

## “Half the Battle”

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Lieutenant Raede Kolinkar got ready for duty with all the enthusiasm of a Hutt going ballroom dancing. The uniform never quite fit right, but the cut of the fabric was really the least of his concerns.

The Rebel fleet trooper shrugged on his black combat vest over his light blue shirt. The vest hung limply from his shoulders, draped on his gawky frame that still hadn't recovered the peak muscle tone and health his body had had when he'd been attending the Imperial Army Officer Academy on Raithal just a few months ago. Kolinkar pulled the belt on his grey pants one hole tighter, and then shoved on his scuffed, third-hand boots. His holster sagged awkwardly from his hips, holding the DH-17 blaster that was the most comfortable, familiar part of this whole get-up. Lastly he put in his earpiece and then plopped the large white clamshell helmet on his head. He adjusted it to be marginally straighter and then buckled his chinstrap.

Like always, he did all this without the aid of a mirror. The last thing he wanted to do was see a reflection of himself.

With a sigh, Kolinkar left his closet-sized quarters and robotically shuffled down the cramped corridors of the *Marauder*-class Corvette *Gravitas* toward the mess hall for breakfast. After being on this ship for a couple of weeks now, he knew his way around well enough to walk mostly on autopilot.

Most of the doorways he passed on the way were newly adorned with small decorations: scraps of fabric meant to be ribbons, pictures printed on flimsi of people or flowers or landscapes or animals or famous Alderaanian cultural contributions, and various words of solidarity. The ornaments confused him until he remembered the date and the endless security briefings from this past week. Today was the first anniversary of the destruction of Alderaan. Kolinkar rubbed the bridge of his nose to ease a pressure headache that was already beginning. The ship would be on alert today for the heightened possibility of Imperial attacks, and that meant his platoon would be at elevated readiness too.

He barely acknowledged any crew members he passed in the corridors. Once in the mess hall, Kolinkar went directly to the food serving line, got a tray full of glop that supposedly passed for food, and then sat at a corner table by himself. On the way he walked past a table full of fleet troopers laughing and chatting together. A couple glanced in his direction but then ignored him. Kolinkar supposed they were in his platoon, but he wasn't quite sure. Hell, he hardly even knew their names, and he'd been relieved last week when they'd stopped bothering to invite him to eat with them. They'd also stopped trying to interact with him outside of strict work-related discussions after he'd kept shutting them down. What was the point? They were a close-knit veteran squad of marines and security personnel, and he was just their brand-new platoon leader, some inexperienced twenty-year-old kid many years their junior, with a black mark on his Imperial record and a name that wasn't even his own. He'd made it clear to them over and over that he had no desire to be friends with them or care about anything other than

their skills with a blaster. He wasn't there to have friends. He was there to do his job, nothing more, and the two ideas were mutually exclusive.

He wished they weren't, though. He was so blasted lonely.

Raucous laughter reached his ears. Over at the fleet troopers' table, it looked like they were enjoying themselves.

Kolinkar poked at his glop of "food" for a minute and watched them. If he changed the uniforms in his mind's eye, he could easily see himself at that table with his classmates on Raithal, trying to get in some last minute fun and relaxation before another gruelingly hard day began. And always—always—there he was with his best friend Gaiti, making exceedingly detailed and sincere plans for how to get assigned to the same squad when they graduated.

And, as always, there was the crushing horror that had been his constant companion for the last few months, the feeling he'd felt when he'd discovered that his inseparable friend was dead because of him. That ill-fated live-fire exercise on Raithal still haunted him. In Kolinkar's turn to deploy his "troops" made up of his classmates, he'd told Gaiti to take his team to what Kolinkar had thought would be the safest place on the entire training field. Some sort of "mishap" or "incident" or "miscommunication" had proven that it wasn't, though, turning that spot into the wrong place at the wrong time. Kolinkar had purposefully tried to protect his best friend, and it had gotten Gaiti killed.

Kolinkar briefly squeezed his eyes shut, and when he opened them, he attacked the food on his plate without an appetite, only a desire for its bad taste to distract him from the guilt. He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to be alone. He wanted to be cramming for final exams with Gaiti. But he wasn't.

Shoveling a forkful of dried mystery meat into his mouth, he scowled at the blue sleeve of his uniform when he glimpsed it as if it and it alone was the cause of all his misery. He still couldn't believe he'd ended up here, but few organizations were as accepting of someone with a dishonorable discharge from the Imperial military and the subsequent downward spiral and crashing and burning of his life. And like he told himself every day when he suited up, if he was the kind of person who got the Empire's best up-and-coming cadets killed, then he was already an enemy of the Empire, and he might as well be outwardly honest about it.

The food did indeed taste awful, but it was nowhere near the magnitude needed to pull his thoughts away from their black hole. All he could think about was how lonely he was and how much he wished Gaiti was sitting in that empty seat across the table from him.

Two of the fleet troopers eating together got into a loud, exuberant debate. Then another one joined in. Kolinkar glanced up at them. While they were eating they'd all taken their large white helmets off and slung them by the chinstraps on the backs of their chairs, out of the way. Kolinkar kept his helmet on and huddled down into its anonymous depths. Despite himself, he desperately wanted to go over to those fleet troopers and eat with them. Get to know them. But he didn't.

Getting too close to people only got them killed, and he'd be damned if he would let that happen again.

Hyperspace was a peaceful place. Its swirling blue tunnel was like a security blanket, protecting the ship from all the dangers in realspace. The visual effect through the bridge viewport of *Gravitas* was almost hypnotic, and Captain Lucial always preferred that sight over the one of the neverending paperwork on the datapad before her. In particular, the Duro would rather be working on almost anything else but this. Putting the last bit of polish on the brief

words she would say to the crew today to mark the anniversary of Alderaan was simple in theory but very difficult in practice.

“Captain?”

Captain Lucial immediately picked up on the waver in her bridge officer’s voice and turned that way. “What is it, Ensign Meler?”

“Ma’am, internal sensors are... indicating blasterfire onboard.”

Captain Lucial leapt to her feet from the captain’s chair. “Where?”

“It’s... I think it’s in Navigation, ma’am.”

“Contact Security. Nav—” Captain Lucial turned from Ensign Meler at Sensors to Lieutenant Wpriro at the bridge’s Navigation station just in time to see the display’s feed from the Navigation room blink red and then cut out completely. Lieutenant Wpriro looked startled but quickly recovered and began inputting a flurry of commands. When the Nav station remained blank, Captain Lucial stepped up to him. “Lieutenant, what’s happening?” she demanded.

Lt. Wpriro continued his technological attack as he replied, “I’m not sure, Captain. My station’s been locked out.” The Mon Calamari input another sequence, and at last the bridge’s navigational display showed something again: a countdown clock, in progress, running down from a little over fourteen minutes.

“What is that?”

Captain Lucial waited impatiently while Wpriro continued working fast. Thirty seconds later he raised his finned hands in the only display of helplessness Lucial had ever seen from him. “As far as I can tell, Captain, all navigation controls are locked out. I can’t access them from here anymore. Something’s got to be happening in the Navigation room.”

“What’s the countdown for? A bomb?”

Wpriro shook his head. “That’s the hyperdrive clock. I think the ship is going to revert to realspace at that time.”

“But we’re not due to come out of hyperspace for hours.” Lucial turned to her comm officer. “Get Security down to Navigation, and warn them of the blasterfire. Have a med team standing by.” Lucial looked back at the countdown clock. “If you’re right about reversion,” she said to Wpriro, “then that would mean...” She did quick calculations in her head, plotting their course and velocity against thirteen more minutes of flight time in hyperspace. Her stomach sank at the answer.

Wpriro had been doing the same thing on the navicom. He grimly pointed to a red dot with several flagged notes from Rebel Intelligence. “It would drop us in this system. Right in the middle of a busy Imperial military refueling hub.”

Captain Lucial had no plans for *Gravitas* to commit suicide that day. “Drop us out of hyperspace now!”

“Helm’s not responding, ma’am!”

“Then reroute commands. Power down systems. Pull the physical plug on the engines of you have to! Do whatever you need to to get control of this ship back! And get Security down there *now!*”

Lt. Kolinkar’s heart pounded as he stood outside the locked door to Navigation with the squad of fleet troopers that had been eating at the nearby table. So they were in his platoon after all. Two of them worked at bypassing the lock on the door, another was running through comm frequencies, and the rest had taken what positions they could in the confined corridor. On the deck was a limp strip of fabric, presumably a makeshift ribbon that had been ripped off the

doorway.

Kolinkar held a datapad with a feed from the bridge. It regularly updated with whatever information the bridge could determine about the situation inside Navigation, and in the corner was a countdown clock fast ticking down from nine minutes. The comm officer had briefly explained the situation on Kolinkar's run over here and had stressed the importance of disabling Navigation from inside the room before time ran out. Some off-shift Navigation techs were on their way to help.

Kolinkar resisted the urge to wipe the sweat from his face. Despite what the Rebels thought about the value of his Academy background, none of his classroom training had prepared him for this.

The still image of a Rodian popped up on the datapad's display. From beside Kolinkar, a fleet trooper with unsightly scars of burns on his face and hands leaned over to look at the display as well. The name of Avton Vok was added to the image.

"As far as we can tell, Avton Vok is the one inside Navigation," the bridge sensor officer said over the Security frequency. "We're not sure why. He's a slicer, been on board for several months, clean record. Here's some bio information."

Text started scrolling on the datapad. The burned fleet trooper suddenly stabbed a scarred finger at one line. "There," he said, "that's why. He's from Alderaan."

Kolinkar didn't see what that had to do with anything. "How much longer until we can open the door?" he demanded.

"Not sure, sir," a trooper working on that replied. "We can't bypass the lock."

"Then do something stronger," Kolinkar snapped. Like they should have done in the first place instead of wasting time with the lock.

The two troopers stopped messing with the door's controls and instead got out small explosive charges. "This way'll take a few minutes to prep," one said as they delved in.

"I got a comm frequency connection into the room," the comm specialist announced, holding up a comlink.

Kolinkar was just about to grab it and demand that the Rodian get his green hide out of Navigation on the double before they blew the door, but he stopped when he noticed that the comm specialist's eyes— as well as the eyes of everyone else in the squad— were not on him, the one in charge there, but were instead on the burned fleet trooper beside him. There was a nearly palpable expectation hanging in the air that Kolinkar didn't understand.

"Work your magic, Sangrey, so we can get back to breakfast," someone said.

...That's right, the burned man's name was something like Tak, maybe? Tak Sangrey? Sangrey turned to Kolinkar. "I can talk him out of there, sir," Sangrey said.

"How?" Kolinkar asked. "Do you know him?"

"I'm about to."

Kolinkar uneasily shifted his weight and glanced at the countdown clock. Eight minutes. Talking wouldn't help and would take too long, but they weren't ready with the door yet anyway. "Hurry it up."

Sangrey took the comlink and thumbed it on. "Avton? Can you hear me?"

"Keep out! Stay away from me!" a voice shouted back over the comlink.

Kolinkar jumped a bit, but Sangrey never flinched. His calm, steady voice was directed at the Rodian again. "Easy there, I'm here to help you. My name's Tor. How about you tell me a little about yourself and how you came to be in Navigation this morning?"

"Forget it! You wouldn't understand anyway!"

“I hope you’ll let me try. I imagine today’s a pretty rough day for you, isn’t it?”

“Like you would know! Like anyone can know what it’s like to lose your *entire planet!* Every single thing you ever knew or loved, just obliterated! Gone forever!” The pure, raw pain evident in the Rodian’s voice even through the comlink static surprised even Kolinkar.

“It’s nothing like Alderaan, I know, but I know a little of what it’s like to have the Imperials destroy your home. I’m from Ralltiir,” Sangrey answered. “Watching people you’ve known your whole life get killed and cities you grew up in get bombarded by the Empire is a horrible thing to experience. You have every right to be hurting about what happened to Alderaan. How did that lead you to Navigation today?”

Seven minutes.

“Because I’m sick of it! I’ve waited a year— *a whole damn year*— for the Rebel groups I was in to strike back hard at the Empire, to repay it for Alderaan. But they never did! All they ever did were stupid timid little hit-and-runs, with tons more running than hitting! I’m sick of it! So today, just once, I’m going to *make* us hit something! When we drop out of hyperspace, we’re going to *have* to do some damage to the Imperials if the captain wants her ship to get out of there!”

Sangrey frowned. “It’s a pretty big target you picked for a single ship that can’t fight big targets very well. Lots of innocent lives on board will be put at risk if this happens, including your own.”

“So what? Everyone here is a Rebel, damn it! This is what we signed up for! Killing Imperials! Fighting them! Has everyone forgotten that?!”

Six minutes. Still no closer to getting in and disabling whatever the Rodian had done to the programming in Navigation. Who knew how long that would take? Kolinkar willed the team at the door to work faster.

Sangrey took a deep breath. His voice remained calm. “No, we haven’t. But we have to pick our targets intelligently. Dropping a ship full of unprepared people into the middle of a massacre isn’t going to accomplish anything. Without any time to prepare, we can’t even maximize the damage we’d do to the Imperials. We’d probably do less damage to them than we could if we went into battle in a smarter fashion, on our own terms. Hurting all your friends on this ship, your allies, isn’t a fitting way to remember Alderaan. All it would do is give the Imperials a chance to shed more blood on this date. Look, I get it. I do. I would love nothing more than to deliver some payback to the Imperials who wrecked my own home. I know you feel the same. We can figure out a way to do that together, but first we need a good, operational ship and crew, and that means we need to stay in hyperspace and not drop out early. Okay?”

The Rodian sounded weary, deflated. “I— I’m tired of trying to be patient. Of waiting for the higher-ups to decide when the perfect time to strike might be. Because they never think it is.”

“Just be patient a little longer.”

Five minutes.

“How much longer?!” The Rodian’s anger was instantly back. “This is just another excuse, another stall tactic! I’ve heard a year’s worth of them already!”

“But this isn’t the way to go about this. You’re not someone who wants to kill his own allies and get them hurt. That’s not what you want to do for Alderaan.”

“I will if I have to! I have to do *something!* No one else is!”

Sangrey’s eyes suddenly lit up as if he’d had an epiphany. He took a breath to speak again, but before he could, one of the fleet troopers working at the door caught Kolinkar’s eye. “Ready with the door, sir,” he said softly. He held up a small remote that would detonate the

miniature charges on the door.

*Finally!* Kolinkar pocketed the datapad and readied his weapon. “Blasters on stun. Blow the door,” he ordered.

“Sir, wait!” Sangrey whirled to face Kolinkar. The fleet trooper with the remote detonator hesitated, watching. “Don’t blow the door yet,” Sangrey pleaded. “I can get him to cooperate and shut down the program himself.” He still held the comlink near his lips but was no longer transmitting.

Kolinkar shook his head. “There’s no time!” he shot back. “Your attempts at connecting with him aren’t working! We need to get in there now and give ourselves time to figure out his program and stop it.”

“They *are* working! I’ll have him out of there in one minute, sir! Trust me!”

“That’s a minute we don’t have! Blow the door,” Kolinkar repeated.

Still the fleet trooper with the detonator waited, looking instead at Sangrey. Sangrey didn’t back down. “Sir, if you blow the door, he’ll panic and probably turn aggressive. With my way, we get the program shut down and no one gets hurt.”

“We don’t have time or guarantees for your way! Now *blow the door!*” Kolinkar demanded, sending the last sharp words at the trooper with the detonator.

That trooper made a face but stepped back and pressed the button on the remote. The charges went off with a loud bang and burned through the internal locking mechanisms of the door. Over the comlink, the Rodian gave a startled cry.

Sangrey cursed and spun around to face the opening door, pulling his weapon while taking one step sideways to stand directly between Kolinkar and the door. One of the front fleet troopers immediately tossed a stun grenade into the Navigation room, but before it could go off, a spray of lethal blaster bolts flew out from inside Navigation.

Sangrey jerked backwards and slammed into Kolinkar. The impact threw Kolinkar off balance and both of them fell to the deck. He was aware of blue flashes like lightning in the room in front of him, and then things were over before he’d really known they’d begun. He squirmed out from underneath Sangrey’s limp mass and checked on him.

People were calling for other people, for the Navigation techs, for medical personnel, but Kolinkar didn’t hear the words. He was staring at the lifeless body of Sangrey beside him.

It was the one-year anniversary of the destruction of Alderaan, and the Death Star was still claiming Rebel casualties.

That had been a long, chaotic day.

The other Navigation techs weren’t able to disable the program or the controls in time due to safeguards that the Rodian had installed. With the Rodian unconscious from the stun grenade, there was no stopping *Gravitas* from reverting to realspace at his intended premature time, square in the Imperials’ laps. Captain Lucial had nearly talked her way through to a clear jump point when the Rodian’s program automatically broadcast a Rebel transponder code to the Imperial ships. Then it had been nothing but sheer luck that allowed *Gravitas* to escape in one piece, though battered badly. The damage control teams onboard had been running themselves ragged trying to stem the worst of the damage and keep the ship spaceworthy enough to get them to the nearest drydock alive.

So it wasn’t until the next morning that Kolinkar had a chance to stop at Sangrey’s barracks to collect his belongings. Kolinkar paused at the door for a moment, willing his bleary vision to focus despite the distinct lack of sleep, and then pressed the door chime.

A Nautolan fleet trooper opened the door and scrunched her nose when she saw him. “Oh. It’s you. Sir.” She reluctantly stepped back, allowing him to enter.

The bunk room had gone quiet, with the seven somber, equally ragged fleet troopers inside who had obviously been conversing now looking directly at Kolinkar. He felt the temperature drop a few degrees and pulled up short at the sudden hostile vibes from a group that up until now had been apathetic at worst toward him. They were all in uniform— and armed— so Kolinkar decided it would be best to stay in the doorway. Luckily he saw Master Sergeant Varayan, his second-in-command, in their midst. Since Kolinkar’s assignment to *Gravitas* he’d depended on Varayan to handle all personnel matters in the platoon, which made it that much simpler to keep himself distant. Varayan was probably in there getting things ready for Sangrey’s memorial service later that day. Kolinkar caught his eye and said, “Just here for the pickup.”

Varayan nodded and brought him a box. After handing it over, Varayan quietly said, “I can do it if you want me to.”

Kolinkar longed to say yes, but he shook his head. “No, I’ll do it. It’s my job.” Though his time at the Academy hadn’t taught him how to write his first letter of notification to next-of-kin either. He had no clue how he was going to do this, and he was dreading it. “Thanks.”

He turned and walked out. He was just about to breathe a sigh of relief at being away from the inhospitable glares when he heard footsteps behind him and the Nautolan say, “Lieutenant.”

Kolinkar grimaced, stopped, and wiped his exhausted expression neutral before turning to face her. “Yes?”

The Nautolan crossed her arms and took a second to size him up through slitted eyelids. Finally she spoke with some bitterness. “There’s something I feel you should know. Sir. I get that you want nothing to do with us. That’s clear as water. But we won’t stand by and let you take us down with you.”

Kolinkar’s chest tightened. “I’m not doing anything of the sort,” he shot back. In fact, he was doing the exact opposite.

“Yes, you are,” the Nautolan replied, undaunted. “You just did it with Sangrey. He’s— was— our best negotiator. He’s talked people down before in shorter time and against longer odds than that was. When he said he’d have Avton surrendering and cooperating in time, I believed him. We all did. And he would have done it. If you’d known him, you would’ve known that. If you’d known that, he’d still be alive. Plus we wouldn’t be limping to drydock right now.”

Kolinkar unsuccessfully fought to hide a wince and tried to cover it up by lashing out. “I made the call I did based on the information I had at the time.”

“That’s my point. Your information was incomplete, and it shouldn’t have been. You couldn’t trust Sangrey’s abilities if you didn’t know they existed. Do you know exactly what each of us is capable of? Our strengths? Our weaknesses? You can’t and won’t trust us until you have the whole picture, and that’s what I’m afraid of. Your incomplete information is going to get more of us killed. Sir.”

With that, the Nautolan turned on her heel and strode back to the troopers’ barracks. Kolinkar watched her go, then he shook his head hard to clear it and the persistent headache, restraightened his helmet, and walked to his own quarters. Her words hit uncomfortably close to his 0400 hour doubts last night.

Finally the door to his tiny room closed behind him, offering seclusion from the blasted, messed-up galaxy outside. Now maybe his headache would go away at last. After a long, deflating exhale, he set the box of Sangrey’s belongings on the floor beside his small makeshift

desk. Kolinkar tossed his helmet onto his bed, grabbed a datapad and logged into the system to find Sangrey's next-of-kin information.

His next-of-kin was a brother who was indeed from Ralltiir, but apparently Sangrey had gotten him to one of the small Rebel safeworlds. That would make it easier for the Rebels to deliver Sangrey's belongings, at least. The last Kolinkar had heard, nothing was getting past the Imperials onto Ralltiir.

He pulled up a blank screen on his datapad and stared at it, eventually trying several different ways to start the letter to Sangrey's brother, but he erased each one. Nothing was working. Nothing felt anything but superficial. How could he write a letter about someone he didn't even know? How would that look to the brother, who was about to feel the same crushing despair that Kolinkar knew all too well? If he'd gotten one of these letters about Gaiti, the last thing Kolinkar would have wanted to read was something that sounded trite, formulaic, and impersonal.

After an hour of frustration and a screen that stubbornly remained blank, Kolinkar's gaze shifted to the box on the floor. Maybe there was something in there he could use to at least make it sound like he'd had a clue who Sangrey was.

He set the datapad aside and sat cross-legged beside the box of Sangrey's packed belongings. One by one Kolinkar took out the items and studied them.

There were numerous datacards of mystery novels and holofilms, and datacards with instructional information on zero-g spacejumping. Had Sangrey done that, or just wanted to do it? Kolinkar didn't know. There was a small, polished stone carving of some sort of quadruped. An empty candy bar wrapper, which was folded with such care that it must have somehow crossed the line from trash to treasure, and a single sabacc card lay on the bottom of the box. There was a small rock and a few other random, odd trinkets Kolinkar couldn't identify.

Then there were the holodiscs. Kolinkar put them into a small holoprojector and was fascinated as he cycled through each holo, all of them taken on what must have been Ralltiir. He'd looked at several holos before he realized that the unfamiliar man in each one was really Sangrey before he had gotten the burns that marred his skin. Now that Kolinkar recognized him, the holos had a bit more meaning. There was Sangrey with a blaster and a shooting instructor; another featured a teenage Sangrey with a sports coach of some kind, maybe grav-ball. Several showed a pretty girl who might have been a girlfriend. There were teachers and classmates. Many contained what Kolinkar guessed were family members: parents, grandparents, maybe aunts and uncles and cousins, and definitely the brother who would be receiving the letter. A few were from a couple decades ago and showed a boy with an animal that resembled the carved quadruped— could this have been Sangrey with a childhood pet? Finally there were many of a teenaged and young adult Sangrey with a Gotal of similar age. These holos showed adventure, mischief, excitement, fun, and a deep friendship. It was the most uninhibited Gotal that Kolinkar had ever seen. Kolinkar idly wondered where that Gotal was now, and if he and Sangrey had made plans to take on the galaxy together.

After the last holo blinked out, Kolinkar looked around at all the odd items surrounding him. Despite himself, he was curious. He tried to imagine what had driven Sangrey to keep those specific items and how their history and meaning fit into Sangrey as a person. What kind of life did he have that would end up with these particular things in a box under his bunk on a Rebel Alliance warship?

No matter how hard he tried to understand them from Sangrey's point of view, he couldn't. He didn't understand Sangrey's life or who he had been. If anything, these strange but

important objects and memories had hopelessly complicated the effort.

With a sigh, Kolinkar carefully put the items back in the box and picked up his datapad. Still on the floor, he sat back against the side of his bed and stared at the blank screen again.

Tentatively he started typing, trying to talk to the brother that he could now see in his mind's eye. Kolinkar expressed his sympathy for the pain he knew this news was going to inflict. He talked about the passion Sangrey had had for life and for helping others through protecting them and trying to understand them. He talked about the loyalty and friendship Sangrey had earned with his squadmates. And he talked about how Sangrey had saved Kolinkar's life in the shooting at the cost of his own. He ended the letter by writing *I'm honored to have known him*.

Kolinkar was just about to sign the letter but paused, looking back uneasily at the last line. That sentence wasn't true, because he *hadn't* known Sangrey, and he couldn't sign his name, even a fake one, to it. He erased it and wrote instead *I'm honored to have worked with him*.

That was better. That was true, at least. He went to sign the letter but again stopped before doing so. Something still wasn't sitting right, but he didn't know what.

The nebulous feeling nagged at him for several more minutes until his stomach growled. Kolinkar checked his chrono and was a little surprised to see it was already lunchtime. His lack of an appetite meant he'd skipped breakfast that morning, but some lunch sounded good. Maybe some food would get rid of his headache too. Then he could come back and figure out what was wrong with the letter.

He let his large helmet swallow him up again as he walked through the corridors, which were still laden with the hazy sting of smoke. Technicians and droids worked at numerous open access panels in the walls, fixing extensive damage to the conduits, ducts, and fluid lines. Kolinkar hunched down and averted his eyes each time he walked past them.

Finally he made it to the mess hall. It was a bit more subdued inside and less crowded than normal. He went to the food serving line and got his plate of glop.

On his way to the corner table he stopped. There was the table full of fleet troopers again, members of his platoon. There were the Nautolan and Varayan and others. There was also one empty chair. The fleet troopers were talking together, but they were somber, hushed, dull.

Kolinkar stood for a minute and watched them while his chest tightened and his headache throbbed with a new intensity. He remembered empty chairs at lunch tables, and that awful sense that someone important should be sitting in them but wasn't, all because of him.

He'd tried so hard to prevent a recurrence, and it still had happened. Getting close to people got them killed, and not getting close to people got them killed. Well, what the hell was he supposed to do now?! He wanted to scream, fling his lunch tray across the room, and go steal a shuttle or something and fly it into a sun.

But he didn't. He didn't know how to fly a shuttle anyway. Instead he looked at the Nautolan, and then he looked around the table at all the chairs filled with beings he was responsible for. If he ignored what the Nautolan had told him, would more chairs end up empty?

Kolinkar looked over at the secluded corner table waiting patiently for him, then returned his gaze to the group. Maybe he was doomed to failure either way, but the thought of even more empty chairs, more letters he couldn't write, was more than he could take.

Or, rather, it was more than he could take alone.

Yes, each time his mistakes had caused there to be an empty chair, but it was only empty in comparison to the chairs all around it that were still full, and maybe that deserved his focus for once.

Kolinkar slowly walked with his food tray to the fleet troopers' table and stood at a spot well away from the empty chair. They noticed him almost immediately, stopped talking, and turned to look at him. Again Kolinkar felt a distinct chill, but he took a deep breath and asked quietly, "Can I join you?"

Some of the glares were infected by puzzlement, but there were reluctant, grumbled agreements, and the two troopers closest to him grudgingly scooted over to make room between them. "Thanks." Kolinkar set down his tray in the area they had opened for him, grabbed a chair from an empty table behind him, and dragged it over. He took off his helmet and slung it by its chinstrap on the back of the chair and sat down.

The group of fleet troopers was staring at him with varying degrees of confusion, resentment, and cold shoulders, but despite the less-than-warm welcome Kolinkar was surprised to find that his headache had subsided to nearly nothing. The group was still quiet, still watching him, now with some suspicion.

Kolinkar took another deep breath and twirled his fork restlessly between his fingers before he finally said softly, "Do me a favor? Tell me about him. And you."

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*The End*

Revision A  
7-3-15