it big, you go to Coruscant.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You wanted to make it big?”

“I wanted to matter,” she said, soft. “I wanted… I wanted my work to matter.” She hugged her bag to her chest, running her hand down the worn strap.

“When I was a kid I read the local news every morning with pa. He took us to the library every week and all I ever read were biographies and histories and essays. Fiction is fine, I guess,” she shrugged, and her bag jangled. “But it’s always been real stories that mattered to me, you know? Like the ones my ma told me. The ones that truly happened. And I thought, since I didn’t have stories of my own, I could write down other people’s stories for them. But that’s not–”

She sat up straight all of a sudden and turned back to him, eyes flashing, fury in every line of her body. “That’s not how it works! On Coruscant, that’s not how it works. Coruscant News Network isn’t a news network, it’s a business. Reporting isn’t about telling real, true stories, it’s about making money, and I just– the way people talk about the war– I just couldn’t do it anymore.”

And Davijaan remembered the month he’d spent on Coruscant, after the war, and all the civilians who’d said, “Thank you for your service,” with a sneer or a simper, and Loren coming home made a lot more sense, because he hadn’t been able to do it anymore, either.

“But it’s not like I was any better,” she continued. “That’s what makes me so– So–” She threw her hands up again, almost tossing her bag out of her lap. “Because I wasn’t any better! I have no right to be upset! Because the war wasn’t real for me until I was sitting in that damn cell, watching you bleed on the fucking floor!”

Davijaan flinched.

Loren froze, and shrank back into her seat. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up, I didn’t mean–”

“No, it’s alright.” He shook his head sharply. “You were there too, you’re allowed to– I just don’t want–” He cleared his throat. “That was when you were crying?”

For a moment he thought she was going to push, but she just regarded him evenly for a few seconds and said, “Yes.”

He tried to force his body to relax, tried to sink back into his chair and listen. It was hard to look at her all of a sudden, so he turned to the sky.

“When I started at CorNN the war was just something happening in the galaxy far away,” she continued, hesitant, but with a lingering edge of frustration. “Things never got closer to me than the blockade on Pantora, and on Coruscant… It was wrong of me not to– not to think about it, I know. But it just seemed so far away. I talked about it and wrote about it and kept up with it on the news, but war was something that happened to other people. And then I got arrested, and met you, and suddenly war was happening to me.”

Davijaan was quiet for a long time, staring out at the blue.

Finally he said, “Maybe it was wrong of you, maybe not. There are a lot of things I don’t let myself think about until they’re happening to me. Until they’re right in my face and won’t let me look away.”

“Isn’t that cowardly? To not face something until you’re forced to?”

“Maybe.” He breathed in, breathed out. “Or maybe it’s the only way to face all the evil things you have to face without going mad.”

She didn’t respond, and they lapsed into silence once again.

He tried to imagine, for just a moment, not having to think about war. Not the “don’t think about it” rule, not waking up every morning and wondering what kind of pain awaited him that day, not the constant distraction away from memory after memory of fear and resignation and loss, but... Existing without those memories. Existing without being trapped in a cycle of remembering and reminding himself not to remember.

He couldn’t. But that was the point, wasn’t it?

Davijaan glanced at the chrono. Their time was up. He brought *Glimmer* out of autopilot and circled back around towards Amaura.

“Did you feel like it mattered?"

He startled badly, but years of experience kept his hands steady. “Did–” He glanced over to Loren, her head tilted as she studied him. “What?”

“Fighting in the war. On Umbara you seemed so… I mean.” Her brow creased, her tattoos scrunching as she frowned. “I want my work to matter, but I think everyone wants that. Everyone wants their effort to make a difference, or to find fulfillment in what they do. And I just wondered, if…”

He’d saved Mitts’ life, once, during a dogfight across the purple sky of a planet he no longer remembered the name of. Shot down the vultures tailing him and covered his limping flight back to base. Mitts had been crying when he finally climbed out of his cockpit. Badly shaken, but breathing.

“Sometimes,” he said. “Sometimes I felt like it mattered.”

“What about being a pilot?”

Breathe in, breathe out. “It feels like… a dream.” Except it wasn’t something he would have even dared to dream, before.

And then the Yang’s hangar was right beneath them and he had to put his focus into the landing procedures, and it wasn’t until he and Loren were unbuckling themselves and standing to stretch that he realized he’d forgotten to ask– “What are you going to do, now that you’re back?”

“Oh,” she shrugged. “I’ll probably help around the office or the hangar. Give Maraso a few days off.”

“If you… If you don’t want to be here, you don’t have to stay,” he offered, meeting her gaze intently, because realizing that for himself had probably definitely saved his and Kote’s

lives.

“I know.” She smiled. “It’s good to be back to– to–”

“To re-group?”

“To re-group, exactly. I don’t know where I’m going next, but I do know I’m not going to stay. But thank you, for the reminder. Goddess knows my parents aren’t going to bother with one.” She rolled her eyes. It looked forced, but at least she was making an effort.

She took two steps out of the cockpit and then turned back to him, guilt and embarrassment clear in her expression. “I’m so sorry, for breaking down on you. Again. That was a lot to– to throw at you, all at once.”

“It’s alright.” He waved away her apology. Really, he’d been more or less asking for it.

“At least I didn’t cry this time.”

He gave her a wan smile, and she snorted into the back of her hand.

“It hardly seems fair– I talk a lot about me, but you don’t talk a lot about you.”

He rocked back on his heels and shrugged. There was plenty he could talk about, he supposed. But not much about himself. Not much he thought she’d want to hear. “Nothing to say.”

“That’s not true.” She planted her hands on her hips. “You get this look sometimes like you’re going to say something, and then you don’t. Like just now. What were you going to say?”

Davijaan blinked, and then just stared at her, consciously keeping his face as expressionless as possible. “Um. I forgot.”

“Oh.” She seemed genuinely disappointed. “Well, if you remember, I’m happy to listen.”

“I’ll… keep that in mind.”

They left the cockpit together, but she stopped again before he could open the hatch, and this time her expression was all hopeful determination.

“Is it ok if– I have to go home tonight, and let my family fuss over me, but would it be ok, if tomorrow…”

He hesitated, and then said, slowly, “I have the day off. Would you… show me another hiking trail? And maybe afterwards we can go somewhere to eat? I can pay this time.”

“That sounds perfect. Thank you.” Her smile was bright with relief and genuine happiness, and Davijaan had to smile back.

She pulled him into a quick hug, tight and cold and a little awkward with her bag in the way, and something in his stomach fluttered.

Huh.

She turned and opened the hatch herself, and walked down the ramp and into the arms of her impatient parents, and Davijaan stood just inside the hatch and watched the careful reunion, mind racing.

He had no trouble admitting he was attracted to Loren. She was very beautiful, and she'd been kind to him. But that didn't mean anything, because he was attracted to lots of people.

He'd taken two steps off Kamino and realized all in a rush that of the millions and billions of different faces in the galaxy, a disconcerting number were terrifyingly beautiful. Almost every leave had been marked by the server, club goer, or sex worker he met at a bar and found himself sweet on. The fluttery feelings were nice, but always faded after the end of leave. Out of sight, out of mind.

Kote had listened to him gush over each respective sweet in baffled amusement. As far as Davijaan knew– and if anyone would know, it would be him– Kote had never been sweet on anyone. That was fine. Just meant Kote had plenty of material to tease Davijaan with, while Davijaan had nothing. Totally fine.

(To Kote's continued delight and his own never ending embarrassment, he'd been infatuated with General Kenobi for the brief span of time between the General saving his life and Kote pointing out the next morning that Kenobi was constantly humming under his breath– a fact which proceeded to drive Davijaan mad whenever he was in the same room with the man.)

But the thing about being sweet on terrifyingly beautiful strangers was that there were clear rules for engagement. A pattern of sorts, a rhythm he fell into along with most of his siblings with similar interests. You went to a bar, paired off with whoever caught your eye, and spent the evening drinking and flirting. You went back to their place and had sex if you hit it off; went back to the barracks and nursed your hangover if you didn't. It was casual, and rarely allowed for follow-up, which suited Davijaan and his ever fading feelings just fine.

(It was rare, but occasionally an encounter on leave turned into something more. The day after he'd saved Mitts life, Mitts had shown him a holo of his daughter and partner, and thanked him again on their behalf. Davijaan had wondered sometimes if he'd like something that, if he met someone who would like it too.)

So, while being sweet on Loren wasn't surprising, all things considered, she wasn't a stranger. She was a friend…? It didn't matter. The important thing was there were no rules for engagement, so there would be no engagement. Which was fine. And shouldn't be a problem for long, because he was never sweet on anyone for long.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Except, he realized with dawning horror. They were spending most of tomorrow together. And Loren lived here now.

Well. Fuck.

Chapter 6

Loren was waiting for him in the village's public parking area early the next morning, seated on an all-terrain speeder bike.

"I was thinking we could go up to the old quarry," she said. "To the lake."

Davijaan had never been to a quarry or a lake, so he nodded and smiled, and climbed onto the bike behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and trying not to squeeze too hard as they lifted off.

They drove up an old stone-paved road that wound its way up the side of Amuara, the deep early morning shadows and fog of the valley falling away the higher they went, the scattered snow at the peak shining white in the early morning light. It wasn't a short trip, but Davijaan never tired of looking out over the valley and past to the tundra. Loren was a confident driver, and she was solid and relaxed against his chest. Neither of them tried to speak into the wind.

Eventually they rounded a bend, and Davijaan stared in shock at what must be the quarry. Stunted trees and scrub and lichen did their best to cover the exposed stone, but it looked like a massive explosion had torn deep into the side of the mountain. He couldn't see the bottom, just the sheer sides. Loose, jagged grey rocks too big around to lift easily tumbled around the edges of the gaping hole in the earth, building a barrier between a narrow trail and the drop.

Loren parked in a cleared patch of ground a ways away from the trailhead, and Davijaan carefully extracted himself from the bike.

"That's the quarry?" he asked, taking a few steps towards it, tilting his head for a better look.

"The old quarry. The new one is further down and around the mountain. We can't really see it from here."

"Looks like a crater from an explosion."

"Well, there were explosions. Just many small ones over many years, to break the stone from the mountain."

"Ah." He'd never wondered how stone was quarried before. Small, focused explosions made sense.

"So," Loren came to stand level with him, adjusting the bag over her shoulder. "Shall we?"

***

The trail around the edge of the quarry wove in and around boulders and patches of overgrown scrub, sometimes in the shade and sometimes in the sun. If he looked up from his feet Davijaan could see the green slope and the red tundra and the blue sky stretching out

ahead of him, and glimpse shimmering water and damp stone through the gaps in the barrier to his right. It was almost too narrow to walk side by side, but they made it work.

Neither of them tried to start a conversation, but periodically Loren would point out a plant or a bird and tell him what it was called. Cranberry and fireweed and moss heather. Pantoran willow and common pine. Ptarmigan and grouse and even a gyrfalcon soaring so high it almost couldn't be seen. They walked for almost an hour, Loren offering tidbits of information and Davijaan committing them to memory, the path curving to follow the diminishing stone barrier. It was nice, to not have to talk.

"Oh, look!" Loren pointed to a bright green plant growing in a crevice in the stone. "There's still some blooming!"

"Some what?"

She crouched in front of the plant and parted the green leaves to display two sunny yellow flowers. "Dandelions."

"Dandelions, eh?" Davijaan reached out and brushed a hand hesitantly over a leaf. There were deep notches all down the sides, making it look as jagged as the stone.

"They're not native, but they're not invasive either," Loren continued. "They're hardy; they'll grow just about anywhere, in any conditions. After a wildfire or an earthquake dandelions grow back first. They've always been my favorite wildflowers."

"Do they– most flowers smell nice, right?"

She shrugged. "I've never thought dandelions smelled sweet, but they smell fresh. Here." She picked one of the flowers and held it out.

Davijaan brought the flower up to his nose and took a cautious sniff. "Hm. You're right, smells more like–"

Something caught in his throat, and he sneezed right in her face.

He reeled back, mortified, dropping the flower in the dirt and trying to apologize through a sudden barrage of sneezes.

Loren just tipped her head back, and laughed. "It's ok, it's ok, sometimes the pollen makes people sneeze. Though you… probably should have stopped by now."

She dug around in her bag for a thermos. "Splash some on your face and take a drink, see if that helps."

Davijaan managed to hold in a sneeze long enough to follow her instructions, and the water did help. His eyes and nose and throat still itched, but he didn't feel the overwhelming need to sneeze until he couldn't breathe anymore.

So, dandelions wanted to kill him. It wasn't surprising– in his experience most things wanted to kill him. But it was disappointing.

Loren picked up the flower and laid it back on the rock. “They’re edible, too. I was going to see if you wanted to try one, but...”

“Maybe not this time,” Davijaan agreed, trying to discreetly rub at his eyes.

She grimaced, embarrassed, and took a few steps down the trail. “We’re close. And there’ll be plenty of water to wash your face off again once we’re there.”

They fell in beside each other again, and after another five minutes of walking both the trail and the rock barrier dissolved into a thick patch of willow scrub. Davijaan could hear rushing water somewhere beyond it. Loren didn’t even hesitate, ducking down and pushing branches aside to reveal a hollow of sorts. A bright little tunnel formed between the bushes. She crawled in, and he followed.

His eyes and nose started to itch again from the dust and the leaves, but after a minute they emerged from the scrub and onto the carved stone bank of a fast flowing river. Loren stood and stretched and smiled. “Almost there.”

Upstream, to Davijaan’s right, the river poured out of a gap in the boulder barricade that marked the boundaries of the quarry.

“You might want to take your boots off.”

He turned to find Loren already removing hers, and followed suit. She left her own boots and bag next to the tunnel exit, and he set his next to them and followed her barefoot across the stretch of sun warmed stone through a gap between two boulders and into the quarry, and to the lake.

They were standing on the edge of the quarry, on a flat stone ledge. The ledge split a little beyond them, one portion rising higher and higher to form the sheer rock walls he’d glimpsed at first, dotted with patches of lichen and glinting silver in the noon light, the other remaining level and creating a sort of path around the lake. Because at the base of the gaping, ragged chasm in the earth was a lake. An expanse of still water– a perfect mirror to the blue sky above.

The space was simple but not streamlined, at once both empty and alive, and Davijaan wasn’t sure what to make of those distinctions.

“Do you like it?” Loren asked, hushed in the calm.

“I do. I really, really do. This is–”

He turned in a slow circle, the murmur of the river and the whisper of his feet across stone the only noise. “This is amazing. How…”

“My family came here every summer when I was a kid. Other families come up sometimes, too, but it's a bit of a trip.”

“Worth it.”

“I think so.” She smiled. “Speaking of, can you swim?”

“Can I–” He glanced at the water. “Ye-es?” Technically. Maybe. Probably? He hadn’t kept that particular skill sharp.

“Sometime you’ll have to come up with us and swim.” She sat down on the ledge and stuck her bare feet in the water without a second of hesitation. “It’s nice after a long hike.”

He gaped at her. She blinked. “Yes?”

“There aren’t any… *things* in the water?”

“Things?” she asked, mystified. “Like what?”

Like dead bodies, he didn’t ask.

“Like, I don’t know. Fish. How big are the fish?”

“They get pretty big, but they’re easily scared away.” She grinned and kicked her feet, scattering drops of water to sparkle in the light and sending ripples out across the surface. “They won’t come nibble on your toes, I promise.”

“That’s not…”

“Come sit.” She patted the spot next to her. “Put your feet in. Splash some water on your face.”

Carefully, he sat, rolled his pants up, and dipped his feet in the water. It was shockingly cold and sent a shiver all the way up his body, but it was… nice. It came almost to the lip of the ledge and almost to his knees. He leaned forward and cupped some in his hands, and was able to look past the reflection of the sky and see jumbled stones and silt resting a hundred or more meters below the surface. The water washed away the dust and sweat of the climb and the burning in his eyes; it was cool and sweet on his lips.

He tilted his head back and breathed.

They sat in silence for a long time, taking in the water and the stone and the sky.

Loren sighed, and leaned back on her elbows. “I missed this place when I lived on Coruscant. I missed the quiet. This is the first time I’ve been here in… oh, two years?”

“You could have waited and come up with your family. You don’t have to go out of your way to– to show me around.”

“No, but I want to. It means I get to see all my favorite places again, and it means I get to see your face when you see them, too.”

Davijaan swallowed. “Oh.”

“That’s the good thing about being back– getting to spend time outside, under a real sun. Being reminded there’s more to life than labor. That I live in my body and not in my head, if that makes sense.”

He thought it did, a little. As if the cold water and the hot stone and the absolute stillness of the sky made you more aware of your breath in your lungs and your blood in your veins and the ache in your muscles as you turned to take everything in.

It was grounding. Like a hug.

“Thank you,” he offered, soft. “For bringing me here.”

She sat up and smiled, tattoos scrunching around her eyes, and knocked her shoulder into his. His heart skipped a beat.

“Thank you for the opportunity.”

***

That evening they ended up at the same restaurant they’d eaten lunch at before. This time Davijaan was cognizant enough to read the “Family Restaurant” sign over the door. Whose family, it didn’t say. He wasn’t sure if that meant it was supposed to be a restaurant for families or if part of the sign had fallen off.

Loren didn’t so much as glance at her menu. Davijaan didn’t know enough about the foods listed to make an informed choice of what he wanted to try, and he was alright with ordering the same thing as her, but he read through the whole thing and tried to form a mental picture of the foods he didn’t recognize.

“Do you know what you want?”

He looked up to find Loren leaning over the table and staring at his menu. “Uh…”

“You could try this.” She pointed at a dish.

Fish dumplings, eh? He’d tried dumplings once, out with Hawk exploring the lower levels, and they’d been so spicy he’d choked on them. “Are you recommending this to me so you can laugh at the face I make when I try them?”

She gasped in mock horror. “What have I ever done to deserve such an accusation!”

Davijaan raised an unimpressed eyebrow, but when the server approached he ordered the fish dumplings.

When their food arrived and he steeled himself to take a bite, he was pleased to discover that fish dumplings were mildly seasoned and flaky and delicious. And that Loren wasn’t laughing. He took another bite.

She poked at her roasted tubers, watching him eat with a small smile. “Do you like them?”

“I– Yes.”

“I thought you might. Strong flavors seem to shock you.”

He rolled his eyes and tried the pickled vegetables that came with the meal. They were sour, but not the kind of sour that hurt to eat. He actually liked the contrast with the dumplings.

“What do you like to eat?” Loren asked, taking a bite of her food.

“What do I– what?”

“What do you like to eat? Or, what do you and your brother cook at home?”

“Um… we don’t? Cook?”

She blinked at him. “Really? Well, what do you eat if you don’t cook?”

He took another bite of dumpling, but she waited for him to answer. “We buy pre-made stuff, mostly. We’ve got the hang of boiling water to rehydrate foods, but we never learned to cook.”

“Oh.”

They ate for a few minutes in silence, and then Loren cleared her throat and said, “I could maybe teach you some things? I’m not a very good cook myself, but I could at least show you the basics. If you’d like me to. Only if you’d like me to. I don’t mean to imply–”

“No, I think–” Davijaan fussed with his fork, realized what he was doing, and set it down to focus on her properly. “I think I would like you to. It’s something I probably ought to learn, right?”

“Probably.” She shrugged, huffed a laugh. “It might make life easier, at least. It did for me when I first moved out. Buying everything pre-made gets very expensive very quickly. My first few weeks working at CorNN I bought breakfast on my way to work every morning and didn’t stop to add up the bills until I’d exhausted my food budget for the month.”

She told stories of learning to cook as a child, and trying to recreate those recipes on a budget and with unfamiliar ingredients during her first few months in the city. Davijaan listened and asked questions and ate his fish dumplings, and when the server came back he paid the bill.

***

Loren arrived at the house early on the morning of his next day off, her bag slung over her shoulder and a large basket held in both hands. Davijaan met her at the door and took the basket, setting it carefully on the table. Kote wasn’t up yet. They should have the house to themselves, as long as they were quiet. He turned to find Loren walking slowly around, taking in the mostly empty room curiously.

He’d bought furniture– a table and chairs, a desk, a couch. He hadn’t been sure what else was supposed to go inside, to use or to decorate. Barrack walls were always covered in pinups and

film posters and painted murals, and he wasn't sure if that was the kind of thing civilians had in their living rooms.

He'd laid out his collection of trinkets on the desk for lack of anywhere better to put them, and now Loren stopped in front of them. She didn't touch, but she studied the model ship Wolffe had bought him and the bit of asteroid he'd pulled out of his engine after a close call and the brightly colored woven… thingy Fiddle had made. (Bracelet? Ribbon? Fiddle had said it was for luck or something. He'd worn it wrapped it around his wrist under his gauntlet for every single battle thereafter without bothering to ask what it was supposed to be.)

"Are these souvenirs?" She asked.

He shrugged. She turned her curious gaze on him, but didn't push.

"You've got a nice place here."

"Thanks. We like it."

He liked it. He liked having his own space to do whatever he wanted and he liked not being responsible to anyone but himself for how clean it was. He wasn't sure if Kote liked it or not. It was hard to make him talk most days. Davijaan wasn't sure what to do other than wait. He didn't know what might or might not happen in the future if Kote didn't– if he never–

"Shall we?" Loren asked, moving towards the kitchen area. Davijaan followed, studiously not thinking about it.

"I thought we could make pancakes," she said, opening the basket and laying ingredients out on the table. "They're easy and very filling. Which is perfect for me because despite my generous offer to teach you I am in fact a terrible cook."

"Well, you know how to use an oven, so you've got that on me at least."

She grinned, setting a wobbly bag of flour down with a hum. "I suppose I do. Do you have a mixing bowl? And a pan?"

"Maybe? I think?" He started opening cupboards. He'd bought the kitchen things the lady at the shop had recommended, but they hadn't been used much. He didn't know where Kote had stashed them.

"I brought my own just in case."

"Let me see if I can find it, I think–" He opened the cupboard over the stove and a dozen pots pans came spilling out to clatter over the floor. He stumbled aside, but one still managed to smack him in the face on its way down.

"Ouch, shit–"

"Are you ok?"

"I found the pan."

He set it on the counter and pressed the heel of his palm hard against the stinging spot on his forehead, and quickly started picking up the rest of the fallen pots, grumbling under his breath about dumb brothers and dumb metal pans and dumb cupboards.

“Here, let me help.”

Loren abandoned her ingredients to climb up and kneel on the counter, and he passed things up to her to stack in the cupboard. The sooner they got the mess cleaned up the sooner they could start the damn cooking lesson.

“Davi?” a voice called from the stairwell. “What are you doing?”

Davijaan flinched, and dropped the pot he was handing off with a crash. Kote always slept late, he was supposed to stay asleep and downstairs until after Loren left. He was supposed to–

“I, uh. A friend came over!” he called, hurriedly stooping to pick it up again, knowing Loren had noticed the name and hoping she hadn’t noticed either the flinch or the way his voice cracked. “We’re trying to cook!”

Kote padded up the stairs and into the kitchen, blinking, dressed in wrinkled sleep clothes and hair a tangled mess. He slowly took in Davijaan standing frozen by the stove with the pot, half a dozen more scattered around the floor at his feet, and Loren sitting on the clean counter with one hand inside the cupboard.

Loren waved. “Hello!”

“Um. Hello?”

On the table, the sack of flour fell over with a thump. The noise seemed to wake Kote up the rest of the way. He took a step forward and poked at the flour.

“What are you making?”

“Pancakes!” Loren announced, bright and cheerful, and Davijaan could have kissed her for not commenting on Kote’s… anything.

No, *he absolutely could not.* Shut the fuck up, brain.

After cycling through the appropriate embarrassment, horror, and resignation, Davijaan set the pot on the stove and waved Kote over.

“This is Loren. Loren, this is my brother.”

Loren hopped off the counter with a smile and stuck her hand out Coruscanti style. “Pleasure to meet you. Odd Ball’s told me a lot about you.”

Kote raised an eyebrow, glancing between Loren and Davijaan– and if he said something about *nice hands* Davijaan might have to kill him outright– but then he straightened his shoulders and shook her hand.

“Likewise, ma’am.”

“Oh, Loren’s fine. And, it's Cody, right? Like the Marshal Commander?”

Kote blinked. Davijaan cleared his throat. “Yup, that’s him.”

Loren froze. “You’re… Marshal Commander Cody. Of the 7th Sky Corps?”

“Ah, yes?”

Loren dropped his hand and whirled around, eyes blazing. “You didn’t tell me your brother was one of the highest ranking officers in the GAR!”

Davijaan took a step back. “Technically, every officer in the GAR is my brother.”

“Oh, yes, and I’m sure you know all hundred thousand of them personally, and they all decided to move to the edge of the known universe with you on a whim! How many other officers do you have sleeping in your basement, Odd Ball? How do you feed them when you can’t even turn on an oven?”

And Davijaan was used to how people reacted when they found out he was close with Kote; he knew the pattern like he knew the borders of the shadow he’d always stood in. But “people” had always meant “clones” in the past, and Loren’s shock and exasperation did not feature in the usual scenario.

Kote looked like he was either about to laugh or jump out the window, but when Davijaan met his eyes over Loren’s shoulder and silently begged for help, he cleared his throat and offered, “We’re batchmates.”

“Batchmates?” She said it carefully, frowning at the unfamiliar word.

“Decanted from the same batch. Batches do everything together growing up.”

“Like twins, I guess,” Davijaan added. Even though that wasn’t an accurate comparison at all.

Loren’s eyes narrowed. “You know, you never told me what your rank was, either. Were you secretly a big name and I’m just too ignorant to connect the dots?”

“Ah, no.” He huffed a laugh. “Sorry to disappoint, I’m just a lowly flight squad Commander.”

“Hm.”

“Lowly, nothing.” Kote slung an arm around Davijaan’s shoulders and grinned. “Odd Ball’s one of the best pilots in the fleet.”

“Is that so?” she said.

“That's a bit of an exaggeration–”

“Don’t downplay–”

Davijaan gave him a look that said, *Don’t,* and Kote didn’t.

He did sigh and raise an eyebrow that asked, *Do you want me to leave?*

Davijaan hesitated, and gave a half shrug that meant, *Not really.* Not if it meant Kote slinking off downstairs again. “If Loren’s alright with that,” he said aloud, and turned back to find her looking at them with a bemused smile.

“Alright with what?” Right. She wasn’t fluent in Kote and Davi eyebrows.

“Alright if I stay?” Kote asked. “I don’t have to be involved, I can just sit and watch, but–”

“Of course you can stay! It’s your home, your kitchen.” She seemed offended by the very suggestion that he leave. “And we’re going to make more than enough food for three.”

Kote brightened a bit, and helped Loren pick up the last of the pots and pans on the floor, and then the three of them got started on the pancakes.

It was deceptively simple. You just measured out the dry ingredients and the wet ingredients into a bowl and mixed them into a batter, and then fried spoonfuls in a pan. But the frying part was tricky. Davijaan burned his first pancake to the bottom of the pan, and they had to set it in the sink to soak and heat up a new one. He was only marginally more successful on his second try. Kote got the hang of it after three attempts and tried to tell Davijaan it was all in the timing. Even Loren burned a few.

It was tricky, but they slowly worked their way through the bowl of batter, Kote and Davijaan jostling each other for space in front of the stove and fiddling with the heat settings and Loren teasing and stirring a pot of berry sauce. Davijaan let Kote and his impeccable timing do the honor of frying the last pancake as he helped Loren plate the finished ones and pour sauce over them.

They ate on the porch, legs dangling over the sides, a cool breeze against their faces. The pancakes were amazing; the sweet berry sauce did a good job of covering the burnt taste. And there was something about eating food that he’d made, with his friend and his brother.

When they were finished Loren and Davijaan left Kote sitting on the porch and took the dishes inside to clean up. Loren wiped the counters and table down and started packing her unused ingredients away while Davijaan tried to scrub the char off the bottom of the pan. If he’d ruined another one he was going to be highly annoyed.

“Here, let that soak for a good hour or three.” Loren took the pan from him and filled it with soapy water, and set it on the counter. “I’ll wash and you dry?”

He collected the cloth he’d used on the few occasions he’d done dishes, and came to stand a careful distance from her in front of the sink.

“So,” she said, handing him the first clean plate. “That’s Cody.”

“That’s Cody.” He kept his eyes on the plate and his tone light. “He live up to your expectations?”

“Oh, he surpassed them.” She knocked her shoulder against his with a teasing smile. “It’s not every day you see a Marshal Commander in his pajamas.”

Davijaan kept his face carefully blank.

She sobered, studying him. “He’s not… he’s not doing very well, is he,” she said, quiet. “You never talk about what he’s up to these days, and he seems–”

“He’s still adjusting,” Davijaan cut in. “He’s still– He’s still just–”

“It’s alright, you don’t have to explain.” She turned back to the sink. “I can’t imagine what the war must have been like, for him. For you. I hope he starts doing better soon. For both your sakes.”

He didn’t respond, and she handed him the next plate silently.

After working for a few more minutes in silence, she asked, “Why didn’t you tell me about him?”

Instead of pointing out that he had told her about his brother, a great deal more than he told most people, in fact, he shoved the last plate in the cupboard and said, “Didn’t come up.”

“The same way being a pilot never came up?”

“How did you even know who he was?” In his experience most civilians had no idea how rank worked, let alone which clones were ranked at the top.

“Well, I, um.” She was focused intently on scrubbing away a bit of char stuck to the spatula. “I may have… written an article on him?”

He blinked. “You– what?”

She sighed. “Remember I told you my old boss was upset that I wouldn’t write about Umbara?”

“Yes.”

“Well. He said he had no use for a reporter who wouldn’t report on her own experiences, and I almost socked him in the jaw.”

He made a strangled noise and she flashed him a quick smile before focusing back on the sink.

“I didn’t tell him about you exactly,” she continued, in the same intentionally casual tone. “But I said I’d met a clone, and instead of Umbara I’d like to put together something on the clones, because we’d covered everything else war related. He said if I’d met one clone I’d

met them all and it was a waste of time to report on something the public wasn't interested in. I wrote the article anyway."

She handed him the clean mixing bowl. He just held it, staring at her. "I couldn't find public information on clones other than high ranking officers, because they worked so closely with the Jedi. But I found holos and bits and pieces about victories and losses and threw something together on the officer who seemed the most widely recognized."

"Cody."

"Yeah. Marshal Commander Cody." She smiled, grim. "I turned it in to my boss. He told me to scrap it or clean out my desk."

"You got fired?"

"No." She turned the water on with more force than necessary and started loudly rinsing utensils. "I quit."

"You quit your job. Over an article you wrote on my dumb brother."

"He's got a very impressive record."

"I *know.* I was *there.* I just… You quit your job over an article about *clones?"*

"I quit my job for a lot of reasons, but that was the breaking point, yes." Her shoulders hunched, and she set the dripping forks and knives on the counter when he didn't reach to take them from her. "It seemed silly to write about my own experience with war when nobody had bothered to write about the clones'. You and your brothers fought the war, and won it. Bled and died in it." She looked up at him, eyes hard.

"And that, to me, sounds like a story that matters."

***

"What's wrong?"

Davijaan blinked back to himself, and re-focused on Loren's speeder as it started down the road back to the village.

"She– she just *says things* sometimes, and she means them completely seriously, but they're so– they're so–"

And that, to me, sounds like a story that matters.

He shook his head.

"Huh." Kote leaned against the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. "Care to share?"

"No."

“Alright.”

They watched Loren disappear around a bend, and then Kote turned to Davijaan, lips curving with a hint of a smile.

“Well, *vod*, you were right.”

Davijaan squinted suspiciously. “Kote…”

He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “She does have *very* nice hands.”

“I am never telling you *anything ever again*, get back here–”

Kote laughed as he was chased inside and tackled to the floor, and it was the best sound Davijaan had ever heard.

Chapter 7

Autumn was sudden and brilliant, in the mountains. One morning Davijaan left his house and found the dull red-green of the tundra had brightened into scarlet and citrine and saffron, and the teasing chill in the air had worked itself up into an icy wind. He arrived at work laughing and shivering, cheeks and lips chapped and hands stiff, and Mr. Yang had made him sit next to the heater and drink hot tea before he was allowed near *Glimmer.*

It had been one of Loren's work days, and she'd sat beside him with her own cup, sighing and lamenting the fact that she hadn't been able to go swimming that summer. Davijaan rather thought having her next to him, casually listing all the places she wanted to show him next summer and all the ideas she had for winter activities in the meantime, warmed him up better than the tea.

The Yangs were in business four days a week, with one family rest day that was all but sacred. Mrs. Maraso had arranged the schedule so that Loren did the office work the first two days and she worked the last. He thought Mrs. Maraso might have done that on purpose, since there seemed to be a lot more running back and forth between the hangar and the village office necessary on those first two days. At least, he saw a lot more of Loren than he ever had of her sister. Regardless of his suspicion of abuse of power, he wasn't about to say anything, because the arrangement meant that his own free days always coincided with his friend's.

***

With the arrival of freezing rain and strong winds Davijaan and Loren didn't go hiking as much, and when they did it was on short trails close to the village. He enjoyed the slower pace and the chance to study the changing landscape, but as the cold became more intense he wished he had other activities to suggest that did not involve being outside. Loren didn't seem bothered by the cold at all. Maybe almost freezing to death every time you stepped out the door was just something you were supposed to get used to in the mountains. Stars, he hoped not.

At least the cooking lessons had become a standing date. Once a week Loren came over with a new recipe and a bag full of supplies and they spent the whole morning in the kitchen, crowded around the hot stove, making something. More often than not Kote joined, and the three of them muddled through the instructions and divided up the results.

Usually it was at least edible, but there were some memorable disasters. Their one and only attempt at baking had ended with a mass of vaguely cookie shaped lumps, raw in the middle and burned black around the edges. Loren had fallen off the table jumping to turn the fire alarm off, and Davijaan had only just managed to catch her before she hit the stone floor. They decided to put a hold on baking lessons after that.

To Davijaan's distinct lack of surprise, Kote was good at cooking. What *was* a surprise was how much he enjoyed it.

He studied every recipe with the same intensity he'd once given to tactics and strategy, laying out ingredients and supplies with precision. He insisted on following the instructions to the letter even when Loren assured him liberties could be taken with certain measurements and ingredients. Whenever the food turned out well he brightened. And he hummed as he worked, keeping time to a marching beat, and Davijaan hadn't realized how much he'd missed Kote's unconscious humming until he heard it again.

***

"Well boys, I think we've finally got the temp settings for the oven figured out."

Davijaan snorted around a bite of perfectly-cooked casserole. "Took us long enough."

"Took us long enough," Loren nodded in agreement as she served herself a second helping. "But we did it!"

"We did it," Kote echoed, a faint and fond smile appearing as he looked at the dish that'd been roughly ninety percent his creation.

It wasn't that Davijaan and Loren hadn't helped. They'd just been a little distracted by their conversation about the absorbent qualities of dishcloths. That turned into a conversation about blankets that turned into Davijaan demonstrating how brushing his hand over the couch changed the color of the material, and Loren fumbling through a half coherent explanation of piled fabrics and their many practical and aesthetic uses. By the time they'd stopped theorizing about how piled fabrics were manufactured and got off the couch, Kote was sliding the casserole into the oven.

"So," said Kote, shifting in his chair and poking at his food and trying to look anything but eager. "What did you have in mind for next week?"

"I honestly have no idea." Loren shrugged. "You've thoroughly exhausted my meager repertoire, I'm afraid."

"Ah."

Kote stared down at his bowl silently for a long moment, and then asked, "Is there a place I could buy recipe books, so I could experiment on my own?"

Davijaan looked up sharply. Opened his mouth; closed it.

Humming around another bite, Loren chewed and swallowed thoughtfully before she spoke. "I'm sure there is, I'd have to ask Pa. Actually, if you want to learn more than the basics, I could see if he'd be willing to give you lessons?"

Davijaan held himself very still and watched Kote's face light up, and relief and resentment tangled into a knot in his gut.

"You'd be willing to ask for me?" Kote asked, hopeful.

"Of course!"

“And you think your Pa would say yes?”

“Well,” her lips twitched up in a brief smile. “I don’t think he would say no.”

“Thank you,” said Kote, bright and shining, and Davijaan turned his face away.

***

The morning of Kote’s first cooking lesson Davijaan shadowed him as he got ready. They didn’t really talk. Kote was stuck somewhere in his head, eyes distant and fingers tapping against his thigh as he wandered around getting dressed and collecting his shoes and jacket, and Davijaan didn’t feel like getting him unstuck. The ride over would do his work for him. Probably.

Kote left without saying goodbye. He just wandered his way out the door, taking his humming with him.

Davijaan stood in the center of the room for a long while, staring at the closed door. Eventually he wandered his own way over to the couch. He curled up and traced little patterns into the blue fabric– light blue and then dark blue and then light blue again– and hated himself for wishing Kote hadn’t left.

He’d spent the last four-ish months working and exploring and spending time with Loren while Kote had just. Existed. And he’d wanted Kote to do things but he hadn’t been sure how to include him in any of what he was doing. (And maybe some part of him hadn’t wanted to.) He’d been waiting for Kote to get himself moving. And now Kote had gotten himself moving. And he had no right to be upset.

Davijaan hated the quiet of the empty house.

But even when Kote was there he wasn’t really *there.* It was hard to spend time with him when he wasn’t there. Even when they were both home they usually stayed on their separate floors of the house, Kote down in the bedroom and Davijaan up in the kitchen. He was sitting in the living room alone and staring out the window like he always did on his days off, and Kote’s presence in the house– or lack thereof– made no difference.

Except it did, and he didn’t think he could stand to be alone all morning.

He and Loren both had today and tomorrow off, and they’d made plans for tomorrow. She hadn’t said she was free today, but she hadn’t said she was busy either.

No harm in asking, he decided, and got up to find his comm.

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Loren had responded to his brief message almost immediately, and arrived before Davijaan was really ready for her. He answered the door with an awkward hello, and received a cheerful greeting in return that went a long way towards convincing him that she actually did want to be here and wasn’t just humoring him.

“So,” she said, breezing past him into the living area and setting her bag on the kitchen table. “I take it you have something planned?”

Sort of? He’d spent his time waiting for her frantically wracking his mind for normal civilian activities. He would rather not be outside and he would rather not cook and he would really rather not sit in the living room alone, but there were few other things he spent his free time on.

“I thought maybe we could play cards? Or…”

Cards weren’t a favorite pastime of his, but he’d gotten enough practice to be decent, and a well-dealt game could last hours supplemented by drinking and storytelling. Though maybe not the drinking, this time.

“Sounds good to me,” she said, smiling.

“Right,” he said, relieved. “Right. Let me just– The deck’s downstairs.”

He thundered down the stairs and into the bedroom, annoyed with himself for not having everything set up already. The cards were in the top drawer of the dresser, unless Kote had moved them, in which case they could be literally anywhere in the house and he had no hope of finding them. He pulled the drawer open and riffled through the collection of dissected comm units and tarnished medals and armor cleaning and repair supplies. Stars, please let the cards be in here.

“Is this your room?”

Davijaan flinched, and turned to find Loren hovering in the bedroom doorway. Had she tiptoed down the stairs or had he really been *that* distracted? He surreptitiously glanced around the room. The bed, the dresser, the two crates stacked against the wall. It wasn’t clean to barrack inspection standards, but it wasn’t terrible.

He shrugged, suddenly feeling awkward again. “It’s, um. Both our room.”

Her eyes found the single bed. “Where does Cody sleep?”

“We share.”

She looked surprised for a split second and then smoothed her expression over. Did natborns not share with family? Was sharing weird? She’d been so quick to offer to share, before, and he’d thought–

“I used to climb in with Maraso when I had a nightmare, growing up,” she said, fond and remembering.

He relaxed. “We did too.” Sort of. Depending on how you defined nightmare. “Guess we just got used to sleeping like that. Didn't make sense to buy two beds when we’d only use one.”

She took a step inside, hesitated, and glanced at him. “Is it alright if I…?”

He wasn’t sure if he wanted her wandering around in here or not, but here she was, and he didn’t have a reason for his unease so it probably didn’t matter. He waved her inside and turned back to the drawer. Get the cards and then get both of them out.

Cracked radio casing, leaky tube of glue, half used roll of twine… Davijaan closed the drawer with a huff and opened the next one down. Maybe Kote had stowed them with his clothes.

“Is that… you or Cody’s armor?”

He turned again, slower this time, to see her standing in front of the stacked crates with her hands held politely behind her back. The gold-orange and white of his helmet was just visible out of the open lid of the top crate.

He swallowed. “Mine.”

“May I see?”

For a long moment he just stood there, mind racing, trying to come up with an excuse as to why she may not see, or touch, *please get out of here right now–*

At his continued silence she turned, concerned and apologetic. “You don’t have to show me, I was just curious.”

“No! No, it’s fine.” He smiled. “I don’t mind.”

She probably hadn’t ever seen clone armor up close. She just wanted to look, she was just curious, and he had no real reason for the discomfort he felt at the thought of her studying his armor with the same intensity she studied him. It was just armor. It wasn’t like she was going to laugh at his messy paint.

Abandoning his hunt for the cards and mentally cursing out his dumb brother– not for the first time that day and most definitely not for the last– he marched over to the crate and grabbed his helmet, holding it out stiffly for her inspection.

Kote never bothered to get his armor out, but Davijaan couldn’t just end a war-long habit overnight, and still took his own out every other evening to clean and check for damage. So at least the helmet was clean.

She didn’t try to touch. It irritated him that he was relieved.

He’d never been particularly attached to his armor, not like some of his siblings. In his mind a set of armor was like a ship. It served you as long as it was able to and when it was no longer able, oh well. Time to move on to the next set.

This helmet was from the set he’d been issued after Umbara, hastily painted with Kote’s help in the few hours between his release from medical and his first shift back on active duty. The paint job was neither detailed nor well done; the goal was more to resemble his old armor enough that everyone would be able to see it was his.

Loren studied the helmet curiously. It was a pilot's helmet, not a trooper's helmet, so probably different from what she'd seen on the news. She raised an eyebrow and nodded at the motif over his visor. "What's that?"

"That?" If she'd written a whole damn article on a clone she had to know something about battalion colors and individual preferences, which meant she was probably asking about the motif itself. He grimaced. "I was trying to paint a planet, with a shooting star, you see? But the stencil slipped, so I got the alignment all wrong and now it just looks… I should re-do it."

"I think you should keep it. It fits."

"It– what?"

"Well, I mean," she looked back up at him, lips curving up at the corners. "It's an odd ball, isn't it?"

He stared at her aghast as she burst out laughing.

"No wonder Cody told me to leave it alone," he groaned. "I bet I was the only one not in on the joke. Figures."

He shoved the helmet back in the crate with exaggerated displeasure, hoping she wouldn't ask to see the rest of the set.

"The cards aren't down here," he said, making his way out the door and mentally urging her to follow. "We're going to have to look upstairs."

She did follow, and he shut the door firmly behind them and forced himself to walk instead of run up the stairs, leaving his and Kote's unexpected sanctuary and their boxed-up past only partially disturbed.

They found the cards, eventually, in one of the drawers in the desk. Amid some rather colorful curses directed at Kote on his part and amused quips on hers he dealt the first game. By the time Kote returned home Davijaan had discovered he was a lot better at cards than he'd thought he was and that Loren was both frighteningly competitive and a sore loser, and most of the messy feelings of the morning had been soothed.

***

Kote kept going to the Yangs. Once a week, like clockwork. He always brought home the leftovers of whatever he'd made.

He still spent most of his days inside, not really doing anything. But it was easier to get him to talk, and he had more things to talk about. The people he saw in the village, the weather. The only thing he never brought up was the cooking lesson itself. Davijaan never asked.

He didn't always arrange to have Loren over when Kote left, but he did often enough that she'd started to ask ahead of time if he was ready to get his ass kicked at cards. He always said he was ready whenever she was, and hid his grin at her indignation.

And maybe, just maybe, he started to look forward to the mornings when Kote was gone and it was just him and Loren sitting at the kitchen table, arguing over sabacc rules and drinking tea and getting distracted by the view out the window.

***

“That is. Not a real rule.”

“Says who?”

“Says every sabacc playing clone in the GAR! No, stop–” He slammed a hand down on the draw stack before she could get her grimy fingers on new cards. “You’re just making things up so you can finally win!”

Loren gasped in horror, clutching her scant remaining cards to her chest. “You dare accuse me of such underhanded tactics–”

“I absolutely dare! Cheating is all well and good, but you have to be sneaky about it, damn it, you can’t just–”

“Well I don’t see why GAR rules should apply outside the GAR, so there.”

He leaned back in his chair with a groan. “How many times do I have to– This is torture, is what it is. You’re torturing me.”

She looked up from her cards, sharp. “That is *not* funny.”

Hm. The corner of his mouth curved up against his will. “I think it’s hilarious. You just don’t appreciate my sense of humor.”

“I’d appreciate it if it was actually funny.” She crossed her arms over her chest with a huff. “If you make me laugh about torture I will never forgive you.”

He smirked. “Challenge accepted.”

“No! That’s not a challenge, that’s a warning!”

And Davijaan laughed, because she looked so unbelievably offended, like it was just the principle of the thing, and because they were sitting in his kitchen arguing about the right way to play sabacc.

When he focused back on the game, on Loren, she was looking at him strangely, mouth half open like she’d been about to say something and forgotten what it was.

“Yes?” He tilted his head, trying to mimic her own disconcerting gaze and knowing he was falling to hide his amusement.

She flushed indigo and snapped her mouth shut. “I–”

The front door creaked open, and they both startled as Kote fumbled his way inside. Davijaan was the first out of his seat, taking the heavy box from his brother. Loren was close behind him and quickly divested a bemused Kote of his scarf and jacket.

“Welcome home!” she said, shaking them out and hanging them over the back of the couch with the rest of the winter gear. “Your brother is the worst cards player I’ve ever met.”

Davijaan sputtered, standing in the middle of the room with the box, and Kote shot a puzzled look between the two of them and the remains of the game laid out on the table. “I– Thanks? And. I was not aware he was that bad.”

“Well, he is,” she said, decisive, picking leaves out of the tangled tassels of his scarf.

He thumped the box down on the kitchen counter. “Lies and slander!” he hollered. “Cody, come– look at this!” He flailed in the direction of the table. “Look! Look at those cards and tell me who was winning!”

Hiding a smile, Kote dutifully inspected Davijaan’s cards and then Loren’s, and shook his head. “Too close to tell, I’m afraid.”

“You *bastard–*”

“I *knew* it! I–”

“You’re just going to have to go another round,” Kote announced, loud and ringing, cutting off their protests at the pass.

Davijaan glared at Loren’s mockingly innocent and unfairly beautiful face– *why did her cheeks have to scrunch up like that when she smiled, damn it–* before giving in and sitting heavily back in his seat to reshuffle and re-deal. “Dumb brother,” he grumbled as Loren joined him, prim. “Dumb friend. Dumb cards.”

If that noise behind him was Kote snickering he might have to commit violence in his clean kitchen.

Thankfully the choked off sounds of amusement were quickly drowned out by the creak of the box opening and the clatter of heavy dishes being placed on the counter. “Brought home the rest of this for you,” Kote said, opening cupboards and the conservator and generally making a racket.

Davijaan was sick and tired of new foods.

He finished dealing the game in silence, and ignored the plate of bread… something Kote put on the table in reach of him and Loren. Bread rolls? With berries and stuff baked in? Whatever. He wasn’t hungry.

Kote went back to the cupboard, blessedly quiet, and Loren cautiously took a roll. “Do you *want* me to stay for another game?” she asked, soft, cards in one hand and roll in the other. Davijaan glanced up at her and back down to his own cards.

She was usually gone by the time Kote came back. Gone or getting ready to go. But he wasn't ready for her to leave yet– to leave him and Kote to their empty house and whatever tension existed between them these days– so he shrugged. "Stay as long as you want."

"Hm. Well, in that case, I hope you're ready to get your ass kicked."

She winked, and he flashed her a grin, and then Kote was sitting down at the table between them with three mugs of tea and some kind of spread for the rolls and asking if it was too late to be dealt in.

***

Early the next morning, Kote came upstairs.

He did that sometimes, on the days after cooking lessons. Came upstairs, bothered Davijaan into helping him, and made something other than good old reliable porridge for firstmeal. It was like he still had a bit of life left in him from the day before, and had to use it up on something before it faded away again.

As much as Kote's sporadic and confusing moments of being fine and normal frustrated him, it was Davijaan's second day off and he would much rather have something other than porridge, so he stuck around and allowed himself to be bullied into peeling vegetables and cracking eggs. He wasn't sure what exactly the end result was supposed to be, and he wasn't about to ask. It was going to be better than porridge, that was for sure.

Kote was humming again. Davijaan picked little bits of shell out of his bowl of eggs, shoulders stiff and jaw set. He'd missed the sound so much he'd forgotten how annoying it was.

When the scrambled-fried-whatever food was done, they sat and ate in silence. They'd never had to talk, before– and a lot of the time Kote needed quiet anyway– but something about these silences was different. They both knew it. They both refused to bring it up. It'd been like that since the end of the war and at this point Davijaan didn't know how to bring it up. He tried to just be happy that Kote was here and alive and starting to go out more, but some days it was a lot harder than others.

He did the cleaning afterwards, since he figured it was only fair. And when left to his own devices Kote could take hours to do the dishes. He was putting the plates away when Kote, still sitting at the table, said, "Mr. Yang wants you to come with me next week."

Davijaan froze. "He… what?"

"He asked me to ask you to come to the lesson next week."

"Ah." Davijaan slowly unfroze. "Why?"

When he looked back at Kote his brother had already turned away. "I don't know. Ask him."

Davijaan closed the cupboard. "What do you two even do?"

“Cook. Talk.”

Davijaan grit his teeth. “Wouldn’t want to disrupt your routine.”

“You wouldn’t,” said Kote, so quiet Davijaan almost didn’t hear.

“What’s so great about cooking, anyway? There’s got to be a limit on new foods.”

“Probably. I don’t know. The cooking is fun, but that’s not... I like the talking part.”

“The talking part.”

“Yes,” he said, firm and with an edge of warning. “I like talking with Mr. Yang. It’s nice sometimes to just… Be Cody.”

Everything in his head shut down abruptly, and all Davijaan could do was turn and gape at his brother.

He’d hated that name during the war; wouldn’t let Davijaan call him by it even as a joke. Said it was a name for the civilians and the Jedi and the paperwork.

“It’s *nice?”* He finally managed to choke out. “It’s nice to– to be *Cody?”*

He wouldn’t look at Davijaan; just stared blankly at the wall, shoulders set. “That’s what I said.”

“But… You’re not Cody.”

His jaw tightened. Chin tipped up.

“You’re– You’re not– You are *Kote.* That’s who you’ve always been, you–”

“Maybe I’m not anymore,” he interrupted, hard and bruising as stone. “Maybe I don’t want to be. Maybe it’s easier to become someone new than to keep trying to be someone I’m not!”

“Trying to be–” And then Davijaan was angry.

“No!” he shouted, hands curling into fists. “No! Nothing– *Nothing has changed!”* His voice cracked, he didn’t yell like this, he never had, he didn’t want–

He forced himself to lower his voice into something sharp and vicious, more angry than he could ever remember being, fury focusing his attention until the kitchen faded away and all he saw was the familiar defiance and self-righteousness in his brother's gaze.

“Nothing about you has changed,” he spat. “Whatever ever the fuck is wrong with you *now* was wrong with you *then;* you’ve just stopped trying to hide it. Trying was during the war. Trying was on Kamino. Don't you fucking *dare* tell me *this* is trying. Now that I’m the only one– Now that no one needs you, to– to win their war or be their brother– you’re done trying. You’re ready to lay down and die. But that’s not– You can’t– We’re not dead yet! We are not dead yet, damn it! We are not dead yet, and that has to mean *something!”*

His last cry echoed around the kitchen as it slowly came back into focus. Davijaan stood in the middle of the floor, panting and shaking and terrified.

Kote opened his mouth.

Davijaan turned on his heel and walked out the door.

Chapter 8

Davijaan ended up at the door of the Yang's hangar.

He didn't have a shift today, he had no business showing up at work. But he'd left the house without his jacket and it was freezing outside, the blue sky covered over in thick grey clouds, and he knew he had to go somewhere. Maybe not here. Definitely not here. Mr. Yang would ask so many questions.

But if not here, where?

For the first time he wished he'd wandered around the village more often, if only so he could think of some place people would let him just. Be.

As he was standing there frantically trying to come up with a reason to be standing there, the door slid open. Mr. Yang stuck his head out, squinting in the wind. "Odd Ball? Come in, come in. What are you doing standing out in the cold, come in!"

He went in.

Mr. Yang ushered him into the small office off the main hangar and made him sit down in the chair closest to the heater.

"What can I do for you, son? What brings you here on your off day?"

"Oh, you know." He smiled. "Didn't have any plans. Didn't want to spend the whole day cooped up inside. Figured I'd come down and see if you had anything for me to do."

Mr. Yang gave him an odd look, but didn't say anything about his missing jacket. "Well… I suppose you could always load up *Glimmer* so she's ready for tomorrow."

Davijaan shot out of his chair. "Sounds good, I'll get right on it, sir!"

"Make sure to sign in!" Mr. Yang called as he darted out of the office.

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There wasn't a lot to load up, so he moved slowly, trying to drag the work out. Nobody else was around. Mrs. Yang had a passenger flight and Mrs. Maraso was down in the village office, so he had the whole empty echoing hangar to himself.

On his next day off he would have to go to the library or the hardware store or somewhere– somewhere there were people– and then keep going, so he could become a familiar face. So he had a place he could go, next time, a place that wasn't work. Only there wasn't going to be a next time. There shouldn't have been a 'this time.'

Kote had run out on him many, many times before. Davijaan had never once run out on Kote. Then again, he'd never had anywhere to run. Kote could sit in a corner and sulk for hours, but

Davijaan couldn't stand the thought of sitting alone and just. Thinking about it.

He worked for thirty minutes or so, determinedly undercutting the silence of the hangar by thumping crates and containers down harder than he should, thoughts tangling and twisting and tightening around him until it was hard to breath.

He tried to remember the last time he'd let himself be really, truly angry. He couldn't.

As he was debating asking Mr. Yang if he could take *Glimmer* out– just for an hour, just so he could be close to the heavy emptiness of the sky, the fuel could come out of his paycheck– the office door opened and closed behind him. Footsteps whispered across the duracrete. Too light to be Mr. Yang, sounded more like–

"Hey," said Loren, voice soft in a way that made him grit his teeth. He turned to her.

She must have only just arrived; she held her gloves in one hand and her face was flushed, her hair tucked under an embroidered headscarf. Frost-brittle leaves tangled her bootlaces.

"Hello," he said, sharper than he'd intended. "You're not working today."

"Neither are you."

He shrugged. Picked up another crate and made for *Glimmer's* hold. She followed.

"Came by to say hello. Pa said you were in here. Need any help?"

He set the crate down with a thud, paused in the hatch to peer down the gangplank at the few scattered containers he had left. "Not really."

"Are you ok?"

Davijaan opened his mouth. Closed it. Smiled, bright and perfect.

Loren's brown creased. "Do you need– can I–"

"I don't need anything, I'm fine. Just. Had to get out of the house for a bit." He stomped down the gangplank.

"Did something happen?" She stayed right at his elbow, voice too loud and too quiet and *too much.* "Is Cody alright?"

He shrugged again. Picked up a container. Loren stood at the foot of the gangplank, blocking his way.

"Did you two… have a fight?"

"No." Didn't count as a fight if only one of them was screaming.

He shifted his feet, willing her to move. He wanted his own noise, not hers. He wanted the silence of the sky and he wanted the sounds of strangers. He wanted to get his work done and

he wanted to abandon the job and the Yangs and the village and just wander off into the mountains and stay there forever. He wanted to be alone. He wanted his brother.

“Is there anything I can do?”

Stop asking me questions.

“No.” He cleared his throat. Adjusted his grip on the container. “I said I’m fine. Rough start to the day, but I’ve had worse.”

“Odd Ball, I don’t think you’re fine.” She looked so concerned, and maybe a little bit scared. Something cold and hard settled in his chest.

Stop thinking you know anything about me.

“You’re– I can see something’s wrong,” she pleaded.

Stop looking at me.

“And you’ve done so much for me, you’ve listened every time I needed to talk, and it’s the least–”

– you can do. It’s the least you can do. After everything else you’ve done, this is the least–

Stop–

“I don’t owe you *anything!”*

Loren took a half step back, mouth open in shock, and–

He did owe her. He owed her so damn much, but he didn't know how– he couldn't–

He turned and slammed the crate down and took a few steps towards the door, and stopped dead. Because leaving meant going through Mr. Yang’s office, and he hadn’t finished his work yet, and he didn’t think he could bring himself to walk out on both the people he cared about in the same morning.

So he stood in the center of the room for silent seconds that stretched into an eternity, shaking and ashamed and terrified to turn around and see Loren’s face.

“No, you don't,” she said at last, voice even and calm and so much easier to listen to when he didn’t have to look at her. He took a deep breath in, held it, let it out slow.

“You don’t owe me a single thing. I’m the one who owes you, when it comes down to it. But friendships don’t run on debts and favors, they run on gifts,” she said, firm. Like she was reminding herself, too. “And I want– I know you’re not comfortable talking about yourself, and I’m not trying to– to guilt you into sharing things you don’t want to share. But I can see that something is wrong, and I’m happy to listen if you need to talk.”

For a long moment he breathed, and she waited.

“I shouldn’t have come here.” His voice was hoarse. He cleared his throat. “I don’t know why…”

“You’re always welcome.” A cold hand slipped into his, and squeezed. After a moment, he squeezed back.

Loren tugged him over to the crates and pulled him down to sit next to her, not letting go of his hand, so close their legs were pressed together hip to knee. It was good. Grounding. She didn’t say anything else, and that was good too. He’d stepped over a line and wasn’t sure how to step back yet. And he wasn’t sure what he would do if she kept asking questions.

As soon as he relaxed, exhaustion hit, and he remembered why he tried not to be angry. It always left him empty and aching and on the verge of tears. He hated feeling– being– so out of control.

Kote had maintained a careful rage for the entirety of the war, and Davijaan had often wondered how. Maybe that was why he slept so much these days; the war was over and the anger was gone and all it had left in its wake was bone deep tiredness.

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Cleared his throat again. “I’m sorry. For shouting. I don’t usually…”

He still couldn’t quite look at Loren, but he felt her shift against his side. She ran her thumb over the back of his knuckles, calluses catching on scars.

“I didn’t think so. You never struck me as much of a shouter.” Her voice was rueful and light. “I’m sorry for pushing like that. You really, truly don’t owe me anything, and I’m sorry if I ever made you feel like you did.”

Huh.

He… wasn’t sure what to think about that. There were responsibilities that came with relationships, he’d always known that. Being siblings or being friends meant obligations and duties and debts– on both sides.

He didn’t love many of his brothers. He didn’t even like most of them. But he’d had a responsibility towards them that he’d done his best to fulfill. That responsibility of care and protection and loyalty had kept the clones alive on Kamino; kept them alive during the war.

He owed Kote everything. He could spend the rest of his life trying to repay that debt to no avail.

“You don’t have to tell me what happened, but,” her grip tightened. “Do I need to go yell some sense into Cody?”

“Ha. No.” He shook his head, guilty and bitter. “Already tried that.”

“Ah.”

She was still waiting, he realized. Waiting for him to either start talking about it or to make it clear he didn't want to.

He *didn't* want to talk about it. Talking about it meant thinking about it.

But, at the end of the day, Kote would be waiting for him in their house on the mountain, and pretending nothing was wrong wasn't working anymore.

He didn't have to tell her everything. He didn't have to go into specifics. She'd said he didn't owe her anything, and if that were true then he didn't owe her the whole story and didn't intend to pay it over. But maybe, since she'd given so much of herself so freely, he could give a bit of himself in return.

Just broad strokes, just things most of the GAR had always known. Just the things he'd let himself think about and wonder about and put into words, before.

He didn't have to look at her when he spoke.

"I wasn't a good officer."

She didn't protest, didn't tell him he was underestimating himself the way Kote would have. She just kept rubbing her thumb over his knuckles, and he felt raw and sore and uncomfortable in a way he couldn't remember ever feeling. It was odd.

"Or, I'm not a good leader. Just in general. Any sop in a uniform can give orders, but whatever it is that makes people want to follow you, I don't have. But Cody does. Half the GAR would follow him into hell with a smile. But he– he needs someone to watch his back. And that's always been me. He leads; I watch his back. That's how it's been for as long as I can remember."

That was the only reason he'd gotten into command track. The only reason he'd graduated, the only reason he'd gotten the post he had. Because Kote needed Davijaan behind him to function at his best, and during that first year of command track it became abundantly clear that the GAR needed Kote to be functioning at his best.

"But, now the war is over."

"... And?"

"And, that's it." He shrugged, awkward in their cramped seating arrangement. "The war is over."

And it's finally starting to feel real.

The war had been the only constant in his life. The war, and Kote. The reason he existed, and the brother who had somehow stayed beside him and made existing worth it. And now the war was over, and Kote…

"Now Cody– he's– He doesn't want to be a leader anymore," he continued, not sure how to voice this part but feeling he should try. "I've followed him my whole life, and now… Well. I

might have yelled at him about it, this morning. And came here to get away. And just ended up yelling at you instead."

She hummed in consideration and leaned further against his side. Maybe she really wouldn't hold the yelling against him. "May I ask a question? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

Deep breath in, hold it, let it out slow. "Yes."

She squeezed his hand again, and she needed to get better gloves because her own hand was still freezing. "Whose idea was it to come to Pantora?"

He flushed, embarrassed. He considered not answering but couldn't think of a good reason not to.

"Mine."

She nodded, unsurprised. "Why?"

"I don't know. Neither of us really knew what to do, after everything. And I… I guess I wanted to be somewhere peaceful while we figured it out."

She straightened, and he could picture the way her eyes would flash and her features sharpen as she took that in and puzzled it out.

"I don't think leading and following are as clear cut as leader and follower," she said, thoughtful. Not like a fact– like a possibility.

"My siblings and I– Of course Maraso did most of the babysitting and helped Pa and Ma when the rest of us were little, but just because she's the eldest, the example, doesn't mean she's the responsible one all the time. She has her moments of silliness, and we've all had to step up and help out. There's no one role any of us fall into. We fulfill the role we need to based on circumstance."

It didn't seem very possible. In the GAR the chain of command reigned. Everyone had a defined role and everyone fulfilled that role to the letter and that was the way things were.

But, Davijaan hadn't been a good officer, and he wasn't a soldier anymore. And neither, he realized, was Kote.

"And besides," she said, still not looking at him, still holding his hand gentle and close like something precious. "If you're always busy watching his back, who's watching yours?"

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Eventually he and Loren untangled themselves and finished loading up *Glimmer.* They had lunch with Mr. Yang, and helped him file some paperwork, and cleaned out one of the back rooms that the whole family had been reminding each other needed to be cleaned out for months. Mostly, Loren talked about nothing and everything, and Davijaan listened.

Mr. Yang left as they were finishing up the back room, patting Davijaan on the shoulder and handing the hangar keys to his daughter with a smile. “Take your time, take your time,” he said, waving over his shoulder as he headed out the door. “You two have plenty of time.”

Loren flushed and rolled her eyes and picked up the pace. Even if they did have time, it had been a long day for both of them and they had actual work the next day and didn’t want to linger too long. In short order they finished their cleaning, closed down the hangar, and collected their things to leave.

When Davijaan stepped outside, it was snowing.

He’d seen snow before– fought a few sims in snow and flown through blizzards more than once– but he'd never been outside in it. Never felt it falling against his skin.

He stood on the hangar steps and tilted his head back and stared up into the white-grey sky, and little pieces of it broke off and drifted down and scattered across his forehead and nose and lips. It was soft and cold and stung as it melted.

He wondered if kissing Loren would feel like snowflakes.

And then he shook his head sharply, to dislodge both the thought and the snowflakes, and turned to his friend.

The snow didn't melt all at once when it landed on her face. Instead it blanketed her features and sort of, settled there. Several snowflakes had clustered over the upper curve of her tattoo. He shoved his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out and brushing it away.

“Did you walk here?”

He blinked. “Hm?”

She gestured to the parking area, empty except for her own speeder. “Did you walk here?”

“Oh, um. Yes?”

She frowned, and the snowflakes slid off her cheek. “Well, you can't walk home in the snow. Come on!”

She led the way to her speeder and he obediently climbed on behind her, hoping she wouldn’t notice how badly he was already shivering. She didn’t seem affected by the cold, even though she was barely better dressed for it than he was. Just gloves and a poncho. Which frankly wasn’t fair.

The sun was setting somewhere behind the clouds, and by the time they were on the main road it was night. The wind stirred up by the speeder spun the snow into white plumes, violently roused up in a whirlwind and gently laid down in drifts, glittering in the headlights. He tucked his face in Loren’s neck and closed his eyes and felt the sky fall on his head and shoulders, and wondered if being snow-covered was a kind of drowning.

***

When Davijaan arrived home the house was dark. He found a ration bar in the back of a cupboard and choked it down in the empty kitchen, and then crept past the breakfast mess and down the stairs. A sliver of light stretched out into the hall from under the bedroom door.

Kote was sitting in the center of the bed, back to the wall and legs pulled up against his chest. He blinked when Davijaan stepped into the room; opened his mouth. Davijaan cut him off with a sharp gesture. “Don’t. Say anything.”

He changed into sleep clothes in silence, and then flopped face forward onto the bed with a groan. After a moment, a tentative hand started rubbing the back of his neck. He shivered at the warmth on his snow-stung skin.

“I’m still mad at you.”

“Alright.” Kote’s hand continued uninterrupted.

Davijaan shifted around until he had his head pillowed on his arms, facing the far wall instead of his brother. Just for a moment, he allowed himself to lay still, and think.

He took a deep breath, held it, and let it out slow.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Please. Please tell me what’s wrong.”

Kote’s hand pulled away. Davijaan waited, his chest aching.

“You’ve always had times when you needed to be still and quiet and alone,” he finally continued, watching the shadows cast by the lamp shift along the wall as Kote’s movement rustled the blanket.

“I know that. I understand. Or, I thought I did. I thought you just needed to take breaks from the war; from yourself. I thought this was the same thing. I thought you just needed a break, and when you were done taking a break, you’d go back to being yourself. But it’s been months. It’s been almost six months, and apparently you don’t want to be yourself anymore, and I’m– I’m…” He swallowed. “I’m scared.”

“I’m sorry.” Kote’s voice was distant, flat and emotionless the way it had been more often than not since the war ended. “I didn’t mean for this to happen. It is like taking a break, I think, except I didn’t get to decide when it started and I don’t think I’ll get to decide when it ends. Too much was changing all at once and I just couldn’t…”

“Our whole lives changed,” he muttered, pressing his face further into his arms, not sure if he was annoyed or sad. “Maybe it was silly to hope we wouldn’t.”

The hand settled on his shoulder, light and hesitant. “You can still call me Kote, that doesn’t have to change.”

“Do you want me to call you Kote?”

“I don’t know.” He pulled at a loose thread in Davijaan’s shirt. “It doesn’t feel like my name anymore.”

“You picked it yourself.”

“But I didn’t pick it *for* myself.”

Davijaan rolled over onto his back and folded his hands over his stomach, staring determinedly at the ceiling. Part of him wished the lamp was off. They’d had so many conversations laying side by side in the dark, and he wondered if this one would be any easier if they were pressed close in a pod under the same blanket.

For a moment he missed his pod back on Kamino. Not the one in the command barracks, in the Gen-One barracks. He’d hardly ever slept in it; more often than not he’d waited until the lights cut off and then climbed in with someone else. But when he did, he slept with Didja or ‘38 or Tapper curled next to him.

After Tapper died, their whole batch had slept in their own pods. He and Kote had started sharing again in command track. Out of sheer desperation, probably. The assurance that he wasn’t alone in this, in any of it, in command track or war or life, had been the only thing that kept him going that first year. The year when he’d made his name.

“I’m still Davijaan,” he said, firm. Like he was reminding himself, too. “That hasn’t changed. I don’t think it ever will.”

“Well. You didn’t choose your name for war.”

No, he thought. *I chose it for you.*

He closed his eyes, took another breath. “Is Cody what you want to be called?”

“Eh. If it was good enough for the Jedi it’s good enough for me.”

“That was a serious question, asshole.” He flailed in his brother’s vague direction, smirking when his hand made contact with a smack and a yelp. He accepted the foot to his ribs as his due and moved on. “Didn’t you just, see it randomly on the holonet?”

Teeth flashed in the corner of his eye. “And that was a serious answer. I looked up a list of common human names, back when Kenobi kept insisting I give him something to call me that wasn’t a number or a rank. So I found a name that was my name, but not.”

He fought the urge to smile at the teasing tone that had crept into his brother’s voice. “I still think it sounds odd.”

“It sounds boring, is what it sounds. But. I think I like that. It’s just a normal name. A normal human name for a normal human.”

Davijaan swallowed hard. “Hmph,” he grumbled. “Well. I guess if it was good enough for the Jedi…”

He huffed something that might have been a laugh, and Davijaan smiled, and for a moment their room felt almost peaceful.

Eventually Davijaan rolled out of bed to turn off the lamp. He poked at his brother until he unfolded himself from against the wall and crawled under the blankets, and then climbed in beside him. After the usual sorting out of elbows and knees and who had the good pillow, they lay side by side in the silence and breathed for a time.

Davijaan stared up into the black and imagined smooth plastisteel curving over his head and around him and his brother, enclosing a space that was just theirs. Private and safe.

“I’m sorry I don’t know how to help you,” he whispered.

The blanket rustled. A hand brushed his and pulled away. “It’s alright. I don’t know how to help me either.”

“It’s not alright. It’s not. There has to be something…”

“Having things to look forward to helps. Being around people one or two at a time helps. Making things helps. Maybe other things will help.” He paused, and tensed. Davijaan could picture the way his jaw would tighten and mouth would thin, defensive.

“I’m trying. I am,” he said, firm. Like he was reminding himself, too. “I promise I am. But it’s hard. I don’t know why it’s hard, but it is. It’s so, so hard. Just breathing hurts sometimes. Everything hurts. Everything hurts and I don’t know how to make it stop.”

Davijaan shifted around and pulled his brother into his arms, holding on to him like he always had before a battle. “*Gar shuk meh kyrayc,*” he said, and tried to make his voice authoritative and threatening like ‘17’s, but just ended up pleading.

He laughed, wet and hitching. “I’m no use alive either.”

“*I* need you,” Davijaan said, feeling like his chest was being cut open, like he was falling out of the sky, like he was sinking alone into the sea. “I still need you. Why isn’t that enough?”

Cody didn't say anything.

The last of Davijaan’s control gave way, and he wept silently into his brother’s shoulder until he fell asleep.

***

When Davijaan woke up the next morning and reluctantly untangled himself from his brother and his blankets to get ready for work, he had two comm messages waiting for him. One from Loren, asking how he was.

And one from Wolffe.

Chapter 9

“You think all four of us will fit in the bed?” Cody called from the hall.

“Hm.” Davijaan eyed the narrow bed as he continued shoving crumpled clean laundry into his brother’s drawer. If he wanted it folded he could do it himself. “We could do three, but not four.”

“Three on the bed, one on the couch?” Davijaan heard the hall closet shut with a creak and a click, and soft footsteps on the stone. “But then one of us would have to sleep alone upstairs...”

“I can buy some more blankets, we can make up a pallet down here.”

Cody stuck his head in the door and frowned at the overflowing drawer. “That would work.”

“Hm.”

Davijaan didn’t want Wolffe and Fox down here. Wolffe maybe. Fox he wouldn’t mind banishing to the couch. But Cody would never agree to that, so. Extra blanket and pallet for them both.

“At least if he’s on the floor, Fox won’t bite me in his sleep,” he mumbled.

“What was that?”

“I said, even if they’re on the floor, they’ll get a good night's sleep.”

Cody transferred his frown from the drawer to Davijaan, and narrowed his eyes into a proper scowl. “You better be nice to Fox when he’s here.”

Davijaan scowled right back. “I'm always nice to Fox.”

“Mhm.”

“When have I not been nice to Fox!?”

“Well.” Cody leaned against the door frame, thoughtful. “There was that time you got into a fight in the locker room—”

“He tripped me into the bench! And laughed!”

“— and that time you smacked him over the head with a tray in the mess—”

“He kept kicking me under the table!”

“— and that time you took a wrestling match too far and both ended up with bloody noses—”

“We were seven! We didn’t know how to pull our punches!”

“— and that other time—”

Davijaan slapped a hand over his mouth.

“I’m an adult!” he hollered. “I’m mature! I can play nice with people I don’t like! You, out of everyone, know this!”

Cody danced around the room, dodging Davijaan’s attempts to tackle him with bored poise. “This whole week is just going to be me and Wolffe trying to keep you two from being alone together in the same room, isn’t it,” he sighed.

Finally giving up, Davijaan abandoned the rest of the laundry and stalked out of the room with a haughty sniff. “If Fox wants to hang on to old grudges, that’s hardly my business.”

“Davi—”

“No, no, I see what you really think of me,” he called over his shoulder as he thumped up the stairs. “All this time, my efforts to be rational and calm and friendly have been ignored. It’s only when I slip up that you notice!”

He heard Cody laughing as he emerged upstairs, and took a moment to flop down on the couch and roll his eyes extravagantly. Sure, he and Fox weren’t close, but they’d always gotten along when they needed to. Give or take a few fistfights. But that was true of most of Davijaan’s relationships with his siblings. Or, well. Minus the fistfights. But really, Fox wasn’t special. Aside from being the only one of his brothers to repeatedly provoke him to violence. Kote didn’t count.

Cody. Not Kote.

He had to change the shape in his head if he wanted to successfully change the feel in his mouth. He was working on it. He’d messaged Wolffe and said to use Cody for now, and to not ask why, and maybe someday that would feel like less of a loss. Maybe one day he’d actually get used to it. Maybe one day neither of his brother’s names would taste of bitterness and pain.

***

After the war had ended Wolffe had bought his own ship and fucked off to who knows where. Some of the 104th had gone with him, and a few of the batchmates he’d managed to reconnect with. And of course, his shadow.

During the war Davijaan and Wolffe had kept in contact more out of habit than anything else. A weekly “Are you dead?/ Not yet.” exchange had defined their relationship during the months in space. When they could they met up on leave, slipping back into their command cadet friendship like they’d never left it.

Wolffe was… comfortable to be around. He’d been the only other cadet in their command track navigation class who’d seemed excited to be there that first morning. Davijaan still

wasn’t sure who had latched on to who first.

Besides comfortable, he’d found Wolffe to be meticulous and perceptive and open with affection. He was also terrifyingly intense and effortlessly intimidating. He was a commander, and he’d earned his rank in a way Davijaan’d never felt he had. But Davijaan was used to intense, and had never let himself be intimidated by his siblings. He liked Wolffe and Wolffe liked him and that was that.

Which was why, after Wolffe let him know his crew had a job delivering cargo to the new Pantoran embassy on Orto Plutonia and would be in the system soon, Davijaan had invited him to come stay with him and Cody for a week. He wouldn’t say he missed being surrounded by the same face every day, but the novelty of being one of only two clones—humans— in the village was quickly wearing off. And maybe he had missed Wolffe.

He’d known, theoretically, that wherever Wolffe went so did Boost and Sinker, so when Wolffe asked to bring someone he hadn’t even thought before saying yes. He’d been surprised when Wolffe announced the date and time his crew would drop off him and Fox.

Briefly. Briefly surprised.

Davijaan had begrudgingly agreed to go straight from work to meet their visitors at the spaceport if Cody came along. He didn’t see the point of going all the way down there just to come all the way back, on speeders, in the snow. Wolffe and Fox would have to rent their own speeder for the trip back anyway.

Snow was creepy. It was like the whole landscape had been covered in a thick blanket and it was impossible to see what was lurking underneath. At the same time, there was no cover whatsoever. Everything was white, so everyone could see everyone from miles away. It was also too damn cold. But it had been cold before the snow, so he tried not to hold that against it.

He did like the snow at night. When the whole land glowed silver in the shine from Orto Plutonia, like the billows and waves and foam of the sea under three moons. He didn’t think he’d mind the return trip in the dark.

***

Wolffe yanked Davijaan into a tight hug before he even had his mouth open to say hello, and didn’t let go until Kote pried him away, whining about his own hug. Fox hung back next to the luggage, and exchanged a polite nod with Davijaan while their idiot brothers somehow turned a hug into a wrestling match. Kote— *Cody,* was laughing again, and the sound relaxed Davijaan enough that he offered Fox a smile.

Fox blinked, and frowned. Before he could feel properly annoyed by that, Cody extracted himself from Wolffe and tackled Fox, and then Wolffe tugged Davijaan over into that mess too, and everything was loud and happy and familiar for a time. Davijaan wondered why he hadn’t missed this more.

***

Cody was the happiest Davijaan had seen him in months. Compared to their last awkward meet up before the four of them split ways, the atmosphere when they finally got out of the snow and into the house was downright cheerful. There was still a sense that something was different between them, but enough was the same that Davijaan allowed himself to relax fully and enjoy the noise of brothers tramping all over his space and touching his stuff.

He ended up helping Cody make dinner; one of the soups Loren had shown them. When everything was ready he collected Fox and Wolffe from the bedroom and made everyone sit down around the table, bumping knees and elbows, before they dug in.

Wolffe took one bite and started choking. Davijaan was out of his chair and thumping him on the back before he registered the movement.

“Are you alright?” Cody asked, also halfway out of his chair, brow creased with concern. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing!” Wolffe caught his breath and growled. “It’s good. It’s really good! What the hell!?”

“Hey!” Davijaan took a step back and crossed his arms. “Why are you so surprised, huh? Cooking’s easy. If you have a recipe. And if you practice.”

His spoon clattered against the bowl. “Easy? *Easy?* I’ve been trying to teach myself to make porridge for months, and he says cooking is *easy!?*”

Davijaan sniffed. “Maybe you’re just bad at following simple instructions.”

“Maybe you bought fancy soup and heated it up and took the credit.”

“You watched us make it!”

“I watched you make something. I was stowing my kit when you were serving the bowls, how do I know you didn’t swap it out?”

Davijaan sputtered and flailed in mock indignation as Wolffe smugly laid out the imaginary plot to convince him they were good cooks, Cody settled back in his seat with a grin, and Fox continued to eat his soup steady bite by steady bite.

***

They stayed up late talking that first night. Wolffe and Fox were now captain and first mate of the heavy freighter, *The Pack.* They’d spent the last few months flying cargo from one end of the galaxy to the other. Their crew had dropped them off on Pantora after the Orto Plutonia job was over, and were going to meet some contacts to see if they could scrounge up a new job in the meantime. Hauling cargo didn’t make much of a profit, even with the increased demand due to galaxy-wide rebuilding efforts. Mostly because of the equivalent increase in piracy.

They would make more credits and be steadily employed if they did ‘piracy insurance’ work, but Wolffe had flatly turned down the few protection jobs they’d been offered.

“If I never have to fire a blaster again in my life it will be too soon,” he said with a laugh and a grimace, and that was the end of that.

Eventually the difference in local time and ship time made itself known. Davijaan and Wolffe set up the blanket pallets and herded their respective brothers to bed. With the lights off and the soft sounds of breathing in his ears, Davijaan fell asleep faster than he had since the night before Cody had changed his name.

***

When Davijaan blinked awake it took him a moment to remember where he was. But the blankets over him were warmer and softer than Kamino standard, and the air was cold on his face. There were only three brothers asleep beside him, not three dozen.

Or, two. Fox was awake, but didn’t make any move to get up while Davijaan dressed. He ate and left the house before the others woke.

His shift was fine. He was by no means distracted, but he was certainly not as engaged as he usually was. That didn’t matter when he was in the air; flying was flying and he could fly his route in his sleep at this point. But Loren was in the office and gave him an odd look as he clocked out.

“You look… determined,” she said, quirking a smile as she collected her coat and gloves.

“I have some errands to run before I head home. I’ve got to make something interesting for dinner.”

“Oh? You’re cooking instead of Cody?”

“Well. Cody can help, I guess.”

She laughed, and he smiled, small and to himself, and waited as she took her turn signing out.

They hadn’t spent much time together in the last tenday. After the whole Cody debacle he’d needed to deal with that and prepare for Wolffe’s visit, and she hadn’t asked him any questions when he’d told her he wouldn’t be able to meet up for a few weeks.

But he had some time, now. A few minutes at least. And he’d seen her at work and messaged her off and on, but he’d missed just talking to her and being with her, and it felt like all the happiness of the night before was still settled warm in his chest and making it easy to linger so he could walk her to her speeder.

As she shut and locked the door, he shoved his hands in his pockets and searched for something to say. A statement or a question she could respond to by either starting a real conversation or brushing it off. Whatever she wanted. “Any suggestions for how to impress someone with my cooking skills?”

She almost missed the hangar step, turning away from the door too quickly, and he caught her elbow to steady her.

“Impress someone? With cooking specifically? Um— Well, I don’t really— You don’t need —” She pulled away and tugged her bag further up her shoulder, looking at him intent and just the slightest bit confused. “I think it mostly depends on the person and what type of food they like? If you make something you know they’ll enjoy, then it doesn’t matter so much how skillfully you make it.”

“Hm.” He wasn’t sure what all Wolffe liked, but he knew he used to seek out spicy foods on leave. Sadly, skill would absolutely be the defining factor here. “I’ve got a couple opportunities, I’ll figure something out.”

He was still holding her elbow. He released it, shoved his hand in his pocket again. Neither of them took a step back.

“So…” He cleared his throat. “I’ve got to get to the grocer’s before it closes.”

“Probably a good idea.”

“You’ve got to get home, right?”

She shrugged. “I’m not in a rush.”

“Oh. Um.” He looked all around at the silver snow drifts and the stars and how tightly Loren was gripping the strap of her bag. “Would you like to come with me?”

Her hold relaxed. “Sure!”

***

In all their rush of preparation they’d forgotten to make sure they had enough food for four people. They could make what they had stretch if they needed to, but they didn’t need to. During the day Cody had messaged Davijaan a list of things Wolffe and Fox had apparently said they were interested in trying, mostly local foods like the berries for pancake sauce and the magical jerky.

The grocer's shop was yet another two-story round stone building with a domed roof, the interior of the second floor— the shop— lined with carved wood paneling. It was warm and brightly lit and smelled of dirt and blood and spices; crowded with tall aisles of wooden shelves and bulky conservator cases. Davijaan loved it. It was a space that always felt full and alive even when he was the only customer.

The grocer waved a friendly hello to both of them when they finally stumbled inside and out of the cold. The shop would be open for a while, but it was nearing what Davijaan had discovered was the typical Pantoran dinner hour, so he and Loren were almost the only people left inside. They took their time, going from aisle to aisle and checking to make sure they had everything on the list, discussing possible recipes to make and remembering the times they’d made them.

“I still giggle whenever I remember your face after that first bite of jerky,” Loren laughed as she added a package of the aforementioned ration replacement to the basket she was carrying.

“You looked so stunned. Absolutely flabbergasted.”

“Wasn’t expecting it to be good,” Davijaan grumbled, and threw in another package— this one with a little flame design to denote extra spice— and brutally snuffed out the flicker of understanding and sympathy he felt for Wolffe.

It wasn’t like he’d been best friends with whoever had made that jerky. There was an element of brotherly trust that had been betrayed.

“I thought you didn’t like spicy foods. Or is that for Cody?”

“Not for Cody.” He hesitated.

He hadn’t said anything to the Yangs about Wolffe and Fox because it hadn’t seemed important. They would visit and then they would leave and that was that. Nothing to do with work was disrupted. But a lot to do with Loren had been disrupted. She hadn’t asked, but he abruptly wanted to tell her. “Some of our brothers are visiting.”

“Really?” Her eyes widened in surprise, and then she smiled. “That’s fantastic! I’m happy you’re finally getting visitors. The twins came to see me a few times at university and it was always a wonderful time. Are they more of you and Cody’s, um, batch?”

“No, not batchmates.”

Davijaan found more and more that he didn't mind telling Loren things. About himself; about clones. She wasn't weird about any of it. She just wanted to know. And she told him things about herself and Pantora— things he wanted to know. And it was nice to tell her things just because he knew having answers would make her happy, the same way she told him things because she thought the answers would make him happy.

Maybe it was sort of like a gift, in some ways.

“Not batchmates, but still pretty close friends. I met Wolffe in command track. We took all our piloting classes together. 1010’s Wolffe’s brother.” They weren’t batchmates either, but who were brothers and who were friends was a totally separate thing from batchmates.

He checked his list— just a few more things— and turned down the end of the aisle, hitching her bulging bag further up his shoulder. It was so damn heavy, he had no idea how she managed. She fell into step next to him with another question already poised on her lips.

“Ten Ten. Huh. Wasn't your trainer also named after a number? Seventeen, or something similar? Are number names common on Kamino?”

“Um. Not really? Those aren’t names, they're designations.” He found the packages of dried grains that Cody liked to put in soups and she obligingly held out the basket so he could add two. “But ‘17 and 1010 prefer them, so.”

She didn’t retract the basket. He glanced up to find she’d tilted her head, considering him seriously with glowing gold eyes. He could almost see her adding things up in her head.

“In all those reports I read on the third systems army, it always said Cody was a nickname,” she said, slow and deliberate. “I assumed his full name was kept out for security reasons. And then when you were filling out the flimsiwork you didn't put down a surname, and I wondered... That number, that wasn't just a part of his rank?”

He blinked. “You thought it was— What?”

“I thought it was something to do with differentiating the commanders or the sections over which they had command, I didn't even…” She pursed her lips. “That was his, um, designation?”

“Designated serial number. Well.” He gestured vaguely and then had to hitch up her bag again when it slipped. “It was always just the specialization code and the last four digits on the public reports.”

Even if he didn’t mind as much, it was still odd to talk about this. He'd never had to put any aspect of being a clone into words before, because everyone he’d want to talk about it with already knew the details, because they'd lived the details.

“But, Cody isn't a nickname.” *Not anymore.* “It's his name,” he said, firm, needing this to be understood for some reason. “He chose it.”

Something flashed across her face before she carefully covered it over again with mild curiosity. He didn't think he wanted to name it.

“What about Odd Ball?”

He stiffened, even though he’d seen that question coming. “I, uh. I definitely chose it. It's… my legal name, now.”

She'd heard Cody call him Davi. He knew she'd heard, he could see the question in her eyes. But she must have seen something in his eyes too, because she didn't ask. He relaxed.

“Did… Did all of you choose your own names, then?”

“Well. Nobody else was going to name us.”

“Oh.” Her hold on the basket tightened, and she pulled it close to her chest. “I’m sorry.”

He blinked. “For what?”

She opened her mouth; closed it. “Sorry for asking all these questions.”

“Eh.” He smiled. “Comes with the job, right?”

She huffed; swung the basket to rest on one hip. “I’m trying to get to know you, silly. You have to ask questions if you want to understand something. Or someone.”

“Oh.” He could feel his face heating up. *Time to redirect.* “Cody's like that. Always asking questions. He did what he was ordered but he always wanted to know why.”

“And you didn't?”

“Knowing why they were issued wasn't going to change the orders, or the fact that I had to follow them.” Though. That was why Cody had been such a good field officer. He’d alway focused on achieving the mission objective rather than following orders to the letter.

“Even if it doesn’t change things in a practical sense, I think knowing the why of something is important. It— It changes the way you think about that something, I suppose.” She sighed, and in silent agreement they started down the aisle again.

“I really am sorry for bringing all of my clone and war related questions to you,” she said a few minutes later as he dumped bottles of cooking oil into the basket. “I need to do my own research. Proper research, not just skimming news feeds. That does come with the job. And even if I don’t technically have the job, I still have the damn degree.”

“The war’s over,” he said, rote, blank.

“Yes,” she said, grim. “But we still have to live with it.”

He kept his gaze fixed on the shelf of spices in front of him. How to tell all these red powders apart… “Still haven’t told your parents about Umbara?”

Something rustled next to him as she shifted the basket into one hand. “I want to. I think they know I haven’t told them everything.”

“Did they not get some kind of alert when you were brought to medical?” He pulled a dark red tin off the shelf. Darker meant hotter, right?

“I wasn’t brought to— to the hospital. The ship’s doctor checked me over and gave me some bacta and meal supplements and that was it. Anyway. I wasn’t the one who was hurt.”

She was the one who had cried.

Kote hadn’t been there when he woke up, but Mitts and Fiddle had. Mitts had run for the commander when Davijaan asked for him, and as soon as his shift was over Kote had brought all his flimsiwork and camped out on the medbay floor, half under the cot so as to be out of the medic’s way. He’d slept there for a week. Mitts and Fiddle and Shua and Bolts and Feather had been in and out when they’d had time, and Kote had even commed Wolffe when their off hours lined up. Davijaan hadn’t been alone for a single second of the whole rotten ordeal.

He turned around, tin in hand, and pulled Loren into a tight hug, crushing her bag between them. “Here. For the ones you missed.”

She made a sound of surprise and then leaned into him, bringing her free arm around his waist. He ignored the way his heart sped up. Her cheek was cold against his ear.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“You’re welcome.”

Eventually she pulled away, took a deep breath, and smiled at him. The kind of small smile that didn't try to cover over anything, and just made her look settled. Content. Her eyes were a bit red but he didn't think she was going to cry again.

"Here." She offered up the basket, and he placed the tin of spice on top.

"That's everything on my list."

She nodded absently, propping it on her hip again. "So, when do your brothers arrive?"

"Last night."

"Last—" The settled smile vanished. "They're already here?"

"Yes."

"Odd Ball!" She gaped at him, aghast. "You're working tomorrow!"

"Yes? Was I supposed to tell your parents? It's not going to affect my ability to fly."

"You didn't want to take the week off to spend with them? You could have used your vacation time!"

"Oh." Was that what that was for? He already only worked three days out of every five. He wasn't stressed enough to think longingly of taking leave.

Loren kept right on talking, brow creased. "You might have to come in tomorrow. It's short notice, but Ma can reschedule next week's flights, but tomorrow would be tricky, so if you don't mind—"

"What are you—"

"How long are they here for?"

"Um. Four more days."

"Work tomorrow, off the next two days, so then it would just be the one day we need to reschedule, perfect!"

"I can work! You don't need to do that! It's only a seven hour shift!"

"And it's only one extra day off! Paid, if you do your flimsiwork tomorrow!"

He opened his mouth to protest, and then thought better of it. He'd known, theoretically, that he had paid time off available. He'd just never put thought into what he would use it for.

"I guess this is as good a reason as any," he mumbled. "Alright, alright. I'll talk to your parents and get that figured out."

She nodded once, sharp and satisfied, and he rolled his eyes.

They made their way to the counter, exchanged basket for bag, and Davijaan paid for his groceries with his own money.

At the bottom of the wide steps they lingered, silent, heads tilted back to look at the sky. The streetlights were few and intentionally dim, and the galaxy spread out sparking above them. It was more familiar like this— broad and black and studded with stars— but terrifying. The vastness of the blue sky was finite. There was a horizon. Space just went on and on and never came to an end.

He thought he would miss flying in space, but he didn't. If he had to fly alone, he wanted it to be through a sky and not a void.

He watched his breath curl into steam in the air and said, "If you wanted to meet them, you could. My brothers. Only if you want to. And I guess I'd have to ask them first, but—"

She nudged him with a shoulder. "Of course I want to meet them. Just let me know when you're ready."

"I will."

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Davijaan doused one serving of his casserole with the red powder, and Wolffe wept straight through dinner. He was very pleased with himself. Cody announced at the end of the meal that he would be taking over the cooking for the rest of the visit.

***

As he washed the dishes— Wolffe helpfully drying, Fox sprawled on the couch being useless, and Cody hiding from bright lights in the bedroom— Davijaan cleared his throat and announced, "Day after tomorrow, you guys are going to meet Loren."

Wolffe paused. "Loren?"

"What the hell is a loren?" said the couch.

"*She* is… my friend."

"She's the Pantoran lady with the nice hands!" Cody shouted from downstairs.

"Shut *up* about the hands! And I swear if one of you says some shit like that in front of her —"

"Wait wait wait." Wolffe put the plate and cloth down. "The same lady? Like the one from Umbara? You found her again? Is that why you moved all the way out here?"

"*No*, I moved here— I met her— I work for her parents, so—"

"Pretty much," said the stairwell.

“You were *with me* when I decided to move! You know it had nothing to do with her!”

“You didn’t tell me shit about *why,* you just said you wanted to, and I know you were pretty shocked when you ran into her, but, really Davi, did you think—”

Davijaan had slammed the sink off and was halfway to the stairs when Fox interrupted the fratricide with, “What’s she like?”

He almost said “the sky” before his brain caught up with his mouth. “Um. She’s nice? Friendly? Nosy, so be prepared to be asked way too many questions. Stubborn. Calm under pressure, but gets worked up easy over little things. Talkative. Too smart to hide things from. Gets stuck on details. Good memory. Considerate. Competitive. A sore loser.”

Wolffe stared. He shrugged. “You should see her try to cheat at sabacc. She's miserable at it.”

“You’ve watched her play sabacc?”

“I’ve beat her at sabacc. Many, many times.”

Wolffe reeled back like he’d been struck. “You hate cards.”

“Yes. And?”

“You played cards with her.”

“Yes? It was something to do.”

“What the fuck, Davi.”

“I don’t mind cards!” He rolled his eyes. “They’re just not my favorite. We do a ton of other stuff. We go hiking and we cook and we just, talk mostly.”

“I have to meet Loren,” Wolffe declared.

He crossed his arms over his chest and glared. “You’re going to meet her the day after tomorrow whether you want to or not, and you’re going to like her!”

A slow, toothy grin spread over Wolffe’s face. “Sir, yes sir!” he snapped out a crisp salute.

Davijaan threw his hands up in exasperation and went back to the dishes.

Chapter 10

The morning of Loren's visit, Davijaan was possibly probably sort of terrified.

He hadn't had a chance to *really* freak out when she'd met Cody, because it all happened so fast. Somehow it had worked out, because Loren was friendly by nature and Cody was polite by default. But Wolffe and Fox were not Cody. Wolffe could be polite when he wanted to be, but he didn't often want to be, and Fox had never made the effort in all the years Davijaan had known him.

This was going to be a disaster.

"Will you have some faith in us?" Wolffe grumbled as he dragged Davijaan from where he was pacing in the kitchen to the couch and forced him to sit down and breathe. "We know how to make nice with civilians."

"But she's not a regular civilian!" he snapped. "She's— She's different. And if you make her uncomfortable or upset or—"

"Alright, fine, don't have faith in us! Have faith in her! If she's really as stubborn and understanding as you said I don't think she's going to run screaming if we tease her a bit."

"Do *not*—"

"I'm not planning to! I'm just saying—"

"Something's burning," Fox said mildly from his seat at the table.

"Cody!" Davijaan shot to his feet. "Cody, get up here! Your thing is burning!"

"So get it out of the oven," echoed from the stairwell.

"You put it in, you get it out!"

"I'm busy!"

"Busy with what!? What's more important than—"

"Can't you just—"

"Oh for the love of—" Wolffe marched over and shut the oven off with a snarl. "There. Heat's off. Now how do I get it out?"

Davijaan sank back down onto the couch and half listened as Cody rattled off more directions from the stairs, accompanied by some clattering noises that implied he was in fact actually busy, and tried not to think.

Whatever his brothers did, however Loren reacted— it was out of his hands. It would either be a disaster, or it wouldn't. The only thing he could do at this point was brace himself.

***

Loren arrived almost exactly on time, and Wolffe stationed himself at the window to watch her walk up the steps.

"Huh. She's really pretty," he said, face smushed against the gap in the shutters. "Why didn't you tell us she was pretty?"

"Was that relevant?"

"I would have liked to have been informed, yes."

Davijaan yanked him away by the collar as Loren knocked, but Wolffe started smacking at him and he was forced to strike back, and then properly defend himself as Wolffe tried to put him in a chokehold. The sound of someone muffling a giggle broke through the haze of brotherly love and he looked up to realize Fox of all people had opened the door and Loren was standing next to the desk with one hand over her mouth, eyes glowing and cheeks flushed.

And then he lost concentration enough for Wolffe to succeed in putting him in a chokehold, and had to stand there and suffocate while Fox took her coat like she was some fancy senator and Wolffe hollered— "Hello, ma'am! Sorry you had to see this, but my idiot brother forgot to tell us how beautiful you are and that was a mistake that deserved retribution!"

Loren tipped her head back and laughed.

"You show him, Wolffe!" rang out from the stairwell, and Davijaan wondered if dying was really all that terrible.

When she calmed down, Loren asked, "Would you please let my friend go?" sweet and smiling. Wolffe stiffened momentarily and then released him. Davijaan stumbled away, trying not to wheeze audibly.

She turned her smile on him, and it softened. "Hi, Odd Ball."

"Hello." He was still on edge, but he found himself relaxing enough to smile in return, small and maybe a bit hesitant. "Um. This is Wolffe—" he elbowed the asshole sharply in the side "— and that's 1010."

"Hello Wolffe, and 1010. It's lovely to meet you both! I'm Loren."

Fox offered her a nod, but Wolffe stepped forward and took her hand and shook it. "Pleasure's all mine, Miss Yang. Odd Ball told us all about you and your family. Any friend of his is a friend of mine."

"I'm just glad to know he has other friends. And please, call me Loren."

Wolffe’s eyebrow went up and then down in quick succession, but before he could say anything Cody came thumping up the stairs, pushing his overgrown hair back and getting grease all over his forehead in the process. He wiped the rest of the mess off on his shirt and grinned at Loren, relaxed and happy and hopefully momentarily sane enough to balance out whatever was wrong with Wolffe.

“You’re here! I made you something.”

“And I brought you something!” She dug around in her bag and pulled out a small red container. “Or, well. Pa sent me over with something.”

Cody led Loren into the kitchen to inspect whatever it was he’d made— some kind of sweetbread, it was always bread with Cody— and Davijaan and Wolffe and Fox followed a few feet behind.

Wolffe elbowed Davijaan in the side. “Well, what do you know,” he muttered. “She hasn’t run screaming yet.”

The amount of self control Davijaan exerted to keep from full-body tackling Wolffe to the floor would have made ‘17 proud.

Cody carefully dumped the steaming loaf of bread out of the pan and onto the counter as Loren opened her container of fruit spread and dug around in the conservator for the butter. Davijaan slid up to his brother and tugged at his dusty shirt. “What the hell were you doing?” he whispered.

Cody kept his gaze on the bread as he sliced it. “Cleaning my armor.”

“Why. Were you cleaning your armor.”

“I don't know! I had the energy to do it, so I did it! Don't ask me why I do things, I don't know anymore.”

Davijaan glared into the middle distance. “I hate this.”

“Yes, well. So do I.”

Cody placed the coveted end slice into Davijaan’s bare hands, and Loren sighed and pulled a stack of plates out of the cupboard. Wordlessly, she took his bread and buttered it and gave it back to him on a plate, and then collected her own slice and steered him over to the couch.

“They’re terrible brothers,” Davijaan grumbled, slumping into the cushions with his plate balanced on his lap. “The absolute worst.”

Loren patted his arm sympathetically and took a bite of her fruit spread smothered bread.

Wolffe was still at the table, doggedly picking all the nuts out of his slice while Cody complained that if he didn’t like nuts he should have said something before they were added to the batter, but Fox dragged a chair over and settled across from the couch. He ate steadily,

pretending he wasn't paying any attention to the rest of them at all. But Davijaan could see his gaze flicking around the room, and it always landed on Loren.

Fox hadn't tried to talk to him yet. He spoke to Davijaan when they were all in a group, and asked him to pass something or scoot over or explain how the fresher controls worked. It was starting to make him nervous.

Loren swallowed her bite and said, thoughtful, "You know, sometimes you just have to take the bad with the good."

"What good? There is no *good,* it's all *bad,* and I can't believe I have to put up with—"

"So, *Loren,"* Fox interrupted, not quite loud enough to cut off the bickering from the kitchen. "What do you get out of this, exactly?"

She froze, slice of bread hovering in the air in front of her mouth. Davijaan stiffened and took in a sharp breath, but she squeezed his arm in warning— and he knew this was going to happen, Fox had been so quiet, he *knew* he was just waiting for an opportunity to be a bastard — but he sat back and watched as she set the bread down and straightened up and smiled, eyes flashing. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Fox looked utterly at ease, almost bored, sitting in the hard wooden chair like it was a throne. "What do you get out of this?"

"I heard you, but I'm afraid I don't understand. Get out of what?"

"This." He waved vaguely at the two of them, sitting pressed against each other on the couch. "Your friendship, or whatever. I have a pretty good idea what he gets out of it, but what's in it for you?"

"Usually what one gets out of a friendship is friendship," she said, prim, "and Odd Ball has been a very good friend to me."

"He works for your parents."

Her smile thinned. "I didn't get him his job, if that's what you're worried about. He was all but hired before my parents found out I knew him."

"Uhuh."

"Technically, *I* don't work for my parents. I help out so I have something to do while I look for a new job in my own field. I have no influence over how their business is run."

The kitchen was silent. Davijaan looked over to find Wolffe and Cody watching the proceedings, tense, but not poised to jump in and break it up. He met Wolffe's eyes and silently begged for help.

Fox always fought dirty. With words and with fists. He was brutal and ruthless and never pulled his punches. Almost never. If this got out of hand…

Wolffe slowly shook his head. Davijaan grit his teeth and focused back on Fox and Loren, both sizing each other up and neither willing to back down.

“And what field is that?”

“Journalism. I’m a reporter.”

“Really?” Fox raised an eyebrow, words dripping disdain. “Surely there’s nothing newsworthy happening in this part of the galaxy.”

“You’d be surprised. I worked for CorNN during the war, and the slower pace of local planetary news is actually quite nice.”

“CorNN?” He stilled; eyes narrowed. “You're L. M. Yang.”

“I am.” Loren tilted her head, considering. “I take it, you know of me?”

“I know you weren't being paid off by a senator, which is more than I can say for most of your editing team.”

Her polite smile froze. “You know,” she said through gritted teeth. “I wish I could say I was surprised.”

“I also know you bothered a few of my— a few CG troopers about interviews or some shit.”

At that her failing smile vanished completely, and her brow creased with concern. “You were stationed on Coruscant?”

Fox’s face was smooth and blank as stone. “I was.”

She folded her hands in her lap, defensiveness replaced with contrition. “If you were someone I asked for an interview, I apologize. I wasn’t fully aware of the risk to either you or myself at the time.”

He leaned back in his chair, face still closed off but body language openly skeptical.

“She’s alright, *vod,*” said Kote from the kitchen, soft but with the edge of an order. Fox didn’t relax, but his expression shifted from blank to mildly annoyed. Davijaan tried not to breathe an audible sigh of relief.

“Hmph. Well. If Cody vouches for you, I guess.”

Davijaan crossed his arms over his chest. *“I* vouch for her.”

“Your opinion doesn't mean shit.”

“Stars, can you two not!” Wolffe threw himself down on the couch next to Davijaan, overturning his delicately balanced plate. “I swear, every time you’re in a room together. Every time.”

“My ma taught me if I can’t find anything nice to say, I shouldn’t say anything at all,” Loren added, looking pointedly at Fox.

“Her Ma’s scary,” said Davijaan, busy picking crumbs off his pants. “I would listen if I were you.”

Loren gasped. “My ma is a sweet lady!”

“You say that because you don't work for her.”

“She has been nothing but kind—”

“She's intimidating! She's an excellent pilot, and—”

“So are you! That’s the silliest excuse to be intimidated I've ever heard!”

He felt his face flush, and rolled his eyes. Shoved a bite of half-crumbled bread in his mouth so he wouldn’t have to respond. When he looked away from Loren he found Wolffe studying him intently. Fox looked increasingly disturbed.

“What?” Davijaan asked.

Wolffe cleared his throat. “You two go flying a lot? What’s your ship model? How’s it handle?”

“That’s right!” Loren leaned forward to peer around him. “Odd Ball said you were a pilot too.”

“Owner and captain of *The Pack,* my pride and joy! She’s a freighter, Brayl-class, bought her used a few months ago.”

“Glimmer ’s a G9 Rigger,” he said, swallowing his bite. “Perfect for the mountains.”

Wolffe snorted. “Isn’t that the same kind of monstrosity Skywalker had?”

“Oh, yes. But she’s been babied by her mechanic, she’s never been in as bad a shape as that poor hunk of metal.”

Cody dragged a chair over and settled next to Fox, and they talked quietly and ate their bread while Davijaan and Wolffe and Loren discussed ships and ship maintenance and the perils of flying over the mountains, and it was the happiest Davijaan remembered being since the end of the war.

***

When Loren finally gathered her coat and bag to leave, saying she was expected for dinner at home, Davijaan walked her out to her speeder amid a chorus of goodbyes from inside. She gave him a quick hug that he returned the best he could, and then he watched as she disappeared around the corner.

When he made his way back up to the porch Fox was leaning against the railing, blocking his way to the door, looking at him with utter disgust. “A reporter? Really?”

He forced himself to take a deep breath and release the tension from his body. He’d gotten into many a fight with Fox and it had never ended well for either of them, and on the stairs in the snow was just asking for a broken neck. “What's so bad about reporters?”

“Spoken like a clone who’s only met one.” Fox grimaced. “At least she was smart enough to get off Coruscant when she could.”

“She's tough. She would have been fine.”

“She's an idealist. She would have been corrupted or killed in another year.”

Davijaan snarled and shouldered roughly past him to the door. “Stop with the paranoid banthashit. Not all civilians are out to kill each other. Or you.”

“It wouldn't have been direct. But.” Davijaan’s hand stilled on the door controls. “Why do you think a relatively inexperienced reporter was sent right into the heart of a volatile political situation like Umbara?”

Davijaan went cold, his persistent unease over why her family hadn’t been alerted when she was captured or rescued sinking low in his stomach.

He opened the door and stalked inside without another word.

***

When he made his way into the kitchen for another slice of bread, Wolffe slid up beside him and nudged his shoulder and grinned and said, “She didn’t even scream a little bit!”

Davijaan gave in to his destructive impulses and bowled him over with prejudice.

***

Having extra time off work was nice in theory, but Davijaan wasn’t used to having nothing to do. Even his regularly-scheduled off days could be hard to get through unless he planned something in advance.

Having brothers visiting didn’t make much of a difference, because none of them were used to having hours and hours of unstructured time to spend together. Leave was different; leave was mostly about exploring Coruscant. There was plenty to explore in the mountains, but Davijaan hadn’t missed hiking in the cold and he wasn’t eager to introduce the concept to Wolffe. Instead, the day after Loren’s visit, he took Wolffe up to see *Glimmer.*

It was the Yang family’s collective off day, so the hangar was all closed down, but they stood at the small window and took turns peering inside— Wolffe exclaiming about how well kept she was for such an old model and Davijaan listing off the specs and recounting some of the more interesting incidents he’d gotten into with her. Storms over the mountains were no joke, even if they weren’t the most difficult conditions he’d flown through.

Eventually standing in the snow talking about ships got boring, and they made their way back to the house. It was close to midday, and meals had quickly become an activity that could be dragged out to fill time rather than a simple necessity. Davijaan hoped Cody hadn't gotten anything started yet.

He pounded up the stairs and flung the door open, and froze.

Fox was laying on the couch, eyes closed, head resting in Cody's lap while Cody read and absently stroked his hair. At the sound of the door he glanced up from his datapad and blinked. Davijaan opened his mouth— probably to scream in horror— and Wolffe promptly slapped a hand over it and dragged him right back out the door.

"Leave them be," he hissed, tossing Davijaan against the railing and shutting the door softly. "He can't sleep anymore unless someone else is keeping watch. If you wake him up, I'll gut you."

"I wasn't trying to! I just wasn't expecting—"

"Whatever." Wolffe stalked down the stairs and towards the speeder shed. "You said you and Loren eat in town sometimes. Where are we headed?"

And Davijaan reminded himself that he liked spending time with Wolffe, and that Cody and Fox had been friends just as long as he and Wolffe had, and that restaurant food was actually really nice and eating out was an excellent time filler, and followed.

***

"I can read that for you, if you want."

Wolffe scowled, but handed over the menu without a word.

Wolffe was just exactly as literate as all the clones. He wouldn't be alive right now if he wasn't. But he was weirdly picky when it came to fonts. He hated to read anything handwritten, or where the letters had flourishes. It wasn't that he couldn't, he just squinted and complained the whole time until someone gave in and offered to read it for him. Davijaan would have said it was a wiring issue in his eye, but even on Kamino he'd had trouble with the scraps of handwriting they'd come across.

He laid the menu out flat on the table and read the name of each dish out loud, pausing to point out what picture went with what. He hadn't tried many of them, but he did suggest Wolffe steer clear of the purple soup.

After they placed their orders— Wolffe some kind of fried vegetables and Davijaan the fish dumplings he usually got— Wolffe leaned back and folded his hands on the table and met Davijaan's eyes with a casual air.

"So. Why didn't you tell me about Loren?"

He shrugged. "Didn't seem… necessary."

Wolffe's eye twitched. "You mean to say, the lady you spent a week locked up in a cell with and then wouldn't shut up about when you were rescued just happened to live in the village you moved to, and you got a job at her family's business, and spent enough time around her to consider her a friend, and you didn't think that was significant enough to tell me?"

Davijaan took a long sip of his water. "Maybe I didn't tell you because I knew you'd be weird about it."

"You're the one who's being weird about it! You have a bad habit of not telling people shit they need to know and then getting all worked up when they call you out for it, and honestly it's starting to piss me off."

"I do tell people shit they need to know! What I don't do is tell everyone everything about my life."

"And you don't think I need to know about at least *some* of what's happening in your life?"

"I think that my relationship with Loren isn't going to affect my relationship with you in any way whatsoever, and therefore it's none of your business."

Wolffe leaned back in his seat with his arms crossed over his chest, gaze flat and annoyed. "First of all, don't look me in the eye when you lie like that, it's disconcerting. Second of all, you're a coward who can't put up with some gentle, loving teasing over—"

"No, stop right there!" He flailed in a vaguely threatening manner. "Cody hasn't shut up about it! Now *you* won't shut up about it!" He groaned. "If she ever finds out I said that she's going to think I have some kind of fetish."

"Do you?"

Davijaan choked on his water and came up sputtering. Wolffe regarded him with a smirk. "I mean, that's all you said for a half hour. Just kept asking for the lady with the nice hands."

He laid his head on the table and wished sincerely that damn Colonel had killed him. "This is why I don't do spice," he mumbled into the sticky wood.

"Oh, come on. You've only been high, what, twice? On *pain meds?"*

"It wasn't just from the meds." *Thanks, Yikes, for letting me stay awake and watch you re-break four of my fingers.* "Crying over dumb jokes and going on and on about some lady I barely knew has not encouraged me to experiment."

"Some lady who was kind to you."

"No, she… she just…" He sat back in his seat, gripped his glass tight and felt the condensation trickle down over the back of his wrist. "Her hands were cold. And. It was a distraction. From…"

"From the pain?"

He shrugged. Took a sip of water.

“Hm.” Wolf raised an eyebrow, but didn’t push.

They sat in silence until their food arrived, and then Wolffe politely waited until Davijaan had taken his first bite to ask— “So. When are you going to tell her you’re sweet on her?”

He didn’t choke to death, but it was a near thing. “Who said I was sweet on her!?”

“Oh, you didn’t have to say anything. I’m not blind yet.”

He cringed. “Was it… obvious?”

“Well. Probably not to her.”

“Good.” He refrained from breathing a sigh of relief, and poked at his pickled vegetables. “She doesn’t need to know.”

“What?”

“Or. There’s not really a point in telling her?”

“No no, explain yourself. *What?”*

Davijaan looked up from his plate, surprised. “You heard her. She’s looking for a new job. She wants to move to a city, make it big. She… She wants her work to matter. And I hate to say it, but Fox is right. Not many stories that matter out here. So.” He shrugged. “In another few months she’ll leave. And you know I’ve always been out of sight, out of mind when it comes to this stuff. Not really a point in telling her about feelings that are just going to fade.”

Wolffe stared at him, face completely blank, and then let his head fall back against the seat with a thunk. “Fuck. You’re hopeless.”

“Hey, I know how to flirt! I know how to impress people! I am choosing not to because— Because it feels wrong!” He tried to keep his voice down, sincerely hoping the couple at the table next to them were too wrapped up in each other to pay attention to their surroundings, but he was starting to get frustrated.

“It’s not like there is anywhere this— *this* could go. If she was interested in anything other than friendship she would have said something. And even if she was interested, I’m not going to hook up with her once and then never speak to her again. I’d like her to at least be able to look me in the eye when she comes back to visit her family.”

“Fucking *stars.”* Wolffe smacked the table. “You are *hopeless.”* He sat up properly and looked him dead in the face, the pupil of his false eye visibly narrowing. “Davijaan. Loren adores you.”

His mind went totally blank for almost ten seconds. “She— what!? No! She’s not— She can’t — Cody would have said something!”

“Kote hasn’t noticed a damn thing, because he’s *Kote.”*

“Whatever. That doesn’t make any sense. Why would she—”

“Why does anybody like anyone! Stars if I know. The fact is, you’re sweet on her, she’s sweet on you, and you’re both idiots for not saying anything. This is the kind of shit you have to tell people, Davi!”

He scowled. “What do you know about it, eh?”

“I know there are plenty of places ‘this’ could go, *if you tell her how you feel.”* Wolffe shook a threatening finger in his face. “And I’m not talking about one time sex, I’m talking about an actual relationship.”

“It’s not like you’ve ever—”

“Oh, shut up. You know how long it took me to convince Fox I wanted to be his friend? Way too fucking long. But the only reason it worked was because I looked him in the eye and said, ‘I want to be your friend.’ And in an uncharacteristic lapse in paranoia, he believed me. You two are already friends, right? That’s the hard part done and over with.” He raised a considering eyebrow. “You were never friends with anyone you were sweet on before. That has to mean something.”

“Maybe it does mean something.” Davijaan’s gaze slid from Wolffe’s face to the expanse of white in the window. “But she’s leaving. And I don’t know how much of— of *this* is just because we see each other almost every day. We’re friends, yes. But ignoring other feelings — that I already know aren't going to last— how long is our friendship going to last?”

“I think it’ll last as long as you want it to. It’s not like we saw each other every day during the war, and here we are.”

“But we stayed in contact because of the war.”

I needed you, he didn’t say, but he thought from the way Wolffe’s expression tightened that he heard it anyway.

“Once we don’t see each other anymore—” *once we don’t need each other anymore* “— how do I know we won’t forget about each other?”

Wolffe let those words hang in the air; stared at Davijaan staring out the window. Finally he sighed, and said, “You know, Plo told me… He told me.” He cleared his throat.

“He could sense when it was all too much, and he’d come find me and Boost and Sinker and sit us down and meditate with us, and talk to us about— everything. And he told me there was a time to let go, but also a time to hold on.”

Davijaan had known Wolffe and his general were close, but even if Wolffe talked about Plo Koon often he didn’t talk about their relationship much. He used to think it was out of consideration for other commanders who weren’t close with their Jedi, but now he wondered if it was because whatever was between them was too personal to share.

“Sounds like typical Jedi banthashit.

Wolffe’s lip twitched. “Maybe. But he explained it as, not living in anticipation of loss? You can’t wake up every morning wondering who’s going to die that day. You just can’t. So you hold on tight to the people you love, and don’t let go until your very last second of time is up.”

Davijaan’s food had gone cold. He shifted his gaze from the window down to the fish dumplings that had been his favorite since the day Loren had suggested them. “General Koon’s the one who helped you get in contact with your batch?”

“Yes.”

“Hm.”

“I told him about you too, you know. About pilot training. Told him about that time the sim machine broke.”

“Your fault.”

“You can’t prove anything.”

A smile flickered across his face, and died. “Isn’t it easier… to forget?”

Wolffe turned his glass slowly in his hand, eyes locked on Davijaan. “Have you forgotten your batch?”

He said nothing.

“Did you forget Loren, before?”

He thought of the flash of sky-blue disappearing down the dark stone hall; thought of the way blue had seemed to catch in the corner of his eye for months afterwards. He thought of the excitement he felt the first time Loren had messaged him— *I hope we can meet up again when I come back.*

He swallowed. “No.”

“Maybe you’ll forget each other. But maybe you won’t.” Wolffe jabbed his fork at Davijaan’s nose. “A maybe is not a certainty, idiot. Forget about maybes. Focus on what is happening right in front of your damn face. You’re friends, and you’re sweet on each other, and that matters. Don’t you dare let go of her before your time is up.”

Chapter 11

Fox was awake and talking quietly with Cody when they got back from town. Davijaan had a hard time looking at him when Wolffe yanked him down onto the couch to join the conversation. Which was per usual, and went unremarked upon.

The four of them got through the rest of the day sitting around in the living room and comparing notes on how their lives had changed since the war ended— food and clothes and schedules and living conditions and work. When he could laugh and grumble about them with his brothers all those changes seemed less overwhelming.

***

The won't-look-at-Fox thing carried over into the next day. It was Davijaan's first ever paid day off from work, so Cody was being weird and made him pancakes for breakfast with the rest of Loren's fruit spread stuff. It was actually pretty nice at first, but then Davijaan ignored Fox when he asked for someone to pass along the pancake plate, and Wolffe picked up on the fact that this wasn't a normal won't-look-at-Fox mood. Because of course he did. Because Davijaan wasn't allowed to feel things about people without telling Wolffe, apparently.

So when Wolffe cornered him in the kitchen after breakfast— after Cody had gone downstairs and Fox had stepped outside— and shoved a finger in his face and demanded: "You need to be nice to Fox." Davijaan felt a hot little burst of anger in his chest and had to breathe for a second to keep from yelling. And that made him more angry, because he used to have better control than this, and that made him forcibly shut down all of his loud emotional responses until he could deal with them in private.

"Fox has plenty of people being nice to him," he said, smacking Wolffe's hand away, flat and cold and ready to shoulder past him to the other side of the room. "I think what he needs is someone who actually responds to his shit appropriately."

"Cody and I are—"

"Ignoring it. Do you think I've forgotten how you two just sat there and let him conduct his little interrogation the other day?"

"He had to get it out of his system." Wolffe heaved a sigh. "Look, we were watching. If it had gotten out of hand we would have done something. And if she's going to stick around she'll have to learn how to put up with him. She did a pretty good job for her first time, in my opinion."

"First of all, you have no idea if she's going to stick around, so don't even try to distract me with that," he spat. "Second of all, she *shouldn't* have to learn to put up with him! Just because Fox doesn't trust civilians as far as he can throw them doesn't give him the right to treat *my friend* like some kind of criminal!"

Wolffe's eyes narrowed. "Working on Coruscant fucked him up."

“More than he was already fucked up?”

“Davi—”

“No!” He took a deep breath and gripped the counter and lowered his voice. Control. He was in control. “I've known Fox just as long as you and Kote. Maybe I don’t voluntarily spend time with him, but I know him. I know what he's like. I know what he's capable of. Stop making excuses for him. Working on Coruscant had nothing to do with it, he would have been like this no matter where he was stationed. Because he’s always been like this.”

“People change.”

His grip tightened. “For the better, or for the worse?”

Wolffe just shook his head. Davijaan regarded him silently, mouth set in a thin line. “When we were cadets, whenever he hurt me, all you two ever did was check the both of us for blood, and then shrug it off. That hasn’t changed, apparently.”

“Fox never tried to hurt you.”

“I have the scars that say otherwise.”

Wolffe glared, and shoved his finger right back into Davijaan’s face. “You two never gave each other anything more than superficial cuts and bruises. You think you know so much about him, and you don’t even understand why he went after you so often.”

“He was just jealous—”

“No, *you* were jealous. Don’t even try to pretend otherwise. And you’re still jealous! Seven years, and you’re still jealous, and you can’t look past that for long enough to wonder why Fox was scared of you!”

Davijaan blinked. “What?”

“You heard me!”

He sputtered and threw his hands up, momentarily shocked out of his anger. “That doesn’t make any sense!”

Wolffe shoved him in the chest. “Go talk to him.”

“No!”

“Yes! I’m tired of having to mediate between you two. It’s exhausting, and it’s stupid.” Punctuating each word with a stabby finger, he snarled— “Go. Talk. To. Fox.”

Davijaan took a stumbling step back and towards the door. “What am I supposed to say!?”

“Hello, good morning, I’m sorry for being an ass to you for the last seven years.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

Wolffe crossed his arms over his chest and planted his feet, firm and foreboding and furious. Davijaan gave up. He stalked over to the couch and grabbed his jacket, and slammed the door behind him.

Fox was standing at the porch railing, studying the white hills. He flinched when the door slammed. If Davijaan hadn’t been looking for a reaction he would have missed it.

“Odd Ball.”

“... Fox.”

He shrugged his jacket on and took a few cautious steps to stand even with the man, just out of arm’s reach. Fox didn’t so much as glance at him, but Davijaan snuck a proper look at his face for the first time in probably a full day.

Fox had come out of the war paranoid, withdrawn, and untouched. Except for his hands, which had been a mess of scabs and scrapes since Davijaan had met him, and had only gotten worse with time. His knuckles were so scarred over they were the raw pink of flesh.

“So.” Fox brushed a hand over the railing, and a handful of glittering white drifted down. “This is snow.”

“That’s snow.”

“Hm.”

They stood in silence for… a while. Even with Wolffe’s blunt advice he had no idea what he was supposed to say. Fox certainly wasn’t in a hurry to make this easy for him.

He shuffled his feet. Sighed. Shoved his hands in his pockets. He chanced a glance over his shoulder and locked eyes with Wolffe, standing at the window shaking his fist. Davijaan whipped his head back around.

“He’s at the window, isn’t he?” Fox said.

Davijaan scowled and reached out to shove some more snow off the railing. It was very satisfying. “Snow’s annoying, but it’s pretty fun to play with.” A plan of attack forming, he scooped up a handful of the stuff and started shaping it the way Loren had shown him.

“Play with?” Fox eyed his hands with justified suspicion.

“Like this.”

Davijaan ducked forward and shoved the packed ball of snow into Fox’s face as hard as he could, and then without waiting to see the results turned on his heel and all but fell down the steps. He could hear Fox swearing and thundering after him. He had to hold in a few

hysterical giggles as the adrenaline hit and he remembered just how much he didn't like running from certain doom.

He tripped on the very last step and landed face first in about three feet of wet snow. He had two seconds to take a breath before Fox's knees hit his ribs and drove all the air right back out. He coughed and tried not to inhale snow as Fox settled his weight over his shoulders and ground his face into the stuff. He flailed and yelled and kicked. Eventually the weight lessened, and finally Fox grabbed his collar and yanked him around and sat on his chest.

"Why did you do that," he hissed, cheek rubbed red and raw from Davijaan's not-very-thought-out handful of snow.

"Payback," he wheezed. "And because for about three seconds I thought it would be funny."

Fox's eyes narrowed. He studied Davijaan's face, suspicious, his hold on his collar gradually relaxing until he slid off his chest and stood. He hesitated, and then offered Davijaan a hand up.

Davijaan did the only thing he could reasonably be expected to, and took it. And then yanked Fox right back down. He managed to flip their positions, straddling Fox's chest with his knees pinning his arms.

He wouldn't say he was good at hand to hand, but he hadn't been sparring with Kote for eleven years for nothing. He very firmly shut up the voice in his head telling him that the only reason he'd managed to catch *Fox* off guard long enough to pin him was because Fox didn't read him as a threat.

"You bastard." Fox squirmed. Davijaan leaned more weight on his arms. "This stuff's cold!"

"I'm aware," he said, wiping half-melted sludge off his face. "Payback, remember?"

Fox went suddenly and terribly still. Davijaan blinked at him for a few seconds and then carefully stood, walked a few feet away, and sat down.

Fox sat up abruptly, and started breathing again. Davijaan looked away and ran his hands through the snow in silence. It had been sort of trampled down here at the base of the steps, and also in front of the speeder shed, but for the most part the speeder only kicked up the top layer, so the whole rest of the yard and mountainside was smooth and untouched.

The other day at work he'd expressed his surprise over just how much damn snow there was, and Loren had burst out laughing, and told him to just wait. He'd found the whole interaction sort of terrifying.

"Hey." He flicked snow in Fox's general direction. "Why did you always pull your punches?"

Fox's head snapped up, shocked. "What."

"After that time you gave me a bloody nose. Whenever we fought, when we were cadets, you always pulled your punches. Still pisses me off thinking about it."

There had been a pattern to their fights. Fox would bait and poke until Davijaan had had enough, and threw a punch. Then Fox would let him flail for a few seconds before efficiently shutting him down and inflicting pain in some way that wouldn't do permanent damage.

It had always felt like being toyed with. Like a predator playing with it's food. Davijaan's nose had healed without a mark, but his arms were littered with little pale fingernail scars. They were dumb and petty and represented a kind of helplessness he did his best not to think about.

Fox looked away. Shrugged. "Kote got mad. Told me not to hurt you like that again. Wasn't sure what he would do to me if I didn't listen."

Davijaan raised an eyebrow. After the broken nose incident— not the first of their brawls, but one of the earliest— Kote had dragged him aside and yelled at him about getting into pointless fights and hurting each other for no reason.

"You're not each other's enemy," he'd said. *"So stop acting like it."*

Apparently Fox hadn't gotten that part of the lecture.

"So why didn't you?"

"Why didn't I *what?"*

"Listen!"

Fox scoffed. "Didn't break your nose again, did I?"

"Why couldn't you ever leave me the fuck *alone!"* he shouted, lurching to his knees, flinging his arms wide, ignoring how good it felt to finally say this. "Even if you *didn't* go all out and beat me to a pulp, it was like you had to prove that you *could!"*

Fox drew into himself, shoulders hunched and knees pulled to his chest. "I didn't want you to hurt me."

For the second time that morning Davijaan was shocked into silence. He gaped at Fox for a solid thirty seconds before he regained enough breath to rasp, "Hurt you!? Hurt *you?"*

"It was pretty obvious you didn't like me. I got tired of waiting for you to do something."

"What the hell were you expecting me to do!?"

"Turn Kote against me," Fox answered without hesitation. "Convince him I was a liability, or out of control, or a waste of time. I spent a lot of time trying to make myself useful but it was always you who were indispensable. He needed you. But he didn't need me. Didn't think he'd let me stick around if he didn't need me." His voice dropped so low Davijaan almost missed him saying— "I wouldn't have stuck around if I hadn't needed him."

He sucked in a breath and let it out slow. Settling back on his haunches, he tilted his face up to the clear blue sky and just breathed.

Finally he sighed and said, carefully even, “That’s fucked up.”

“So Wolffe tells me.”

Whatever Davijaan had needed from Cody didn’t exist anymore. Maybe whatever his brother had needed from him didn’t exist anymore, either. But he still wanted Cody in his life. And it wasn’t just because he didn’t know what his life would look like without the brother who’d always been there. He wondered if wanting counted as needing, in some cases. It felt like it should.

He thought about Loren, and about needing her— as a distraction, as a guide, as a friend— and he knew without having to think about it that even when he didn’t need her anymore he’d still want her.

When he looked back down to earth Fox was still sitting curled in the snow, and Wolffe was standing on the porch, arms crossed. Observing. Davijaan cupped his hands over his mouth and hollered, “We’re not going to kill each other! Go away!”

Wolf rolled his eyes so hard his head tilted, but went back inside.

“Actually, if you wanted to kill me this would be the perfect time and place,” Fox mused with a totally straight face. “Hide my body in the snow and nobody would find it for months. No body, no crime.”

“What. Is wrong with you.”

Fox shrugged. “Easy out.”

Davijaan sputtered. “For me or for you!?”

He didn’t respond to that, and Davijaan flopped onto his back and groaned. “Stars, enough with the wanting to be dead shit. I get enough of that from Cody.” He waved in the general direction of the house. “You realize he would die if you did.”

“He’s got Boost and Sinker.”

“You realize, *he would die if you did*, right?”

“... Right.”

He flung a handful of snow at Fox’s face. “You're not dead, asshole! Deal with it!”

Fox burst out laughing. “Everyone thinks you're so friendly and nice, but you are the rudest, pettiest fucker I know. Does Loren know this about you?”

“Maybe I don’t have a reason to be rude to Loren, ever think of that?” He surged to his feet and planted his hands on his hips. “They don't keep you around because you're useful. They like you. Stars know why.”

“Well I figured that out.” Fox rolled his eyes. “Still don't know why they like me.”

“My best guess is, you’re a pity case.”

“Probably.”

“I don't like you.”

“Oh don't worry,” Fox drawled. “I don't like you either.”

He dug his hands into the snow and ruffled it up. His clothes had to be soaking wet, just like Davijaan’s, but he seemed content to sit and study the stuff.

“So. Snow,” he said, smoothing down the patch he’d scuffed. “I kind of hate it.”

“So do I.”

“Wolffe thinks it's pretty.”

“So does Cody.”

“I hate that he's right.”

“Terrible feeling.”

Fox looked up at him, exasperated, and for once the exasperation was with him, not for him.

If they just had an honest moment of commiseration Davijaan might have to actually murderer the bastard.

With a groan, he hauled Fox to his feet by the collar of his sodden shirt. “Come on. Out of the cold. If you get sick Wolffe will never forgive me. There's this tea we have that Loren showed me how to make. It tastes like the tundra smells. Maybe you'll hate it.”

***

Later that day, at the spaceport, while Cody and Wolffe said their goodbyes Fox and Davijaan stood a little ways away and regarded each other evenly.

Fox offered him a nod. “Odd Ball.”

He rolled his eyes. “Just call me Davijaan, dumbass. At this point it’s weirder if you don’t.”

“Fine, then. Goodbye, Davijaan. I guess I’ll probably see you again sometime.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Unfortunately,” Fox agreed.

And then Wolffe descended on Davijaan to give him another perfect and suffocating hug, and he didn’t catch Cody and Fox’s goodbye but he thought Fox might have been smiling when he boarded the ship.

He and Cody watched it take off and disappear into the blue, and Davijaan gathered the courage to ask— “Do you think it was a mistake? Moving all the way out here?”

It took Cody a while to answer. “No,” he finally said, firm. “We’re just going to have to ask more people to visit.”

And Davijaan swallowed, and nodded, and kept his face turned up to the sky.

***

Davijaan went back to work the next day. The routine was nice, and having something to do was nice. He tried not to think about how much he missed Wolffe already, and instead messaged him to ask if they had their next job lined up yet.

He technically always had an hour’s break for midmeal, though he usually didn’t bother when he was flying the whole shift. Today, he was not flying the whole shift. He’d had two short deliveries in the morning and then his first passenger flight ever to look forward to in the afternoon, and as he waited around for his passengers to arrive Mr. Yang told him he’d better sit down and eat something.

He found a spot against *Glimmer*’s side and sat and pulled messily cloth wrapped lumps of bread and cheese out of his jacket pocket. Cody was getting better at baking with each new attempt, but now they had more bread than they could eat. Davijaan always grabbed a hunk for breakfast and a hunk for lunch, along with whatever fruit or cheese or meat they had to go with it. He unwrapped them and took a bite, and let his head and shoulders rest against *Glimmer*’s comfortingly icy side.

Mrs. Yang usually did the passenger flights. He’d never asked why, mostly because he didn’t think it mattered. But now he was getting sort of nervous at the idea of having people he didn’t know on his ship.

Before he could decide if he wanted to think about it or not, Loren came out of the main office, bag slung over her shoulder. She smiled when she saw him, and patted her bag. “May I join you?”

He nodded, and waved her over. He tried to hurry up and swallow so he could say a proper hello and ended up inhaling something he shouldn’t.

Loren plopped down beside him and dug around in her bottomless bag, patting his shoulder while he coughed, and then handed him her thermos. He took a drink and cleared his throat. “Sorry,” he rasped, handing it back.

“Oh, don’t apologize.” She set the thermos on the ground between them. “I’ve started to come prepared. You’re not a very cautious eater, are you?”

He shrugged and took another bite. “If you don’t eat fast you don’t eat.”

“Ah.”

She rattled her bag around some more and pulled out her own hunk of bread and a container of coagulated soup, which she proceeded to submerge the bread in, and eat cold soggy bite by cold soggy bite. Davijaan tried not to watch.

There was something to be said for ration bars, after all.

When they'd both finished eating she unearthed two more containers— and he really had to get a look inside that bag someday— and set them on the floor between them. One held little red pastries and the other held dried fruits.

Davijaan hesitated to reach his grimy hands in there and was handed two pastries and a slice of something pale and leathery for his trouble. He ate in careful bites and dared to watch her out of the corner of his eye, his conversation with Wolffe suddenly and annoying at the front of his mind.

Loren hummed as she ate. Nothing loud or obnoxious, just faint pleased little noises. She always nodded after swallowing her first bite, as if deciding the food was indeed worth eating. She gave eating the same total focus she gave everything else.

Thinking back, she had been giving him quite a bit of that focus in the last few months. It was terrifying, but also… amazing. And they didn't spend time together just to spend time, they actually accomplished things. Talked about things. It wasn't just Umbara and it wasn't just an obligation to show the new person around. She'd said she'd hoped they could be friends, and then put in the effort to be his friend. More effort, in some areas, than he had.

Maybe that did mean something. Maybe Wolffe wasn't totally delusional. Maybe it wouldn't hurt anything to… test the waters?

Then again, in his experience, when you were interested in someone but they weren't interested in you, they usually brushed off flirting with a pitying smile or scorn. He couldn't picture Loren looking at him with scorn, but he wasn't sure he wanted her pity either.

Damn it, Wolffe. You don't know *that she's sweet on me.*

"So. Your brothers left yesterday?"

He blinked, and then shook those thoughts away to be thought another time. Because he had time, now. "They did. In the afternoon. And thank you. I would have been at work when they left if you hadn't bullied me into taking the day off."

She gasped in mock indignation. "I did no such thing! I made a gentle suggestion and you followed it because you knew it was for your own good."

"Uhuh." He rolled his eyes, but grinned. "Still. Thank you."

"Did you have a good visit?"

"We did. Hopefully they'll be able to come again soon."

"I'd love to see them again, if that's alright. Even if 1010 was an ass."

Davijaan groaned and buried his face in his hands. Loren had the gall to laugh.

“They’re *terrible* brothers.”

“It’s ok, really. He was just looking out for you.”

“Was he?”

“He was.” She patted him on the shoulder. “I’ll be prepared to get payback next time I see him, never fear. And I’ll be more prepared when I meet the rest of your family, now that I have a better idea of what to expect.”

“They’re not all like that! Wait, the rest of—” his head snapped up. “What?”

“Your family? Or is it just—” Her brow creased; she tilted her head. “You and Cody did say something about a batch, right?”

“Oh. Well.” He shrugged, not sure what he wanted to say about that. “We have other friends, and close brothers, but we’re not… not our batch. Haven’t seen each other for a few years.”

Seven years. They’d been apart for as long as they’d been together. He probably wouldn’t recognize them. Maybe Didja had learned to shut up. Maybe ‘38 had a name.

“Fell out of contact?” she asked, soft and sympathetic.

“Sort of.”

“It’s never too late to reach out again. I had several close school friends I dropped out of contact with when I moved, but I’ve been trying to reconnect. It’s hard, with how our lives have changed. Most of them are married, or working, or both. We don’t see eye to eye on everything the way we used to. But it’s nice to catch up, and at least know what happened to them.”

He didn’t want to know. He’d been telling himself for years that if he ever got a third star tattooed on his ankle it would be for Kote, and he didn’t know what he’d do if he searched a list of numbers and found he suddenly needed a constellation.

“Though,” she brightened, “there’s one friend I’d like you to meet. She lives in Kyurem, but she’ll be here for Tyan’s Night. I’ll introduce you then.”

“Tyan’s Night?” He raised an eyebrow. “Who?”

“Oh! She’s— the sun I suppose? The Lady of the bright sky? You’ve noticed the days getting shorter, right?”

He nodded. He’d been arriving at work in the dark and leaving work in the dark for the last few weeks, and it felt sort of like being in space again.

“On the longest night of the year— two weeks from yesterday— we celebrate the sun and the Lady of the sun, Tyan. It’s sort of an end of the year holiday. Usually people return to the sky

they were born under, or at least go where most of their family is. There's a ceremony at sunset, and then a village wide celebration until sunrise. You should come."

"Oh." He shifted on the duracrete. "Am… am I allowed? Is it a religious— thing?"

She burst out laughing. "Yes and no. It's a religious thing for those who are religious, and it's a family and friends thing for those who aren't. You don't have to go to the official ceremony, though you *are* welcome. I suppose me and my family are more on the religious side of it, but." She nudged him in the arm. "The Lady won't begrudge you enjoying yourself at her party, I promise. You're a Pantoran pilot, after all. You fly under her eyes."

A Pantoran pilot.

He hadn't even lived there a year, but he supposed he *was* a Pantoran pilot. He was a Pantoran citizen, and he was a pilot. He wasn't a soldier or a civilian or a human or a clone, or even an immigrant. He was a Pantoran pilot.

And, he'd never thought much about religion other than to wonder about the Jedi's dedication to the Force, but the idea that some mysterious being was watching him and protecting him made him feel… Something. He didn't think he believed it, but he thought he liked that Loren did.

"Alright, I'll come. It's been a while since I've been to any kind of party." Since the end of the war. "I'll see if I can drag Cody with me."

"Fantastic! I think you'll enjoy it." She popped one last piece of fruit in her mouth and started closing up the containers and tucking them away in her bag. "In fact," she continued, casually, "you two should have dinner with my family that day."

"Um. I don't know if—"

"I don't know why Pa hasn't dragged you both over kicking and screaming yet," she continued, bowling over his flimsy attempt at an excuse with a shake of her head. "But it's only a matter of time. So why not make this the time? Besides, family dinner before the ceremony is traditional, and you're practically family."

He stared at her wide eyed until he regained enough breath to croak, "What?"

She looked up from her packing, surprised. "You're part of the business, it's a family business, therefore you're family."

Suddenly, it hit him that Loren was not and had never been anticipating the inevitable end of their friendship at some nebulous point in the future, once they stopped needing it. That she was starting to see him as a constant.

Suddenly, he felt very silly.

"How do you just…" he shook his head, swallowed. "Say things like that. With a straight face."

“Say things like what?”

“I’ll… I’ll see what Cody says.”

And she grinned, cheeks all scrunched up and eyes glowing, and it felt like a bit of the noon sun shone into the hangar.

Chapter 12

Scarcely five hours after it had risen, the sun set on the shortest day of the year, all pale gold and soft orange and delicate pink scattering across the clear sky and shimmering over the snow covered mountains. Davijaan tipped his head back as he walked and felt the warmth across his face even through the biting wind.

He and Cody had left the Yang family dinner only a few minutes ago, stuffed full of unfamiliar foods and overwhelmed by well wishes and each with a small gold bead Mrs. Yang had pressed into their hands with a solemn nod. It hadn't just been Loren and her family, it had been what seemed to be every Yang in the village, and they'd all wanted to meet the boys living up at the old Lin place.

Davijaan had enjoyed it more than he'd expected to. It hadn't been at all like a clone gathering, but it had been loud and happy in the same ways. The house— not Loren's family's but her uncle's— had been brightly lit and fastidiously clean and smelled like the pine trees on the slope. Cody had held up pretty well, all things considered, and spent most of the meal talking quietly with Loren's grandfather, seated across from him. He'd glared at Davijaan's concern earlier in the day and sworn he'd be fine, but Davijaan was sure he'd find a quiet place to hunker down at some point during the night's celebration.

As the remains of the meal had been cleared away and the shadows had begun to lengthen, the family had rushed to get ready for the temple ceremony. Cody had decided that was their cue to leave, and Loren had seen them off with a smile and a wave and a call of, "Bright night to you!" which they had hesitantly returned. The road had been cleared of snow and the walk was short.

When they spilled out of a side street and into the village square there were a handful of people sweeping away last night's dusting of snow and spacing out narrow composite boards over the icy stone.

"Need any help?" Cody called, steps quickening as he headed towards the group standing around a stack of lumber, Davijaan right behind him.

They turned to face the newcomers, and then one young man stepped forward and waved.

"Hey, Odd Ball! Didn't expect to see you here! Is this your brother? Bright night to you both!"

Davijaan blinked. "Aron?"

His sort-of-acquaintance-sort-of-coworker grinned and dipped his head in acknowledgement, and then gave a deeper sort of greeting bow to Cody. "Grandparents are Amuara folk, so we're always up here for year's end," he said as he straightened. "And if you two have time, we could always use extra hands. You're Cody, right? Come on over!"

After brief introductions and instructions, Cody and Davijaan helped Aron and an assortment of others also not attending the temple ceremony to cover over the square with smooth pinewood boards, nailed down to the composite framework bolted into the ground. It made a sort of raised floor, just high enough to sound hollow when Davijaan stomped on it.

On the north side of the new floor a smaller raised platform was built, like a stage, with a long bright blue cloth hung behind it. On the west side the grocer and the librarian unloaded a cart full of portable heaters and chairs. When the floor was finished Davijaan and Aron drifted over to help.

“Set them up in a sort of circle— no that’s not— here let me do it.” The librarian, a Mx. Wu, took the little round heater right back out of Davijaan’s hands and set it exactly where they wanted it, and then gestured for him to hand them the next one. Davijaan met Aron’s gaze over their head and raised an eyebrow. Aron shrugged and rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. Davijaan handed over the next heater.

“Library’s the cleanest building in town,” he muttered to Davijaan a few minutes later as he passed with an armful of chairs. After watching Mx. Wu arrange each individual heater in a crisp semi-circle as precisely the same distance apart as could be managed without a way to measure, he believed it.

Cody came over to help set up the chairs around the heaters, and Mx. Wu’s determined expression melted into a smile. “Cody boy,” they said, and patted him on the arm. “Bright night to you. Good to see you here. Takes a lot of attention to detail to get events like these up and running. You're just the sort we need helping out.”

Cody smiled a smile he must have stolen directly from General Kenobi and said, “Always a pleasure to help, Mx. Calen.”

Mx. Wu flushed a surprisingly flattering shade of indigo.

“Calen!?” Davijaan hissed as soon as they moved their attention on to the chairs.

Cody shrugged. “I go to the library sometimes when you’re at work.”

He blinked. “Really? Why?”

“Mr. Yang suggested taking walks, so I try to take one every day. The library is a nice endpoint.”

“Huh.” That made a certain kind of Cody sense. He’d gone to the Jedi Archives once to just see what they looked like. Davijaan couldn’t care less. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Never came up.”

With a sudden flash of clarity Davijaan understood why that answer annoyed Loren so much.

“Well. Do the walks help?”

“They don’t hurt.” Cody adjusted a chair in a way suddenly and obviously reminiscent of Mx. Wu. “And it’s nice to see all the different skies.”

Once the little seating area was arranged they were put to work setting up trestle tables at the south of the square, hanging ropes of small round lanterns from bordering shop fronts, and helping a handful of musicians unload crates and bags from their speeders and arrange themselves in front of the stage.

As the sky shifted from blue and gold to black and grey, only a thin band of a yellow so dark it was almost orange rimming the horizon, people began to drift into the square.

At first it was business owners, each bearing a clear, round lantern that they lit and hung over the door of their shop or office. Some also set out a basket of snow-damp twigs on their porches. And then all at once families started to arrive, children darting around and exclaiming over how the square had been transformed and parents setting out food and drinks on the trestle tables, some in warmers and some nestled in trays of chipped ice.

Everybody was wearing gold jewelry, and as more and more lanterns were lit and the square began to glow as brightly as day the crowd flashed and glimmered as it moved. Music started, just loud enough to be heard over the chaos of conversation.

Aron peeled away when his family arrived, and Cody stuck near the musicians and the stage. Davijaan had intended to stick near Cody, but made the mistake of stepping out into the still growing mass of villagers to look for Loren and got trapped somewhere in the middle. He recognized more people than he was expecting to, and many came over to say hello and wish him a bright night, but mostly he wandered, not sure what he was supposed to be doing or what was going to happen next.

People were still arriving, but slowly, and the square was almost at capacity. An older woman climbed onto the stage and made a loud ringing announcement in Pantoran, welcoming everyone and declaring it sundown. Or, something like that. He was picking up Pantoran pretty quickly, Mr. Yang assured him, but most people took one look at him and switched to Basic, which was helpful but also frustrating.

Whatever she had said, the crowd cheered, and as she descended the stage music began.

It was mostly drums and different kinds of wind instruments; a quick beat and an encouraging melody. A significant portion of the people in the center of the square paired off and arranged themselves in lines, and when the music shifted, started a dance.

It was fast and excited and somehow precise, couples spinning and weaving around each other in a larger pattern he couldn’t follow. The neat lines from the start dissolved into circles, and then triangles, and then intricate patterns that never lasted long enough for him to puzzle them out. Some couples were concentrating very hard on their footwork and some were carrying conversations over the music.

“Hey, Odds!” Cody shouted over the music. “Want to?”

Davijaan looked at him like he was crazy, because he was, but Cody didn't back down. "Neither of us know the steps!"

"We'll figure it out!"

And then Cody was pulling him out into the whirling mass of dancers, and after a few halfhearted attempts to get his hand free Davijaan followed, laughing.

He made Cody lead, because this was Cody's dumb idea, so he could be the one to figure out which direction they were supposed to move in. Cody pouted, but kept a calculating eye on the couples surrounding them as he dragged Davijaan clumsily through the first steps of whatever this dance was supposed to be. It wasn't too bad, actually. Nobody was looking at them funny.

Davijaan had always enjoyed dancing, before, in their rushed classes on movement on Kamino and in Coruscant clubs. This was altogether different from both of those kinds of dancing— all about footwork, all about larger patterns, all about staying in time with your partner— but it made him feel the same way. Steady and real and at the same time light enough to fly.

After the second round Cody turned to him with a grin. "You just have to get—"

"The timing right, I know." Davijaan smirked. "Counting seconds and steps instead of just moving with the music, aren't you?"

Cody rolled his eyes, but his smile didn't disappear all through that round and the next.

Eventually it was Cody who pulled them back out of the crowd, a break in the music sending half the couples to the tables of drinks. Instead of letting go Davijaan hugged his brother tight, and Cody hugged back.

"Thanks," he whispered. "For dragging me out to the middle of nowhere."

Davijaan rocked them back and forth a bit, and didn't say, *thank you for letting me.*

They followed the migration to the tables and served themselves cups of hot spiced drink of some kind. It was tangy like Pantoran tea, but also fruity, and sweet. Cody asked an older man also serving himself a cup from the pot what it was called, and got sucked into a conversation about local berries and how they were grown and preserved. Davijaan, shivering, took his cup over to the heaters.

Not many people were over there. It looked like mostly parents with small children and a few older people. Davijaan sipped his drink and surreptitiously studied a woman whose hair was almost entirely white, only a few pink stands in her elaborate bun betraying the original shade. He wondered if she had ever lived anywhere other than these mountains.

He finally sat down next to a heater and set his cup carefully under his chair. The temperature had plummeted in the last hour; any warmth long gone with the sun. His heavy jacket was

doing a good job of keeping the wind off, but he was still not used to being in this kind of cold for this long.

He had no idea why the village thought it was a good idea to hold a party outdoors in the middle of winter, but then again there weren't many large buildings around here. And nobody else seemed to mind the cold too much. They certainly weren't bundled up the way he and Cody were. Probably the dancing. Or they were used to it. He shivered at the thought of getting used to this weather and pulled his gloves off and stuck his hands practically on the glowing coils of the heating mechanism.

The music picked up again, and when he looked back to the dancers he saw Cody and the librarian whirling past. He snorted, and watched them for a bit before finding Aron in the crowd, dancing with an older woman who looked quite a bit like him. Mother? Sister? Aunt? His gaze started skipping between other couples as he pondered the possibilities.

And then he saw Loren.

She was dancing with one of her brothers. Bereth, from the two triangles tattooed across his cheekbone. She'd let her hair down from the bun she'd had it in at dinner, and it fanned out around her face in a shimmering blue curtain as she spun, the dangling charms of her beaded gold headdress catching and flashing in the lamp light. She was laughing. Head tilted back, face bright and clear and open. Even as she stayed in step with her brother, with the other dancers, there was a stillness to her he couldn't name. Something grounded; her movement flowing over dirt and stone and wood instead of floating above it.

It made him feel—

"Enjoying the view?"

Davijaan jerked his head around to glare in the direction of the voice, sputtering, "What? No, I—"

"Oh, so you think she's ugly?"

"Are you blind!?"

"No," muttered the young woman sitting next to him, in lightly accented Basic. "But you might be." She gave him a critical once over and sniffed. "Hm. You're Odd Ball?"

He crossed his arms over his chest, tired of people knowing his name before he'd had a chance to give it to them. "Maybe I'm Cody. How would you know, you've never met either of us."

"If you were Cody you wouldn't have gotten so huffy that I guessed right."

Davijaan scowled, and then tried to smooth his face into a smile, or at least into something neutral. He was pretty sure from her unimpressed eyebrow he did not succeed. So he was out of practice, so what.

“Yes, I’m Odd Ball.” He gave her a nod that was sharper than he meant it to be. “And you are?”

“Fenna Chen.”

She nodded in return, and he used the moment to take her in fully; dark purple hair and geometric tattoos and bright yellow tunic, hoverchair and embroidered blanket. His first instinct was to ask where she’d served in the war, and then he had to frustratedly crush that reflex and remind himself she was a civilian and there was more than one way to get injured, and then his eyes snapped back to her hair as his brain finally caught up with—

“Chen?”

Fenna smiled. “My mother is quite the fan of yours.”

He grimaced. She laughed.

He’d run into Mrs. Chen a handful of times— once in the grocer's, and that had been kind of terrifying— and she was always perfectly polite, but regarded him and his clumsy answers to her probing questions with an air of quiet disapproval.

“I don’t even know what I did,” he groaned.

“Oh, don’t mind ma.” Fenna waved dismissively. “She’s just annoyed that you and your brother wouldn’t jump through all the hoops she set up for people who move here.”

“But… I thought nobody moved this far north?”

“I think you’re the first off-worlders in her lifetime, actually. Still. She’s not on the village council for nothing. Making people jump through hoops is her joy in life.”

He nodded, slowly, comprehending at last. “Sounds like some officers I know.”

Fenna opened her mouth, and closed it. He smiled. “Yes, my brother and I are former GAR.”

“Well everybody knows *that*, I just wasn’t sure if it was polite to ask questions.”

“Funny, you didn’t seem very concerned with politeness earlier.”

It was her turn to scowl, but there wasn’t any heat behind it. Half of him cringed at talking to some random civilian like this but the other half was pleased that she wasn’t offended.

“Well this is helpful!”

And he looked up to find Loren approaching, steps still light and fluid. “Fen!” she exclaimed, and launched herself at the hoverchair. Fenna hugged back, laughing.

“Hey, Lo, bright night to you. Good to see you again!”

“Good to see you too!” Loren pulled away and sat down on the other side of Davijaan, effectively trapping him. “I assume you two have introduced yourselves?” He nodded, hesitant.

“Fantastic!” She bumped her shoulder into his. “Fenna is the friend I mentioned.”

“Ah.”

“Oh don’t worry.” Fenna patted his arm. “She told me all about you, too. Good to finally put a face to the name.”

Huh. Well then.

Before he could either run or sink down into the chair, Loren asked Fenna a question about her work— something about numbers analysis for a business— and Fenna launched into a story about misfiled flimsiwork and incompetent assistants and he settled back to listen, fascinated. Misfiled flimsiwork had been very rare in the GAR. Or maybe just in the 212th, where Cody’s insistence on *doing things right* extended even to the filing systems.

The music rose and fell and the conversation shifted from work to social life to family life to hobbies. They both made an effort to include him, but he didn’t have much to say, and was content to listen to the ins and outs of their lives. He’d heard a lot of what Loren shared about living at home again and looking for a new job, but she left out the details of her growing frustration with the situation when she told Fenna about a disastrous interview, and he wondered why.

Every once in a while he would glance around and find Cody. He hadn’t danced with anybody else, but he was always talking with someone new. Eventually he looked over to find Cody looking back.

His brother was standing alone next to the table, refilling his cup. He tilted his head at their little group, asking if Davijaan needed rescuing. Davijaan shook his head once. Cody nodded and disappeared back into the crowd.

“Your brother’s cute.”

Davijaan twitched violently and turned to sputter at Fenna. “He’s? Identical to me!?”

“No, he has that scar,” she pointed out, half joking and half patronizing, “which I assume everybody was too polite to tell me about. Makes him look like a hero from a holofilm or something. Dashing.”

The memory of Kote’s blood seeping out between his fingers hit him like a punch to the gut — the sharp edge of the shrapnel in his brother’s skull digging into his palms as he pressed hard against the wound, his hands too small and too dirty, Kote’s head lolling to the side before Rex scrambled to hold it steady.

He cleared his throat. “Don’t you dare tell him that. If he gets it into his head that he’s the handsome one I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Loren pressed her lips into a thin line. “Fenna,” she said, chiding.

“What?”

Loren just shook her head. And then music started to pick up again, and she jumped to her feet and grasped his wrist, eyes on Fenna. “I don’t mean to abandon you, but—”

Fenna waved her away with a smirk. “Have your fun, and come find me again later. I’m going to go see if Ma Gao brought her tea jellies.”

“Save me one!”

“We’ll see!” Fenna fiddled with her controls and floated serenely off in the direction of the tables, and Loren turned her attention back to him.

“I saw you and Cody dancing earlier. You looked like you were having fun. Want to give it another go?”

“Absolutely!” He shot to his feet. “I mean— I don’t know the steps very well yet—”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you trip and fall!” She grinned, and pulled him back out into the crowd just as the dance began.

He was familiar with the basic steps after his turn around with Cody, but not this new pattern. And the steps were not yet entrenched muscle memory. Loren took his hands and took the lead, smoothly and without comment, and drew him though the weaving patterns of couples across the floor. They kept time without the frantic energy of many of the others, but with no less purpose. Davijaan relaxed into movement and found the rhythm again. It was different with somebody he didn’t know as well, but he thought, glancing down at Loren’s feet, not difficult.

As he became more confident of where they were supposed to end up after each new turn, even if still unsure of the precise footwork to get there, she skillfully swapped their positions and let him have a turn leading. He didn’t think he did too badly. They didn’t run over anybody.

Every time he looked up from their feet to her face she was smiling. It made it a lot harder to concentrate, and he kept stumbling. But she kept smiling, so he didn’t think she minded.

When the music died down again, he and Loren came slowly to a halt. They stood and breathed in slivered clouds, neither making a move to let go or step away. Her eyes were flashing in the golden light, so brilliant they were impossible to focus on, and so intent on him it was impossible to focus on anything else. After a moment she squeezed his hands, and the icy shock of them jolted him out of whatever daze he’d fallen into.

“Your hands are freezing,” he grumbled, adjusting his grip to rub them between his own. Freezing and very strong. “Are you warm enough?”

She gaped at him, and then tilted her head back and laughed.

“I’m Pantoran, silly! I have a lower body temperature than humans.”

Davijaan dropped her hands. “Oh.”

“And here I thought you appreciated my cold hands,” she said, planting the aforementioned hands on her hips, lips curving up in a teasing smile.

He rolled his eyes. “I was too busy dying to think about why they were cold. Sorry.”

“You were not *dying.* And actually—” she snatched his hands back and squeezed them again. “You’re the one whose hands aren’t supposed to be this cold.”

She cupped them between her own as if she intended to rub at them the same way he had hers, and then abruptly dropped them. “That’s not going to help, is it,” she huffed. “Where are your gloves? I don’t know if mine will fit, but—”

“I have them, I have them!” He fumbled around in his pockets and pulled them on. “Took ‘em off by the heaters.”

“Oh, good.” She studied him anxiously as he tugged them on. “Do we need to go inside? The library, the hall, and the temple are open all night.”

He shifted his feet and tried not to shiver visibly. “I’m warmer than I was before we started dancing.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You know, all that exercise made me thirsty. I think now would be the perfect time to get something to drink and sit down out of the snow. Don’t you agree?”

He gave her an unimpressed look, but followed her to the table and collected another cup of the hot fruity tea.

“Not the library,” he said, when she started to lead him in that direction. He couldn’t see Cody in the crowd anymore, and had exactly one guess as to where he might be. She nodded and veered towards the village hall.

The lights were on, and just inside the entrance a young man was holding a crying child. Father? Older brother? Davijaan had no idea how anybody was supposed to tell, but it probably didn’t matter to the kid. The man gave them a tight smile, which Loren returned, and then hurried Davijaan down the long hall and towards an open door.

Inside it looked something like a briefing room. A long low table dominated the center, with padded benches arranged around it, but there were hangings on the walls and the overhead lights were bright instead of stark. Loren closed the door and settled them in a corner.

He drank most of his tea in two quick gulps and savored the feeling of warmth spreading through his chest. The building wasn’t heated to a temperature he was comfortable with, but tucked out of the wind with Loren it was very cozy.

“Sorry about that,” she said, swirling the dregs of her tea.

“About what?” *Please don’t be sorry about the dancing.*

“Fenna. Saying that about Cody’s scar.”

He blinked. “What?”

“You froze up. Just for a second, I don’t think she noticed, but.”

“Oh.” He shrugged, not sure how he felt about her noticing. “It happens. Just. Remembered something.”

The corner of her mouth curled up in rueful bitterness. “I suppose most scars like that don’t have happy memories.”

“None, that I know of.” He snorted. “Dumb memories? Annoying memories? Sure. Happy ones are in short supply. Unless you count a tattoo as a sort of scar.” Those could have any emotion attached to them, though a sort of determined joy was what he’d seen most often.

“Huh.” She reached up and unconsciously ran a finger over the interlocking circles across her cheekbone. “I suppose technically it is a scar. For Pantorans tattoos are something like a family history, or a way to honor your family. Not really happy or sad, just memory for the sake of memory.”

He thought of the two stars on his ankle and the names attached to them, and thought he understood. “It can be like that for clones. I guess mostly tattoos were… something we could control.”

She looked at him, steady, and didn’t ask if he had any tattoos, and he thought because of that he might show her someday.

And then she did ask— “Did it scar badly?”

He’d certainly seen worse, but. “Depends on what you call bad. I don’t know. It’s kind of hard for me to look at.”

“Oh.”

“You can see for yourself, if you want,” he offered, trying to sound casual.

“Oh, you don’t have to…”

“What?” He flashed her a grin. “Don’t want to see the results of your handiwork?”

She huffed. “Well, when you put it like that.”

He’d stopped visibly shivering, but he still grit his teeth as he set his jacket aside and pulled his shirt and undershirt over his head, turning so he had his back to Loren. He wanted her to see, to reassure herself. He knew how important that was. But he didn’t know what memories would spread across her face and didn’t want to.

A sharp inhale, a slow exhale, and a long beat of silence. It had been long enough that the dozen or so jagged vertical cuts had lost the raw redness of new scars and faded to a silver-pink, but they still stood out starkly against the brown of the rest of his back. It was probably hard to look at if you weren't used to looking at stuff like that. Then again, she'd seen it fresh and bleeding. And all she'd done was cry.

He shifted uncomfortably, waiting for her to say something, and then a featherlight finger traced a raised scar along the length of one shoulder blade. He shivered.

She pulled her hand away. "Sorry, cold hands, I know. I should have asked."

"No, it's alright. You can touch. I don't mind." He was surprised to find he meant it.

The hand returned, more hesitant, and didn't linger, simply pressed between his shoulder blades and then retreated.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"I'm sorry it happened."

"Eh. Things happen."

Cloth whispered across the floor as she scooted closer, rising up on her knees, and then her arms came up around his ribs and her chin settled on his shoulder, and she pressed close against the length of his back and hugged him.

She was solidly built. Sturdy. Not like a clone— like a carefully crafted weapon designed to hit and hit hard— but like a mountain. Like underneath cloth and skin and fat she was carved from the foundation stone itself.

He let himself lean against her, and her arms tightened the slightest bit, and he felt steady and safe and real. Like a bit of her own groundedness was settling into him. His eyes burned. He thought he could stay like that all night, or maybe forever. He wanted to.

But however comfortable she was, she still wasn't warm, and the room they were in wasn't warm either, and after a while he started to shiver in earnest. She pulled away slowly, with a sigh, and he hoped that meant she had wanted to stay like that too.

She scooted away and before he could reach for them picked his shirt and undershirt up off the ground and handed them over. He put them on quickly, and then hauled himself to his feet and shook his limbs out.

"I should probably go sit by the heaters for a bit," he said as he did up the clasps on his jacket, apologetic. "It's out of the wind in here, but…"

"Yes, and being half naked didn't help," she replied, dry. "But. Thank you for showing me."

He kept his focus on the clasps. "It helps, to see."

“I… It does.” She cleared her throat, and he chanced a glance at her face, hoping his flush had receded. She met his eyes with a new sort of understanding, and then offered him an arm. “Shall we?”

***

The rest of the night passed in succession of whirling dances and enthusiastic conversations and lots and lots of food, interspersed with announcements and performances. The small stage hosted most of these; a very stylized dance from a young woman dressed all in yellow and gold, a group of older people singing, and a play performed by who he assumed were children from the local school.

He’d never seen a play. Cody had once, when Kenobi had taken him and some other officers to one on leave. He’d said it was fun, and that was about it. This play was probably not to the standard of the fancy theater Cody had described, but it was certainly fun.

It was in Basic, but it was hard to follow due to the, uh, variety in performance quality. Loren whispered an abbreviated version of the story, of how Tyan and her goat climbed to the top of the sky every day so she could bring light to her people, climbing down only when the cold of the earth became too much, and how on the coldest days she couldn’t stay up there for long. “And so on the longest, coldest night, we keep the sky bright when she cannot.”

It seemed sort of… “It’s not true, is it?”

“Does it matter?”

He supposed it didn’t.

After the play, and probably close to midnight, a series of fireworks were set off from the lower slopes of Amaura. It sounded uncomfortably like grenades going off out of sight, but the effect against the sky was pretty. The play and the fireworks over with the smaller children started to disappear from the crowd. He didn’t think it likely that they left voluntarily, and wondered what kind of escape attempts would be made over the course of the night.

He and Loren danced a few more times, and he danced with Fenna twice, and even Aron tracked him down and asked for a dance with a grin that made him blush despite himself. He had to take periodic breaks to huddle by the heaters and drink hot tea, but for the most part the constant movement kept him warm and awake. And maybe, he realized as he drank his fifth cup, something in the tea.

Cody re-appeared in the early hours of the morning, but seemed content to sit by the heaters and talk to the people who approached him. Davijaan looked over at one point to find Fenna sitting next to him, and desperately hoped she wasn’t trying to flirt with his poor oblivious brother. But then she said something that made Cody smile, so Davijaan restrained himself from marching over there.

As it neared mid-morning, the sky beyond the glow of the lanterns began to lighten.

The music stopped, and the dancers separated. The crowd quieted. Children began to reappear from where they'd been tucked away to nap. Those sitting rose to their feet, and everyone gathered in the center of the square, facing the east. Davijaan found himself and Cody absorbed into a cluster of Yangs, Loren at his side and her brothers behind them. Mr. Yang glanced over his shoulder to smile and then faced the east once more.

One by one the lanterns died. Out of fuel or set to some timer he didn't know of. An older woman walked the perimeter of the square and put out the few that lingered. The stars became visible just as they were fading into the grey of a late morning dawn.

Davijaan breathed, and waited, and Loren's gloved hand slipped into his.

The faintest glimmer of gold touched the mountain tops, and the people began to sing.

The song was rich and slow and bright, in a language that was almost Pantoran but wasn't. The sheer number of voices smoothed out the way Bereth's voice cracked and the way Mrs. Maraso's young daughter stumbled over the words.

Loren's voice was low and clear and perfect, and he focused on her alone, singling her voice out from among the others, and it washed over him with a memory.

The sun rose, and the people sang. When the gold-red light began to touch rooftops and drip steadily into the square, they stopped. Everything was utterly still for a moment, and then a child loudly demanded a snack. The crowd broke out in murmurs and began to break down into smaller groups.

Davijaan turned to Loren, mouth dry. "I think... I think I've heard that song before."

She regarded him evenly. "I'm surprised you recognized it. I sang it for you. Or, hummed the tune."

"... Oh."

She ran her thumb over his knuckles and tilted her head back, and some of the sunrise lit her eyes. "It was always night on Umbara, but with the light on in our cell I could pretend it was day."

He wanted to say thank you, but it didn't feel like enough, so they stood in silence under the sky until the demands of the new day could no longer be forgotten.

Chapter 13

Three days after Tyan's Night, Davijaan walked to work in the dark.

Because the sun set so early and rose so late, he hardly ever saw it anymore, except through the viewshield when he was flying. He didn't mind too much. It really was oddly reminiscent of being back in space; of going about his day under glaring white lights while starlight streamed in through the portholes.

Sometimes he missed the blue. If the closest he could get was being outside, he'd take it.

He usually got to work early and took his time doing the pre-flight checks on *Glimmer.* He never managed to get there before Mrs. Yang, who had the most meticulous pre-flight checklist he'd ever witnessed, but he was still surprised to find her waist deep in *Glimmer's* engine.

"Um, good morning, ma'am," he said, hanging up his jacket and wincing at the crunch of icy boots on duracrete. "Need any help?"

She glanced up at him and blinked in surprise. "No. Almost done. Just a tune-up. Thought I mentioned, yesterday."

"No, I don't believe so."

"Ah." She turned back to her work.

Davijaan waited a minute for her to say something else, but her focus was stuck on the guts of the engine and wouldn't be coming unstuck for some time, so he headed for the office to wait.

He knew enough about engines and hyperdrives to do basic repairs, but he didn't enjoy it. Mrs. Yang did. Very much. Odds were even if she remembered beforehand to tell him she was planning to fix or adjust something or if he'd come in and start his checks and realize it was different.

He sat in the chair behind the desk, because Mr. Yang wasn't coming in today and because he'd never sat behind a desk before. It was pretty comfortable. Solid wood with lots of cushions. Good back support. He ought to get changed and ready for work, but who knows how long Mrs. Yang would be. He probably had a good twenty minutes before she came to find him.

The door slid open and he shot to his feet, mortified.

Loren blinked in surprise, and then snorted, dumping her bag and coat on the bench against the wall and sitting primly in one of the chairs across from him. "Good morning, Odd Ball. Comfortable?"

He slumped back down and crossed his arms over his chest. “I am, actually. How come all the chairs in the office aren’t like this?”

“Pa strained his back badly a few years ago and now he needs the extra support.” She smirked. “If he finds you stealing his chair enough, maybe he’ll buy you one.”

“Eh, why bother?” He abandoned Mr. Yang’s entirely too comfortable chair and sat down in the free chair next to her with a contented sigh. “I like this seat much better,” he grinned, and dared to reach out and tuck a strand of blue hair behind her ear.

She flushed and rolled her eyes. His heart skipped a beat.

Before he could open his mouth and press his advantage, she cleared her throat and sat up straight. He swiftly removed his hand in case she was about to tell him to leave her the fuck alone.

“So. Odd Ball.”

“Yes, Loren?”

“I wanted to tell you first, before everything gets underway, but. I’m going to be moving, finally.”

He stared at her, frozen, for a solid three seconds before he realized she was waiting for a response. “Oh? Good.” It was. It was very good. She’d been wanting— needing— to move away again since she’d moved back. “Where?”

“Just to Kyurem.” Her mouth twisted in an amused grimace. “I think I’m done with big city living for the time being. An apartment in Fenna’s building is going to be available next month, and I’ve applied to the town council to get the new lease. If everything goes well, I should be able to move before the snow melts.”

He nodded slowly and mustered a smile. A real smile. “I’m happy for you. Do you… does this mean you got the job?”

She’d been applying for everything writing related in a thousand mile radius, and had gotten several interviews and even a few job offers, but nothing that was as advertised when she applied. She’d come home from the last interview with Kyurem Daily Journal angry and proclaiming that she was a writer not an intern, thank you very much, and that’d been the last he’d heard.

“Nope.” Her nostrils flared. “There was a reason I started my career on Coruscant and not small-town Pantora. But they did accept the article I submitted!”

“Was that the one I read?”

“No, it’s a new one. You can read it if you want.” When he nodded she jumped out of her seat and went to dig around in her bag for her datapad. “It’s about immigration patterns on Pantora before and after the war.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“There’s been an influx in the last six months, mostly in the marsh cities. I called down to the Lombre city offices and got some excellent interviews from the staff who process immigration applications. Just sent it!” She shoved the datapad back in her bag and came skipping back over. She seemed extra energetic this morning. Excited to finally have a plan in motion, probably.

“You don’t have to read it now, or ever, but it’s something you might be interested in.”

“Definitely interested. Sounds like me and Cody were on to something.”

She’d kept writing while she was job hunting, trying to finish an article a month in between all her other obligations. To keep her skills sharp, she’d said, but he thought she just enjoyed the process of researching a question and putting her thoughts in order on the answer. She’d let him read most of them when they were finished, and he didn’t know anything about writing or news articles but he was positive these were excellent quality. He’d liked the one about the process of creating a hiking trail and their historical importance to mountain communities especially.

A few months ago, out of curiosity, he’d looked up her CorNN articles. They were obviously well written, and it was interesting to read about the aftermath of a battle from a civilian perspective. But they’d made him uncomfortable for some reason, so he'd stopped. Maybe it was just that he’d felt he was reading them behind her back.

“See the pattern? None of the local news offices will let me get past an interview, but they’ll pay for an article or two.” She sat back down cross legged, somehow balancing on the chair with her hands on her knees, and offered him a wry smile. “I think having CorNN on my resume might be doing more harm than good.”

“Weren’t they a big deal on Coruscant?”

“They *were.* Not so much, in the last year. Anyway.” She shrugged, and then turned her determined gaze on him. “I’ve decided to focus on freelancing for a few months. Get myself established as an independent.”

He blinked. It took him a minute to think through all of the implications of that. Of freelancing. “That sounds… kind of terrifying.”

“What, working for myself?”

“Yes. Just going out and— and doing stuff? Without any kind of framework, or reference point.”

“Oh there are several rather famous— or maybe infamous— freelance reporters whose examples I can learn from. It’s not exactly uncommon in the field.”

He quashed a nervous laugh and shook his head. “That’s so weird.”

She leaned forward, an expectant eyebrow raised. “Didn’t you do the same thing? Move all the way out here with no plan?”

“Sort of? I wasn’t thinking about work. I just—” *needed to get away* “— wanted a change of scenery.”

“Well.” She sat back and tilted her head to the side, considering. “I want a change of scenery. I’m tired of working in other people’s offices.”

And if that was a good enough reason for her, then it was probably a good enough reason for anyone. What did he know about it anyway? “I hope it goes well. Freelancing.”

“Thank you.” She grinned, sharp and bright and satisfied. “Me too.”

“Odd Ball?”

He twitched and then craned his neck over the back of the chair to see Mrs. Yang standing in the open doorway, glancing between the two of them. Loren waved. When Mrs. Yang focused back on him, she was smiling faintly. “*Glimmer*’s ready.”

He shot to his feet. “On my way, ma’am. Thank you.”

Without a word Loren stood and followed him out, pausing briefly to hug her mother. He changed into his flightsuit and when he closed his locker she was standing next to *Glimmer* with his work datapad. She handed it over and he found his checklists. Starting with the exterior, they made their way around the ship in silence, checking landing gear and the seals around external hatches and various meter readouts.

She held the datapad as he checked the bolts on one of the stabilizers, and quietly said, “I wanted to ask you, or to ask you first, but… Cody. Marshal Commander Cody. I still have the article.”

He looked up, shocked.

Before he could say anything she continued, speaking fast but firm. “I’d like to revise it and submit it. Locally, but also to some galactic publications. He was an important public figure in the war and *somebody* should write about him. I’m just not sure if that somebody should be me. I know him. Rather well, at this point. If I revise the article I’d want to do an interview and I’d want to include something of his life now, and I’m not sure if— I don’t want to ask, and accidentally—”

“Send him spiraling?”

“Yes.”

He sighed. Rubbed a hand across his face. Stood. “You might,” he said, taking the datapad and making a note of the state of that stabilizer. “He’s kind of, shut down that part of himself?” He handed the datapad back and moved on to the rear cargo doors.

“He was this brilliant tactician, you know. Planned his battles down to the second. He could tell you exactly where everyone from the general to the shiniest trooper needed to be and when. Winning the war was all about timing, for him. Of course,” he said, noting how the hold’s steady internal air pressure readouts from the night before lined up with the hangar’s own fluctuating air pressure. “You can’t plan for everything.” Like the Chancellor being a traitor. “But he got damn close. I don’t know how to remind him of who he used to be without… without…”

“... Sending him spiraling. I see.” She peered over his shoulder and copied down the numbers. “Well in that case, the project is shelved. Maybe someday.”

“Maybe someday,” he agreed. She handed over the datapad and he found his list for internal checks. They made their way to the boarding hatch. He lowered the gangplank, but paused on the first step.

“It’s going to be a year, this spring.”

She regarded him evenly. “It is.”

He turned away and marched inside the ship.

They worked their way from the hold to the circuitry room to the engine room to the cockpit. He sat in the pilot’s seat with the datapad balanced on one leg and checked the oxygen filter readouts and the fuel level and the pressure controls, Loren leaning against the back of the chair. There were never any surprises, but he’d never feel comfortable flying a ship he didn’t thoroughly inspect beforehand.

During the war inspections were carried out right after landing, no matter what conditions you’d just been flying in or how long you’d been in space, because you never knew when you’d have to take off again at a moment’s notice. Best to put your ship to bed in good shape, just in case. The slow pace of morning inspections was something to be savored.

“Someday, I’d like to write about you.”

He froze, hand on the yoke. “Me?”

“Yes, you. About some of your experiences in the war, and how you got to where you are now.”

“What’s there to write about?” His grip tightened. “I didn’t do anything particularly impressive then, and I’m not doing anything particularly impressive now.”

She huffed a laugh. “I think our definitions of impressive are very different. But it’s not so much about the particulars as it’s…”

She stayed leaning against his chair, arms crossed against the back of his neck. He kept himself facing forward, both wanting to listen and wanting to tell her to leave. The part that wanted to listen won out.

“During the war, all I wrote about was the destruction. About the way it obliterated landscapes and cities and lives. When I interviewed refugees they all had the same story. I was safe and I was happy, or at least things weren’t too bad, and then war happened to me. But now there’s all these rebuilding efforts— on Ryloth and Christophsis and Cato Neimoidia. People are putting their lives back together. And it’s… It’s important to me to tell both sides of it, you know? The war happened, and it was horrible. And that’s a story that matters, but it’s only half the story.”

Her hand drifted down to cup his cheek, and he held himself utterly still.

“The war happened, and it was horrible, and now it’s over. And now we have a chance to rebuild. You’re a part of that. All of your siblings, but also you; Odd Ball. You fought in the war, and it was horrible. But you won it. And now you’re rebuilding. And it matters that the people whose lives were most impacted by the destruction have a voice in the stories of the reconstruction.”

He shook his head slowly, trying not to dislodge her hand. “I didn’t just fight in the war. War… was my whole life. There’s nothing to— to reconstruct. I’m… I don’t know what I’m doing.”

She stroked a thumb over his cheekbone. “Where did you learn to fly?’

“Kamino.” He swallowed. “Flight sims on Kamino.”

“You’re still flying. The war is over and you’re still flying.”

“Maybe that’s just the only thing I know how to do.”

“Maybe.” Gently, so he could shake her off if he wanted, she hooked a finger under his chin and tipped his head back, leaning forward so she could gaze down at his face. “Or maybe you’re doing the same thing I am— taking the pieces of a brief and disastrous career and making something of them. I just hope I can make something good.”

***

Loren left early, before he docked for the night. He did the post-flight checks on his own, and missed her steady presence.

He walked home with his head down, eyes focused on his feet on the road, glancing up every few minutes to the stars.

Usually he hated being alone in the quiet. But it was never really quiet in the mountains, just. Still. Peaceful. If you listened, you could hear the wind hiss over the snow, or pine branches creak under its weight. The scream of an owl or the howl of a wolf.

He made good time and sped up as his feet found the packed-down path to the steps. Movement and winter gear only kept him so warm, and he was ready to get inside and eat and curl up under a blanket. Loren complained about how hot he and Cody kept their house but after a lifetime of chilly hallways they wanted to be comfortable.

Ignoring the railing, he took the first three almost at a run, and then his icy left boot came down on the icy fourth step, and he slipped.

He tried to catch himself, but his foot slid across the tread and through the gap in the soffits, and his momentum carried him forward to land heavily on his right knee on the fifth step, his left shin colliding with the blunt edge of the board.

He heard the crunch and snap a split second before white hot pain shot from his ankle to his hip.

“Kote!” he screamed, in pure pain and panic, and then bit his tongue and forced himself to breathe. The door slammed open. The wood vibrated with heavy footsteps on the porch.

“Davijaan? What happened?!”

“Cody,” he said, low and urgent, clinging to the railing and the step and holding himself as still as he could. “Cody. Cody I did something to my leg. I think— I might have broken it.”

Cody picked his way down to where Davijaan was contorted over the steps and picked him up under the arms, easing him up and away and then over his shoulder, one hand on the injured leg to hold it steady. Davijaan grit his teeth and breathed.

He was set down in the snow, his leg stretched out not quite straight in front of him, and Cody felt down the length and hissed when he found the spot on his shin Davijaan was trying very hard to ignore.

“It's broken,” Cody confirmed, grim. “I can splint it, but I don't have anything for a cast. Where do I take you? Is the medcenter open? Do we need to wait till morning? If I can get supplies—”

“Loren.” Davijaan dug around in his pocket and shoved his comm into Cody's hand. “Ask Loren.”

She answered almost immediately. *“Odd Ball? What—”*

“It's Cody. Odd Ball broke his leg. Where do I take him?”

There was a half second of silence as she took in both his words and his tone. *“The clinic. There's always someone at the desk. I'll comm ahead and meet you there.”*

She rattled off an address and Cody ended the call with a grunt of acknowledgement.

***

He'd broken his arm during a sim when he was five. He remembered the specific burning pain of it very well. His fingers had been different— smaller and more contained. And he’d known that was coming. He’d had a chance to brace himself. His arm, and now his leg, had been sudden and shocking and maddening.

His leg hastily splinted with the contents of an old medpack, Davijaan clung to Cody as he drove them into the village. When they arrived at the clinic the lights were on and a uniformed nurse was already opening the door for them. Cody looped Davijaan's arm over his shoulder and helped him limp inside, and then followed the nurse past the reception area and down a short green hall to a small blue room.

A stout older woman in a plain wrinkled tunic looked up from pulling a sheet over a cot. "Set him down here," she patted the cot, and Cody and the nurse moved to obey. "Right here, get his leg laid out straight, that's it."

When Davijaan was settled to her satisfaction she started opening cupboards and laying out instruments and supplies. "I'm all set, Narishka." The nurse nodded and ducked out of the room.

"Now, it's Odd Ball whose leg I'm attending?" Finished with the cupboards, she turned her attention to Davijaan.

"Yes ma'am. And I'm Cody."

"Hm. Been wondering when I'd see one if you in here." She carefully and confidently removed his boot and bootliner and rolled his pant leg up past his knee, frowning at the swollen mess she found underneath. "Though I'd hoped it'd be for a physical and not an injury. I'm Dr. Lin." She gave them a brief nod of greeting that was more a flick of her chin. "Good to meet you boys."

"Pleasure's ours, ma'am," said Cody, stilted and tense but returning the nod. He'd stationed himself on the other side of the cot and settled into parade rest, and if Davijaan knew for sure he'd be able to speak without his voice breaking he'd tell him to sit down.

"Now, it's been years since I've treated a Human but I did some review and reading when you moved here, so we should be all set. Speaking of, how would I go about getting your medical histories?"

"No idea."

She glanced up sharply at Cody's cold tone. "Hm. In that case, any past surgeries? Previously broken bones? Allergies or unusual reactions to medications? Conditions such as hypotension or arthritis? Episodes of anxiety or depression?"

"He… I…" Cody glanced down at Davijaan, eyes wide and just starting to go blank the way they always did in medbays.

"Oh, goddess' sake." Dr. Lin bustled around the cot and herded Cody over to the low bench against the wall. "Young man, sit down."

Cody sat.

She turned to Davijaan and planted her hands on her hips. "One of you needs to tell me if you're allergic to anything before I give you pain medication."

Davijaan cleared his throat and forced himself to sit up straight. “Not allergic to anything.” His voice came out hoarse, and he winced. “Regular dose for a Human won’t work though. I don’t know what the right dose is. Had— broke my arm as a cadet and four of my fingers last year. Had my— had brain surgery… almost a year ago? And.” He held out his left wrist. “Still have my ident chip. Don’t know if that matters, since they didn’t bother to take them out. Don’t know anything about the rest. Sorry.”

Dr. Lin blinked. “Well.” She looked from Davijaan to Cody and back to Davijaan. “Well. Thank you. You relax, I’m going to give you a dose and a smidge of something in your leg.”

Davijaan lay back on the cot and tried to be still. It didn’t even hurt that badly anymore, now that it wasn’t in an awkward position or being jostled around. The pain had settled into a dull throb from his ankle to his thigh. He didn’t feel the needle when she injected whatever medication she’d settled on, though he craned his neck to keep a close eye on her hands.

Hurried footsteps in the hall, and then Loren burst into the room, shawl fluttering and bag rattling. When she pushed her hood back her face was flushed and her hair a loose tangled mess. He wanted to run his fingers through it.

“Odd Ball! Sorry I wasn’t here to meet you, I was—”

“Too many people,” Dr. Lin interrupted.

“But—”

“Sit down or wait outside.”

Loren sat next to Cody. She turned to say something, and froze. “Cody?”

He twitched. “Hey,” he forced out. “Thanks. For the directions.”

She looked to Davijaan, panicked. He swallowed down his frustration. “Could you grab his arm? Just, squeeze it really hard.”

Quickly, she took one of Cody’s wrists in her hands. “Like this?”

He shied away from her grip. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t have to be here.” Davijaan tried to sit up and meet Cody’s eyes. “You can go—”

“No.”

“Quiet, please.”

The room fell silent.

“Hm.” Dr. Lin frowned at her scanner, and at his leg, and then looked up to frown at him. “It’s a clean break. I’ll set it, cast it, run a bone-knitter over it, and that will be that. Can you still feel it?”

Yes. “No.”

“Hm. Would you like me to get Narishka to help you brace yourself?”

“I can hold still. I know how to hold still, you don’t have to—”

“That is not what I asked.” She took off her old gloves and put on a new pair, eyeing him up and down with a furrowed brow. “Loren? Come help him sit up.”

Loren hesitated, and then returned Cody’s wrist to him and hurried to the cot.

When he'd got his arm set it had just been him and a medroid in a cold quiet room. With his fingers Yikes had talked casually about nothing the whole time, and he’d had Cody with him, even if Cody had been sitting at the far end of his cot trying not to watch but unable to look away.

Loren helped him upright and then slid on to the cot behind him, sitting sideways and wrapping one arm around his waist. He clamped on to her wrist and reached back, fumbling, and until she took his free hand. He breathed slowly and kept his eyes on Dr. Lin’s hands and tried not to think.

He used to be jealous of Cody’s ability to do that. Stop thinking completely, and just go away inside his head. Davijaan’d had to work hard to not think about things. But eventually he’d realized he’d much rather be awake for whatever the Kaminoans did than wake up later with something changed.

Loren’s grip was firm but not bruising. Her breath stuttered in his ear and he wondered distantly if she was going to cry.

When the cast was drying and Dr. Lin was reaching for the bone-knitter he let himself slump against her.

“Don’t walk on it for a week and a half. This won’t heal it fully, just get the process started. You're going to schedule appointments with Narishka for a week from now to check your cast, a tenday from then to get it removed, and within a month of that you both ought to have a full physical.” She glanced up at him, and he thought maybe she wasn’t frowning in annoyance so much as concern. “You hear me?”

“I hear you. Ma’am.”

“Good.” She looked over his shoulder at Loren. “They’re going home with you?”

“Yes.” She ran a thumb over his wrist. “If that's ok?”

“You don’t have to, we can—”

“You can’t drive and your brother shouldn't. And in case of complications you should be monitored overnight. You're going home with Loren.”

Davijaan could argue, but he was tired and in pain and couldn’t think of a good reason to.

“Alright.” He leaned back and closed his eyes. “Good.”

***

Apparently the reason Loren hadn’t met them at the clinic was because she’d been busy telling her whole entire family what had happened.

Mr. Yang was waiting for them at the door, and took Davijaan’s weight from his daughter easily. He grit his teeth and let Mr. Yang help him hop down the stairs to the bedrooms.

“The twins are at Maraso’s for the night; the sheets are changed and there’s spare clothes in the cupboard. If you’d like something to eat I can bring down some soup.”

“We’re fine,” said Cody, voice still a bit flat but eyes clear. “We’ll probably go straight to bed.”

“Good, good. You’ve had a lot of excitement. Get some rest. We’ll see you both at breakfast!” With a nod he transferred Davijaan’s arm to Cody, and disappeared back up the stairs. Loren gave them both a quick hug before she followed, and Davijaan whispered a quiet thank you into her hair.

The walls of the twin’s room were covered in faded posters and poorly made hangings and quite a bit of dust. Davijaan knew Bereth and Evereth mostly lived at the quarry barracks, so maybe they just never got a chance to clean properly. At least there was nothing on the floor.

There were two beds. Cody deposited Davijaan on the one to the left of the door, and then hesitated.

He sat on the one to the right, and began to undo his boots.

Davijaan opened his mouth, and closed it. “What— what are you doing?”

“Don't want to kick your cast in the middle of the night.”

“I'd be fine.”

“I think I'd rather…”

“Alright.” He swallowed. “Alright.”

He got his single boot and his jacket off, and then managed to maneuver under the blankets. He was hungry and also nauseous, and he stank of sweat, and his whole body ached. He didn’t want to move. If he could just lay still for a few hours— not even sleep just lay there— maybe he’d want to do something about one or all of those problems.

He sighed. Shifted around trying to get comfortable. Cody turned out the light, and he heard the blankets rustle across the room as he got himself situated. He sighed again. “How come it’s only my leg that’s broken, but all of me hurts?”

“Don’t know.” He could picture the way Cody’s eyes would narrow in contemplation. “You bruised both your legs pretty badly, maybe that’s part of it.”

“Maybe.”

He stared up into the dark and tried to remember what had been on the poster over the head of the bed. He thought it might have been a building exploding. The mental image abruptly made him snicker. “This is so dumb.”

“What?”

“Cody.”

“I’m right here.”

“I slipped on the steps.”

“... Yes?”

“I slipped on the steps and broke my leg. Cody, I slipped on *ice.”*

Cody snorted. “You did in fact slip on ice.”

“No, you don’t get it. I slipped on ice, and broke my leg. What the fuck. This is the dumbest fucking injury I have ever— in my whole life— ice, Cody! *Ice!”*

Cody started laughing quietly, trying to muffle the noise in his pillow. Davijaan didn’t care anymore. “I walk up and down those damn steps every damn day! And today! Of all days! *I slipped on ice!”*

“I can’t believe—” Cody gasped, trying to control his breathing. “I can’t believe— you broke your leg walking home from work! Not even walking home, you *were* home! You were five feet from the front door!”

“I was five feet from the front door!”

Davijaan burst into hysterical giggles and slapped a hand over his mouth.

He and Cody laughed and laughed, trying to keep the noise down, until they were loose limbed and content, and then they slept.

Chapter 14

“It’s sort of working. It doesn’t hurt *as* bad.”

“But…”

“If you’re so concerned, I can just take another one!”

“But what happens if it’s too much?” Cody insisted, re-reading the label on the little green bottle of pills for the fifth time.

Davijaan threw his head back against the pillow and heaved a sigh, because unfortunately neither of them knew the answer, and he didn’t actually hurt bad enough to want to experiment.

Dr. Lin had prescribed some kind of medication he couldn’t pronounce to help with pain and inflammation, and she’d told them to stick with just a smidge higher than a regular Human dose for now until she could run some tests. Davijaan had wanted to tell her that wasn’t necessary, but he’d also wanted to stay on her good side. It always paid to be on the medic’s good side. “Would Yikes know?”

“I don’t know. Is it even the same kind of medication he used to work with?”

“Ask him.”

“I don’t have his—”

“Would Gregor?”

“Maybe.”

“Ask Gregor.”

“Fine. I’ll do that.” Cody turned to leave, and hesitated. “I don’t know how long it will take. Are you…?”

Davijaan crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s not like I have anything to do other than sit here and be miserable.”

When he’d tried to ask Mr. Yang about work at breakfast yesterday morning, he’d been informed that he was on sick leave for the next four weeks, and shouldn’t worry about a thing. He’d insisted that his leg would be back to normal in a tenday. Mr. Yang had shaken his head and gone on about taking the proper time to rest and recover, and listening to the doctor’s orders, and maybe asking the Feng’s boy to cover some of his shifts.

At the mention of Aron, Davijaan had given up. They could all do whatever they wanted. He didn’t care anymore.

Cody scowled and put the bottle back on the dresser. “Yell if you need anything,” he said, and stalked out of the bedroom.

The silence settled heavy over Davijaan. He wished there was a window.

They’d spent most of yesterday morning at the Yang’s, just talking quietly in the twin’s room while everyone else was at work. Bereth had peeked in once to ask if they needed anything.

Just before lunch Cody had walked down to the clinic and collected their speeder, and they’d gone home. They’re been a pile of slimy half cut vegetables on the counter from the night before that Cody’d washed and cleaned and returned to the conservator, and then they’d both eaten some jerky and stale bread, and gone back to bed.

Cody had slept on the couch. He’d said he didn’t want to jostle Davijaan’s cast, but Davijaan didn’t remember that being an issue when they were five.

It might be an issue now, if he was honest. He’d woken up an hour ago with his leg tangled painfully in the blanket. Now he was lying on top of the freshly made bed with a pillow under his left leg; swollen from toes to knee, the skin stretched tight over bruised flesh. The pressure of the cast was leaden. The medication took the edge off, but it still burned.

There was a stack of flimsi books, a datapad, and deck of cards on the floor next to the bed. Cody’s books. Davijaan’d never liked to read. He’d rather spend his time with real people than fake people, thank you very much. The datapad would make his headache worse. Cards were pointless without another player.

He lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling and wondered if asking Cody to come back down and sit with him was really something he needed.

His mind drifted from Cody to the other person he’d like to have sitting with him, and then to their last conversation.

He’d always thought of building as making a physical thing. A ship or a set of armor or a blaster. But she’d said people were putting their lives back together. Maybe she’d meant living required a plan and skill and effort. Some serious thought put into it.

He draped his arm over his eyes to block out the lamp light and wished he was any good at making things.

***

He must have fallen asleep again, because he woke up to Cody’s hand on his shoulder.

“Find Yikes?” he mumbled, blinking.

“I got his comm from Gregor, but he hasn’t responded to my message yet. Loren is here to see you.”

“Oh.”

“Do you want me to help you up the stairs, or tell her to come back later?”

Davijaan thought about it. “You can send her down here.”

Cody raised an eyebrow, but made his way out the door without comment.

Davijaan wanted to sit up and untangle his hair, but he also didn’t want to move. Oh well. She’d seen him worse.

He did try to get his hair out of his eyes. That was more or less a losing battle. When he heard footsteps on the stairs he gave up.

Loren hesitated in the doorway, one hand on the frame, gold eyes glinting in the lamplight. Her hair was down around her shoulders. She must have left her shawl upstairs, but she still had her bag.

“Hey.” He waved and tried to smile, very aware of how pathetic he looked and trusting she wasn’t just going to stand there and stare at him.

Her lip twitched in what was hopefully amusement, and she set her bag just inside the door. “Hello.” She inched a bit further into the room. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. For the most part.”

She came to stand at the side of the bed. “May I…”

He patted the spot next to him and she sat. Gingerly at first, and then she lay on her side, propping herself up on an elbow, careful to keep her socked feet away from his legs. He started to ask what the occasion was and then her cool hand was brushing his hair back, and he sighed, eyes fluttering closed.

She hummed; a short pleased sound he was sure he’d heard before. “Cody said you’d appreciate this.”

“Bastard.”

“I thought he was teasing, but he said…” Her hand stilled momentarily, and then she scratched along his hairline. “He said you asked for me when you got your broken fingers set?”

Davijaan went rigid, eyes snapping open. “I’m going to kill him.”

“Oh, don’t do that. I wouldn't be able to write my article!”

“He can live until it’s published, and not a *second* longer.”

She tipped her head back and laughed, and Davijaan relaxed. When she met his eyes again she seemed sad, her falling hair casting shadows across her jaw. “I’m sorry I didn’t say a proper goodbye.”

“Eh. I was pretty out of it. I wouldn’t have noticed.”

“Still. I’m sorry.”

He shrugged, and smiled up at her. “Turns out we didn’t need a goodbye, so I’m not complaining.”

She smiled back, small and still a little sad, and then pulled her hand away and lay down properly, curling around him with one arm across his chest. “I’m glad you’re ok.”

“Me too,” he said, quietly, to himself, and tentatively traced the back of her hand. “This brings back happy memories,” he said, tone light and teasing.

She snorted and poked his ribs. “That’s not funny.”

“Not trying to be funny.” He attempted to keep his focus on the ceiling, on the blankets; but found himself leaning into the press of her all along his side. “It really was… nice, to have you there. Despite everything.”

“I was pretty useless.”

“But you were there.”

“I suppose.” Gently, she turned her hand over so he could hold it. “I think that went both ways. I felt so bad that you’d been captured, but I was so relieved to have someone to talk to. To have someone who understood what was happening.”

“I…” He flushed, remembering his first impressions and resolutions in the new context of their friendship. “Honestly, I was more annoyed than anything else. I thought I was going to have to do damage control. Make sure the poor civilian wasn’t going to crack under the pressure.”

“Well,” she said, chagrined. “You weren't wrong.”

“In some ways, but. I thought I was going to die, on Umbara. And having someone— having you— with me, facing it all with me, made it easier.”

“... Oh.”

Shifting a bit— not to get closer, just to get comfortable— he cleared his throat, and carefully said, “I’ve been thinking, about that stuff you said, about rebuilding. And, I— I really don’t know what I’m doing. I was supposed to die. We were all supposed to die. And then we didn’t. And it feels… Odd. Like nothing matters anymore.”

He thought of Fox, and Cody, and wondered if going through the motions of living out of habit was really any better than refusing to be a part of something pointless.

“I do things because— because what else is there to do, except fill time before I die?”

“You’re not going to die.”

“Sure about that?”

Her arm tightened around his chest. “You’re not going to die any time soon.”

“It’s not like I want to, I’m just… expecting to. Waiting to. Like it’s going to happen any day now, and then it never does. We got back from the clinic and I felt— surprised, I guess. That I keep getting hurt but not killed.”

“Odd Ball, I…” She pulled away and sat up, kneeling beside him. She studied him, mouth a thin line and brow creased in concern. “Have you talked to anybody about this? Maybe Cody?”

He blinked. “No? We don’t usually, uh, need to talk about this sort of thing. Or maybe clones don’t. We all grow up waiting for the same things.” His eyes slid off her face and back to the ceiling. She was still holding his hand. He wished she’d lie down again, so he didn’t have to face her. He opened his mouth. Closed it.

“One of our batchmates died when we were ca–kids," he said, even and deliberate. "Died in his sleep. He’d hit his head, and— anyway. He was in with Cody. Sharing a pod. When Cody woke up, he started screaming.” He'd been terrified. Alone in his pod and so scared he couldn't move, couldn't breath. He'd lain there for what felt like hours, waiting.

He didn’t know why he was telling her this. Maybe because he’d never told anybody.

“When the screaming stopped, when I opened my pod, an alert had gone off somewhere and some long-necks had come, and they were pulling Tapper out of Cody’s arms.”

When he dared to look at her, Loren’s eyes had gone wide and glassy, her grip on his hand bruising. “And you saw?” she asked, voice hoarse. He hoped she wasn’t going to cry.

“I saw.” He smiled. “First corpse, you know? Firsts are always special.”

Her mouth fell open in shock. “Stop that,” she said, sharp.

“Sorry.” The smile dropped, and he tried to pull his hand away but her grip was too tight. “I can stop talking about this. This probably isn’t something you want to— I should have asked, if—”

“It’s ok, it’s ok. I’m…” She abruptly released his hand; wiped her eyes and cleared her throat. “Thank you. For giving me that memory. I’m sorry you had to— to go through that.”

“Eh.” He shrugged, feeling awkward and unsure but also achingly relieved. “Everybody lost a few batchmates. We’d lost one before. But it was different, with Tapper. I guess, seeing him, I understood that would be me, in a few years. Understood, death happens right in your face. And it’s bloody, and there’s screaming.”

Loren wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth, jaw tight and hands curled into fists. He wanted to sit up and— something. Hug her, hold her, tell her it didn’t matter. It had happened years ago. He’d seen so many deaths since then, what was one more cadet?

He lay still, and waited.

Finally, she straightened. Took a deep breath, and let it out slow.

“My grandma died in her sleep,” she said, voice even but rough, gaze distant. “One night she went to bed next to my grandpa, like always, and didn’t wake up in the morning. We all miss her. I miss her. But, her death was peaceful.”

She looked down at him, and her eyes were shining, determined. “I don’t know everything that’s going to happen over the course of your life, but you are not going to die in violence and blood,” she said, firm; a vow or a promise. “You will die at home, surrounded by people who love you, and nobody will be screaming.”

He swallowed, looked away. “Sure about that?”

“The war is over, and you’re alive. And you’re going to keep right on living until your body’s had enough of the sun. You hear me?”

“I…”

“Odd Ball.” She leaned forward and took his head in her hands and forced him to face her, palms cold and bracing like mountain wind. “Do you hear me?”

“... I hear you.”

All the tension drained out of her body at once, and she slumped forward to lay across his chest, burying her face in his neck. Cautiously, he wrapped his arms around her waist and held her. Something in him settled.

“I still don’t know what to do with all this time.”

Her breath tickled his neck. “I thought you said you came to Pantora to figure that out.”

“Sort of? I wasn’t thinking about building.” Hoping he wasn’t crossing a line, he splayed one hand over the small of her back and started stroking up and down her spine. “Mostly I wanted to find a place to just be, until… I don’t know.” His hand slowed. “Living isn’t something I ever let myself think about. It makes more sense, the way you said it. The idea that you actually have to put some thought into it. But the thing is, flying is… important to me. But it’s not…”

“The most important?”

“I don’t know.”

She propped herself up on her elbows so she could look at him again. Her nose was inches from his and he focused very hard on not looking at her lips. “I think all that matters about living is that you enjoy it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What happened to wanting your work to matter?”

“If you enjoy it, then it matters to you, doesn’t it?”

“I guess.”

“Work and living are separate things, sort of. I enjoy my life. Even if I never wrote again I would still find things to enjoy. But the reason I enjoy my work is because I can see it having an impact on other people’s lives.”

He thought about the villages scattered all through the sister mountains and the faces of the villagers as they helped him unload cargo, and he thought he understood what she meant.

A small smile spread across her face, and with a contented hum she settled back against his chest.

They lay like that for a long time, her breath ghosting over his neck and his hand pressed to the center of her back. She smelled like stone and snow and sweat. He was in danger of falling asleep again, and he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to miss a single second of this.

He was fighting the urge to yawn when her comm went off inside her bag. She heaved an annoyed sigh and slowly extracted herself from his arms. Instead of taking her comm out she grabbed the whole bag and came back to sit on the side of the bed. In the stark blue glow her face was vivid and drawn.

“Pa wants to know if he ought to bring us all lunch,” she said, dry. “I suppose I’d better tell him I’m on my way home before Cody’s clean kitchen is invaded. Unless you’d rather—”

“No, no.” He tried to recreate the Jedi handwave of nonchalance. “You go. Cody and I will sort ourselves out.”

“If you’re sure.” She stood and slung her bag over her shoulder. Something about the movement brought to mind holstering a blaster. “I’ll probably drop by tomorrow after work. I can bring something with me then?”

“I’m not opposed.”

She smiled, and leaned over the bed to brush his hair back once more. “It was really good to see you. Goodbye, for now.”

As she turned to leave he levered himself up and caught her wrist. She glanced back over her shoulder, puzzled. He opened his mouth. Closed it. Swallowed hard. “I think you should tell your family about Umbara.”

She stiffened, face suddenly blank. “I don’t want to.”

“But you should.”

She looked away.

Releasing her wrist, he sat up properly and winced as the movement dragged his leg off the pillow. “It’s not good to— to face that kind of thing alone. And you’ll always have me, but.

The more people the better. At least tell your parents. The more people who know, and maybe understand, the more it doesn't feel like something to be ashamed of. And it's not. You didn't crack under the pressure."

He'd never had to tell anybody things about himself, because his siblings and friends had always been with him. They'd seen, and they'd known. They'd experienced everything together. But he was starting to understand the way these things could fester, if they weren't spoken aloud.

She stood there for a moment longer, and then she turned and cupped his cheek and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Thank you," she whispered, and took a step back.

Before she could walk away he caught her wrist and kissed her palm.

He looked up to find her gaping at him, cheeks flushed and eyes wide. Before he could find something to say she tugged her hand away and left.

***

Davijaan maneuvered himself to sit up against the headboard and by the time Cody came back down he'd spent a solid hour reviewing everything he could have, would have, or should have said before Loren left. If she'd just waited two seconds, maybe he'd have been able to choke something about— about—

"Told Yikes what the medication was," Cody announced, leaning against the doorframe. "He said a double dose would be fine, just probably make you pass out. He said to try a dose and a half first."

"Hmph."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. Give me the damn bottle."

Cody did not give him the damn bottle. Cody checked the time and said it was early but they could probably risk it, and then gave him a whole pill and the larger half of a broken pill. Davijaan swallowed them and then tried to get his legs over the side of the bed.

"Hey!" Cody scrambled to stop him. "That's going to take a minute to work, idiot."

"I want to go outside."

Cody huffed, but carried him up the stairs. There were covered dishes he did not recognize on the table.

"Did you go somewhere while I was asleep?"

"What?" Cody glanced up from where he was doing the buckles on Davijaan's single boot, and followed his gaze to the table. "Oh. No, Mx. Calen brought that over? Some of it. The

blue bowl. Has some kind of sweet soup in it. Loren brought dumplings. Found the plate of cookies on the porch."

"... Oh." He was still trying to puzzle out why people were suddenly bringing them food, and if it had something to do with him breaking a leg then what exactly was the connection, as he shrugged on his jacket and limped out the door.

The cold wind on his face made it easier to breathe. It had snowed again last night; covered over all the muddy scuffs from his fall in white. He tipped his head back and gazed at the curve of the pale blue sky and wondered how he'd managed to live his whole life without this.

"Sorry." He leaned against Cody and the porch railing, and didn't take his eyes off the sky. "Wasn't annoyed at you."

"Uhuh." Cody brought his arm up around Davijaan's ribs to brace him better. "Did Loren do something? She seemed upset when she left."

Of course she did. Because he hadn't asked or anything, he'd just— but she'd— first! She'd done it first! But maybe she hadn't meant it like—

He thunked his head against Cody's shoulder and groaned. "It's nothing."

"It's *something."*

"It's nothing I want to talk about. With you. Right now." Cody could tease about hands all he wanted, but Davijaan had no intention of outright saying he was sweet on Loren until he had a plan of action.

Cody had never met anyone he was sweet on before.

"... Alright."

They stood in silence until Davijaan's knee began to cramp from holding his foot above the snow dusted boards.

As they shuffled their way back inside Davijaan said, "Loren wants to write about you."

Cody stumbled, and caught them both before they fell face down on the doorstep. "What?"

"Or, she's already written an article about you, and wants to rewrite it."

Cody closed the door harder than he needed to.

They took their jackets off and then sat down so Cody could remove their three boots. Davijaan waited until he was working on a sticky buckle— one of them ought to get their armor repair kit up here and fix it, but they never remembered— to say, "I think you should let her."

Cody's hands stilled, and then resumed. "Why?" he said, voice flat.

He shrugged. “Mostly because I think it would be funny to see a picture of a clone on the front page of a news article. But, also, it would be— It would mean something to the rest of us. To the galaxy. Just to have a document somewhere that says, here’s this random clone, and this is who he was and this is what he did. Something that’s not a military report.”

“Huh,” said Cody, and then he didn’t speak again for the rest of the day.

***

Cody kept sleeping on the couch. It felt odd to not be in the same bed, or even in the same room. Davijaan was pretty sure it wasn’t the cast, but he wasn’t sure how to ask outright.

He was surprised to find he didn't mind. It took some getting used to, but the distance at night meant he started looking forward to seeing Cody at first meal.

***

Dr. Lin was *flabbergasted*— and Davijaan had to work hard not to laugh at the contrast between her frown and her shock— when she ran a scanner over his leg at the one week mark and found the break was mostly healed.

“Sun above. You two *are* fully Human?”

He and Cody spent an awkward fifteen minutes trying to explain what exactly they were, and at the end of it the shock was gone and the frown looked thunderous.

“Hm,” she said, and removed the cast with deft hands. She gave him an adjustable splint and told him he still couldn’t walk on it for another week at least, and then followed them out to the reception desk to move their appointment for their physicals up by a tenday.

***

When they arrived home they found the ice had been scraped off the steps, and thin strips of black plastoid with short dull spikes all down the length had been nailed in rows on each step. Davijaan had seen similar plastoid strips on some steps in the village. It wasn’t until he saw them on his own steps that he realized they were an ice deterrent.

There was a box of Mr. Yang’s dumplings at the door.

***

Loren visited every day. Sometimes for minutes, sometimes for hours. Usually they sat on the couch upstairs and she tried— and failed— to teach him to knit, and he tried— and failed— to find a way to bring up the kiss and explain himself.

One day as he struggled to find where he’d dropped a stitch she said, calm and conversational, “I told my parents.”

Ah. “What did they say?”

“Not much. Mostly cried. Ma cried.”

“Ah.”

“It went better than I was expecting. And. I do feel better.” She found the stitch for him, walked him through how to fix it, and that was that.

***

The next day they had supper at the Yangs.

It’d been a tenday, and Dr. Lin, baffled but pleased, had finally cleared him to walk on his own two feet again. There was a particular satisfaction in walking up a set of steps after having been carried down them two weeks ago.

After the hellos and how are yous at the door, Mr. Yang pulled Davijaan into the kitchen and into a crushing hug. “I’d wondered, when Lo was so vague about how you’d met, but…” He took a step back and gripped Davijaan’s shoulders tight. “You are an incredibly brave young man. Thank you for taking care of my daughter.”

Davijaan flushed. “I– Thank you, sir, but I didn’t do anything, really. She was the one taking care of me.”

“Nonsense, utter nonsense,” he said, releasing Davijaan with a firm shake. “You took care of each other.”

His eyes were damp. Something caught in Davijaan’s throat, so he could only nod in response.

Later, when they sat down, Loren slipped her hand into his under the table. He glanced over at her, surprised. She looked nervous, her lips drawn in a thin line, and she glanced meaningfully between him and her pa. He nodded, and smiled, and squeezed her hand.

When he tried to pull away she squeezed right back, and they held hands under the table all through the meal.

Chapter 15

The week before Loren left was miserable.

She was absolutely ecstatic to be getting out of her parent's house, and the whole family was relieved that she'd still be close, but Davijaan didn't have the courage to ask about anything more than superficial details. He was happy for her, really.

"It's just that I know a lot is going to change," he tried to explain to Cody one evening as they cleaned up from supper. "We're still going to be friends, I don't think anything could change that at this point. But what if she starts acting like Hawk and only comms me every six months? What if she's so busy she doesn't want me to visit? She'd have to come up to visit her family sometimes, right? I'd at least get to see her then, right?"

Cody heaved a sign and loudly scraped the last of the stew into a bowl. Davijaan snatched the pot away from him and started scrubbing. "Sometimes friends take breaks," he said, shoving the bowl into the conservator. "I haven't talked to Rex in forever. So what. I'll comm him again sometime and ask how he's been, and we'll be fine. So what if you don't see her for a few months? Spend your time with someone else. What was his name? Teren? With the dots?"

"His name is *Aron,* and they're not— they're… hm." The cluster of five small circles on his cheeks did rather look like dots. He turned off the water and put the clean pot on the counter. "That's not the point."

"Davijaan. It's fine." Cody sounded confused and exasperated and he cringed, knowing he shouldn't be as worried about this as he was. "She'll be an hour away."

"I know, I know. But I'm still going to miss her. A lot. And I don't know— and. Well. I'm…"

… Might as well. At this point he just felt silly keeping this to himself. He ran a finger through the water pooling on the counter from the dripping pot. "I'm sort of sweet on her. Have been. For a while now. Um. Since she moved back here."

Silence. After a few seconds he forced himself to turn around and look.

Cody's expression was hard and cold as ice.

"So Wolffe's not delusional," he bit out. "Good to know."

Davijaan stiffened. "What did Wolffe—"

"He said you were sweet on her, and to keep an eye out. I said he was talking out of his ass, because you would have told me something like that."

"I was going to, I just…" he gestured helplessly, trying to encompass the enormity of his distraction for the last year. Cody's expression softened into something hurt.

“It’s not like you had to tell me, but why didn’t you?” he asked, low. “You always did before.”

“You weren’t like this before.” Cody flinched. Davijaan took a step towards him and then stopped, standing awkwardly next to the sink. “I’m sorry. But you were so unhappy. And it felt… wrong to tell you about all the good things happening to me. Especially when… when I didn’t want to include you in all of them.”

If Cody hadn’t come upstairs that day, he didn’t know when he would have tried to introduce them. He was happy his brothers liked Loren, and happy Loren liked his brothers. But their friendship hadn’t been something he’d wanted to share.

“That’s not how this works.” Cody slowly shook his head. “That’s not… I would have been happy. To know you were happy.”

“Would you?”

He looked away.

“Cody… Cody, you hardly talked to me for months when we moved.” He took another step forward. And another and another, until he was standing close enough to touch. “You teased when I told you I’d found Loren again, but you didn’t ask about her. You didn’t ask me anything about anything.”

“I would have been angry.” Cody finally met his eyes, distant and sad. “I would have been happy too, but…”

“I know.”

“It made me so angry that you were— you were fine, and I wasn’t, and you could do things, and I couldn’t. Angry at myself, mostly.” His gaze sharped. “I don’t think I’m angry anymore, but I’m not sure what I feel instead.”

They stood there for a moment longer, just looking at each other. It felt like he was seeing Cody again for the first time, in the yellow lamp light in their house in the mountains. His face was so familiar, every line and curve and expression and scar, and yet the strangeness of the last year seemed to have warped it into something unrecognizable.

After a long while, he reached out and grabbed Cody’s sleeve, and tugged him over to the couch. He sat them both down almost on top of each other, and then they just sat, watching shards of sunset cut through the open window and across their dusty red rug.

The silence was overwhelming. Davijaan wanted to say something— to drown it out, to distract from it— but he didn’t know what. And he knew that would help him more than it would help Cody.

Just as he was starting to dread sitting like this for the whole evening, Cody snorted, and elbowed him in the stomach, and asked, “Remember when you came crashing into my cabin going on about General Kenobi?”

“He saved my life, asshole!” Davijaan cuffed the back of his head none too gently. “Swooped in and *saved my life!* I'm allowed—”

“I can't *believe* you like his accent.”

“It's distinguished.”

“It's *annoying.”*

“You just got tired of listening to him talk all day.” Davijaan huffed. “I’m sure if you heard it in the correct context, such as a gentle reassurance that you were doing fine and hadn’t actually made a mess of the mission… You see?”

Cody laughed, and relaxed, and then shifted around so he could look Davijaan in the eye.

“Mr. Yang offered me Loren’s old job,” he said, easy as anything. “He said Maraso doesn’t want to go back to doing it full time.”

Davijaan raised an eyebrow and tried not to look flabbergasted. “And?”

“I said I’d think about it. It’s mostly flimsiwork. Which I know I can do.”

“Huh.” He leaned back into the couch so he could comfortably take more of Cody’s weight. “Do you want to?”

“Maybe? I want to do something. I feel like I *can* do something, finally. Like…” He pressed a hand against his chest, and then curled it into a fist and let it fall against his side. “Not sure if I want that something to be more flimsiwork.”

“I think you should look for a job. Somewhere else. I think, I think—” He blinked and cleared his throat. “Maybe Mx. Calen will hire you to dust bookshelves.”

“Maybe.” Cody cracked a smile. “We’re going to be here for a long time, aren’t we?”

“I hope so.”

“I hope so too.”

***

Loren moved to Kyurem on a clear day so cold Davijaan’s eyes stung when he blinked.

The only ones scheduled to work that day were him and Maraso, so the rest of the family could help her move. He was handling Mrs. Yang’s passenger flights again so they could take *Glimmer* for the luggage. Loren had a lot more than a single stack of crates this time around, and he helped her and the twins load the cargo hold while Mr. Yang settled some flimsiwork details with Maraso.

Before the family boarded, Loren, grinning maniacally and practically vibrating from excitement, flung herself at him for a hug. She squeezed him so tight for a split second he

thought she was going to try and pick him up, and then she started giggling and rocking them back and forth and then he started giggling too because what was she even *doing*— But she was happy, and settled down after a few seconds of giggles, and finally loosened her hold on his waist and stepped back to look at him properly.

“You have to come visit,” she declared, beaming.

He swallowed hard. She made it sound so simple. “Of course I’ll come visit.”

“Every week.”

“Every week?” He snorted. “Sure you’re not tired of me yet? We’ve seen each other almost every day for the last six months.”

“I will never be tired of you.” And then she kissed him on the cheek and danced up the gangplank, calling over her shoulder— “I’ll see you in a week, Odd Ball!”

He stood stock still in the middle of the hangar while the rest of the family boarded until Maraso, smiling, tugged him into the office to get out of the way of take off.

***

Cody asked around at a few different places, but it turned out that Mx. Wu was delighted by the prospect of having him dust their bookshelves. He wasn’t paid much, and only worked two days a week, but he always came home smiling.

***

Because of their work and because of their somewhat regular appointments with Dr. Lin and also because Loren was gone and they had nothing better to do, he and Cody started spending more time in the village. Sometimes they ran errands, sometimes they explored. Sometimes together, sometimes on their own.

Usually people made a point to stop them and say hello. Occasionally they spoke in Pantoran, and smiled at his and Cody’s stumbling responses, and said they were glad to see them settling in.

The grocer started recommending things they hadn’t bought yet, especially meats, telling them what it was and how to cook it and its whole history as a traditional Pantoran food. Cody persuaded Davijaan to start walking home from work with him, and the first time he showed up at the pristine library Mx. Wu gave him an extended tour and asked what his favorite genre was. When he said he didn’t like to read they gave him such a horrified look that he ended up going home with a healthy dose of shame, a laughing brother, and a stack of audio novels of all genres.

The young father with the crying child came into the Yang’s village office to schedule a flight while Davijaan was there doing flimsiwork, and ended up staying and asking him about how he’d enjoyed Tyan’s Night and informing him that yes, there had indeed been something in

the tea. He never mentioned his name, but spoke freely about his child and his work and the ice fishing trip he was planning as though Davijaan already had all the context he needed.

It wasn't that people hadn't gone out of their way to speak to him before. They had, often and insistently, especially in the early days, and it had almost driven him away from the village completely. But it was different, now. There was something almost fond in their attention. It wasn't all distantly curious questions about him and his life; they talked about themselves and their lives and about the village, and their willingness to share made it a little easier for him to share in return.

***

A few weeks after Loren moved, Aron invited him out for drinks on his next off day.

"There's a couple of us try and meet up every other tenday or so," he'd said, ernest but clearly trying not to be overwhelming. "Mostly old school friends. It'll be good to have a new face."

Kyurem seemed like a long way to go for a drink, but he was going to be down there anyway to see Loren, and he was genuinely curious as to what this part of Pantora had to offer in terms of bars and clubs and related company. He hadn't bothered to explore on his own, because that wasn't the point of going out for drinks, but if he was invited…

He arrived late and left early. He didn't dare get even tipsy, but he was surprised by how little it took to get Aron and the other Pantorans loud and laughing. He did eat a lot of fried food and met a half a dozen new people— who already knew exactly who he was, because there were only two humans living in Amaura and that was a novelty all on its own. He was surprised to find he was more amused than annoyed by this point.

He got along well with Aron's friend Onnero. They spent a solid hour discussing the quality of the hiking trails around Amaura, which he was pleased to discover he knew enough about to discuss for a solid hour. Another of Aron's friends, Dellen, asked him if he had any good stories from the war. He deflected, and nobody asked again, and he thought maybe he wouldn't mind coming to the next one.

***

Since the visit Davijaan and Wolffe commed each other almost every day, and he still got the occasional message from Hawk and Jesse and even Gregor. He was pretty sure Cody had started sending his daily and weekly check in messages again too, because he started to bring up Rex and Fox and Gregor in conversation more often; mentioning what they were up to or asking if Davijaan remembered that-time-when. And once—

"I talked to Kenobi today."

Davijaan almost fell flat on his face as he fought with a boot. "What!? How?"

"Over the comm, like normal people."

“Jedi don’t count as one of those.” Davijaan frowned at the stuck buckle. “Are you sure any of us count as one of those?”

“There’s got to be some kind of line.”

“Fair enough. How’s Kenobi? What did he want?”

“He’s fine. Just wanted to make sure we hadn’t died yet.”

Davijaan snorted and started picking at the metal joint.

He’d never outright said it, but back in command track Cody hadn’t had high hopes for his future Jedi general. Or for the Jedi, in general. Or maybe it had been ‘17 who hadn’t had high hopes. Cody and ‘17 had seemed to have a lot of the same opinions.

Kenobi had basically set all his expectations on fire. While Cody’d rarely had anything nice to say about the man, he’d begrudgingly decided to respect him in truth a few months into the ordeal of their partnership.

“Fantastic. Glad he hasn’t kicked the bucket. Again. Will you come help me—”

And Cody got the armor repair kit and helped him fix the buckle, and didn’t mention Kenobi again that evening.

***

He did end up visiting Loren once a week. Or she would come up to spend time with family, and visit him. Really the only things that changed were they had more to talk about and less interruptions, and he was so relieved he didn’t know how to put it into words.

He liked her apartment. It was the third story of a three story building; all one room except for the fresher. It was big, and full of her things— bright yellow and green and blue woven hangings and shelves of datapads and books and a desk with mountain peaks carved on it— and her.

They would sit on the low couch and sometimes she would try to teach him a game or a craft, and sometimes Fenna would come up from her apartment and join them and laugh at Davijaan’s inability to count stitches.

Sometimes they would just talk. About work, about their families, about Pantora. Sometimes about the planets they’d visited during the war.

She had so many stories of interesting people she’d met and the interesting things they’d had to say, both on Coruscant and off. The professor who’d hated her writing style and tried to fail her because she wouldn’t change it; the old man who used to stand outside of the CorNN building and curse the Republic and harass the employees as they came and went; the old woman who served a meal of bark tea and stale bread in the ruins of her former home when Loren arrived to interview her.

He didn’t have many stories, having set foot on few planets outside of Coruscant, but he would describe the colors of the skies he’d seen. The purple and orange sunset of Teth, the dusty beige horizon of Boz Pity, the grey and blue clouds of Cato Neimoidia. He never brought up Kamino, and she never asked.

Every time they said goodbye she kissed him on the cheek.

***

The Yangs kept having them over for supper. Every week.

Davijaan wasn’t sure why Mr. Yang always insisted, but the food was good, and there was never any rush to be anywhere, and fewer Yangs overall to contend with. So it was actually sort of relaxing. And usually family suppers were on days Loren was visiting.

One day shortly after the snow banks had started to melt around the edges, Davijaan and Cody arrived mid-morning at the Yangs for a cooking lesson.

Davijaan had only agreed to come the once, and he spent most of the two hour period watching Cody and Mr. Yang prep and stuff half a dozen grouse and trying not to burn the sauce he was in charge of. Unfortunately he’d never been good at multitasking.

Mr. Yang was as talkative as ever, but he was softer than he usually was at work. Davijaan didn’t know if it was being in his own home or being with Cody. He spoke a little bit about everything— an upcoming vote on the school budget, an old friend grieving his wife’s death, how the quarry operated, how his business was run, what he planned to plant in his garden boxes in the spring.

Cody asked clarifying questions, but for the most part listened. For lack of anything better to do, Davijaan listened too, and tried to put faces to the names in Mr. Yang’s stories.

Loren was visiting that day, and at one point she peaked into the kitchen and grinned knowingly at him. He wasn’t sure what the joke was but he liked being in on it.

Instead of going home and coming back later for supper, he and Cody stayed at the Yang’s house all afternoon. They ate the grouse and tubers and burnt sauce for lunch and then spent hours picking over the leftovers and talking with Loren and the twins about everything and nothing.

There was a whole lot of talking about nothing involved in all these new acquaintances, or friendships, or whatever they were making with the people of Amaura. But Davijaan knew enough about talking to break a dangerous silence and talking to use up empty time and talking to distract from pain to know that nobody ever really talked about nothing. This wasn’t so much talking about nothing as it was an invitation to talk back.

That night after supper and clean up, the family migrated to the living area, and took Davijaan and Cody with them.

Cody was engaged in quiet conversation with Loren’s grandfather, and Loren herself ended up sitting between her brothers and arguing about some holofilm she’d sworn she’d never watch. Davijaan couldn’t quite hear what was being said but it was loud and enthusiastic.

Mrs. Yang’s lip twitched when he caught her watching him watch Loren, and she beckoned for him to come sit with her. He did, just a little bit scared, and she took one of his hands in both of her own and turned to face him fully.

“Did my daughter ever tell you why I moved here?” she asked, quiet, a faint smile softening her features.

“No.” He shifted, feeling incredibly awkward in the face of her calm. “Your— Mr. Yang said you needed a change of scenery, and you liked the mountains.”

“Yes. And no.” She tilted her head in brief acknowledgement. “I was in an accident. The hyperdrive malfunctioned and threw us into realspace hard enough to break a wing. One of my passengers died.”

Davijaan’s horror must have shown on his face, because she stopped to pat his hand. The thin lines around her eyes deepened.

“I couldn't fly anymore after that,” she continued, quiet, steady. “My parents convinced me to get out of the city, explore the planet. See new things and make new memories. The mountains were my last stop. I spent three days here, and fell in love.”

He blinked. “With Mr. Yang?”

“Later.” She patted his hand again, her smile returning, her eyes starting to glow. “Dhanse came into my life much, much later. First, I fell in love with the sky.”

***

Spring in the mountains was cold and wet and wretched. Overnight snow storms turned into rain showers, and snow banks became sheets of ice as they melted to slush and then re-froze, and melted and re-froze and melted and re-froze for a tenday until the night time temperatures finally settled above freezing.

Once everything stopped freezing solid all over again every night, wet and wretched became wet and disgusting. The yard underneath the snow was soft and muddy and liable to hold boots captive until they could be freed by inconvenienced brothers. The formerly dry river overflowed its banks and washed out part of the dirt road, which wasn’t dirt anymore so much as a very long mudslide.

Davijaan hated it. Everything was dripping all the time, usually on him, and everything was filthy which meant that *he* was filthy, *all the time.*

But the tundra was a bright, new green. It even smelled green. Like Pantoran tea but also like dirt and bruised leaves and damp moss. There were dandelions blooming along the road and the pine trees had bright new growth. As the sun rose earlier and earlier and set later and later

he walked to and from work every day, damn the mud, and just reveled in how good everything smelled. He usually arrived home sneezing so bad he couldn't see straight, but it was worth it.

On one such afternoon after he'd heaved himself up the steps, pausing on every third one to sneeze, he was greeted on the porch by both Cody and Loren.

Cody had the audacity to laugh— as if he hadn't seen Davijaan sneezing his brains out every day for the last three weeks— but ushered him inside and took his jacket. Davijaan kicked his boots off and then Loren turned the sink on and helped him drink some water and wash his face, which mostly fixed the problem.

"You really ought to ask a doctor about this," she said, concerned, handing him a dishcloth.

Davijaan grunted and finished cleaning himself up, having no intentions of asking Dr. Lin about anything he didn't have to. It was just sneezing. Something dusty in the air. He was fine. They'd all be sneezing too if they walked around outside as much as he did.

"I'm fine," he said, folding the cloth and hesitating to set it back next to the sink. It ought to go in the wash. "Good to see you. Thought you weren't coming up this week?" He was supposed to go down to see her tomorrow, but he wasn't about to complain about an extra visit.

She took the cloth from him and set it on the side of the table closest to the stairs, so somebody would remember to carry it down. "I had the day off, and Cody wanted to ask me some questions, so here I am."

She'd gotten another part time job keeping books at a merchant's warehouse, and spent all the rest of her time writing and editing and sending articles all over. A few had been accepted, but none had really taken off yet. She'd said it could take years, though they both hoped it wouldn't.

"Questions about what?" He looked at Cody, surprised.

"About the article." Cody looked back, steady and even and with just the slightest hint of, 'don't question me, I know what I'm doing.' Davijaan rolled his eyes.

"Just about the interview process, and where I intend to send it. Things like that."

"Wanted to know the details before I agreed to anything."

Davijaan froze. "Wait, are you…?"

Cody's head tilted slightly. "I'm thinking about it."

"Oh." He swallowed. "Good."

He offered Davijaan a smile that might have been a smirk and might have been a grimace.

“Well.” Loren started collecting her bag and poncho. “If that’s all, I should probably head back. I didn’t tell my parents I was coming up and if anybody sees me on the road I’m going to get all sorts of nosy questions.”

Cody huffed a laugh. “That’s all. And thank you, again.”

“It was my pleasure. See you at supper?”

“Next week,” he confirmed, and went to get the door for her.

On her way out, she paused in front of Davijaan. “And I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said, and hesitated, and then leaned forward to kiss his cheek.

His face flushed, but he managed to nod, and return her smile, and watch her walk out the door without making a fool of himself.

When the door shut he turned and found Cody gaping at him. “What the hell was *that?”*

He crossed his arms over his chest and glared. “What did it look like?”

“That—” he gestured to his cheek “— was a very natural and practiced gesture. You didn’t even flinch.”

“And?”

“Davijaan.”

He sighed, letting his arms fall to his sides. “She just… started doing it. A while ago.”

“You said you were sweet on her and left it at that! You didn’t tell me she—”

“She’s not!”

Cody sputtered.

“She hasn’t said anything!” Davijaan threw his hands up, exasperated. “It’s probably really fucking obvious how I feel. She probably knows. She probably would have said something if she felt the same way.”

“You can’t just make assumptions, blockhead! You have to confirm crucial information yourself!”

“This is not a campaign!”

“It's not *not* a campaign!”

Davijaan let his head fall back and groaned. “Cody.”

“Davijaan.” Cody narrowed his eyes. “Have you told her?”

“No,” he forced out through gritted teeth.

“I cannot believe—” Cody spun on his heel and started pacing the floor. “All this time I thought— You implied— You should have clarified—” He planted himself in front of Davijaan again and waved a hand at the door. “Tell her! Ask her. See what she says.”

“No.”

“If you didn’t have the decency to tell me you can at least tell her!”

“I don’t want to.”

“Davi. Come *on.”*

He buried his face in his hands and groaned again. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m telling you what to do! I’m telling you to *talk to her!”*

“And then what!” He looked up at Cody, feeling a little bit like the floor was about to fall out from under his feet, throat dry and heart pounding. “After the talking, then what? I don’t know— I don’t know the rules of engagement. I can’t make a plan of action. And she matters too much for me to— to not think about this.”

Cody raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “I bet she knows the rules.”

Davijaan said nothing. Cody stepped forward and slipped a hand under his shirt and tickled him.

Shrieking and flailing, Davijaan collapsed into a heap on the rug. Cody followed to keep tickling him.

“I bet there are tons of rules,” Cody grinned, mercilessly tormenting Davijaan’s poor, poor sides. “I bet you’ll have to ask all sorts of embarrassing questions to figure them out. I bet you get laughed at a few times. In fact, I think I’m gonna comm Fox and set a bet for—”

Breathless with laughter, Davijaan smacked at his face. “Do *not.”* If he told Fox, Fox would tell Wolffe. And then his life would be over.

“Like you could stop me.” Cody caught his wrist and pinned it. “Now hold still.” His free hand found the back of Davjaan’s neck and *pinched.* Davijaan thrashed and squealed. “I’ve been neglecting my brotherly duties.”

Davijaan kneed him in the stomach and when he bent over, gasping, grabbed onto his shirt and pulled him down onto the rug. “Stop! We’re done! We’re done, you bastard.”

Cody grumbled and groaned, but stopped. They lay side by side on the floor regaining their breath, giggling off and on, lungs and stomachs aching.

Flinging a hand in Davijaan’s face, Cody panted— “You want to know what I think?”

“No.”

“I think you’re thinking about this too much.”

“Leave me alone.”

“You don’t know how she feels, you don't know the rules— you’re only working with half the information you need. Obviously you can’t make a plan. Gathering information is the first step.”

“This really, *really* is not a campaign.”

“I thought you’d talked to her about this already."

"Now who's making assumptions?"

"How have you not talked to her about this?”

Davijaan thumped his head against the floor. “She probably had all sorts of people falling at her feet on Coruscant. She probably has all sorts of expectations!”

Cody levered himself up on his elbows. “Probably. But you’re not going to know what her expectations are until you *ask.* You should go do that by the way. Right now.”

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

“She just left!”

“So she’ll have time to get home and put her things away before you come pounding on her door to confess your undying love.”

“Shut up.”

“You do, thought, right? Lo—”

Davijaan rolled over and shoved his face into the rug.

When he let Cody back up for air, he was laughing.

“Where do you even get lines like that!?”

“Well, if you ever bothered to read a book, maybe—”

“No!" Davijaan shoved him back down. "Forget I asked.”

Eventually he let Cody get up, and let Cody pull him up, and then slumped on the couch and contemplated turning into a hunk of rock. Or maybe a pile of mud. That way Cody wouldn’t try to touch him again.

Cody stood directly in front of him and crossed his arms. “You know why you should tell her?”

“Will you stop?”

“Because you never got the chance to tell anybody else.”

And, he hadn’t. But that wasn’t just because leave was short and his feelings faded fast, it was…

“It's different with her.” He swallowed, looked away, caught himself and looked back. “It’s not just, you know. Fluttery feelings, or whatever. I mean, yes.” He sat up straight, trying to communicate how serious this was.

“Yes, she’s beautiful and funny and I always want to be around her, but she— She sees things so differently. The whole galaxy. And it’s like she can see right through me, too. And it’s kind of terrifying. But also really exciting? Being with her…” he glanced out the window, to the tundra and the mountains and the blue blue sky. “Being with her is like flying.”

Like having something solid under your feet even when you’re so high up you can’t see the ground. Something constant amidst the chaos.

“Huh.” Cody tilted his head, amused but maybe also understanding. “Well, then.” He gave Davijaan a critical once over, and then dragged him to his feet and shoved him towards the door.

“Wait! Are you really—”

“Yes.”

“But—”

“No.”

“What if she doesn't—”

“Then at least you'll know for sure!” Cody flung his jacket into his arms and kicked his boots towards his feet. “Go. Now.”

“You know, just because you can snarl like ‘17 doesn’t mean—”

Cody snarled. Davijaan put his jacket and boots on.

“Forget about neglecting brotherly duties, you’re abusing brotherly privileges,” he grumbled. “Privileges that are abused are revoked, asshole.”

“Uhuh.” Cody opened the door with a grin. Davijaan glared.

He made it two steps outside when Cody’s hand came down heavy on his shoulder.

“And. I am happy for you.”

Davijaan swallowed hard, and turned and hugged his brother tight, and then rushed out the door.

Chapter 16

Davijaan got halfway to Kyurem before he pulled his speeder over to the side of the road and sat, and watched a cluster of blue birds swim in the marsh, and debated turning back.

He really wanted to go home and just. Not do this.

But if he went home without talking to Loren, Cody would be insufferable.

And, it'd been months. He was tired of trying and failing to not think about how she would react if she ever found out. Trying to guess at how she might feel, at what she might want. He'd rather ask. He'd rather know. He'd rather face this and get it over with.

Whatever she did was out of his hands. If she was upset or uncomfortable he could just stop visiting her for a few weeks. Let them both have some space. Find a way to apologize. He'd say his piece and brace himself.

He got back on the road and kept going.

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When he arrived at Loren's door he didn't let himself stall; he knocked immediately and held himself ready to march inside as soon as she opened the door. But then she took forever to open the door, and by the time she finally poked her head out he had something stuck in his throat.

"Odd Ball? Hello?" Brow creased in bemused surprise, she gave him a quick once-over and opened the door a little wider. "Would you like to come in?"

No. "Sure."

He tried to smile. It must not have come out right, because her surprise was quickly replaced by concern.

"Is everything ok?" She ushered him over to the couch. He didn't sit, just stood awkwardly in front of it. He took a deep breath.

"Did something happen after I left? If—"

"I think I'm sweet on you."

Silence. Total silence for one, two, three seconds while Loren tilted her head, baffled.

"You think? You think—"

"I mean, probably." He winced. "I mean, I know. I am. Sweet on you." It came out softer and more hesitant than he'd wanted it to.

“Sweet..?”

“You know. Sweet… um… feelings.”

Loren’s confusion cleared, and she took a single step forward, studying him eager and intent. “You mean you’re interested in me?”

It was his turn to blink in surprise. “I’ve always been interested in you?”

“No, I mean…” A blue blush slowly spread up her face. “Romantically.”

“Oh.” He felt himself flush red, heart pounding in his chest. He straightened, swallowed hard. “Yes, that.”

“Finally!”

And, a joyful shriek had not been a reaction he’d expected.

Loren spun in a circle in the middle of the room, laughing, and he stayed frozen in front of the couch, gaping.

“Finally!?” He sputtered, thoroughly unprepared for whatever the hell was happening. “What do you mean *finally?”*

“I’ve been waiting for you to say something since the— since—” She waved her hand in front of his face.

“Waiting for *me* to say something? Why didn’t *you* say something?”

“Well first you were recovering, and then Pa said I ought to wait—”

“Wait, wait. You talked to your parents about this?” he asked, horrified.

She huffed and crossed her arms in mock indignation. “Like you didn’t go running to Cody for advice.”

“I didn’t, actually,” he grumbled. Cody hadn’t given advice so much as he’d issued marching orders.

“I didn’t mean…” She let her arms slip until they were linked loosely over her stomach, embarrassed. “It sort of came up when I was telling them about— and I didn’t know what to do, because you hadn’t said anything straight out but you’d certainly implied, and Pa suggested I wait for you. Since you’re still sort of… settling. I figured you’d say something when you were ready.” She shrugged, and grinned. “And you did.”

“Ah. Well.”

Whatever. What was one more thing the Yangs knew about him, at this point? They’d witness the fallout of this conversation, one way or another. He took another deep breath; let it out slow. “Then, you don’t mind?”

Her mouth dropped open in shock, and then she visibly stilled herself, all the frenetic energy of her happiness concentrating into something earnest and gentle. “Of course I don’t mind. I’m interested in you, too, silly. Sweet on you.”

“Oh.” He swallowed.

“Oh,” he said again, breathless with relief. “I’d hoped…” A hand reached for her, before he caught himself and let it fall against his side. “I… May I..?”

“Come here.”

She pressed him back onto the couch and he let her, overwhelmed and suddenly unsure. She hesitated, and then climbed into his lap, and he wrapped his arms around her waist and clung to her, desperate for someone to hold on to in this rush of unfamiliar emotion.

No matter what Wolffe had said, or what Cody had insisted, or what he himself had made note of, he truly hadn’t expected her to feel the same way. Hoped, vaguely. Hoped enough to wait and consider. But the only responses he’d let himself imagine were the ones where he had to manage the pain of dismissal. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh or cry, and tried to control his breathing so he wouldn’t end up doing both at once.

Loren shivered in his arms, and he relaxed his grip in case she was uncomfortable, but she just pressed closer; her cheek against his ear, her arms around his shoulders. They stayed like that for a long time, holding each other.

Finally Loren pulled back to look at him, bright and warm and absolutely elated. If she kept looking at him like that for the rest of his life he’d die happy.

His thighs were starting to go numb. He shifted, careful not to dislodge her, but with an apologetic grimace she slid off his lap to sit next to him, still close against his side, still with one of his arms around her waist. He was pretty sure he was grinning like a madman. He was absolutely sure he wouldn’t be able to stop.

“So.” He cleared his throat and smoothed a hand down her side, and then stopped, and then when she didn’t say anything did it again. “What now?”

She raised an eyebrow. “What now?” she echoed.

“One of the pilots in my squad had a partner. I think— I would like that. If you would also like that. But I don’t know how to go about, um, *that.”*

She hummed, considering. “We could start with dating? Something more casual?”

“Yes! That sounds— yes. That’s just, going places together?”

He’d definitely heard people talking about dating, on leave. They were at the bar with a date, or their date had stood them up, or they wanted to plan a date. He was trying desperately to remember if Mitts had ever mentioned dating his partner. He was pretty sure they’d just commed a lot.

“For the most part. Going places and doing things together, getting to know each other better.”

He snorted. “So, what we’ve been doing?”

“Well, yes.” Her eyes sparkled. “Except now we make it romantic.”

“Right.” He felt himself blush again, the grin fading into something fixed. That was the part he wasn’t sure about. The part he expected her to have expectations for. “You’ve done this before? Had a partner?”

“I dated in university, but that was mostly because everybody dated. I only had two relationships that were serious.” He wondered how she qualified a serious relationship. “You?”

He shrugged. “I could always find someone to spend time with on leave, but nothing that lasted more than a day or two."

She looked surprised, and then thoughtful. He wanted to sink back into the couch and curl into a little ball of shame. Instead, he looked her in the eye and said, “I need you to understand, I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Slowly, she nodded, scooting a little closer and slipping her own hand into his where it rested on her hip. “That’s ok. Every new relationship is different, so we can be wrong footed together.”

For a long moment he just stared at her, and then he started laughing.

“What?” She squeezed his hand, startled. “What did I say?”

“Nothing! Nothing.” He muffled the last of his laughter against the back of his wrist and got himself under control. “You just— you make everything sound so simple. I stress and worry over something and it’s like it doesn’t even register as a problem for you.”

“I *am* taking this seriously, I’m not trying to say your concerns don’t matter, I—”

“I like it.” He knocked his shoulder against hers, smile softening. “Makes it easy to be around you. Makes life… not so terrifying, with you.”

After a moment her own smile returned, amused, and she reached up to cup his cheek. “I’ve always thought of you as fearless.”

“Ah. Not really.”

“Courageous, then. Laughing in the face of your fear.”

It wasn’t very courageous if the only reason he was laughing was to keep from crying, and the idea that she saw him like that made him feel a little self-conscious, but also a little in awe.

He leaned into her hand and looked at her, at the care and curiosity bright in her eyes and the humor etched in the curve of her lips and the determination solid in the set of her jaw. “Do you want to start tomorrow? Dating?”

“Absolutely.” She nodded once, firm. “The sooner the better. Do you want me to plan something? Or—”

“I think I have an idea, if that’s alright?”

“Really?”

Probably.

They’d already arranged to spend the day together. Davijaan was supposed to come down to Kyurem so they could go out on the tundra. There wasn’t a good reason to change their plans, except it hadn’t been a date before. Now it was a date. Now it felt like he ought to put more thought into it.

There was still one place on Amaura he hadn’t gone. He didn’t think either of them had been intentionally avoiding it, but maybe it just hadn’t been the right time.

“Meet me at the hangar tomorrow morning? And we’ll go from there?”

She ran her thumb over his cheekbone, over the nick that had scarred into a tiny silver-brown spot, and pulled her hand away. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Good. That’s good. And—” Because he should probably check, just in case, just so he didn’t accidentally do something he shouldn’t. “— are there any Pantoran rules I should know before we— before this starts?”

Loren frowned. “Hm. Well, traditional Pantoran courtship mostly centers around escalating gift giving. There are… quite a lot of rules.” He *knew* it. “One of us would give the other a gift to show interest, and they would use it or wear it or whatever to show the interest was returned. And give their own gift after the appropriate amount of time had passed, and so on. So, maybe no gifts? At least not yet. Not until we decide where we want this to go.”

“Alright. I can do that. No gifts.” She was the one who was always giving him things, anyway, though food probably didn’t count.

“Not yet,” she repeated, deliberate, and then shifted so she was sitting sideways, almost facing him. “And, are there any Kaminoan courting practices you’d like me to be aware of? I actually, um, tried researching them once, but the only information on Kamino I could find was about their contribution to the war effort.”

Davijaan went utterly still.

“Kami— what?” He tried to laugh, but it sounded dry and cracked to his own ears.

Loren raised an eyebrow. “Well if we’re discussing Pantoran rules, shouldn’t we also discuss the Kaminoan ones?”

“There’s no— I don’t— I’m not Kaminoan, so.” He stood, abruptly needing to be out of her arms. He’d forgotten Kaminoans ran cold, though the scientists had always had gloves on when they’d touched him.

“Weren’t you raised there?”

“I— That’s different.”

“Ok?”

“When I said I didn’t know what I was doing, I really meant I didn’t know.”

Loren looked up at him from where she knelt on the couch, one hand hovering in the space where he’d been sitting, just as confused as when he’d been clumsily trying to explain how he felt. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“No.” He choked down some hysterical giggles. “No, you don’t.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and stood in the center of the room, feeling a little like punching something and a lot like running far away and never coming back. Which was silly. He was being silly. She was trying to be considerate.

He tasted bile at the back of his throat.

“Do you..?” She sat back on her haunches, her hand falling to her lap. “Would you mind explaining?”

She was speaking evenly, carefully, but there was an edge of annoyance in her voice. With a surge of anger, he found he didn’t care if it was for herself or for him.

He opened his mouth to say he did mind, actually, and that he didn’t owe her anything and especially not this, and then closed it, and breathed.

He didn’t think he could talk about this right now, but he wanted to be able to talk about it later.

“Not right now,” he forced out, and he tried to make it even and careful but he was pretty sure it just sounded strained.

“Ok,” she said, standing, and as suddenly as it had appeared the annoyance was gone, replaced by worry. “I’m sorry if—”

“It’s fine.”

“I didn’t mean to bring up a sensitive subject.”

“It’s not a sensitive subject.”

From her uncertain nod he could tell she didn’t believe him, and honestly he wouldn’t have believed him either. He wasn’t sure what expression he was making but it probably wasn’t

very pleasant to look at, and he wasn't bothering to cover it up. All of a sudden he was exhausted.

"Too bad we're not doing gifts, or I'd ask for patience," he joked. "Or does it count as a gift if you have to ask for it?"

"It does if I choose to give it to you. But patience isn't something you have to ask for." She offered him a contrite smile. "Sorry if I was being pushy again."

"You just wanted to know. I'm the one who..." He cleared his throat. "I think I'd better get home. Don't want Cody to burn the house down making supper."

"You could eat here. I was just about to get something started."

"I think I'd rather…"

"Ok. Ok, that's fine."

He edged over to the door and laid a hand on the controls, but couldn't make himself open it. He wasn't running away. This wasn't running away. But he still felt… "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Of course you'll see me tomorrow," she said, firm, and stepped up beside him to squeeze his hand. "Bright and early."

And Davijaan leaned in and carefully kissed her cheek, the same way she had for every goodbye for the last few months, and then made his way outside into the sunset.

***

Cody was waiting on their porch. He took one look at Davijaan's face and his expectant grin fell away.

"What happened?" he demanded, blocking Davijaan's way in the door.

Davijaan heaved a sigh and shouldered past him. "Loren was being dumb."

"Loren was being dumb!?"

"Yes."

"Alright…" Cody followed him inside and watched wide-eyed as he kicked his boots off with unnecessary force. "Care to elaborate?"

"No."

"... Alright?"

"We're going on a date tomorrow."

He left Cody sputtering in the living room and thumped down the stairs.

“Kaminoan,” he muttered under his breath as he threw open the bedroom door. *“Kaminoan.* Fucking hell. Does my neck look like a toothpick to you?”

He was still sort of angry. Not with her so much as with himself. The ride home had given him plenty of time to obsess over every second of their conversation. It’d been going so well, not just fine but perfect, better than he’d dared to hope, and then— and he’d tried to brush it off, but— and he hadn’t run out on her exactly, but he hadn’t left in the best way either, and what if—

He groaned and flung his jacket onto the bed.

Cody hadn’t followed him down. He waited in the middle of the room for a minute, but when he didn’t hear footsteps on the stairs he thumped his way back up.

He found Cody braced against the railing, critically studying the stairwell and debating if he wanted to brave it.

“What are you doing?” he scoffed.

“Didn’t know if you wanted me to bother you.”

“I almost always want you to bother me. Get over here.” He dragged Cody into the kitchen and put water on to boil.

Cody didn’t go down into the bedroom at all anymore. Not without permission. It was firmly Davijaan’s space. He’d moved his stuff into the empty closet in the hall, and he kept his blankets and pillows there when they weren’t on the couch. He’d said something the other day about buying another bed, and Davijaan was mostly fine with that, except he didn’t know where they would put it. Not in the bedroom, obviously.

Now that he’d been in so many other houses and offices and stores, he understood how small their own little house was, a mile past the edge of the village. And it was theirs— it was his; filled with his things and his brother— but it was still small. And maybe they wouldn’t always fit in it. And maybe that was alright.

He slumped at the table and Cody finished making them tea, because he’d watched the most picky tea maker in the galaxy fix his morning tea almost every morning for almost four years. His personal opinion on the taste may be neutral but his professional opinion on the technique did not allow room for Davijaan to dump loose leaves into a glass and pour lukewarm water over them and call it good.

“She thought we were Kaminoan,” he said, sudden and shattering in the easy silence of tea making. Cody almost dropped a mug.

“Um.”

“That’s what I said, and then she wanted to know *why,* and…”

“You did tell her though. Not *why,* but before all of this, you told her—”

“Yes I told her! I said, we’re going on a date!”

“Uhuh.”

“We are. Tomorrow morning.”

“After having a fight?”

Davijaan threw his hands up, exasperated. “We didn’t have a fight!”

Cody rolled his eyes. “Was she mad?”

“Sort of. Not really.” He looked down at the table, at the knife scars from before they’d got slab to cut on, at the stains and scars from accidents with colorful vegetables and hot pans. “I said I’d explain sometime. Maybe.”

He dragged his eyes up to Cody’s face as his brother set a steaming mug in front of him. “I don’t even know what I would say. We’re not Kaminoan, but what are we instead?”

Loren had said he was a Pantoran pilot. He’d started tentatively thinking of himself as Pantoran after that, just to see how it felt. It felt pretty good. But if she hadn’t meant it, if she’d been saying it just to say it… You weren’t really a member of a community unless the community thought of you as a member.

Cody was tense, his gaze distant. “We’re siblings. We’re veterans. We’re people. Do we need to be anything else?”

“We could have been Kaminoan.”

“We could have,” Cody allowed. “Or we could have been Mandalorian. Or Coruscanti.”

Davijaan breathed in the smell of the tundra in the steam from his mug. “I think I want to be Pantoran.”

Cody nodded, a faint smile settling over his features. “That wouldn’t be so bad. If we’re going to be here, might as well make ourselves at home.”

“But if she doesn’t— If that’s not how she sees—”

“Loren’s opinion isn’t the only one that matters, you know.” Cody raised an ‘are you really that dumb’ eyebrow and took a long sip of his tea, leaning against the counter. “What does the average Pantoran know about clones? Loren was right in the middle of the Coruscanti media scene, and she’s been your friend for a year. She knows more than most. Mx. Calen didn’t even know Kamino was a planet until I asked why it wasn’t on their starmaps.”

Davijaan scowled. “It does matter, though. Her opinion.”

“I’m not saying it doesn’t! I’m just saying, Loren isn’t the reason we moved here.”

She was. But also she wasn’t.

Davijaan drank his tea and thought back to those days and weeks on *The Negotiator* following the end of the war, almost exactly a year ago now, and the aching need to be anywhere else in the galaxy. He looked around his house, the living area with the couch and desk and woven hangings he and Cody had bought, the kitchen with the cupboards full of foods they knew how to cook. The bedroom downstairs that was his.

He watched Cody drink his tea and ignore the attention. Cody, who still had days where he was distant and silent and angry, and who would probably never be Kote again, but who was alive. Who was still beside him. Who had many many more days where every other word out of his mouth was the usual confident condescension; days where he teased and laughed and went to work and came home and cooked too much food.

He knew he'd changed too, he must have, but he wasn't sure exactly how. He didn't feel different. Maybe a little more calm, maybe a little more steady, maybe a little more comfortable in his skin. Maybe a little less terrified.

He liked slow changes better than sudden ones, he decided. You couldn't really get out of either kind, but at least slow changes were gentle. They gave you time to adjust to the idea of them; to watch curiously for them rather than wait on edge to be found by them. For the first time, he let himself wonder how he would change in the next fifteen years.

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It was still dark when Davijaan got to the hangar. He spent almost a half-hour pacing, knowing Loren would show up but not knowing what mood she would be in after yesterday.

But when the sun rose and Loren arrived, she was smiling. Sort of hesitant, sort of nervous, but smiling. So he let himself relax.

"Hello, Loren."

"Hello," she said, and then they stood in the space between their speeders and looked at each other until they both started to giggle.

"Ready?" he asked, and she nodded, and they climbed onto his speeder and he drove them to the trailhead.

She must have realized what he had planned long before they got there, but she marched over to read the marker anyway. She didn't say anything, just waited for him to collect his pack and then took his hand as they started on the trail.

Neither of them had much to say at first, and they were both nervous, he thought, though not just because of the way things had ended the day before. They'd done this same sort of thing before many, many times, but this time there was a new understanding between them. Neither of them were trying to make it different, but it still felt different.

It was a long hike. Honestly, starting before dawn would have been smarter, but Davijaan was not about to walk up a mountain in the dark. As the sun rose they watched light and shadow

play across the boulders and pines along the path, and listened to the wind in the branches and the infernal dripping and the birdsong.

There were still patches of muddy snow and ice scattered in the scrub, but the trail was dried out enough to walk on without fearing for their boots, and it was warm enough they both took their jackets off as the day went on.

As they started to leave the trees behind more flowers appeared between the rocks. Purple and blue and white, and yellow. Loren picked a few dandelions, and she kept the blooms a good distance from his face but had him try one of the leaves. It tasted fresh and bitter and almost like it was biting him back.

He watched as she knotted the flowers into a bracelet. The contrast of sunny yellow and grass green against her sky blue skin drew his eyes to her wrist all morning, until the blossoms started to close and she took it off and tossed it into the scrub.

The last few trees they passed were scraggling sprouts, fresh and pale. To his bewilderment, Loren insisted they stop a moment so she could coo at them.

“But it’s a tree!”

“But it’s smaller than a regular tree, so that makes it cute!”

Davijaan stared at the tree in question, scruffy and short and just about as thick around as his pinky finger. “How does being small automatically make something cute?”

“It just does,” said Loren, matter of fact, kneeling in the dirt in front of it. “It makes me want to pet it.”

“Pet the *tree?”*

“Stroke its leaves, smooth out the scuffs in its bark, pat the dirt down nicely over its roots.”

“What the fuck. Loren. Loren *what—”*

“Tiny little trees are *adorable, Odd Ball,* and the only reason you can’t see it—”

“Is because—”

“You’re—”

The argument over the relative attractiveness of tiny little trees left them both at ease, and they kept up the teasing as they climbed higher and higher, neither letting go of the other’s hand.

They reached the peak of Amaura just after noon.

They sat on a broad slab of rock, overlooking the cliff but well back from the edge, reluctantly releasing each other to dig out their thermoses. Davijaan had packed food, but he

waited to get it out, enjoying the warm stone under him and the arching sky above. Everything was still this high up; still and calm and quiet.

Loren leaned against his side, arms looped around her knees, and they sipped their water and regained their breath and gazed out past the cliff in silence.

When he felt settled, like a bit of the mountain's calm and quiet had seeped into him, he set his thermos aside and said, "So. About yesterday."

Loren buried her face in her hands and groaned. "I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have made assumptions, I should have—"

"No! That's not— It's a fair assumption to make. We *were* raised there." And he'd mostly decided he wasn't going to talk about that part. Ever, if he could help it. But— "You really thought of me as Kaminoan?"

"Well, formerly of Kamino, currently of Pantora. I knew you had good reasons for moving here."

He nodded once, relieved, because somehow it mattered less that she thought of him as Kaminoan if she thought of him as Pantoran at the same time. "I always thought of myself— I don't know, maybe some of my brothers think differently, but I always thought of myself as part of the GAR. A soldier. Or, I used to."

Loren shifted, her trousers scratching against the stone, and turned to meet his eyes. "I know there was a lot very wrong with the GAR; with how you grew up. There's still a lot wrong with the general public perception, and— anyway. I know I misunderstand some things, but I also know it wasn't… How the media chose to portray it."

You can just say slavery.

But if she wasn't going to say it straight out, then neither was he.

He shrugged. "Didn't pay much attention to the media."

"No," she said, slowly, studying him with a creased brow. "I suppose you didn't."

Looking out past the cliff, he could see the village spread across the valley under the noon sun; larger buildings clustered tightly around the grey lines of the main roads, smaller buildings thinning out as they climbed the low slopes, becoming interspersed with pine trees and flowering scrub. The grey and brown and blue smudges of roads and trails and the river wandered in and out of the village before winding up to the white peaks of Amaura and her sister.

It was so small, it was almost like looking down through a viewshield, except he didn't have to focus on flying. He could just sit and rest and look.

"Peace wasn't real for me until I met you."

Loren startled. "What wasn't?"

“Peace,” he said. “Life without war. It wasn’t something I’d ever let myself think about. But, that first day, listening to you describe your life— your ma is a pilot. A civilian pilot. I’d never— and the way you described the mountains and the village and the sunrise. I didn’t know that was something I could want. So.”

He took her hand again, running his thumb over the back of her knuckles. “Thank you, for giving a bit of your peace to me.”

If it really had been goodbye, if he’d never seen her ever again, if he’d stayed on Coruscant and watched Cody fade away, he’d still have that. No matter how things ended with whatever they were trying to do, he’d always have that.

“I’m sorry.” He offered her a rueful smile. “War was a poor gift in return.”

“Don’t be sorry.” She shook her head and took his hand in both of her own. “I know I said… But I didn’t mean it as a bad thing, I meant war finally had a face, and it was yours, and you were…” She straightened, unfolding her legs so she could scoot around to sit facing him, gold gaze intent, pinning him in place.

“You are one of the most selfless people I know. You’ve been there for me through some of the worst times in my life, and you always laugh at your own pain but you’ve never laughed at mine. It’s been— it’s been so good, to be a part of your life in peacetime. To see you happy. It makes me so happy to see you happy.” Her grip tightened. “Odd Ball, I think—”

“Davijaan.”

She blinked.

“That’s… That’s my name.”

“Your name?”

He swallowed hard. “The one I made up. For myself.”

“Oh.”

She looked a little like he’d just punched her in the gut.

Last night he’d decided to tell her, because this was one thing he knew wasn’t going to change, and because if they were going to try and do whatever it was they were going to try and do then she deserved to know. Maybe not what it meant, maybe not why he'd chosen it, but it was getting harder and harder to listen to her call him Odd Ball like Fox used to. Like the troops under his command, like General Kenobi, like every civilian he'd ever introduced himself to.

He’d been waiting for a good time. But there was not a good time, there was only a limit to how long he could wait, and if this conversation was going to continue he needed to say this before he was too overwhelmed to say anything, but now she looked—

“You can keep calling me Odd Ball, if— if Davijaan sounds wrong. You don’t have to—”

She took his face in her hands, breathless and a little awed. “It sounds perfect, Davijaan.”

And then she kissed him. And, after a moment of shocked surprise, he slipped a hand under her hair to cup her neck, and kissed her back.

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They stayed up at the top of the mountain under the sun and the sky for most of the afternoon, and there was a lot of kissing but also a lot of talking. By the time they headed back down, linked hands swinging between them, Davijaan felt much more certain of this, of them.

He wanted this. He wanted a house with his brother in the mountains and to fly every day in a clear blue sky and to spend every second he could with Loren. He wanted this life, and he had it. And he didn’t ever have to let it go. And part of him was still trying to understand that, but most of him was at peace.

He looked at Loren, walking beside him in the sunset, and knew she’d still be there in fifteen years.

Chapter 17: five years later...

Waking up next to Loren every morning was perfect.

There were the usual elbows in kidneys and cold feet on shins to contend with, but every time he woke up and remembered that he Loren were in their house in their bed and could stay there as long as they wanted, and just— be, and not worry about anything happening beyond their front door, he got something caught in his throat.

He woke up first, slowly, with Loren pressed all against his side, and spent a few minutes just looking at her in the thin line of light shining under the door. At her hair coming out of its braid, and the mark she always got on her face from sleeping on it, and the gold curve of her tattoo sparking as she shifted. As he brushed a strand of hair out of her mouth a chime echoed down the stairs.

Her eyes snapped open. “Damn it. They’re early.”

Davijaan groaned and buried his face in the pillow. “I said you should schedule it for—”

“Cody said he’d bring food, I thought—”

“That he wouldn’t intentionally misinterpret the time?”

Loren heaved a sigh. Propping herself up on an elbow, she stretched and scrubbed at her eyes, and he fumbled over the side of the bed for the lamp controls. She blinked in the sudden light, strands of blue hair in a fuzzy halo around her head. He rolled over on top of her and wrapped his arms around her waist and tucked his nose against her neck. There was a little bruise there. He nipped at it and she yelped and smacked his arm.

“Do *not.* I have to get up and let your brothers in.”

“Cody has the door code.”

“We have a meeting.”

“Bastard’s early. He can wait.”

“Davijaan.” She huffed something that might have been a laugh or might have been an incredulous snort. “My love, please?”

Davijaan grumbled, but let go. Loren crawled over him and out of their bed, disturbing their little bubble of warm air.

He sat on the side of the bed and watched her dance around getting dressed, in no hurry to do the same. He’d been covering some of Aron’s shifts at the Kyurem spaceport, and it wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy baiting the manager who kept trying to poach him from the Yangs, but this was his first real day off in almost two weeks and he intended to make the most of it.

It was supposed to be Loren's day off too— and they were supposed to be getting ready to go driving over the tundra to see the stars and the sunrise— but she couldn't find another time for this meeting. Since at this point in her career she created her own schedule, give or take a deadline, she'd decided to work today and have tomorrow off. But that was fine. Plans changed. At least they still got to spend the day together.

Shawl slipping off her shoulders, she finally stood still in front of the mirror to tie a scarf over her hair in place of re-braiding it. She gave her reflection a sharp nod and marched over to the bed, coming to stand in the space between his knees. His hands settled on her hips, and she tipped his chin up and kissed his cheek, perfunctory. "There. Good morning."

He wrinkled his nose. "Is it a good morning?"

Some of the flustered franticness eased away, and she kissed him on the lips, apologetic. "A busy morning, then. And hopefully a good afternoon."

The door chimed again, and she winced.

"Want me to bully my terrible brothers until they go away? Tell them to come back another time?"

To his surprise, she actually thought about it. "No," she finally said, firm. "I want to get this project started sooner rather than later."

He ran a hand up her side, smoothing down her shirt. "Want me to come up and make tea?"

"Please."

She took a step back and he stood, hand slipping from her waist to brush carefully over the slight swell of her stomach that still sort of terrified him.

That little bump, and everything it meant for their future… had not been the plan. But it was happening, and the only thing he could do now was brace himself.

He threw a shirt and sweater on and followed her up the stairs, picking his way over the cold floor to the kitchen and putting the water on while she rushed to answer the door. When Cody and Rex finally came stomping over with numb fingers he handed them both a mug.

"Thank you," said Cody, accepting his mug in his free hand with a charming smile like this wasn't the hundredth time he'd invaded their home at way-to-fucking-early o'clock because he was excited about something.

Rex took his own mug reluctantly and with a muffled noise that might have been thanks, and then made a face at it when he thought Davijaan wasn't looking. The caf versus tea debate hadn't been a debate until Rex started visiting regularly, and Davijaan had not been pleased by the new tension in their previously nonexistent relationship.

Shutting the door against the snow and striding into the kitchen, Loren accepted the mug of weird-smelling pregnancy tea Davijaan handed her with another kiss. He kissed her back, because he could never kiss her enough, and then glared when Cody heaved an annoyed sigh.

“I’ve got all my hard copies of wartime articles down in the office, so we can get started as soon as we’ve eaten,” Loren announced, before violence broke out in her clean kitchen.

Cody thumped a crate stuffed with old GAR issue datapads down on the table with a sharp grin. “Excellent. The sooner the better.”

From the top of the crate he removed a covered dish and thrust it in Davijaan’s direction. He accepted it with a critical eyebrow. Food, he presumed. Probably an egg something. Cody’d been on an egg kick since he’d added nunas to the little farm he’d turned his house and land into.

“And what am I supposed to do with this?” he asked, flat.

Cody rolled his eyes and walked past him to turn on the oven. Loren snorted and started setting the table, and Rex quickly put his tea down to help.

Davijaan extracted himself from the chaos and carried the crate of datapads down to Loren’s office; one of the extra bedrooms they’d designated for the duty. The thin stacks of flimsi on the desk he presumed were the articles she’d printed out. He set the crate down and flipped through one of them, curious.

Loren and Cody were going to write a book. Or something. A compilation, she’d called it, of old news articles and military documents and interviews with former members of the GAR. After her article on the Marshal Commander had become sort of infamous in the core worlds, there had been wider demand for information on the clones. Davijaan thought it was good that most of the information in their book would come from the clones themselves.

He read a particularly inflammatory headline about the cost of the GAR, grimaced, and let the flimsi fall back into place.

“That’s the fear mongering stack.”

He looked up to find Loren hovering in the doorway, embarrassed. “I split them up according to the intention behind the article. You don’t have to read them, I know you don’t particularly want to be involved. Everything’s ready upstairs if you want to come eat.”

He ran a hand over the flat printed picture of a battalion of clone troopers under the headline; rank after rank of clean white armor. It might as well be a picture of empty sets on stands. “It’s not that I don’t want to be involved, it’s that I don’t have much to contribute.”

She had the skill and experience to write a book, Cody had the connections to provide the information. Namely, Rex, who’d volunteered to be their first interview. Davijaan now knew quite a bit more about writing and about what had happened in the Senate during the war than he’d ever thought he’d want to know, but not enough to help.

“I could interview you.” A cold hand slipped into his. “If that’s something you want.”

He ran a thumb over the back of her knuckles and gazed down at a blank visor and thought about it.

He’d lived though Kamino, lived through the war, lived through the mess of rebuilding. But so had many thousands of his siblings. His story wasn’t particularly special in that regard. But now he lived with Loren, who had very firm opinions about stories and why they mattered. After years of carefully talking around subjects until they were both ready to talk about them straight out, he knew she understood what she was asking.

Slowly, he shook his head. “No. At least, not right now.”

He looked up from the photo to find her smiling, soft. She squeezed his hand. “I didn’t think so, but I wanted to ask.”

He smiled back, and instead of saying thank you pulled her into a hug, and let himself be happy that he’d lived long enough to be able to hold her like this.

Maybe someday he’d be comfortable with an interview; with the idea of strangers knowing what he’d lived through and what he thought about it. But for now, his siblings understood. Loren tried her best to understand. And that was what mattered.

“Will you two stop being disgusting and get up here so we can eat?” Cody hollered down the stairs. "If this gets cold I'm not heating it up again!"

Davijaan stiffened and opened his mouth to yell that if Cody didn't want to see them being disgusting he could always *leave,* but Loren just started laughing, and took him by the hand and dragged him back up the stairs and into the day.

End Notes

Thank you for reading!

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