

When Twilight Checks In, The Collars Pull Tight

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When Twilight Checks In, The Collars Pull Tight

by [Buckhunter](#)

Summary

Sequel to When The Suns Grow Low, The Fight Only Gets Tougher.

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“I don’t know how you made it this far, Cobb. I really don’t.”

“I got you for that.” Cobb shoots back.

“Real good thing, too, buddy. You’d never make it without me.”

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Bray Ealdel, a close friend from Cobb Vanth’s past, returns to Tatooine under mysterious circumstances. For Cobb, it’s a chance to catch up on lost time. But Bray, if he plays his cards right, gets to keep his life for a little longer.

Notes

Crossposted to FFN under the same name.

This first chapter is a prologue. I can’t say I’m sure how long this fic is going to be yet, but I’m almost certain it will be shorter than the last. (The next will, hopefully, be longer than both separately if all goes to plan). Anyway, you’re in for a ride with this one.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Prologue

Approx. 16 BBY, 25 years ago...

The old, rust-orange door slides open with a grating hiss, letting the cool night air of Tatooine waft into the small slave dwelling. A man in his mid-thirties ducks through the short doorway, his dusty brown hair only a tad redder than the walls that surround him. It's dark within the small abode, a single candle weakly flickering in the back, where two alcoved beds rest, one occupied, the other not. The shared home consists of only two rooms, a main area and a closed off refresher. It reeks of blood.

The newcomer sighs as he hits a button on a control panel, the door to the outside sliding shut with a rattle, hardly clicking shut. He steps from the round-roofed hallway and makes his way over to a small kitchenette set off to the side of the room, where he grabs a waterskin, pops it open, and tilts it back over his open mouth. He relaxes as the water soothes his parched throat, then approaches the man laying in the occupied bed.

The second man is younger, by around a whole five or six years, and his tousled brown hair is darker. A bandage has been wrapped around the circumference of his forehead, thicker around a spot just below his right temple, where the faintest trace of red bleeds through. His eyes are closed, and his bare chest rises easily.

"What the hell happened to you?" His friend asks, his voice holding a familiar drawl that can only come from Tatooine.

"Hmm?" The man is awake, proven when he opens hazel, pain-glazed eyes. His voice carries the same accent as the first man's. "Oh, hey."

"Hey yourself." A pair of eyebrows raise in an honest, curious disbelief as the man peers down at him, lips twisted in concern. "What'd you do, Cobb?"

The injured man, one Cobb Vanth, gives an uneasy laugh. "I, uh...I cut out my trackin' chip."

"You *cut open* your *head*?" He frowns as he sits down on the empty bunk, beginning to remove his beige boots. "You know how crazy that is, right, buddy?"

"Mhm." Cobb lazily shifts into a more comfortable position where he lays. "I'm feelin' it. Hurts quite a bit. But not as bad as the Star did. Nothin' beats that."

His companion sighs as he sets down his second boot. "So, you plannin' on runnin' soon, then?"

"I don't know, Bray." There's a touch of exasperation in his voice with the first few words. His head rolls towards his friend. "Just gettin' ready for when the time comes, I suppose."

“Right, and *how* are you goin’ to explain a head wound like that?” Bray Ealdel returns, flashing a pointed look at him.

“I’ll tell ‘em I slipped an’ caught it on somethin’ on the way down. Easy as that. Happens all the time in our work, don’t it?”

The other man laughs quietly and shakes his head, rising to his feet once more. “I don’t know how you made it this far, Cobb. I really don’t.”

“I got you for that.” Cobb shoots back.

“Real good thing, too, buddy. You’d never make it without me.”

The younger of the two smiles to himself and shifts restlessly where he lays, thin blankets wrinkling even further beneath him.

A small silence drags on between the two men as Bray drags himself over to the kitchenette, his own energy spent after a day’s hard labor. He finally casts the waterskin aside, instead kneeling down to open one of the lower cabinets, pulling out a polystarch ration pack and tearing it open. He pours the flour into a small bowl, tilts some of his water into it, and leans back against the counter, waits for the flour and water to mix and react.

“Are you goin’ to cut out yours?” Cobb asks, the question not unexpected. “I could help.”

Bray shakes his head. “I don’t got one.”

“You never told me that.” He hides his surprise well. “What do you stick around here for, then?”

“I said that *I* don’t have a chip. *Ma* still does. I leave, they’ll blow her.”

“And here I thought you stayed around for me.” Cobb teases. He rubs at his head, chews at his lip thoughtfully. “I could take hers out, if she’d let me.”

Another shake of his head, this one more firm than the last. He takes the completed portion bread from the bowl it had risen in. “Ma’s too old to be cut open like that. It’ll do her more harm than good.”

“Then, *what?* You just gonna stay here till she *dies?*”

“That’s not for you to worry about.” Bray retorts, demeanor changing with his companion’s words. His own are of dismissal. “You just performed surgery on yourself, Cobb- best rest that pretty head of yours. You know you ain’t gettin’ tomorrow off for nothin’.”

Something bitter and hurt flashes through Cobb’s eyes, and he’s suddenly in a less than friendly mood himself. “Forgive me for wantin’ to help my *best friend* and *his* mother in place of my own. Ain’t *my* fault that my folks got themselves killed, an’ yours took me in.”

The other man recoils, eyes widening at the sudden shift in the air, at the terseness replacing his friend’s amiable personality. “I didn’t mean it like that.” He insists. “Listen, buddy- you’re

family to us. Always have been. But Ma's *my* responsibility. You shouldn't have to worry 'bout her on my behalf, okay? I know you mean well-

“-Look, just leave it, would you? I don’t care.” Cobb snaps, though the way in which he turns his scarred back on him as he rolls over betrays his thoughts on the matter. “G’night, Bray.”

Bray sighs and remains still for a long moment, troubled eyes resting on the younger man’s back. He shakes himself from his stupor and turns his attention back to the polystarch portion bread in his hand. His appetite most likely gone, he takes a bite anyway. Life as a slave on Tatooine is rough, and the next day will be no different.

9 ABY, present time...

Saleucami, like most planets in the Outer Rim, is a quiet place to live. An out-of-the-way planet, the population is small and most interaction is limited. The terrain is a unique mix of everything warm, ranging from swamps to arid deserts. Most people stick to the drier swampy areas, where there’s just enough water to farm, not quite enough to flood.

This is where Bray Ealdel lives, in a dingy, three-roomed cottage with a garage just big enough to hold the speeder bike he’s currently parking inside of it after a long day of working out on one of the neighboring fields between his place and the nearest town.

To anyone who had known him back in his Tatooine days, it would seem *very* strange that he would choose this line of work over all the other options out there, the intensity near that of the labor that he had once been forced to do for years on end. But, after spending more than half as many hunting down bounties at his master’s summoning, he is *more* than happy to throw himself into working fields.

It’s honest work, the most honest work he’s done his *whole* life. And he’s fifty-nine, skin weathered, mustache white, wide-brimmed hat atop his bald head. He’s lived a long time for a man with the Star on his back, a chip in the back of his neck.

Bray is proud of that.

He thinks of this as he cuts the engine of his speeder bike and listens to the familiar thrum die out, bleeding away into the silence of the garage, letting the ambient sounds of the insects and invisible light wind fill the air in its stead. His back creaks the moment he rises to his feet, but he ignores it as he steps back out into the open, humid air of the land he calls home.

The grasses squish like sponges beneath his boots as he walks around towards his front door, wet from the rain that had fallen a few days back. He casts the horizon a glance as he goes, the sky a soft pink, the planet’s single sun sinking towards the horizon as yet another day

comes to its end. He's half-tempted to stop and watch the sunset, but that's always been more of Cobb's thing than his own, and Cobb isn't here.

He doesn't let himself think about Cobb Vanth. Those days have long since passed.

Instead, Bray climbs up his rickety old porch and stomps the mud from his boots, spots a small package leaning up against the closed front door. It's been some time since he has received anything from anyone, much less something straight to his place. Usually, he has to collect them in town. That's why he knows who this one is from just by looking at it, what it likely contains; it's his next job.

Bray grimaces, gut twinging with nausea, and he picks it up, heads on inside. *What do you want this time, boss?*

He pulls the old-fashioned door shut behind him, and the floorboards groan under his weight, worn down from years of use. The cottage had been abandoned when he had found it so long ago, and despite all he's repaired and replaced, it still shows. Old and grotty, just like him, still fighting on as if the galaxy isn't throwing its worst at them. In all honesty, the house itself isn't any better than the ones back on Tatooine. But that's okay, because it's *not* one of the houses from Tatooine.

With only the natural light bleeding in to light the space, the shadows are dark, but it doesn't bother him. No one ever visits him- friendly, unfriendly, or otherwise. He's safe. Safe, other than the blasted package in his hands.

Less than interested in lighting any lanterns, he roughly sits down at the multipurpose table in front of the closed-off kitchenette at the far end of the main living space and sets about opening the case. He does so slowly, as if drawing it out might change the contents- as if drawing it out may prove what he knows to be true false.

Of course, it doesn't, and the first thing he ends up pulling out is one of the handheld model holoprojectors. He feels his face drain of color, feels the shake in his arm as he sets the device down on the rickety old table.

He takes a deep breath and swallows, reaches back in the open box and pulls out an older datapad, one of the kind that can only store what is transferred onto it from elsewhere, one of the kind that really doesn't do anything. He refrains from turning it on; he doesn't want to know what his next target looks like, yet. He doesn't *need* to know what the target looks like yet. It's times like this that he regrets lying to Cobb about his chip all those years ago.

The last item in the box is a letter, telling him that he knows what to do. And, he does.

He reaches out and activates the holoprojector.

His stomach churns as he waits for the other end to pick up, this particular device altered so that it's only able to hook up to a single channel. He feels like he's going to be sick, and that's *before* the humanoid shape materializes into existence before him.

He's not ready when he finally does, moments later- the Pau'an Brarkesh Zerem. His *master*.

His breath leaves him, and he'll never be quite sure how he finds his voice. "You require my service?"

"You've grown bold." Zerem hisses in warning. *"Remember your place."*

Bray fights back a flare of indignance- it's *not* his fault he got left alone for the better part of ten years. But he corrects himself nonetheless. "Do you require my service, *master?*"

"Better." His master purrs. Black eyes narrow, showing the whites around the irides. *"Have you accessed the datapad yet?"*

"No." He admits, his gaze flickering over to where he had put it down. He's falling back into his old submission quicker than even he had thought he would. "Should I have?"

"It will not be necessary yet." The Pau'an informs him, his tone finalizing the matter in the way that it always does. He's silent for a moment, observing Bray, as if assessing his ability to see this new job through. *"I've run out of tracking fobs, but I know of a woman in Mos Eisley who can tell you where your quarry is."*

The bounty is on Tatooine? He wants to ask. But he doesn't. It isn't his place to ask questions, never has been. "What's her name?" He asks instead.

"Peli Motto. She owns a hangar bay labeled three-five. It is on the outskirts of town, but it shouldn't be difficult to find."

Bray commits the name and hangar number to memory.

He thinks he sees frustration in the eyes of his master when the Pau'an speaks again. *"I have been sending others after this one for years, yet he has managed to kill them all himself. If any can defeat him, it will be you. If you don't..."*

He nods. He already knows what will happen, shall he return unsuccessful. "I won't fail you."

"We shall see." Now, *that* is doubt. *"Take a look at that datapad."*

A sudden wave of dread slams into his chest and he almost argues. His arms have a slight tremble to them as he reaches out for the datapad and gingerly takes it in his hands, hits the button that powers it on.

And there, staring up at him, is the face of Cobb Vanth.

No.

He spins to the side and retches, stomach acid rising from his empty stomach to burn his throat as he dry heaves. His thoughts spiral uncontrollably, a kaleidoscope of images rushing up all at once, quickly shoved aside by a memory thought long lost to the sands of time.

He's sitting quietly in the back of his family's hovel when a pair of explosions come in quick succession, rocking the whole block- the home itself rattles so hard that it's more than clear

the explosions are on the very same street in which Bray lives. It jolts him from picking sand from his fingernails, knocks him to the floor. His mother drops a plate. It shatters.

His father staggers from the back room when the ground settles, face tight. "Stay here." He says.

"As if." He shoots back, climbing up from the floor. He loves his father, but he's always gotten along better with his mother.

His mother leaves the broken plate where it lays, hands gripping the edge of the counter. "I dread to know who it was this time."

There aren't many explosions that happen in Mos Espa, and least of all in the Slave Quarter- and that's how they know, without a shadow of a doubt, that the cause of these two is an angered owner setting off a couple of transmitter chips.

Neither he nor his father quite make it to the door, for it opens instead and large, dark-skinned Jeree rushes into the entryway, his clothes engrained with soot, his eyes wild with the distress that he's struggling to hold in.

"Cliff-" The man coughs, choking on smoke, and wipes at his mouth.

"Who was it?" Bray's father asks, rigidly stepping forward, reining his emotions in. He's always been good at it. He'd even passed it down to Bray.

"Jezhref and Idith Vanth." Jeree manages to get out.

His eyes widen. "Their boy..."

"Took a hit to the head, but he's okay. Miyo's with him."

"Did he see?"

Jeree nods grimly, gaze flickering between Bray's parents in an unspoken question.

His mother turns to her husband with a silent plea in her eyes.

"Bring him here." Cliff sighs, unable to fight against his lover's wishes. "At least, for now. We'll take care of him."

The relief in Jeree's eyes is so strong that Bray has to look away from the man. He wishes that others were able to hide their emotions as well as he and his father can.

The big man is gone by the time his gaze returns to where he had been standing. He blinks, sighs silently to himself, and returns to where he had been seated, the grit beneath his nails forgotten, eyes locked on the door. He doesn't know the Vanth couple, much less their son, but it's clear that his parents do. How, he'll never know. Old friends, perhaps. But, nonetheless, an orphaned boy does leave a heart heavy.

His parents speak quietly, but Bray doesn't care to listen.

The front door opens a short while later, Jeree ducking through with an unconscious boy hanging in his arms. The boy, perhaps twelve years old, is covered in thick, black soot, has a thin line of blood streaming from his dark hairline.

Something in Bray's rebellious heart shifts at the sight.

He doesn't know it then, but Cobb Vanth has just become one of the most important people in his life.

Locking onto that little boy, the one who had just lost both of his parents at once, Bray forces himself to turn back towards the datapad, shaking near-violently, struggling not to double over at how ill he feels. He focuses on the screen, at the evolutionary headshot images of Cobb over the course of his life.

The first image, he's perhaps six years of age, brown hair loose and growing long down the sides of his head, face round, eyes bright; the second image, just as Bray had met him; the third, eyes haunted, face a little more angular, hair recently cut and spiking up; the fourth, jaw set tight beneath thin stubble, hair raked back in the style that is *him*, eyes holding a light beneath the harsh grim acceptance; the last, the most recent- the same hazel eyes as always, his hair silver and styled the same as Bray has always remembered it, his beard full, that familiar old scar just behind his right eye- his whole expression just *daring* someone to go after him.

He looks good for his age.

Bray can't go after him, not the man who had been *raised alongside him as a brother*.

He shakes his head and tries to say as much, but his voice is a croak, and his throat still burns.

"You will go after him." His master holds up the device that he knows controls the bomb inside his head. "Or you will die."

Does he really have a choice?

Chapter One

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delayed update, I've actually been rather busy with school lately and simply haven't had the time to write much. I also almost crashed a car during one of my driving practice sessions on Saturday, March 26th so that was pretty terrifying- and eye opening. But, hey, I'm alive, so it's fine.

The chirp of a communication device breaks the silence within the small home at the edge of Freetown. And so, Cobb Vanth's day begins with a warning message from Din Djarin, the Mandalorian who had once helped him slay a krayt dragon.

[06:17] DD: *Someone is looking for Freetown.*

[06:18] CV: *What makes you say that?*

[06:18] DD: *He visited my mechanic in Mos Eisley.*

[06:18] CV: *They alright?*

[06:19] DD: *She's fine.*

[06:19] CV: *Good.*

[06:21] CV: *Oh, and thanks, by the way. I'll be on the lookout.*

After eating a light breakfast, Cobb faces his first battle of the day: getting his blasted hair to stay down. He'd spent a good half hour in his shower the night before, having been covered in grease and who knows what else. It had been a busy day, most of it spent helping repair some faulty mining equipment. But he's happy that it's only his hair that's protesting, rather than any of his aging joints. It means that it's another day of getting by without having to think about how much more taxing his job has become on his body.

Once he's gotten his hair situation taken care of to the best of his ability, he pulls on the worn old boots he could probably do with replacing and makes sure his modified shoulder is in top condition. He then grabs his blaster holster and jerbaskin hat, and heads out to greet the pre-dawn light that is just beginning to stretch out across the dark Tatooine skies.

The temperature is cool before the suns rise, coldest just before the dawn. Cobb doesn't let it bother him. If anything, the heat is his problem, but he's pretty sure he's gotten that under control at this point. It's been three months since the hunting trip heatstroke, four since his return to Freetown, two since he had taken out that Chiss bounty hunter.

He'd say that things have been going well if he didn't think that would jinx it.

Never mind that.

It is a nice morning. Quiet. Air still.

A few of the animal caretakers are heading out to feed the rousing banthas that the miners will be taking out to the site with them, feet trudging through the sand. A couple of them wave in greeting, mindful to be silent for those who are still sleeping. He tips his hat in response, continuing on down the road to the other end of town, where he can see a team of three hunters doing a final check on their gear before they head out.

He figures that they'll be gone for at least a good four days. Likely more. He had been on the last trip, a couple of weeks ago, and it had taken them three whole, *long* days. The herds are wandering off, slowly getting further away in their free roam. They'll come back in time, he knows- the herds. They always do. It's mostly the fact that his people are gone for so long chasing after them that bothers him. Not knowing if they'll come back or not, if they've crashed, run out of supplies, or been sold off by slavers. He, better than most Tatooine folk, knows how easily any of that could become reality. It eats at his nerves every time they head out longer than a couple of days.

Cobb tells himself that they'll be fine. Jo is part of this group, so why wouldn't they be? She knows what she's doing- she always has. She *is* their finest hunter, after all. Knowing that brings him enough comfort to keep his worry at bay as he approaches them.

"Morning, Marshal." Jo greets, sparing him a glance from where she's tying her pack up to her speeder bike.

"Mornin', Jo." He returns, dipping his head to the other two hunters when their gazes flick up at the sound of his voice. His eyes lightly skim over their gear. "All set?"

She nods, approaching the seat of her bike. "As ready as we'll ever be."

One of the others grunts his agreement.

"Alright. Take care of yourselves out there." Cobb tells them, stepping back. Good-humoredly, he adds, "Bring back somethin' good."

"Always do, Marshal."

He smiles. "Right. I'll let you go on your way, then."

Jo mounts her speeder and reaches to turn over the engine. The other hunters perk up at that, finish checking their gear, and follow suit. The previously silent dawn is now alive with the

gentle hum of the engines. Good thing, for the rest of the town, that these Imperial-model jumpspeeders run quietly- much unlike his own racing speeder.

“Don’t miss us too much.” Jo teases, eyes twinkling, as she glances over at him one last time.

He rolls his eyes amiably. “I won’t.”

They both know that he will. What else would he do?

Jo gives him a small nod in parting and revs her speeder's engine. It jets forward, peeling out across the desert, the other two right behind it. Amidst the dust cloud left behind, Cobb holds in a sneeze and scolds himself for standing so close. He turns and heads back into town.

He has time to kill, before the banthas are done eating and the miners are ready to head out- he usually escorts them, a part of his routine he'll confess that he doesn't exactly remember why he'd picked up. Nonetheless, he's happy to do it. There's no reason for him not to, anyhow, and a little extra walking never hurt him.

He parks himself along the backs of the buildings between the banthas and the main road, leaning up against one of them and lightly crossing his arms over his chest. Though he typically comes out a few minutes later than he had today, he doesn't mind waiting. He enjoys the darker hours of Tatooine, before the suns are up, and before they're down. It's quieter, cooler, more peaceful. It reminds him what they fight for.

Cobb watches as the lighter shades of blue leak into the dark ones high above, pushing them away. On the horizon, there's the faintest hint of orange as the first sun begins to rise. The stars are gradually beginning to fade, blending into the lighter hues of color. He might hate Tatooine more often than not, but it's home, and home has its moments.

It's nearly half an hour later that the miners begin to trickle in, the sunrise bright with the first traces of the day's brutal heat. If he chooses to look closely enough, he could even see the top of the second sun peeking over the horizon, chasing after the first. But he doesn't, instead focusing on greeting each of the miners as they come, watching as they saddle up the banthas and load them with gear. They make quick work of it, and soon they're ready to go.

They start out towards the mines, taking the usual route. Cobb lingers toward the right of the group, sharp eyes scanning the flats as they go.

He glances back to the main convoy every now and again, just to check that everyone is keeping up. A couple of weeks ago, one of the older banthas had fallen behind- they'd had to retire her afterwards- and they'd had to backtrack because the handler hadn't mentioned anything. But, today, all seems well in that department; everyone's maintaining a decent pace, the banthas aren't as stubborn as usual. The promising sign of a good day.

The ravine is a good two clicks out, but that doesn't mean too much when the area they're settled in is as flat as it is. It's a strain on his eyes to squint into the distance, though, he supposes that he prefers it to worrying what might be creeping up on them on the other side of every sand dune. This morning, other than their little group, the flats are empty. No one else in sight. *Good.*

Most of the miners are silent, leading a bantha or carrying something, content as they are, but a few strike up quiet conversation. He half-listens in as they talk about which of the different tunnels they're going to work in for the first few hours of the day, zoning out as his feet lead him in the right direction.

All the while, the suns pull themselves up further from the endless stretch of sand, the sky growing brighter as dawn comes to pass.

The walk really isn't all that long- they'll arrive onsite in about a half hour, then Cobb will see the miners settled in and head back to Freetown to follow his patrol route around the surrounding territory, make sure the moisture vaporators are working and that there aren't any troublesome strangers coming up- he *really* hopes that the one Din had warned him of earlier doesn't intend to do any harm.

After all that's done, the day will be for him to help out the townsfolk where he can.

It's a couple of hours later that Cobb finishes his morning patrol of the land surrounding Freetown, deeming it safe and empty for now, with no sign of the potential interloper that the Mandalorian had mentioned. The sky is that shade of morning blue that it always is against the sharp, early glare of the suns, and the air is already almost uncomfortably warm.

He pulls his well-aged speeder up in front of his home and cuts the engine- which has been working just fine, running at top condition following its tedious reconstruction those couple of months ago- listening as sound fades to the laughter of the children playing in the street. The townsfolk had risen in his absence, the children gathering to entertain themselves before they head down to the school.

He adjusts his hat and throws a leg over the speeder, planting his boot-clad feet in the sand beneath him. He rolls his shoulders to restore feeling in them, ignoring the gentle, familiar- dare he say *comforting*?- whirr of cybernetic parts in his right one.

An excited, high-pitched voice calls a greeting to him.

He picks out the face of Ann's son, Tenn, among the children, and lifts a hand to wave to him.

The boy grins wide, then turns to re-immersing himself in the game at hand. Cobb's own lips twitch, and he moves on.

He makes his way through the streets, checking up on people as he goes, making sure all is in working order. With Miyo, he discusses what kind of meat that Jo and her hunting team might bring back. And with Taanti, he talks of some items to add to the shopping list for his next run up to either Mos Eisley and Mos Espa. Another trip is due soon, and Cobb is more

than happy to head up north to take care of it himself- he never can bring himself to pass up the chance to stop by and visit with Fett's gotra.

He ends up joining the toolsmith- a man named Teb, who is a whole decade and a half older than Cobb himself- in sharpening the ends of dulled pickaxes that the miners had left in his care for the day. It's mindless, time-consuming work, and they make easy conversation as they scrape at the rounded edges of the metal, grinding it sharp again. It's grueling on the back and shoulders, though he only feels it in his left one. His right shoulder doesn't feel much these days, and that always works in his favor for tasks like this one.

They sit on the shop porch for most of the morning, long after the children head down to the school, the suns progressing to their peaks, the heat rising by the quarter-hour. They take short breaks every now and again, Cobb more so because of how his mechanical parts *absorb* the heat, but they only have a couple left by the time they stop for something to eat. They swing by Miyo's diner, then return to finish the job, doing their best to ignore the lazy weight in their bellies that tries to tell them off.

They're working on the last two pickaxes when the process comes to an abrupt end, the sound of an approaching speeder bike coming down the road quickly putting an end to most of the doings around.

Cobb keeps scraping away at the sun-softened metal of the end of the pickaxe laying across his thighs, electing to only look up if Teb reacts to the biker's appearance in a way that he finds concerning. His knuckles ache from holding the sharpening stone for so long, but, *stars*, he's nearly finished.

The sound of the engine grows louder as it makes its way through town, approaching their position outside of the toolsmith's shop.

When his companion finally looks up, Cobb doesn't know what he expects him to say. But it's definitely not, "Is that who I think it is?"

"What?" He asks, his voice coming gruff from his dry throat. He swallows. It's been a while since his last water break. He halts in his work and glances up, curious of what would make the old toolsmith react like *that*.

He almost drops the pickaxe on his feet.

Because, riding up on the speeder bike, is a man he had long since accepted that he would never see again: it's Bray Ealdel.

In front of them, a long stretch of sand, endless, relentless- and, yet, their freedom. Behind them, a city, hunters, captors, slavers- an eternal prison.

This is it.

The streets of Mos Espa are bustling with the normal day-to-day business; they haven't been noticed. The endless sand before them sings a song that Cobb has heard more and more

recently, and it's louder than he's ever heard it before, beckoning, telling him that they're close, that they can be free.

The people are looking to him, in every meaning of the phrase, awaiting the order.

He tells them to go. But when he moves to follow, Bray stays rooted to the spot.

"You comin'?" Cobb asks, baffled.

Bray shakes his head. "I'm goin' to hitch a ride off this dustball."

"You're leavin'?" He doesn't know how he's supposed to feel, what he's supposed to say.

"This planet might be your home, old buddy, but it ain't mine. You get that?"

Cobb does.

"Yeah, I get you, partner." He bites the inside of his cheek and forces a shaky nod. They've known each other for twenty years- Cobb grew up with him. Parting never has been easy for him.

He exhales and tries to smile. "Just don't get caught again, you hear? Won't have me to save your skin a second time."

"Same goes to you, pal. Stay safe out here." Bray tells him.

"Don't worry 'bout me, I got this." Cobb lifts his right hand to remind him of the blaster he stole in the initial escape, the light of the midday twin suns glinting off of the dark material. He glances back toward the other runaways, who've put a little distance between themselves and the edge of the town. "It'll help protect me an' all of them folks."

"They'll send hunters. You'll need it."

"I'll get the hang of this thing an' shoot down every one they send after me. Just you watch."

"I don't doubt it, brother. You could rule the galaxy, if you wanted- if there wasn't an Empire."

"Maybe." Cobb snorts, drawing out the first syllable. They both know that he'd never willingly attempt to rule a galaxy, that he doesn't like going for the big stuff. Leave it to people who actually know what they're doing.

And then they're silent, out of words and time, neither wanting to part from the other, both needing to get a move on to stay safe. The unknown stretches on ahead of the both of them, but this moment strings itself out into an eternity. Goodbyes are harder than the worst physical labor that a man could ever try to do.

Bray reaches out and pulls Cobb into a quick, tight hug. "Who knows, maybe I'll stop by an' see you again."

"I think I'd like that." He says, around the lump in his throat.

"Alright, you get on out of here, Cobb. They all need you." Bray takes a couple paces back after they part. "Stay safe, brother."

"Hey, we'll be fine. You just worry 'bout yourself." Cobb advises.

The other man laughs. "Alright, alright." His eyes grow wistful. "Cobb Vanth, I guess I'll see you around sometime."

"And you, Bray Ealdel." Cobb touches a couple of fingers off-center of his forehead, as if tipping a hat. A simple gesture, yet it holds so much weight to it.

He forces himself to turn, and begins to head out into the hot, vast desert after the others- after his people. He glances over his shoulder only once, and, when he does, he glimpses the back of his closest companion as he re-enters Mos Espa, never to return.

He's in a state of shock, and he knows it. His jaw is hanging open, but he can't quite gather himself enough to close it. Because Bray is *right in front of him*. Bray, who *left* Tatooine. Bray, who he'd thought he'd never hear of again.

He blinks, swallows back the dryness in his throat. His legs rise without his realizing, and he's stepping out into the street, the pickaxe falling into the sand. "It can't be..."

The speeder bike slows to a stop as soon as its rider spots him, those familiar brown eyes widening before settling in triumph. "Well, if it isn't Cobb Vanth."

That voice, though aged, is unmistakable. He may have gone bald, his facial hair white, but it's *him*. It really is.

Cobb lets out a breathless laugh, a silly grin spreading across his face. "Bray Ealdel. Look at you, a ghost ridin' on out of the Dune Sea." He shakes his head, still trying to wrap his head around it, around the fact that he's looking upon his old friend in *real time*. "Wondered if I'd ever see you again. You got old there, partner."

And the reply is flawless, as if they haven't been apart for more than *two decades*. "I swear *your* hair used to be brown."

Cobb feigns offense- though, perhaps, a tiny shard of it *is* genuine. "What, does silver not look good?"

"No, no, it suits you. Always were a silver-tongued fox." Bray fires back. He cuts the engine on his speeder completely and begins to climb off, his smile retreating into something tired and gentle. "It's just, it's been a while."

"Well, you got that right." Cobb agrees, stepping forward to guide the bike out of the middle of the road for him. He makes a mental note of where he's leaving it, just in case his friend needs to grab it later. "Hey, Teb, it okay if we leave this here for a bit?"

"Go right ahead. It won't be in anybody's way." The toolsmith assures him.

“You have my thanks.” Cobb tells him, as he finishes moving the vehicle aside. He gestures to the pickaxes, a small twinge of guilt springing up as he realizes that he’s not going to help finish the job. “You gonna be alright finishin’ those up?”

“You’ve done more than enough to help already, Marshal.” Many of the older townsfolk remember Bray. Fewer remember his relationship with Cobb. Teb is one of them. “You go enjoy yourself.”

“Alright, well, if you’re sure...” He hopes that his face conveys his gratitude. “I’ll come check up on you later.”

He glances at Bray and jerks his head down the road, and Cobb’s feet habitually start guiding them in the general direction of his tiny excuse for a home, Teb left behind on the porch of his ship to finish what little is left of his work. It won’t take him long- he, like everyone else, is good at what he does.

“Did he call you *Marshal*?” Bray asks, the moment they’re out of earshot. Cobb laughs at the disbelief in his voice.

“Yeah, he did. *Someone’s* gotta look out for this place, an’ since I technically founded it...” He shakes his head as he trails off. They have *a lot* of catching up to do. “Let’s head inside. Get a drink, cool off a bit.”

“Gee, pal, you might be a marshal, but *when’d* you lose your tolerance for the heat?” It’s an honest question, backed with surprise.

Cobb pauses, considers how to answer, and tilts his head when he does, speaking a little slower than he intends to. “I didn’t. Not in the way you think, anyway.”

Bray frowns. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

His smile is grim as he jerks his head forward. “C’mon, I’ll show you.”

Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

Believe it or not, I *am* still working on this. Just been incredibly busy. Partly because of school, partly of my own doing (binging a few shows). Anyway, if you read this, happy Star Wars month!

It's a little cooler inside his home, out of the reach of the suns. It's darker, too, of course, but the solution is easy enough: just leave the door open and let the daylight filter on in. He doesn't plan on them sticking around long, so there's no point in lighting any of the candles.

He ignores the warm draft that wafts in.

Bray looks around the main room with a little interest, and Cobb can tell that he's comparing it to their shared hovel in the Slave Quarter from back during the old days. Cobb's pretty sure that the main room here is *smaller* than that hovel. But he's one person, and he doesn't need that much space. He doubts Bray lives somewhere much larger himself.

"So, this your place?" Bray asks.

"Yeah. She ain't much, but she's home." Cobb's in the kitchenette, pouring himself a chilled drink to help chase out the heat. He holds up the glass. "You want somethin'?"

His friend shakes his head. "Nah, I'm good, buddy. What did you wanna show me?"

He clicks his tongue and grimaces. "I'll get to that. You in a hurry?"

"Not particularly." Bray answers.

"Relax a minute, then." He encourages, taking a generous sip of his drink. It does wonders to sooth his parched throat. "You know, a friend of mine told me that someone was lookin' for Freetown. Didn't expect it to be *you*."

"Nothin' like a good surprise, huh?"

"Ain't that the truth."

Cobb drains his glass as Bray moves to sit down on the couch, removing his hat- it's rather similar to Cobb's own, actually- and placing it in his lap. It's odd, seeing that head without the auburn mop of hair that he remembers it having. So much time has passed...

They're each silent for a minute, and Cobb wonders if Bray is also contemplating how lucky they are that fate brought them together again. He never expected Bray to return to Tatooine.

To see him now, it almost feels like a dream. But it's not, because he would be *whole* if it was; he can hear his shoulder whirring softly as he cleans the glass and sets it aside.

"Look, I don't know *why* you're here, Bray, but I'm glad you are." He confesses.

Bray huffs in a rueful amusement. "Believe me, it wasn't easy to stay away. Wanted to come back, but... It's almost like someone *told* me to. Couldn't ignore it. Glad I wasn't too late."

"I've had a couple close calls." Cobb tells him, rounding the counter to come into the seating area. He removes his bandanna and begins undoing the clasps of his shirt. *Now's as good a time as any.* "Slavers, bounty hunters, Tusken, all the like. But not many people out there can outshoot me. An' even less *now.*"

He slips out of his shirt and lays it on a side table. He can feel Bray's eyes on him as he reaches up to the release on his shoulder covering and tugs on it. There's an audible click as the panel springs free from the restraints holding it in place over the inner workings of his shoulder. He grabs it and pulls it fully off, revealing the machinery hidden away inside of him. Bray's eyes widen, and Cobb doesn't need to look at it to see what his friend is seeing—to visualize the blood pumping through the tubes, to see the glint of the faint light on the metal.

"You're one of them, then." Cobb almost flinches at the blunt phrasing of it.

"Not by choice." He places the protective cover on the counter. "You hear 'bout the Pykes?"

"The people in Eisley are sayin' they tried invadin' a few months back."

"Yeah." Cobb confirms. "I nearly killed a whole patrol of 'em, sent the survivor back out with a message. The bosses sent in a bounty hunter to scare us. Shots got fired, an' my deputy wasn't as lucky as I was. Been told that the hunter didn't survive the battle in Mos Espa, though, an' that's good enough for me."

"Who patched you up?" Bray wonders, the faintest trace of curiosity slipping into his normally-stoic expression.

"Friend of a friend of a friend." He shrugs. "A guy I know sent me to Boba Fett's, and Boba Fett called in one of 'em mod artists. Of course, I didn't know until *after* they'd already done it, but I ain't one to complain 'bout bein' alive."

The other man hums in what Cobb figures to be agreement. "Heard a lot 'bout this Fett guy since I landed. A Daimyo tryin' to undo all of what Jabba's done? Sounds like a real piece of work."

Cobb laughs. "He is. The good kind, though, mind you. Planet's been doin' well since he took to the throne. Wish he'd done it sooner."

"Good to see Tatooine finally have some room to breathe." Bray murmurs, gaze wistful.

"Yeah." He quietly agrees, a thousand memories flitting across his vision. He blinks away a pair of bottomless red eyes and glances down at his open shoulder.

His friend's voice perks up, changing the subject to something just a little less sore. "And the hand, it's the same old one?"

"Yeah, it is." Cobb says. "The shoulder's all that's new. Reconstructed it from the inside."

"What's it like?"

He ponders the question for a little bit, leaning back on the counter behind him and chewing contemplatively on the inside of his cheek. "It has its drawbacks, but it's handy. Faster. Stronger. Younger than the rest of me. Get tired of hearin' it sometimes, but what can I do?"

Bray tilts his head. "You can hear it?"

"Sure can. Though, it fades into the background most of the time. Sounds like the joints of one of those 3PO-series droids."

"Haven't seen one of those in a *long* time."

His lips twitch upward. "Neither have I. Don't got any droids out here in Freetown."

Bray snorts. "Freetown is *the* most unoriginal name I've ever heard."

"Hey, it wasn't *my* idea." Cobb says, raising his hands up in defensive surrender. "The folks 'round here say it suits us, and Taanti's set on it, so it ain't changin'. Though, I personally liked *Mos Pelgo* better myself. Got a certain ring to it."

"Taanti's still around?" He actually looks *surprised*, as if he's forgotten that Taanti's younger than Cobb himself is.

Cobb *just* stops himself from barking out a laugh. "C'mon, Bray, you saw Teb. Got a few stragglers who've trickled in over the years, but most of the people 'round here are from those days, way back when." He pauses as a sudden thought passes over him. "I can show you around, reintroduce you to some of 'em, if ya want."

Bray gives a slow, considerate nod. "You know what? I think I'd like that."

"Alright." He cheerfully draws out, grabbing his shoulder cover from where he'd put it down and fitting it back in place. He makes sure to listen for the telltale click to make sure it has been fastened on right. Then, he moves to grab his shirt, briefly turning his back on his friend as he does. He can feel those sharp eyes piercing his back.

"You still got the Star on your back, too."

He throws Bray a baffled look. "'C'mon, pal. You know nothin' ain't gonna get rid of it."

"I know that." Bray scoffs. "It's just been a while since I've seen one. I don't got any mirrors at my place."

"You don't have a *mirror*? *Really*?" Cobb sounds as incredulous as he feels. "Might I ask *why* that is?"

Bray laughs, now. It's quiet, but it's a laugh. Genuine. He takes up his hat once more and rises to his feet. "C'mon, buddy, the suns ain't gonna wait up for us."

He rolls his eyes at the sudden spurt of eagerness on display from the other man, and quickly closes his shirt. He pulls his neckerchief on, and makes sure to snatch his own hat from its resting place on the way back out into the sunlight. Might as well get on with it.

Tatooine, of course, hasn't cooled down a beat. It's only a half hour or so after noon, and the twin suns are still high in the sky, scorching the endless flats and dunes of the barren planet's grainy surface. It's a real shame that it's only going to get hotter in the coming hours, that the heat won't really give away until the blue above begins to turn indigo and the triple moons climb out among the distant stars.

The streets of Freetown are even quieter than before, only a small handful of people out and about, going on about their business. The Tatooine summers are absolutely relentless- which, granted, isn't saying much because everything's roasting no matter *what* time of year it is.

Cobb Vanth and Bray Ealdel are two of these few people, walking down the main street side by side, two pairs of boots carving through the loose sand.

At this point, they've stopped by a couple of places, said hello to a good handful of people. But, somewhere along the line, they forgot their true purpose for wandering the streets, and now they simply talk and enjoy the company of the other.

"So, where've you been keepin' yourself?" Cobb finally asks, as they step around a pit that some of the kids had begun digging that morning. It isn't deep yet, but it wouldn't be fun for someone around their age to fall into it.

"On a small farmin' planet called Saleucami." Bray says, right at his elbow, grimacing as he peers at the hole. Slave children always got punished for doing such things as *digging holes*.

"A farmin' planet, huh?" Cobb can't picture any place that's anything other than sand. He might ask Fennec or Din what other planets look like, since they're the two people he knows that go offworld to a variety of different places the most. He'd probably ask Fett, too- he's been around, before getting beached here- if the poor man wasn't so busy trying to *revamp* the crime world of Tatooine. "Sounds a bit wetter than here."

"Oh, she is." Bray huffs. "But it's quieter out there. Everyone keeps to themselves."

"Lucky you." He briefly wonders if he's the only man out there who has ever had the misfortune to be jealous of a *planet*. "But, hey, look here- a small, out-of-the-way town on Tatooine. Not many things bother with us. You could stay, you know. If ya want. I know some more folks who'll be glad to see you."

“Is that separation anxiety of yours comin’ back?” His friend teases, masking a thin layer of genuinity.

“Nah.” He waves the idea off, withholding a smirk of his own. “But, unless you haven’t noticed, worlds away ain’t exactly the same as bein’ neighbors. We used to *live together*, remember?”

“Yeah. I miss that, Cobb. I do.” Bray confesses, eyes shifting to the sand beneath them in guilt of, what Cobb imagines, staying away for so long. “But I can’t stick around for too long.”

Oh. Cobb blinks back the sudden, sharp mixture of surprise and disappointment that stings in his chest. He reminds himself to be glad that Bray made it out here at all. “Got people to look after yourself?”

“In a way.” Bray shrugs, and then abruptly changes the subject. “You get with Ann yet?”

The question is so unexpected that he laughs before he can catch himself. He shakes his head as he answers, perhaps a little *too* quickly. “No. She’s safer if I keep my distance.”

The other man’s expression is indistinguishable. “You haven’t changed.”

“I got the town, that’s all I need.” He knows it’s not true, but he says it anyway. Bray came out here at long last, and he is *not* going to ruin the mood with his personal baggage. “What about you? You got anyone?”

Bray grimaces. “You know that ain’t my kind of thing.”

“Guess *neither* of us have changed much, then.” Cobb hums, scuffing his boot in the sand as they slow to a stop. He raises his eyes to his friend’s face as he turns to him. “You got anywhere to be?”

He purses his lips and shakes his head. “I can hang around for a few days, if you want.”

“I’d like that. You and I, we have *a lot* of catchin’ up to do.”

“You’re Bray Ealdel.” It’s the first thing that Cobb says to the older boy after he decides not to think about last night, about the blood and gore, about his parents.

Today’s a rare free day for the Ealdel family, and Cobb gets the day off because of, well...he doesn’t need to explain it all again. But, for now, the parents are out in the market, and the boys are all alone in their master’s hovel.

The Ealdel boy narrows his dark eyes. Cobb can tell that he doesn’t like him. “You know me?”

He shakes his head. "I've seen you around. Your parents knew mine. Came by some nights, when they thought I was sleepin'." He drops his gaze to the floor as the memories flood over him. He misses his parents. "They seem nice."

"Do they?" The other boy sneers at nothing in particular. "Well, you don't know 'em like I do."

Cobb grits his teeth. "At least you have parents."

He can feel Ealdel look away, instantly ashamed of himself.

When the time comes to meet the miners and help them bring in the day's haul, Cobb is easily able to rope Bray into joining him for the trip.

They walk out there alongside one another, hats on their heads to block out the mid-afternoon suns, and bask in each other's familiar presence, speaking of whatever comes up. They talk of Mos Espa, their time enslaved there; they talk of the recent battle, of Boba Fett and Din Djarin; they talk about the Dune Sea- or, well, *Cobb* does, telling Bray of the different tasks the townsfolk have to do just to survive way out here.

"It ain't easy, but it's honest work. Wouldn't have it any other way, relyin' on ourselves instead of the slavers." Cobb says.

He has a flask of water at his left hip, hanging from his belt opposite of his blaster. He pops it open and brings it up to his lips to fight off the dehydration every little while. In the early days after his recovery of Bane's shot, he'd tried dumping some of the water on the mechanics of his shoulder, to cool it down. He'd quickly learned that it doesn't help, and hadn't done it again. A cold evening shower is the only thing that does anything for that issue, other than spending an eternity cooling in some shaded place- usually Taanti's saloon, Ann's house, or his own.

Sand collects in his boots the further they go, and Cobb wonders whether it'd be worth patching them up or buying new ones altogether. He's had the battered old things for years- just over half a dozen, if he remembers right. He admittedly has no clue as to how they're *just* beginning to fall apart. Bray's own boots look stronger than his do, but they're likely newer, too. He'll have to ask where his friend got them, before he leaves and heads back to Saleucami. He's sure that Din wouldn't mind doing a little cross-space delivery- he *does* owe him a favor, now. It doesn't necessarily hurt to indulge, though even Cobb knows the dangers of Tatooine, and the better things he could ask of his friend.

When they finally reach the ravine, he pauses to empty his boots and guzzle a good third of his water store before he leads Bray down to where the miners will be preparing to haul the day's spoils up to the waiting banthas.

Only a couple of the miners are old enough to remember Bray, and they greet him with almost as much respect as they give to Cobb himself. The younger ones are just happy to have an extra set of hands to help with the workload, exhausted from a combination of exertion and Tatooine heat- it's worse underground, more humid than the sandy surface.

It isn't long before the animals are loaded up and ready to go. As they head out, starting back toward Freetown, Cobb takes the lead of one of the banthas himself, saving another man the concern of having to watch over it. Bray walks alongside him, hands free, seemingly content to stand by until he's asked to jump in.

"You've done well here, Cobb. For yourself, an' all of them." He remarks.

He can't help but feel the smallest pang of relief- part of him *had* been worried about Bray's opinion, had *wanted* to impress him. An amusing thought in of itself.

He's a little more than glad that it doesn't show in his voice when he responds. "You think so?"

"You've got more than I do." Bray confesses. "More people, better gear. *Better* people." He pauses wistfully, then shakes his head and smiles. "You've done real good by them, Cobb, you know that?"

When he refuses to elaborate further on his own living situation, Cobb nods and glances back at the tired miners trailing behind them. They're more content than the miners he remembers back in Mos Espa, during the times of slavery. "Believe me, partner, I know."

The shadows are long, stretching from one side of the street to the other and beyond, cooling sand that had previously burned flesh to the touch. It's a sure sign that the suns are retreating to let the triple moons offer their temporary salvation. It will be perhaps an hour more until darkness sets across the land in full. The streets are quiet.

The cantina-saloon is lively with townsfolk of all trades, done with their work until the suns rise next, celebrating another free day out in the harsh Dune Sea.

A group of men, already well on the way to becoming drunk, clash their glasses together merrily, their laughter carrying out through the open door. Their childless wives watch them, exchanging friendly gossip between one another. A ragtag group sings as Teb plucks at the strings of his worn hallikset. Miyo's voice in particular sounds out of place among those of the younger singers, but no one would ever tell her so. She is as proud as the rest of them.

This is the jovial scene that Cobb and Bray step into. They slide over to the bar, and Cobb pours them drinks while Taanti's busy serving others. There's a silence between them as they observe the rest of the town, a warm feeling sitting in Cobb's chest. This is the best ending any normal day can have, at least out on Tatooine.

He removes his hat and places it on the counter beside him as Bray's eyes trail up the ribcage of the krayt dragon, following the bones from floor to ceiling. He remembers the Mandalorian looking at them the same way the second time he'd come by.

"These real bones?" Bray finally asks, bringing his gaze back to him.

Cobb nods as he swallows a mouthful of spotchka. "Krayt dragon. Mando helped take 'er down."

A disbelieving eyebrow raises at him. "Really? You fought a *krayt dragon*?"

He knows how it sounds. Not many people go off and *fight* krayt dragons- or *survive* fighting one- he thinks Freetown and Din might even be the first. The beasts live a hundred years and maintain good health right up until the end. Just about every krayt skeleton around is from one that was suddenly claimed by age. Truthfully, Cobb wouldn't believe his words himself had he not *lived* it.

"Don't believe me?" He rises to the challenge, knowing full well how to prove his claim true. "I can show you what's left on the kill site."

Bray's lips twitch up into an amused smirk. "I might take you up on that."

Cobb faintly smiles himself, turning his eyes back out to the people. He glances at a group of men, miners, and listens in briefly on one of their stories. It's an old one, about one of the higher mines collapsing a few years ago. There's laughter as one man recalls how ridiculous they'd all looked after they'd reached the surface. Cobb had been there, volunteered to help them. He'd done it a few times, before he'd gone silver and decided to stick to the sand beneath the suns. And they all *had* looked ridiculous that day. Jo still teases him about it.

At the thought of her, his gaze trails over to the hunters' table. It's half empty with Jo's three-man team out on the job. He allows himself a moment to hope that all is well with them, then moves on, determined not to linger on it. Worry gets no one anywhere if they allow it to consume them. He's learned *that* time and time again.

He turns back to the bar at the sound of Bray's voice. "And there he is, the famed Weequay himself. How you been?"

Cobb follows his friend's gaze to Taanti, who'd finished tending to the others and now has his eyes on them- eyes that are wide in something near surprise. After no more than a couple of beats, the bartender gives himself a shake, his rough-skinned body jolting back to life as he sets back to work by topping off their drinks.

He had been there, back in the day, and had known Bray on a thin level. No doubt he'd caught wind of his return by now. Gossip gets around fast in a small town. Very little rattles Taanti, and this is no different- at least not on the outside.

"Let me re-introduce you to Taanti, barkeeper of this here cantina." Cobb speaks up over a loud note in the background, turning to each as he addresses them. "Taanti, you remember Bray?"

Taanti leans over the bar, voice low, almost accusatory. “What’s *he* doing here?”

In hindsight, he probably should have expected that kind of reaction.

Bray’s eyebrows raise as he turns on him. “What, did you tell them I was gone for good?”

“That ain’t what I said, no.” Cobb replies, shaking away lingering surprise. He sighs. *Ain’t nothing ever easy*. “Why don’t you go on an’ wait outside for a minute? I’ll be out there in a trice, then we can head on over to my place an’ call it a night.”

The man’s gaze flicks between both him and Taanti, and his shoulders slump as he accepts defeat and gives in. “Alright. Don’t take too long, will you?”

“I won’t.” He promises.

Bray pushes his weight off of the bar and leaves his drink behind as he pivots towards the door and strides off. Cobb watches him go, resigned, and tries to push back the bad feeling in his gut when he turns back to Taanti.

His voice is sharp, almost snappy. “What’s the matter with you?”

Just because he understands where Taanti’s coming from doesn’t mean that he agrees with the attitude he’s showing over it.

“I don’t trust him.” The Weequay confesses gruffly, still angled across the counter.

You don’t say. His teeth grind together. “You don’t trust anyone who doesn’t live here, Taanti.”

“It’s been *twenty years*, Marshal.” Taanti argues. “Trust me, he’s *not* here for a friendly visit.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Cobb snaps, offended. It takes a moment for the harshness of his own voice to set in, and he winces in regret. He sighs, offering a silent apology. “I’ll keep my eye on him, alright? If anythin’ happens, *I’ll* take care of it.”

But the other isn’t done.

“If it came down to it, *would* you be able to?”

Jaw tight, Cobb whips around and stalks after his friend, jerbaskin hat clutched tightly in his white-knuckled fingers. He can still hear the music and the laughter, but what is it other than a temporary joy from the deception and misery that the galaxy is fond to remind him of?

His uncertainty lingers in the bar behind him.

I don’t know what I’d do.

Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

I am, in fact, still working on this. I intend to see this three-part series through to its end, no matter how long it takes. I was busy graduating, working on other projects, and starting to learn how to drive. Possibly getting my first job soon as well.

I'm still working on another series of mostly one-shots, but it's definitely about time I returned to working on this. If you're still here, thanks for sticking around. If you're new, make sure to read *When The Suns Grow Low*, *The Fight Only Gets Tougher* first.

They set out the following evening, to head out to the krayt dragon's lair. The peak of the day's heat has already come and gone, gradually waning with the late suns.

Cobb's trusty old speeder, lined up alongside Bray's standard issue bike, throws up sand behind it, scattering dust to the wind with and between each cough of the engine. Despite her age, she runs true, engine rumbling louder than the one beside it. Every now and again, he lets himself creep forward just enough to easier guide his old friend across a desert that the other isn't as well learned in, along a route *he* so happens to be well familiar with. Because jetting through these dunes is a breeze for Cobb. He's right in his element.

The day had been full of laughter and stories of the time lost, filling a hollow gap within Cobb that he had long forgotten about. But he can't shake Taanti's words, the foreboding tone to his gruff voice. He can't forget the warning, the question, the *doubt*. Why *has* Bray returned? Surely not to harm any of them? Surely not to harm *him*?

There's no bad blood between them, not that he last checked. He just hopes that conclusion is accurate. It has been *years*, after all, so forgive him if his memories from way back then are a bit hazy. He's a *man*, not a walking memory bank.

Thus far, Bray hasn't seemed off. Cobb has hope that Taanti is wrong about him.

The man himself flashes Cobb a smile the next time their speeders fall back in line with one another, his eyes warm in the same way that he has always remembered. He returns it, taking care not to show his teeth, lest his mouth catch loose sand. *That* had been a hard lesson the first time he'd gone riding. His throat had been scratchy for *days*.

"Suns are setting!" Bray calls over the roar of the engines. "We gonna ride through the night?"

"We'll stop!" Cobb assures him.

His eyes track the descent of the suns for a moment, their sinking round shapes bleeding the sky orange. They'll duck back behind the horizon in a little under half an hour, and then the

pair of them will have about another hour before darkness swamps the Dune Sea completely and forces them to call it a night. They're making good time, though, better than when he'd taken Mando out this way. Maybe it's because he isn't trying to tell a story as they go.

He combs one hand through his beard to free it of stubborn grains of sand, then squints and refocuses himself forward. It's a good evening for a ride. He just hopes that Jo's hunting team is having it as easy as he and Bray are. He doesn't let himself wonder what the chances of crossing paths with them are.

The lower the twin suns grow, the cooler the breeze gets. It's almost *cold*, and they may have to take a break soon just to let calmer air warm their bodies. Though, at that point, it'll likely be more worth it to retire altogether and get some proper rest before the dawn. Cobb's joints are stiff already. *Stars*, age is becoming less and less kind to him.

Against the galaxy's advice, he lets them continue on through that half hour. The suns fall, the bright orange of the skies grows softer, and begins to turn pink and purple. White lights twinkle far above, the stars piercing through the darkening hues to reach out and guide those poor souls lost in the dunes.

Twilight is a beautiful thing on Tatooine, always has been. Another day survived, more bright ones ahead.

The podracing engine whines temperamentally, and Cobb decides to take pity on it. He calls over to Bray, and they come to a gentle halt on a flat stretch between the dunes, cutting the power to their motors for the night.

"You all good?" Bray asks him, his voice filling the void left behind by the engines.

"Sure am." Cobb smiles something rueful, patting the speeder's engine cover as he climbs from his seat. "But she's a stubborn old thing. Time's takin' its toll."

"Sounds like someone *I* know." The other man remarks, pulling his bag from where it hangs over the back of his own mount. He sets it on the ground and digs out a water canteen, reminding Cobb to do the same as he stretches his back. "We settin' up camp right here?"

"It's safe, you've got my word. I'm pretty friendly with the locals in these parts, they won't harm a hair on either one of us." *Thanks, Mando.*

"Gee, Cobb, you really *have* made a livin' for yourself out here."

"Mhm. Told you I would." He says, grabbing a second pack from his speeder and setting it down beside the other. He pulls it open and hauls out a few pieces of firewood, tosses them into a rough pile in the sand. It'll only grow colder, and they'll want the heat soon enough. But the cooling engines of the speeders will do for now, and he nestles down against his own, at a distance safe enough that it won't burn him.

Bray follows his example, crossing his arms over his chest and lightly knocking their boots together.

There's a silence between them, one that's easy and familiar. Cobb *likes* talking, but he can't deny that he enjoys the feeling of *this* either- the feeling of talking without words. They never really *had* a night like this to spend, a night without fear, not back then. It feels good, truly, to sit beneath the stars in relative safety alongside a long-lost friend.

A long time ago, these empty nights made him cautious, paranoid. That was a different man, a runaway slave- someone lost, afraid, *new* to the stretch of life beyond civilization. *That* was a rookie leader with nothing but a half-healed scar on his head, the clothes on his back, and a stolen blaster to his name.

The Marshal *relishes* in these nights, for he has long since come to learn that they are *not* empty. These nights, they carry a whisper. It's a whisper from the wind to the very soul of a weary survivor like him, congratulating them on another day of staying alive, preparing them for the one ahead. A respite, a quiet calm. A breath amidst the mess that is life on Tatooine. When he listens closely, this worn-down old man can hear how the sand shifts beneath the night breeze, gentle gusts caressing the planet's rough surface as if ghosting over an old lover's face, urging them to continue on.

No non-native could possibly understand it, but Cobb Vanth does. He reckons that Bray might too, even if he's been gone for a large fraction of their lives. No Tatooine-born man could ever forget the feeling of it, not even if they'd yet to experience it.

He may not believe in any of the deity or Force nonsense, but he believes in *this*. Because, sometimes, it's *all* he has. Trying to do good takes a lot out of him, far more than doing *bad* ever could. The good path is the one that takes the most toll, the one that will *always* take the most toll. But he will *never* regret taking it over any of the others he could've chosen.

So, Cobb sits and listens to the night wind, breathes in the desert air and thinks of everything that's been done right by him, everything that's been done right *for* him. Sometimes, the sun really *does* shine down on a womp rat like him.

"Hey." He says, warm and gently humbled even as the sky grows darker by the very second, his body cooler with each breath. His words feel like they have more meaning now than the last couple of times he's said it. "I'm glad you came out here."

"Yeah?" Bray returns, voice quiet in a way that says he can also feel the comforting whisper of the wind. "Me too, buddy."

Cobb smiles lightly to himself at that, and blinks himself from his haze to stretch muscles that are already growing stiff.

He digs through his travel bag for his welding torch- he carries it not only to make fast repairs to his speeder, but also to light fires, a use that's been needed on countless occasions. It's an old thing that sputters when he turns it on, but it works, and soon the pile of twiggy firewood is alight, bathing them in an orange glow that makes up for the lack of even a single sun.

He fishes out his hat and leans back against the podracer, mirroring Bray in the way that his arms are crossed.

They watch silently as the flames lick upwards, flickering softly as they feed smoke into the night air. The smell of burning timber adds to the warmth of the moment, making it all the more memorable. Cobb savors it, content to listen to the quiet crackling of the fire and the sound of wind whispering across the landscape. It feels almost just like that morning when Jo had sat beside him on his porch. He hopes that she and her team are getting enough rest.

He sighs quietly to himself, tilting his head back against his speeder, looking up at the bright stars. He never gets tired of looking at them. They look so small out there, so fragile, so far away. It reminds him of how small *he* is, in the grand scheme of things- and oddly enough, that's always been a comfort to him. Small, loveable, able to help those at his level or lower.

Life is rough, but remaining unseen to the big brother in charge of it all is everything. He does his part, keeps his head down, hidden away from the greater, and he likes that. It *works*, for him *and* the town. It always has.

Bray quietly shifts closer to the fire, rubs his hands together to warm them. His gaze is distant, and he casts his eyes back out across the desert. "There really a dead krayt out there?"

The lingering doubt makes Cobb's lips twitch in gentle amusement, and he doesn't answer the question directly. "I ever lie to you, Bray?"

"Nah." The other man softly shakes his head, voice edged with a hint of familiar old teasing that makes Cobb almost *miss* their younger years together. "You never had the guts to."

He grins to himself, letting his head bob in a small nod. His eyes trail in the direction of the kill site. His next words are simple enough, spoken at almost a reverent murmur in the nostalgia of it all. "There's a dead krayt out there."

"Figures that *you'd* kill one." Bray hums, quiet voice laced with a thoughtful pride.

Technically, I didn't kill it, Cobb doesn't say. He shrugs, scratches at an itchy spot on his chin through his beard. Bray can say what he likes, but Cobb won't ever take credit for Din Djarin's work. The krayt dragon would have never been slain without him.

A stillness falls over them again, and Cobb lets himself relax further against his speeder. It's comfortable enough, more so than laying flat on the ground, and the longer he remains in this position, the more drowsy he becomes. It's easy to sleep when he's certain that he's almost completely safe, when he's in the presence of a friend. It's unfortunate that he'll *have* to shake himself awake and lay down properly. His back is as temperamental as his speeder is.

His gaze tracks back to Bray, whose own eyes are burning invisible holes into the sand at his feet. He looks the slightest bit troubled, and Cobb has half a mind to ask. But whatever it is, he decides, isn't his business, and he keeps his mouth shut. Close as they are, they're each allowed to have their own secrets.

He sighs, reluctantly plucking his hat from his tousled hair and dragging himself from his resting place. Might as well lay down before he gets *too* comfortable.

He stretches his weathered old muscles one last time and lowers himself onto his left shoulder, tucking the arm beneath his head. His other hand holds his hat close. He'd rather wear it, but the winds would carry it away long before dawn, so this will have to do. He exhales, quietly watching the way the flames move. It's mesmerizing enough.

Beyond the light, he glimpses Bray's silhouette shift as well, the older man lowering himself fully to the ground, though remaining propped up on an elbow. He pulls a flat, rectangular object out of his own bag, sparking Cobb's curiosity.

"What's that?" He asks, squinting uselessly past the flames. It hurts.

Bray just laughs, looking at the object for another long moment and shaking his head before tucking it back where he grabbed it from. "Nothin' important."

"If you say so." Cobb caves, blinking to fix his eyes. They really aren't what they once were- though, *nothing* of him or his possessions are, after all. He doesn't even have the same *shoulder* as the one he was born with.

"I'm surprised you ain't pryin'." The older man confesses, sounding almost confused in a way that puts Cobb on edge, in a way that screams '*something's wrong*'.

"Ain't no point in pryin', Bray." He returns, wishing he could leave it at that.

But he can't. He just *can't*.

He can't leave the conversation where it is because Taanti's words are suddenly resurfacing, flooding back in a rush, telling him that it's not safe to trust someone who's been gone for a whole *twenty-years* no matter who they are. He can't because Taanti has good instincts, because Taanti is *rarely* wrong in his judgment of character. He can't because what Taanti said *scares* him. "*Marshal. Trust me, he's not here for a friendly visit.*"

Cobb swallows and gets his arms beneath him to push up high enough so that he can properly see his friend over the fire raging between them. He *needs* to see his face, his reaction to what he says next. "You do know that I trust you, yeah?"

Bray glances up at him with a closed-mouth smile, unlodging his arm from where it holds up his head so that he can fully lay down. His voice is soft, almost sad. "Yeah, I know, buddy."

Kriffing suns. Something *is* wrong.

Cobb's stomach churns and twists around itself, threatening to spill out anything and everything it hasn't yet digested. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, hopes on Scott's grave that it comes off as tired, and lays back. Because he *does* trust Bray. With his life. Always has, up until this moment. But to know that his friend, his *brother*, is keeping something *this big* from him...

He hates it when Taanti is right.

What are you hiding, Bray? Cobb thinks back to the object the other man had held, what it had looked like. It had been thin, rectangular- a datapad, possibly? He's only seen a few of

those in his long life, as speeders are the only real major technology out on a low-life desert planet like Tatooine. Speeders and *blasters*, to be a bit more in-depth. Bray *could* be in possession of a datapad, but-

Bray *does* have a blaster. But that's no surprise- who the hell *doesn't*? Any free man Cobb has ever seen on Tatooine has a blaster. The planet doesn't have the best reputation out there. The *worst*, probably. But, then again, the existence of the blaster raises a dangerous question: Does Bray intend to *use* it against him?

The crackling of the fire feels a bit more foreboding, now, the whisper of the wind more like a warning. Cobb can feel his heart rate speeding up, a lump that he can't swallow forming in his throat. This is not good. Not good at all. He's been being played the whole time- by his *best friend*- and he hadn't even known it. Taanti *was* right. He truly was. Cobb should've never trusted Bray, the man who'd suddenly shown up after *two decades*.

And now he's alone, laying across a fire from a man who intends to *kill* him. He's going to die before he gets back to Freetown, isn't he?

Cobb would cry if the desert hadn't already drained him of all his tears. *Why? Why is he after me? Why am I still alive?*

The thoughts run rampant inside his head, spinning, overlapping, and twisting around until it hurts to breathe and he knows no peace. His chest aches with fear, and with anger, and with sadness, all wrapped up together into one emotion that refuses to subside.

He might as well be dead already. Either way, there's already a hole burned through his heart, ripped open as easily as a true flesh wound. The galaxy really does know how to play a cruel joke. A shame that he's always catching the brunt end of it.

"Cobb?" Bray inquires, voice concerned in a way that makes him feel even sicker, in a way that makes the heat of the fire feel absolutely *suffocating*. "You alright?"

And, suddenly, it's obvious, and he curses under his breath, even as he doesn't know up from down or left from right. *He's trying to gain my trust.*

There's a horror to the realization that almost makes him forget to breathe altogether. Bray's playing on it, pretending to care for him to get close and pull the trigger at the right moment, at the moment that's safest to preserve his own life.

What's worse is that it was *working*. Up until a few minutes ago, it was *kriffing working*.

Cobb couldn't tell the difference between the man he remembers and this killer-friendly facade, and now his life is about to come crashing to pieces, like a poorly-built house collapsing on top of him. And, stars, does it feel just like that, like a crushing weight that's pulling down *hard* on every part of his body.

He wants to laugh. To scream. But the air won't come out. His body is shaking, and he doesn't know how to make it stop. He wants to scream, to cry, to *break* something, anything

to make this Force-forsaken feeling go away. He doesn't want to be here. He needs to go, to move, to *do* something. *Anything*.

His legs scramble and slide to get beneath him, and he stumbles as he straightens up, messily returning his hat to his head. His eyes land on Bray for the briefest of seconds, and what he sees in the other man's gaze looks so real that he nearly *does* vomit. Cobb can't look at him, instead wringing his hands together and pressing laced fingers to the back of his neck as he tries to take a deep breath.

"I'm goin' for a walk." He finally finds his voice, and it's a warped, terse thing. *Breathe through it, Cobb.* "Don't wait up for me."

Cobb doesn't wait for a reply, and his feet quickly drag him off into the desert, away from the fire, and away from the man who's been pretending to be his friend.

His body moves of its own accord, and his mind is somewhere far away, swimming in a pool of panic and despair. His mind can't catch up. It doesn't want to accept the truth, even as it's clearer than the skies during daytime. It can't wrap itself around the idea of his closest friend, who had been his rock for a whole twenty years of his life, doing this to him. The only real family he has left, out to *kill* him. *Why? Why? Why?*

He can barely feel the ground below his feet, can barely hear the sound of his own footsteps. All he can hear is the repetitive slam of his heart against his ribcage, the roar of blood in his ears, the harsh pants that rip from his lungs.

The world is a blur around him, but he doesn't care, just walks and walks, as fast as his unsteady legs can make him. The fading light and warmth from the fire mean little to him. He already feels cold, abandoned, lost. Like there's nothing left but the darkness closing in around him, swallowing him whole. He's *drowning* in it.

He wanders until he trips and his face hits the sand. Only then does he glance back over his shoulder, at the camp. The firelight is a speck on the horizon. It's then that he pauses to breathe, that his lungs finally find the strength to *hold* air, to properly filter it. He closes his eyes, letting the freezing night air numb him inside out.

Cobb just sits there for a while, *just sits* until his breathing evens out, until the pounding in his temples begins to recede, until he feels dead inside.

He's going to have to do something, and he doesn't have many options. He could sneak back into camp and ride away on his speeder, leave Bray there alone. He could kill Bray in his sleep, get to him first.

He could...he could *play along*, pretend to be as oblivious as he's been the past couple of days, give Bray a chance to change his mind. It's the long game, of course, but Cobb doesn't think he could live with outright *killing* the man. As an ex-slave and founder of Freetown, he's all about giving second chances. And, if Bray doesn't take his, it *isn't* Cobb's fault for that.

"If anythin' happens, I'll take care of it."

“If it came down to it, would you be able to?”

Cobb takes a deep breath. *If this doesn't work, I'm going to have to.*

Chapter Four

Cobb jerks where he sits and grabs the table in front of him as the block shakes. In the back of the hovel, Bray curses.

That one sounded close. Cobb hopes it wasn't someone he knows.

He sucks in a deep breath and lets his shoulders fall, scrubbing a hand over his face. Lera asks him if he's alright, and his response doesn't hit his own ears. He thinks he says yes, not that it matters. He hates the chip explosions. They remind him of his parents. It's been four years since they died.

He stares at the pair of chance dice he'd been fidgeting with. The explosion had moved them, too, but they'd managed to roll back onto the same color as before. One blue, one red. Slavers use them when they bet slaves.

He'd found these ones on the street a couple years back, taken them as something to entertain himself with. He likes to imagine his master debating over freeing him with them.

That day will never come, though, and he knows it. He's young, strong, and there's no pointing in giving him up. The fact that the blasted dice keep landing on opposite colors as one another proves it. He'll probably die the same way his parents did, the same way the last person out there just had- his flesh and blood painting the sand bright red.

He wonders who it was this time. He hopes it wasn't Cliff. Cobb is tired of losing parents.

But when the sun begins to set, when Bray's father should be stepping in through the door, it opens to reveal Jeree. And then he knows: Cliff Ealdel is dead.

Lera trembles at the sight of the man, and her voice shakes as she calls Bray out to join them; she knows, too.

"No." Bray says, shaking his head and backing up. "No, he can't be dead. I just saw him this morning."

Cobb can't look him in the eye. There's a lump in his throat, and his eyes burn. His legs wobble, his fists clench and unclench at his sides. He remembers waking up the day after his parents died, fighting Cliff, running home to see them, finding it empty. He remembers feeling strong arms wrap around him, a gruff voice whispering apologies in his ear as they took him away-

"I'm sorry, son." Jeree says. His voice is tight, his words quiet and solemn and sad...

Bray takes a deep breath and pushes past Cobb, past Jeree, and races out into the street without so much as a word. The door hisses shut. Cobb stares at the sand his feet had thrown

through the doorway. He feels sick.

Lera collapses onto his shoulder, sobbing. Her lover is dead. Bray's father is dead. The man who took Cobb in is dead.

Cobb holds her close, finds his voice, murmurs quiet reassurances into her ear. "He'll be back."

The triple moons are high in the night sky, bathing the sands in their pale light. The windsong has turned dark, *cold*. Its invisible tendrils hiss a repetitive warning when they brush against the sand, pushing at anything they can touch.

Run, the wind says.

It's going to be okay, the moons soothe.

"Leave me alone." Cobb Vanth says, stumbling across the desert, back towards an orange light on the horizon.

The sand bites at his skin, and the wind doesn't apologize or back off in the slightest. It's not quite a sandstorm, but he should have been prepared for such a thing, should've dug his goggles out of his survival pack before he'd left the camp. *Think it through* feels a little ironic right about now.

Because, now, he's dealing with the consequences of his actions. His scarf is pulled up over his nose and mouth, and he uses an arm to shield his eyes from the worst of the airborne sediment.

Oh well. He's survived worse.

And he has worse yet to come, in the form of his best friend attempting to kill him.

But, at this moment in time, he's still alive, and he has already decided to take advantage of that. Fresh air really does offer a bit of clarity to the distressed man- it really is a good thing that Tatooine has a *lot* of that. He has a plan. He has a plan, and he has heart. *Spirit*.

His owner had said that about him, his voice twisted in disgust.

The other slaves had said it about him, and their eyes had sparkled with both pride and worry alike.

Spirit is dangerous- a *good* dangerous. It can give life to love *or* hatred. It could get him killed, or it could see him through the week. Throw in a dash of hope, determination, and a sense of what one's doing, and it generally means the latter.

Cobb has hope, has faith, and hasn't ever given up on anything in his life. And he *thinks* he knows what he's doing. He has a fair enough chance at surviving the upcoming attack, whenever said attacker chooses to strike. Even if it *is* Bray Ealdel. Even if he might not get through the fallout.

He knows exactly what he's capable of.

He just doesn't know what *Bray* is capable of, these days.

Well, one way or another, I'll find out, he tells himself as he stumbles into camp.

The warmth from the fire is still strong enough to return feeling to his skin, even as the wind threatens to flatten it, to smother it. Both speeders are still there. *Bray* is still there. Best of all, Bray is *asleep*- Cobb doesn't have to explain himself to him. Nothing's amiss. He hasn't missed a *thing* in his couple-hour absence. His chest aches with a hollow relief.

He's halfway to his own little setup beside his jumpspeeder when he suddenly remembers the flat rectangle Bray had held earlier, the *datapad* that no doubt has something on him in its system. He needs to see it. He needs to see it, the same way he had needed to hear the tone of Bray's voice, the same way he needed to see the somber look on Bray's face to understand his intentions.

Does it matter? He asks himself, hesitant to indulge that part of himself, hesitant to get *that* close to a man who seeks *his* death. It's the part of him that wants to be *wrong*, the part of him still in denial over the whole thing, the part that wants to curl up into a ball and sink beneath the sand.

But it *does*. He doesn't know why, doesn't understand why, but it *does* matter.

It's a validation that his other half needs if it is to push on, if it is to allow him to judge his friend so. Besides, he *is* curious. How couldn't he be?

So, Cobb stops in his tracks and turns toward Bray's own resting place, taking each step as lightly as he can manage, shifting as little sand as he can. If the other man were to wake up now...Cobb purses his lips, ignores how his teeth are so tightly pressed together that they grind against one another.

But Bray doesn't wake, and Cobb is at his side a second later, silently grabbing onto his pack and leaning it toward himself, dropping to one knee in the sand. The dust in the air will cover his tracks later, if it keeps up as long as he thinks it will. If not, well- he doesn't plan on sleeping anyway- he'll have plenty of time to do it himself.

He opens the bag and peers down into it. He pushes aside a few ration packs, a discolored water canister, a pair of worn electrobinocs- stars, there's even an extra blaster pistol in there- *ah, there it is*.

Cobb carefully extracts the datapad from within the bag, resting the pack itself against his leg as his other hand slowly helps the other contents of it to rest where they'd been before, in a

position that they won't shift from and accidentally wake their owner. His breath of relief is lost to the wind, a sound that even *he* doesn't hear.

It takes him a moment of studying the device to figure out how to turn it on- which it, *thankfully*, does without a sound. He lays it down on his thigh, peers down at it as the display comes to life, pauses because-

Oh, it's me.

At the top of the screen, centered, is his name in Aurebesh. Below it, five images- pictures of *him*- with his approximate age at each time scrawled out beneath them:

He doesn't recognize himself in the first one image, the picture of a boy only six years old, with long hair and bright, happy eyes;

The second, he knows well: *that* Cobb is a little sadder in the eyes, had just lost his parents;

In the third, he looks haunted, on the verge of starvation- his hair is spiked up, and it's the most ridiculous that he can ever remember looking. He'd been about twenty, then, maybe a year and a half younger at best;

The fourth image is the look he'd had just before he'd cut out his slave chip- face still scar-free, head bearing brown hair styled the same way that he keeps it now, combed back nice as it could be during those times, chin scratchy with unkempt stubble;

And, the last picture? It's like looking into a blaster *mirror*. It sends shivers up his spine, drops a heavy stone into his stomach. *How* had they gotten that last shot of him? *How* hadn't he *seen* them?

The breeze softens, for just a moment, and brushes up against his cheek. *I'm sorry*, it says, and then throws a gust into his side that nearly knocks him over. His teeth grind together, something Bray had said to him resurfacing.

"Believe me, it wasn't easy to stay away. Wanted to come back, but...It's almost like someone told me to."

He hates that those words make sense now, hates that he'd missed the double meaning. *Yeah, right, more like someone sent you here.*

Cobb swallows a lump in his throat and lets his head bob in a nod as his other half absorbs that this is the *truth*, that Bray *is* here to kill him. He can no longer even *try* to deny it. *Kriffing slavers and bounty hunters.*

He takes a deep breath, hovering there for a long moment before deactivating the datapad and sliding it back in place among the other supplies in the pack. He rises to his feet and makes way back to his speeder, squinting against the sand and the dying firelight. The flames are small, the wind depriving them of still air, oppressing them, unforgivingly pushing them *down*. It makes the shadows feel a little more ominous, even with the moons almost directly overhead.

He grabs one end of the speeder, lifts it up despite the strain it puts on him, and drags it around to shield his body from the blasting sand. He retrieves his packs and tosses them up against it, then settles down within this little bubble of protection and pulls his neckerchief back down to settle around his neck. He's in for a long night, a *lonely* night. *Lonely...*

He needs to talk to someone, needs someone's support, needs someone's listening ear.

Din, his mind supplies, and he almost smiles. Because Din Djarin doesn't mind it when Cobb shoots him a message. He never complains about it, no matter the time, no matter what he's up to. The Mandalorian is always happy to offer himself up to help him, to hear him out.

Cobb reaches into his main bag and pulls out his communicator- why he'd left it here at camp when he'd wandered off is beyond him, though he'd also been distraught enough to leave behind his protective eyewear and somehow hadn't lost his hat. He powers the thing on, pulls his knees up close to himself, drags up the chatlog between him and the Mandalorian. He doesn't know why he starts off the conversation the way he does.

[22:35] CV: *Say, how much do you know about my past?*

[22:39] DD: *I know that you were once a slave.*

[22:39] DD: *Why?*

[22:40] CV: *Old friend from those days rode out of the Dune Sea a couple days ago.*

[22:40] CV: *He's the guy who went to your mechanic.*

[22:40] DD: *And?*

[22:41] CV: *He's been hired to kill me.*

[22:41] DD: *Are you sure?*

[22:41] CV: *As sure as I am that Tatooine has two suns.*

[22:43] DD: *Does he know that you've found out?*

[22:43] CV: *Not yet.*

[22:43] CV: *He's been playing me well, though. Had me fooled for a while.*

[22:44] DD: *Do you want me to come to Tatooine?*

[22:44] CV: *Nah, you can stay put for now. I'm hoping that I can figure this out on my own. But keep in touch.*

[22:44] DD: *I will. Be careful.*

[22:45] CV: *Always am, my friend.*

He certainly *will* be now. Cobb doesn't sleep a wink.

The second half of the night comes and goes as quickly as the air heats up once the suns rise each morning. The fire goes out at some point, but Cobb doesn't bother building it back up; he doesn't need Bray asking any more questions than he suspects he might. It's harder to pull off a lie about rising early with a burning fire that had never gone out in the first place.

He's shivering by the time Bray wakes up, but the winds have subsided and the sand is still. The skyline shines with traces of first light on the way. They talk a little, Bray offers him one of his ration packs, though Cobb declines and opts to warm himself up instead.

"No wonder why you're still as thin as a twig." Bray says.

He manages to pull forth a close-mouthed smile. "Keeps me fit."

From there, they pack up camp, start their speeders, and head back out across Tatooine's gritty landscape, the first of the suns beginning to peek above the horizon, stretching its golden rays across the sands.

It isn't long before the starry field above fades into the light blue of the sky, before both suns are wholly in view if to those who look the right way. The cold of the night fades, and with it comes the warmth of light. The desert feels a little more full, even as creatures of the night scutter back to their homes to sleep.

Cobb does his best to keep Bray's speeder bike in view with each passing moment, only allowing it to dip away when he has little choice but to pull forward to direct them the right way; letting the man out of his sight is just *asking* to be killed, and he knows that now. He can *feel* eyes on him during the seconds that his own are distracted in.

They blast across the Dune Sea, carving through the sand beneath them and leaving little trails in their wake. The longer those trails become, the hotter it gets. The horizon shimmers and swirls into a blur of yellow-brown and light blue that Cobb knows better than to try to distinguish between. The flats become dunes and then flats again, and rocky cliffs rise up above them, forcing them to cut back on the gas and reduce their speed. It's the canyon he'd taken Din through when he'd first brought him this way.

He's prepared when the Tusken show up, their massiffs taking the lead and smelling the two riders out. Bray goes for his gun, but Cobb rolls his eyes and waves him aside, stepping from his speeder, the two of them mimicking him and Din from during their own journey.

Fett's been teaching him the sign language that the Tusken use. Cobb, being a natural-born man of Tatooine, knows both how to barter and how to ask for passage through forbidden lands. He's more than happy to put all of this to use.

His luck comes through shining gold, the Tusken remembering him from their last friendly encounter. Negotiations are short, and then he and Bray are back on their way, lacking in firewood. He almost wishes he'd asked them to take his companion out *for* him. Fortunately or not, he'd never wish that upon any man. The Tusken may still be savages at times, but he isn't one himself.

Half an hour later, they take a proper break, pausing to drink and wipe the sweat from their brows. Cobb estimates that they'll arrive at the krayt's lair pretty soon.

"Somethin' the matter, bud?" Bray asks him, emptying his boots of some of the sand that fills them. "You've been actin' funny all day."

"Yeah, well, I didn't sleep that great." Cobb says, and it isn't even a lie. He was so paranoid that he didn't sleep, and so tired that he didn't eat. He doesn't feel too fine *overall*.

The other man tilts his head as he sets his second boot back on, thoughtful but not wanting to pry. There's something behind his gaze that Cobb hates knowing the name of. "This about what happened last night?"

The image of scavenging womp rats tearing his discarded body apart rips across his mind and makes him feel ill. Because Bray *can't* know. Not yet, not this soon. He shrugs, hopes it comes off as careless as he wants it to. "Bad memory came back up. I'll be fine."

Bray doesn't press, doesn't raise so much as a finger against him. Cobb holds in his breath of relief until the engines of the speeders roar louder than his *thoughts*. For now, he's getting away scot-free, alive and in one piece. And, right now, that's all that matters to him. Because, with him out of the way, who knows what Bray might do to the town. He doesn't know the full extent of how far gone his old friend is yet.

The canyon is behind them before long, and they skirt along the rocks on the outside of the range concealing it, Cobb steering them down around the edges of worn, familiar cliffs and crumbling boulders. They make good time. They'll be back in Freetown long before night falls again, and that's the best news Cobb has received in *weeks*. He just hopes that he's still *alive* by then, that his weary old bones don't end up resting with those of the krayt dragon.

In the distance, off their right, a rocky plateau rises up to block out the sight of the empty desert, and Cobb knows they're close. He slows his speeder down and prepares for a leftward turn, gesturing for Bray to follow his lead.

Yeah, he thinks, we'll definitely be back by sunset.

The loose grit on the ground shies away from the pod racer as it rounds the next bend into a smallish, circular valley with bones sticking up from the sand in the middle of it and a gaping hole into darkness at the far end; the dragon and its home- they've made it.

It's a nice little reassurance that Cobb isn't losing his memory in his old age. His body may not be as functional as it once was, but *something* of him is.

He glances over his shoulder to make sure that Bray is still behind him, hands free of weaponry, then rights himself and guides them out into the center of the valley, where he brings his speeder to a gentle halt and chokes the engine. He squints against the suns and retrieves his hat from his bag while he waits for Bray to do the same.

“This the place?” The man asks, gesturing toward the bones as his speeder bike pulls up and stops alongside the podracer.

He nods, gazing out at the sight himself. “Yeah, this is it.”

The sands have filled in the depression made by the skeleton quite a bit, and parts of it *are* missing- courtesy not only of Jawas, but of the Tusken and Freetown themselves- but it’s still more than recognizable as what it had once been, as the mighty beast that had terrorized the Dune Sea for years on end.

The krayt dragon had kept even most slavers away, and it’s a big part of why Freetown settled where it is. Word about the creature’s destruction hasn’t gotten around yet, evidently, as no one’s come after them- though, they *do* have Fett working to undo all of that, to abolish slavery on Tatooine, and it *does* help that the Empire had eradicated some of the planet’s slavery so that they could clean up the place and take it over themselves, however long *that* had lasted.

Cobb doubts the word ever *will* get out. They don’t have any big talkers back home, and visitors are uncommon, despite what the appearances of Din and Bray may suggest. He’s happy with that. *Whatever keeps us safe.*

He recounts the tale in full, pointing to relevant locations around the valley as he does- at the cave opening, up at the mountains, out to the bones.

Part of him really does see it just as it had happened, playing out in real time before them: he remembers Jo handing him the controls to the explosives, he remembers the brave Tusken trio that had lured the beast out, he remembers hanging back as his people fought alongside the tribe to force it out the rest of the way. And he remembers flying up to the peaks, firing at the krayt alongside a *true* Mandalorian and feeling the thrill of it all.

He also remembers Din telling him to watch over the child, watching him get swallowed up by that thing, wondering if he actually *would* be left as the kid’s guardian. He remembers watching the beast *leap* from the ground, watching Din *fly* from its mouth...

Cobb won’t ever forget that day. He’d learned a lot from Din, then. Gained a friend, an ally in and out of battle who would trust him with anything, someone *he’d* trust with anything- even with Freetown, if it ever came to it. *At least, I know that he wouldn’t ever betray me.*

The story comes to an end. Cobb answers the questions that Bray throws at him over a meal around their speeders, and they seem honest enough. It really does sting, knowing that the man he grew up alongside is playing him, that he still *thinks* he’s playing him. But he doesn’t feel sick over it anymore, and maybe that’s actually because he’s no longer running on an empty stomach.

By the time they're ready to head back out, Cobb thinks he might be ready for the ultimate betrayal. He *feels* like it, but he knows he never will be. That's what makes it betrayal, after all.

Either way, he's on the clock, now. And he is as prepared for it as he'll ever be.

Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

Sorry, I got a job. I'm sure most of you know how that is. If not, well, one day.

Cobb is somehow still alive when they roll into town later that afternoon.

They've returned soon enough to head out to the mines and help the crews bring in their haul for the day, so that's exactly what he has Bray and himself do, to which Bray replies with, "This is *really* what you do every day, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is." He nods. "It's nice, too, when bounty hunters ain't tryin' to get me."

He says it because he can't get a moment alone, can't *let* himself have a moment alone. If he lets Bray out of his sight...who knows what else his old friend has planned.

He can't even tell Taanti that he was right after all, for fear of Bray going after *him* for it. Cobb doesn't know if he would do something like that, but he doesn't want to find out. As much as it's a bad idea for his own life, he's more comfortable with the man at his own side. Because at least he knows his town is safe. The people will *always* be his first priority.

Cobb takes a breath and wipes at his brow, hoping he's as good at masking his thoughts as Bray has turned out to be. He pulls his canteen from his bag, slings it across his body.

"That happen often?" Bray asks as he does the same, still playing oblivious- he really *would* have made a great actor had things gone differently after his departure from Tatooine. Cobb wonders if he ever considered it as a profession over whatever *this* is.

"Often enough to *annoy* me." He says, and they start out across the desert. He's happy to walk the stretch, his weathered joints stiff from sitting on his speeder for so many hours. Still, he can't help but to sigh, because he can't get a blasted *read* on the other man. "Damn tired of buryin' people."

And isn't *that* true.

It really hasn't been all that long since the krayt dragon, and their graveyard is already *far* too large. He doesn't want to add Bray to those numbers. He *really* doesn't want to. But the man just won't be straight with him.

Is it possible that Cobb has hardened so much over the years that his old friend, a man he had considered his *brother*, can't tell if he's onto him?

Cobb doesn't *think* he's changed that much, but he knows that change is a might bit easier to see from an *outside* perspective. He's experienced it himself; he's lived his *whole* life with the people around him, seen them grow and change- and, in some cases, even die. He still remembers the way Jo's eyes would light up when she was a child.

But that's not important, now. Cobb isn't the one who needs to be seen through, read raw- that would be Bray, and Cobb *needs* to figure him out. If he doesn't...

He blinks away the dark spots that cloud the sand before him, loosens his posture with his next step forward. He has to let things play out, let them happen as they will. Because this game, it's about *waiting*.

It's a good thing that the years have taught him patience.

What he doesn't know, however, is that things will come to a close sooner than he thinks- a *lot* sooner than he thinks.

It's long dark outside when Cobb decides to head out after Bray. The older man has been out for far too long, longer than curfew allows. They lost Cliff today, and Cobb doesn't want to lose Bray too. Lera's heart would never take it.

So, Cobb slips out into the night, taking routes that only few know, the ones no one will ever think to look in. He already knows Bray's favorite spot in the city, knows he'll be there- it's no surprise that he is.

He tries to coax his friend into heading back down to the Slave Quarter, but it escalates and soon Bray's throwing punches at him. Cobb doesn't fight back, hardly tries to defend himself. Because his friend is grieving, and it wouldn't be right to keep him from it; a boy has every right to grieve the loss of a parent.

In the end, Cobb drags him homeward. Tears are still drying on Bray's face when they arrive at the door, and Cobb's got blood on his own, but they're both in one piece. Bray struggles to free himself even as Cobb reaches for the door panel.

Cobb's face is bruising, and he has little patience for another knock to the cheekbone.

"He's gone, Bray! There ain't no point in fightin' me." He tells him, because he knows all too well how it feels to lose a parent- he's lost both. He lost both, at the same time. His voice falls quieter as he remembers how he'd taken that news. "He's gone."

Bray sinks in his hold, the first true sob finally ripping from his throat as the tears come anew.

"I'm sorry." Cobb murmurs, because nothing he can say could ever fix this.

There's sand in his hair. Always is. Always more than he'd prefer. If he survives whatever the hell is currently going on and lives long enough to take a trip offworld, it'll feel strange *not* to have to wash the dust from his body.

This is what Cobb tells himself as he shrugs out of his shirt and unlatches the panel over the mechanics of his shoulder, blowing dust off of it like someone would the end of an old slugthrower after firing a round at a man.

Bray's sitting on the couch, seemingly resting, when the Marshal heads into the 'fresher, and he dearly hopes that he *stays* there.

Because Cobb needs to clean the grit from both the trigger and the barrel of his blaster, too. It's been a few days since the last time, and he's never been quite keen on letting it sit around for too long; makes the old thing as temperamental as his speeder- and that's not entirely ideal when he's got a man with murder on the mind in his home.

Night has fallen upon Tatooine's sands, darkness swamping the land. It's quiet out in town, Taanti's saloon aside. There's something eerie about it, a constant buzz at the back of his head, though Cobb can't quite put his finger on what.

Nonetheless, he's quite content to bunker down in his own bed, get some proper sleep. The stars know he needs it: Cobb Vanth is a tired old man.

Well, he's *old* in the sense that many on Tatooine never reach this age. Old in the sense that *his parents* had never reached this age; he's older than they ever were, has been for some time, and *that's* a bittersweet thought indeed. He does his best to keep from dwelling on it.

No good ever comes from thinking that way, he's learned, and he can't exactly deny that he's done a *lot* of ill-advised thinking of the sort recently.

His mirror is well past its prime years, stained with so much dust that it never comes out when he tries to scrub at it. Despite that, he can see himself well enough in its dull shine; he meets his own eyes as he drags his hands through his silver mop of hair, and lets the grains of sand trail his back down to the floor.

He skims the tips of his fingers against the scar behind his right eye, over the familiar jagged texture of damaged tissue. Cobb smiles at the flood of old memories that come with the touch, remembering his first sparks of rebellion against the slave lords of Tatooine. He'd been different, then; stronger, meaner. Full of fire. *Twenty years, so long ago...*

Guess I'm past my prime, too, he thinks. His gaze falls from the mirror as he fondly shakes his head, a few last pieces of sand freeing themselves with the motion. He'd never trade this

life for anything. 'Til the last breath, it's his.

'Til the last breath...

A gun clicks behind him, and Cobb's blood runs cold. *Kriff.*

"You know," Bray says, "I could shoot right through one of those little tubes an' kill you in an instant."

He swallows hard; he hadn't heard the other man sneak up on him. He should've. There's a killer in his house, the air has been off all evening- he should have *known*. He should've known that *tonight* is the night. Instead, he'd let the warm memories of the past and the familiarity of his home put him at ease. Big mistake. A *very* big mistake.

Despite what he's discovered, Cobb has played *right* into his hands.

He's a dead man.

Probably.

Because Cobb isn't *stupid*. Throughout his years, he's weaseled his way out of more places than he can count; for a man as amiable as himself, he has some pretty good survival instincts. Now, he can't quite see how he could get out of *this*, but he'll still die if he doesn't *try*- and it's not exactly like things can get *worse*.

He slowly turns around, reaching out to get a grasp on the denial he'd shoved away, twisting it into a sort of hopeful caution. If there's *any* way to talk the other man down, it'll be through acting oblivious, by guilt-tripping him into pulling back.

His voice shakes a little as he eyes the small blaster drawn at Bray's hip, and *that* is no act. Could never be one. "Bray? What're you goin' on about?"

"I think you already know the answer to that." Bray's smile is twisted as he waggles Cobb's communicator between his fingers, the screen showing his messages with Din from the night before. "I'm here to kill you, Cobb."

The irony of it isn't lost on him; that Bray caught onto him the same way he had just the night before- by digging through his belongings. He really *should* have known better than to be that careless. But he doesn't well have the time to think on that, on how the tables have turned, on how a *marshal* such as himself had made such a *rookie* mistake.

Because his eyes fall back to the blaster, to the barrel tilted *right* at him. *Ah, well.*

Cobb tilts his head and nods at the weapon. "That ain't gonna kill me. It'll cauterize 'em tubes. I won't bleed."

Of course, the blood'll clog up somewhere it's not meant to, or it'll get cut off from the arm completely- possibly causing him to *lose* it- but Bray doesn't need to know that. There's still a chance- a chance to talk him out of it. To intimidate him into backing down.

Bluffing like that, it's a good trick. Works well for a man like himself.

But part of him *does* know; part of him *knows* that it won't work, *knows* that Bray isn't the kind of man to be intimidated, *knows* that a person is hardly intimidating to one which he grew up alongside. Deep down, he *knows* that this will end in blood.

He'll never *not* try, though. It's just who he is. This life has yet to suck *all* of the spirit from him. And if he has any say in it, life never will.

Bray looks at him and he snorts. As if they're still on the same side. As if they always have been. As if he's not about to give a go at shooting him down. "Oh, come on, old buddy, you think I don't know that? Slugthrowers ain't out of business yet."

Oh, Cobb thinks, and stares at the blaster- at the *slugthrower*. He never thought that he'd go out simply by *bleeding* to death. He decides that it sounds anticlimactic. He watches as Bray's finger twitches, and his jaw hardens as reality sweeps over him. *And there goes diplomacy.*

The Marshal hasn't yet removed his own blaster from his side, and he lets his hand drop to hover over it as he stares Bray down.

He doesn't want to shoot him. He doesn't want to, but he *will* defend himself from the man. Their past will *not* be the reason that he lets himself die- not that his chances of *survival* are too great, but...

He *will* defend himself.

He will, whether he wants to or not.

Because Cobb Vanth is a survivor, and that's what survivors do. It's an instinct. A *horrible* instinct, one they hate, one that they can never let go of, one that saves their lives time and time again no matter how they feel about it.

The core desire to *survive* is a powerful thing. It has made Cobb do horrible things himself. He doesn't go down willingly, and Bray oughta know that.

So, they stand there. They stand there in a silent, grueling battle of courage and wit, one man with his gun drawn and the other waiting for the moment to pull his own. It's dead quiet, so much so that the duracrete-mud house rumbles a little and the tension in the air is so tight that one could hear even his lightest breaths.

Cobb's never liked the whole sizing-up bit of these gun duels, but he appreciates the distant thoughts that they let him have: the thought that Bray is older than he is, that he's probably *faster* than Bray is, that he might be able to draw *and* get a shot off before Bray has the chance to put one in his chest and get whatever reward he came back here for. He has the experience, that gut instinct to survive. He has a *chance*.

And he stands his ground until the air is so heavy that the anxiety makes his chest hurt, until it almost *feels* like the day that Cad Bane had shot him and Scott down, until he *knows* that

it's time to jump to action.

Kriff it, Cobb thinks, and his fingers close around the handle of his blaster.

Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

Updated, at last! On my birthday, no less. That's as much of a gift for me as it is for you guys. 😊

Anyway, there's a trigger warning at the end (because of spoilers).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A beam of red fires across the room. It comes from Cobb's weary old blaster, and it doesn't hit Bray.

Instead, the blaster bolt makes contact with the other man's own weapon and throws it from his hand.

Cobb doesn't fire again; he doesn't have a chance to. Because his own blaster is getting knocked from his grasp as soon as his friend loses his, the man just a bit *faster* than he'd thought he would be. Unarmed, Cobb's teeth knit themselves together beneath a scowl of focus. *Great, it's a brawl.*

Cornered as he is, he throws himself at Bray. It's the only way to get past him, to get into more open quarters: to push and claw, tooth and nail- and his punches aren't half bad, for a skinny man such as himself. Not that it means all that much when Bray is both stronger and a little bigger than he is. He's lucky that his lunge is somewhat unexpected, surprise aiding in just how much they stumble back.

It isn't enough, though. Because Bray recovers quickly, even with his back now up against the wall opposite the refresher. And *his* punches? Turns out they hurt a lot more than Cobb anticipated they would- and there's two things he's misjudged already. Well, he's only fought alongside Bray *once* before.

"Why are you doin' this?" He asks, hanging off the sides of the doorway with his fingers alone to hold him up.

But the closest thing he gets to an answer is, "It's nothing personal, pal."

Bantrashit, Cobb thinks, and drops to the floor before the booted foot flying at him can slam into his chest. He pulls himself back together quickly enough to recover from the near-miss before Bray does, and he slips past him and out into the main room, back on his feet. His jaw aches where the other man's fist had connected with it.

He chances vaulting over the couch to gain some cover and distance, by some miracle doesn't completely ball it and hit his head in the fall. When he twists back around, Bray's

there, lips curling like he wouldn't want his best friend to fight back if someone tried to kill him.

And *that* hurts more than any physical blow. For Bray to take a bounty to come specifically after *him*? That's no accident. All the years he'd wondered if he was still alive out there... And here he is, swerving around the couch toward him, knife in hand.

Cobb reckons that he might've *preferred* not knowing to *this*- and if not, his sand-beaten body certainly would have. Because the sudden movement he makes as he jerks away from the swinging blade nearly has him falling itself, a sharp flare of pain in a knee so tired out by the cruelty of those like the Hutts and the Pykes; a life of labor and marshaling really does wear one down. But, for now, his feet are holding beneath him, and that's all he needs in this fight- balance. Balance, speed, and smarts.

When Bray lunges again, Cobb dodges and rolls, coming up from behind and taking advantage of the momentum to land a solid kick in on the man's spine and push him forward. Marshal or not, he's always been a bit of a street fighter; an untrained man can only be so elegant without a blaster to look out for him. Though, when he factors everything in, he really *would* like to take the fight outside. The extra space couldn't hurt, could it?

He makes to get a head start on that idea while Bray's still trying to regain his own sense of balance.

But, as Cobb has learned, his ideas- improvised or not- never really do go *to* plan the first time around. The knife flies across the room, and he howls in pain even before he registers that it's embedded itself into his arm. Bray himself isn't far behind, following up his well-placed knife with a bodyslam.

They crash into the wall adjacent to the door, the sound loud and angry. In a daze, Cobb wonders how many of the neighbors they've just woken up. And then an elbow's coming down on his head, and he's raising his arms to grab it and *shove the damn thing away*. He gets a face-full of his own blood from where the knife is still embedded into his right bicep. A copper string of curses slips through his teeth, and he sounds like a smuggler.

The knife's grip prods him rather painfully in the cheek as Bray forces his arms back down toward him- and Cobb?

Well, a survivor's instinct truly is a nasty thing.

Because he takes the thing between his *teeth* and tears it right *from* his arm. The world is spotted with red and black for a moment, and something akin to an alarm blares at the back of his mind, but he ignores it and tries to jab the sharp end of the weapon at his old friend through it anyway.

Cobb slumps to the floor along the way, and Bray *screams* as the blade tears into the tender flesh of his thigh, a sound sure to wake the entire town.

The handle of the knife pulls from the Marshal's teeth as the other man goes down, and it startles him so bad that he almost forgets that he needs to move. But his arm can't hold his

weight, and he practically folds over himself in his attempt to get back up, droplets of blood smearing on his face and flesh shoulder as he leans into the wall for support. He hears someone shouting from a couple of houses over, and he does *not* want his people throwing themselves into whatever the hell *this* is. *Move, dammit!*

And then it's a race against Bray, a contest of which of them might get up first. The air is thick and alive with the heavy wheezes that drag out of their lungs. Cobb's muscles burn- his arm is *white-hot* in agony- but he doesn't slow down; he can't afford to.

It pays off, too. By some star-blessed miracle, he's up first, staggering the last few steps to the door while Bray finishes getting his legs to steady beneath him. His blood roars in his ears as he stumbles out onto the porch, the chill of the night no use in cooling his nerves, no use in straightening his swirling thoughts. He needs to get himself sorted. He *needs* to.

The cantina is quiet down the road. His legs shake, and he can *feel* his people watching from the windows and doorways of their homes. Bray's frustrated breaths are behind him, and he chances a glance, stepping further from the front of his home-

And right off of the porch.

Kriff.

Cobb spits sand out of his mouth as he spots someone coming to his aid. His throat hurts, but he gets words out all the same. Two, short and terse, with just enough authority to make the figure obey them. "Stay back!"

No sooner has he said it than a weight comes slamming down on him, driving his face back into the ground, the breath from his body, a sharp pain up his spine. A hand digs into his hair and grabs ahold of it at his scalp, pulling his head up. He groans at the uncomfortable knot forming in his neck.

"Don't make this any harder than it has to be." Bray hisses into his ear. And it almost sounds like a plea.

Cobb chokes on a laugh of disbelief. "You're the one *killin'* me."

He tosses his head back. There's a sickening crunch and a yelp of pain, the hand in his hair releasing him to check on the nose he'd just smashed. In that moment of freedom, he jabs an elbow backward, too.

Bray falls back with a wheeze, and Cobb scrambles up and away. Standing above his old friend, he can't deny that kicking him upside the jaw is a tempting thing. But ever the gentleman, he restrains himself. Because Bray truly is a pitiful sight, clutching at his gushing nose the way he is, blood streaming down his arms. His eyes burn in fury. And that alone makes him unrecognizable, so different from the version of him Cobb had once known.

Cobb sighs, hands coming to rest in their usual position, thumbs hooked around his belt. When he speaks, he sounds as tired as he feels. "Who sent you, Bray?"

Bray growls in response, though the sound is too strained to give anything but the barest suggestion of menace. His free hand reaches for something hanging on his belt, and Cobb can't quite act quick enough.

A jolt of electricity explodes in his shoulder not quite a beat later, the current dragging a strangled cry from his throat before he can stop it. His ears ring, but he thinks he hears the sound of a blaster shot. There's the vague sensation of falling backward before the ground meets his skin. His body spasms. And it doesn't stop.

Cobb can't move, can't breathe. He can only scream. The pain isn't just excruciating, it's *unbearable*. It sears every nerve ending of his being, makes his vision flash white and then darken around the edges until he thinks he might actually die right there. He can feel the erratic way his heart flutters in his chest, candlelight in the wind. His head feels light, his mind floaty and distant.

He doesn't get the mercy of unconsciousness.

The spasms don't stop, nor does the ringing buzz in his ears. His blood continues to boil like liquid fire in his veins. His lungs refuse to kick back in, and his gasps for air do nothing for him. His insides feel aflame whilst his mouth tastes of metal, and the taste is almost sweet. It's all so sickening, and he's about *willing* to die when the static finally fades and his body sags back into the sand like a child's doll.

Air is suddenly as precious as water, and he drinks it in with greed as his throat gradually opens back up. Breathing hurts. Each inhale scrapes against his lungs like fingernails on glass. His arm feels almost detached when he drags his hand up to his aching chest, to the aching organ at the center of it. His *whole body* is a distant thing, disconnected and holding together by threads. *By wires*.

Cobb might've laughed if *breathing* didn't hurt so much. No wonder why his arm feels so *off*. He vows then to never use another EMP himself, not against anything even remotely biological- rarely has he even been subject to such *pain*. And this definitely isn't one that he'd wish to inflict upon anyone. Not even Bray.

Bray. And that has Cobb freezing in a fleeting moment of fear before the anger- the *rage*- comes flooding in. Because Bray *knows*. He knows, and he *still*...

His ears are still ringing, his body still trembling, but Cobb pulls himself onto his side and drags his gaze down to his feet. And sure enough, the man himself is standing naught but a few feet off, face twisted in horror at what he'd just witnessed- at what he'd just *done*. Their eyes meet, and there's almost an apology in Bray's. But Cobb can't forgive him. Not for *this*.

Part of him wants Bray dead.

A huff pushes through his charred nostrils. His voice is a rasp, but it imposes his change in demeanor all the same. "Alright, I'm done bein' nice. Playtime's over."

Weak muscles propel him forward, and he sweeps Bray's feet right out from beneath him.

Bray falls hard in the sand, but he's so shocked by the unexpected violence that he doesn't even have the chance to move before Cobb's hauling himself onto him, languid limbs settling like dead weight as he pins him down. His body spasms, and his anger flares once more. He tightens his hold, presses his knee down on Bray's back. He wants it to *hurt*. Because why the hell shouldn't it?

"Who sent you?" He snarls, the force behind the action tearing at his raw throat, making it burn. The dusty air smells of smoke and blood. He doesn't know what's *smoking*. He doesn't care, either. All he sees is Bray, and all he *wants* is an answer.

He wants to know who sent his *best friend* to take him out.

Bray doesn't answer. Just lays there beneath him, trying to catch the breath that had been knocked from him in the fall.

There's fear in his eyes. Not of Cobb, but of the *Marshal*. Of the man who rose up and accepted this role over his people because of their respect for him, their unwavering *trust* in him. The Marshal is upfront in everything that he does, refuses to play games if he can help it. It's quite clear that Bray finally gets that, now.

But he's so afraid that he's not yielding to the commands given of him, and the Marshal's patience has run dry. *Cobb's* patience has run dry.

"*Who. sent. you?*" He punctuates each word by letting a little more of his weight shift into his knee, into putting more pressure on the spot between the other man's shoulder blades. He's tired; much more of this and his *own* muscles won't be able to take it. "*Tell me. Tell me so I can put a bolt in their skull.*"

He'd do it, too. He *would*. Cut to the source and put an end to the countless hunters they keep sending. Put an end to *that* chapter of his life. How *Bray* got caught up in it, *who* sent him—that's what he needs to know. Elsewise, it's doomed to continue on until his death. Maybe *after*, if that's not how or why he dies.

And his people would pay for that in his stead. Cobb can't live with that, others paying for his mistakes. He's seen the consequences of that already; never again.

Thus, he asks again: "*Who* was it?"

Bray writhes beneath him. Trapped, afraid, unable to escape. He doesn't answer the question this time either, and Cobb grits his teeth in attempt to temper his frustration, to stamp on the tightness of his chest that hasn't ebbed since the EMP let up. "Don't make me ask you again, Bray. Who told you to come after me?"

"H-he gave me no choice." Bray finally manages to get out, panting with the effort, voice shaking. He swallows, and it's then that Cobb realizes it: No, he's not scared of *him*. Not completely.

And yet, the fear of whomever sent him is enough to keep him from *telling* Cobb who sent him. It grates on what nerves he has left, and then they're just *gone*.

“ANSWER THE QUESTION.”

His voice bounces off of each and every building in town. And if he didn't have eyes on him before, he certainly does *now*; his fury is a rare thing any day. But in the middle of the night, right after battle? Oh, heads are *definitely* poking out to see what's going on. Heads are poking out of their homes, just in time to catch the end of it.

Because Cobb misses the movement of Bray's arm, misses the clicking of a weapon preparing a shot, and the night lights up red.

He flinches so hard that he falls back into the sand. But when he checks himself over, he has no new wounds. It dawns on him, slowly, what had just happened. His gaze finds Bray, the blaster pressed up into his side. He can only stare. “No...”

He feels sick.

Bray's eyes are glossy, but they find him all the same. “I didn't want- couldn't...” He struggles for breath. “I couldn't do it, Cobb. I'm sorry.”

Cobb doesn't notice how those eyes don't blink again. All he knows is that the man just *shot himself*, and that thought gives him enough adrenaline to maneuver himself closer to rouse him.

But it's no use.

“No...No, no, no, no. Bray- hey!” He shakes him, harder than he probably should have. There's no response. None at all. “*Bray.*”

He's gone, Cobb tells himself. It takes another moment to truly sink in, and he settles back in the sand, stunned. Struggling to believe. The heat of battle fades, and the night chill begins to creep back in. Cobb feels numb. *He's gone*.

He pulls his arm up into his lap and holds it close. Licks the blood from his lips. His shoulder hisses, and he glances at it. Sees a mostly-cooled blaster shot embedded in the metal bones. He blinks, and looks away, doesn't think about it. It's not important. What *is*, is that he's somehow still alive.

He's still alive, because Bray killed *himself*.

Betrayed and saved by the same man. On the same night. And isn't that interesting?

Searching him isn't a conscious thought. It's what Cobb does whenever someone attacks him; he searches them for hints as to why they came. And this is no different, his hands digging through Bray's pockets, because it's *normal* when nothing else is. When the person who attacked him is the man he grew up alongside. When that same man is *dead*.

The night is silent. The people are slinking from their homes, but they know better than to intrude upon his business. They watch, reassure one another and put their children back to bed good and proper, but no one approaches him directly.

He pretends not to notice they're there; he doesn't want to talk to anyone, not now. Seeing him upright as he is had better be good enough an assurance that he's fine. Because Cobb is barely holding himself down, and he doesn't know how he'll take to conversation. He's still volatile enough to *punch* someone- and, oh, how he'd live to regret *that*.

In his foraging, Cobb finds his communicator and stuffs it back in his own pocket even though it lights up with a message from Din; the Mandalorian can't help him, now. The danger's past. He's still alive, his would-be killer dead. The town is *safe*, the seconds of security bleeding by on his chronometer. But the question stands nonetheless: What if he *had* let Din come to offer his assistance? Could things have ended differently? Could Bray have lived, too?

The very next item that he happens upon answers that question for him. It's a broken holoprojector, and it still turns on when Cobb activates it. The image of a familiar, wealthy Pau'an springs to life in front of him. Cobb's only seen him once, but this hologram is all he needs for his questions to be answered:

Bray had lied to him all those years ago, when he'd said he never had a chip in his skull like *he* had; he never *escaped* that life. Walked away from Tatooine just to get dragged back down into this mess. As a *hunter* of the runaways their master set him upon. The tall bastard's been the one sending men after him for all these years, and Bray was his last-ditch effort.

He'd really had no choice, and he'd decided that he'd rather die than kill the man he'd called his *brother*.

That's the last straw.

A harsh, jarring laugh rips through Cobb's teeth as he finally snaps, his head tilting back to curse the stars above. He doesn't notice how the holoprojector slips from his grasp, how the purest form of hatred makes him tear the blaster from Bray's cooling hands and scream as he hurls it down the road. All he notices is the *agony* in his absent shoulder afterwards, the way the air seems to close in on him, and-

It's all too much. *Far* too much. And sitting here, looking at it all...he can't deal with any of it, not right now. The eyes on his back, the cleanup, the burning of the body- they're *all* too much, the darkness closing in around him and leaving him lost in a thick black fog. It's suffocating, and he needs to *get away*.

He doesn't remember getting up, but he's halfway on his jumpspeeder next thing he knows, saddling up in the seat and powering the old pod racing engine on the front of it. The roar of the engine blots out *everything*, even the light of the rising moons. Cobb turns toward the Dune Sea, and jets off into the night.

If the townsfolk call after him, he doesn't hear them.

Trigger warning: suicide.

Chapter Seven

[20:51] DD: *Haven't heard from you in a while.*

[20:51] DD: *How are things?*

[23:03] DD: *Vanth.*

[07:34] DD: *If you don't respond within two days, I'm coming down there to make sure you're not dead.*

Heat rolls up from the sand in waves that obscure the horizon, chasing away what little moisture lingers in the air and baking the residents of the land almost in the same way that the inside of a hypersonic oven would a scurrier. The suns are nearly directly overhead, their harsh light mercilessly beating down on a ragged lone figure as he stumbles toward a cluster of structures in the distance. A half-day's march behind him, a modified podracing speeder bike. It had run out of fuel the night before, and now the man- one Cobb Vanth of Freetown- is making his way back on foot.

Crusted blood is smeared across his face, arms, and bare chest. His shoulder is open, gleaming beneath the light. The same arm shudders, starting at that very spot- a movement that just about makes the deep wound further down start oozing again. But the twitching is nothing he has any control of, and it's been plaguing him since the battle that had given him his other wounds.

Cobb Vanth is a tired old man, hanging on by the skin of his teeth as he's been, each passing moment more painful than the last. Exhaustion is slowly shutting his body down as he walks, his feet dragging along beneath him. His heartbeat hasn't evened out since the EMP hit him, and none of the rest of him is quite in sync with anything else either.

But Freetown is in his sights at last, after half a day's walk, and his work for the day is nigh halfway over. Because he still has to go *back* for his speeder, too. With the fuel that he's come for weighing him down. And maybe his blaster- leaving without it the first time around had been a dangerous gamble, and that's a slim thing to be lucky with *twice*. Especially on *Tatooine*. The desert is as touch-and-go as the *city* on this planet; anyone with half a mind knows it. Anyone whose skin bears the *Syndicate Star* knows it.

He begins to plan it out the closer he gets, what he'll do when he gets there: Head in from the back, grab a fuel canister from the few he's got lined up along the backside of his home, slip around to the front to grab a couple of things from inside. In and out, because he doesn't plan on letting things sit for too long. He'll work on cleaning things up once he's got his speeder parked back out front, safe from the Jawas who might happen upon it; he's spent *years* working on it, improving it- he can't afford to *lose* the thing.

It never fails to surprise him how empty Freetown looks from afar, brimming with life as the street sometimes is. From this distance, it looks like a *ghost town*. And *that* makes Cobb wonder how many potential visitors- friendly or otherwise- have been deterred from approaching it over the past couple decades, how many times it may have saved lives or led runaways to their untimely deaths.

He never thinks about it for long, knows better than to. On a cursed world such as this one, looking out for more than oneself and one's people is just *asking* for trouble to find its way to you. Such is the way of things in the Outer Rim.

Cobb's seen it *all* out here, some things more than once.

Time stretches on into what feels an eternity, but he's still upon the town sooner than he'd been expecting in this condition. It looks quiet, empty. The people are in various states of shock and mourning, recovering from the betrayal of someone they'd thought their own. Of someone who *was* their own, stuck in a nightmare they'd not realized he hadn't escaped as they had. And the air, it still *smells* of his blood- of *both* their blood.

His nostrils flare just thinking about it as he circles around the outside of the settlement and begins following the backs of the buildings down toward where his own home is.

He can see the dwelling from the end of the street, lined with several fuel canisters of various volumes and old speeder parts that he's saved just in case. If one looked at the place from behind as he is, they'd never know that there'd been a tussle in it just the night before. But he *does* know; the *whole damn town* does.

And while he knows that they'll be quite worried about him by now, he'd rather be left alone; his speeder's out of fuel, sure, but *he's* barely running on fumes himself. Cobb doesn't know what he'll do if someone says the wrong thing to him, and he's not inclined to find out. The last thing he needs is more friendly blood on his hands. He's got enough of it on him right now to last *many lifetimes* of internal warfare.

A shiver runs up his spine- or perhaps it's another tremor- and he forces his attention away from that particularly violent train of thought. *In and out, Cobb. Don't make it harder than it's got to be.*

If only it were that easy, he says to himself. And he must look a madman, the rueful smirk twitching at his lips beneath all of the blood.

His house is right beside him, suddenly, and he jerks back before he can pass by it. His eyes roam over the suns-beaten fuel canisters, and he really wishes he could remember which ones have how much fuel in them. He doesn't need much. One with just enough fuel for his

speeder to get back. But hell if he knows which one *that* might be. The blasted things all look the same, scarring aside. Looking at them then, he decides that he'll be more organized with it in the future. Whether he'll actually *do* so, he doesn't know. But it's a nice thought.

Cobb heaves a hefty sigh, lets his shoulders fall slack before he braces them for what might just be a *lot* of weight. He *really* hopes that his body can take it; *dragging* the canister would be rather slow-going in comparison to carrying it. He'd hate to be exposed out there any longer than necessary.

"Alright." He murmurs, and reaches out for one. His fingers close around the handle, he lifts, and- *ah, fierfek*.

He lurches forward as the *full* canister pulls his arm down, the rest of him with it. A startled noise escapes him just before his head slams against the tank, his legs folding unnaturally between him and the ground. He doesn't hear the telltale *pop* of the lid coming off, and his lower half is drenched in speeder fuel before he's got a clue what's going on.

It takes him a moment to right the thing, the grease-slick outside of the canister sliding against his fingers. He's left sitting in quite the puddle, gas fumes stinging his eyes and burning his throat. His head falls gently against the canister, and Cobb wonders if it'd be more appropriate to laugh or to cry. He could probably do with another scream, really, though he'd probably worn himself out from it after his speeder had quit on him.

He hears footsteps in the sand, coming down from around the front of the house. He doesn't have it in him to glance up and see who it is. The intended casualness of the tone catches him as off-guard as whose voice it is. "Whatcha doing, Marshal?"

He does look up, then, because *that* voice belongs to one out-of-town Jo. *Welcome back*, he wants to say. But no sound slips past the dry lump in his throat, and he swallows. He blinks and takes his hat when she holds it out to him. He tries to thank her, but his words take a sardonic turn, and he finds himself gesturing to his fuel-plastered legs. "Speeder ran out of fuel, an' now I'm covered in it."

It's her turn to look surprised- though *horrified* and *concerned* probably suit her expression better. "You *walked* all the way back here?"

"Sure did." He hums, gingerly placing his hat atop his head with a dim hope that his hair's cleaner than his face is. His muscles protest as he begins to pull his legs beneath him in a manner that'll make it easier to get up. "And I'm goin' to walk all the way *back* out there to get it."

Jo clicks her tongue the very same way that her sister does, and her mouth opens to say what he expects will be *No, you're not*. But he shakes his head at her, and her words change just the slightest before the first has even passed her lips.

"Not alone, you're not." She says, and helps him up before his exhausted mind can realize what it is that she's doing.

It takes a moment to click, that she just volunteered herself to come along with him- that she feels the need to *look after* him. His lips curl at the notion, and Cobb hardly notices how he wavers on his feet with the step he takes toward her, indignance rising as thick as smoke. “I can handle it, Jo. I don’t need any help.”

“The same way you handled grabbing that fuel canister?” He’s never heard someone sound so *snide* and *genuine* at the same time.

And the part of him that’s always wanted her as his deputy is right proud. She would’ve fit right in alongside him and Scott. The three of them, they’d have made quite the team. Freetown would’ve been *completely* safe for *years*. But that’s a dream long since shattered by blue skin and crimson eyes.

Now, he’s nothing but frustrated by the way she’s just as strong-willed as he is. Because it’s difficult to argue with someone so similar to oneself, as has always been the case between the pair of them. If he can’t shut her down, he *won’t* win.

His teeth grind together, because asking the galaxy to be left alone for even a moment is *apparently* a bit too much to ask.

“Don’t start.” He warns, jerking a finger at her in emphasis before he bends over to try his luck carrying the offending object once more. The fuel canister is lighter when he lifts it, and he tries not to think about the fact that it’s only because *half* its contents have soaked into his clothes and the sand. Distantly, he wonders if the blood on *her* clothing is from touching him or from cleaning his house in his absence.

“Marshal.” She eases up, and her frown is again more of concern than annoyance; she’s not *trying* to push his limits. But it’s evident that she’s at a loss as to how to settle him. “You can barely *stand*.”

“I’m fine.” He tells her, and lets the truth sink through in his tone. He’s exhausted, and he doesn’t want to argue with her. Cobb doesn’t want to argue with *anyone*. And he doesn’t want to leave his speeder waiting for him for too long, either. The Jawas have no restraint when it comes to finding *abandoned* belongings out in the wastes, and he’d hate for the podracer to become one of them again.

So, he caves. But not without a weighty sigh. “Tell ya what: You grab Taanti’s speeder, an’ I’ll meet you in front of the cantina. How does that sound?”

Her lips twitch upwards into a smile, and she nods. “Alright. But you’d better get cleaned up first, or we’ll *never* hear the end of it.”

Cobb huffs and meets her eyes. “You’re not wrong.”

Once his speeder is back where it belongs and Jo is on her merry way, Cobb hops back into the shower. His skin is itchy. There's nothing *there*, and it's just so *itchy*. Invisible blood is crusting the hairs of his arms down, and he'll get it off if it's the last thing he does.

He's in a daze, scrubbing it from his skin, *clawing* at it with chipped nails. Sometimes the blood is visible, sometimes it's not, and then- *kriff, it's running*. Red-tinted foam swirls down the drain, and he simply watches it as his arm screams for him to do something sensible. He pours the rest of his shampoo onto his head and scrapes phantom sand from his hair, but the soapy water is no less pink than before.

Then the stream *stops*, and he stares up at the shower head far longer than it should take him to realize he's used up *all* of the water he's got for the week. Cobb curses, and wraps his arm tight when he realizes it's still dripping onto the sandstone-tile floor. He looks in his old mirror, and his skin has just a bit *too* much color to it, his sizzling shoulder is *just* too warm.

Well, at least he doesn't smell like sweat anymore.

But he can still smell the *blood*- nothing can mask the scent of it- and he suddenly wishes that he could reverse time and take the damn shower *again*. He will never be clean enough; the sonic just isn't the same.

Cobb dresses himself and sets upon removing what's left of the blood that stains the entryway of his home. Jo had almost finished before he wandered back into town, and it doesn't take long for him to get the rest done. His communicator chirps while he picks the remaining flecks of it from beneath his fingernails, and he doesn't bother responding before he dons his hat and heads out onto the street. Even now, he just wants to be left alone.

After burning the body and carving the gravestone himself, he lays Bray Ealdel to rest alongside Scott. His greatest failures, together... It hurts so much that he can't even *feel* it. It almost doesn't feel *real*. Why must every conflict end with Cobb standing over the grave of someone he cares for?

It wasn't supposed to be you, he sighs, staring at the patch of sand between the graves. A marshal is supposed to die *for* his people, not have them dying for *him*. Since when did the *protector* need protecting? No, it should be *his* ashes down in the soil, mingling with that of those who've passed before him.

But what's happened has happened, and Tatooine's never given a womp rat's ass what any of its people think. He's alive, and they're not, and-

"I coulda used you on this one, kid." He tells Scott, and stays there all night.

Cobb only leaves when hunger drives him home, and he doesn't sleep before he returns. Even as his body begins to shut down and the spasms grow worse, he doesn't think he *could*. He'll let himself pass out, and he'll figure it out from there.

He won't let himself spiral, not like he did last time; he's better than that.

The darkness comes quickly once the suns have fallen below the horizon, the moons rising to chase the light away and cast the ghost of it with their own. The town is sleeping, everyone but the Marshal tucked up in their homes. Safe, as always, sheltered from the elements. It's one less stone in his stomach. All the same, it's not enough to ease the pain that he feels, not enough to settle his nerves and let him rest. The night is as cold as his chest is heavy.

The stars are dimmer than normal, but they're still bright enough to make him feel small, insignificant. It's a strange contrast to how he feels knowing that two brave men *died* for him, defied orders given to them and stepped into the way to save *his* life. It's almost like he's the most important insignificant man in the galaxy, while he knows he's far from it.

He knows people like him who are *much* more influential than he is. So, why? Why did they do what they did? Why is *he* so important? What did *he* do to deserve to live?

The question keeps rotating in his mind, has been since it first occurred the afternoon before, and he's no closer to an answer now than he was then. He may have led a slave revolution and started a town two decades ago, but that's not notable enough for *Scott* to leap at the chance to die for him; the kid never respected him *that* much.

He's just a man who stood up when no one else had the courage to, who decided that things needed to change, to *end*. Maybe he *has* decided to keep doing so the older he's been getting, but does that *really* make him any more indispensable than anyone else? Does his title- does his *bravery* make him more essential than the youngest child? More important than the young man he'd taken under his wing, the man he'd been training as a possible *replacement* for himself?

It doesn't; he's no more significant than Scott was, than Bray was, than Taanti is. Than Ann, her sister, and her son are.

Cobb doesn't understand it. He *can't*.

But he can't let himself spiral, can't let the darkness drag him down into the sands and bury him like it's buried so many others. He has to *fight* it, fight the breeze that's reaching right into his core and wrapping around every *morsel* of flesh that clings to his bones. Can't let the darkness push through his barriers and tug at his fraying threads of sanity, make him further question himself and every decision he has made.

These people need him still, Cobb knows, and they need him at his *strongest*; the rumbling of an approaching speeder in the distance only reaffirms this. He *has* to keep treading water for them. Because that's what he does.

The two *stupid* men who died for him? He's doing this for *them*, especially. They gave him more time, so he could give the *town* more time.

He can't let them down.

So, he listens to the speeder and lets his weary heart beat a little faster, lets the adrenaline spike his nerves, lets the heat of the moment flood through him and warm frozen muscles. Lets his ears strain to keep track of the engine's whine. He's got his blaster at his side, and he's still got breath in his chest- he can do this. He's not the *Marshal* for nothing.

Cobb checks his ammo, makes sure his blaster is primed and ready. He considers heading out to meet the newcomer, but realizes how pointless it is. No one would show up in the *middle of the kriffing night* without reason, and he's the only one around that a man might seek out. He's not one to argue with saving a bit of energy for the fight- and especially not *now*, of all times. It gives him more time to collect himself, anyway, to formulate a plan.

The engine is louder, coming down the road, but he keeps his eyes forward. Uses his boot to smooth the sand in front of the headstones, to pack it down. There's the wisp of a familiar presence behind him, backing him up, and it's a little easier to breathe for a moment.

Scott frowns at him as he prepares to leave. "You got this one, boss?"

"I got it handled, Deputy. You take care of our other guest, now." Cobb smiles. He knows it doesn't reach his eyes, but he does try. "He's goin' to be around for a while yet."

And then he's alone again, and he can hear a speeder bike pulling up back at the edge of the road. The engine goes dead, and silence falls back upon the town. But in that silence, he thinks he can hear their footsteps coming up behind him. The bittersweet feeling in his chest fades, and his fingers itch, the air going thin.

The urge to draw is painful, and it takes his all to hold still. He can't move too soon, needs to time the shot right. Because he only *gets* one shot. He can't afford to mess it up, not with how his body's still all off-kilter. He needs to be quick and precise, and *stars*, he hopes he *can* be in this condition. He sucks in his breath, holds it, counts the seconds as they pass. Why the *hell* is the guy walking so slow? *Not yet, not yet- wait 'til he's in range-*

CRUNCH.

He whips around, fumbles and almost drops his blaster before he manages to get the barrel up, fires- and the sound of the bolt hitting *the* armor echoes into the night, like a note in a song. His ear rings where the shot had rebounded over his shoulder. But he doesn't move, struck dumb by the sight before him.

Beskar armor reflects the moons' light back into his eyes, and Cobb blinks in surprise. He stares at Din Djarin.

Din Djarin stares back.

The Mandalorian's hand is stuck halfway to his holster, uncertain, his body having locked up mid-action. He's nearly poised to fire back, but he doesn't move so much as a muscle as Cobb takes in the sight of him. The shot had hit a couple inches down from the top of his

chestplate, but the man is as still as a dead body anyway. Almost like a statue. A statue with a *gun* pointed at his chest. He's a man caught in a speeder's headlights, so to speak.

There's not a sound in the desert, as if it hadn't expected this any more than *they* had. And then Din's speaking, hesitantly, his open hands raising in front of him to show their emptiness. He's shaking, just a little. "Marshal. I don't mean you any harm."

I know that, Cobb wants to say. But the guilt comes fast and raw, and he turns away before it shows on his face. Armored footsteps hesitantly come up to stand at his side as he shoves his blaster away, and he forces himself to respond. "Sorry."

"It's not your fault." Din vouches, and then it's quiet again, the two of them standing there amongst the dead.

He can see the Mandalorian's helmet turn to read the names on the stones in front of him. The man's shoulders visibly begin to slump as the threat of danger fades, and Cobb can feel his own adrenaline tank. It leaves him vulnerable to the chill in the breeze, and he shivers. *Spasms*. No words rise up from his companion, but he doesn't step forward to beat him to it- because after what he'd nearly just done, Cobb sure as hell isn't going to speak first.

There's invisible blood on his skin, again, and he thinks he would *die* if it meant being able to rinse it off; he could *never* wash himself thoroughly or often enough for it to be satisfactory. An exhausted sound drags from his throat, and he tries to get his muscles to relax.

Din seems to sense the effort, and while he still sounds subdued, he also seems the slightest more understanding when he speaks next. More empathetic. And he doesn't ask *what happened*, but instead: "Which one was he?"

"...Bray Ealdel." Cobb tells him, soft voice rough from lack of use. He clears his throat. "Scott was the deputy."

Neither of them say anything for several long moments, Mando's cowl flapping in the light desert winds. There's not much to *be* said between the two of them, anyway- the words are in the air already, speaking for themselves. And the Mandalorian seems to feel it, too. The seal of his helmet breaks with a low hiss, and Cobb watches him remove it from the corner of his eye. A gesture of respect, no doubt. Of comfort. Of friendship.

But Cobb doesn't know how to respond to that, so he swallows and casts his eyes forward, rereads names he doesn't want to reread. He wonders why the man cares so much, why he bothered coming out here- really, they hardly know one another. It doesn't take him long to find the stomach to ask.

"What are you doin' out here, Mando?"

"You weren't responding to my messages. I was worried." Din says, and his bare voice is the most honest thing Cobb's ever heard. "I'm sorry about your friend."

"You live on Tatooine, there ain't no happy endin's." He shrugs, and pivots on his feet to head back up the road. He doesn't mean to make eye contact. "Bout time I remember that

womp rats don't have wings."

End Notes

I introduced way too many OCs in the prologue, so here's a little guide as to who they are (as per my personal notes). Most will not reappear again.

Brarkesh Zerem [Bray's master, once Cobb Vanth's & Lera Ealdel's]

Bray Ealdel [Best friend to Cobb Vanth, six years older]

Cliff Ealdel [Bray's father]

Lera Ealdel [Bray's mother]

Jezhref Vanth [Cobb's father]

Idith Vanth [Cobb's mother]

Jeree [Ann & Jo's father?]

Miyo [No familial relations, the old restaurant lady from prequel]

Other OCs, some only with brief appearances (this will update as I go):

Ann [Jo's older sister, widowed when Mining Guild came through, mother of one]

Tenn [Ann's son, approx. six years old in main plot]

Teb [No familial relations, toolsmith, fifteen years older than Cobb (though I have no idea why this last part is relevant)]

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