Newbie

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Newbie

by Spalunky

Summary

USED TO BE CALLED "A NEW FAMILY"

Echo is the newest member of Clone Force 99 and It' s not an easy role to take on. While recovering from the ordeal on Skako Minor, Echo must also navigate the complicated relationships of the Bad Batch and find his place with his new team.

He may also discover some secrets about the batch that he wasn't expecting.

(Or the one where Echo parent-traps Crosshair and Hunter)

Notes

Howdy yall. Don't come for me if the description of the interior of the ship is inaccurate. they have bunkbeds, take it.

Echo is sad rn, but you would be too.

I had a lot of fun writing all the characters and I plan on adding more chapters as inspiration comes. You're comments really encourage me to keep writing! Let me know what you think or anything you'd like to see happen!

The Havoc Marauder

With each step Echo took towards the ship, a quiet voice in his head was screaming out; telling him to run back to Rex. He forced himself forward. There was nothing left for him with Rex, with the 501st. It was what he knew, but he couldn't fool himself into thinking things would go back to the way they had been before the Citadel. They'd already questioned his loyalty; he couldn't spend the rest of the war proving himself to his own legion. He'd be kidding himself if he thought he'd truly fit in there. Then there was Rex, more specifically, the way Rex had looked him since the rescue. It wasn't pity, Rex was better than that, though he did see it in the eyes of other troopers they had passed. It was guilt. Rex didn't forgive himself for leaving Echo behind, critically injured, but just barely alive. Echo didn't hold it against him, not in the slightest. The mission always came first. Echo never questioned that. He was glad they made it out, it was that simple. Rex didn't need to be guilty, but Echo knew he couldn't stop him, couldn't take that weight from the captain's shoulders even if he tried. But if Echo wasn't around, he wouldn't be a constant reminder. Rex didn't need to be so haunted, and Echo would do better with a small group that he could learn to trust and who could learn to trust him.

Echo nodded to himself as he thought it over. Clone Force 99 had invited him to join them after all. It was better for everyone; for himself, for Captain Rex…there wasn't much else to consider, he knew that Fives was gone. Things were blurry when he woke up on Skako Minor, but he knew that he was being rescued by Captain Rex and General Skywalker but not Fives. He knew then and there that Fives was gone, lost to the war like so many others. Thinking about it now, Echo didn't feel sad. He didn't feel anything. He wasn't sure why, it scared it him, but he hardly felt that either.

The rest of Clone Force 99 was standing outside their ship as Rex and Echo parted ways. They all gave a final salute, it was a goodbye, a thank you, maybe even a see you soon. But it was brief and soon he was climbing into the ship with his new squad mates.

The inside of the ship was a mess but nobody else seemed to care or even notice. The other four dispersed naturally throughout the ship while Echo stood just past the threshold where they had entered. In the cockpit, Tech prepped the ship for take-off and charted a course back to Kamino. Crosshair sat on his bunk and began to carefully dismantle his oversized rifle. Wrecker was digging through a storage crate destructively and no one bothered to ask what he was looking for. The one who seemed to be in charge, Hunter, had stepped to the back of the ship in an attempt to find some privacy. He was receiving a transmission, or maybe sending one.

It was quiet except for the thrum of the ship's engine. It was a familiar sound, though Echo hadn't even been on a ship in what felt like a lifetime. Regardless, the smell of blaster scorched armor and the soft vibrations of the engine was all so familiar. It was like he was back on a republic gunship, being brought to the drop site alongside his brothers. Echo could feel the wind whip across the parts of his body that his armor left exposed. Amongst his fellow troopers, he caught eyes with Fives. They were both holding onto the ship as it made its decent towards a smokey battlefield. Even through the helmet he could tell Fives was

smiling at him. Then it was time to jump out and join the front lines. Captain Rex led the way. Bolts of blaster fire shot past them in every direction. Vaguely he could hear a trooper cry out and drop to the ground, but they had to keep going. They were made for this.

Someone was talking to him. He couldn't quite hear what the voice was saying but it was gentle and warm. It must be Fives. The voice was growing louder and the battlefield around him was starting to blur. Still, he didn't know what Fives was saying. Was it Fives? No, it sounded concerned, but firm and insistent now. Maybe it was Rex.

"Echo??" Hunter repeated for the third time.

"Yes sir," Echo responded suddenly, and they were both taken off guard.

Hunter watched as Echo blinked and looked around the ship like he was seeing it for the first time. He watched how Echo squeezed his eyes shut in quiet frustration and Hunter stopped himself from asking if he was okay. Stupid question: he had been there for the rescue, seen what Echo had been rescued from.

When Echo opened his eyes again, Hunter repeated what he had been saying before. "It'll take a while for us to reach Kamino" Hunter said and put a hand on Echo's shoulder, it felt bonier than he had anticipated but he didn't react. "We don't have loads of space, but we'll make things as comfortable as we can," he said and waited patiently for Echo to respond.

Echo glanced over at him and nodded gratefully, "thanks, Hunter" he said, his voice quiet but firm. With that, Hunter stepped away to give Echo some space.

Crosshair grabbed Hunter by the arm as he passed. "What were you thinking," Crosshair hissed, loud enough for only Hunter to hear. "Inviting a reg to join the squad?" he scoffed then glanced briefly at Echo then back to Hunter. "Let alone that one?"

Hunter narrowed his eyes disapprovingly at Crosshair. He was used to the other clone occasionally challenging his decisions and he knew Crosshair wouldn't be happy with this one. To say the Bad Batch was a close-knit group was a gross understatement. They were family, inseparable since childhood, and all each other had. Having someone new in their ship, their room, their space…would take some getting used to. Hunter considered explaining to Cross hair that Echo needed a place where he wouldn't be an outcast, that he clearly couldn't go back to a legion full of regs. But he knew better than to think Crosshair would care about any of that.

"You kept track of how many droids you took down?" Hunter asked him instead. He knew very well that Crosshair and Wrecker had running competitions regarding kill counts.

"Yes…" Crosshair answered with obvious suspicion.

"Did you beat Wrecker today?" Hunter asked.

"Yes" Crosshair said with narrowed eyes.

"Well Echo beat both of you, and he wasn't even in the room" Hunter told him, much to Crosshair's chagrin. There was nothing Hunter could do to make Crosshair like Echo, or anyone for that matter. But he could at least force him to admit that Echo was an asset to the team.

With Crosshair temporarily quieted, Hunter continued his way to the cockpit to find Tech. Tech was dividing his attention between his data pad and piloting, and the ship was clearly not his priority. He was just waiting for the first opportunity to jump to hyperspace, but they were still clearing through the final layers of atmosphere.

Hunter leaned against the pilot chair "…so, what exactly is going on with him?" Hunter asked, quietly. He was careful not to be overheard by the others on the ship.

"With Echo?" Tech answered without caring to lower his voice.

"Yes, obviously Echo" Hunter hissed, glancing over his shoulder and hoping that the others were distracted. "He seems a little…out of it" he said when he turned back to Tech.

"He's shown signs of brief periods of dissociation since he woke up" Tech said, sounding as unbothered as ever.

"Okay…Is that bad?" Hunter asked

"It's better than extended periods of dissociation" Tech replied vaguely.

"Tech," Hunter said scoldingly.

Tech finally looked up from his data pad and saw that Hunter was still waiting for an explanation though he had already given it. Tech started again with an impatient huff. "Dissociation, Hunter, disorganized patterns of thinking which can result in difficulty or inability to differentiate between reality and one's thoughts" he explained as thought Hunter should have already known. "Yes. You could say he's a bit out of it."

Hunter frowned while he considered both Tech's description and Echo's behavior. "You mean...like flash backs?" Hunter asked.

Tech looked vaguely irritated. "…sure" he said then looked back down at his data pad.

"Will it get better?" Hunter asked.

"There's no way of knowing, even for me" Tech replied.

Meanwhile, Echo had moved further into the ship, if only to stop Hunter from worrying about him. Near the back of the ship, four small bunks were built into the wall, two on each side of the ship Wrecker was sitting on one, Crosshair was leaning on the bunk across from him. The two of them quieted their already sparse conversation when Echo joined them.

"Hey look, it's the newbie!" Wrecker said excitedly.

Echo sat down next to wrecker, "it's Echo" he said.

"Yeah I knew that!" Wrecker laughed boisterously and gave Echo a friendly punch in the arm.

Echo frowned and rolled his shoulder.

"We've never had anyone new join the batch before," Wrecker told him.

"The batch?" Echo repeated

"The Bad Batch! That's us!" Wrecker explained proudly.

"We don't usually go handing out invitations to every Reg with a sob story," Crosshair added, "but I guess Hunter sees something in you."

Echo glanced between the two of them. They seemed like perfect opposites, and their greetings were too. He wasn't sure what to say to either of them.

"Reg as in regular clones" Wrecker leaned over towards Echo and pretended to whisper though he wasn't actually any quieter.

"…I got that" Echo assured him.

Echo eyed Crosshair. Crosshair glared back and continued to fidget with the toothpick that hung out of his mouth. Echo looked away as he considered that maybe he wasn't as welcomed here as Hunter had made it seem. They were a family after all, and Echo was a stranger to them. Or maybe Crosshair was worried the Echo would be a weak link. On the battlefield weak links got people killed. Echo couldn't blame him for being protective of his squad. But if he didn't have a place here then Echo didn't have a place anywhere. The thought was enough to make his chest feel tight and his stomach turn. The galaxy wasn't kind to clones who didn't serve a purpose. Echo hoped he still could, that he would get his strength back and that he'd find a way to be a soldier again. He had to stop himself from thinking about it. He had to stop himself before his nervousness started to show and before that thought came creeping into his mind. He thought maybe he wasn't meant to be here anymore. Maybe surviving everything had just been a fluke or a cruel joke. Maybe he wasn't meant to be alive.

He hated himself for thinking it, but every train of thought seemed to reach that conclusion at some point. The thought haunted him. He wasn't strong enough to fight it off. It kept coming back. Not now…he thought to himself. He couldn't let himself seem weaker than he already did.

"But you're not really a reg!" Wrecker reasoned. Echo looked over at him with a brow raised, "…you're half droid, aren't you?" Wrecker said confusedly.

Echo looked down at his hands. One hand. One piece of machinery. He hardly recognized himself "..I guess" he answered quietly. He hoped the others hadn't noticed the way his voice trembled just slightly.

But they had. Wrecker's face coiled into an expression that was equal parts panic and guilt. He hadn't meant to upset anyone. He looked at Crosshair for help, but Crosshair just rolled his eyes.

"Eloquent as ever, Wrecker" Crosshair said flatly.

"Hey, I can give you the grand tour!" Wrecker offered and gave Echo another friendly shove.

Echo looked up from his hands, taken off guard and needing a moment to realize what Wrecker had said. "A tour?" he asked skeptically, "of the ship?" he raised a brow. He looked left and right and could see both ends of the small ship. He wasn't sure what Wrecker planned on showing him besides a standard cockpit and the unmade bunks they were already sitting on. But Wrecker had a big unwavering smile and didn't seem to notice Echo's confusion. "…okay?" Echo said, leaning forward with a perplexed expression.

Hunter and Tech were still in the cockpit, struggling to reach an agreement.

"I'm not a medical droid, Hunter. The medical facilities on Kamino are better suited to treat him" Tech said logically.

"We can't just drop him off in the med bay. You know Kaminoans aren't interested in helping an injured clone, not when they can just make a new one" he scoffed. "You know what will happen if they decide he's not useful" Hunter whispered but his tone was stern.

Tech kept his gaze down at his data-pad but he could no longer ignore what Hunter was saying. "…I don't know the extent of the damage" he conceded. "But it would be safe to assume he's quite malnourished" he said then glanced up at Hunter, waiting for confirmation that he was following.

"…I know what malnourished means" Hunter told him, slightly offended but still focused.

"He'll need high calorie intake and as much rest as possible." Tech continued, "We have sedatives in the med kit."

"Sedatives?" Hunter asked.

Tech shrugged as if it made perfect sense. "The more rest he gets the faster the recovery process will be" He explained.

Hunter nodded. It wasn't a perfect plan, but it was a good place to start. "I'll pass out the rations. You just make sure he takes the sedatives before lights out" Hunter said.

Tech nodded back at him, and Hunter left the cockpit. He was making his way towards the back of the ship when he noticed Echo had approached Crosshair and Wrecker while he had been with Tech. He watched curiously. Echo was sitting on Wrecker's bunk and Wrecker was kneeling on the floor digging through a crate of his belongings and showing each one to Echo.

"This is the first thermal detonator I ever wired," Wrecker said fondly then passed the explosive to Echo for him to hold.

Echo took it and eyed the explosive carefully. This bomb alone was enough to critically damage the ship and kill everyone inside, "…Well it's not wired now, right?" Echo asked.

Wrecker laughed happily; his attention was already returned to his crate of belongings, "..and this is the second one I wired!" he said and handed Echo another thermal detonator.

Crosshair stood across from them, arms crossed and leaning against the other bunks. He smirked at the way Echo's eyes widened as the second bomb was pushed carelessly into his lap. But his amusement faded quickly when he saw Wrecker pull four old, beaded necklaces out of his crate.

"Crosshair made these when we were just kids" Wrecker explained, holding up the poorly crafted necklaces. "Remember Cross?" He asked, looking back over his shoulder at the other clone. "We each got one."

"How do you still have those??" Crosshair questioned with disbelief.

"Didn't think I'd let ya throw em out, did you??" Wrecker said happily.

Echo smiled at the two of them and the way they bickered. They had clearly grown up together, it was nice to see that some families hadn't yet been destroyed by the war. Before he knew it Wrecker was putting all four necklaces around his neck then went back to digging through his crate. It certainly wasn't the tour he had expected but Wrecker's excitement was contagious and for the first time since he was rescued from Skako Minor he was distracted from his memories.

Wrecker looked a little hesitant to share the next but only for a moment. "This is my Lula" he said and shoved the well-loved toy into Echo's line of sight, just a few inches from his face.

Echo nodded. He wasn't sure what he was meant to do, Wrecker was just holding the doll there for him to see. "…Hi Lula," Echo said quietly.

Wrecker laughed, "you're funny, newbie!" he smiled then put the toy in Echo's lap along with explosives from earlier.

"It's Echo," Echo insisted.

"I told you I already know that!" Wrecker reminded him then he went digging through the crate again. Echo really had no idea what he would pull out next or how long this would go on for, but it seemed he was just along for the ride now.

"This was my first helmet" Wrecker said. Then before Echo knew it he was wearing an old phase one trooper helmet.

"And this is Hunter's spare knife! He's been looking for it for weeks!" Wrecker laughed.

Hunter had been watching from the other end of the ship and chuckling to himself. Echo looked a little scared, but things were going as well as he could've hoped. He was glad Wrecker had managed to lighten the mood. Hunter's amusement quickly faded however when he saw Wrecker dig out his old knife.

"What did I tell you about hoarding other people's things?" Hunter scolded and plucked the knife from Wrecker's hand before he could force it on Echo.

"Aww take it easy sarge, you weren't using it" Wrecker laughed.

"Because I couldn't find it, Wrecker" Hunter said with a huff. He had to step around Wrecker and brush past Crosshair to reach the lockers at the end of the ship where they kept rations and medical supplies. No one minded, they were used to sharing the tight space with each other. Privacy and personal space were only a myth on the Havoc Marauder.

"Put your things away, Wrecker, its time to eat" Hunter said. There wasn't much food left on the ship, they hadn't been expected to travel home with another mouth to feed, but they'd be back at Kamino soon enough.

"Really??" Wrecker asked excitedly.

"We already ate before the mission" Crosshair said skeptically.

"Well I'm hungry" Hunter said. "We'll finish what we've got and restock when we get back to Kamino," Hunter told them.

Crosshair glanced at Echo, he knew Hunter was trying to take care him without calling too much attention to it. He got up and walked to the locker to see for himself how much spare rations they had. It wasn't much.

"He can have my share" Crosshair said quietly. Hunter smiled softly back at him. He knew Crosshair wasn't as cold blooded as he could act. Though sometimes it seemed as though Crosshair had even fooled himself. Crosshair rolled his eyes at Hunter's knowing smile and went back to his bunk.

"Can you believe it?" Wrecker said excitedly as he stuffed his things back into his crate. "Double rations!" Wrecker said excitedly and punched Echo's shoulder before running off to line up behind Hunter.

Hunter handed Wrecker a single rations bar. "This is all you're getting. And don't complain, we already ate" Hunter took a moment to quietly explain while Echo took the helmet and the necklaces off and placed them carefully back in Wrecker's storage crate.

"Aw man.." Wrecker said, pouting disappointedly at the small food-bar he had been handed. He turned to walk back to his bunk, but Hunter put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him.

"And Wrecker, I know you're excited but…gentle hands with Echo" Hunter whispered then imitated the way Wrecker had punched Echo in the arm before coming over for his rations.

"Huh?" Wrecker whispered back.

"Take it easy with the punching" Hunter explained seriously, "Echo's a bit...sick"

"Riiight" Wrecker whispered back and nodded in agreement. Then he tore open his ration bad and ate half of it with a single bite as he walked away.

Echo came over once Wrecker had moved out of the way.

"Wrecker can get a bit excited, but he means well." Hunter told Echo as he handed him a few ration bars and a sachet of high calorie meal replacement that was usually used to keep the troops moving during missions that required long periods of traveling on foot.

"I don't mind" Echo answered sincerely.

He looked down at the food Hunter had handed him, He understood that Hunter was trying to help him recover and he appreciated that Hunter was trying to do it without singling him out, but he wasn't sure if you could eat even half of what was given to him. He didn't have an appetite, but he would try to get some of it down. What was left of his body was skinny, frail even. He was smaller than what thought possible for a clone. Regaining his strength would be a long process and it started with eating. He could tell by the look Hunter was giving him that giving even one of the bars back wasn't an option.

"Thank you, Hunter" Echo sighed.

"We are entering hyper-space" Tech called out from the cock pit and suddenly a blue tint was shining from the cockpit.

Echo saw the Tech was coming to the back of the ship and he stepped away so he could get his rations too. Echo made his way to cockpit where he could sit and eat without feeling like he was in the way. He held his rations tight to his chest, so the others didn't see how much he had.

Tech hadn't been on his way to get rations though; he was crawling onto the bunk above Wrecker's without looking up from his data pad.

"Hey Tech, Hunter's giving out extra rations" Wrecker told him excitedly. When Wrecker stood, the upper bunks reached just above his shoulder so he could still talk face to face even when Tech was in bed.

"Obviously the extra rations were meant for Echo" Tech said with a frown.

Wrecker glanced down guiltily at the wrapper in his hand. "…oh"

"Wrecker's been doing his best to harass the reg" Crosshair said. "He'll probably make a break for it as soon as we reach Kamino" he smirked and climbed up to his own upper bunk across from Tech.

"No, he won't" Hunter said, and scowled at Crosshair.

"We can hope, can't we?" Crosshair drawled.

Hunter glared at him once more but didn't answer this time. He climbed up on the foot of Wrecker's bed so he could get his head above the top bunk and look at Tech. "Hey, aren't you going to assess his injuries?" Hunter asked insistently.

"I'm not a medical droid" Tech repeated the same excuse he had earlier.

"He's part of the batch now, and you'd do it for any of us," Hunter reasoned.

Tech narrowed his eyes at his data-pad, "….I'll do it when he's been sedated" Tech agreed reluctantly.

"Wait…why are we sedating him?" Wrecker asked confusedly. He didn't know why the others were talking so quietly but he followed suit and kept his voice lowered too.

"So he can rest, Wrecker" Hunter answered as he hoped back down. He crossed to the other side and decided to join Crosshair on his upper bunk rather than stand on the lower bunks to see everyone. "I told you, he's sick"

"He's unwell, not sick" Tech corrected him and went on explaining what he had already told Hunter in the cock pit. Wrecker nodded intently.

"Yeah...it seemed like he was in that freezer for a while..." Wrecker agreed.

"Its wasn't a freezer, Wrecker, it was a stasis chamber…" Tech corrected him again and so the cycle went on.

Crosshair looked over at Hunter who had climbed onto his bunk and sat next to him, "What he needs is a therapist" Crosshair said coldly. He spoke even quieter now, just to Hunter.

The two of them ignored the chatter between Tech and Wrecker. They knew the routine by now. Tech would attempt to explain something, Wrecker would try to put it in his own words and Tech would correct him, try again to explain and confuse Wrecker further. It could go on endlessly sometimes.

"He's fine, Tech said he'll get better. It's just malnourishment" Hunter whispered. What Tech had told Hunter wasn't nearly as hopeful, but Hunter couldn't give Crosshair another reason to think this was a bad idea.

Crosshair remained unconvinced and wasn't afraid to show it, "I think Wrecker almost made him cry," he said flatly and chewed on his toothpick.

"Really?" Hunter asked worriedly and glanced in the direction of the cockpit, "…What did he say?" Hunter asked, he needed to know if there were topics to avoid.

Crosshair rolled his eyes and chose not to answer, "When did you get so soft, hm?" he asked then reached forward and briefly toyed with a piece of Hunters hair.

Hunter gave him an unimpressed look and shrugged away from his condescending touch.

"All this for a reg?" Crosshair rose a brow.

"He's like us Cross, he doesn't have a place anymore," Hunter tried to explain.

Crosshair shook his head, at Hunter's seemingly endless sympathy. "We can't go around collecting misfits," Crosshair scolded, "we don't have the space"

"We'll make space" Hunter said stubbornly.

They locked eyes for a moment, both of them unwavering, frustration mounting between the two of them. "It wasn't your call to make," Crosshair sneered.

"I'm in charge, Cross" Hunter said. "I know you don't like it, but that's how it is"

Crosshair went back to fidgeting with his toothpick and looked away unhappily. "…Whatever you say, Sergeant" He muttered.

Hunter sighed. He hated when things got this way but if Crosshair insisted on questioning his every call, it was inevitable. Crosshair couldn't be convinced of anything. All Hunter could do was stand his ground and hope that eventually Crosshair would come around. In the meantime, it always left him wondering why there always had to be pushback, why it was so hard for Crosshair to accept that Hunter was in charge. The others never questioned an order, but Crosshair was compelled to test him whenever he got the chance.

The squabbling between Tech and Wrecker was getting louder and soon it was enough to distract Hunter and Crosshair from their own small feud.

"No, that stationary. I said stasis, as in homeostasis-"Tech said frustratedly but he didn't get to finish his statement.

"Whatever! Same thing!" Wrecker interjected impatiently.

"It's not even remotely close to being the same thing" Tech argued.

"Nobody cares" Wrecker huffed.

"Nobody cares? You just asked!" Tech said exasperatedly.

"Just drop it, both of you" Hunter said. He always tried to keep the peace; it just didn't always work.

"No, he's right" Crosshair interjected. The other two finally paused their bickering and looked over. "Nobody cares," Crosshair agreed.

Tech narrowed his eyes and adjusted his glasses disapprovingly. He knew Crosshair was only trying to get under his skin, but his patience had worn thin.

Hunter put a hand on Crosshair's shoulder, "You're not helping," he muttered.

Crosshair looked over at Hunter with a small smile, "I'm not trying to," he said.

In the cockpit, Echo sat in the co-pilot's seat. One leg was curled up on the seat in a criss-cross position and his other foot was propped up on the edge of the control console. He watched the blue light of stars passing by while they travelled so smoothly through hyper-space. He could hear the rest of the Bad Batch bickering while he ate. He didn't really care to discern what they were saying but it was enough to distract him from how un-hungry he was. He'd managed to finish one of the bars Hunter gave him but only one small bite of the

second. It still felt like too much. Echo sighed when he looked down at how much food was left in his lap. It was going to be a long recovery until he had his strength back.

He smiled to himself when he heard the squabbling eventually descend into reluctant laughter. He knew he was going to have to try and be a part of the comradery at some point. For now, it was nice enough to overhear it. It wasn't that he didn't want to belong to a family again. He just didn't know how to insert himself into their dynamic. They were all so close. When most troopers existed in legions; you had close friends, but you had hundreds of brothers. But Clone Force 99 didn't work like that, it was just the four of them versus whatever the galaxy could throw at them. Echo could only imagine what that felt like. The Domino squad had felt like a family for a time, but they all died so soon. Too soon, their first deployment, the first time they saw real combat.

After that, it was only him and Fives. Echo smiled. That was more than family. No matter what the war threw at them, they never had to face it alone. From fighting off endless waves of droids on the battlefield, to fighting off nightmares in the barracks, they never existed without each other. The rest of 501st had called them twins, they were so inseparable. It made Fives and Echo smile at each other because they knew in truth it was more than even that.

"Have you finished eating?" Fives asked him.

"I think so" Echo nodded. "I don't think I can fin- OW!" he winced and smacked a hand over his neck where Tech had planted a syringe without warning. Echo blinked up at Tech as he realized it hadn't been Fives' speaking to him.

"What the hell was that?" Echo questioned. Tech was standing over him now, adjusting his glasses and studying him.

"Should only take a moment.." Tech answered vaguely. He was talking to himself, rather than answering Echo's question.

Echo's eyes started feel heavy. He was blinking and it was getting harder and harder to open his eyes each time they closed. He could feel his breathing slowing too but there was nothing he could do to fight it.

"You…drugged me" Echo mumbled. He couldn't summon the energy to be anything more than confused. Tech's expression changed, he seemed satisfied with the results, and he was leaving the cockpit just as quickly as he had entered. Tech returned to the other three and discarded to depleted syringe.

"You can collect him now, Wrecker" Tech said.

"Hold on" Crosshair protested from where he sat with Hunter on his upper bunk, "where's the reg going to sleep?" he asked. He clearly had no intention of sharing his bunk.

"Uh-he can sleep with me" Wrecker decided. He still felt guilty for how he had upset him earlier and how he had taken the extra rations after that. Echo was part of the bad batch now, he was Wrecker's brother, and Wrecker was loyal to his brothers. He was happy to share his

bed if it made up for the misunderstandings that came before. But the others were staring at him with obvious skepticism.

"You'll crush him, Wrecker" Crosshair was the first to say what the rest were thinking.

"Aw…he doesn't take up that much room" Wrecker said with a shrug but the other three were already moving to the next possible solution.

"It would be easier if he took a lower bunk…" Tech suggested strategically.

"…I don't think that matters" Hunter said dismissively.

"Maybe he doesn't need a bed. Maybe we just plug him into the power generator overnight" Crosshair said, only half joking.

Hunter gave him an unamused glance. "You know what, he can take mine" Hunter decided, already tired of the negotiations. "And I'll share a bunk with you" he told Crosshair.

Crosshair seemed taken aback by the suggestion. "No way," he said and crossed his arms.

Hunter put a hand on Crosshair's shoulder "It'll be like old times, remember those nightmares you used to get," He assured him with a little grin.

Crosshair only grew more defensive. "We're not cadets anymore" he said with narrowed eyes.

"Then quit acting like it" Hunter said, his smile suddenly fading.

"None of us want to share our bunks" Crosshair sneered.

"I will," Wrecker offered again.

Crosshair continued. "--and why should we? You're the one who invited the reg" He reasoned stubbornly.

Tech raised a finger. "Perhaps we should let Wrecker share his bunk" He offered. It was clear that Crosshair and Hunter were going to come to blows before the came to an agreement.

"The likelihood that Echo would actually sustain significant damage via Wrecker laying on him is…relatively low" Tech explained.

The other two stopped glaring at each other long enough to look over at Tech.

"Relatively?" Hunter repeated.

"Deal," Crosshair agree then looked at Wrecker "he's all yours"

"Great. That's three votes. Sorry sergeant, democracy prevails" Tech declared then returned his attention to his data pad.

All four of them looked towards the cockpit when they heard a thud. The four of them jumped off their bunks and hurried to down the ship's corridor to find Echo had completely succumbed to the sedative Tech had given him and had slid off the chair in a slump.

"…Seriously Tech" Hunter said, entirely unimpressed.

"I told you I'd give him a sedative, Hunter. You know what sedatives do, don't you?" Tech asked rhetorically.

Hunter chose not to answer, just walked back to his own bunk underneath Crosshair's and sat down. Crosshair and Tech returned to their bunks as well and Wrecker came carrying Echo over his shoulder. Hunter considered scolding him for how carelessly he was carrying the new member of the batch, but he didn't have it in him. Hunter just sighed and started removing his armor. Wrecker tossed Echo onto his bunk then turned to face Hunter.

"Hey Sarge…" Wrecker said in a quiet tone that made Hunter raise a brow.

"What is it?" Hunter asked.

"Echo didn't finish his rations," Wrecker said as innocently as he could. He could tell Hunter was already in a bad mood from arguing with Crosshair.

"Go for it," Hunter sighed.

When Hunter finished undressing down to his blacks he placed his armor in a crate underneath his bed and laid down. The others were doing the same, except for Wrecker who was still sitting on the end of his bed, finishing the rations that had been meant for Echo. Hunter looked passed Wrecker to see Echo. He was laying on his side, exactly where he had landed when Wrecker tossed him there. Hunter could tell just by looking at him that whatever Tech had given him had him in in a very, very deep sleep. He was so still he almost looked dead. His colorless skin didn't help. But still, Hunter envied him simply because he was asleep.

"How long until we reach Kamino?" Hunter asked, glancing up at Tech.

Tech was in bed now too. He turned off the ship's interior lights from a control panel on the wall. Now the ship was only lit by the blue glow from the cockpit. "Approximately 9 hours" Tech answered then laid down and rolled to face the wall.

Wrecker was getting ready for bed now too, "Goodnight Tech, goodnight Crosshair, goodnight Hunter!" Wrecker said, like he did every night before bed.

"Goodnight Wrecker" the other three mumbled in unison.

"Goodnight, newbie" Wrecker whispered.

"He can't hear you-" Tech started to correct him.

"Quiet" Crosshair hissed.

Kamino

Chapter Summary

Echo wakes up on Kamino and has a moment to bond with Tech. HUnter and Crosshair wind up with a secret to keep.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone, sorry if this chapter isn't particularly exciting. I want to take out the time to really flesh out the relationships between the batchers.

Let me know what you think!

They were used to being stared at whenever they returned to Kamino. But it didn't help that Echo was still unconscious and Wrecker was carrying him bridal style through the halls. Once againg, Echo was doing a great job of looking dead.

Hunter knew it looked bad. It looked really bad. It looked like they were smuggling a corpse back to their quarters. The rest of the batch knew it too. Wrecker was the only one who was unabashed by the extra attention they were garnering from both staff and clones they passed by. They didn't have a choice; on the ship they had tried everything to wake Echo up, but he remained as lifeless as ever. So here they were, marching quietly through the white halls to the single room they shared. Their eyes were narrowed, faces hardened into scowls. On Kamino they were always on the defensive. Outnumbered by Kaminoans and Regs who saw them as a defective science experiment. They couldn't show any weakness. They moved down the hall as a united force. No one would've guessed they had been feuding just moments ago, passing the blame around as they took turns shaking the newest member of their team.

When they reached their room Wrecker tossed Echo down onto Tech's bed. For a moment they all stood over him and cocked their heads just slightly.

"Tech," Hunter said, his voice low and temperamental. "Why isn't he waking up?" he asked as patiently as he could manage.

Tech adjusted his glasses. "It is curious..." he admitted, "I must have misjudged the dosage"

Hunter dropped his face into the palm of his hands for a moment. He had made it his mission to help Echo recover and it was quickly turning into a nightmare. What was he going to do if

they managed to accidently kill Echo on the first day? Captain Rex would surely make his way to Kamino to kill Hunter himself.

"…Is he dead?" Crosshair asked, not to torment Hunter further but he genuinely found it hard to tell.

They all watched as Tech placed two fingers on Echo's neck and waited to see if he could feel a pulse. Wrecker glanced nervously at the others as the brief moment passed. "No, he's fine" Tech said.

Hunter took a deep breath. "I'm going to the mess hall" he decided.

He couldn't stand around and worry any longer. He craved a real meal rather than the rations they lived off when they were away. The others did too, and they followed him when he started to walk back to the door, but Hunter stopped and pointed a finger at Tech.

"You're staying here until he wakes up" Hunter instructed him.

Tech frowned unhappily but didn't argue. "Fine. Bring something back for me" he said.

Hunter nodded. Him and the other three disappeared back into the hallway and the door slid shut behind them.

Tech glanced at his desk and the materials he had been working on but abandoned last time they were sent out into the field. He walked back to his desk and looked over the items all of them either half-repaired or half-invented. He glanced back at Echo who laid still in on his bed, and decided it was time to start something new. Underneath the desk a was a small box of electrical materials he had collected from other unfinished projects. With a bit more consideration, he selected just a few tools and carried it all back to his bunk. He sat down next to Echo's sleeping form and started working on wiring the first few circuits of his new project.

He squinted through the yellow lenses of his glasses as he spliced the circuits, occasionally sending little blue sparks into the air. He was hungry but having the room to himself was a rarity he didn't mind. Every few minutes he set his tools down in his lap and checked Echo's pulse again, just to be sure. He was so focused on the tiny wires he was working with he lost track of how long he had been working.

Eventually, Echo started to stir while Tech went on working. It started with slow, heavy blinks. Echo was waking up and the drug was suddenly fading almost as fast as it had set in. Echo was sure not to move, or even let his breathing pick up past the slow pace it had been when he was sleeping. He glanced around the strange room, taking in as many details as he could without moving his head for a better view. The place was cluttered with random materials and had the same funny smell as the Havoc Marauder. Tech was sitting next to him, seemingly unaware that Echo was awake. He wasn't sure where Tech had taken him, but he was certain it was Tech who had drugged him.

With one swift move, Echo lunged at Tech, wrestled the small drill from Tech's hand and held it to his neck. Tech's eyes were wide with shock, he did nothing to fight back, just lifted

his hands defensively.

"You're awake" Tech noted.

"You drugged me" Echo said through gritted teeth.

"I sedated you" Tech still found the time to correct the other clone. "It was Hunter's idea. Long periods of rest are likely to hasten the recovery period" he explained, leaning away from the tool Echo was holding to his throat.

"…Oh" Echo said, slowly lowering the little drill and climbing off Tech to get a proper look around the room. "Where are we?" he asked.

Tech sat up but remained sitting on his bed while Echo looked around. "Tipoca city, Kamino" he answered.

Echo stepped further into the center of the room and continued looking around. The room didn't look like the rest of Kamino, it was lacking the bright lights and sterile white walls. But from the little windows Echo could see the dark endless sea sloshing and swelling. He could guess which bed belonged to which member of the batch just by looking at it. He turned back to face Tech and thought about apologizing but decided not to. Good intentions or not, they had still drugged him.

"You all live on Kamino?" Echo asked. It was a strange thought. He hadn't lived on Kamino since he was a cadet but then again the batch didn't have a Jedi general to follow across the galaxy and certainly didn't have a Venator-class Star Destroyer that could house hundreds of clones for months at a time.

"Between missions" Tech nodded.

Echo nodded. Coming back to Kamino between missions would take some getting used to. He hadn't even stepped into the familiar hallways but being here was enough to bring back memories. He couldn't let those memories distort what was real. He walked back to the bed and sat down next to Tech, looking for a distraction.

"What are you working on?" he asked.

"It's for you" Tech answered vaguely, "But it will take time to finish"

Echo eyes the little circuits more skeptically now but still he couldn't discern what Tech was building.

"Why are you making something for me?" he asked.

"I noticed on our last mission that you seemed to be in pain when you scomped-in to the mainframe of the separatist forces." Tech told him.

"it's fine, I can do it" Echo assured him, he knew his ability to 'speak' to computers and droids was currently the only thing that earned him a spot on the team. "Its just…a lot of information, all at once" he explained.

"I assumed" Tech nodded. "When I'm done with this I should be able to wire it straight to your cybernetics" Tech explained, sounding less bored than he usually did.

"You mean my head?" Echo asked

Tech nodded. "It'll give you more control over the flow of information. This way scomping-in will be…less abrasive." He assured him.

Echo smiled hesitantly at the strange act of kindness. "…. I'm sorry for attacking you" he apologized even though he had told himself he wouldn't.

Tech just looked at him and smiled ever so slightly. Echo assumed that meant it was all water under the bridge, or something along those lines. The room fell quiet again, but both were comfortable with the silence. A few minutes passed before either of them spoke up. Echo studied the room again and wondered how long the four of them had lived here. Was this the very room they grew up in? Then Tech set his new project aside and picked up his data-pad instead and looked over at Echo.

"You're a tactician" Tech said.

"Me? I guess" Echo only agreed because he couldn't really tell if Tech was asking a question or making a statement.

"You wouldn't have been so effective at countering the republic's attacks if you weren't" Tech reasoned.

Echo felt a little uncomfortable, he made a point not to think of how many battles the republic lost because of him. Or more so, because of the way the Techno Union had used his mind and memory, "Well, I wrote most of those attack plans with the captain. But besides that…it's just about knowing how they think" Echo explained and shrugged. He tried not to put much thought into it and tech seemed satisfied by the non-descript answer.

"You're anti-social," Tech said.

Again, Echo couldn't tell if it was a question or not, but he frowned this time. "No, I'm not" he disagreed.

"When it comes to social engagement you've shown disinterest on multiple occasions. Or at least, less interest than the average person" Tech argued.

Echo narrowed his eyes. "Are you writing this down??" He questioned and tried to get a look at the data-pad, but tech leaned away before he could. Tech looked at Echo and adjusted his glasses, still waiting for an answer.

Echo glowered. "I'm not anti-social" He insisted but gave up on trying to see the data-pad that Tech held so dearly. "What do you know about average people anyways?" he grumbled.

Tech had returned to typing notes into his data-pad but paused for a moment. "Only the statistics" Tech answered, then continued typing.

Echo almost laughed, though he was sure Tech wasn't intending to be funny. "I'm not anti-social. You're all just…like a family. And I don't want to get in the way of that" Echo explained and looked away bashfully.

"I see" Tech said. He took a moment to consider Echo's position. He certainly didn't envy him. "For the record, Wrecker likes you" Tech assured him.

Echo smiled just a little. "Well, I'm glad" he said genuinely. Wrecker didn't seem particularly difficult to win over, but it was still a start.

"Hunter likes you too, obviously" Tech added. "And so do I"

Echo picked his head up, his smile growing. He found Tech's directness so refreshing. He knew exactly where he stood with Tech. There was never any second guessing.

"Crosshair doesn't dislike you personally" Tech tried to tell him.

"...you think he'll warm up to me?" Echo asked. He didn't sound particularly worried, just tired. He knew exactly how Crosshair felt about him being here. He also knew better than to push his luck trying to win the sniper over.

"That's impossible to predict, we've never even considered having another teammate before" Tech explained. He knew Hunter or Wrecker would have assured Echo that Crosshair would come around. However, Tech figured there was no use in getting Echo's hopes up when he had no prior data to back up a claim like that.

Echo nodded. He appreciated Tech's honesty. He found himself starting to properly relax since he had been rescued. "So where did they go?" he asked curiously.

"You pay close attention to detail." Tech said out of the blue.

Echo scoffed. "It doesn't take a detective to notice three of the four of you are missing". Then he realized Tech's attention had returned to his attention to whatever notes he was taking on the data-pad.

"Have you ever been described as 'meticulous?" Tech asked curiously.

Again, Echo tried to look at the data-pad and he caught a glimpse before Tech leaned away again. "You're keeping a file on me??" he asked, a little astonished.

Tech blinked a few times and adjusted his glasses. "It's the most efficient way to get to know you" he answered. "…Is there a problem with that?" Tech asked.

Echo thought for a moment. "No…that's fine" He decided. It was a bit strange but then again, Tech was a bit strange. "Just…you don't have to interview me" Echo told him.

Tech nodded and lowered his data-pad for once. Tech knew everything there was to know about his other brothers, but Echo was an unknown variable. It was in his nature to try and gather as much information as he could, but Echo was right. It would come with time, not with a detailed personality assessment.

"Where are the others?" Echo asked again.

"The mess hall" Tech replied. "They're meant to bring something back for me…I assume they'll bring something for you too" Tech assured him. "Though, they were concerned that the sedative may have killed you" he added.

Echo just scoffed. "Clearly it takes more than that to kill me" he said flatly. Tech smiled at that. He was starting to get a read on Echo's timid sense of humor. Then Tech stood up from the bed.

"I can show you around" Tech said.

Echo looked around the room confusedly. Just like the ship, he could see all of it from where he was sitting. "Around Kamino?" Echo asked.

"Around our…quarters" Tech said, though he was hesitant to give their single room such a title. "That's Hunter's bed" he said, pointing to the relatively neatest bunk on the other side of the room. "Crosshair's" Tech continued, pointing at each bed that lined the room. "Mine, obviously. And yours and Wreckers"

Echo had already assumed which bed belonged to who and had guess correctly. However, that last statement took him off guard. "Mine and Wreckers?" he repeated, eyes widening as he waited for some sort of punchline. He hoped this was Tech's idea of a joke.

"Well, yours, Wreckers, and Lula's" Tech added, looking slightly amused.

Echo just blinked at him for a moment but there was no punchline. "…How?" was all Echo could ask.

Tech shrugged. "You fit on the ship, you'll fit here" he answered. "Nobody else wanted to share" He explained.

Echo couldn't exactly blame them for that, privacy wasn't exactly a commodity for clones. Their own bed was basically the extent of it. Anyone would be reluctant to give that up, except for Wrecker apparently. He didn't know Wrecker very well but somehow it didn't surprise him.

"Well…I could set up a spot on the floor. Just temporarily" Echo offered.

Tech nodded. He was still getting to know Echo, but it seemed in character for him to offer something like that. "If anyone's sleeping on the floor, Hunter will make sure it's not you" he warned.

Echo frowned, that would backfire. Squeezing in next to Wrecker didn't seem too bad when he compared it to one of them having to sleep on the floor while he took their bed. "Why does he care so much?" Echo asked, sounding just a little frustrated.

"Hunters is…compassionate" Tech said it like he had a file on him too. "He gets this way whenever one of us is injured"

"But I'm not…one of you" Echo said. He realized it sounded a bit cold, though he hadn't intended it to. "Not really" he added, quieter this time.

"To Hunter you are" Tech said simply.

Echo's expression softened but before he could reply the door slid open. The others had returned, and Hunter was carrying two extra trays of food.

"Hey! He's alive!" Wrecker cheered.

Hunter looked visibly relieved as he set the food down on the table in the center of the room.

"Forget the drugs, I thought Tech would've bored him to death by now" Crosshair said, earning a laugh from Wrecker.

"I wasn't boring him; Echo was actually listening to me" Tech huffed back at Crosshair.

"Look, Tech has a little friend now" Crosshair said teasingly. "He's always wanted his own droid"

"Shut up, Crosshair" Echo interjected. All four of the other clones looked over at him in surprise. They had grown so used to ignoring Crosshair's chiding remarks and Echo had been so quiet up until now, none of them had expected him to push back.

Crosshair had been taken off guard too, but it only lasted a moment before he sneered at the new member. "What was that, Reg?" Crosshair spoke venomously and stalked towards Echo until he was close enough to look down at him.

Echo was unimpressed by Crosshair's intimidation tactics. "You heard me" Echo answered, his tone stern and unwavering.

"So, it speaks" Crosshair hissed. Hunter watched the two of them carefully. He thought about interrupting be he knew tensions would only continue to rise if he jumped in to defend Echo every time Crosshair felt like starting trouble.

Echo watched as Crosshair slowly plucked the toothpick from his mouth and flicked it away. Echo found it a notably unpleasant habit, but he refused to let it distract him. He didn't want to give Crosshair the time to think up another insult. "I know you don't want me here. But you're wasting your time if you think name-calling is enough to get rid of me" Echo told him. Then a silence passed where Crosshair just glared down at him and replaced his old toothpick. It was impossible to tell what Crosshair was thinking but Echo stood his ground.

"Noted" Crosshair said then pushed past him and continued towards his bunk.

Echo couldn't tell if it was a threat, or a truce and Crosshair was happy to leave him guessing. The other three went about their business as though they hadn't been watching the stand-off. Hunter wiped some miscellaneous junk off the table so Tech and Echo could sit and eat.

"Hungry?" Hunter asked.

Tech nodded and sat down at the table. "You took your time coming back" Tech scolded lightly before he started eating. Echo wasn't hungry, but he understood that it didn't matter. He sat down next to Tech.

"Thanks, Hunter" he said before he started eating.

"It's no problem, I'm just glad you woke up" Hunter told him.

"…Tech said it was your idea" Echo said, raising a brow.

"My idea?" Hunter asked.

"Sticking a needle in my neck when I wasn't looking" Echo clarified.

Tech looked up from his meal and adjusted his glasses when he felt Hunter staring at him. "Yes?" Tech asked.

Hunter swallowed his frustration. He had asked Tech for his help; he had not instructed him to sneak up from behind and drug their new teammate. It seemed, while they had the room to themselves, Tech had told Echo otherwise. Hunter told himself it didn't matter. The last thing the team needed was more arguing. Crosshair had that base well and truly covered. So, he didn't bother trying to clear his name. Instead, he put on a friendly smile and placed a hand on Echo's shoulder.

"I needed you well rested" Hunter said. "We've got a lot to do today."

Echo looked up from his food and rose a brow.

"You need new gear" Hunter elaborated.

"And you've gotta paint it!" Wrecker added from across the room

Hunter nodded. "And we'll have to request another bed" he said.

Echo visibly perked up.

"When you're done eating" Hunter clarified.

"I've had enough" Echo told him though he had only choked down a handful of bites.

Hunter sighed. "No, you haven't" he told Echo quietly then walked off to his own bunk before Echo got the chance to argue.

Echo huffed unhappily and glared down at the food in front of him. The only thing worse than the food on Kamino was having to eat it when you had no appetite. He knew that Hunter meant well, but it didn't mean Echo enjoyed being treated like a patient.

"I don't need to spend every minute eating or sleeping" Echo frustratedly to Tech. "I should be training, getting my strength back"

"Incorrect" Tech replied after finishing the next bite of his lunch.

Echo crossed his arms, entirely betrayed by his new friend.

"Any rigorous training would likely do more damage than good" Tech explained.

Hunter had just sat down on his bunk for a moment and started to relax when he noticed Crosshair shooting him the most blatant, unwavering glare one could imagine.

Hunter rose his brows back at the sniper. He didn't know what to think. He knew Crosshair would be skeptical about a new member of the team, but this was reaching a new level of miserable.

"What is it Crosshair??" Hunter snapped incredulously.

"I'm going for a walk" Crosshair answered dryly then got up and left the room with Hunter following behind him.

The others watched the little scene unfold with little surprise. Echo was at least a little amused even if he didn't show it.

"Are they always like that?" Echo asked Tech.

"Frequently" Tech responded, sounding quite sick of it. "Though.." he added more thoughtfully. "Things have seemed particularly tense since you arrived"

Echo frowned. "I haven't done anything to him"

"Don't worry about it, Crosshair just doesn't like to share" Wrecker interjected and sat down across from them.

"What do you mean? Share what?" Tech questioned

"Hunter" Wrecker laughed.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking" Echo agreed. He was smiling again and sharing in Wrecker's amusement.

"Share Hunter?" Tech said confusedly. He Adjusted his glasses and looked questioningly at Wrecker, then at Echo but he still wasn't sure what they were insinuating.

Meanwhile, in the hall Hunter had just caught up to Crosshair.

"Hey, what's gotten into you?" Hunter demanded. He grabbed Crosshair by the arm and forced Crosshair to look over at him.

"I could ask you the same thing" Crosshair sneered.

"That's not an answer" Hunter insisted through gritted teeth. Crosshair pulled his arm out of Hunter's grip and kept walking.

"You've been miserable since we got on the ship" Hunter kept going. "you can't take it out on the team!" He scolded.

The argument earned them a few curious glances from other troopers in the hall, but they were used to be stared at.

"I'm surprised you've noticed" Crosshair said coldly, looking down at Hunter with narrowed eyes. "Considering the amount of time, you've spent fawning over that reg"

Hunter just looked even more lost. He didn't understand what Crosshair wanted from him and it seemed like nothing short of begging was going to make him come forwards and say it.

"Are you kidding? He needs help Crosshair. You saw what happened to him on Skako Minor" Hunter said. His confusion was still clear, he knew Crosshair didn't need it explained to him. On the ship Crosshair had been happy to give up his rations so that Echo could have more to eat but now he rolled his eyes unsympathetically.

"Yeah I saw it" Crosshair said. "The separatists fried his brain. He's still completely insane, by the way, and you think you can fix it by doing what? Hand feeding him and kissing his ass?" Crosshair jeered.

Hunter's expression hardened. "I'm trying to help. That's what we do, we take care of each other"

"Since when did that extend to strangers?" Crosshair challenged.

"you don't trust him? Is that it?" Hunter asked, thinking he may have finally gotten down to the root of the problem.

"Please" Crosshair scoffed and rolled his eyes. "He's a Reg. I'm sure he's happy to blindly follow orders until something finally manages to kill him"

Hunter looked around the hall then grabbed crosshair by the arm and pulled him through the nearest doorway. It led to a lab of some sort, but it was empty and looked like it had been unused for some time now. Hunter hoped that if they were free from the prying eyes in the hall then maybe Crosshair might give him a straight answer.

"Then what do you want?" Hunter asked once the door to the lab shut behind them.

Hunter's eyes widened when crosshair shoved him. Hunter's back hit the wall, Crosshair stood close and glared down at him.

"Maybe I want you to grow a spine" Crosshair said venomously. "Stop pretending it's your job to save everyone. Start acting like a leader". Crosshair poked hunter in the chest with each statement.

Hunter was still taken off guard by how aggressive Crosshair had become. Shoving each other around was usually the batch's weird way of showing affection, but this was different. Hunter couldn't remember the last time a disagreement had come to blows. He knew he had to find a way to get Crosshair to calm down, but his own temper was wearing thin now.

"Act like a leader?" Hunter scoffed. "Is that what you're doing? Should you be in charge Cross?" he asked sarcastically. "All you do is pick fights and this time you can't even decide why you're angry!" Hunter accused.

Crosshair's lip began to twitch into a snarl, but Hunter kept going.

"You have no idea what it takes to run this squad. Babysitting you and your temper is only half of it" Hunter ranted and glared up at Crosshair. "You want to play Sargent but you-"

Hunter couldn't finish because Crosshair had suddenly grabbed him by the chin and pressed their lips together. Hunter was too shocked to respond. It lasted just a moment, but Crosshair was kissing him.

As far as Crosshair could tell, much to his own shock, Hunter was letting him. Crosshair stepped closer and placed his hands on Hunters teeny tiny waist.

Feeling Crosshair's hands on him was enough to break Hunter from his momentary shock and replace it with panic. Hunter pushed Crosshair off him.

"What the hell was that!?" Hunter asked, eyes wide.

Crosshair stood frozen, looking just as baffled. He had done and yet he also couldn't believe it.

"Nothing!" Crosshair said, sounding panicked. His eyes darted to the door nervously. "I'm leaving, don't follow me" he said, his voice had returned to its usual tone, if not a little quieter.

Hunter watched him leave. He was still frozen in place, unable to make sense of what happened. All he knew was that he couldn't tell anybody. Crosshair would certainly kill him if he even thought about telling the others.

So, he walked back to their quarters, trying to pretend nothing had happened. His spirits lifted slightly when he saw Echo sitting and chatting with Wrecker and Tech.

"Tell me what you're insinuating" Tech requested, clearly frustrated.

"I'm not insinuating anything, I think it's pretty obvious" Echo said with a small, amused smile.

"Yeah!" Wrecker agreed enthusiastically. "It's obvious!"

On second thought, maybe Wrecker didn't get the joke either. Nevertheless, it was good to see them bonding. Not great, however, to see Echo was sharing his food with Wrecker and Wrecker was helping himself to the lion's share.

"What's going on here?" Hunter asked with a hesitant smile as he approached the table.

Tech answered before the others could.

"Echo is insinuating something about you and Crosshair but is being intentionally vague and Wrecker is pretending he knows what Echo's talking about" Tech complained.

"Me and Crosshair?" Hunter repeated, a little more on edge than he normally would have been. He laughed and tried to play it off as though he wasn't taking it too seriously. "…what about me and Crosshair?" he asked.

"hey! I know exactly what the newbie is insinuating about" Wrecker interjected defensively.

"What about me and Crosshair" Hunter asked again, ignoring Wrecker, and looking at Echo. Tech was also looking at Echo with his brows raised expectantly.

Echo looked up from the lunch he had been picking at and met eyes with Hunter. It was the first time he had seen the Sargent look nervous.

"It was just a joke" Echo assured him without really answering. Then he shifted his focus back to his lunch.

Hunter wanted a real answer, but he knew he couldn't ask a third time without it seeming like a sensitive subject.

"…Right" Hunter said, maybe trying a bit too hard to sound casual.

"This has become infuriating" Tech said defeatedly. Having already finished his lunch, he left the table and returned to the mess of circuitry he had left on his bunk.

Hunter took what had been Tech's seat. He grabbed the lunch tray that had slowly inched closer and closer to Wrecker and slid it back to Echo.

"That's not yours" Hunter scolded Wrecker. "You already had lunch"

"Hey!" Wrecker protested with a pout. "That's not fair, he told me to eat it" Wrecker said pointing a finger at Echo.

Echo shot Wrecker a rebuking glare.

"That's true" Tech interjected from his bunk. Echo shot him a look too.

"Really?" Hunter rose his brows at Echo in exasperation.

"Well, he wasn't mean to tell you" Echo explained, narrowing his eyes at Wrecker again.

"Why won't you eat??" Hunter groaned frustratedly.

"I am eating" Echo answered tersely. "I don't need you force feeding me" he said, pointing at Hunter with his fork.

Hunter put his hands up defensively. "Nobody's force feeding you"

"And I don't need you counting calories either" Echo added.

Hunter sighed. Echo was certainly getting more comfortable than he had been on the ship. Hunter hadn't taken him for a troublemaker, but here he was trying to sneak his rations to Wrecker as soon as Hunter left the room. Hunter knew now that he'd have to keep an eye on him. He was quiet but defiant in his own way and dangerously stubborn. He'd fit right in with the rest of the batch, Hunter thought to himself. Between Crosshair and Echo, down time on Kamino was turning out to be more exhausting than most missions.

"Where's Crosshair?" Wrecker asked.

"He… just needed some air" Hunter answered distractedly. Just mentioning it had his mind flooding memories of that kiss. It only lasted a second, but Hunter could remember every detail. He shook his head and tried to push the thoughts away.

"Too much time on the ship, I guess he's sick of us" Hunter added, half joking, half serious.

"For the record, I'm sick of all of you as well" Tech told the,, obviously still irritated from being left out of the joke.

"Aw, you don't mean that" Wrecker said with a big grin. He walked over and joined Tech on his bunk.

"These circuits are fragile, Wrecker" Tech warned him.

"lemme help" Wrecker said

"No, I can do it on my own" Tech said.

"I can help!" Wrecker insisted.

Tech sighed. "Alright, hand me the micro-fusion-spanner" Tech instructed

Wrecker happily knelt on the floor and dug through the footlocker below Tech's bunk until he found the right tool.

Echo looked up at Hunter again. "let's go, you said we could get another bed"

Hunter nodded. "We'll have to lodge a request but I'm sure they've got a bunk to spare" he got up and headed out into the hall again, this time with Echo following him.

Echo blinked a few times when they stepped out. The batch's room wasn't nearly as bright as the perfect white halls. Being in there, he had almost forgotten that they were on Kamino at all. It was jarring how instantly a familiar place could drag back memories long forgotten. Echo tried not to remember anything specific. Memories were too risky; it was too easy for him to get stuck in them. A few seconds of remembering and suddenly it was hard to tell what was real and what had passed.

Hunter broke the silence and Echo made a point to focus on whatever he had to say.

"We've got a lot to do" Hunter told him. "we'll get you a new bed and new armor, of course" Hunter assured him. "But there's also some complications regarding your file. I received a

transmission from Nala Se when we were on the Marauder. You were listed as killed in action, but I guess that can be corrected…"

Echo could already feel himself losing focus. He didn't know what was wrong with him, he never had a hard time concentrating before. If anything, Fives would often remind him when he was hyper-fixating on something or someone. But now he just couldn't bring himself to listen. It wasn't like Hunter was prattling on about something boring, what Hunter was saying was important, it directly affected him. Still, It didn't matter the sights and smells and sounds of Kamino were too distracting.

A group of clones passed, all of them joking amongst each other then quieting when they passed Hunter and Echo. By now Hunter realized that Echo wasn't listening. He wasn't even responding.

He put a hand on Echo's shoulder in order to regain his attention.

"Don't worry about them" Hunter said, glancing towards the regs they had passed. "They always stare at us" Hunter assured him.

"…yeah" Echo nodded.

In all honesty, Echo had been the one staring. When he looked at them, he saw himself. They were strong, fit, healthy, perfectly identical. He still thought of himself as the very same but when the troopers had passed he saw his own reflection in the windows behind them. He didn't even recognize it. He had to consciously remind himself that the gaunt face staring back at him was really him.

It was an unfamiliar experience for him. Echo had never once considered how he looked until now. He never had to, he's always shared the exact same face as everyone else, it was comfortable. He didn't know this new face, his new body. It worked but it didn't feel like his.

"Anyways" Hunter went back to what he had been getting to earlier. "The Kaminoans want to do a full examination before the officially let you join us" Hunter told him.

That got Echo's full attention. Hunter continued.

"So, I figured, I'd get everything else set up for you while you're in the med bay" Hunter offered. He knew Echo wouldn't want to be examined. Nobody liked being poked and prodded by the long necks, especially after what the Techno Union had already put him through.

Echo stared blankly at Hunter then started to shake his head just slightly. "I don't want to do that" he said quietly.

It was the first time Hunter had seen Echo allow himself a moment a vulnerability. Even when they had just freed him from the stasis chamber he picked himself up and led them out of the base without pausing for even a moment.

"I know" Hunter said his voice low and soft. "they're not going to do anything to you…they just seem…curious" Hunter said, but he wasn't sure if that made things any better.

Echo didn't say anything, he knew that he didn't have a choice. Hunter didn't either, he was only the messenger. If he didn't walk himself down to the med bay, the Kaminoans would send for him. As a clone you never possessed anything. Nothing was ever truly yours and that included your mind and body. The Kaminoans were fond of science experiments, kicked himself for not having expected this.

Echo was glad that Hunter had chosen not to tell him until they were alone, but at the same time he had been blind-sided. They walked in silence to the med bay where Nala Se, Kamino's top scientist, was waiting with two other Kaminoans by her side.

"CT-1409" She greeted him in that slow, monotone voice they all had.

"ma'am" Echo said in resignation.

"Thank for agreeing to the examination. It's not often a clone returns from the dead. Of course, we are very curious about you're…modifications." She explained.

Echo didn't answer, he didn't need to, she wasn't expecting him to.

"You're in good hands" Nala Se went on. "Only myself and my most trusted medical staff will exam you. We may even be able to improve these crude modifications. Our technology far surpasses that of the Techno Union" she said proudly.

Echo nodded. He didn't care to hear her attempt at pleasantries so he started to step towards the entrance of the med bay but one of the other Kaminoans blocked his path.

"We won't be conducting the examination here" Nala Se clarified. "My assistant, Yado Pes, will escort you to my personal laboratory" she said.

The Kaminoan who stood in front of him started down the hallways and gestured for Echo to follow. Echo did without looking back at Hunter.

Hunter looked up at Nala Se, who now shifted her attention to him.

"Thank you for delivering him to our agreed rendezvous point" she said. "You are dismissed"

"Well, when will we get him back?" Hunter asked.

"When the examination is complete, of course" Nala Se answered calmly.

Hunter was careful not to show any frustration at the non-answer she gave. Nala Se turned and walked off in the same direction when they had taken Echo.

Hunter couldn't help feeling like he had already failed the newest member of his squad. The best he could do now was make sure Echo came back to a bed of his own.

From Bad to Worse

Chapter Summary

While Echo is under observation by Nala Se, Crosshair tries to resolve things with Hunter after their awkward kiss. Things manage to get even more awkward.

Chapter Notes

Hello yall. This is a shorter chapter that focusses more on Hunter and Crosshiar so I hope everyone's into that!

AS always- let me know what you think! and what you'd like to see!

It was evening when Crosshair finally bit the bullet and started making his way back towards their shared room. He would've stayed away longer, wandering the outer halls of Kamino, pretending to be distracted by the view of the endless sea. But predictably, it had started to rain. It rains hard and often on Kamino. Reluctantly, he decided that no matter how strained things were with Hunter, it wasn't worth getting drenched just to avoid him a bit longer.

At least he had the long walk back to the room to decide how he was going to play it. Should he refuse to acknowledge it and let the kiss be slowly forgotten? Should he wear it confidently or even try it again. Would Hunter even bring it up or would they both pretend it never happened?

His time to contemplate his options was suddenly cut short. He came to a halt when he saw Hunter struggling to drag a standard issue, dura-steel frame bunk down the hall. The sight was so ridiculous Crosshair momentarily forgot that he had been trying to avoid him.

Hunter had a firm grip on the frame of the bed. His teeth were gritted, he was leaning back with all his weight as he slowly tugged it inch by inch down the hall. Troopers and Kaminoans gave the spectacle a wide berth as they passed, but nobody offered to lend a hand.

"What are you doing?" Crosshair asked

The familiar voice took Hunter off guard, his grip slipped and almost fell back on his ass, but he caught himself just in time.

"We need another bed" Hunter answered. "I'm bringing back to our room"

Crosshair almost looked disappointed in him, "…why" he asked simply.

Hunter sighed. "Wrecker won't answer his comm" he explained.

Crosshair crossed his arms. "And you thought you'd bring it yourself?" he assumed.

"It's heavier than it looks" Hunter said defensively.

"It looks heavy, Hunter" Crosshair said flatly. He crossed his arms. "I'm not saying you're being weak; I'm saying you're being stupid" he explained.

Hunter glared at him. "Helpful as ever, Cross" he muttered then grabbed the frame of the bed again.

Crosshair walked past him, continuing his way towards their room.

"Aren't you going to help??" Hunter called after him.

"No" Crosshair answered simply. He didn't even pause to look back.

Hunter cursed under his breath angrily. He expected things to be a bit weird with Crosshair after what had happened, he knew Crosshair had been avoiding him. But it still felt like a slap to the face. Hunter was left to continue dragging the bed, making slow but steady progress.

He had made it about halfway where then he heard Wrecker's boisterous laugh from behind him. Hunter sighed in relief and finally gave up on dragging the bed.

"Cross said you needed me to come rescue you" Wrecker said teasingly.

"You weren't answering your comm, I figured I'd do it myself" Hunter scolded him lightly.

"I was busy helping Tech with his… whatever it is" Wrecker told him. He made his way to other side of the bed and Hunter had to jump out of the way when Wrecker started pushing it with ease.

Hunter walked beside Wrecker as he pushed it back to their room.

"Aright, I think that's everything" Hunter said, speaking to no one in particular. Hunter pointed to where he had already placed a footlocker filled with new armor and Wrecker pushed the bed over to the designated spot. The rest of their bunks were built into compartment in the wall, but Echo's was a standard bed that now stood just below the row of windows on the far side of the room. He was sure Echo wouldn't mind the slight difference.

"So…where is he?" Wrecker asked.

"He's-" Hunter started to explain but Tech rushed to answer first.

"I assume the Kaminoans will be conducting a full examination" Tech hypothesized.

"Yeah" Hunter said, nodded. "I don't know when he'll be back"

"Whatever will you do with yourself in the meantime?" Crosshair asked with sarcastic concern.

Hunter's grey eyes flickered towards Crosshair. He didn't glare, just shook his head slightly before looking away. He didn't know what had gotten into Crosshair, or how he was meant to fix it.

"I'm hitting the showers before dinner" Hunter decided.

The room was quiet when Hunter left. Tech was still focused on his circuitry, but Wrecker was pouting and glaring at Crosshair from his bunk. Crosshair pretended he didn't notice Wrecker staring at him. He knew Wrecker didn't like it when things got this tense but that wasn't his problem. Wrecker threw his pillow at Crosshair, and it hit him in the side of the head.

"Why are you givin' sarge such a hard time?" Wrecker questioned

Crosshair glared and threw the pillow back at Crosshair. "He's fine, he's just worried about that reg"

"No, he's worried about you" Wrecker said, pointing an accusatorial finger at the sniper.

"Please" Crosshair scoffed.

Tech picked his head up. "His behavior is irregular, he normally showers in the morning, before wake-up call" Tech noted.

"So?" Crosshair said, crossing his arms.

"Maybe he's avoiding you" Wrecker said, raising his brows at Crosshair.

"A possible theory" Tech agreed

Crosshair just rolled his eyes "Maybe he went to the showers because he wanted to shower" he argued bitingly.

Crosshair turned away from the other two his arms still crossed. He glared at the floor as he considered what they said. Was Hunter really avoiding him. Quarreling wasn't new for them, but Hunter had never gone out of his way to avoid him. Maybe he had really pushed things too far when it came to questioning Hunter's leadership. Or maybe it had nothing to do with the arguing and everything to do with that stupid mistake of a kiss. He didn't know what he was going to do but he knew he had to at least attempt to patch things up. It was only a matter of time before they were deployed on their next mission.

Crosshair stood from his bunk and walked towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Tech asked.

"Showers" Crosshair answered curtly. "I'll talk to him" he added quietly. It was the closest Crosshair came to admitting any sort of fault.

"That's right, go kiss and make up already" Wrecker said jokingly.

"I said we're just going to talk!" Crosshair snapped.

Wrecker shot a confused glance at Tech. Tech answered with an uninterested shrug as Crosshair hurried out.

Meanwhile, down a long stretch of halls, Hunter was stepping into the communal showers and surveying the room carefully. On the ship it was easy to find some privacy. There was one shower, no sharing, no buddying up. Everyone just waited their turn. On Kamino, Hunter had to be much more careful. It was usually best to go in the early morning. Before wake-up call there was no one to interrupt or catch a glimpse. Clones were never shy about their bodies. Why bother? They had nothing to hide, nothing the others hadn't seen before. Every inch was identical when it came to the regs at least. It wasn't quite the same for the bad batch, but they had grown so close they all stopped caring a long time ago. Except for Hunter. The rest of the batch didn't care enough to question it, but Hunter was much more private. He got dressed alone, and he showered alone. Hunter did have something to hide.

Hunter hadn't actually expected to find the showers empty but there was no one insight. The long rows of communal showers were empty, the room silent except the occasional drip from a leaky shower head. It was a pleasant surprise for sure, if he could shower now he wouldn't have to wake up so impossibly early the next morning. He'd have to be quick, the showers were empty for now, but he had no way of knowing how long it would stay that way. The thought of someone walking in while he was mid shower made him nervous. However, the idea of sleeping in to wake-up call was starting to seem worth it.

He looked around one was lost time before stepping further into the showers, picking a faucet, and starting to undress. He untied his bandana and tossed it onto the nearest bench. His dark hair immediately fell in face, and he shifted it away from his eyes with a shake of his head. His armor was discarded quickly and placed on the same bench. He scanned the large room one more time then, his blacks were off next, and he was in the nude.

He turned the shower on and stepped into the water with a quiet sigh. That was the best part about waiting until you had the showers to yourself. The water was always warm, never quite hot, but warm. When your body was always some degree of sore from the latest mission. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. The water running through his hair had his entire body relaxing.

The quiet bliss only lasted a moment. He opened his eyes suddenly when he thought he heard footsteps. In an instance the relaxation had left his body. He ducked behind the nearest wall. Half walls divided each shower in some mockery of privacy. Half the time clones had to double up in the showers anyway.

Hunter held his breath and waited but the footsteps had quieted. Slowly he peaked just his eyes above the wall. No one was there. The door was still closed and panel beside it was blinking a small red light. The green light flashed when the door opened or closed, but apparently it hadn't moved.

He must have overheard footsteps from the hall. He waited another long moment to be sure. Then slowly he stood back up and stepped hesitantly back into the water. He finished his shower with a bit more haste. The dispenser on the wall offered the standard soap, meant to sufficiently clean a clone's body and hair. Hunter scrubbed it over his body and head then rinsed it off just as quickly. He grabbed a fresh towel from one of the large crates in the corner of the room.

His nerves began to settle again as he dried himself. That was until he heard the door slide open. He wrapped his towel around his waist as quickly as possible then turned to see Crosshair scanning the room, locking eyes with him, and making his way over.

"What are you doing here" Hunter asked, eyes wide.

He was obviously uncomfortable, but Crosshair couldn't quite tell why. "Looking for you" he answered vaguely.

"Whatever it is, it can wait" Hunter insisted. His eyes darted towards the bench. His blacks and his armor sat in an unruly pile. In his armor, he was safe, secure, confident. He was a trooper just like the rest of them and he was damn good at what he did. Now Crosshair stood between him and his armor, and he was left to face him with only a towel tied tightly around his hips. Each time his gaze flickered back to his armor he considered making a break for it. He had to fight the urge back down into the back of his mind.

Crosshair narrowed his eyes as he looked down at Hunter. He knew Hunter was more on the private side when it came to things like showers but still, it was strange seeing him so nervous. Hunter was never nervous, always the brave leader. Yet here he was, wet hair dripping down his face, eyes wide, and clinging to the towel around his hips. It was scary to see Hunter so shaken, and it hurt to think that things might stay this way because of a kiss. Surely their friendship was stronger than that. Crosshair hoped.

"No, now" Crosshair insisted.

"Okay, okay what is it?" Hunter asked impatiently.

Crosshair looked down and glared at the floor for a moment as he found the words. Then he looked back up and swallowed his breath.

"What happened earlier…" Crosshair started to try and explain but Hunter interjected.

"It's fine" Hunter said quickly

Crosshair stared back at him in surprise and confusion as he wondered what on earth Hunter meant by that.

"…It's fine?" Crosshair repeated with quiet disbelief.

"Sure" Hunter said, hoping to end the conversation. "Its not a big deal."

Crosshair's heart was beating fast in his chest. This was it. This was Hunter giving him the green light. Of all the scenarios he had braced himself for on his walk down here, this was the

one he didn't even consider. He couldn't believe it. Hunter: their courageous leader, Hunter who was just as handsome as he was fearless and just as fearless as he was compassionate could want him. Or at least want to be kissed by him. As difficult as it was to believe, he couldn't let the chance pass him by.

Crosshair put a hand on the back of Hunter's neck and pulled him up into a sudden kiss. This time he tried to kiss him slowly, and softly. He wanted to take his time with it and enjoy the taste of the other man's lips. He wanted a moment to realize this was finally happening. The other kiss had been over just as soon as it had started. Crosshair was determined to make this one last.

It didn't. Hunter pushed him off even sooner than he had last time and for a moment they just looked at each other with big, bewildered eyes.

"What are you doing??" Hunter was the first to break the silence.

Crosshair didn't answer. It was dawning on him that he had read the moment all wrong and he was frozen in horrifying embarrassment. Hunter had meant it was fine to kiss him, he meant that he was trying to forget about it.

"Get out!" Hunter said, losing his patience. He couldn't bear to stand her so exposed any longer. "Just get out so I can get dressed!" Hunter insisted.

Crosshair was too mortified to try and defend himself. He stepped back slowly then suddenly turned and hurried out of the showers. He didn't even stop the question whether Hunter had the right to kick him out of public showers in the first place. He hurried down the hall, all he knew for sure was that he didn't want to be there when Hunter finished getting dressed.

Crosshair had been a mission to resolve things, but he had only made a bigger mess. There was no denying it now, no playing it off as a mistake. He had made it clear that he wanted Hunter. He had shown all his cards and Hunter clearly didn't feel the same way. He was a fool for thinking he would. How would things go back to normal now? Would the others find out? Crosshair's head was spinning as he stormed back towards their shared room. But even now, though everything had gone from bad to worse, he still found himself conjuring back the image of Hunter, only covered by a towel, his wet hair dropping beads of water down his exquisite form. His body was strong, well-muscled and toned. His skin was smooth and dark and probably warm, but Crosshair could only imagine that part.

He tried to shake the image from his mind, but he didn't stand a chance.

Midnight Decisions

Chapter Summary

Echo has some advice for one of his distressed little brothers.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is pretty short but I had a really fun time writing it. Let me know what you think and what other relationships in the batch you'd like to see more of!

They didn't speak for the rest of the day. Both Hunter and Crosshair busied themselves with tidying their things and the space around their bunks. Tech went on working on his latest project (which still resembled nothing more than a pile of circuitry), and Wrecker sat around complaining about how bored he was.

"We haven't even been back a day, stop complaining" Crosshair muttered.

"Well, why is everyone being so quiet?" Wrecker questioned unhappily.

This time nobody answered. Tech looked up from the wires in his lap and raised his brows expectantly at both Crosshair and Hunter. Crosshair and Hunter caught eyes for a moment then quickly looked away and went back to organizing their things. Wrecker watched them skeptically. They were both acting so strange. Neither of them had ever cared about the clutter before, the room had always been a mess.

"Well, where's the newbie?" Wrecker asked. At this point he was desperate for something or someone to entertain him.

"I told you Wrecker, the Kaminoans wanted to see him" Hunter answered.

Wrecker looked out the window, the sun had gone down long ago, the sky was nearly as dark as the ocean below it.

"Yeah but, it's gettin' late" Wrecker said.

"I don't know when he'll be back. They might keep him overnight" Hunter explained calmly.

"It would take some time to fully examine and understand the modifications the Techno Union made. Echo's cybernetics are an impressive feat in interconnecting organic and non-organic systems." Tech chimed in.

"Whatever, why can't you just talk normally?" Wrecker said impatiently.

"I am speaking normally" Tech refuted.

"Just say he talks to computers with his brain" Wrecker suggested.

"That would be inaccurate" Tech said stubbornly

Hunter sighed; he could tell Wrecker wasn't going to settle any time soon and the only thing that was worse than Wrecker complaining was Wrecker and Tech trying to find a common language. Then he found something under his bunk that might help pass the time.

"Come on, I'll play some cards with you" he offered and walked over to the table in the center of the room.

Wrecker hurried over to the table. "Now we're talking! Let's play Seven Card Comet! Loser shares a bed with the newbie!" he declared.

"Wrecker" Hunter said, looking up at the other clone with a confused frown. "We already got Echo his own bed" he said and gestured to the extra bunk sitting against the far wall.

"Yeah I know…but he seems kind of sad" Wrecker explained in a whisper that still managed to be louder than most peoples' speaking voice.

Like other squads, it wasn't unheard of for members of the bad batch to share a bed if someone was upset or injured. Still Hunter couldn't imagine Echo being much of a cuddler.

"Well…it's a good thing you always lose" Hunter said with a faint smile as he shuffled the dusty deck of cards.

"No, I don't!" Wrecker argued excitedly. "Tech! Come play!" he called.

"I'm working" Tech answered distractedly

"Cross!" Wrecker called insistently.

"No" Crosshair replied simply.

"Tech, get over here we need a third player" Hunter said, beckoning Tech over to the table with a nod of his head.

Tech sighed and set his project down carefully on his bunk. "Fine" he conceded reluctantly. "For the record, beating the two of you will be entirely uninteresting" he said as took a seat next to Wrecker.

This time Crosshair can't stop himself from glancing over at the others. He feels an irritating tightness in his chest as he wonders if Hunter would have called on him if it hadn't been for what happened in the showers. Sure, he had said no to Wrecker's original offer to join their card game, but Tech had too. Maybe he was over thinking things. Hunter wasn't trying to ice him out. Hunter didn't play games like that, he assured himself, or tried to. He tried to turn

his attention back to the data-pad he had been busying himself with since he finished sorting his things.

It was late. They'd been playing for hours. Even Wrecker had grown bored of the game, but he wouldn't be the first to call it quits. Hunter was determined to stay up until Echo got back. Tech on the other hand, genuinely wanted to win, no matter how long it was going to take. They were all beginning to yawn and rub their eyes and stretch and shift in their seats. Hunter glanced enviously over at Crosshair, who had called it a night an hour ago.

"It's your turn" Tech said, snapping Hunter back to reality.

"…right" he sighed and laid a card down.

"When's the newbie coming back?" Wrecker asked, looking a little concerned now.

"I still don't know, Wrecker" Hunter answered tiredly. "They didn't say"

"You asked the same question 20 minutes ago." Tech scolded Wrecker impatiently. "Now take your turn, I've almost won"

"Hey who says you're gonna win??" Wrecker protested, temporarily distracted.

"Hunter just laid down the last card I need" Tech said simply.

Wrecker looked down at the table and gasped dramatically. "Sarge! Look what you did!" he complained.

"Sorry Wrecker, I wasn't paying attention" Hunter said honestly.

"Pick it back up!" Wrecker told him.

"That is not allowed. Hunter's turn has ended" Tech said stubbornly.

"That's not fair! He wasn't payin' attention!" Wrecker argued.

"That's not my problem" Tech argued back.

Wrecker growled frustratedly and stood up. "It's about to be your problem" he said pointing a finger at Tech.

"Actually, it's much to my benefit" Tech said, adjusting his glasses.

"Hunter's the sarge, he gets a redo!" Wrecker insisted.

"Rank does not earn you a second turn" Tech said stubbornly.

"Who says"

"That's the rules"

"You're making that up!"

"Both of you cut it out" Hunter scolded. "Wrecker, sit down and take your turn. If Tech wins that's just how it goes. It's just luck" he said grumpily.

"Actually, its approximately 75 percent luck and 20 percent strategy…and 5 percent turn sequence" Tech explain.

"Nobody cares" Wrecker quipped.

Hunter sighed. "He's right, Tech"

Tech sat back in his seat with a pout of his own as he waited for Wrecker to take his turn. Wrecker narrowed his eyes at the cards in his hands. He was usually the one complaining that the others were taking too long but this time it was him that was hesitating. He was desperate to find a way to stop Tech from winning but the holograms on his cards just stared back blankly, offering no solution. Wrecker let out another frustrated growl as he contemplated.

"Wrecker, there's nothing you can do." Tech said impatiently. "Just take you-"

The door slid open and all three of them looked over in unison. It was Echo, looking tired but otherwise unchanged.

"Hey! Newbies back!" Wrecker announced excitedly.

Echo was a little taken off guard by the welcome. "I thought you'd all be asleep by now" he said, still standing in the doorway.

Hunter looked a little relieved. "We were just finishing up our game." He explained.

"I'm about to win" Tech told him. Then his eyes flickered to the clone sitting across from him. "If Wrecker would finish his turn"

Wrecker's smile turned to a petulant glare when his attention shifted back to Tech. "Whatever" Wrecker said frustratedly and laid down a card.

Tech wore a satisfied smile as he picked up the cards on the table and made his winning move.

While they went back to playing, Echo took a few steps further inside but remained on the outskirts as he scanned the room. Crosshair was already in bed with his back turned towards them, years of practice allowing his to sleep through Wrecker's shouting and Tech's arguing. He noticed another bunk pushed against the far wall and realized it must be for him. He made his way over to it and sat down, pretending not to feel the others watching him. It wasn't anything special, but it was a bed of his own. It was nice. It made everything feel strangely permanent. It disillusioned him from the idea that this might all be a dream he'd wake up from eventually.

The three sitting at the table glanced amongst each other tentatively. None of them could properly read Echo's reaction to the new bed. Hunter was the first to speak up.

"We can move it someplace else if you don't like it there" he offered, though admittedly there wasn't much room for redecorating

There was a brief delay before Echo looked up and met Hunter's gaze.

"No, this is fine. Thank you" he said politely.

Wrecker got up from the table and walked back to his own bunk which was set into the wall like the others. "You could always bunk with me!" he offered with a friendly smile.

Echo looked confused. He couldn't tell if Wrecker was joking or if it was a genuine offer. He even looked over at Tech and Hunter but they both shrugged back at him.

Echo looked back at Wrecker. "…I'm fine" he answered.

"Can't sleep alone on your first night" Wrecker insisted.

"I have my own bed now, Wrecker, it's fine" Echo said and maybe it came out a bit more harshly than intended but he was tired. They all were. He hoped they'd chalk it up to that.

Wrecker's face fell. He didn't ask again, just started removing his armor and readying himself for bed. Tech made his way to his own bunk and quietly undressed as well. Hunter walked over to Echo's bed though he wasn't sure it was a good idea.

"How did it go?" Hunter asked, l. crossing his arms and leaning against the frame of Echo's bunk.

Echo glanced up at him. "Fine. I guess. They didn't tell me anything. I wasn't awake for most of it" he answered vaguely.

He decided to leave out certain details, like the fact that the only reason he'd been sedated was because of panic attack that had consumed him as soon as he laid on the operating table. He'd never felt anything like that before, and he certainly wasn't going to try and explain it to Hunter.

"The Kaminoans think we're all just science experiments" Hunter said empathetically. "We used to get poked and prodded a lot when we were still kids" he explained.

Echo's expression softened and he nodded. "That sounds terrible" he said earnestly.

"It's not so bad when you're not alone" Hunter said.

Then they both got quiet for a moment. Hunter moved to sit beside him on the edge of the bed.

"Try to be patient with Wrecker, I think he's just excited to have a new friend" he said quietly.

Echo nodded again, the look in his eyes turning a little guilty now. Hunter gave him a reassuring but notably gentle pat on the shoulder before getting up and walking to his own

bunk.

Echo watched as the others dismantled their armor. It was a night-time ritual he used to know well and look forward to. He didn't have any armor to take off now. When he had woken up after the examination the temporary armor the batch had lent him had been replaced by the red pants and tunic supplied to all cadets living on Kamino. It was more comfortable but still ill-fitting on his shrunken frame and he didn't exactly appreciate how much it reminded him of being a cadet. He had worked so hard and achieved so much since his time on Kamino but now it felt like he had to start over completely.

He laid back in bed and tried not to think about how long the road back to normalcy would be. He'd have to take it day by day for the sake of his own sanity. Maybe tomorrow he'd manage to eat a bit more, maybe he'd feel less exhausted all the time, maybe he'd manage to patch things up with Crosshair or maybe he'd even try to work on some strength training. Those goals seemed reasonable, obtainable even.

Tech turned off the lights using the controls on his data pad. Everyone was tucked into their bunks now and soon they'd be asleep just like Crosshair.

"Goodnight Hunter, goodnight Tech" Wrecker said.

"Goodnight, Wrecker" the other two yawned.

"Goodnight Crosshair" Wrecker whispered it this time.

Predictably, there was no response.

"Goodnight, newbie" Wrecker added.

"Night, Wrecker" Echo answered.

At some point in the night Echo had given up on trying to sleep. Instead, he had helped himself to Tech's data pad for a bit of reading. That's when he discovered that Tech's data-pad had unprohibited access to most of Kamino's files. He couldn't help himself. He looked up Fives. The Kaminoans only kept basic data, CT numbers, any abnormalities, any reconditioning, any specialized training. It wasn't anything Echo didn't already know, however, he found it peculiar that Fives wasn't listed as 'killed in action' like so many of the others but instead the file simply read 'deceased'. Cocking his head to the side curiously, he moved on to old mission reports. Thankfully, Tech had managed to bypass the security on those too.

He quickly became lost in it. He accessed every report that had CT-5555 or ARC-5555 listed in its description. The reports weren't terribly detailed, but he allowed himself to picture every planet, every battle, every recon and infiltration mission. He could almost see himself side by side with Fives sneaking through deadly forests, scoping out separatist strong holds, or-

Echo suddenly realized someone was not only watching him but was standing over him. Crosshair was standing beside Echo's bed, staring down at him. Echo sat in a crisscross position, practically glued to the data-pad until now.

Echo jolted and cursed when he saw him, "what do you want?" he asked, tense and on edge from having been startled.

"Is that Tech's data-pad?" Crosshair asked, keeping his voice low so he wouldn't wake the others. "Do you have a death wish?" he added, raising a brow

Echo shrugged, "he wasn't using it. I'll put it back when I'm done."

Crosshair's narrowed eyes flickered to the screen of the data-pad and eyed Fives' file curiously.

"Is that your boyfriend?" he asked mockingly.

It was clearly an attempt to get under Echo's skin, but Echo refused to be provoked. He told himself not to respond, but it was just too tempting.

"Is Hunter yours?" he asked, returning his attention to Files and reports he had been reading.

Crosshair froze. All he could do was assume that somehow Echo had found out about what had happened in the showers. He didn't know how. Surely Hunter wouldn't have told him. The others didn't seem to know. His mind was racing but he steadied himself the same way he did before lining up the perfect shot. Slow steady breaths, until even his heart slowed to an easy rhythm.

"What do you know about that?" Crosshair questioned coolly.

Echo shrugged and didn't bother to look up from the data-pad. "I know you don't stare at the others the way you stare at him" he said simply. "I know you argue with him just to get his attention. And I know Wrecker and Tech are too used to it to notice, but I've been around, Crosshair. It's obvious."

Again, Crosshair was speechless. Echo hadn't even been part of the squad two days and he had already sorted out something it had taken Crosshair was still coming to terms with. Crosshair glanced around the dark room to make sure the others were still sleeping. The he knelt on the edge of Echo's bunk and grabbed Echo by the collar of his shirt.

"There's nothing going on between me and Hunter" He growled.

Echo couldn't help but be taken off guard by the way Crosshair pulled him up to face him. Instinctively, his eyes widened, his hands went up to grab Crosshair's wrists, of course only one could. Now face to face with Crosshair, both illuminated by the faint glow of the data pad he'd dropped on the bed, Echo narrowed his eyes.

"I think that's pretty obvious too" Echo said, refusing to back down. "Have you tried being nice to him?" he asked rhetorically. "Or at least, less of a prick?"

Crosshair sneered then pushed Echo back down towards the bed. Echo sat back down with a huff. Unexpectedly, Crosshair sat down beside him, arms crossed tightly against his chest, scowling at the ground but glancing over at Echo occasionally.

"…he doesn't feel the same way" Crosshair said quietly.

Echo eyed Crosshair, cautiously. He'd never met anyone who could go from volatile to vulnerable so quickly.

"…Did you ask him?" Echo asked gently.

"No. I did something much more stupid" Crosshair muttered angrily.

Echo sat beside him quietly, waiting for Crosshair to go on. Crosshair glanced at Echo again then looked away and shifted and sighed. He clearly wasn't much of a talker, but he was desperate enough to make an effort.

"…I kissed him" Crosshair admit. "Twice."

Crosshair didn't know why he was telling this to someone he barely knew. Perhaps it was because Echo had made it sound like he had experience with such things, or because he claimed to have already noticed Crosshair's feelings towards Hunter. Or maybe it was simply because Echo was sitting beside him, listening attentively without studying him the way Tech would, or interrupting him like Wrecker.

Echo had never considered himself as someone who was good with advice but when Crosshair looked over at him he could tell that he was waiting for Echo to say something.

"Well..." Echo thought for a moment. Crosshair hadn't given him much to go off, but he would try his best to help anyways. "Sometimes things don't…always go…as well as you might have imagined…" he started hesitantly.

Crosshair looked very unimpressed by Echo's answer.

Echo sighed and tried again. "But sometimes the problem is the context…or the timing" he offered.

The younger clone nodded hesitantly.

"Maybe you took him off guard" Echo added. "But you never really know how someone feels unless they tell you."

Crosshair shook his head. "I can't ask him something like that. It would put everything at risk."

Echo nodded understandingly. "I know what you mean" he assured him. "I know this squad is everything to you, it means everything to Hunter too. I don't think either of you will let an awkward kiss get in the way of that"

Much to his surprise, Crosshair felt some the weight leave his shoulders. That was true. It had to be. That's what Hunter did, he protected the squad. He wouldn't let something like this tear it apart.

"…why are you being so nice?" Crosshair questioned skeptically.

Echo laughed dryly at that then shrugged, "Its easier than fighting"

Crosshair rose a brow. "You don't have any fight left in you, Reg?" he asked

"Not for you" Echo answered. "Unless you keep calling me Reg"

Crosshair snickered this time. Then there was a quiet pause.

"Well, I think fighting is easier" Crosshair said and looked back down at his lap.

"Maybe you could try being nice to Hunter, at least" Echo encouraged.

Crosshair scoffed.

"Maybe you could…give him a compliment" Echo insisted.

"Don't be stupid" Crosshair hissed.

"It's settled." Echo decided. "Tomorrow you're going to give Hunter one whole compliment."

Crosshair glared at him.

"That's the deal. That's the price of my secrecy" Echo told him.

"Fine" Crosshair said, rolling his eyes.

Echo smiled faintly. "Now get off my bunk, I'm reading" he told him.

"Don't push it, Echo" Crosshair said as he stood up.

He hesitated, considered saying thank you but settled for nod which Echo returned. Then Crosshair walked back to his bunk, feeling a little better than he had before.

The Deal

Chapter Summary

Crosshair tried following Echo's advice, Echo continues to try and find answers regarding Fives' mysterious death, Hunter bars Echo from training until he's stronger, Echo and Crosshair make a deal.

Chapter Notes

Hey lovies! Sorry this update took a while. I said I wouldn't do this but its happened...I'm writing like 5 different fics right now. Such a mess. Anyways, this one is always such fun to write.

Let me know what you think and any ideas you have for the fic!

While Crosshair went back to bed with a mind slightly clearer and shoulders less burdened, Echo stayed up and returned his attention to the military archives on the data-pad. He hadn't asked Rex what happened to Fives when he had the chance. He felt confident assuming that Fives met his end with a valiant sacrifice, leading the charge on the battlefield or on a dangerous extraction mission. It was a story he'd heard and witnessed firsthand too many times to count. But now, as he read through countless files and mission reports, the story was becoming less and less clear. A growing suspicion drove him to keep searching, but the mission report that had CT-5555 listed as a casualty never came.

After hours of reading, his search led him to Kaminoan medical files. He could see that the patient was listed as ARC-5555 but all further information was black-listed, restricted, even to though Tech had bypassed most security regulations on his data-pad. Whatever was in this file was top secret.

"What were you doing on Kamino…"Echo whispered to himself curiously as he scrolled through what little information the report permitted him to see.

There was a similar file with CT-5385 listed as the patient. Echo didn't recognize this number. The file was locked down with the same impressive security protocols. With a sigh he shut down the data pad, ending his search for now. If he wanted more information, he wasn't going to get it tonight. He'd have to ask Tech to try and bypass the security and access the complete files, or better yet, ask someone who knew firsthand what had happened. Either way, it wasn't happening tonight.

Echo got up out of bed and crossed the dark room. When he quietly knelt next to Tech's bunk and carefully pushed the data-pad back under the mattress where he had found it. He paused a moment, when Tech mumbled something incoherent in his sleep, then rolled over.

He was on his way back to his bunk when he passed Wrecker's. Sprawled across the small bed and snoring loudly, Echo was certain he had never slept that soundly in his life. He glanced back towards his own bunk but hesitated. He remembered how crestfallen Wrecker had looked when Echo rejected his invitation to share his bunk, and what Hunter had said after words, "He's just excited to have a new friend". Echo would be lying if he said he didn't feel a little guilty about it.

He glanced over at Crosshairs bunk. It hadn't been surprisingly easy to mend things with him and Crosshair was easily the most difficult member of the batch. Being friends with Wrecker should be the easy part. It wasn't an easy pill to swallow but Echo was self-aware enough to admit that he hadn't actually put much effort towards being friends with any of them. But if he wanted to stop feeling like such an outcast, that would have to change.

With another quiet sigh, Echo stepped towards Wrecker's bunk, put a hand on his shoulder and gently shook him.

"Hey" Echo whispered. "Move over"

"Huh?" Wrecker answered blearily as he blinked his eyes open.

"Move over" Echo repeated.

Even through the darkness, Echo could see the smile grown on Wrecker's face.

"You sleep by the wall" Wrecker decided, grabbing Echo's arm and pulling him easily onto the bed.

Echo landed on the other side of Wrecker before he realized Wrecker had grabbed him in the first place. He quickly tried to make some room, scooching away until his back hit the wall. Even with both of them laying on their sides, there was very little space between them.

Wrecker was still smiling at him. Echo smiled back politely.

"Thought you wanted to stay in your own bed" Wrecker said, in what was meant to be a whisper.

"Well…I changed my mind" Echo explained "Just for tonight" he added quickly after.

Wrecker didn't answer. To be fair, there wasn't much to say. Echo just wasn't sure why they were still staring at each other.

He cleared his throat softly.

"Goodnight, Wrecker" he said, wondering if that was what Wrecker was waiting for.

"Not yet, you've gotta roll over" Wrecker corrected him as though it was standard procedure. "You know, so I can spoon ya"

"Oh" Echo said but didn't move.

It wasn't a big deal. Clones shared beds all the time and when they did, cuddling up to one another was relatively inevitable. Wrecker had clearly done this with the other members of the squad. It wasn't new to Echo either. But suddenly he was all too aware of how his body would feel in someone else's arms.

Wrecker would be used to the warm, soft, muscular bodies of his brothers. So much of Echo's body was comprised of cold durasteel and circuitry. Even the human portions that remained would feel boney and uncomfortable in someone's arms.

"Why don't you roll over" Echo offered a compromise.

Wrecker seemed taken off guard by this.

"…really?" he asked.

Echo nodded.

Wrecker carefully shifted to his other side. With what little room there was, it took a bit of wiggling and adjusting. Once Wrecker was situated Echo closed the tiny gap between himself and Wrecker's massive back. He went to put an arm around the other clone but stopped himself. They were both laying on their right sides. The only arm he had to offer was the mechanical scomp-link. No body wanted the cold arm of a droid wrapped around them while they slept. The worst part was, Wrecker would probably be too kind to object.

Echo retracted his strange excuse for an arm and kept it by his side.

"Goodnight, newbie" Wrecker said.

"…that's not my name" Echo whispered back.

Wrecker let out a huff that Echo couldn't quite read.

"I told you, I know that" Wrecker grumbled.

"Okay…well, I'd like it if you used my name" Echo said patiently.

"Would it make you not so sad all the time?" Wrecker asked.

Echo was quiet. "I'm not sad" he whispered so quietly it was a wonder Wrecker even heard him.

"Yeah you are. Hunter's always going over to whisper things to you cuz you won't talk to anyone" Wrecker explained.

"I'm talking to you now, aren't I?" Echo argued.

Wrecker let out another huff but this time it sounded closer to a laugh.

"Yeah that's a good point." Wrecker agreed. "Goodnight, newbie"

Echo just sighed and rested his forehead against Wrecker's back. "Goodnight, Wrecker"

In the morning, Echo and Wrecker were the last ones sleeping. The other three were awake and sitting at the table but still groggily rubbing their eyes, not yet dressed in their armor.

"Do you think Wrecker kidnapped him?" Hunter asked, as the three of them stared over at two in Wrecker's bunk.

They were still on their sides, exactly how they fell asleep. Echo was almost completely hidden behind Wrecker. Except for his mechanical arm, which at some point in the night, for its way around Wrecker's waist. More accurately, it rested on Wrecker's waist, as it couldn't reach far enough to really hold him.

"I don't know, it looks pretty consensual" Crosshair said with a small, amused smile which Hunter returned.

Tech, on the other hand, was not nearly as pleased that morning.

"Someone took my data-pad last night" he said, standing up from his seat suddenly.

Neither Crosshair nor Hunter answered so Tech narrowed his eyes at the pair of them.

"It was on a slightly different angle than where I left it" Tech explained, still waiting for an admission of guilt.

Hunter sighed. "I didn't touch it, Tech."

Tech shifted his focus to Crosshair.

"Obviously I wouldn't touch that thing if you paid me" Crosshair answered. "Who knows what kind of holo's you have saved on it."

"It was Wrecker then" Tech said, looking at the two who were yet to wake up.

Of course, Crosshair knew who took the data-pad. He could've told Tech and ended the conversation then and there, but he found it more entertaining to see if Echo would get away with it or what Tech would do if he didn't get some answers soon.

Tech made his way to Wrecker's bunk and gave him an impatient shove.

"Wake up, Wrecker" Tech instructed.

"Huh?" Wrecker mumbled as he blinked his eyes open.

"I know you stole my data-pad last night" Tech declared.

Wrecker woke to Tech leaning over him, eyes slightly magnified by his goggles, an accusatory expression on his stern features.

"I didn't take anything" Wrecker said, pushing Tech back with a big hand.

Wrecker sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Tech had stumbled back but was not deterred. If anything, he was only more determined to get Wrecker to admit to the crime. Someone was going to take responsibility for it.

"I already questioned the others. I know it was you" Tech said stubbornly.

Wrecker did his best to ignore the blabbering of the other clone. He got up and took his time stretching his arms and his back, groaning happily as he did. He stepped straight past Tech and walked towards the table where Hunter and Crosshair were sitting and ignoring each other.

"What's for breakfast?" Wrecker asked eagerly.

Tech was quick to plant himself between Wrecker and the other two.

"Nothing! Nothing until you admit to what I know you've done!" Tech insisted and pointed a finger up at Wrecker.

Wrecker swatted Tech's hand away frustratedly.

"I told you I didn't take anything!" Wrecker huffed.

"Unlikely!" Tech said stubbornly. "You stole Hunter's knife. My data-pad was clearly your next target!"

"Both of you cut it out" Hunter finally interjected when their squabbling become too heated to ignore.

"Don't defend him Hunter, he knows what he's done" Tech said, narrowing his eyes up at Wrecker.

"You don't know if it was him." Hunter tried to calm him.

"Yeah!" Wrecker added. "You can't prove anything!"

"Wrecker, cut it out" Hunter insisted, positioning himself in between the two of them.

Meanwhile, Crosshair was pleased to watch, looking vaguely amused as Hunter struggle to keep the peace.

"What does it matter, Tech? Whoever took it, they put it back" Hunter reasoned.

"It matters because this is a clear violation of privacy." Tech argued sternly

"Maybe Echo took it" Crosshair finally chimed in, then watched how the others glanced over at the new member of their squad who was still sleeping soundly in Wrecker's bed.

"Echo?" Tech repeated with obvious skepticism.

"I don't know, he keeps to himself" Hunter said

"It's still a possibility I hadn't considered" Tech said and adjusted his glasses.

The tension between them had clearly faded But Wrecker looked concerned now.

"Well, I don't care if it was 'im." Wrecker said, looking over at the other clone in his bed. "I've never gotten to be the little spoon before. I think we should keep him" he said thoughtfully.

"What?" Hunter said flatly.

Tech looked just as confused but Crosshair was snickering to himself behind him.

"He's part of the team Wrecker, we're not still deciding if we're gonna keep him" Hunter told him.

"Really??" Wrecker asked excitedly.

"Obviously, he's not a stray cat" Tech muttered. He was still quite grumpy, but his temper had settled now.

"Yes" Hunter ignored Tech's comment and answered Wrecker with an exasperated sigh.

Things had just started to settle when Echo suddenly sat up, looking lost and out of breath. He looked around the room with a distant but frightened look in his eyes. The others tried not to notice as Echo slowly remembered his new reality. It started when Echo looked down at his hands, only to find he only had one. He looked around the room once more and this time he recognized the four other clones standing around the table. Hunter, Wrecker, Tech, and Crosshair. His racing mind began to ease as he took his time to remember each one. Soon enough, it all came back and the memories retreated to the back of his mind for now.

"What time is it?" Echo asked confusedly

"Good question" Tech said. "We only have 15 more minutes before the mess hall stops serving breakfast" he reminded the others.

"What?" Echo questioned confusedly. "How? I slept through wake-up call?"

Echo couldn't believe it. All of Kamino came to life following the daily wake-up call. Bright lights flicked on, five familiar beeps rang out and cadets, medical staff, and troops all started their routines. Life as a member of the 501st attack battalion worked similarly. Echo had always lived by routine and schedule. Never once did he sleep through the alarm, that just wasn't how things worked. Of course, things were different when it came to the bad batch. Everything seemed to work differently when it came to the bad batch.

"No, I dismantled the wake-up call system in our quarters years ago" Tech told him

"Right…" Echo sighed, he was only one day in, but he was already kicking himself for letting something like this surprise him.

"Come on, let's get some breakfast!" Wrecker said impatiently.

The five of them made their way through the serving line and approached their usual table with trays full of the standard breakfast rations.

"Want me to carry that?" Wrecker asked as he watched Echo grasp his tray in one hand and balance the other end on his scomp-link.

"I can handle it" Echo answered tersely.

Echo followed them to their usual table and sat down on the end, just next to Wrecker and across from Crosshair. For a moment they all sat and ate in relative silence. The mess hall was half empty and would be closing soon, they had to eat quickly. Echo tried to ignore the way Hunter was keeping tabs on him and the food on his tray. He was eating what he could stomach, a bit more than the day before. Wrecker on the other hand, was already nearly finished with his meal.

"What are we doing after this?" Wrecker asked.

"I don't know, maybe we'll run some drills" Hunter answered without really giving it much thought.

"We've run every course Kamino has to offer a multitude of times. Continuing to train against the same obstacles offers little opportunity for progress" Tech said.

Hunter sighed "I know that Tech…"

Echo looked over at Crosshair and caught him staring in Hunter's direction. Echo smirked in amusement. He couldn't help but wonder if he and Fives were ever this obvious. Maybe they had been, but there was something about Crosshair's loner act that made his crush even more entertaining.

Crosshair scowled when he noticed Echo looking at him, and even worse, the subtle but knowing grin on his face. A glare from Crosshair could curdling the blood of lesser foes, but it didn't phase Echo. Echo rose his brows and nodded towards Hunter. nodded towards Hunter. Crosshair glanced at Hunter just for a second then quickly shook his head. The idea of complimenting Hunter was enough to make Crosshair nervous. Crosshair knew for certain that Echo really was crazy if he thought Crosshair was going to do it here and now, in front of the rest of the squad.

Echo rolled his eyes then cleared his throat.

"Hey Tech" he said,

Tech looked over at him from across the table.

"I like your glasses" Echo said, just to prove to Crosshair how easy it was.

At first, Tech seemed taken off guard by the comment, and the others did as well. Then Echo gave him an earnest nod and Tech started to smile.

"I designed them myself" he said, pushing the glasses further up my nose. "They're equipped with night vision as well as thermal sensors" he went on.

"Impressive" Echo noted, and Tech went on rambling excitedly about the first prototype he had created and the changes he had made since then.

Crosshair's face contorted in frustration as he watched how effortlessly Echo obtained Tech's undivided attention. Crosshair would give anything to have Hunter talk to him like that and Echo made it seem so easy. However, when Crosshair considered doing the same, and complimenting Hunter so brazenly, he found it almost impossible to speak at all.

The slow drawl of a Kaminoan voice over the speaker cut off Tech's long-winded explanation.

"The Mess Hall is now closing."

And just like that, satisfied and full or unfinished and hungry, they had to make their way back into the long white halls.

"I'm still hungry" Wrecker complained.

"Here" Echo said offering the bread he had stolen off his tray and hidden in his sleeve.

Wrecker's eyes lit up. "Thanks newbie!" he said excitedly.

Echo twitched his hand away just before Wrecker could grab the bread. "Echo" he corrected him stubbornly.

Wrecker laughed happily. "Thanks Echo" he said, purposely sounding like a scolded child.

Echo handed him the food and Crosshair stopped Hunter from intervening with a single look.

"Time for training?" Wrecker asked.

Hunter nodded. "We'll see if any of the more advanced courses are available" Then he turned to face Echo with an apologetic but stern expression. "We'll meet you back in our room" he told him.

"What?" Echo said then quickly shook his head "No. No no no, I want to train with you" he told him.

"You're not ready yet" Hunter said unwaveringly.

"That's why I need to start training" Echo insisted.

"Tech agrees, if you exhaust yourself it only makes the recovery process longer" he said, clearly paraphrasing.

Echo shifted his gaze over to Tech who looked away guiltily. In fact, they were all making a point of looking distracted or distancing themselves from the conversation.

"Fine" Echo muttered.

He couldn't very well train with a squad that didn't want him there. He turned and made his way back towards the room on their shared quarters at a brisk pace. The rest of them continued towards the training courses in silence.

"Hunter…" Crosshair said quietly, it was a good a time as any to try to compliment him.

Hunter looked over at him, his mood obviously dulled by having to send Echo back to the room. Hunter was always reluctant to give orders like that, but he was the leader. He had to look out for the others even when they wouldn't look out for themselves.

He looked up at Crosshair, questioningly.

Crosshair could feel himself start to freeze up again, with a nervousness he had never experienced before.

"You…" Crosshair hesitated.

"Spit it out, Cross" Hunter said, expecting the usual reprimand on his leadership skills.

"Never-mind" Crosshair said quickly. Now wasn't the time, he decided. He'd do it later.

Hunter was left eying him both skeptically and a little nervously.

Meanwhile, in their shared quarters, Echo was left to his own devices. He couldn't be bothered to quell his irritation now that he was alone. He all but stomped into the room, a single fist clenched at his side. He was already so sick of this room. It wasn't a room, maybe for the rest of them it was, but for him it felt like a prison cell. Who were they to say if he was wasn't ready to train?

He sat with a sigh on the edge of his bed, knowing he had to at least try to calm down. They were trying to help him. No matter how frustrating it was Hunter was in charge and Hunter made the call. No amount of sulking was going to change it. He crossed his arms and scanned the room for any kind of distraction. His mind drifted back to the files he had poured over the night before. That investigation was far from resolved. Unfortunately, Tech had taken his data-pad. He kept it with him at all times when he wasn't asleep. However, Echo didn't need to bypass any security measures just to make a call.

All he needed was a holo-projector or a comm-link. He was still so used to wearing his armor, it stunned him for a moment when he looked down and didn't see the white and blue plated gauntlet with built-in comm-link. He narrowed his eyes determinedly, there had to be something here he could use.

The first place he checked was a crate of miscellaneous spare parts by Tech's bunk and he immediately gets lucky. A small holoprojector was wedged between a jumbled mess of circuitry and some other invention Echo didn't even recognize. Echo took the holo-projector back to his bunk and set it for the old Torrent Squad comm-channel.

He waited. Just as he was beginning to contemplate the likelihood that there would be no answer, the blue hologram of Captain Rex appeared in the palm of his hand.

"Rex!" Echo said excitedly and lifted his mechanical arm to his forehead as a salute.

Rex was smiling back at him. "At ease Echo" he said fondly. "Is everything alright?" he asked.

"Everything's fine, we're on Kamino" Echo explained vaguely, a twitch of his brow revealing how strange he found it to be back on their 'home' planet.

Echo continued before Rex could answer. "The others are training. I was hoping we might have a chance to discuss something…but I know you must be busy" Echo said politely.

It hadn't gone past Echo's attention that Rex was in full kit, holding his helmet under his arm. The captain of a battalion like the 501st was left with very little downtime, he couldn't expect today to be any different. Rex was looking around, clearly surveying the surroundings that the hologram wasn't displaying. There was a moment before he returned his attention to the call. Echo waited patiently until he did.

"I have some time" Rex assured him.

Echo smiled, because he knew Rex probably had to choose speaking with Echo over some other responsibility. Echo could see Rex was walking somewhere more private. He couldn't see it but he heard a door slide shut.

"You're looking good, Echo" Rex said approvingly.

Echo couldn't shake the faint smile he'd been wearing since Rex picked up, but he only scoffed in response.

"You look better" Rex insisted more seriously.

Again, Echo didn't answer. A comment like that coming from anyone else would have made his skin crawl and his mood turn sour but it was different coming from Rex.

"You're fitting in with clone force 99?" Rex asked, sounding a little like a concerned parent.

"Yes. I think?" Echo nodded, frowning contemplatively. "…it'll take some getting used to" he admitted. "But I actually wanted to talk to you about Fives" he added, before Rex could

distract him with another question.

The warm smile dropped off Rex's face. Echo almost felt guilty, he knew how much it affected Rex to have to be the one to bear such news. Of all his responsibilities as Captain, this was the most painful. It was particularly difficult when it came to Fives and Echo. Rex had developed a soft spot for the pair of them ever since they were shinnies, he'd watched them grow up together, and become some the best soldiers in the 501st. He'd also tried to help Fives pick up the pieces of Echo 'died' at the citadel. Rex had tried everything he could to be a friend, a brother even, but Fives was never really the same after that. It felt like some kind of cruel joke that Echo was back just in time to mourn Fives now.

"I'm sorry Echo, I thought you knew. Fives is gone" Rex answered, his tone forcibly calm and even.

"I know" Echo nodded. "I knew when you rescued me. He wasn't with you; I knew what that meant" Echo explained. "I just…I need to know how it happened"

Suddenly Rex seemed stiff and a little distracted. He was glancing to the side and shifted his helmet over to his other hand. "Echo, its not a nice story" he warned.

"I wouldn't expect one" Echo scoffed. He knew as well as anyone that clones didn't get pleasant endings. Yet Rex was clearly trying to keep something from him. "What campaign was it, Rex?" Echo insisted, sounding a bit sterner than he had intended

"He got sick" Rex said, looking back to Echo with his mind made up. As much as it hurt him, he couldn't tell Echo the truth. Echo could never leave well enough alone, but Rex would be damned if he let Echo get mixed up in the same political mess that got Fives killed.

"Sick?" Echo repeated.

Rex nodded "There was nothing any of us could do" he said vaguely.

Echo slowly started to shake his head. "…Why are you lying?" Echo asked quietly. Rex had never lied to him before. Sure, things were different now, but Rex was still meant to be his friend.

"That's the truth, Echo" Rex said apologetically.

"No, it isn't. He didn't get sick. That's a lie" Echo snapped

Rex remained calm and collected, always. But it did hurt to know he was hurting Echo, even if he was trying to keep him safe.

"…I have to go" Rex said, looking distracted again.

"Just tell me the truth!" Echo insisted.

"I really have to go, we're shipping out" Rex told him. "I'm sorry, Echo. I'll talk to you when I can" he was speaking quickly now. "It was good to see you. I have to go now"

The hologram disappeared.

For a moment Echo just sat glaring at the holo-projector in his hand. He was down to two options when it came to finding the truth; Find a way to bypass the security measures on the files or find a way to make Rex talk. Accessing the files would require Tech's help and he hadn't wanted to involve any of the others in this. It was bad enough that Crosshair had interrupted him the night before. But on the other hand, he had no idea what it would take to make Rex change his mind, he didn't even understand why Rex wouldn't want to tell him in the first place.

The rest of the batch were properly exhausted after running dozens of battle simulations. They passed each test quickly and efficiently; it was the urge to compete one another that posed the actual challenge. When one of them pushed a bit harder, the others had to show that they could do the same. They all had kill-counts running in the back of their minds, though it was only Crosshair and Wrecker that openly discussed their competition.

They were making their way back to their room now and Crosshair found himself glancing down at Hunter again. It only took a moment or two for Hunter to notice and meet his gaze with a skeptical and tired stare.

"What is it, Crosshair?" Hunter asked, when Crosshair lost his words again.

He shook his head, trying to fight away the stone-cold nervousness. "You…did well" Crosshair said quietly.

Now Hunter was quiet for a moment, his expression turning surprised and a little confused.

Crosshair nodded, because there was no turning back now. "Nice work, identifying which droid was giving the orders" he explained.

Hunter smiled hesitantly. "Just like that time on Florrum" Hunter nodded. "They all fell out of position when you took out the one with the internal strategy communications."

Crosshair smiled faintly back at him. "But I did that on accident. How did you know which one to take down?"

"Some help from Tech" Hunter admitted, smiling openly now.

Tech lifted a hand briefly without looking up from his data-pad, happy to take his share of the credit.

"Whatever! Who cares about one droid? I took down 58!" Wrecker boasted.

Crosshair rolled his eyes, he was still wearing a little grin, riding the high of having made Hunter smile.

Wrecker kept pressing. "Well? What's your count?" he asked knocking his shoulder against Crosshair and making him stumble.

"Doesn't matter" Crosshair answered dismissively.

Hunter and Tech both scoffed quietly. Everyone knew what an answer like that meant.

"Looks like I win again!" Wrecker announced happily.

Crosshair's expression shifted back to his usual glare. Hunter laughed again and put his arm around Crosshair's slender shoulders. "You'll get him next time" Hunter assured him with a playful teasing tone.

Crosshair fought down the start of a smile and quickly pushed Hunter's arm off with a defensive glower instead. Hunter chuckled once more as they reached the door to their shared room.

"We're back, Newbie!" Wrecker called happily as soon as the door slid open.

Echo was up and waiting by the door, arms crossed.

"Woah, where are you going?" Hunter asked.

"Out" Echo answered dismissively. "If that's allowed" he added grumpily.

"Echo.." Hunter sighed, but before he could decide whether to apologize for leaving him behind or convince him to stay, Echo made his way out into the hall.

"Uh…I think he's mad at you" Wrecker whispered to Hunter at full volume.

"Thanks, Wrecker. I didn't notice." Hunter said flatly.

"…I'll get him" Crosshair said quietly then followed Echo into the hall.

"What?" Hunter mumbled confusedly. Last he knew Echo and Crosshair were either ignoring each other entirely or at each other's throats.

Unbothered by the commotion, Tech continued to his bunk to work on his latest invention. He was grabbing the circuitry from his box of materials when he suddenly paused. His back stiffened and he adjusted his glasses as he narrowed his eyes at the others.

"Someone's touched my things" Tech said accusatorily.

"Not again, Tech" Hunter huffed.

"Where do you think you're going?" Crosshair asked, easily matching Echo's stride.

Echo shrugged. "Anywhere that isn't that room, I've been sitting in there all morning"

"Hunter's trying to help you" Crosshair told him.

Echo scoffed. "Oh, you're going to tell me not to give Hunter a hard time?" he rose a brow.

"Yes" Crosshair said, rolling his eyes.

"Hunters the one giving me a hard time!" Echo ranted frustratedly. "He's not my doctor, neither is Tech."

"You're not exactly in fighting shape" Crosshair said unsympathetically. "There's no point in pretending you are"

Echo fell quiet now and glared at the floor as they walked in no particular direction. It was easier to admit that Crosshair had a point, he didn't dance around it or try to be polite about like the others did. It was kind of true. Echo didn't feel like he was in fighting shape either, he just couldn't stand sitting around anymore. He'd never had this much down time in his entire life.

Crosshair sighed quietly, deciding to change the topic for now. "What comes next?" he asked, suddenly seeming a little shy.

Echo looked up at him confusedly.

"I gave him a compliment" Crosshair clarified impatiently.

"You did it?" Echo asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

Crosshair crossed his arms defensively "That was the deal, wasn't it?"

Echo smiled faintly then shrugged. "I don't know, just be nice, I'm not an expert."

"You made it sound like you were" Crosshair scoffed

"No, you're just particularly bad at it" Echo laughed dryly.

"I'm not going to ask for help twice" Crosshair sneered. "Your advice worked. I complimented him, he liked it. Tell me what to do next" he insisted.

"….you want me to help you get with Hunter?" Echo asked, holding back another laugh.

"I'll train with you" Crosshair bargained.

Echo's smile faded as he considered the offer.

"We'll start at the firing ranges. Nothing too…" Crosshair paused and looked Echo up and down "strenuous"

"Hunter's in charge, he's made the call, he wants me to wait" Echo said hesitantly. "It would be insubordination."

Crosshair rolled his eyes. "Well, I don't care, reg. But enjoy waiting around on your bunk, if you insist"

Echo quickly shook his head, throwing his prior trepidation to the wind. "No, it's a deal. You help me train, I'll help you with Hunter" He agreed with an eager nod.

Crosshair's lips curled into a tiny, satisfied smirk. "Deal"

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