

Chapter 1

The man had been staring at Ren for half an hour now.

He was wearing the olive green jumpsuit of the Revolutionary Reform Coalition - casually referred to as “the Revolution” - and was carrying the standard-issue photon blaster of the Reform Corps. On his right leg were the bars of a sergeant, and clipped to his belt was an electric stunner and baton. All normal for a soldier of the Reform Corps.

The sergeant had boarded the sliptram two stops after Ren had, and had been watching Ren closely ever since.

The slipstream reached another stop, and five of the thirty-two people onboard exited. One new passenger, a man who looked about thirty cycles old, had boarded.

At the next stop - Abor Station - Ren stood to leave. He was on his way to see a friend who lived on Abor Main. As he walked out, he grabbed his bag casually from the seat beside him. But a voice - a commanding, firm voice - stopped him in his tracks.

“Excuse me, sir. I’d have you remain where you are. All other passengers, please exit this car immediately.”

This statement was issued from the sergeant. Ren groaned inwardly as the other passengers filed silently out of the car, some stealing a sympathetic glance at the young man who had been told to stay by the soldier. But nobody argued or complained - ever since the Ravis incident two work-cycles ago, which had made planetary news, nobody argued with any member of the Reform Corps.

Within a minute, the car was emptied of other passengers. Some had gone to other cars on the slipstream, others exiting the sliptram altogether.

The soldier looked across at Ren. “What is your registered name?” he asked.

“Ren Shawe, sir,” Ren replied, channelling as much respect as possible into his voice.

“Good. How old are you, Shawe?”

“Seventeen cycles, sir.”

“Ah, rather young. But not too young to enlist,” the soldier commented. “I myself was sixteen and a half cycles old when I enlisted in the armed forces. Of course, things have changed slightly now that the RRC is in control. There is the mandatory draft - we *are* in the middle of a war, after all. Can you tell me the minimum age for the draft, Shawe?”

“Seventeen and a half cycles,” Ren said.

“Quite right. Now, I’d like your UID, please.”

Ren swore in his head. An officer taking somebody’s UID, or Universal Identification, meant they would bounce the ID in a database to check personal information - a list of infringements, a birthdate, or other information. If this Reform Corps sergeant bounced Ren’s UID, he’d find that Ren was actually close to eighteen cycles old - seventeen cycles and nine moonturns, to be precise. But there was no refusing the officer, so Ren rattled off his code.

“71-AIX-8246-ABZ,” he said.

The officer nodded slightly and punched in Ren’s UID on the portcom embedded in his jumpsuit. He turned it sideways for Ren to see. “Confirm. Is this you?”

Ren looked at the hologram of his profile, the birthdate, and the other assorted information regarding him. “Confirm,” he replied.

“All well and good,” the sergeant said. “Now. It says here you are seventeen point nine cycles old. Is this accurate?”

Ren sighed. There wasn’t a way out of this one. “Yes.”

“It also tells me you are not registered for the Reform Corps draft, nor are you currently enlisted. Confirm.”

“That is correct.”

“I will register you for the draft in accordance with the Inquiry Act,” the sergeant continued. His tone left no room for argument. “Understood?”

“Understood,” Ren said after a lengthy pause.

The officer pressed two buttons on his portcom, and a successful chime sounded. “Congratulations, Shawe. You are now registered for the draft. I must bid you good day.”

With that, the sergeant walked out of the tram car.

Ren got off the tram two stops further down the line than he had planned. He was a good twenty blocks from Abor, the station nearest to his friend’s residence. He swore as he boarded a new sliptram and sped through the various subcities of Natte.

Rags was a complicated person.

He was thirty-three cycles old, had curly brown hair, and lived in a small residence on Abor Main. He had been twenty-nine when the Revolutionary Reform Coalition had taken over in the coup d'état of 1043. And had seen on the planetary news the rise of the Resistance two moonturns afterwards. And for three and a half cycles, he had watched as the two factions tore Wyuup apart.

Rags lived in the subcity of Abor, towards the eastern edge of Natte. It was far closer to the Dispute than almost any other province of Wyuup. That meant many more soldiers and attacks than other provinces experienced, and military movements through Natte were often seen.

Rags was also a man of many secrets. Ren had met him two cycles ago at a job they both worked with Natte Elevated Science - back when Ren's father, Xet, was still alive. Rags had been close friends with Xet prior to the Insurrection, when Xet had been falsely accused of conspiring with Resistance members and taken to Death Row for treason. Both Ren and Rags had lost their jobs at Natte Elevated Science when the laboratory systems had downsized, but had remained good friends. And yet, Ren had never gotten much personal information out of Rags - which was understandable, seeing as most people throughout Wyuup were rather suspicious of anybody they met even before the Revolution had taken over and the insurrectionists had begun a turf war.

More importantly, the two were good friends and had supported each other through the turbulence of the Rift.

Rags was boiling a package of prefood when Ren knocked on the door of the small Abor Main apartment.

"Come on it," he called. Ren obliged and met him in the small kitchen. The two grasped hands briefly, and then began to chat.

Eventually, their conversation turned to the current events - from the death of Jes Ravis to the raid on Tatin. It was at this point, when the subjects permitted, that Ren explained the day's events on the sliptram.

"A Revolutionary bounced my UID today," Ren began.

Rags sucked in a breath. "What happened?"

"He saw I wasn't registered for the draft. So he decided to do the honors."

"Now, that ain't good at all," Rags said after a pause. "Ain't no way we can let you fight for the Coalition. Not after what happened to Xet. Not at all."

Ren nodded. "I'd leave the province if it came to it."

Rags scoffed. "And do what, join the Resistance? They killed your ma sure as the Coalition took your dad."

"Well, I'd make it on my own in the flatlands," Ren suggested. "Away from the Coalition, the Resistance, everybody."

"Yeah, and that would last just as long as the flatlands' neutrality. And that ain't gonna be long."

"Well, there isn't much else I can do, is there now?" Ren pointed out. "I could try and sit out the draft - hope for some good luck."

"Daresay you need some luck," Rags said. "And you'd waste ten cycles lookin' over your shoulder, waitin' for the Coalition to let you off? They're gonna take every man they can to fight the Resistance - and them insurrectionists have somehow outlasted the 'superior skills' of the Coalition."

"I just don't see any way out," Ren said.

"Nor I. And that's a problem."

The two companions sat in silence for a while.

"Didja hear of the new plan for the Liberation of Luar?" Rags asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Ha," Ren said. "The Coalition isn't going to waste resources taking back Luar."

"Eyh. The Coalition always hits back as hard as it can. And that's gonna be pret-ty hard."

"You think so?"

"The whole province is full of supplies, civilians, an' the like. No way they's gonna let it lie. Betcha twenty credits the Coalition will try and take it back within the next moonturn or two."

"It's a bet I'll win," Ren replied, shaking Rags' hand and sealing the deal.

"Alright then. A deal's a deal. Now, ya got a place to stay tonight?" Rags inquired.

"I'll find something, somewhere," Ren said. "I'd hate to impose-"

"You're stayin' here then. No question." Rags looked over at the stove. "Food's ready. Soup."

"Thanks," Ren replied.

"Eh, I promised Xet I'd take care of ya. It's my job."

"Well, I'm glad for it," Ren said.

"Of course you are."

The two sat down at the table and began their meal - but Ren couldn't shake an unsettling feeling that something was about to go horribly wrong.