Cold on the Ramparts

by anesor

Summary

The emperor is dead, long live the Republic! With the Sith-lord gone, that doesn’t mean the war is over or the Republic lacks many messes to keep the Jedi busy. One young married couple may still start that family, because someone wants to be a father and rather likes the idea of twins…

Notes

This is the sequel to the crossover fic If This Goes On... wholly centered on Alt ROTS cleanup. Alternate timelines do not mean all the Sith wrought destruction fades away. We’ll see more people, more problems, and more relationships than you can shake a stick at. Title comes from the Heinlein story: "If This Goes On..."
See the end of the work for more notes.
New Responsibilities

- Vora Meyers

It had been several of the shorter Republic weeks since Obi-Wan had let slip about Anakin’s coming promotion. The Senate’s rewards or rah rah was not going to be quiet, so the growing extravaganza left me jittery. Ahsoka was going to be much more quietly promoted in the Temple alone without Senate notice and her party had taken over 79’s for almost two days.

Anakin enjoyed taunting me with every crazy idea as soon as he heard about them from Padmé. As far as I was concerned, a pretty certificate and an extra cookie at dinner would be enough, maybe a trip to Tahiti. But nobody asked me, I was too much good copy. I knew that, I’d suggested that the Order get a little more forthcoming and transparent. As it was, information about Terra was just plain omitted into Jedi anonymity for the newsies.

My extra tutor, Dooku, was less than sympathetic to my nerves. He was stern, and I spent my entire mornings in drill with him, both boring and straining muscles and muscle memory. Despite his sometimes harsh comments, I enjoyed his occasional flash of humor. Dooku relaxed a little once Obi-Wan and Anakin stopped their observation.

Practice in the evenings included other combat skills and study. Obi-Wan pushed me still. I sometimes got distracted by how the glow of a lightsaber reflected off his face. I could feel his amusement after I’d managed to trip and fall on my face.

If I kept busy enough, I could hope I hadn’t blown Anakin’s surprise. Ignorance prevented his flailing because my flailing about ceremonies was so entertaining. I didn’t really have any other duties aside from studies, most Council meetings were without Padawans. I wondered how Padmé kept a lid on the surprise because she had to be in on it.

The day dawned and I was in spiffy new robes, with silk and embroidery stitching, courtesy of the Senate’s need for show. I kept trying to calm myself, with limited success.

Anakin was dressed up as well and very pleased with himself. He escorted Padmé as she entered.

-Everything will be fine, my dear. This is diplomacy, your formal oath will be in Council chamber.-

Obi-Wan was still echoing pride as well as baffling glee.

A very formal looking protocol droid announced the imminent start, and Anakin lazily joined the Jedi delegation as a last buzz echoed through the huge chamber.

I had my chance to tease him now, and I knew it. Congratulations, Papa Skywalker!

Anakin looked at us and started to beam. -A little hard to surprise anyone.-

-Maybe, maybe not.- Obi-Wan hid his smile.

A droid called for the audience’s attention again and started listing off formalities with all long and stylized phrases to validate whatever was being awarded. Anakin was pretending to hide his yawns, though it really wasn’t that long.

Obi-Wan was amused as he sent a wakeup nudge through the Force, and I could feel annoyance and humor threading from the other Jedi around and behind us. Ahsoka felt a thread of something that
made her suspicious of us and I winked at her.

Now that I was done anticipating it, my nerves were settling. The droning finally paused, and a tide of applause rippled around the space with feeling a pitter-patter of recorder triggers being activated.

One day just after I’d survived my first training session with Dooku, I caught Ahsoka trawling the media with a plethora of results that I tried to ignore. Unfortunately the media was more tabloid on the whole than Cronkite. And I could feel their interest in a new Jedi.

Now the new Chancellor read off a summary of enemy forces active that day, here in Coruscant and a long list of other locations. I was glad that it was termed as enemy or Sith, not mentioning the brothers as traitors. Obi-Wan crossed his arms and played with his beard as he observed the crowd of Senators and celebrities.

I could feel the buzz of his focus as he considered the mood.

More disconcerting were the large holos showing the attack on the Temple. It wasn’t a continuous stream, more like a stop motion where the pauses were usually well chosen. No one was shown as scratching their butt, for instance. Occasional narration by the droid explained a few things for outsiders’ benefit like the evacuation of the younglings when Troopers smashed into an empty creche.

Some, no, most of the battles were new, Ahsoka had been very busy before she caught up to me. Many Red Guard, controlled clones, and an unknown darksiders were whittled down as we found and fought the Sith. I saw on other newsfeeds about worlds where some Jedi were slaughtered and some escaped. One battle, where clone fought clone, that only some had been dechipped made my heart break. Some clips showed clones defending. Clone units and Commanders like Cody were commended.

Warm fingers traced around my clenched fist, rubbing circles on the back of my palm. Consciously relaxing, I took his hand and gave Obi-Wan a weak smile. Our sleeves hid this from most.

Then the footage became a narrative in lies and betrayals. I’d first caught sight of myself with Anakin and Dooku at tea inside the cell, even as Sidious was claiming he was mistreated or dead.

Dooku, back in more like Jedi-style robes, watched the holos with a faint smile. “My death was a great surprise. I don’t know how I missed it.”

I almost laughed aloud. But then I stared through the footage of me at the breech point in favor of the later silent fight with Sidious. Obi-Wan paused a little too long and I gripped his hand.

The Force lightning Sidious threw out made the audience gasp, but only a little longer than seeing the trusted Chancellor’s appearance become monstrous as he drew on the Dark side. As much as I’d expected it, I still found it disturbing.

When Niquus appeared, I discreetly watched my feet. The narrative named me like it had the Team earlier.

- Truly, my dear, your Shii-Cho isn’t ineffective, that form takes advantage of unpredictability. Master Fisto was difficult for any to defeat. Dooku is an experienced swordmaster, and I am sure he will realize that the second form won’t be for you. -

What should I learn? I was now more familiar with them, but there were only three I had ruled out.

Obi-Wan smiled down at me. - I have every confidence you will choose wisely, my dear. -
I grumbled to myself when the holo narration ended with another rumble of applause. Then came Bail’s beginning the official award ceremony, lauding the Order for defeating the Sith menace with a minimum of civilian casualties, despite the great cost to themselves.

Then he announced the awards for Master Kenobi, Master Skywalker, and Knight Meyers, gesturing that we come forward.

All at once, Obi-Wan squeezed my hand one last time before letting go. My stomach butterfly collection got bigger, and Anakin’s surprise and shock rippled through the bonds and probably the entire chamber.

-Come, Padawans. Dignity.-

I wanted to rub my cold and sweaty palms against my robes.

-You knew… you both knew!-

I waited for Anakin to start moving, though my knees were close to locking.

-Did you not say it was difficult to surprise others?- Obi-Wan’s smile was absent from his face but not his voice. He nudged me with the Force and we stepped off as one.

I concentrated on moving smoothly and keeping my stomach from rolling over.

Anakin started calming as we walked, and then started bubbling with happiness and pride as he looked out over the crowd.

My feet needed all my attention, or the concrete would encase them.

-My dear…- A swell of Obi-Wan’s affection made breathing and moving easier.

The awards were given by Chancellor Organa and placed by Master Windu, who had the faintest smile. We turned to face into the chamber, and I was struck by dejah vu and a younger Skywalker. But then the masses of the audience broke rank and seating locations and started milling around and towards us.

That dejah vu struck again and I started scanning around me as a blaster hit the stage right beside where Chancellor Organa and Master Windu had been standing. Master Windu had his blade out and shielded him.

I’d moved, looking up as a dozen more shots fired into the now convulsing crowd. Other Jedi were leaping up to find the source, but I thought the danger was past.

At least one casualty led to a knot of blue protectors around a Senator. Anakin was nearly panicking as he rushed to his wife. I looked at Obi-Wan, and he had not drawn his lightsaber either.

Most civilians were eager to get away, but even newsies were sent on their way in a few minutes. Medics collected the injured and the traumatized, leaving only a few Senators and the Jedi.

-We will not be investigating this time. We will be participating in peace talks off planet, leaving in two days.- Obi-Wan was studying the chamber, despite his comment.

Anakin was hugging his wife, with a sideways look back at the remaining Jedi. He plainly expected some negative reaction from them, and seemed almost disappointed when none of them batted an eye.
“Vora, we yet have the official ceremony.” Obi-Wan took my arm and towed me along as he moved us toward the exit.

Now, I was as nervous about that, even if the Council was a much smaller group.

Anakin rejoined us and hugged me while Obi-Wan smiled at both of us. Anakin’s excitement affected his lift off in the speeder, fast and nearly meteoric, taking us far above the city. This time I reached for Obi-Wan’s hand, and could feel him relax a little too. I was half afraid we’d be doing an Immelman, but we stayed upright.

Back on the ground, Obi-Wan herded us off to the Council Chamber after taking our lightsabers. I read what knighting usually included, but I remembered almost nothing without checking the recording. I remembered being prompted and Obi-Wan being distracted for a moment with a feeling of wonder.

Better was my memory of Obi-Wan’s surprise at the approval from the rest of the Council for successfully finishing with a second Padawan. Anakin’s happiness at being named Master from his own efforts was almost incandescent. He really could not absorb that the older Jedi approved of him.

My next morning session with Dooku could have been skipped as far as I was concerned. Today, I got to see how well Form I fared against the other forms, both for attack and defense. It seemed like it was perpetually a day late and a dollar short even with his greater age.

“Now, young Meyers, you will need to study each of the other forms until the Force tells you which to specialize in. Have you any thoughts, Grandpadawan?” His mood was unclear.

I didn’t like how unsettled the older man seemed. “Are you feeling okay? You’re in this middle ground, and I don’t envy you that.”

Dooku smiled slightly. “You speak so casually about emotions, though they seem to flow by you nearly as quickly as those who banish them.”

I sighed at the tiny criticism in the comparison. “I learned to control emotions without denying or purging. Are you interested to be involved with the Code revision discussions? I mean, I’m sure they don’t trust you, but as a sometimes outsider and former Master, you have a viewpoint as different as mine.”

“I believe my time as a Sith means my credibility and effective rank is below yours. Nor am I permitted to interact with Initiates and Padawans, excepting a certain rebellious one.” Dooku sounded bored.

I shook my head. “I don’t need to be protected like that from darker emotions, I lived in them for decades. I will say that one of the paradoxes I’d like added is about compassion versus cruelty. Those seem very clearly omitted at some point.”

Dooku looked thoughtful. “I will regret the lack of our discussions, aside from my general quiet while you are on missions.”

“Can you blame them? Any news about a civil trial for your crimes?”

“I am fairly sure that the Council is stalling. I don’t believe there is much precedent for my return to duty after that much… insanity. I understand the Senate is far less forgiving as a group.”

“Would you like to teach? What would you have wanted five or ten years ago? I think the Senate
and Order will be taking hard looks at themselves.” I believed that everyone needs a purpose, a cause…

His composure fractured, but held together. “Padawans are not supposed to pass into the Force first.”

“Shit happens, sir, and his influence passed down to Obi-Wan, right?” I wasn’t going to mention my hope that Force ghosts were not a fannish inspiration. “Would you like me to speak to them on your behalf?”

Dooku’s smile had an edge. “My suggestions are rarely viewed without suspicion.”

“Anakin knows about that more than you think, sir.” The movie night needed to become more available within the Order, and I rubbed my forehead. At least on the good side, Anakin’s good mood lately made it clear he was still bright as the sun.

A chuckle from Dooku. “I see Master Kenobi has influenced how you deal with irritation.”

I wasn’t sure what prompted that, but time for a little puzzle for him. “Not a surprise. I’ve looked up to him since I was about twelve.”

The former Sith looked doubtful given our age difference and Obi-Wan would have been an infant, but Dooku could not feel a lie.

“Sir, I should be here tomorrow yet, but I don’t know when we’ll be back. Treaty negotiations may be slow.” And I would help keep a lid on the more volatile member of the Team.

Dooku stated. “I may be able to give some tips.”

“Why don’t you? Contact Obi-Wan. He’s said that the coalition fractured over the last month and a half.” I suspected that Dooku’s rejoining the Order and getting out of politics might help with reconciliation.

“… Or it would make them feel all the more betrayed by myself and Order by extension. I burned so many bridges.” Dooku turned away, looking bleak and older again. “I can give tips for some of their leaders who may still be in power, but I wasn’t looking for peace but obedience. By any means necessary.”
Estimated Time of Departures

Chapter Summary

Separatist worlds are suing for peace, but not all at once. The first one is getting a wary delegation from the Jedi and GAR, to get things started before Senators step in. Preparations take longer than expected, including for the General doesn't want troops.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Obi-Wan Kenobi

I wasn’t surprised when Vora got overwhelmed in the ceremony, getting quieter as the public approval swelled. Now Anakin was basking in it, still thirsty for open approval. I was relieved that it wasn’t a bottomless chasm of need. His attention seemed to shift between Padmé and myself during the events summary but he was more often distracted by the change in his wife’s Force signature.

Vora’s amusement had grown too.

The reminder that the wars had not ended was less expected, and I idly wondered who would be assigned. A future treaty mission with Raxus and the largest block of the Separatists was coming soon, but I suspected they were alarmed by the legions who’d attacked during Order 66 and didn’t wish to make the first overtures. Both sides and the conflict itself had been pawns, but healing after so much bloodshed would take years.

I was aware that our treaty mission to Kaller would be a good symbol for peace, but we each would have to accustom ourselves with separations. If the Force willed it, we would have fewer enemies before we met their younglings.

As we returned to Temple, Anakin spoke with intensity. “Why didn’t you warn me? I’d believed the only way I could get that respect from the Council was if someone made them.”

“There never was a schedule for when or who is named full Master, Anakin. It is usually recognition for a particular achievement, like two successful apprenticeships, or wide Mastery of self and skills. I was younger than most humans. More things may change with the Code review, and those are unknown for now. It was never about your skill, but about your self-control.” I was proud of him.

The Council chamber wasn’t far, and Vora wasn’t as eager. My dear...

She looked up and smiled sadly, her curls sliding from in front of her eyes. -Think I’m going to miss being your Padawan.-

Not much will change in that. You know I slip up with Anakin often enough.

-Anyone tries to end that bond, they can go stuff it. I’d just want to make a new one.-

I had to smile. I’d always suspected Anakin would have said the same, but it was never forced. I can still feel the ripped trace from when Master Jinn joined the Force.
Vora sent the warmth of a hug and a touch of concern before I joined the Masters in the circle for the ceremonies. Dooku was observing with a neutral expression.

Anakin was excited and proud, his signature bright as a nova. Ahsoka, the most conventionally trained, was excited and aware of her place in Jedi tradition for this ceremony. Her braid was sliced by a beaming Anakin. I could feel faintly that she was planning something to annoy her former Master. Vora was grave with the weight of it. In hindsight, I wished I had started a braid for her as soon as it was formally recognized, as it separated her more than I realized.

Others were promoted as well, all Padawans to Knights. The war has been costing us too many of our young people and I suspected many of these Knights would have their own Padawans early, like Anakin and I.

Still I allowed myself some pride. The three of them were wise and strong in the Force.

-They are a credit to you, my Padawan…-

M-m- Master?

-I am proud of you. We will speak again.-

A cool and calm spread around, and Master Yoda looked at me with a faint twinkle.

-Vora

I bowed and left Dooku while it was still morning, eager for a quick shower and quicker lunch in the mess. The hot water felt so good on aching muscles.

-You wanted my company earlier?- Obi-Wan was just entering the suite.

That left me grinning. Anytime, Obi-Wan.

We made for a very wet fresher and we used more towels to clean up the room than on ourselves. Obi-Wan looked bemused with the wet mess we made. He knew my memories of more pleasant spa style bathrooms.

The suite and the fresher was on the plain side. If I felt like a battle, I’d try to convince someone of the value of a hot tub or steamy spa. This wasn’t high tech, and my envy got me half-smile as fingers combed his wet hair.

Fresh robes and we reached the cafeteria. The Initiates had returned weeks ago, and seeing their reaction to seeing us was both incredibly cute and intimidating. Obi-Wan knew what to say, so I listened as I nearly gobbled my food.

Obi-Wan was distracted by their questions, and I nudged him to eat. Once the students had run off the class we had the room mostly to ourselves.

I thought a moment as he ate, and asked, “What’s the Council planning to do about Dooku? He cannot stay in this limbo for the rest of his life.”

His good mood faded a little. “There is no consensus, beyond that he has regained some freedom within the Temple. It makes for a rather large prison, but several worlds want him tried and executed,
worlds that took heavy losses while he was commanding. They might soften in time, but Bail does not believe so. We don’t execute the Fallen, they usually manage to join the Force through their own actions. I believe he is now gray, unlike his arrival.”

“I think… no, I am more than sure he needs more purpose than tutoring the occasional light saber student. He floundered very badly in his grief…”

Obi-Wan winced, with a quick pang floating away.

I gripped his arm. “Yeah, I think the two of you could have helped each other, like how Anakin helped you recover. It’s not your fault, you already had too much on your plate. It looks like the three of us are just about the only ones he interacts with outside the healers. He needed hope for the future after Naboo, the same way Anakin became your hope.”

Obi-Wan settled back and thought about that. Then he smiled. “I suspect you are that, my dove. I’m sure you were the only one showing and feeling any compassion when Mace brought him back. I was finding it hard to purge my anger at all the deaths he caused and times he’d attacked us directly. The darkness from Sidious was choking visions for years. Your and Anakin’s visions seemed to be shaking it off better, and that also worried the Council, as the most openly emotional among us. They would never have considered your training otherwise.”

I was puzzled. I didn’t remember any visions before that attack on Naboo.

His grin was crooked. “The timings of things you did in quarantine couldn’t be ignored, several came before related debate, though we were not in regular contact.”

Okay, that was higher on the creepmeter. “So what can Dooku do? I’m sure you don’t want him with a Padawan until he’s been longer vetted, but he needs human contact. We’re all going, right?”

Now, Obi-Wan rubbed above his nose. “I will ask Master Yoda if there is some creche or other duty. Master Drallig is adamant about his distrust and reluctance to allow blademaster duties for Dooku. There’s more, isn’t there, Vora?”

Extend trust and he will either prove worthy or continue his Fall. “When will the videos from Terra, holos, get more available within the Order? I think seeing how little he would have affected the future will help confirm the pointlessness of that path. Tomorrow before we go, he can see how dark that path would have been.”

“Were these your ideas, my dear?”

I paused to think. “I feel certain, but I cannot see him remaining quietly under house arrest unless he is approaching senility. I want to leave these suggestions before we go tomorrow.”

“You will need to learn to approach the other Council members too.” His exasperation was clear.

Negotiation… right? “How about six month’s grace for that? I’ll try to get more comfortable with them and maybe have the time to chase more Masters around with my ideas.”

My former Master smiled at the image. “Accepted, my Vora. I would have been willing for a year, but you and Anakin need to believe that the Council are your brothers, too.”

I wasn’t happy, because I’d prefer avoiding their notice.

Obi-Wan chuckled at me, his eyes brightening. “You are doing a terrible job of that, my dear. Our line seems to be gaining a reputation among the younglings for defeating Sith, one way or another.
The bolder ones are gearing up to approaching Dooku on dares, and you know Anakin would be top of the list if he were that age.”

I realized our talk was taking a long time, and I shouldn’t just hang out with Obi-Wan. In a rush I put out the last two. “Dooku’s more willing to talk about important things now. I think he’s willing to advise about the Separatist leaders, if you have any questions. And his might be a useful viewpoint when Code revisions begin discussion. I'm not saying he should have a vote or anything, but his insights from both sides of the fence could help.”

“Stop, stop.” He waved me to stop with another laugh. “The intelligence on the leaders would go to Master Windu or maybe Madame Nu if there was no rush. Right now I will need to take priority because of our departure time. The Code… that is on hold for a few months, certainly until after the primary repairs are finished. Nothing about how the debate will be structured has been decided.”

My task list collapsed nicely. The movies and passing Sep intel were the only things I needed to prepare.

“Not exactly, General Meyers. We have two more overdue tasks to begin before we depart. You must meet your Commander and Anakin has your time this evening. Come along.”

I had to sigh even as my stomach sank.

I did not want to be a General.

When we returned our trays, he set off toward the more public portion of the Temple before he spoke again. “What are you expecting, based on your study?”

“A regiment seems like too many to grok and a legion seems even more intimidating. I never quite found a good definition of a corps. I can’t quite figure out what rank general you’re considered to be, Obi-Wan.” The order of battle document I’d studied was too abstract to be real, and I could not afford that error.

His amusement was clear. “Those ranks are more political titles than important to the Order. Anakin is ranked higher by the Senate. My 212th started as a Legion, but more units are attached at need. Those ranks mean nothing in the Force. Ahsoka’s regiment will be following her to her legion.”

“I’d rather start with a company.” Well, I could hope to start small.

“We will be meeting with your Senior Clone Commander. The 408th had served under Knight Loreck Ta’em, who did not escape. They are… troubled, my dear.”

When I looked at his face, I saw the tiniest smug in his lips. I knew that he knew how I would react to that comment. My freaking out seemed less important, but I elbowed him anyway.

“Roster and records should reach you very soon. This will be a joint mission, so Cody and Rex will watch for problems as well, and I trust their instincts.” He paused to look me over and smiled. “You will do fine, Knight Meyers.”

Someday I’d get pissed enough to shave half his beard. I’d entertain myself with thoughts of which half.

We reached a marked door and Obi-Wan walked right in. Two clones were inside drawing themselves to attention, one in orange markings I knew to be Cody. The other had a yellow-brownish green.
The same faces, more or less. I still wasn’t used to that at some level.

They saluted, but only one spoke. “General Kenobi, General Meyers.”

Obi-Wan acknowledged them with a nod, which I copied, despite my panic.

“Introductions, Cody?”

“Generals, this is CT6268 of the 408th Legion. Dice, this is General Kenobi and General Meyers, just promoted from battle.”

Any protest I wanted to make, would make things worse, so I bit my tongue. “Nice to meet you.” Then I wanted to kick myself for saying something so bland and meaningless.

Obi-Wan took pity on me. “General Skywalker and Rex will be along later, he has business to take care of before we ship out. We will be taking the Resolute and the Negotiator, prepared for trouble. We hope that this diplomatic mission will produce a treaty, and at best, movement toward reunification. But we acknowledge that some may never rejoin the Republic.”

“Show of force, Sir.” Cody agreed.

I nodded, hoping we’d have a better briefing once Anakin was present.

Cody’s attention narrowed on Obi-Wan. “Sir, I have some billeting assignments to discuss before evening...”

They moved to the other side of the room before speaking. Obi-Wan’s focus and attention had not changed. I wasn’t sure I wanted a chaperon, but I was feeling nervous enough that I wasn’t going to call him on it.

“Sir?” Dice’s voice sounded earnest, but there was bitterness down deep.

I tried to smile. “They’re going to be watchful, General Kenobi has a habit of keeping an eye on his former students.”

Dice looked away, though his head barely moved. “I thought that was me,” he muttered.

That made me laugh. “I’m sure he would have been a good parent if he hadn’t been a Jedi. But compassion is also a virtue that gets lost in battle.”

“If you say so, Sir.”

I bit the corner of my thumbnail. “I want you to feel free to ask me for explanations if you don’t understand me, and be willing to explain stuff you’ve known all your life.”

His worry sharpened.

*Up front... up front...* “Do you want a hard truth or comforting assurances?”

“Truth.” Dice didn’t sound very confident.

“I joined the Order about two years ago from a world beyond the Rim. I haven’t been as well trained in battle as other Jedi. I’m going to need your help, and a lot of it until I’m up to speed.”

He’d stiffened. “I saw that fight.”
“Just about all my training was preparing for that fight. I’m far more familiar with armies and battles on my more primitive home world than in the Republic.” I took a deeper breath. “Nor was I a warrior there, so I’m still on a steep learning curve for war here. I’m sorry I’m not more competent.”

Something softened. “I will remember that, Sir.”

Obi-Wan sent a questioning thread and I agreed. He and Cody came back over and Obi-Wan had a small smile. “The Commander should shadow you, Knight Meyers.”

Dice straightened, but didn’t seem upset.

I was the one uncomfortable. *Am I allowed to use the fresher by myself?*

*-Not always, when in enemy territory.-*

Oh, that was just wonderful. Did they even have Cathy Catheter?

“Healer Che requested a last follow-up, and you should have time to go out before dinner.” He sounded pleased as he left the meeting room.

I sighed and said, “Let’s go then.”

Once we walked through the Temple halls, I wasn’t sure if Dice was more uneasy than some of the Jedi. No one did anything overt, though.

I stopped in a quieter spot and turned. “You don’t have to walk behind me.”

“I do, Sir. Our duty is to guard and not get distracted by conversation. Lack of focus is a loss of control.” His voice was flat.

Drumming my fingertips against my thighs, this felt like the edges of what happened with Order 66. But it was too soon. “I would prefer that we be able to speak when in a safe camp. Talking to my back is less effective for our duties.”

“Understood.” His tone wasn’t cheerful at all.

I tried to forget my silent tagalong, but it wasn’t working very well.

Healer Che was leaving a lab of some kind. “Ah, Pad… Knight Meyers. I wanted to petition your assistance with your former Master. Master Skywalker was of no assistance when I asked it of him.”

It took me a moment to narrow it down. “Resting when injured?”

“He is known for it, Sir. They both are.” Dice’s voice was neutral.

“Thanks for that, Dice. Understood, Healer. I don’t mind bucking his authority if he’s being stupid.” *How,* would be another question.

“I suspected as much, Knight.” The other Council member smiled. “Don’t you pick up their habit, though.”

A droid brought her something to examine and I took that as reason to go. A market? I didn’t really need anything and storage was so much at a premium so gifts were pointless. Did they do the equivalent of baby showers here?

“Lucky you, Dice. You get to play guide. The only things I can think of looking for in a market is
food or small amusement items. Do you know a place?”

The good side of that was that he couldn’t really insist I lead. A short taxi later and we were inside an enclosed mall high in the sky with immense windows of the skyline as background for the goods. I found mostly packaged food and many gift items. I got random fruit and something salty. I finally gravitated to soft foam toys nearly as soft and fluffy as deep pile fur. I had no idea what winged creatures they were, but I finally chose a mother with brown eyes and two smaller ones with blue eyes, one deeper than the other.

I hoped those choices came from some foresight instead of wishful thinking. I had time to figure out how to present them later.

I looked up and realized that Dice and I hadn’t spoken for maybe an hour. “I’m sorry. I don’t know when I might have a chance to do this later. Do you mind?”

“Not exactly, Sir. Will you be using these?”

That made me blink and then I had to laugh. “No, these are baby gifts, and I’m past that. It’s a little early, but that’s okay.” I sniffed the market, hoping somewhere was food. “Is there a market area with fresher food?”

“Rations and mess could be better.” The grin was clear in his voice.

It took well over an hour, closer to two, and I could feel concern faintly through the Force. But I found a bakery I could persuade to sell me a fair amount of raw dough, another place sold a vegetable sauce that wasn’t too spicy and bluish, and a cheese the seller swore got gooey when heated. Two years since my last pizza was too long. It seemed the sauce was usually for dipping or marinade or something and Dice had settled into confusion.

The harder part was persuading the Temple kitchen to let me heat them up. Obi-Wan and Anakin had never seemed to use their kitchenette for much more than tea or reheating. It’d been months until I realized they had no oven, but I was too busy to care much. Finding substitutes would be slow. The pizzas smelled a little odd as the scent leaked from the carriers as I carried them, but I did get some double takes.

Dice felt embarrassed.

“Should I, can I, release you if this is inappropriate? I didn’t want to make the Generals take time out for something like this while I was training, and I’d been ordered to stay inside the Temple unless I had a Knight’s company.”

He didn’t have to ask what he wanted to know.

I looked around the empty hall and said, “I had hot espionage in my head, basically.”

“The High General’s ordered it...”

It took a minute to backtrack his answer to my question, so I continued up to our residential level. Inside, I found Anakin and Ahsoka. I could feel Obi-Wan was coming down. They seemed surprised at the packages I was carrying and Dice following behind me.

Anakin was snickering through the bond.

“Generals, this is Dice, who’s got his job cut out for him. Dice, Generals Tano and Skywalker...”

Who should be getting a cream pie in his face if he doesn’t stop that.
“Is that dinner?” Ahsoka grinned at me. “I don’t recognize the smell.”

I had to roll my eyes. “There’s no oven here and I wanted to try to make a food from my homeworld, with almost completely different ingredients.”

“You cook?” Anakin was surprised.

I counted back, and remembered the strangeness. “This last couple of years is by far the longest I haven’t cooked since… more decades than I want to count. I hope it tastes good.”

Obi-Wan arrived, looking tired. “I’m willing to try. The meals I’ve had on missions, make even my skills almost edible.”

*How long is he supposed to follow me around today?*

-*Until we go to bed. Neither of you are comfortable.*-

Drat. “Well, this is an attempt at pizza, a casual food. I suspect more complex dishes just aren’t possible without imports.” I opened the top layer and started cutting. “You too, Dice.” Then I explained how it was usually eaten before Anakin took a big bite of the steaming hot pizza slice.

Dice’s eyes were wary as he took off his helmet again. My consolation was that they were less so when he looked at me.

-*Excellent, my Padawan.*-

*It was a good idea, Obi-Wan, even if it was awkward. I don’t think he believes I’m to punish him, I’m too inept.*

*You are not inept.*

*Hunting early for baby gifts did nothing to enhance my bad-assery.*

I felt his amusement at that and then surprise. *And I’m not a Padawan anymore.*

A large pulse of warmth reached me, *-But you are my Vora.*-

*That’s better.*

I finally took a bite of my ersatz pizza. It was okay. “Now this pizza is passable for non-professionals. The fun part is that you can put on just about any savory ingredient. I like sliced mushrooms and very thin slices of imported sausage. Shops selling this are traditional for immigrants in my home country and I might have done that if I’d washed out here.”

Ahsoka had three strings of cheese that would not stop stretching, and she might have used the Force to finally punch it off. Obi-Wan was being a little more careful, and must have thought the crust was a handle.

“The crust should be eaten, it’s just bread dough.” The crust was pretty good, a little crunch on the outside but soft and chewy inside. I needed to keep track of the ingredients that worked.

Dice was eating steadily, but I wasn’t sure what he was really feeling with the wash from the Jedi in the room.

It really didn’t take long for the three smallish pizzas to disappear, along with about half the fruit.
“Not bad, Vora, but we gotta get going if I’m to make that meeting.” Anakin was too pleased for it to be anything but with his wife.

It didn’t take long enough for Anakin, Dice, and I to get to the hanger. Anakin’s voice took on command weight. “Dice, wait here until we get back. You may contact your brothers as you wait if you want. We’re shipping out sunset tomorrow.”

Dice wasn’t bothered, but I was awkward as I followed Anakin to a two seater ship. The silhouette gave me a qualm, but I couldn’t put my finger on why.

“This is R2SK, Vora. I found him and checked him over, and he’s been assigned to you.”

The droid whistled from outside the cockpit.

“Hello.” I was at a loss again. “I’m going to have trouble understanding you. I’m sorry.”

The beep was in a minor key and I wanted to pull my hair already.

“Come on, Vora. You’ve done sims.” Anakin was trying to be encouraging. “You already know the flight part, this just adds combat capability.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever had acrophobia.” I envied him that.

He leaped up into the back copilot seat. I breathed out some of my strain and took the pilot’s. The hatch moved down as soon as I was seated.

Readouts appeared in front of me, listing active checklists. Mine was a little shorter, as the courier’s flight list was abbreviated and halfway down. My list included weapons systems. I went through the motions from sims until we were ready for takeoff. Reaching orbit was much quicker, but we passed beyond it.

Anakin’s shields were firm and occupied in the seat behind me. “Artoo, start drill twenty-one.”

Screens lit up and what seemed to be an enemy starfighter swooped down from the sun and grew on the screen.

Oh, I knew there wasn’t another living pilot or even a ship. I didn’t feel anyone close but Anakin’s bonfire. But my fight or flight primitive wasn’t about to take that chance. I accelerated and veered off my original path and then went back enough to attack.

“That was a simple one.” Then he called a series of commands and I got less and less time between new challenges. Other fighter squads, injured ally, attacking capital ships. I got hit and had to restart, as jarring as it was. Attackers flying down into Coruscant, huge space battles, strange ships with odd weapons.

A chime rang, and the current sim faded. My adrenaline left me jittery.

“Any problem with that phobia?” Anakin’s smug grin didn’t have to be seen. “That’s a good start, Vora. Take us back, I need to see Padmé tonight. I’m clearing you for solo flight, got it Artoo?”

I was all ready to head back. “Is Padmé staying here on Coruscant, or coming along?”

He sighed. “I’d hoped, but she’ll be safer here until we verify their reception. Obi-Wan’s the leader. I’m to stay with the troops in orbit as they remember me too well from my last mission there. You’re for goodwill as they don’t know you.”
I was bemused by this, being a figure who was part of some strategy.

Dice was coming back to attention as the Starfighter landed. “General Skywalker, General.”

“Better check it back in and get your Artoo sent over to the Negotiator’s hanger.”

I started to try to figure a way to disavow any need for a Starfighter for my use.

-No, you don’t, Knight! We’ll just wedge one more in. It’ll be fun!-

I have a different definition of fun.

-Oh, really? You didn’t have any problems with swooping or heights that I noticed.-

I couldn’t think about ‘swooping fun,’ so I focused on the Commander to return his salute like Obi-Wan had. Anakin jogged off and zoomed away on a speeder.

“Sir?” Dice didn’t sound as tired as I felt.

“Well, that’s it for today. I have light saber lessons first thing. I’ll admit I don’t know what’s scheduled after that.” I turned to leave the hanger area, wanting sleep.

“You should meet your troops before we go, Sir. I can get your kit to the Negotiator if you show me where it is. The main briefing will be late day, but the other Commanders don’t know when yet either.” Dice followed me though the slightly dimmer nighttime lighting.

I slowed. “You do know that you can come to me anytime with questions or problems? You’re probably missing Knight Ta’em, and I’m dragging you all into something very quickly. I would prefer more time for you to recover.”

“It’s good to have a purpose again.” He looked aside, but was still clear between body language and Force hinting. “Some of us worried that we would be deactivated after… that. Especially after the Jedi death toll numbers passed through the brothers.”

That made my heart wrench.

-No one should be deactivated!” I had bad feelings about that term and took a breath. “You’re people. So you came to be in a different way than I did, So what? We’re far more alike than some of the alien races, and we’re all people. What’s important is if you get better heads on your shoulders than the asses who left booby traps inside you.”

I really wished I could grab stuff from the Internet from here. I was sure Obi-Wan would have a good place to start. “I want you to believe this. Sometimes you are forced into no win scenarios, where both options are bad or there is no choice. You are not guilty if you have no choice, the one who forced you into it is the guilty one. You can grieve, deeply grieve, but I won’t judge.”

Dice sagged a trifle, but straightened. “You need rest, General?”

After that speech my giggle felt a little strained. “Yeah. I’m not that close to the things a Knight should know. I turned down a chance for military training on my world, and I end up here as a general anyway. Short on sleep all the time.”

“General.” Dice frogmarched me further into the Temple.

It didn’t seem very long before I was back at our rooms. I was too tired to get upset. I yawned.
“I will be back at dawn, Sir.” And he waited until I opened the door before he saluted and left.

Obi-Wan sat, waiting in our common room with padds and other records. “My dear?”

I did enough of a meditation to wake up a bit, though I curled up against him first. “Dice spoke a little, either when he was, or thought I was tired. He seems more guilty and apathetic than anything else.”

“That was what the healers thought as well. Do you think he will accept you as a leader?”

This I felt pretty sure of. “Accept, yeah. He was trying to nanny me ‘cause I was tired. I don’t know if he thinks me a fighter.”

With his arm curved around me, Obi-Wan’s chuckle rippled through me. “The 408th has had an increase in viewing the Temple battle today. You may be one of the few who think you aren’t.”

“My history has a tradition of the citizen-soldier, who steps up for an emergency, but goes back when their duty is done...” Washington, first in the hearts of his countrymen, turned down kingship.

He was silent for a long moment, absently sliding his palm over my leg. Then he spoke again. “I saw Anakin cleared you for Starfighter use.”

I didn’t understand why, after my only live lesson, and shrugged. “Ask him.”

Obi-Wan hummed. “What are your plans for tomorrow, General?”

“How would I know?” That deserved a glare of disbelief. “Dice seems to know more than me about my day.”

“He is an experienced Commander, even after what happened to them. You don’t directly answer to your former Master as you did before. You have more autonomy outside your missions.”

“Not all that much difference, with you as Mission commander and Council member… But I guess you’re supposed to do this, right?” I really wanted to set off an Anakin-level pout but I was tired. “Lessee, I have that lesson from Dooku, meet my troops, see if I can acquire a ref for Dice to think about, find out when the boarding and briefing are. Packing, too. Did I forget anything?”

“Nothing significant. Dice should remain close until it’s second nature or it’s not appropriate for the mission, as in a diplomatic dinner.”

That aspect just hit me. “Do I need any special costume for these dinners?”

“Our robes, clean and in good condition are sufficient in most any situation. I spoke to Dooku and he provided some interesting opinions. I will try to confirm the conclusions before I might act on them.

One more thing before I let Morpheus win. “Do you know of any concrete, practical ethics book you can recommend? Brotherhood is a good model for Jedi and the Brothers, but they probably shouldn’t model on civilians with less admirable goals and rationalizations. Their education has been so pragmatic, detached, and downright cold. I’d like to see them learn how to deal with problems outside combat.”

“They would understand better, and there will be so many of them who need guidance when the war ends. Write it up for the Council while we are away. I will check for an introductory source in the morning.”
That was all she wrote, and the room echoed in the silence as my eyes closed.

“Come on, Vora. A few moments more...”

A nudge that wasn’t quite a pinch, and I sat up, blinking, long enough to walk to bed and deep sleep basking in Obi-Wan.

He was already gone when I started stirring in the gray light before dawn. But I could feel that he was busy, so I didn’t interrupt.

Someone was at our door, and I realized it had to be Dice. He seemed to be waiting, so I scrambled for a shower. Dressing, I nearly tripped on my full travel satchel near the door and I sent Obi-Wan wordless thanks as I ate some rations as fast as I could.

I wasn’t finished when the door buzzed, so I tried to finish chewing as I released the latching. “Good morning!” I wasn’t sure how clear I was.

Dice came in and either noted the Obi-Wan inspired order, or the crumbs on my robes and face. “Sir.”

“I guess you should have full access and I’ll ask how to set that up later. That’s the door to my bunk.” I took a deeper breath. “Knocking would be a good idea unless there’s an emergency. Anakin’s often away from his room here, visiting the Senator. Obi-Wan’s room is the other.” I did not want to mention our sleeping arrangements in any more detail, he felt too young.

“Sir?”

That was too vague and I had to frown at him. “I would appreciate it if your questions would have more detail. I don’t want to have anything depend on guessing games, Commander.”

He drew himself up to say, “Yes, Sir.”

Now I was worried that I’d overreacted, but I didn’t know what more to say and sighed. “Can you find out from the other Commanders the times for boarding or briefing, or do I need to do that in an official channel?”

“I can get that for you, General, but as departure is scheduled at sunset, troops are usually expected to be boarded and settled an hour ahead. Generals rarely board that early. Briefing depends in the Mission Commander.”

“Thank you, Dice.” I realized yesterday was the honeymoon and it was going to be a lot more awkward now. Maybe it was the Force warning me, or memories of teen boys with something to prove. “I’m meeting with my Grandmaster first to show him something. Someday I’ll be cleared to show it to non-Jedi. I’m sorry.”

Dice nodded. “Of course, Sir.”

I found the packed holo projector and heard the small sound of a new message. A file titled ethics and service had no additional comment. I didn’t have time to vet it, beyond that it was from an outside printer, but he would. “I mentioned I studied other things before the Jedi found me? I was just starting thinking about morals and ethics on that world, and I would like your thoughts after we’ve both had time to think about this work.”

“General, what are you asking?” He didn’t understand at all.
“You guys have gotten superb training in how to be soldiers, but almost nothing else. Things that were done to you would never have been done if those people had any sort of smacking when they did something unethical. You deserve better and it will be better if you can identify what’s wrong so you can fight the irrational when needed. I’m offering tools toward another path of service to both the Republic and your brothers when the war ends, if you want.”

“All we know is fighting.”

“…And your brothers. You guys have seen terrible things, too terrible to not affect you. You will need to help each other, because there just isn’t enough of us Jedi to do it all, even if we had training. Civvies know you even less, and not enough of their healers understand war’s costs. You guys know what duty and the costs are. I’m hoping some of the 408th would be willing to learn how to help yourselves heal.”

“This book starts that?”

I had his attention, but I didn’t know if I had any belief. “I think it’s a start. You are all of value and worth respect. Ethics covers respect to others and yourself, doing the right things for the right reason because you understand. The Jedi Code is big on understanding too; you can’t just react, can’t take arms if you can’t see and understand what’s happened and what’s happening.”

Doubt was clear.

“This isn’t about the Force. Some call morals hokey religious rules, but they define and judge every group not just the followers of one set of beliefs. Even Jedi screw up sometimes, but we try because the Light side of the Force is steeped in ethical and moral beliefs to seek the best for all.”

Dice shifted. “And the Dark, the Sith?”

“Well, I believe they fail in ethics almost across the board. They are supremely power hungry, with the rule to destroy their brothers and mentors.”

He looked away. “And you are training with Count Dooku.”

I had to laugh. “Oh, he screwed up when he was offered a mirage. I think he can learn better.” My smile had already disappeared in the face of someone who had lost so much from the Count. “He dropped into a rage and grief that is dangerous for Jedi. I hope he can find some contentment with the family line he still has, which includes Obi-Wan, Anakin, and myself.”

The tiniest shaking came before his next comment. “They fought often, everyone knows that.”

“Anger and disappointment affect Jedi, too. Helping stubborn Jedi can be tricky.”

That was a total stillness from Dice and he brayed some laughter.

My face warmed. “Okay, okay. I see that irony. I haven’t been a Jedi for that long.”

“Jedi stubbornness is a rule. You are a Jedi.”

“Laugh it up.” I gathered the holo and left him for the cell in the med/prison area. Dice scanned the cell area before moving to the outer area.

“So they assigned you some of the meatbags, too.” Dooku was extra snide.

_I was not in the mood_ to coddle his arrogance today. “Yes. Someone has to clean up after the mess
your side and the Council left behind. *You* made millions of Initiates in a factory and *threw* them into brutal combat for mere political power and Force comparisons of penis size. These kids don’t really care, they just want to protect each other and the faceless masses who think of them as disposable. Much like Sidious thought of me and my brothers. Do not even *speak* of them like that.” My wrath swelled.

Dooku started to speak and stopped.

I set up the holo unit as I tried to calm down and tried to decide which one to play first. I’d thought ... *Sith*, or *New Hope*, but thought the dead end was shown better in *Empire...* No happy for him. Just before I started, I said, “This presentation was made on my homeworld a little over thirty years ago, I was about the age of a Padawan.”

Then I shut up.

Dooku seemed a little bored, but it was new. There was a curl of the lip at half-trained Luke freezing, but not as much at hearing the voice of Force ghost Obi-Wan and seeing the muppet Yoda. I could feel his suspicions. He paid much more attention to Vader and the brief appearance of Sidious.”

“Where is the Order? Who is this Vader?”

“Master Yoda was the only Jedi left as far as anyone knows. You saw the Sith Lord and his Apprentice. You should be able to guess.” Then I left him to watch.

“How long?”

“Twenty years of Empire. This is the endgame of Sidious’ goals. Efficiency did not improve on the Republic in any way. Later visions suggest a stable Republic might be a very long time coming.”

There were more questions, but I didn’t add much about events. Then the deeper questions came about the stories and the world.

“So we are stock characters in an… opera.”

“For a world that had no history of *any* of it, what else could you be? You were right that the Order had ossified. I wonder how many visions were lost in the Dark side sludge here? They reached my world, but no one knew anything about the Force’s reality, just one of hundreds… thousands of ‘what ifs.’ The actors in the earlier chapters resemble Obi-Wan and Anakin greatly. I thought they were dressed up for a costume party when we met.”

“May I see the others?”

“A billion people on my world have, but access is limited to Jedi unless they decide to send diplomats to a messed up world. When young, I admired Luke the most.” I dumped the six movies into his system. “With how Order 66 affected both Jedi and clones here, they shouldn’t see the Storm Troopers shooting at young Skywalker until they’ve recovered.”

“What form will you study, have you decided?” Dooku was quiet as he changed the topic.

“I’ve narrowed it to three forms, but I value a versatile skill and don’t consider myself aggressive. I’m not ambitious or in a rush.”

Dooku bowed. “May the Force be with you, GrandPadawan.”

“And with you, sir.”
The General went in alone with the Seppie prisoner. I couldn’t believe someone that shiny was the same as in the newsies, but sidechat from the 212th and 501st agreed she was that new.

This was a secured area, or supposedly so. I found a medic and asked, “Are there monitors on the prisoner?”

She nodded toward an island. “It’s all recorded, the Council gets daily reports after his sessions.”

At least I could see alarms and restraints from here. They were talking, but the General was angry at the Seppie. Then there was a holo, it’s images distorted through the monitor, but I saw pieces of walkers, light sabers, and a Sith. The clean armor of vod’e were the hunters of a Jedi. Where did this happen? They stopped the orders.

I never heard of any of the Brothers obeying any open Sith.

I wanted to sit down, to break something. To report Meyers to the Mission Commander. But they talked more and Meyers moved to leave.

Proof, I needed proof she was a hidden Separatist and traitor.

“Hey, Dice. Sorry it took so long. We can hit the commissary first.” She looked too worried for just that.

The quick food in the Jedi mess was a little better than ours, but not that great.

I wanted to get the holos for evidence, but they were left behind earlier. Then she let me lead so she could review the 408th.

When we reached the pad where my cycle waited, General Meyers just stopped. “Shit. I keep getting hung up on transportation. How would other Jedi get there?”

“Taxi, speeder, bike.”

The general’s shoulders sagged. Then her hand went to her belt and she turned toward the guard post with the faceless Jedi. I followed with a tiny pang that I should take us on the bike... that I ignored. I gave directions to the control unit and we flew off toward our barracks.

An injured watch guard saw us land and nodded to the General. He glared at me.

The general looked at the buildings that made up our training, rehab, and staging buildings.

“Which way?” Her voice was very quiet and she wasn’t looking at me any more. The tall and broad barracks building we’d been assigned to wasn’t that far, but the General paused for an instant as she crossed through the doorway.

I sent out the call to assemble, each regiment had it’s own area. She passed through each area, smiled and greeted the Brothers, saying little things while she asked their names. She didn’t do anything suspicious or threatening towards my Brothers.

“General, the transports to take us to the Negotiator and Resolute have landed. Mission briefing will be on the Negotiator.”

“Thank you, Dice. Lead the way, if you would.”
Chapter End Notes

These should hold weekly until we hit NaNo. I had already written this months ago during the posting of the previous story, when someone was concerned about clones... but most featured will be original clones.
Negotiations

Chapter Summary

The Republic sends a show of force with the Negotiator to Kaller. Senate and Separatist eye will be watching to see if peace is possible. The delegation is not as ready or unified as the mission leader would prefer when the mission arrives in the enemy capital, and Master Kenobi is not pleased.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Anakin Skywalker

The hopeful sunlight of early morning filled the nighttime chill. I could just feel the babies through the Force and Padmé started laughing when I put my ear to her stomach. Without the Force, she looked unchanged, my slim and shining angel. I wanted her to come along on the mission, but sure she was working on too much Senate business to leave.

A new nightmare appeared last night, my last night before we shipped to Kaller. I could only remember hearing blaster fire, light sabers activating in a crowd and horror at whatever was happening. All I knew for sure was that this was not Coruscant and Padmé was away.

My knees hurt from the remnant as Padmé held me. “I hate these visions, Padmé.”

“Ani,” she seemed so calm. “They help don’t they? Would you have made other decisions in the Temple if you had no warning?”

I breathed pain from the vision away, hearing my Master’s words to release the feelings again. I wasn’t about to tell him that he could lecture me without being in the same building. I snorted a laugh, because at some point I just knew the memory and actual Obi-Wan would be lecturing at the same time.

“Are you sure this isn’t just a dream?” Her eyes were open wide in the dim room.

I patted her hand on my arm. “I dream sometimes, I even have nightmares of you landing somewhere other than Tatooine when I was little. These visions have… a different weight, a deeper detail, stronger than memory. This one is still too confused.”

Hugging me a little, my wife said, “Doesn’t that mean you have time?”

“Not always, and I couldn’t see anything specific. My strongest ones are about people I care for. It wasn’t you, but that still leaves Obi-Wan, Ahsoka...” My Padawan had a solo mission away from me, like when I made Knight. Vora’s assignment with us was either an admission that she was undertrained or a tacit permission of their bond.

“Make sure you tell Obi-Wan right away, Ani. He can’t help if you stay silent.”

Nestling closer, I thanked the Force that she accepted Jedi ways.
I left Padmé's apartment while she was studying the latest embassies seeking credentials.

I looked at the reported status of the Clone units from the Chancellor’s office, few of the other Masters had any urgency in their care. I wanted the Vod’e to be free, too. Most were reintegrating, some had attacked their generals and were in a kind of shock when their generals and commanders returned. There were a dozen units in worse shape and there were too many Jedi and Clones who seemed to have killed each other. The 57th had acted beyond a clean kill and been beyond cruel. I didn’t know what to do with them, so they were on sick leave. Vora got the 408th, but Dice seemed okay yesterday,

I’d been looking at the available Jedi and most were already dealing with their own troops or were too cold to assign to wounded Vod’e.

With my new Master’s access, I had a clearer picture of how many we’d lost. The Temple was relatively crowded when Obi-Wan was an Initiate. There were ten Initiate clans when I skipped over it. Now there were three.

The would be no more Jedi to help those other troops. I didn’t want to send them back to Kamino as if they were scolded kids, or worse, defective. I’d seen enough hints of that fear.

I really wanted us to succeed with them. Beyond that I wanted them to get free and have their own lives. I hoped many would choose to continue to serve. I still wasn’t sure if we should split up units without a General, to fill in others. Should they be granted a world where they would be themselves?

Masters always seemed too serene as I struggled with training and missions. Now I struggled with the mission I had chosen, or chosen me: clone freedoms and citizenship. They didn’t even want their own lives that much. I didn’t want the Brothers to see my frustration and anger at my lack of answers for them. I couldn’t smile and speak commonplaces like Obi-Wan, but I could manage to appear calm in their watch.

I reached the 501st’s barracks. I didn’t do formal reviews, just catching up on news. I could feel that Obi-Wan and Vora went to their barracks too. Rex nudged me that it was time to board; the 212th had already finished.

In the Force, Vora felt like she had a thorny burr against her skin, but nothing else. Her shields had improved. Rex summarized readiness, and which Brothers were remaining in sick leave. All three forces had enough losses that Vora’s men could be split between the two ships.

It wasn’t ideal, but the Navy had stepped up on blockades and a few battles during the Temple crisis. We hadn’t lost territory, but the Republic had lost ships.

I didn’t think Vora minded not commanding a ship.

As I stopped off to my quarters on the Negotiator, I overheard Rex sending the go ahead to Dice. Obi-Wan’s men and mine were used to intermingled resources, but I saw some annoyance on Dice’s face. The 408th wanted to all be on one ship… or their Commander did.

They were going to be a problem, I knew it. Rex saw that I knew it.

“Log issues and see if you can backtrack to causes.” I hoped it wasn’t Vora.

“Yes, Sir. They had suicides.”

I knew, but hadn’t realized it would still ripple away like this.
Dropping my satchel on my bed, I commed a last farewell to Padmé and Rex pretended I was thinking deep General thoughts.

Vora was approaching officer quarters, but she was muted as she entered hers. Dice fired out in a hurry. Didn’t take long for her to find Obi-Wan’s office-quarters and I waved Rex off to make sure everyone was getting ready to Jump.

I wasn’t surprised to see Obi-Wan and Vora embracing, her signature much smoother. “What was that? Are they giving you trouble?"

My former Master leaned back and brushed her cheek. “You can ask before it reaches that point, my dear.

Her sigh echoed earlier dullness and unhappiness. “Everything was fine in the morning. I stopped in to see Dooku. By the time we got to the barracks, Dice was angry, almost hatred. Everything got harder since then and he doesn’t want to even look at me. By the time we boarded, some of the others were looking at me oddly.”

“I’ll talk to him. Can’t have this spread.” How soon could I set up sparring during Jump?

Vora shook her head. “Can’t have them think you’re holding my hand… They won’t respect that.”

“Anakin won’t, but you’ll need to keep an eye on me” Obi-Wan smirked as he held her. “I’m sneaky about that.”

I had to laugh at him. “You’re both going to have to be sneaky for a while. Some know from the Temple, but your group wasn’t there.”

Seeing Obi-Wan be cross about holding Vora, like I’d been for so long, was sweet and I had to smile at his mood. The chime for the briefing’s start rang just before I could feel the Commanders’ approach. Obi-Wan moved to behind the table where current system maps, fleet, and bases spread as each commander moved near their Jedi.

Vora brought out a padd for notes, though I preferred listening. The briefing didn’t have that much new since my last visit after the start of the war. I noted the military preparedness more than the peace talks, I’d lead Obi-Wan’s reserves if they needed pulled out. My presence wasn’t announced, but the Resolute was known to be my command.

No one would be surprised at my presence.

Obi-Wan and Vora were reviewing the treaty goals and prioritizing them. I didn’t think mutual aid had a snowball’s chance in lava, but it pleased them.

When they slowed enough, I wondered if they spoke through their bond too. “That’s all well and good, Master, but what guard are you taking down with you?”

Obi-Wan made a face, and Cody coughed. At that, Obi-Wan nodded. “That was not decided by comm. I want to see how their reaction feels first. I would prefer fewer, to show our confidence…”

“Fewer means quicker pull out if it does south, too.” Vora examined the orbital stations with a frown.

An instant of aggression that disappeared, but I wasn’t sure who. It wasn’t me.

Now Obi-Wan would try to study everything on Kaller before we arrived.
I skimmed the high points quickly, while they discussed culture and history. I didn’t mind that Vora liked his lectures… better her than me. “Master, I think we’re done planning for now. I’ll set up some drill and competition for the men.”

“Will that be for the 408th too?”

“Yeah, they need to work together.” I didn’t need to think about it.

“Sounds like plan, Master.” She was snickering through the bond.

Obi-Wan waved us away and the two of them started drawing up historical maps, investigating something.

I always wanted to bring Padmé in here… on that table… with all the maps.

They both flushed a deep red and he moved to a different seat as the door closed behind me. I had to laugh as the Commanders and I moved to a hanger. “Rex, start setting it up for both crews now, before jump. We’ll set aside a bay for light saber drill here, too.”

Kaller was less than two days away, but a tournament or series of them could run during the negotiations as well. Rex and Cody cheered up and opened their comms, we’d done this before to kill time. There wasn’t that much to do while in Jump or standing watch.

The chime and rumble said we’d gone into Jump.

I didn’t see Vora that much during the day and a half of Jump. In the tournament, she cheered and consoled her men, with a nearly silent Dice standing behind her. Mid-evening, I practically dragged her off to our training area. It didn’t take long until more vod’e drifted in, wearing all three colors.

Vora’s weeks of training with Dooku had increased her precision and speed, but I doubted she wanted to do the full progression of styles. Makashi was too formal and I would not recommend Niman for her. “Good. Did you learn any progressions besides Shii-Cho?”

“That’s it, Master Anakin. Don’t you forget I’m an old fart. I’m more than half surprised I’m this far along when starting older than you did, kiddo.”

I grinned back. “Maybe you should visit Master Yoda and get your own gimmer stick. You might be a little tall for full effect.”

Vora’s hand covered her mouth and her eyes bugged before laughter snuck out. “I don’t think so. Chastising is one thing, but threatening the family jewels is overkill.”

I tottered forward, holding my unlit hilt. “I am Darth Niiguil…” I forced my voice higher and hopped back like I was hit by a stick. “Ow, kriff it. Fear me.” I heard their laughter.

“Really, my Padawan.” Obi-Wan was the essence of serenity as he removed his outer robes and set his blade too. “Darksiders do not react well when gimmer sticks are used like that. Large sweet candies or sparkly planet razing weapons are much more effective as bribes.”

Now this would be more fun...

- Obi-Wan

I gathered my notes and moved to the bay to join Anakin and Vora where they sparred. There were more pockets of anger and distrust than I could like between people who needed to trust each other
in combat. Vora wasn’t as angry as sad.

As the Mission Commander, I had to decide how far this could be allowed to go. Dice and his Brothers were already gunshy about another General and Vora was different enough that she would not trigger as many associations. Likewise, Vora had no deep trust for Clone loyalty. Dice might have to be transferred to non-combat if he could not work with a new Jedi general.

Vora… I would need to speak to her.

Anakin and I circled around each other, omitting an official start. He grinned before settling in to watching and feeling for my intentions. Tightening my shields to be a pillar, I could note the small twitches that said he was on edge to attack first, but he held himself back.

I felt restlessness from our audience, but that was irrelevant. Anakin and I were at an effective stalemate, we knew each other too well.

I sent a tight message to the Knight. *Flanking attack, now!*

A hint of surprise and she was moving. As Anakin’s attention shifted to push her back against the wall, I attacked the small opening. He parried with an absent smile, our next exchanges were fast and almost scripted as we both looked ahead for the other’s next attack.

A bare hint of intent I was expecting, and a metal hilt stunned Anakin’s arm.

He yelped and threw her a dirty look. She looked surprised.

-*You know better, Anakin. You should be more aware.*-

“Very true, Master.” Anakin bowed to both of us with an evil grin. “Shall we start again?”

We kept shifting our lines of attack and Vora had improved since the last we did this. She was using the Force to revive her energy more than I liked when I called a halt for the night.

Anakin smirked at us. Cody felt like he was smirking when he followed me to my quarters and Dice briskly followed on Vora’s left. We would reach Kaller in the morning, and I wasn’t pleased.

If it didn’t settle soon, I’d set Cody to it. “Knight, I want a report about your command, now.”

She only sighed, but her Commander held a glow of satisfaction. Cody, stopped outside the door as I’d hoped. He must have signaled Dice who halted as well.

Vora slumped inside my quarters. “He’s been cheeky and snide, ever since the pizza. I know I’m being paranoid to think he hated it that much. A hundred little disses, and the only reason I know for sure is because he’s satisfied and other clones are dismayed.”

I knew the dismay was a good thing, that it wasn’t affecting the troop as a whole. “Another week, my dear. It’s no shame if he was broken by Order 66.”

“I just can’t see why he changed.” She looked at the current plans and sighed. “I’ll try to corner him alone once we’re there.”

“Shh, my dear. I do not expect any problems diplomatically this soon. There will be careful display on both sides while we go through protocols to decide exactly what escorts we will be allowed. I do not care the size of the meeting tables or precedence of flags. Do they respect the Republic or will they be petty, thinking that means strength? Will they respect the Order and our safety escort, or will
they treat us as pawns or criminals?

“These questions will decide if these talks will have any purpose, and it could take from a day to weeks to settle our interactions. The treaty could take months or even years.”

Vora’s eyes narrowed. “You’re going down alone, aren’t you? I’m supposed to...”

“No, my dear. You would be expected as a Padawan, but another full Republic General is a different matter.”

That much disgruntlement made me smile. “Has the Force warned you, or given you a vision?”

She shook her head.

“Once we have a recognized embassy, more will be able to come down. It won’t be that long as you were already an announced member of the delegation. More ploys will come before the core of the negotiations.”

“Master...” Vora’s voice was not deferential, but annoyed. “It’s pointless to bring all three of us if you weren’t planning on playing your reputations, or was that the Council’s idea that you’re planning to ignore? Either I, or Anakin are going down with you, preferably both. You are going to stop indulging in your streak for self-sacrifice. There are always alternatives, so you’re going to look harder.”

-Right.- Anakin was leaving his room, already irritated.

I waited for the few moments for him to sweep in, only half dressed.

“Fewer at risk this way.” I crossed my arms.

Vora mirrored me, possibly deliberately. “This is a God-damned peace conference. If they wanted a trap, they would have objected to the Team.”

Anakin was glaring through his wet hair. “You implied to me that Vora was going to have your back earlier. No way are you going by yourself.”

I didn’t think that pulling rank would help. Anakin would probably co opt the Brothers’ help and they’d land moments after me, ruining the united front.

I turned aside without saying anything more. “Very well.”

But deep inside the annoyance, I appreciated it.

The silence remained tense but it faded.

“I’ll see you on the bridge in the morning.” Anakin stalked away, saying something to Cody on the way out.

“Do you want me to go?” Vora asked in a small voice.

Startled, I looked at her, where she gazed at the floor. “No, of course not.”

“I’m not going to apologize. That was stupid.”

“The risks were acceptable. I am sure you and Anakin would finish the mission, if it came to that.”
“Not every way to finish a mission is a success. Neither of us are much at negotiation...”

I stepped over to cup her chin. “I have every faith you would manage, my dear. I am not afraid of death, I am a Jedi.”

Vora’s arms went around me. “Yeah, yeah. But we’ll lose you, your skill, and your wisdom. Being on risky missions is one thing, but seeking out more risk is suicidal.”

“Sometimes it takes one to stop a great darkness.”

We rocked as she thought.

“You can’t protect us forever, my fox. We’re stronger together than apart.” She wasn’t wrong in that.

“Come along, my dear. We should rest.” I doubted we had ended this disagreement, but on mission we must seek rest.

Soon, Vora slept beside me, my fingers sliding through her longer curls until I slept as well.

It was still early by the chrono when a buzz barely preceded the door opening. “Generals,” Cody started and then paused. “General Meyers might want to...”

Vora sat up and rolled off the bed to gather her outer robes again. “Thanks. I never thought I’d have to be sneaking around at my age.”

Before you go, my dear- I propped myself up on my elbow, for a last kiss before we separated for the day.

I sat up and watched her leave with a smile, and then smoothed out my face. Standing, I stretched. “How long until we leave Jump?”

“Half an hour. All units reporting ready.”

“Thank you, Cody. A quick wash and I will meet you on the bridge.”

“A quick wash and food?” His voice was noninflected.

I frowned. “Did Vora speak with you?”

“I noticed it long ago, but General Skywalker reminded me.”

I wondered how a member of the Jedi High Council came to be treated like a youngling, but I didn’t have the time for that meditation.

When I reached the bridge, I was the last to arrive. Anakin stilled for a moment, before resuming his circling to peer over shoulders. Vora was near my consoles, watching the displays, with an occasional bubble of amusement she always had on the bridge. Cody was monitoring the ship’s officers, while Rex observed weapons systems.

Dice seemed uncertain and watching his General along with the rest of the bridge.

Before I reached my seat, we left Jump. We were a good distance away. “Commendations on the Jump. Contacts?” I knew through the Force that there was no immanent threat.

Gones called, “Five capital ships in orbit, none clustering in motion. Resolute out of Jump and close enough for support.”
“Comm the Secretary of Kaller’s office, the usual courtesies.”

The wait seemed longer than it was. “Negotiator, This is the office of the Secretary for the Sovereign System of Kaller. Welcome to Kaller.”

Not as promising as if the Prime Minister had welcomed us or they spoke for more than this system, but still promising. “This is Jedi Master Kenobi speaking for the Republic. I would like to confirm the courtesies for our embassy and treaty mission.” I signaled Boost to send the first set of requests, and I received theirs at nearly the same time.

The bridge and channel were quiet as I scanned their points. I gestured Vora to read them as I thought. There was little change from before and little different than I’d sent. “Agreed, Secretary. If you would provide the location coordinates for us to land...”

The location flagged as the estate that had once served to house their Senator years ago. I did not remember it. This was moving forward smoothly and soon a couple score of our mission were loading for transport.

Anakin glared as Vora and her Commander moved in. His smile was tight and eyes stormy when I moved to board. Anakin?

-I’m fine.-

I gave her a week last night to get it straightened out. I don’t sense as much a problem with the others, but he worked more closely with Knight Ta’em.

The ramp closed. -That’s better.-

I moved to a bench and strapped in, thinking.

We landed on the pad of a spacious estate. The grass and buildings had a sense of neglect. It wasn’t the beauty of Naboo, but it was far from Coruscant’s undercity or the hives of other planets. The brothers spread out, checking for threats, but I was feeling certain that it was safe.

“Cody, signal safe landing up to Anakin.”

A quick tour with our Commanders and selecting rooms for what purpose filled some time. I was relieved when the Senator’s suite had a connecting room.

One spacious room would suit for meditation and training. A reception area was convenient to the main entrance.

“General, I’m setting up sniper posts until we have more down here. We’ll go over everything for nasty surprises and hidden droids, and maybe set up a few of our own. Dice, carry on.” Cody stepped off passing orders, as soon as he moved away.

The communications room was beside a very formal office, but most of the existing equipment would be disused during our stay. We’d stay with our comms. If progress was slow on these preliminaries, Senators might arrive during any deadlock.

My comm chimed, Under-minister Kass Ores confirmed our diplomatic authorizations and wanted to meet very soon to discuss a welcoming reception tonight. I could probably balance flattery and a wish for efficiency in my sleep.

I noted that the supply clone Vits would check into the food for diplomacy, probably in civvies with
a guard. We would need to host and we had not brought much better than rations. Teas popular here along with… Or should I send Vora to find catering and information? Vits and Vora… perhaps they should take two guards. That seemed enough or maybe too much.

Cody returned. “Second carrier is just landing. No trouble or presents located so far.”

“We will be attending a reception tonight, Vora and Vits can go out to find formal items like teas and such for visitors. Check for caterers and each of them should have a guard. Additional intel on how they feel about their former leaders and what they feel about events in the Republic, would also be useful.”

Cody sent orders and Vora rolled her eyes. -Think I should put on an apron and bake a cake?- I paused in my planning. If you think it would be that much more effective, but it is not necessary. No one would expect a full diplomatic staff from the Order. Knowledge is more important.

-And you like tea.- That was a smirk.

Chapter End Notes

Making peace is a lot slower than making things go boom.
Confrontations

Chapter Summary

"What do you do with a surly Trooper?
What do you do with a surly Trooper?
What do you do with a surly Trooper, er-lie in the mission?"
Knight Vora is sent for tea take out as a test for the locals.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Vora

The mansion was pleasant enough, more like San Simeon than Wayne Manor. Cody was not pleased as he scurried around, trying to plug many, many security holes. As much as an armored trooper, armed to the teeth could scurry. More troopers arrived to make a living shield if needed.

I really did not want it to be needed. Hyperware was a pilot among my troops who reminded me of a college buddy who went off the join the Marine reserves not long before 9-11. He liked to blow things up, and we lost touch. I never knew what became of him.

Obi-Wan didn’t seem to have any ulterior motive for this assignment, but I didn’t know jack about tea.

There hadn’t been any particular restrictions on stepping out, but I would have preferred a local guide. The formal gate was within eyesight, and the city beyond. “Cody, I’m heading out.”

He nodded before speaking to another brother.

I wanted, really wanted to have that private talk with the silent Dice, but in a potentially hostile city, I felt it wasn’t time yet. Was that the Force, people skills, or my being a chickenshit who was procrastinating? Leaving the compound to explore, Dice followed me without a word.

The gate had a set of clones who nodded to me as we approached. They were mostly 212th, which didn’t surprise me. Both Obi-Wan and Anakin were losing patience with Dice and me.

I waggled my fingers at their salutes, I never felt justified returning salutes when I still didn’t feel military. “A couple hours, unless I find a chocolate waterfall.”

And that was that. We walked out into the quiet street, taller buildings and hopefully markets a few blocks away.

This silence was getting real old, and I sighed. “Do you know anything about teas?”

“No, Sir.”

“Obi-Wan likes his tea, but I’ve never been as enthused. My world had something like kaf, but I liked that even less than tea. Do you drink any hot beverages to wake or de-stress?” I kept hoping to
stumble on what pissed him off, not that I thought it was tea.

“Kaf.”

Another try. “Did you take a look at that reference?”

“No time.” No inflection either.

Well, that was less than I hoped. But ignoring his surliness was becoming habit. “Have you been on Kaller before?”

“No.”

“Well, then we’re going to look for a market, bakery, or tea seller. Say hello and that kind of thing. Fresh bakeries are much better, right?” I didn’t get any response to my babble.

I stopped after a block where the few tall, maybe saurian people kept away from us without running in panic. So did Dice. “Come up. So we can pretend to talk like civil human beings.”

“Sir?” That was only noise. No content, only cold.

I turned to face his white helmet and swamp green marks. “Don’t pretend this is anything like civil, Commander.”

“Sir, my responsibility is to protect you. This is a hostile Seppie world.” He spoke no more.

I changed my mind. I didn’t want civil right now.

I wanted to smack him.

That was very much not approved.

Turning, I let the Force guide my turns. We were on the edge of a change in building height, where artisan businesses tried to entice those from higher rent areas. A few more turns and I found a bakery. The smell was excellent, and seemed like sourdough.

Inside, the fresh smell made me take a deep breath and want to steal the nearest toaster.

The Kalleran looked at us with big eyes, but didn’t say anything.

I plastered a big smile on. “You could say I’ve traveled many light-years for rolls that smell like that.” I was now doubting that I’d learn anything useful, but I was playing the nice, friendly Jedi.

That got me a nervous smile. “Thank you, Jedi.

“Can you take Republic credits?”

A moment to decide. “Yes.”

“Excellent, I’d like start with a dozen… forget it, I want all your remaining rolls. What do you recommend for feeding diplomats with their tea?”

He started showing me images and I tried a few samples, at least the ones safe for humans, too. I asked for a few to take and told him to schedule deliveries and future payment with Vits in the morning.
Several faces peeped out from the back of the house as we spoke, and I winked at one, hoping the meaning was the same. With tomorrow’s order in the proverbial register drawer, the owner was mellow. I asked about tea and catering that was nearby and good.

The tea shop made me boggle. I’d known of dozens on Earth, but this seemed like hundreds. I had to rely on the owner more than I had with the baker. I bought a half dozen in enough quantity for a state funeral or random diplomatic ceremony. I mangled the name I thought was the one Obi-Wan liked, but it smelled close. They didn’t have anything that looked like the plastic tea from a canister I preferred. There was something close to cinnamon and fruit, that I could doctor up.

I really wanted a cola: fizz, sugar, and caffeine.

The first caterer only had pictures, but the second had a small sandwich shop about to close. Sweet and tangy convinced me and I bought the entire paste and wrap batch to take away. It wouldn’t be enough to be a meal for the entire delegation, but rations alone were also old.

With contact numbers and a treat, we got a lift back to the mansion in the catering speeder. Dice bristled, but he’d forfeited any say by being prickish. The transport from the Negotiator was sitting on the pad and quiet. Reentering took a bit more than leaving, but I found Vits in the kitchen with the numbers, the bakery order, with rolls and wraps to hand out.

Maybe I felt a little naughty to spoil dinner, but I took toasted rolls and tea to Obi-Wan. Feeling ashamed for aggravating him, I left Dice in the hall. I did not feel ready to force anything right then. But I was sick of it too.

Anakin was pacing and stopped to hug me, while Obi-Wan was calm. I put the warm plate on the desk for munching along with the tea.

“Will that be enough tea?” Obi-Wan carefully split his roll, quiet through the bond.

“No, that’s a gift for you. There’s larger quantities of other teas for diplomacy arriving in the morning.”

“Anything else?”

“Wary, but then heading toward pleasant people. They are accepting hard Republic credits, so that’s a big tell about their intentions. I get no feeling of rationing or curfews or prominent propaganda.”

“I agree,” Obi-Wan finished with the spread. “I am sure the Undersecretary will be handing me off to the Secretary or Minister tonight. The treaty will happen if we are patient.”

“Good. Time for the new model lessons, Vora.” Anakin oozed smug as he gave me a one armed hug around my shoulders.

I wasn’t sure I liked becoming an example of Jedi savant piloting. “Is there time?”

“Nothing in diplomacy runs on time, but there’s enough.” Anakin strode off, pulling me with him.

I was out of step and stumbled at first. Our flight to orbit was quick through the upper atmosphere and I was just waiting for the other shoe.

*No one* thought Anakin was subtle.

Anakin spoke from the pilot’s seat. “Do you have a plan?”
Answer the wrong question if he was planning to be vague. “I’m leaning toward Soresu. Niman doesn’t have enough Masters left to give me any confidence in its utility. The others are less of a match, I’m not aggressive.”

The younger Jedi glared at me. “For your Commander.”

“Again, tea, kaf, and talking didn’t work today.” I looked at the stars becoming clearer as the atmosphere fell below us. “He’s mad about something, but hasn’t done or said anything to hint at what. He’s not going to say anything if he might be overheard, he’s had plenty of opportunities if he was. So I got to get him apart and upset enough to say what he hasn’t. I think he’s going to lose his temper before he talks.”

He frowned, enough to be felt in the Force. I was kind of glad Obi-Wan was on planet right now.

“I don’t want to get the other brothers involved. I think it will blow over once it breaks, but it’s driving me crazy.” The silence lasted a minute or two after I said that, I guessed he didn’t have any other ideas either.

“Vora, I got a different starfighter for you. It’s yours and one of the newest line. Great controls.” Anakin wasn’t salivating over it, not quite.

“How many more vehicles am I going to have to pilot?”

His eyes were sparkling. “All of them.”

I finally added it up. “Obi-Wan won’t go out on these jaunts anymore, will he?”

Anakin looked away at the controls again. “He doesn’t really have to, he knows enough ships to get by on just about any of them. Even if he complains.”

My eyes prickled at his sudden loneliness and I reached to grip his arm. “He doesn’t mean it that way. He feels quieter joys, not the exuberant ones.”

Anakin closed his eyes and put his prosthetic hand over mine. “I know, I miss that excitement we both feel in a fight. But it’s not happening as often...”

“You’re an adrenaline junky, Anakin. Fights that paralyze anyone else, get you high. Unless you start picking fights with dinosaurs or a black hole, you won’t top that fight in the Temple for a long time.”

“I know.” His eyes drooped when he looked at me.

I shook my head. “It won’t be calm for that long. And parents get all new stress and panic about their kid’s health and happiness. Two will be twice the strain as they will compete in pushing you.”

That made us get quiet as he set the shuttle down.

“I can’t help much with helping you see Obi-Wan more, I’m not spending that much time with him either. If it weren’t for...” I had trouble speaking my real worry. “I’d think the whole affair was almost over.”

“Yeah.” Anakin sighed. “Let’s go see your ship. It’s prepped for launch.”

By the time we reached the other bay where a wall of cells and lever arms showed craft that seemed too small to be very dangerous, Pokemon with cannons. Some clones were hanging out, like at a
pool hall, in blue, orange, and olive markings.

“They’re not toys.” He was both offended and amused “It is smaller than the Aethersprite, so we can carry more of these Actis interceptors in the same space. I’m kind of hard on mine.”

Two were sitting there, facing the bay doors. One marked with red and the other blue, and he waved me to the blue one. “I’ve customized mine, we all do.”

I thought of the cheesecake on the old bombers, but wondered if I could come up with something good. Not that today was the time. I heard squeaks from the R2s, and I had no idea what they just said.

“This isn’t proper flight gear, so you’ll just have to be careful, Vora.” Anakin’s words were scolding, but excitement and glee were stronger.

Feeling his anticipation and freeform bubbling, I got a nasty sense of déjà vu as it closed. A black painted one was hunting rebels in a trench and I forced my attention on mine and my less familiar droid.

-Vora?-  

*Bad memory, I'm fine. A blink’s worth of time passed. I'm fine. I promise.*

Putting on the head thing as the cockpit closed, I looked at the displays and controls. It was more similar than I expected, and I ran the checklist as it powered up.

With a deep breath and a last check on the deck around me, I raised the hover enough to move forward.

A squeal and some beeps came from the droid. Too slow, a translation appeared on the head’s up. “I’m sorry, Tuess. I know you can do this better than me, but I gotta learn.”

Anakin had already squirted outside like a watermelon seed, but I was moving at barely an amble. I did not want a repeat of the garage door jam and my first car.

We stayed away from the planetary forces as I got used to how it flew. I’d gotten used to the longer front end of the Aethersprite, like many Republic ships. I somehow felt exposed, like the first time I drove a cargo van after sedans. And now I was exposed at hundreds of G’s as I flew over the smallest moon, trying to copy him.

The lesson passed quickly enough until Anakin called time. He felt mellow. It was almost mid-evening, but Obi-Wan was still at our little diplomatic outpost when Anakin quickly set the courier down, almost defiantly.

Obi-Wan was serene and bland, raising an eyebrow at his brother Master. “Vora needs to hurry for the reception.”

“No, I need to hurry. She isn’t needed tonight.” Anakin was spoiling for an argument as he stalked off.

I felt a pang as I crossed my arms to hug myself. I didn’t think a reception would help Anakin’s loneliness. I tried not to think about his other words. Instead I reinforced my shields because a crying jag would not help with anything.

Obi-Wan began to speak, but instead moved outside to a formal looking group speeder.
The squad included Cody and Dice, but lost my Commander and added Rex as soon as Anakin ran up.

I went back inside and looked for something to eat as I let my shields soften. The samples I hauled back were gone and Dice walked behind me with another superior snot attitude. I made some of the fruit tea, adding something like cream and a lot of sweetener.

It seemed all the better compared with rations. Now how it would compare with cranberry scones, this world would never know.

Now I was feeling vaguely guilty and useless as I dawdled over the food, provisioning was never interesting.

I wasn’t looking forward to the comic books’ idea of making buddies, but reason, charm, and snark hadn’t done it. But we had to be able to talk freely about the mission, and talking to a brick wall was not cutting it. But I could not force him.

I didn’t want him to wash out just because he didn’t like me. Lots of people hadn’t liked me and I was used to that, it usually wasn’t this critical. It was becoming clear we’d never be effective without trust. And it was hard to trust someone who seemed to hate your guts. I didn’t distrust him, not exactly, but I felt like he’d happily kick my puppy.

I went to a compartment that we were reserving for practice. I started one of the katas, I was always pleased if I remembered all the moves in the proper order. I remembered seeing demonstrations in their respective forms, but I was too late to claim the supple decades of practice.

I heard a faint snicker.

That made me stop.

“Do you have something you want to say, Commander?”

“No, General.”

Wasn’t that just dandy? “Let me change that. What was so funny, Commander?”

“You’re not very good at that. You’re not a Knight or General. Just an impostor.”

We might as well be swinging them out to compare length.

Made me regret my complete lack of training on Terra.

But I would try to hang on to my temper. “And why is being under-trained a problem? I told you when we first met. You’ve been training for a decade longer than me. That doesn’t mean I can’t fight when there is a threat.”

“But will you fight?” He sounded like he was gritting his teeth.

“I did and I will.”

He didn’t respond to that. He shut down again.

“Fine, let’s spar, no powered weapons, no armor. To yield. Winner gets truthful answers any question.” His questions and reason for anger would be nearly as helpful as if I won.

“No tricks…”
I found something like a bo stick and folded my cloak around my arm to shield it.

Dice had scrounged bully clubs

I could parry those with the Force’s help, but I simply wasn’t as good at hand to hand. Very soon, my ears were ringing and one eye swimming.

-Vora!-

I swept for his head this time. I could not play nice as much as I disliked this. **Do not disturb, I mean it. I need this information.**

I shut off frantic objections as I pushed a crate in his path. In those seconds I almost begged, “What is wrong with you?”

Dice’s nose was bleeding and face starting to swell. “You’re a traitor Seppie. I don’t know what you were passing today but I won’t let you get away with it.”

*Oh, God,* he was delusional.

What he *was,* was very trained. I tried to use the Force to boost me, but I was tired and hurt, so concentrating was getting harder when we were pulled apart by what felt like a mob.

-“Vora!”- Obi-Wan was racing close and the bonfire of his Padawan was just behind.

The spike in my lungs and weight of my eyelids paved my way into darkness.

**- Obi-Wan**

I was looking forward to the reception, a new set of diplomats and motives to unpeel. Having Vora with me was an added bonus. I was worried about how she was adjusting to no longer being a Padawan, or maybe not adjusting. She showed little interest in solo missions or proving herself and proper self-reliance.

Anakin had been so eager to get out and prove himself against his critics. His leading ambition was recognition.

Not Vora. She had patience. She had projects that I wasn’t sure had the rest of the Council’s approval. Not that I was often present when she was discussed. I truly didn’t know for sure why three of us were assigned.

This could be an important treaty to begin a march toward peace, but I had negotiated solo before.

My first surprise came when Anakin invited himself to the reception. He had an edge that said he was unhappy about something, but once there he seemed glad to chat with me in slow moments about Padmé. Vora didn’t say anything, but she seemed surprised Anakin was volunteering.

I was uneasy, but no definite warning when we left. The reception was almost brittle, some of the dignitaries were wary of us though nothing was said. Anakin started to get jittery too.

Then I *felt it* and my stomach dropped to my feet.

Vora was fighting, back at our base.

I said something to the Undersecretary while forcing a warm smile and a quip I didn’t remember, and
Anakin said more as I hurried to the speeder. I didn’t want to distract, but she didn’t want the contact.

The only impression I had was that it was an individual non-Sith, it wasn’t that kind of alarm.

Anakin caught up and took the controls. I’d let him take us high speed, as I sent a message to ops.

I arrived with the two combatants already pulled apart and an explosion of anger in the room. By the time I reached her, I realized that neither she nor Anakin were that angry.

The other Brothers hauled Dice back.

I had to get to her, her signature was faint while Anakin snapped some orders.

Vora was more alert than I expected, though her closed eyes were wet with blood and sweat.

“Vora, dear one...”

-I got it... with two days left, Obi-Wan.-

My heart seized and I had trouble swallowing. What did you get, my dear?

She coughed, and I refused to see what.

-He thinks I’m a Separatist traitor, who passed information today.-

It could have been plausible if he believed she had any interest in helping them. That she somehow fooled or tricked other Jedi. I gathered her closer.

I tried to release my fear and anger as fast as it rose. This was still from what Sidious and the Kaminoans had done.

“How is she?” Anakin snarled for the Brothers, a thread of anger and trace of fear glowing in his voice.

-You can ask me. I don’t think anything broke. I just want to crawl into a hole and sleep a week.-

We hadn’t brought Kix down to the planet. “Up to sick bay, and then we’ll straighten this out. Cody, make sure this camp stays secure, we do not need our hosts learning about this mess. This was a sparring accident.”

Anakin piloted, swift and without flourish. Vora dozed most of the way to the Negotiator.

When I looked over at Dice, he looked sullen and resentful. The others were cold toward him. This was what we were trying to avoid with this Commander. Dice was taken into a cell.

That didn’t matter right now. I held her hand as the sling dropped her into the bacta tank. She twitched but then relaxed into the warmth and sleep.

I asked the medical droid while Kix was busy, “How long?”

A moment and it told me, “Skeletal fracturing and some organ bruising. Full repairs: thirty hours, Emergencies: sixteen.”

“And Commander CT6268?”

“Eight hours.”
I was ashamed of my first reaction and sent both into the Force. I turned to my Commander after a pause. “Cody?”

“Yes, Sir.” He was… no, they were upset. Cody was angriest.

“Put him in the brig. I will speak to him in the morning after I have meditated. He is not to be harmed before a decision is made.”

I needed to meditate, but wasn’t sure if my cabin was the best place. That was why I needed to meditate.

I checked our schedule, mid-morning was the first meeting to confirm the broad strokes. Tomorrow the Republic hosted. “Make sure Vits has the schedule, and that I’m up in time.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I grasped his shoulder and tried to smile. “Thank you, Cody.”

“Of course, Sir.”

Taking a deep breath, I entered my quarters.

Anakin was kneeling in a pose for meditation.

I wasn’t surprised and settled beside him and trying to achieve calm for myself.

I touched down again within my body, leaving the Force-scape of all lives around me. The brightest was next to me and I opened my eyes.

Anakin’s eyes were open. “She was going to push him to uncover the problem. She needed the time and privacy.”

“He believes she’s a Separatist traitor passing information.” I didn’t know what to do, compassion vied against safety.

“I almost want to laugh.” Anakin did not sound amused at all.

“It is not funny. This is against his training and I do not want him...”

I had to breathe deeply again. I still believed unrestrained wants would destroy a Jedi. Vengeance was not in the Code, nor should it be.

But fear was… and I should not fear Vora being attacked again by her Commander. Too much like how my brother Jedi had died.

From that fear came the anger that a trusted Commander would still attack when the Sith order was only history. How many were still like landmines?

Could we ever trust as easily?

“Any word from the...” No! This was not the role of a Jedi. No ignorance, but understanding. War was ending, but it had been almost too long. Taking off the General role seemed impossible right now.

My hand ached. When I glanced down as I flexed it, my hand was shaking. I stared at how it betrayed my lack of serenity.
“Obi-Wan.” Anakin looked calmer than I felt.

Anakin looked calmer.

I coughed, and then had to laugh, which helped. This would make Vora laugh, too. “Yes?”

“Can I...” He gave up and put his arms around me, his fear and anger starting to drop quickly. “I like the echo.”

My first Padawan’s calm was a shell, but focusing on him grounded me. “She should be awake and complaining soon enough.”

“Sorry, but I promised.”

I wondered the context and to whom. “It is no problem, my Padawan.”

He pulled back with a small, real smile. “Did you notice she wasn’t swearing this time?”

I hadn’t.

Still, I felt calmer and more likely to remain so. We needed to understand before any decisions could be made.

When Anakin left to get some sleep, I noted that both Rex and Cody were on watch. The Brothers were our friends and loyal, but sometimes I wasn’t sure what to say to them. I saw where and how they were raised, a splinter of Mando culture to defend the Republic.

“Cody, wake me if anything changes, and thank whoever got them separated. And thank you.”

Vora was still unconscious when I woke, but I’d maintained my calm.

I did not want to wait until she was out. Vora.

Her mind groggy, I repeated my call.

-Obi-Wan- That floated out as softly as a sigh.

This must be investigated, before any other errors spread, too.

I understand.

Washed and dressed for the meeting later, I felt ready when Cody came to collect me. “We will address this before any taint spreads.”

Three Jedi seemed enough for a review board. Cody and Rex as his peers. Further reviews may be needed, but this was a start.

When Anakin arrived, in his more formal robes again, I approved. The negotiations would continue later on schedule. “Now, Anakin.”

Anakin nodded and turned through the halls toward the brig, where the bacta had been removed.

Dice scrambled up as soon as he saw our group. “Sirs.”

Cody as senior clone, spoke. “Field review, now. Do you have any health issues that interfere with your testimony?”
“Do you wish an advocate to speak for you?”

“Do you have objections to Generals Kenobi, Skywalker, and Meyers as judges?”

“Yes, objection to General Meyers.”

“Do you have objection to Captain Rex as replacement?”

That revealed that he had not thought better of his actions. Dice was a stormy mix of anger and fear, not lessened much by the change of judges. We moved to sick bay, facing the consequences of his actions was important.

-**OBI-WAN**!- That was a shriek of outrage, even through the bond.

I saw Anakin wince.

I forced myself to be General. *He must see what his foolishness has done, if there is to be any hope of his recovery. You must have hoped to avoid ending the fight decisively. You were far more injured, yet you scold me for this kind of thing...*

A screen from the side of the room rolled over.

I didn’t object, the point was made.

Cody was starting to list formal charges, but I wanted something else and raised my hand to stop him. “This meeting is for understanding first, formal charges will wait.”

I checked the face of the accused. His face was flat but he examined the fractures and soft tissue injuries highlighted on the monitors with *satisfaction*.

Anakin gripped my arm even as I faintly heard Vora through the bond.

Before I recovered my calm, Anakin growled, “You somehow got the idea that Jedi Meyers was a Seppie spy passing information. Where did you get such a *stupid* idea?”

Dice stiffened. “The General went to a private meeting with the Separatist leader. No one else was present. Monitors showed footage of battles not from the Republic’s side. Clone brothers were being shot down, propaganda by the cheers. I don’t know of the battles shown. I didn’t hear whatever she was trading with the enemy, but the seeming aimless wandering in the city came before she must have found a drop.

“But I had no evidence...” He drew himself up stiffly.

I had stilled as he listed what he saw. “Enough. It is clear now. Those were Force-Visions of what might have happened if the Republic fell, recorded on General Meyers’ home world. They have only been cleared for the Jedi Council and a very few others. We have no empire, and it is a cautionary tale that can cause great harm even now.”

“You found no evidence because *there is no evidence* of events that *might* happen to my son who hasn’t been born yet!”

*Calm, Anakin. You will be reminded of that anytime new people see it,*

-**I’m changing my name to Shi-Wan.**- He grumbled.

I wasn’t sure if he was serious or honored because it was so like my name. *Vora, do you wish*
charges for hurting you?

-It started as sparring, a challenge. If that’s dropped, what other charges are left?- 

There might be some regulations about unbecoming conduct and not stopping at first blood.

I turned to face Dice directly. “Do you understand your error?

“Yes, Sir.” The anger was gone, leaving embarrassment and guilt, with no taint of lies.

“Are the judges satisfied with their understanding of events?” Cody asked.

Anakin and I nodded.

Rex said, “I am less clear as to why he did not consult his Brothers who knew the Generals better?”

“I thought such widespread lies could not be broken without evidence.” Dice was dull and pale.

“I am satisfied.” Rex wasn’t completely telling the truth.

The same feeling was coming from Cody. “Do the Generals plan on further reviews or charges?”

I shook my head, knowing our conclusion. This came from too many secrets, even from our own.

“This field review is over.”

Everyone else filed out and I moved behind the curtain to lean against her tank. “You’re lucky Healer Che isn’t here to scold you. She would be most displeased you returned to a tank after only weeks.”

Her amusement cheered the room. -Knights are going to get injured more often than Masters on the average. I’m planning to listen to her completely most of the time, so she won’t be expecting me to escape if I do. You’re already marked as uncooperative, she’s already appealed to me for help. If I’m bad she’ll think I’ve fallen under bad influences.-

I was smiling as I shook my head. “I must leave, my dear. I will be back as soon as I can.”

Rex accompanied Anakin this time, and I couldn’t be totally surprised that his General managed to both fly more and get closer to potential conflict. Our brief pass through the camp and Cody followed us to the official palace.

Despite their reliance on droids to fight, there might be fewer in use for daily living. I wasn’t sure if that was philosophical or economic. Regardless, there were more tall saurians in the halls we were guided through.

- Dice

I climbed to my feet. Every muscle ached as my Brothers left the training room. Nothing was broken… for the second time in a day.

But this time there would be no treatment. The only differences between this time and Knight Ta’em were that I alone acted under the long shadow of the hated treason, and this time our Jedi survived.

Carry was the last to leave and his disgust hurt the most. I’d kept him from eating his blaster at the end, but he’d steadied since we weren’t broken up by the Generals.
Walking to the showers to clean up wasn’t easy, but it got easier as I got moving. When I was dressed and ready for duty, I was surprised I hadn’t been cut a demotion and new orders. Without that, my place was with my General, but the walk to the sickbay seemed much longer than before.

“… promised Healer Che that I’d be good, but that doesn’t mean I have much patience with boredom.” General Meyers was speaking to Axe while she still floated in a bacta tank.

I took a post outside, settling into the comfort of duty.

“General Meyers, please do not rearrange your room. The layout is standard for a reason,”

“Fine.”

Several scuffs and noises came from the room, and our medic left again, looking sideways at me as he left.

There was a silence, and General Meyers said, “You might as well get in here, Dice.”

I entered, only glancing at her floating in the tank before I looked at the deck.

After a moment, her voice came quietly through the speaker. “I didn’t think I hit you that badly.”

I touched my helmet above my warm ear. “This was since I got treatment.”

“Huh. Is there anything you’d like to add?”

“No.”

“I hope after all this shit, you aren’t going back to those single word answers and secrets.”

“No, Sir. My brothers expressed their disappointment in my failure to trust my brothers and follow the rules. Generals did not need to know of this.”

Another pause. “I see. I’m sorry you saw that holo I was showing Dooku. Him leaving the Jedi was a dead end and would not accomplish anything he wanted. I thought if he saw how disastrous the endgame would be, the less he’d want to go back to being a bastard. The holo’s very Dark.”

“Why would he believe you? You’re a Jedi and he’s the Seppie leader.”

“Not anymore. He’s finally recovering from his son’s death at enemy hands. Change is rolling in on both sides, both Senates are unhappy that Sith controlled them. Republic Senators are hoping to reunify, that’s why we’re here.”

_No war? What reason would there be for the Brothers then?_

“Dice.” Her voice was insistent. “We will not abandon you. Anakin and I are looking out for answers for you guys. He’s working with Senators he knows better than me because he has more free will as a Master than I do as a Knight.”

“Yes, Sir.”

After a few minutes of the burbles from her tank, General Meyers broke the silence. “Well that filled another half hour of bacta hell. How ‘bout them Yankees?”

“Sir?”
Her hand waved through the bacta. “A famous athletic team on my world, and a safe topic. Do you have hobbies? Things you do when not on duty?”

“I drink with my brothers, I sleep.”

General Meyers’ hand touched above her eyes. Her face wasn’t visible through the gear and it made it harder to guess what she wanted.

*Oh. Like for us.* “We don’t have time or space to have hobbies.”

Her shoulders dropped. “Do you enjoy things you’ve done on duty that aren’t combat? Do you like showing someone something they don’t know? Do you like making something that didn’t exist before like a fortification or bridge? Do you like talking to new people or civilians? Do you like seeing new worlds and figuring out what happened before from what you find? Hobbies let you keep learning and improving yourself.”

“Not really, Sir… I’m a highly rated marksman and my duties as Commander keep me busy. I enjoyed working with Jedi Knight Ta’em, keeping him safe, making sure our missions were successful. He was… I admired his skill and professionalism.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Another pause. “Do you want another General after this, for a fresh start? You all should have more say in your futures.”

*No!* Carry’s disappointment had been worse than the other Commanders’. Even with the rash of Jedi promotions, there weren’t enough of them for all of us. My stomach ached. “No. Transfer me out…”

*Alone, alone…*

“… the 408th deserves a General, Sir.”

Chapter End Notes

I figure a little paranoia would be a frequent consequence of that stupid order, even if the deaths could be avoided. And even Vora knows that Marvel movies are not the best meta to model on...
Treaty Boundaries

Chapter Summary

Peace negotiations with the Separatist world Kellar seem to be going smoothly enough. Boredom leaves time and energy to screw-up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Anakin

Obi-Wan and Vora just plotted about food presentation for a meeting and it was boring. I knew Master and Knight both had far more patience with kriffing diplomacy. If I’d stayed in their planning meeting with our Commanders, I would have said something, done something, and been sent back to the high orbit post that was the original plan.

I would be too far away to do anything if Obi-Wan did something stupid.

So I went to the Comm room next door after some drill just for the quiet and tried to contact Padmé. Last time we talked, she was excited about some idea another Senator had for reforms and told me how it might affect the Order. She didn’t say more, but her eyes were sparkling and I wanted to talk more about her health and the babies.

This time my call went straight for recording, with the droid’s assurance that she needed her rest, Master Skywalker…

I left a message, but it didn’t come out right. I’d tried to stop worrying about the bad messages. She needed the laugh when I messed it up. The thought was enough.

The rooms I’d been assigned were large and luxurious, more like the rooms Padmé commanded. Scattering my robes, I threw myself on the bed, hoping to avoid the dream of clones fighting clones for a change by forcing calm as I fell asleep.

I missed sleeping with Padmé.

A timeless space later, I relaxed into my dream, kissing her beloved slender neck and sucking on her earlobe as she moaned. Her cool fingers at my hips always felt fresh and new as she surged against me to pull us closer. My fingers slid and spread under her back, skin flawless and scar-free unlike my own.

--hurry hurry-- Her fingers flew to my jaw, dragging my face across hers. My mouth opened into hers, drinking her taste and moans, deeper from the chest crushing down against my sensitive skin.

Grinding down against me, my breath caught as scratchy beard left my cheek and licked a long line along my breast.

A high pitched whine exploded in my throat. --more, more-- He finally shifted to center, my arms trying to pull him closer and sooner. Beloved beloved stubborn, and faint groan instead of controlled
quiet. Heavy panting he slowed too much for my desire and need.

Pushing up against his mass it wasn’t enough until he finally filled me, tension like an itch soothed and smoothed, warmth around my heat, closer and closer, her breaths shorter and shorter until I didn’t care about looming dizziness as much as reaching…

I bit by her neck marking her as mine, the tiny surprise racing ahead of the emotion and passion until I could breathe normally again, looking up at the dark ceiling of my empty room.

Everything was fine around me in the Force. No emergency. Brothers on watch or sleeping. Obi-Wan and Vora cuddling yet again.

Rolling over in my too empty bed, I hit my pillow with my flesh fist and tried to get back to sleep.

Another formal meeting in the morning, though I felt better than since I left Padmé back in the Core. I made sure I wouldn’t be left behind, by driving to the talks.

Then I spotted the edge of a bite mark under Vora’s robes. She knew I’d spotted it and was embarrassed. Obi-Wan was embarrassed too, and a little worried.

That made me start to chuckle, but Vora started to get angry, I didn’t want that.

*Sorry, kind of.* I projected the breathless bite at them both. *Wasn’t intentional, but you were loud.*

And they were mine, too.

I didn’t think anything would happen today. I felt that the mess with Dice was pretty much over, but that would be more interesting than listening to Obi-Wan charm, reason, and impress the Kaller negotiators on lesser points of a treaty.

One wasn’t lesser to me, a single lumbering speeder we were permitted for meetings had gotten boring in only minutes. I wouldn’t even care if we were only cleared for deep sea fishing, as long as I could get some flight in.

Obi-Wan looked at me with worry, and all I had to do was smile for him to look away with embarrassment.

Watching for attacks and threat in the Force didn’t take much of my attention during these sessions, I was here to impress them.

I thought more about Order 66’s aftereffects for the clones. The last estimate was only three of five had their chips defused by Jedi Master or Brother’s tinkering before the battle. They should all be free of that now. I hadn’t even considered that duty and the hunt for traitors would outlast Sidious.

Vora had spoken more about what they would do after the war, how they would support themselves. She didn’t get that owning your own future was bigger. They worked so well with us because we didn’t own much either. She was used to freedom and I envied that.

All I was sure of was that the Order and Republic owed them.

The Kaminoans? They were slavers. They put those damn chips in the Brothers, not to help, but to collar them like any slave into ‘non-aggression’ unless it was convenient. No different than fight pits for gamblers.

At least the Order didn’t do that to us, and many had left to their own lives without becoming Sith.
Dooku could have done anything else when he left.

Kamino needed to be changed from a slave factory. The brothers should have a say and be able to train new Brothers. They were family. Were the Kaminoans needed for healthy Brothers? Would it be better to find a world for them to make their own culture, or should they merge into the Republic?

I needed to sit down with Rex and ask the 501st what they would like.

Padmé would have good advice, too.

I needed to see her.

We needed to finish here to go home.

I started paying attention to the framing debate again. They’d finished speeders, on the the next thing: Senatorial immunities during final negotiations. I forced my face to stay calm, even though I wanted Padmé sooner.

Really, really wanted to see my wife.

Obi-Wan felt my daydreaming about Padmé and was about to scold, but I smiled at him.

- Padmé

Less than two weeks since the peacemaking delegation left for Kaller and I already sorely missed Anakin. The Senator from Lintrim Prime had an idea for retired clones that had promise: teaching and protecting the poorest in larger cities especially where corruption was bad.

The Senate wanted the Jedi to protect them from dead Palpatine, from his powers even even if they took far more loses. The other Sith had not been known to them, had not been trusted by them, and he had been able to convince them to give away all their freedoms. After the shock faded, they were scared.

The Order had been taken for granted, as Generals in a war the Republic was slowly losing. The news agencies looked at the recorded mostly empty halls afterwards and began wondering. As much as the Jedi Order kept its secrets, some things were included in public record, and the newsies smelled many stories.

They had little access outside reports of Jedi accomplishments, but the Senate had more. The Senate provided much funding and that meant some information had to be released. And that information could be analyzed.

One of the clearest trace in Republic records was the shocking shrinkage in the Order’s count of members over the last millennia, in the last generation, and near collapse since the war began. If they were a species, they would not just be endangered but nearly extinct and eligible for Senate protection. I understood more as I had an idea how long training was between Master Kenobi and Ani.

The Sith reappearing and the prospect of no defense made many Senators take more note of me. They saw my association with Anakin, hovering over me when he wasn’t on mission. The inference was hard to miss unless one was not paying attention. And Chancellor Palpatine knew it was true, even if he kept our secret for his own machinations.

Remembering how some of my fellow students were fascinated by the breeding populations of
endangered druffiloes, I was not pleased.

I did not want public attention moving in that direction.

I did not want my children living under that kind of attention.

Despite that, this was the time for the Order to become more visible. They should have a representative in Senate, not to vote but explain and educate. And remind the Senate that the Order was also made of citizens.

I knew Anakin worried about his 501st after all this, they should be citizens as well. They were children made to protect us, and they have. The droids could be deactivated, no harm. But I had met too many of the Clones to discount their humanity. Rex and Cody’s loyalty was little different than Anakin and Obi-Wan’s. But no world belonged for either group, they should not have lesser allegiances than the Force and Republic.

Some things needed to change for them all. The Clones needed advocates and the Jedi were trying to advocate for them, even after their own losses.

Before new roles could be created the war with ourselves must end. The Separatists were right about corruption, but they were even more pawns of the Sith. Some worlds were still so angry about the war they would not speak of peace and reconciliation. Others plainly felt as I did that we must make peace as determinedly as we made war.

Those I hoped to welcome back into the Republic.

Chancellor Organa sent the Team that defeated the Sith puppet master, which spoke on many levels, I knew that.

That didn’t mean I didn’t miss Anakin. I hoped he wasn’t having nightmares.

I worried enough about our children.

- Vora

Dice seemed calmer, easier, after his comrades had their say. He moved stiffly for a couple days and he seemed more willing to listen. I suggested the ethics book again, but I wouldn’t a third time.

I got to meet Carry the next time Anakin insisted I practiced with my interceptor. He was plainly glad to see I was better and asked about the Temple fight. I thought he was sweet, and I asked him back about how they trained in groups and individual task skills.

Obi-Wan and I sparred late after a reception in the Republic’s temporary embassy. It was only the day after my release from the tank and I was hoping Dice would be the exception, and his Brothers in the 408th would be more friendly. Dice and one of the 212th I didn’t know were keeping watch this late.

I landed on my ass many times, as usual, but I stretched out and grinned up at Obi-Wan.

His smile was smaller. “We are not in quarters.”

“Aye, but that doesn’t mean I can’t look.”

“We are not in quarters, my dear, and I mean for us to speak on other topics before we retire. Tomorrow I will introduce the Order’s welcome here if we become allies. I worry that our oaths to
the Republic would compromise our ability to search for initiates here in Kaller, but I do not think fracturing the Order to allow multiple Temples is the answer for the Separatists either. Reunification would simplify the Order’s responsibilities, as we do not have enough Masters or resources for extra Temples. Even if we could for Kaller, I would not want to set a precedent for every Separatist world.”

“Too bad we cannot make copies to teach. Then again a dozen Master Yodas would surely break something in the Force. He’d get so cryptic, he’d speak only once a month.”

Obi-Wan laughed, as hoped. “A dozen Anakins would make Coruscant implode. I believe we can find peace without going to that extreme.” He settled down beside me and brought my head over to his lap, combing through my hair.

“Keep doing that and I’ll fall asleep.”

“What? And leave them to decide what to do with our bodies?” His voice didn’t sound offended at the idea, nor did he stop.

Wriggling a little closer, I whispered, “Come on down, the mat is softer than a lot of beds.”

“Soon enough, my dear.” He breathed a kiss on my forehead, and sent a jolt through our bond. - What form have you chosen? You have, haven’t you? You will not disappoint me, my dear one. -

I tried to set my jaw despite how comfortable I felt. My reason was refusing to yield to tactical thoughts. “I guess I don’t like what seems best, and I can’t tell if my choice or my reluctance is coming from the Force.”

“And?”

“I don’t want you thinking it’s because of an emotional decision. It’s not, really.”

Obi-Wan huffed one of his almost laughs as he combed though the curls on the top of my head and rubbed the buzz around my ears. “What is your reasoning?”

After telling Anakin and Dooku, it wasn’t that hard. “I read the commentary and considered the Masters I’ve witnessed. I’ve weighed the survival of Masters through the war, too. I was leaning toward Niman at first, until I saw how many died in Geonosis, it must lack the killing edge. I don’t get off on precision or dueling or… well this is more emotional, but I don’t want to study under Dooku on a permanent basis.”

“You can study that form under other Masters as well. He is a Master at the light saber, and overcame Anakin and myself in separate duels.”

That wasn’t the point. “Then I do not have a reason. I don’t know it’s because of him or because of me, I really think it’s a bad idea.”

“It is time for you to move on from form one, my dear. Don’t you feel that as well?”

I nodded. “I’m not aggressive, so that leaves forms four and five right out and I don’t like being angry.”

His voice was very quiet, “That leaves…”

“Lower energy is an extra bonus with my age, but that’s a redundant specialization with you around. It’s always better to have mixed strengths so you’re never caught flatfooted. And really I don’t want
other Jedi to think I chose it because of you.”

Obi-Wan’s mood was odd. “That is not a good reason not to choose it. Most Padawans start specializing in their Master’s favored form, Anakin did too.” A pause. -Don’t you want me teaching you?-

I grabbed his hand in my hair. *I do! But.. it’s emotions. Fear, I’m sure of, and it’s stubborn.*

-Would you fear as much with learning another form?-

Yeah, I’d fear more for my life and getting the job done. That was a new thought and my answer.

Finally.

I could feel Obi-Wan’s approval, bubbling below his calm.

His thumb traced my jaw. “Now, it is time to retire.”

Rising, we walked to the door, with Obi-Wan saying calmly to our guards, “We won’t require your assistance anymore tonight. You may return to your quarters.”

Dice faced me, stiff with uncertainty.

I told him, “Don’t worry.”

Feeling almost like I was being truant, we snuck into his room. He felt pleased and I was glad the decision was done, one way or the other.

I was just surprised when he bit me later when comfort heated up, I hadn’t thought he had a possessive bone in his body. He looked surprised as well, and held me close, murmuring apologies.

The next night Obi-Wan started me with the initial exercises of Soresu and I resigned myself to the agonizingly slow learning process. Piloting became a relief over the next weeks, made easier when we got permission to land the star fighters on the planet. Those were always under live guards.

By the time two months had passed, Obi-Wan had gotten agreement on most of the points toward seeking reunification. Now we were only waiting a few days for the delegation from the Senate to arrive. Anakin was beside himself and had been out scouring the city market for flowers and gifts for his wife.

I was glad to have a little more of Obi-Wan’s attention before this mansion would fill up and privacy disappeared.

I’d already removed my things to Obi-Wan’s rooms. It seemed pointless with the crowd needing housing.

He plainly did one more check through the Force as I sat myself on his lap. Secretive sex had its own flavor, but I was looking forward to some R&R. I really, really wanted to have Obi-Wan to myself, and didn’t know when we’d next have more than cuddling. That made it all the sweeter.

Well aside from when I accidentally nipped him enough to draw blood. I spat it out apologizing in a frantic rush of words, horrified and feeling like shit… all the fantasy stories about blood magic making me ill.

As I stopped spitting and wiping my mouth, I realized Obi-Wan was annoyed, verging on angry.
I was getting more frightened by his reaction to the bite and cringed away, needing to get away. I felt so bad.

-ANAKIN!-

I didn't feel anything from him, not even the burr of him sleeping.

-Anakin, get in here. Now.-

In a moment, Anakin arrived, his hair and sleep pants damp with sweat, too damp. His barely restrained grin was smug. “This time it was intentional.”

Somehow I was shocked and ill, but not surprised.

And very embarrassed. Even aside from the fact we were still naked in bed and a small part of me wanted to flail about that.

“Anakin, I’m very disappoint...”

“Kriff it, Obi-Wan. You two together are very loud. Am I supposed to hide when you make love?”

Obi-Wan winced at the forbidden word and I took his hand to squeeze it.

He held tight too and waved at his former Padawan. “But you weren’t just observing, were you?”

“Thought it was a dream for a while, I only realized when I saw the bite. You’re both sexy...”

I was horrified. “I’m twice your age. That’s... that’s...” It felt like child abuse even if I knew rationally that he was a full adult.

“Adorable,” Anakin said with a firm finality, as if there could be no argument. Then he looked sly. “Think of it like a recording, but no one sees this one.”

I gritted my teeth. “Get out.”

Obi-Wan’s face was set like concrete, and Anakin sauntered out.

Reinforcing my shields, I whispered to Obi-Wan. “No more sex with him around, huh?”

“No,” he sighed sadly.

I did not want that to be permanent, but strangling the boy was right out by the Code.

Late the next day, the Memory Green made orbit with Senators. A shuttle was being sent down to us with escorts from the Negotiator and then the Green was going to the Rim. Obi-Wan did not ask, which annoyed me. I’d thought my promotion would mean more news, but I heard less explanations or running commentaries.

Anakin was excited about Padmé was arriving. Anyone with Force sensitivity would know. I could almost imagine I felt the twins, even as Anakin seemed too young sometimes. Then I remembered he was years older than my father had been.

Under that was annoyance was an almost livid anger at the boy. Smiles were shorter, jokes were fewer. It’s not that I didn’t trust him with my life…

But I didn’t trust him with my life.
Not my comfort or privacy or with Obi-Wan’s. I didn’t like this steamrollering when he’d done it to Obi-Wan before, and I was trapped inside too. Setting boundaries had to be a lesson he learned.

I felt intimidated by the problem. I wasn’t a Master, I was the least experienced in the Order and the Force.

So I defaulted back to quiet, smiling as Anakin and Padmé had their reunion. Within a few minutes Senator Mothma and Padmé were listening to Obi-Wan’s summary of negotiations, the others less focused.

The list of points, both agreed on and the fewer rejected ones took longer than I realized. It had been two months since we got here, and I nearly despaired if I ever had to do this.

-You will do fine. I had to learn as well, my dear.-

Good thing you’ll outlive me then. That certainty was a ton of bricks and I had to swallow. I didn’t want him left alone again.

His alarm reflected back at me, but aside from a look promising we’d talk, he continued his briefing about the small reception tonight.

Our slightly spartan camping in the mansion rapidly changed between aides and droids scurrying about and spiffying. I’d never been a fan of Threepio, as his whining made me want a big lump hammer. Not that I would say that to his friends. But the efforts of the maintenance and service droids were visible in hours.

Once everyone had been started or settled, we sat together on a sofa in his office.

“When did you realize that, my dear?” Obi-Wan’s voice was dry.

I didn’t know if that trace of keening was mine or his. “When I thought it.”

“I.”

That settled it, the keening was him. “It didn’t feel like anything soon. Maybe just because I’m older and had crappy health care on my world. I don’t want you to be alone.”

-He won’t be.-

GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT! I swept a thorn covered cloak over us.

“Dear?”

My eyes were prickling with angry tears. “He has to learn some boundaries and privacy. The Special one doesn’t mean he can roll over our wishes.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “Master Yoda is fond enough of saying the future is fluid. We have seen that already.”

“Maybe it’s a reminder that you need more friends?”

“Look in the mirror, my dear.”

I nudged his arm with a dark grin. “If I die first, I won’t need them.”

His smile was more entreating. “How about if we both agree to take care of ourselves and avoid
exiles?"

“Sure, but what about Anakin? I like contact most of the time, but I don’t want him barging in if we’re in bed.”

“I do not know. He’s always been like this. Anything else is rejection.”

I could almost see the shape of that. “Damn, I wish I’d majored in Psych and my gut says it’s in Child Psychology.”

His arm slid around me, like a warm blanket. “We have what we have, my dear. Trust the Force.”

“Well, yeah, I trust the Force, but it never sends me a briefing.”

“Hasn’t it?”

“Solutions, then. I’m not as worried about him Falling, but I could have cheerfully strangled him earlier. No hate or fear involved.”

Obi-Wan grinned. “I have had that thought as well. And strangling physically is not using the Dark Side… Not that I’m suggesting that.”

Our laughter was black humor at its best, but I stopped. “Working and training with him are all I think I can handle without losing my temper for a few days. I’ll get back to normal sometime later.”

“Releasing it would be better, but I’m finding it difficult as well.” His face along mine, his beard tickled. “As pleasant as this is, training should be early today.”

In the training room, I would far rather watch him do the kata than fumble my way through it. No such luck. At this stage, I was redder from embarrassment than exertion. Ending with some sparring was a relief.

Dressed again, the reception in the government building was more extravagant this time: spiffier red carpets, live atonal music, more snooty and elaborate foods, and even a few decorative ornaments. At least twice as many guests milled about. Obi-Wan was delayed by a security question.

Padmé was glowing, with Anakin beside her when I arrived.

I strengthened my shields.

I was not going to take out my ire on her.

I was not going to take out my ire on her.

I thought my voice held normal irony. “I think they broke out the new napkins for your arrival, Senator.”

“I look forward to being able to visit the sights here again. We once came here for an educational trip to see the krowtas soar above the hot springs and geysers at sunset.” She was in calm diplomat mode.

“Playing tourist would be a nice change,” I agreed. I wasn’t sure if she had announced her pregnancy to the public and decided to remain quiet. “I never saw the sights on my home world much either.”

The triple chimes rang that meant refreshments had been served.
Obi-Wan entered, looking cross. -A palace guard disappeared this morning and her body was found a few minutes ago. All security has been alerted.-

I turned to get the entrances all in view at once, wondering where secret ones would be.

-There’s too kriﬃng many, we might as well be outside.-

I didn’t have anything to add, but the diplomats continued chatting and ﬂirting. So I drifted to ﬁnd an ag secretary and asked about the crops. He was ﬂattered a Jedi was interested, I learned about a grain they were breeding with high proteins that could reduce the heavy meat needs, and I could still monitor events.

Obi-Wan changed conversational partners more often, but was nearly silent through the bond after that ﬁrst warning.

A grandfatherly-type tried to ﬂirt with me, and I took a play from remembering high school creeps and found a refresher.

He was harmless, but I never was very good with that.

“That senior ﬁnance man was admiring you, Vora.” Padmé was smirking and without her husband.

“He can admire away, but he looks too much like my one grandfather. I never had a thing for older men, even back on my world.”

She looked off to the side where Rex was speaking to Anakin in the lobby, and then she grinned. “It is not as if I have either.”

Anakin was striding back with a glint in his eye.

I felt my face stiffen into something like a smile, and excused myself for a drink.

*How strong of a one could I justify?*

Chapter End Notes

Boundaries, boundaries...
Signatories

Chapter Summary

Padme and a few Senators arrive on Kaller to conclude negotiations to discover that all is not well with her Ani. Obi-Wan still attempts to guide his former Padawan, and Jedi inspect the clone reserves in orbit. ...and there is a lot of talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Padmé

Master Kenobi’s list of completed treaty points was encouraging. Mon had not expected as much, given the Jedi’s expanded warrior reputation during this war. I had hopes the final stages would be successful before I had to return home.

I had notified Senator Mothma of my expectant status, but not announced it in public. I was hoping that I could announce my wedding before, but the Jedi had been silent. I was encouraged that their upset had faded, but that was not the same as permission or approval.

Anakin did not want to think about it.

Ani had been irritated when he greeted me at the estate, but relaxed quickly. I knew he preferred combat missions, but peace would increase the chances he would be able to spend time with us. There hadn’t been much time before the first reception and I needed to review Obi-Wan’s notes on the Kaller officials.

The notes didn’t exactly say it, but the locals at the reception were much more welcoming than I expected. Obi-Wan was absently rubbing his chin as a trade official spoke at him. Mon was laughing in a small circle of diplomats. Knight Meyers looked almost trapped, but she fled and the gentleman was left bobbing his head absently.

I caught glimpses of the Clone Commanders in several different color markings at the edges. More than the blue and yellow I had seen most often. Took me a moment to remember that Vora was a General and had troops as well, like Ani and Obi-Wan. We would have had a rainbow if Ani’s former Padawan had escorted us here.

Ani stayed close to me for most of the event, but he didn’t say anything important. He didn’t want me to worry. Obi-Wan mixed and Vora had too.

I knew when it was time to go, the key figures and Kaller officials retired and left more hangers on. Talk had remained more neutral and avoided treaty points, though I had gotten a few avid questions about events on Coruscant and the once-Chancellor. Those I deflected beyond generalities, we were not allies enough for gossip.

I signaled Anakin that it was time to go and made my farewells. He was relieved and took me back. In my much-improved suite, I wasn’t sure if he wanted to kiss me more or check on our children.
“They are so bright, Angel.”

That made me giggle. “At this age, there’s not much else they can do.”

Then came a rush of questions about me, them, and how things should happen. Some I didn’t know, but I had confidence in my healers.

“So, Ani, what’s it like being a Master now?”

He looked cross. “Not that different. Obi-Wan still has higher rank and he disapproves of what I do.”

“Is Vora helping you?”

“She disapproves too. She’s gotten as bad about the Code as Obi-Wan.”

That changed the reception. Vora only spoke about that functionary and moved away as Anakin returned. I had not spoken to Obi-Wan privately at all, so they were avoiding him. They cared for Anakin, argued strongly for him with their Council, so they were angry.

Or as angry as Jedi would allow themselves to get.

“Angel?”

I pulled him over to the sofa to sit and brushed his chin lightly. “What did you do, Ani?”

“Me? I didn’t do anything, they did it all. It’s not like I could stop it once it started… and they’re pushing me away, like he always does.” Anakin was protesting but not coherent about it.

“They both love you, Ani, however they call it.”

He blinked, starting to look upset now. “Their shields have been up and I don’t feel anything from them, like some spiked wall. A few sentences and it closes up again. I could push through, but…”

“You will not do that, Ani.” That I was sure of. “Do you want to make it worse? They are both angry with you, you have to give them time.”

“How do you know that? It could have been any…”

I turned to face him. “I saw it in their behavior, Ani, though I doubt anyone else knows them well enough to notice… What did you do?”

He hugged me tight. “I’ve missed you, it’s been so lonely.”

I didn’t know where this was going, so I waited.

“They are so adorable sometimes. She’s starting to study Soresu, and he is the best at that. I really didn’t want her studying Makashi, not from hi…” My husband was babbling.

“What did you do?”

“I did say they were adorable, didn’t I?” Ani wasn’t meeting my eyes.

I waited and rubbed his back.

“I wondered about them and dreamed about them, just a few rooms away. They were…” He smacked his lips. “The beard was fantastic, just like I always thought… And then I woke up kriffing
alone again.”

I had to force myself to take a breath. “It wasn’t a dream, was it?”

“Well, in the dream I bit her neck. You know where…” He grinned, all happy. “In the morning, she was marked there, too, and they were both embarrassed. He doesn’t do that hardly ever.”

“That doesn’t sound like anger.”

His grin got bigger. “It happened again, but Obi-Wan got bit, he was great.” He looked away. “Then came the argument. But they are so adorable and hot and loud. I didn’t do anything… well, aside from the nips. I’ve missed feeling like that. Vora was upset because she’s older, but that’s pooodoo. Obi-Wan… well, he just shut down.”

I could Ani’s voice shift and didn’t know what to say through my dismay. No wonder they were angry. I leaned against his chest looking for words.

“Angel?” Ani’s voice was higher with traces of panic.

“I’m trying to find the words, Ani.” I rubbed his back with one hand and he settled a little. Simplest was best to start and I looked up at him. “How would you like it if someone observed or interfered when we made love? Something that was just for us. We didn’t know at first and we could not stop it.”

His feelings kept changing, passing over his face, and then he hunched over. “I’d hate it. I’d want to kill them.”

“And you spoke of pushing through their shields on top of this? You must, must give them time. That will best prove you won’t do it again.”

“But I was so lonely…”

“Why didn’t you talk to one of them if you felt like that?”

Anakin smiled a little. “They don’t talk about sex. Even when they were upset.”

“Talk to them.”

“I’d rather be with you.” Ani kissed me, determined to sweeten me up.

I missed him too, but this wasn’t done.

- Obi-Wan

Once the Senators were established, the social activity grew to equal the diplomatic functions. That the Senators excelled at. Treaty decisions moved much slower, so much there was no significant change in a month.

Anakin was quiet.

Vora and I had not spoken about it, and I was getting worried. It was not healing. It wasn’t festering either. It was just there as we fell asleep in each other’s arms.

It was early morning, and she was stirring in the dawn light. Then she snuggled in closer, her nose smooshed against my jaw as she dropped further into sleep. Soon, I would wake her and our day
would begin. Training, despite her silent complaints, and more of us smoothing the talks.

The Council and Senate had anticipated greater opposition and risks for these negotiations, but other than one unexplained murder and the unrest from Vora’s Commander, this had been a smooth mission in spite of the stakes. I was feeling optimistic about our success.

Anakin’s actions had almost nothing to do with the mission and I still did not know what to do.

“You don’t know either?” Vora’s voice was muffled against my throat, but clear in her sleepy thoughts.

“The long ban on attachment doesn’t leave us examples to deal with lonely and jealous Padawans.”

Vora snorted before looking up. “I’m the most recent Padawan involved.”

“You are older and not vulnerable as Padawans usually are, my dear.”

“I’m glad that finally sank in, Ben.”

I hugged her close. “I doubt there are any records or holocrons that deal with that strong a bond and intimate relations.” My face warmed.

“Too bad there’s no manual for Chosen ones in your records.” There was a longer pause that she was thinking about something. “Some fiction had intruding thoughts, but no advice when not an enemy.”

“No, he’s not that, even when he chooses poorly or gets angry.”

Time to face the gundark. “I don’t know how much he was observing over the years. I never had many partners after he became my student. I was suspicious, but sure when you bit me, my dear. It really did not feel like you for an instant.”

“I could, maybe. But I want your skin to stay intact, I’m very invested in that. And don’t want you embarrassed by something that should be private. I could use a pen and draw something goofy or pretty if I wanted to mark you, maybe a kitten or grumpy bear. Something different later.”

That made me chuckle. “I could see you do that.” Then I sighed when my thoughts returned to the problem.

“I can’t say I like keeping my shields up like this all the time. I can’t feel you as much, Obi-Wan.”

I wasn’t happy either. “We are more blind to threats, as well. We should stop.” I missed relations, too, but that wasn’t necessary on mission.

She sighed. “Cut back on shielding. Any other ideas?”

“He should apologize, but I don’t know if he understands all the ways he was wrong.”

“Would one do?”

I thought. “As long as it is not trivial.”

“Agreed.” We lay there for a few more minutes, wisps of sharing relaxed mornings from our pasts on missions and the Smokey Mountains. I knew I was left with a wish to see some of those places for myself. “Time, my dear.”
I didn’t have to see to know that she was rolling her eyes.  

A few days later the negotiations had reached a deadlock on borders and allies when I received a visit from the Senator. Anakin was tutoring, or pretending to tutor, Vora in flight. His lady wife came to my door.

“Senator. To what do I owe the honor of your visit?” I gestured to the seating area of the office, with one last scan that nothing was astray.

She smiled serenely as she sat down, the children evident without the Force. “We have not had the time to speak since my arrival about things other than the treaty. I would like to get your opinion about the Senate’s concerns and ideas about the Order.”

“The Jedi exist to serve the Force, and the Republic as a whole, to the best of our abilities.” I could tell this was a smokescreen, though an interesting one.

That made me concerned about their flight training, but when I checked I found Anakin was feeling his usual happiness in flight. Vora was more muted, but much more comfortable than when she started.

“The Senate has taken those services for granted for too long without understanding. With the size of the Republic and growth over the centuries...” She shook her head. “The Order’s concerns about the Sith should have been taken more seriously. None thought a handful of Sith could nearly destroy us all. So routine politics should not absorb the Order like it has. Many discussions spoke on how to combine both Senate oversight with the Order’s autonomy. A Jedi, or Jedi approved... ‘lobbyist’ could represent the Order and Republic as a whole, that seems one of the better ideas. That would give both a voice and a buffer from Senate politics.”

I thought about that. It would be a change. “The Council will of course need to consider the proposal or proposals. We do not have the resources we had.”

“That is a concern for the Senate as well, fed by the work of archivists and slicers. Too many Jedi have died from a pointless war. The fighting costs of this war have not been shared by many of our worlds, but mainly by the Order and the Clones. A failure of our ideals, aided by the Sith. I believe four thousand worlds have now agreed to these principals, not that the Chancellor disagrees.”

A diversion this may be, but these motions were a surprise.

“Is the fate of the Clones included in this plan?” I worried about all of them, but the Commanders were very... attached to their Jedi.

She waved around us. “Treaties will take time, and we can hope that most worlds will make similar ones to this one. We will have years to find a solution for them, one they deserve.”

“Other worlds will be slow to make peace, as they played both sides.” I had run into that often enough with Anakin. Rim worlds would become a more open problem.

“Bail is working to clean up as much as he can during this interim, though I am confident he will be nominated in his own right. A few Senators, mostly non-Core have petitioned for major reform to the Senate to ensure attention to Mid-rim issues and change representation for living bodies first.” Padmé sighed. “The safest thing for the Clones might be to somehow link them more directly make them the Order’s wards until they come of age and serve for a term. The more belligerent Senators would like control of some, but they should serve the Republic first, much like the Jedi.”

After minutes of silence, I said, “Those seem to be wise proposals as a group, but that isn’t what you
really wanted to speak about.”

Now the Senator looked nervous. “Ani told me what he did, even if I am unsure of the details. I spoke to him about it, but I have been unable to help him beyond a point. I would like to know your thoughts.”

I should have expected this. “We are willing to explain whatever you want to know. But Anakin has never learned that being the Chosen one or simply a powerful Force user, does not excuse him from limits and consequences. And this… intrusion verging on control is so complex a problem. It is not that there was an encounter, unattached liaisons vary within the Code. It is that it was without our consent after the accidental instance.”

She looked at the hands in her lap. “I convinced him that he had to give you time, but I don’t know how much longer he will wait. He really does not understand why you don’t want his company.”

I rubbed the space between my eyebrows. “You’re married to him and you are starting a family. I… we would never want to interfere with that responsibility. He was a wife, children, a Padawan he watches for, and is partner to me. Vora thinks of him as a much younger brother so incest and exploitation of someone more vulnerable is a problem for her too.”

Padmé wove and rewove her fingers, the only sign of her stress. “I don’t believe he understands the incest or student taboos or how they might relate to the ban on Padawans. I will…”

I took her hands and projected calm towards her and the babies. “Padmé, he must speak to us if he wants it to heal. You cannot understand for him.”

“Thank you.” She took a deeper breath. “I know that, but he’s driving me to distraction. He really misses you, Obi-Wan. I hope so much to heal this before the birth.”

“It will.” I knew that weight of the Force as I said it, and felt better.

- Vora

The once a week piloting sessions had increased to more than weekly, only three days apart. I didn’t begrudge Anakin that release. It had been literally years since they had life and death fights this far apart.

Children and their chaos would help a lot too.

First came the adrenal rush… well to be honest it felt more like an overdose while piloting this ship. I’d gotten to respect its speed and maneuverability. I could better understand why Vader kept one.

I’d finally decided on an homage customization beyond the swampy green of the 408th on the nose. I’d just paint a starry forest clearing, a fairy ring, and the words ‘Glamorous glen.’ Maybe someday I’d get the nerve to change that to Ben. It wasn’t exactly paint as it didn’t burn off from reentry friction, so I had to spend some time annoying a maintenance droid to get it to look right and the words in English text. I really tried not to think about that.

We took turns each run inspecting one ship in orbit and checking with the Clones aboard who were trying to stay sharp in a really boring posting. This time we’d be inspecting the Resolute.

As we flew up toward the moonlet, Anakin was quite cheerful. *Are you gonna admit you like flying, yet?*
Okay, flying is fine when no one’s trying to kill me.

-Great! This time you should pilot blind.-

Are you crazy? I’m gonna pancake!

-We can start slow, but feeling everything around you to that detail helps a lot when equipment doesn’t work.-

I grumbled, but I was curious. I was even more surprised when I evaded a drone target Anakin called in at speed. I didn’t do very well and still didn’t like it.

Landing on the *Resolute* was never more welcome. My knees were a little wobbly when I exited, and I was glad the bay was empty today to see my shaky landing.

Anakin had rushed over to hug me, a clear pride in my progress.

I was glad to be standing on solid ground… er, decking, and concentrated on slowing my adrenal high.

Anakin copped a feel, lust strange in his signature,

“Anakin!” I tried to jump back from his embrace, but we only rocked together enough to feel his arousal.

His eyes were dark as he licked his lips. After that instant he loosened his grip and kissed the crown on my head. “I wanted to convince you it was an honest want, Vora.”

We were still too close. He was a cute guy. He was still too young.

I took three deep breaths before I spoke. “You’re married, Anakin.”

“Yes, I remember that very well. But you don’t know those details, or what she approves of. She’ll appreciate that that was your first thought. Next?” That was smug.

“You’re like a little brother, like the one I lost near your age. Even the thought of incest makes me feel a little ill.”

“Really? I’m sorry you lost a brother, but you are *not* feeling ill right now.” The smug ‘next’ was silent.

I grit my teeth. “I love Obi-Wan. He’s been neglected too long.”

“I agree completely. I adore that you’ve helped him loosen up. You are both hot.”

My straws were getting thinner. “I prefer monogamy. I don’t feel comfortable with the idea of being in a poly and I have my doubts about Obi-Wan being interested either.”

That made Anakin sigh. “That I can see. How about if we can cuddle at least or sleep in the same room? I miss the company of people close to me when I sleep. Even on missions we had camps. Those two months before Padmé arrived were hellish.”

Shit, I was negotiating with Anakin. The world was upside down. “Okay, I think I could manage sleeping, as long as we get privacy sometimes. You need *his* permission too. There are boundaries on everyone and everything.”
He nodded. “Anything else?”

“Eavesdropping on our sex through the Force is really creepy. I don’t like biting, mouths are just loaded with infectious vectors.”

“It really wasn’t that deliberate, Vora. I thought it was a strange dream until morning. I realized sooner the second time. That’s it?”

“That’s all I can think of right now.” I was having trouble focusing with him close against me his presence a warm magnet, the sneak.

“Great, I’ll talk to Obi-Wan and then we can all talk.” He pulled me even closer and gave me a sizzling kiss before dashing away.

*Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, had I just agreed to some kind of group marriage?*

Chapter End Notes

I posit that Anakin is very greedy for certain things that aren't money or collectible: he wants family, at all costs. Not changing tags for minor relationships, let me know if you think them really necessary.

Updates should hold at Sunday-ish, except during NaNo.
**Overwhelmed**

Chapter Summary

Anakin is determined to *fix this*, but damning the torpedos and going full speed ahead is not always good tactics.

Chapter Notes

TW: self harm planned in the later part of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**- Obi-Wan**

Padmé was calmer when she left than when she arrived. The Senate concerns and proposals were interesting, and I would have liked to see those in debate. I could understand a liaison to such a political body would be a challenge but it would be separate and official instead of the problematic one with Palpatine that Anakin had.

And my former Padawan, he had been listening to his wife and letting us- recover. He needed to speak to us directly, not have Padmé intercede. That was no solution when we had missions in the future.

Unless he was thinking of leaving the Order.

That was very believable with all of his complaints and the war should be ending. But I was not happy with the idea.

I would miss him. More than I would like to admit. His good spirits were often all that got me through the early days of the war when I could feel the Darkness growing.

I received the chime of a message, and I saw a simple message from Vora without any urgency. She hadn’t tried for a channel to speak, but they should be checking on their men on the *Resolute* now.

Her voice paused after my name. Then she recorded quickly: ‘We spoke and he negotiated a better understanding…’

I wasn’t sure if that was an exasperated sigh, but it cut off. Her signature was far enough away that I only got a confused mix of feelings. Then her wording leaped out at me, her deliberate wording about negotiating.

That left me a little unsettled as well.

Anakin’s idea of negotiation involved more intimidation and the Force not verbal persuasions.

Vora’s mood had shifted to the encouragement, perhaps to the Brothers, so that relieved me. She
should be returning in an hour or two.

I had enough to keep me busy, a secure packet from the Council contained many interesting developments, even stated as summaries. Reading between the lines raised other ideas. The Senate did not seem as optimistic as Padmé stated, but it was still possible. One clear motion was to reauthorize the Order’s search for new members, and that passed with barely any dissent, a notable change.

Anakin’s presence on-planet was brighter than usual, but Vora was still cheerful in orbit. I began collecting the news to pass on so we could talk.

“There you are, Obi-Wan.” Anakin seemed tense but not upset.

“Yes…” I looked up at him, wondering what had his attention. “I am here many afternoons.”

Throwing himself down on the nearest chair, he just looked at me.

“How is Knight Meyers’ progress in her piloting?” I wasn’t that worried, they hadn’t landed in bacta tanks.

“What? Oh, that. She’s doing fine, at least as far as I can tell without actual combat.” Then he fell silent. This was a long familiar silence of some other topic building.

I returned to finishing the Council briefs for him and Vora, and a Senate one for the Commanders as well.

“Aren’t you done with that yet?”

“Almost,” I admitted. “I’m done now, today’s brief should be hitting your comm just about now.”

“Of course,” he said almost bitterly.

This was getting volatile, even for him. “What can I help you with, Anakin?”

He stopped and closed his eyes, swallowing. “I’ve been told I need to talk to you. About what happened. I… I’m sorry, Obi-Wan. I thought I was dreaming, I didn’t mean to influence you or her-the make you… It happened so easy, it had to be a dream, like it was you with me in the dream.” A half-smile flickered as his worried eyes stared into mine.

That was interesting, even if a little alarming. Control of others’ actions was not supposed to be that easy. It was supposed to be a deliberate action even for mind tricks and not the casual abuse of the Sith.

-No!- Anakin had rounded the desk and crouched beside me. “I want to talk about it. I don’t want to force you… force anyone. You’re too kriffing important to me to do that. I want, I need to fix this.”

He was panicking, and I put a calming hand on his shoulder. The calm spread through the room like a wave, with a burst of happiness. His hand reached along mine to hold my arm, a waiting silence.

I wanted to know what he was asking, but the bond was expectant silence without warning. I also wanted to repair this.

I nodded. “You can.”

His arms slid around me and into an embrace without looking at my eyes. He sighed, calming more. “Obi-Wan. I missed you.”
“You only have to speak to me once I’ve had a chance to calm down, Padawan. I will always support you.” I still wasn’t comfortable with this, aside from Vora.

“Missed you more… more than that.” He stopped again. “Why is it so frustrating to talk to you? I’d be almost done if it was Padmé or Vora.”

That was a true question and deserved a true answer, so I thought carefully. This wasn’t just simple answers like age, or being in the Order, it was about silences. “Forgive me, Anakin. I spent too many years trying to be the ideal teacher. I’d hoped that would help my Padawan achieve the most. And be content, if not happy.”

“You did that, Master. Look how fast your second Padawan got promoted.”

That made me smile. “That was as much your doing as mine. You taught when I was unable.” I had to admit one thing. “I don’t believe either of you would be considered proper Jedi.”

Anakin laughed and leaned back. “No… she is handsome, though. I don’t know why she keeps calling herself old.”

I didn’t know either and went to separate and sit back on the chair. “I felt younger, teaching again.”

Grin now a smirk, Anakin said, “And you don’t call yourself an old man anymore either.”

That was true and my cheeks warmed, she jumped on that if I did.

Anakin rushed to speak not even a second later. “You didn’t look old in bed, either of you.”

That distracted me from my red face. I frowned. “You saw both of us? Was this vision like a holo?”

He licked his lips with passion threading through him, not meeting my eyes. “Through your eyes. I was you. I was her. That wasn’t just affection, Obi-Wan. I know this feeling.”

I didn’t want to think the word.

But Anakin continued. “…It was an old dream to hold you like that. To feel you hold me. That’s why I was so sure it was a dream at first, an old one with a new gloss.”

Not smiling anymore, I shook my head.

Anakin knelt in front of my chair now, his voice catching. “Why? Why, Obi-Wan? Is it because I’m younger? You’re younger than Vora by about the same. Is it because I’m male? Is it because of Padmé? I spoke to her long ago. Because I was your Padawan? Because I was a child? I’m not either, now. Am I too… too tainted, too… ugly? I need to know why, Obi-Wan.”

*It hurt to speak.* “..Padawan.”

“No, no! I want a real answer. I’m a Master now, would I have to be Grandmaster to get you to stop using that excuse. What did Vora say to make you stop?”

*It hurt to laugh.*

“She went away to nearly die on Naboo when I shirked my duty as her Master because of my unbalanced feelings. I’d prefer if you not do that.”

“Why?” He demanded in a growl.
“You don’t need me, not anymore, not as a teacher or even as... Padmé clearly filled your heart, even before I knew of your marriage. Your children will need you even more.”

Everyone spinning, spinning away from me...

I had to look away, remembering her surety about passing first. “Vora needed me, chose me, before even- No one ever believed that… believed in m... no proof, no pleading, no duty before even negotiation… just being. I don’t know if I am worthy of that. Everyone else moved on or passed into the Force- never enough, always left behind with only cold duty as the galaxy passes by while I watch...”

It hurt to weep.

My eyes burned but were dry.

How could I… regret their departures so much when I’d always been in solitude? I should be accustomed by now.

Anakin leaned into me, forehead to forehead… holding me tight, quiet aside from one pulse in the Force.

- Anakin

I thought this would be easier with Obi-Wan, I knew him better. Vora hadn’t completely agreed, but I got a good start and it’d be better now.

But Obi-Wan… Obi-Wan, I not only could not get him to step beyond the old excuses, but I found something very different inside. Something I didn’t know what to do with.

He had to stop.

This hurt to even hear, I didn’t need to check the Force to know this was bad. I wanted to scream at him to stop.

Vora! Help!

-Almost down-

He was still, too still, and hunched in with his dry eyes staring at the floor.

“Obi-Wan, I will always need you. That won’t change, ever.” Should I trigger an alarm, a message, summon Cody or Rex?

Vora would be landing soon, but each second felt like a day.

I wanted to shake him until his head rattled. Until all the druk fell out. This was worse than yesterday’s quiet. He wasn’t listening to me, like hugging a stuffed toy.

Tangling fingers through beard and hair, I kissed his forehead. Hoping to stop the spiral of these thoughts.

He didn’t exactly kiss me back, but his arms went around me.

Nor did he push me away. That gave me hope.

Until I heard a step in the room and an indrawn sob.
Vora had arrived, her signature a fiery soup of feelings, too many and too quickly moving to identify. The only clear ones were despair and self hate. *Why the fuck did I*—

Even as she turned darker and ran out faster than she could run, Obi-Wan pushed away and fumbled to his feet. “Vora!”

I karked that one. I looked around the office unable to focus on anything, hearing Vora’s Actis screaming in lift. Then I heard mine.

Cody stumbled into the room in moments, combat ready. “Where’s General Kenobi?”

“Nearly in orbit.” I felt hollow and wondered when Padmé would return.

He ran off to the Comm room to try to figure out what to do.

I hoped he’d tell me.

I didn’t know if I was waiting for some spasm in the Force of an explosion or death. I didn’t feel much aside from crashing and splashing rivers of pain.

I didn’t know how much of it was mine.

- Vora

I’d been so worried when I realized something was wrong. I should have expected that. Really. He’d done it to me earlier when he was trying to convince me. Surprising, but not bad.

But seeing the two of them kissing was another thing. It wasn’t cute. *I was ugly:* anger, fear, loneliness, irony, despair, inadequacy, *jealousy,* and the death of hope. And I’d given *permission* because I wanted them to be happy.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Jealousy was not approved by the Code, after all.

It was just stupid.

I had to laugh as the warnings and alarms sounded, rattling around the cockpit and my head. I shut off the comm system too as I increased acceleration as far as I could. I didn’t care.

Tuess must have sealed things up proper, how sweet.

How far? How far did I need to go to be in sweet silence? Free of others’ thoughts and demands? Orbit? No. The capital ships swung around, looking impressive, mete for the Team’s warhorses.

The moons? Maybe? I could pancake there without risking anyone else. But it was a nice ship and Tuess didn’t deserve my pain.

Beyond the near system? Just set out for some distant outpost within the system, momentum carrying me when power ran out. Then some other Jedi could have old paint, maybe save someone, some other world.

I’d accomplished my goals when I left Earth. Obi-Wan would outlive me. They had reconciled—*boy,* had they reconciled!
I set course, wondering how long the alarms would keep ringing before Tuess figured out I wasn’t going to respond. Now that the course was set, my hands were free to wipe my eyes.

- Vora! VORA! - He sounded faint once I heard him.

I tried to strengthen my shields, but couldn’t concentrate.

- Vora! Where are we going? -

We? We aren’t going anywhere. You need Anakin, he needs you. You don’t need my jealousy and you really don’t deserve it. I thought I was okay with it, but I wasn’t.

Obi-Wan’s presence was still faint and wispy. - Vora! Please! I want to talk. Slow down. I will have to go into critical to get any closer! -

I cut the acceleration, there was already some doppler as we coasted.

This time I felt relief from him.

Why bother? I’m the third or fourth wheel, unneeded anymore with the Sith dead. I don’t think I can separate jealousy out. That won’t ever be part of the Order, it’s darker. It’s not fair to you either. I’m done.

Out here, I felt alone enough in space that I just screamed my loneliness and anger. Ignored everything as I spewed my pain until my throat was raw and I felt as cold and empty as space around me.

- Vora... -

The Actis shifted from a physical jolt. I looked out, and there Obi-Wan was in the other... Anakin’s Actis.

What are you doing here?

- You needed me. And I need you, my dear one. -

I can’t quite believe it. I’m sorry, but...

-Hush. We are a pair, almost a matched set, my Vora. Let us go back to the Negotiator and talk face to face. -

Feeling a little calmer, better able to breathe when empty, I changed the course in a wide turn and accelerated back in-system.

I wanted to hold him so bad, though guilt for interrupting him and Anakin was almost as great. I came to help them but I was ruining it now. I was some kind of selfish waste.

Chapter End Notes

...AKA the crash and burn chapter.
Chapter Summary

Dooku receives a visitor and the peace delegation finally talks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-Dooku of Serenno-

I had never fully considered how tedious life in the Temple could be. But now that I was in this netherworld between guest and prisoner of the Council I’d thought useless and dead to any purpose, I became aware of that fact.

Vos and I were the only partial Sith remaining that I knew of, and he was a Master Jedi, embracing the Light again. I did not wish to speak to him during his brief visits to Temple, and he had made no effort to visit me in my cell. Only my line was bold enough to visit of their own will.

Not that I was eager to leave the Temple at this point, Palpatine had managed to expose not just himself but the Sith’s power to the Republic and even the… popular media. I wasn’t as convinced now that that power was any more useful for my goals, with the way everything dissolved around his actions.

More intriguing was that the movers of his unraveling were all of my line. I could almost say that I did defeat my once Master, as was proper for a Sith.

-I don’t believe that is what the Rule of Two intends, Master- A dry, familiar chuckle echoed around me.

I felt a familiar Force-presence was in my cell. “Padawan?”

-I am relieved you can hear me now, Master.-

“How?”

-Something I learned on a remote world. My understanding is incomplete in some ways.-

I closed my eyes at the unexpected relief and growing joy. “I was more attached than I realized when you passed into the Force.”

-I later grieved for you as well, my Master.-

“What did I not know of this?”

His snort sounded the same, even without a body. -You had to be listening, Master. And manifesting this much is more difficult than I expected.-

I thought over all the legends I’d encountered and the promises of Sidious. The most useful seemed the fables of the outer Rim world of my GrandPadawan.
"Yes. I don’t believe my Padawan will have the free time to learn anytime soon. For that, I am glad the Force willed it."

"Will Palpatine be bothering me like this?"

"Not likely, not this way. Not unless he became selfless in a way I am unfamiliar with as he died." That grin was clear without sight.

I nodded to myself. That explained why his promises of immortality never tempted me. The Force had never encouraged those lies.

Enough of that failure. I waved around my comfortable cell with the open door. “What do you think I should do, my Padawan? I don’t seem to have many options.”

"You counseled me to patience often enough, Master. Learning and study are never wasted."

I could not glare at him now, I had no target.

His amusement colored a near-sigh. "Changes promoted by our line will take time. Some tasks might be very much more satisfying for you, but it might be a few years." The amusement faded. "They are troubled and cannot hear me."

I had not heard any chatter in the… nearly four months since they left.

"They yet make peace on Kaller, struggling with change."

I frowned. “Have you been speaking with Master Yoda? That was especially cryptic, Qui-Gon.”

"Forgive me, Master. Their struggles are their own to share or not. The mission should be a success, they are a credit in peace as well as war."

I could take comfort that they were not corrupted by inertia and apathy. “They do not follow the Code very well…”

"We are renegades, the lot of us. I do not think the Force disapproves."

After that, his presence faded and I was left with much to consider.

- Padmé

The discussions on relative stand-downs of armed forces were stalled. The droid armies could be shut down if they trusted Republic forces. The Grand Army could not, until we had broader peace.

I worried that there would always be an excuse to keep an army. But should the Jedi serve to deal with pirates or other unrest? That could be a waste of so few. The entire GAR was such a small portion of our population, a reserve for emergency, and needed better integration into the Republic.

My comm vibrated, and I took an instant to check it. It was Ani, unusually short. I gave my excuses and checked his message outside.

‘Padme. I kiffed it up bad. Obi-Wan didn’t… and Vora screamed off into orbit. And I can’t feel them right from here… it’s pancaking and beyond red line and I can’t do anything! Call me, Angel, please!’ He sounded miserable.

I hurried to my official vehicle and driver, sending a bare acknowledgment that I was coming to save
When I returned to the embassy, both Starfighters were gone and more clones were visible than usual. I couldn’t say they were milling around, but there were more patrolling and posted, especially for the private side of the mansion.

None were outside our room, but I had passed several outside Obi-Wan’s assigned rooms. Backtracking, I saw that Rex was silently on watch. “How is he? What happened?”

“The meeting with General Kenobi must have gone poorly. When General Meyers and then General Kenobi left in a hurry, the General remained without any orders for us.” A politician’s ear could hear how worried he was.

Carefully patting him on his armored arm, I told him, “He called me and everything will be fine, Captain”

It was harder to estimate the Clones’ feelings with their faces usually covered. “Thank you, Senator.”

The door opened and the office Obi-Wan had been using was neat as I would expect. There were papers neatly stacked on the desk along with folders, all seeming related to the peace mission. The only thing out of place was his desk chair, knocked aside.

Ani wasn’t in the room.

I doubted he was in the fresher, so I moved over to the bedroom door, slightly ajar.

The room was dim, without the living cityscape that most Coruscant rooms favored. It was bright enough to see Ani curled up on the bed, his head smashed into the exposed pillows.

I stepped in. “Ani?”

Face turning toward me, his eyes were as dark as if he had black eyes. “I’d talked her around already and was trying to get Obi-Wan to listen to me…”

I sat beside him and pulled his head onto my now-tiny lap, trying to soothe him.

He hiccuped. “I was losing him and called for help. She saw us kissing… or me kissing him, and ran off. Angel, I never saw… so fast a change. They both flew off into deep space, Obi-Wan redlining his engines to catch up. I’m too far for even glimpses now.”

Obi-Wan was too canny to not have some plan. “Shh, Ani. Obi-Wan is very skilled. Isn’t the Negotiator only a comm away if they need help?”

Anakin sat up and held me, some hope appearing in his eyes. “I was so sure I would feel the explosion.”

“That hasn’t happened, right?”

“Right.”

“I think you can trust Obi-Wan to convince her.”

“I didn’t want this at all. I want everyone to be happy together, to love each other, a family. Not for them to run away from me.”

Sometimes it wasn’t that easy. “Well, do they?”
“Do they what?”

“Do they hate you? It took time to run off and you weren’t distracted with running.”

Anakin stilled. “No. Despair and fear. None of that was directed at me…” He grinned weakly then and stopped. “I haven’t lost them, not like that. I hope.”

I turned his face to me. “Then you need to take care of yourself now. Next time we all should be present and we will want and need different things. You want us all to be closer than just kin, Ani, but I have a far less idea what Obi-Wan or Vora want.”

“I… it’s so hard getting them to talk about some things.”

I hugged him closer. “Something was wrong. We don’t know what, but talking will need to come first with them.”

Anakin started to object, but instead he lay his flesh hand over my stomach and closed his eyes. He seemed to be calming.

Cuddling to him, we settled into a doze for a while.

“What, Goldilocks? Who has been sleeping in our bed?”

“I cannot be sure. Is this where I huff and puff?” Obi-Wan’s face was tiredly pleasant, too.

Ani exploded off the bed, tackling both of them, not saying anything. They looked calmer than I expected.

“Aloud, Anakin.” Obi-Wan warned.

“… I’m not done yelling at you.” He had his arms around both of them, holding tight. “Had visions of crashing and engines exploding and too much silence. Don’t do that again. Ever.”

Vora’s mouth moved in a tic and her face fell from the pleasant mask. “I’m sorry, Anakin. I wasn’t as ready as I thought to… see some things. It’s not you.”

I couldn’t see Ani’s face, but he hadn’t let go. Obi-Wan looked worried before his expression smoothed.

I didn’t know what to say, but I ordered a large dinner from the kitchen to Obi-Wan’s silent approval. The meal was improved over the rations Ani always griped about, but it got their attention off the immediate issue.

Before the droids left with the remains, I considered where this talk should happen. Where seemed important. The bedroom felt more appropriate, as the desk represented the Republic and treaty, and that was not the problem.

I did not want them grabbing at the peace mission as a distraction.

No one objected, but I wasn’t sure which of them understood. Before I would have thought Obi-Wan, but I was less sure now. Anakin sat close to me near the headboard as he ate a huge meal. Vora and Obi-Wan sat apart.

I decided to start it. “What happened?”

Anakin looked unhappy. The other two exchanged glances, and I felt sure, silent comments.
“I suppose it started with Anakin’s eavesdropping and interfering with us in bed. I was more than a little annoyed we couldn’t expect privacy, and it’s kind of killed the mood since then.” Vora’s voice was flat.

I could feel Ani stiffen against me.

“It started from that, and when Anakin and I talked earlier. The biggest things we spoke about were permissions when he wants something, his marriage to you, and that he wanted more company to sleep. Now, I’m sure I didn’t mention *enough* that I was raised monogamous.”

Her face had flushed and I looked back at Ani. He looked awkward too.

Vora sighed before starting again. “When Obi-Wan was hurting, Anakin called. I wasn’t… I could not watch them in a clinch. Their decisions, but I’m too… provincial to comfortably see them together. I cannot *see* it as hot, but… as dissolution.”

As she spoke, I looked at Obi-Wan. His face was the bland one of the Negotiator, and I wished he’d speak.

But after a moment of Vora gripping his hand, she spoke again. “Everything dropped out. I refused to get angry and jealousy is a poison. It turned inward. I had to get away where it was quiet and I didn’t really care if I came back or even could come back.” Her brief smile was feeble. “I didn’t want to crack up and take Tuess with me. Cold silence seemed… peaceful and serene with how I felt. Maybe that’s why those words are too prominent and final in the Code to me most of the time.”

Ani’s laugh was bitter.

“I believe we would be more comfortable with things a bit slower, Anakin.” Obi-Wan’s smile eased into one more genuine, if tired. “Sometimes we will want privacy, and expect you to grant that. If you want something, we want warning and permissions for those involved. This isn’t necessarily ‘never,’ but ‘not now.’”

They were waiting, and I didn’t think my husband caught the cue. “That seems reasonable to me. Ani?”

He started. “How about hugs at least? Do I have to get permission for them?”

That seemed a little overboard, but Vora laughed. Then Obi-Wan huffed and blinked and Anakin snorted.

Anakin shook his head. “Okay, I won’t in official drek, and I did *not* need an image of me hugging Mace in Council.

“But this isn’t out there.” He pulled me with him as they came toward us in a rush. Ani sighed happily into the embrace.

“At all.” The Force was calmer around us, and that was a relief. An embrace of this many was fairly new to me when not a youngling. But Anakin’s content was palpable.

- Obi-Wan

The Force was calmer around us, and that was a relief. An embrace of this many was fairly new to me when not a youngling. But Anakin’s content was palpable.
Vora… Vora was not exactly content or as bright, but she was calmer. We talked shortly, and neither of us thought the issues were solved. As startled and baffled as I’d been when Anakin was talking to me, Vora’s scream into the Force almost made my heart stop.

*Her flight into deep space only slightly better than a more fiery option for self-destruction. I’d been so close to calling in the Negotiator, but I wanted to keep it quiet and not bring in the clones before we spoke.*

*I could feel her surprise when I caught up with her. I wanted to hold her tight, but could only nudge her interceptor and project my affection.*

*Once we landed in the bay, I took a deep breath before moving. Like and unlike any other important negotiation, this was new to be on such a personal level. I dropped out the my borrowed ship, and hurried over the Vora’s, which was still sealed.*

*My dear?*

*Bleak shame reached me as the hatch released and she climbed out.*

“Let us speak in the ready room, my dear.” I waved the refueling and service droids to the ships and took her hand, which was chilled.

*When the hatch closed behind us in the dim room, I turned to face her. “Words are failing me, my dear. I… don’t want you hurt like that. No despair, I know enough of that myself. What you saw…”*

“No, it’s not my business.” Vora’s next breath was too short, though her emotions didn’t settle more. “My feelings shouldn’t interfere with what makes either of you happy. I’ll beat it down on my own.”

*I slid my arms around her, though she winced. “You make me happy. Well, not quite as much when you left orbit like that.” I traced the back of her damp cheek with my knuckles. “Happy was never what I sought, content was enough. But if I ever could have been satisfied with content, that capacity was broken years ago.”*

*My concern about her passing into the Force long before me would have to wait.*

*Vora bit her lip. “You can live years, decades on content. Not that I want you to.”*

“I’d prefer those years and decades with you, my dear Padawan. Study and exploration have a great appeal.” Bracketing her jaw with my hands, I kissed her repeatedly, giving her my hopes, my happiness and how I wanted her in my life. I hoped I managed to smother my earlier fear.

*We’d shifted and I realized that we were against each other from head to toe, our robes in disarray. “Love, I will always need you.”*

*Ditto.*

*We departed the Negotiator not long after that. It was only a patch. We both knew without saying that we had to get back to settle Anakin as well.*

Now we had company on our bed, and it was a little crowded as exhaustion hit me. Vora was a little dimmer in the Force, but brightened as my presence touched hers. Anakin was close as well, his presence wrapped around Padmé and the tiny wisps of their children.

It felt odd, but I put that aside for sleep.
Waking in the morning was also different. I carefully moved off the bed, and was surprised when Padmé got up more quickly and hurried to the fresher. As I stretched and waited, neither Anakin nor Vora woke. They did not like mornings.

Perhaps the Force wished to keep me humble by repeatably sending students to challenge me on a point of morning pride.

I was amused when Anakin wriggled toward the nearest warmth as Vora slept on.

Padmé smiled. “He does like his warmth.”

“But not the sand. If you will excuse me.” I selected garments before entering the fresher for a quick wash. Ready for the day’s duties when I came out, I saw Padmé looking undecided. “Can I be of assistance?”

“I’m not sure this is practical for a permanent indulgence, let alone to allow for privacy. I can agree with that concern.” She had smoothed her clothing and looked anxious to prepare for the day’s debates.

“May I escort you to the treaty debates, Senator?” I knew we should not neglect our duties.

She looked back at her calmly sleeping husband. “That would be wise, Master Kenobi.”

I collected the summaries for Cody and the others and opened the door to where three Commanders were tensely waiting. Padmé continued toward their quarters while three men stared at me.

I regretted that they had been worried. “Commanders, I’m afraid we Generals had a… disagreement yesterday, and ironing it out took until well into the night once we could gather together again. It has nothing to do with the mission.”

Dice asked, worried, “May I speak to General Meyers?”

Projecting assurance for them, I told him. “Once she wakes from her rest, I am sure she will be available. Here are yesterday’s summaries, I regret the delay.”

“How much longer will we be here?” Cody was also worried.

“We are nearing the end of negotiations, then will come the formal ceremonies and hopefully celebrations. With this as a model, other treaties should be simpler and I hope the Council might assign us to some other duties for a time.”

Rex seemed hopeful. “That would be more challenging, sir.”

I had an idea for in the coming sessions. “Perhaps we should have a joint expedition to deal with pirates that have been interfering with both multiple worlds in the Republic and Separatist worlds, taking advantage of our distraction.”

They didn’t move, but that had their attention. I needed to include that suggestion for future missions. Noting that, I checked for related news on the public nets. I went to the kitchens, with Cody following, unwilling to not be in view of me.

“I got a report on your flight paths, Sir.” Cody’s concern was clear.

I sighed as I collected some fruit and rolls to eat quickly. “Some issues need not be reported on in detail for the mission. Compassion and diligence must be balanced. The danger reduced, the further
we’d passed.”

He nodded.

I cast my thoughts back to the treaty, which even as a draft had come to encompass so many things. The Kaller ministers were getting restive. I was relieved the structure we had started before the Senators arrived, was becoming a more inclusive reunion after such bitter conflict.

Padmé arrived, looking lovely, for some kaf and a plain roll, with her formal wardrobe neat and pressed. She announced a little defensively, “Less than weekly. I will sleep early tonight.”

“I received early notice that witnesses from neutral worlds will be arriving today. Though I doubt they will attend today’s sessions. A reception is likely tonight.” I didn’t know enough about her health challenges at the moment, and my research resources on gifted infants were limited here.

She looked cross and muttered a mild expletive. “Early will be harder now. I will need a nap.”

“I can assign them to lightsaber training, if you wish.”

“That seemed to be private time for you two.” She smirked at me.

“Anakin knows the Soresu basic forms more than enough for her training level, he studied them as well.” My face warmed and I scratched my beard, even though it was only training with Vora.

Our reminders chimed and I found the Great Kaller Wisdom hall was lively today. The neutral diplomats’ arrival from Mandalore and other worlds made our progress feel like it had a real momentum.

The Prime Minister posed as if for the banned holo recorders when he announced a costume ball for tonight to welcome the witnessing diplomats.

That gave me a concern. The Order was presumed to be somewhat neutrals in negotiations, but most costumes could so easily give the appearance of impropriety.

*We still had to remain clearly Jedi.*

I had to hope my Padawans were not aware of the opportunity until it was too late.

The meeting was called to order after a short invocation, while I and their chief negotiator faced each other in the central well. I would rate the Prime Minister as a friend after this was over. She was experienced and fair despite an unconsidered alliance. Dooku had nothing ill to note before we left Coruscant, just that she was uncooperative with him.

Our three main areas of contention were resources, prisoners, and the original injustice and corruption that led them to leave. The last would be hard to implement until the Senate began their reforms, but the Kalleran leader wanted good faith evidence immediately.

Prisoners’ fates were mostly resolved, with returns and criminal prosecution for civilian specific targets. The last prison issue was that of their former leader revealed as a Sith. They didn’t want him and wanted some other Separatist government to take responsibility, probably Serenno.

I could recuse myself from that issue, as I was his GrandPadawan, but I did not feel it was needed. Both sides were aware of how often we conflicted. The Order wished unquestioned authority over Force-Sensitives but had little experience with long term imprisonment, so Kaller disavowing his punishment was helpful.
Still, other worlds wanted vengeance within the Republic.

But today we were revisiting the issue of resources and how to join again in brotherhood. Most business and social would splice and grow together on their own. Profiteers would have to compete honestly, and could be a problem. Droid armies could be powered down, slagged, or recoded, though I thought the best could become a tool for the Brothers.

Those issues were simple compared to how the Republic resources should be available for member worlds. How much was a Chancellor responsible to smaller worlds? How could those worlds get responses from the inertia of such a large senate?

What I had not expected was a growing collection of hints during unofficial interactions, if not outright requests that Kaller wanted more direct interaction from the Order. I was not yet sure if the hints had been caught by the Senators.

One lesser Secretary spoke to me during an event weeks ago, tried to subtly ask if the Order wished to build another Temple on Kaller for our own safety. Another diplomat hastily pulled her away, before I had more than a quip to return. There had to be more than that to her request.

Taxes would return to approximately as before the war. As a smaller economy, they might be paying less than during the war, and so strengthen the peace. Confiscating the droid factories was today’s first argument, but those indicated too quick a return to conflict. I enjoyed the point and counterpoint, and sometimes checked on my Padawans. The session ended early, to allow for party preparations.

Padmé excused herself as soon as we landed, hurrying toward her quarters, as did the other Senators.

Vora and Anakin were away from the official rooms, both secretive and amused about whatever they were doing.

When I opened the door, I did not have to ask if they heard about the ball. Something was wrong with Anakin’s ears and face. The brother Vits must have gotten supplies as there was a pile of boxes and packets on one table, while he worked with a small basin on another.

Vora kept pausing to snicker.

Anakin turned to face me, barely keeping a straight face and raised his hand oddly. “Live long and prosper.”

Chapter End Notes

Come on, the Trek/Paramount disclaimer was added for chapter one. Vora was a geek who thought the Team were dressed up for a Halloween cosplay event. It won't get marked for Trek fandom as there's no more crossover than costumes for fun.
Vora talks straight with her Commander, and Obi-Wan's Padawans get creative with costumes for the ball. But all is not well even before the event starts.

Waking slowly, it felt like a lazy Sunday after a rough week. I was warm, though, and considered rolling over to sleep again because I was still tired. The warm arm around my waist made it too much work.

But the shifting hand felt comfortable…

My blurry sight did not show auburn hair nor beard, but brown curls. Warm breath flowed around my neck. “You are not asleep.”

“So? I could be. It’s nice here.”

I snorted at the less than subtle sentiment. “Lift your arm.”

A pulse of worry, but he did.

I rolled onto my left side, the easiest to fall asleep and just happened to face away. His arm slid around me even as I drifted off again.

This I could do.

When I woke again from a hand on my shoulder, I wasn’t as tired.

“Vora, it’s getting close to midday.”

I weighed the pointlessness of leaving the Order and telling them it was because I had an unnatural attachment to sleep. I was worried that they would believe me.

-You could be right. Get up anyway.-

I sat up to rub the eye crud out of my eyes, and Anakin looked more alert and happy. He waved at the fresher as he checked his comm. I heard several chimes from Rex and a notice of more ambassadors arriving before I closed the door. When I hurried back out, I had some to field too.

Once I’d absorbed the news, I asked, “Any preferences?”

“Our Commanders and your drill. I don’t know what to do about the ball. Obi-Wan hates costumes, because they’re undignified and deny that we are in the Order. We’re to be good examples, even in masquerades,” This was a sad little combination of annoyed and resigned.
My first horrified thoughts were two-person cows and Iron Man. Too much work for the time we had and good for only one or two. Explaining would take too long. Simpler to look like Jedi but not. Makeup, minimal garb, easy to explain, sort of.

I wanted to giggle and my cheeks hurt from my grin. “How about if we pretend we are Jedi of a different race? A fictional race? Just makeup and we can wear our usual robes then? We’d need help with makeup supplies, from Vits maybe.”

“What’s so funny?” He was grinning already.

“Some people on my homeworld would pitch a fit at the idea. It’s funny because the race is a little telepathic, they’re over rational but suppress their emotions, exiled their crueler brethren, and tend to peace but can kick ass if they go to war.”

Anakin chuckled at the end of my list. “That would not be a stretch for Obi-Wan. Did you know he can be frighteningly convincing when undercover? He even fooled both Ahsoka and me for a while.”

I hadn’t seen anything about that, but it didn’t surprise me. Pulling it together in one day would be the challenge, as it had been a long time since I saw the articles about how-to in old videos and panels. First came Dice and Rex.

Their worry calmed when they saw us chattering about the costumes. Anakin grabbed the technical aspects of the ears, and he and Rex went off to find our quartermaster.

That left Dice and I as I went to our training area. I could see he was restraining himself. “You have any questions today?”

“Sir, what really happened yesterday?”

I’d said any questions when I met him, and it was time to put up, at least some. “I didn’t want to live after something happened, and I wasn’t eager enough to use a weapon.” I forced a smile. “Obi-Wan really deserves his Negotiator title.”

“You are sharing quarters, General.” A trace of disapproval lay under his words.

“Yes. People do that. You have a lot of brothers. The Jedi have a lot of brothers. But where I grew up, you could have none. The only brother I had, died, and I was alone for years. If you’re lucky, you can find new brothers, new family. I have, even if they drive me crazy sometimes.” I could feel his hidden relief.

“Sometimes sleeping is only sleeping, other times it’s much more important to be close. We’re still figuring this out.” I hoped that made some sense. “Meeting people who might become family, takes time and effort. Making enemies is much easier, hurting people is easier yet. No weapons are needed.”

A long moment passed. “I started that reference you suggested, Sir. I don’t understand much.”

I had to smile. “We’ll have to sit down and talk about it, late night this week, if there’s no other time. If we get really stuck, we can ask Obi-Wan. He loves learning. Just send me which sections before so I can look over the problem.”

-Vora!-

“Probably more training for me, my friend. I suspect they are secretly horrified I grew up without it.”
I suspected Dice was horrified, too.

Anakin arrived, very pleased. “We can do it, Vits thinks a theater can lend us a template and we print the roughs. Then we color. I want to see Padmé in it, too.”

A Vulcan in high Republic finery, this was just glorious.

But glory did not carry into my training. I wanted to look as good at it as they did, instead of some spastic child. I didn’t think I had enough years left in my lifespan to reach their level now. I’d have to work at counselor instead of peacemaker. I saw a long span of losing to Padawans, and I tried to accept it.

It would keep me humble.

And bruised.

Anakin was more ambitious for me. “Come on, Vora. We’ll try a mirroring run through. That can be impressive.”

I didn’t think it was, but at least I didn’t get hit by a training blade. I counted that a win. Then was more drill.

We both felt it: the talks were breaking up. I raced to get a shower and to where Vits was reigning over the cosmetics. Anakin wanted to surprise Obi-Wan and I’d get mine done last when Vits had gotten a feel for it. When Padmé arrived with Obi-Wan, she was amused by the elegant ears and considering an elaborate hair style.

“No, we will not use different names, we are still Jedi.” Obi-Wan’s voice rang of a steely stubbornness.

Anakin’s temper flared. “Right, Hardeen. Only you can do that to save someone who should have been killed. When it’s not to fool your friends, it’s not worth your time.”

Obi-Wan’s pain and guilt was followed by seething anger.

I was worried, and I could feel Padmé was pissed with Obi-Wan, too. Names weren’t that important, no one here would get the joke and I was about to speak when Padmé did.

“I was disappointed in you as well, General. Your men were left without hope.” Padmé’s voice was so formal as to sound hollow.

I was missing something important. I should stay out of it, but I sent a small pulse of affection to all of them, and another to Obi-Wan.

Anakin laughed hollowly, his fists shaking. “He died in my arms, in front of Ahsoka. He left me think he was dead for weeks. How fair is that?”

“How can you argue against my necessities for duty when you slayed those desert scavengers for personal vengeance? How fair was that?” Sneered Obi-Wan, livid.

This wasn’t a spat over a costume, blood was flowing. “ENOUGH!” I clapped, pushing outward to rattle their footing with the Force.

“You, and you. Go get a cold shower, right now. No glares, no snarking. I want you back here in thirty like grown-ups. Or I am going to get creative... Get moving.”
I got a couple glares anyway and they stalked away, pretending the other wasn’t using the same hallway.

The clones in the room were silent and still, even the Commanders like Dice and Cody. Vits was the only one not in armor and his eyes were the wider than Rex’s. Padmé’s anger had disappeared, she watched me too.

I took a deep breath, very surprised that had worked, they’d really been too caught up in their anger. Looking at her, I tried to smile. “Are you okay now? I just knew it was going to get uglier if they kept fighting...”

She slammed into me with a hug, and I felt embarrassed. A kiss to my cheek made me want to shake my head.

I could not jump out of my skin, though I really tried.

Okay, she was not the sweet princess I’d thought.

I sputtered. “Um… ah...”

Snickering, she stepped back. “Thank you.”

That I could handle. “Okay, I know a little about the sand people on Tatooine, but what did Obi-Wan screw up?”

Padmé looked away. “He let Ani think he was dead for an undercover mission. It wasn’t that much before your arrival that it was over. Ani was so broken at the funeral and wanted to hunt down the assassin despite orders from your Council. I don’t know how far it went, but they didn’t talk for weeks after. Then Anakin said they had been on a secret mission beyond the Rim and things really improved.”

So they patched it before I met them, but it never healed fully. I forced a smile. “You have any deep, dark secrets that might make them lose it? Another husband? Twenty-five secret children in school somewhere? Annotated Sith cookbook?”

Hiccuping a laugh, she shook her head.

“This is not the time. They’re both right and wrong and they will have to hash it out, later.” I pushed my fist against my other palm and then relaxed. “Much later.”

Vits quietly took impressions of Padmé’s ears and began the merge and sculpt from the previous impression. I thought it was very cool.

Obi-Wan and Anakin returned at the same time, both avoiding each other. Her first ear tip was done and I found the equivalent of spirit gum to preview the look. Padmé could make a fine T’Pring if we’d ever did a con.

After a few minutes I had them make the remaining impressions. Anakin had managed to damage his while he was gone, but I decided not to comment. Vits fixed it.

I felt a pulse or two seeking contact in the Force, but I ignored that, too.

If I could, I would have grounded them.

I felt jittery enough that I’d smacked them.
Anakin enjoyed arranging Padmé’s hair into something formal. Obi-Wan kind of moped while I tried to explain sheen and brow-lines for females to Vits. I also filled in about the Federation Council, not Senate, President, not Chancellor, independence. Padmé would be a Council member, Obi-Wan an ambassador, and Anakin would simply command exploration and defense ships of the same names as ours in orbit. I’d be an ethno-historian if anyone cared.

Vits, at least, seemed to be enjoying this. I wasn’t completely satisfied when Anakin and Padmé were done, but they’d be the best Trek costumes ever seen on Kaller. Getting Vulcan calm seemed unlikely, and most speech was about costume details.

None brought up the argument topics, which relieved me.

Obi-Wan’s beard seemed odd. I’d only seen a few that I could remember beyond the mirror-Spock. Then I began my appliances, Vits pretty comfortable with the process by now.

“Vora...” Anakin pointed at my hair as the appliance dried.

I didn’t think anything could make the top curls into something formal, but he seemed determined. We didn’t have that much time before it started, but I realized I was already tired and had a headache I hadn’t noticed before.

So I sat and vegetated.

We ran out of time to fine-tune and primp as we worked on some other Republic delegates without their own costumes. We arrived at the costume ball a little late and it seemed packed. What would happen when the clock struck midnight?

- Obi-Wan

I’d felt embarrassed that Vora interrupted a fight that was sliding darker. I’d managed to forget about the raiders that Anakin had destroyed in that story, and the pang of guilt from him when he saw it, said it wasn’t a story. He hadn’t faced prosecution by the Council, but that didn’t mean the innocents should have been swept aside.

I also found it hard to accept that a deception for a mission, he considered to be as bad as multiple innocent deaths. I’d had difficulty completely refraining from contact as it was, as Hardeen. I had to wonder if I would have done the same if I had known.

The cosmetics were really minimal and less restrictive than masks, but I was startled at how I looked. The bounty hunter’s appearance was so different, it didn’t feel like me. This was and wasn’t me.

Anakin and Padmé made a pair. They weren’t smiling, that didn’t fit their costumes. But pretending to be alien counselor and captain who were openly married satisfied them, the hair that Anakin arranged framed her beauty. If they kept these alien roles up, I might even think Anakin could play other roles… someday.

Being an ambassador was a comfortable role for me. Speaking of treaties and peace, charming diplomats, and even dancing with those so-minded. I was fluent enough to greet the Mando diplomats and welcome them to the treaty endgame. That skill was a bittersweet one, because I still thought of Satine regularly.

But Vora picked a quieter role for herself, one that did not fit with how she looked tonight. Her hair had been woven up into a small basket, with various pearls in the weave, borrowed from Padmé. Her ears nestled in the shorter strands as she observed another Senator gathered with us.
I’d had to stifle a breath of jealousy when Anakin arranged her hair to finish our decoration. Others of our delegation were sporting the alien appliances and it would have an effect with our arrival. We used several speeders to arrive together, and our security was not included in the costuming. They were on duty.

The pose was that we were not on duty. Of course we were always on duty and carried our light sabers as usual. Padmé had a hidden weapon.

The great halls set aside for the event had deep draperies hanging to create alcoves along the sides for chat, flirt, and debate. The entry hall was the most crowded, to see and be seen, to select targets to charm or intimidate. Costumes ranged from the generic masks as I usually chose, to highly elaborate frameworks of real or imagined beings. Some were clad as real people from history I did not know, more disturbing were one or two dressed like Dooku, their former leader.

Vora gripped my arm. “I doubt he would see it as a complement, and look, that one is being escorted away.”

“Reconciling my Master’s respect and what he chose to become has been difficult. It has never reached hatred, though I was angry when we fought. Anakin was calmer at first because he had no memories of him as an honored Master.” I saw the other one change his costume.

Now that we were past the initial press, I saw an industrialist that I knew was involved in making battle droids. A discussion of postwar reuse could be fruitful, and they could replace the most hazardous tasks, even support the Clones. Droids could be powerful and sometimes clever, but they had little empathy, comprehension, or initiative. I was still hoping that some droids could be assigned to Republic defense.

“I know that look, have fun charming the castle.” Vora’s smile was wry and eased something that felt off.

My smile was a polite one, though I wanted to smirk. “I will have you know, Knight Meyers, castles do not make the most pleasant of companions. Too many I have met were nasty and Dark wastes of space.

“I much prefer brightness...” With that, I raised her wrist to my lips and I could have felt her flush with my eyes closed. At her understanding, I stepped back to mix with the delegates for a time.

Even across the hall, I could feel bubbles of her amusement at the diplomats floating up steadily.

I noted that Anakin and Padmé were still staying with each other, and sampling refreshments. Even without an official announcement about her expectant state, assumptions, correct ones at that, were being made about them.

If he thought the journalists were annoying, they would be doubly so soon enough. The babies of a Senator and prominent Jedi would be swamped with attention in public.

Some had gained entrance to this event, and I kept moving to avoid them. Persuasion was better accomplished without too close a witness.

My diplomatic duties somewhat satisfied after conversations, I joined Vora in a quiet eddy and took her hand, “Come along?”

A half-step and she said, “Where?”

“Where else, my dear?” The dancing floor was not very crowded and openly accompanying Vora
had its seductive charm.

She slowed us down. “I don’t even know how to dance at home. You know how slow I am with muscle memory skills. You’ve seen two years of my incompetence with that.”

“Shh, love.” I won’t let you, follow me. I strengthened our bond into a trance and stepped into the music.

A moment and she relaxed against me as we sank into the music and each other. Holding her as we moved among the other dancers, became my center.

As we slowed more than the music, others moved around us as we floated among the cosmic stars. Vora’s eyes shone and she looked almost ethereal with shining reflections in her hair as the hall turned behind us. A full stop and I leaned forward to kiss her, a choice and promise of always that I meant.

The Force warned me to move, to push Vora aside as a blaster shot passed by much too closely. Vora spun her light saber out as well as we scanned for attackers. I concentrated to bring Anakin and our Commanders into combat awareness, and my awareness of the crowd and threats multiplied.

_Incapacitate if possible! Help the civilians get out safely._

They acknowledged as live shooters and turret-like droids dropped from above and caused mass panic. Anakin was in a near panic about Padmé and their children.

_Take her out to the Brothers, but be careful._

Vora was moving toward the one shooter, in a pain I doubted she felt.

I deflected bolts into the droid emplacements above us, avoiding the panicked guests. It almost seemed forever until I felt Anakin’s return. He rushed forward as I lifted the barricade table and threw aside. Anakin tore into those shooters.

A burst of darkness spread through the hall and I checked for Anakin, but he was fine. I cast about again seeking the driver behind this attack. I knew there was another… a familiar other, quiet as a whisper within the Force.

A Force Sensitive and not Light. An enemy that had not been as dead as I thought after over a year of silence. I knew when Anakin made the connection when he got angrier.

Vora and the Brothers focused on the bounty hunters while I sought Ventress’ location. Only she would know the target and client. Ventress could sometimes be reasoned with.

_Come out and face me, Asajj!_ I sent it out in the Force as much as my words went across the hall.

Shots continued to fly but fewer as seconds passed during the melee. The Force around us was still clouded. A surge in the Force by Anakin and the ceiling turrets were ripped out and dropped to the floor spitting sparks and smoke, enough to cloud the emptying room.

The few remaining enemies made a break to escape, but they were reduced to crawling away from assorted Force shoves.

Only one, a woman in a bulky coverall, remained standing. She had a blaster ready though it appeared she had a light saber clipped at her side.
“Can we not deal for some kind of more peaceful outcome?” I offered.

She laughed and took off the mask, revealing a dark fuzz to go with the harsh look on her face. “All deals were honored, but you will not give me the one thing I want.”

Anakin started to slide to attack position, but I watched the Dathomirian woman’s signature as shielded as it was. “What would that be?”

I did not like…

Ventress drew a red blade, and not the one visible earlier. “Maybe you would trade the life of your Padawan, Jedi.”

Vora lifted off the floor and made choking sounds, pulling on the Force in a rising panic.

Anakin lunged as did I, but Ventress parried us both, her second blade out too. I did not feel Vora’s relief at getting free with our distraction, but she was concentrating.

Our exchange of blows was not decisive, but Ventress leaped back. “While this has been amusing, it is no longer profitable. Until next time.”

Anakin threw his blade, but she ducked and crashed out a window. He chased after, but I heard an engine roar away as I ran back.

Vora was up on her hands and knees, panting. She made only terrible gurgles when she tried to speak. *I’m okay, aside from my throat.*

I knelt beside her and helped her upright so I could see the damage. The dark bruises on her throat were typical and showed as so dark against her tannish skin. What alarmed me more was the hairless spot on one side of her head, the familiar smell of burnt hair lingering from a blaster bolt that was too close.

*Oh, my dear one.* “I’m proud of how you held your calm, my Padawan. But what were you concentrating on?”

“A pipeline of air. It almost wasn’t enough, but I didn’t want her putting more pressure on or shaking me like a terrier. Who was she?”

Anakin stalked over. “Ventress, a warlord and bounty hunter who was hand in glove with Dooku and presumably Sidious’ plans.” He smirked. “She and Obi-Wan flirted during their confrontations.”

Cody and some other clones entered the hall, where nearly all the guests had left. “General, only a handful of casualties. The building is secure.”

Kaller security poured in as well, watching both us and the Clones and then asking what happened. There had been one death in the first seconds on top of direct blaster and trampling injuries. I went to examine the body of a local official. Anakin thought it was unusually bloodless for Ventress. The security was polite and I could feel that Anakin found that odd as well.

But I worried what Ventress wanted. She’d been a canny enemy far more often than an ally.

Perhaps the attack or being reminded that Jedi were protectors, but negotiations started progressing more quickly again. Even the social debates slowed and we had time for study and training in the evenings. The draft of the treaty was close to approval, then to be sent to both Senates for approval, though there, Senator Mothma had more influence than Padmé. Then we would wait for ratification
to make it official.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, I did not expect the only costumes in the entire story to happen to post for Halloween. Makes a nice serendipity though.

NaNo starts tomorrow and posts may slow, though I do have a cushion.
Counsel

Chapter Summary

Anakin must face an intervention about the dread prospects of custody and family planning. After they finish making the treaty, comes the prospect of each preparing reports and summaries. At least one puzzle may have a solution...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

-Anakin

Padmé was both angry and frightened in that attack, more because the risk to our children. I never liked Ventress; she somehow gained a kind of friendship with Obi-Wan and Ahsoka. She was a Darksider, and I didn’t trust her at all.

One death, and I wondered why she attacked while we were present. The dead official wasn’t that important.

Padmé was.

I insisted that we take her up to my medics on the Resolute. Obi-Wan watched Vora closely, but I didn’t know why until I saw the burn on her head. We returned to the surface in the morning and I stayed with Padmé almost continuously.

Weeks passed and Ventress was not active here. I was getting bored while the Senates argued. Obi-Wan admitted to his opposite that the Senate on Coruscant was close, very close to passing approval. Privately he said it was more that neither side wanted to appear weaker by passing it first.

I didn’t want the twins to be born here.

One night it was just the four of us in the formal dining room, Mothma and her aids were on some fishing trip with a local who had been an old friend. Padmé was getting less comfortable from the twins and I was happy to stay in with her.

Vora took a deeper breath once the food service droids left. “Are you guys going to admit to the Republic as a whole that you married? It’s important enough a commitment for you to buck the Order, but what does it mean besides youthful rebellion?”

For a second I just looked at her, then I got angry. Why was she questioning us? Padmé was the most important thing in my life. She didn’t understand.

Padmé touched my arm. “Let us hear her out, Ani.”

“Thank you, Padmé,” Vora said. “Yeah, you committed your futures to each other, but marriages usually have a public component. At some point people will wonder if you are truly committed to raising the children together if they think you’re unmarried.”

“It’s not anybody’s business… And we are married.”
“It’s a matter of trust. The people who voted for her to represent then. The people who trust a Jedi will be unbiased...”

I glared at Obi-Wan. “This is your doing with how you breathe the Code.”

His eyes glittered. “No, not at all.”

A thunk on the table came from where Vora slapped it. “No. I’m familiar with this bind when I was less than your age. Divorces and separations and tragedies and wondering if Daddy will still be their Daddy like what happens to other kids.”

“No! I would never leave them! You know I would never...” I leaned on the table and gripped the wood to hold still.

“You have got to plan ahead, Anakin. It is not fair to force Padmé to do it all. This is for your children’s’ sake, not a statement of anything else. I trust she’s already started financial planning, because you don’t have that to contribute. What happens if you two get hit by a meteorite one day? No Sith, no war, no plots, what do you have prepared?”

That I didn’t have to think about. “Obi-Wan... and you.”

“Oh, Ani. There’s a lot more to it than that.” Padmé smiled a little.

Vora covered her face with her hand and then looked at me. “I appreciate the honor. But there’s usually a lot of paperwork to make sure, or other officials or relatives might not even let us see them. That’s not even counting enemies.”

“We’re married, why would it be hard?” I didn’t understand.

“Because nobody officially knows you’re married! Or officially knows you’re the father. A relative of mine lost a beloved daughter after years because there was nothing official. He had to watch when someone else raised his kid right into their Undercity, just for the lack of paperwork.”

“No. I can prove it!” The things on the table rattled.

Vora shook her head. “I’m not saying you won’t eventually, but I don’t know how fast your courts work but sometimes it took years, while you wouldn’t see them. You married each other, but now you need to admit it to the world. Despite the consequences.”

I hated paperwork and officials, and looked at Padmé.

She smiled. “I have made some preparations, but they are incomplete.”

I looked at Obi-Wan, who looked calm and expectant. I wasn’t sure if he was amused or not. “I want to keep it private and avoid getting in more trouble.”

“The Council knows, individually. I am not privy to how they will react as a body.” He sipped some tea. “I believe it would be safer to act while the memory of Sidious is still fresh and the war not over.”

Padmé nodded. “Agreed.”

“Are you sure?” I had to ask her, of what I was afraid to think about.

“That’s my cue to go.” Vora stood up. -Mission accomplished.-
Obi-Wan nodded and departed with her.

“Don’t you think they will take care of the twins, Angel?”

“Of course they will, Ani. They want you to plan for the future, that something could happen to us, to either of us and the twins will need us to take care of them after we’re gone.” Padmé held my hands tightly.

I squeezed her hands, and brushed her cheek. “I cannot imagine you not being with me, Angel. I just stop. Then I’ll explode...”

Anger echoed far in my mind, demanding action.

“Our children will need you even more. If they’re sad, your anger will frighten them. I do not want you to avenge me like on Tatooine, they will need you too much.”

Even as a ‘what if?’ the storm was gathering: fear for Padmé, anger that anyone might hurt her, worry about our children, need to keep them all safe.

“Ani!” Padmé held both sides of my face until I met her eyes. “This is just preparation, like fire suppression equipment, like shields, like weapons training... We don’t want our home to burn down, but being prepared will help, as much as we might hate the preparation.”

The storm calmed. I could keep them safer if I wasn’t there.

I could be on a mission, after all.

Padmé had been rubbing my hands. “I can show you the financial plans I made so far. My family will want to see them as they grow, too. I... I’m not sure about announcing our marriage. It’s a little frightening after this long, Ani.”

That I was disturbed by, too. I didn’t know how the Council would react when it was public news. It was one of the better secrets to keep as far as I was concerned. They’d ignored us for two and a half years. But tradition said a Master who broke the Code in such an open way was ejected from the Order. I’d long been angry at the Council, but things were much better now.

I could probably be happy outside the Order, but I’d miss Obi-Wan and worry he’d do something stupid on his own.-I’d get bored. I wanted it all. “We should do it now.”

“How should we announce it?”

“I’ll ask Obi-Wan, he’s probably been worrying about it since he found out.”

Padmé slid into my lap. “We will be fine, Ani.”

Her added bulk from the babies was a wonder, and I leaned against her to feel their heartbeats. “I hope so, Angel.”

- Vora

I’d been worried about triggering Anakin’s anger or panic, but he had to learn to get past that. No one really thought about these things much, once they were set up. But he needed to help more than swinging his light saber and making babies. Being a Dad was a lot more.

“I would have appreciated if you had warned me, my dear.” Obi-Wan spoke as we reached our
I shook my head. “He still gets extra stubborn if you criticize him sometimes. I think it will take years until that isn’t his knee-jerk reaction. I’m not a threat to his place in the world.”

“You could have been. You were my second Padawan, and I remember how that felt.” His face was blank.

That was my clue to give him a big hug. No, to hug the stuffings out of him. “That was half a con-job on the Council and he was in on it. I wasn’t really a child that everyone was going wild over. No one could replace him in your heart, even if he didn’t always see that.”

“He wasn’t the only one, my dear.” He held me close as well, stiffening with his attention elsewhere and then relaxing.

I’d rest on today’s victories over stubborn Jedi.

The Senators announced their ratifications nearly simultaneously. There’d be proofing and ceremonies and some big parties and symbolic gestures, but now there was a timeline for Kaller to rejoin the Republic.

This wasn’t a chunk of the Separatist union according to the charts, but it had been a solid member world that wasn’t extremist. My personal guesstimate was that over two thirds would rejoin. Half the remaining could not face that they lost so much to the Sith or gave in to their hatred; they might never rejoin and they would be a problem for years. The rest, the rest were pirates, profiteers, and slavers who never really intended to be civil, that I doubted either side really wanted them.

That included Tatooine, that pit of villainy, that boil that needed to be lanced. Something I thought overdue, but we already had so many pots on the stove.

Now, I got to see the celebrations of the Kaller people, who had been too long in a war they didn’t really understand until it was too late. We celebrated, but this was only the first for us, so it was a tempered joy.

I felt a little more tempered as I hadn’t lost people that I knew. I felt grief for Dice and the Jedi, and their sorrow for them. I grieved for their losses, but didn’t feel it like they did. I felt more guilt that I didn’t feel any grief for the masses killed during the war. The Code discouraged grief, but it wasn’t control or serenity for me, but not really giving much of a damn for faceless people. So I was horrified at the abstract, but uncaring about the individuals.

I could feel terrible guilt that I was a cold bitch. And self-centered too. Yep, celebration made me depressed and my smiles faked. I found it easy to avoid getting plastered and getting into trouble at the parties. I was very glad to finally depart for Coruscant.

Days of Jump didn’t do much to help my restlessness. It wasn’t until we were back in our quarters, that I realized the restlessness wasn’t all mine. Anakin had gone to Padmé’s apartment with her.

We arrived early in the day for the Temple, and I was surprised that it felt like home this time. Oh, I still missed Terra and the house I grew up in, but this was fine, too.

“Knight, make sure to include in your notes about the mission of how you responded to Ventress’ choke hold.”

Ugh, even the high points would take a day or two, and I had other things I’d rather do. Some things weren’t really important to the mission or Order to report, like choosing which form to study or
finding out why Dice was being a jerk. “I didn’t do that much to talk about.”

“Observations and analysis are as useful, too, my dear.” Obi-Wan dropped his satchel in his room and waited for me to do the same.

I never did like doing homework right after school. Still I sat and started an outline.

“We will deliver our verbal report after the Council has studied the written. Well, our reports more than Anakin’s.” Obi-Wan smiled from the table where he was settling to work. “His are usually one really, really long sentence. Or five short ones.”

I liked his smile. “I’ll try to split the difference. And watch out for drama, I could include a scene from something like Masters of the Forbidden Galaxy or something just to see if anyone is paying attention.”

Obi-Wan concentrated, trying to remember the reference and I just knew when he made the connection. He started shaking his head and realized I was about to bust up laughing. He huffed a laugh, “Not the classic Lost Tooka Treasure of the Ceran Expansion?”

“That one is behind a paywall. Maybe later?” We both turned back to our own reports in more cheerful moods.

I started with a list of events and marked which were mission related. I noted my observations on the city, the encounter with Ventress and her choke hold, and my thoughts on how the treaty process went overall. In a separate file I noted more personal… accomplishments? Discomplishments? Was there an antonym for that word?

This exercise was not warming the heart, but draining it. I never understood how people could puff themselves up in job reports.

But I’d liked writing too much in an earlier life to write some shit down to get it over with. A cold shower and I went out to get some air and see new faces.

Not a lot of air, I planned to see how my GreatGrandmaster was doing. I knocked at the doorway.

“Ah, Knight Meyers, I assume your mission was successful.” He looked up from nothing in front of him.

“It was fairly peaceful, unexpectedly so for a peace conference. Kaller is rejoining the Republic.” Both his face and presence in the Force were nearly neutral. “If it helps… No, that would not help. A civil war is never painless. I truly thought everything had to be destroyed to save it.”

“Do you want to save it now?”

He sighed, his shields thinning a little. “Even in my maddest moments, that was what I wanted the power for, to clean out the calcified waste. I blamed the Order for Qui-Gon’s death and their apathetic reactions to the menace looming.” A bitter humor ran through him as he spoke, but then it smoothed. “I think I have finally come to accept my Padawan’s passing into the Force.”

That was good. “If it helps, Kaller decided against demanding your head as part of the treaty.”

Then came a bark of his laughter. “They always lacked the nerve to do that much. They were a solid supply world for the war effort, but without even a tech edge to use. Easy to exploit or intimidate if they got restive.”
“I wandered through the city at the start, and they didn’t seem particularly upset to see me. I found a good bakery and bought them out.”

Dooku stilled, and a belated worry surfaced. “A bakery?”

“It was just us and the Brothers, a group not known for it’s fine cooking skills for diplomatic functions. The Senators and support staff arrived weeks after our preliminaries were proven safe.”

His smile was sardonic. “The Council always did underestimate the values of fine living to smooth relations.”

Yeah. I’d missed that in my outline and wanted to note that. “Excuse me, I have to remember to include that.”

“You haven’t reported yet?”

“I did a detailed outline, but some things had nothing to do with the peace treaty.”

“Like?”

“I started Soresu study.” I felt a little apologetic.

Dooku’s smile returned. “Not surprising. He was your Master, even if you are breaking the Code as well.”

I glared at him. “I’m not some vulnerable teenager who was exploited. He’s the younger. My contemporaries are grandparents and I am my own person. That did not change because I came here.”

He waved that off. “I agree the Order must change, but some traditions should remain.”

“My decision had almost nothing to do with Obi-Wan’s preferences. I’m not aggressive and I’m just not suited to the other forms. I know I need to keep training, but my tradition has no problem laying the blade down when the need has passed. It just hasn’t passed.”

Dooku had started to interrupt but stopped. “Did you use your skill on this mission?”

I touched my neck without thinking. “Not exactly. Someone attacked an event late in the process. It wasn’t clear if it was for a bounty or a grudge against our mission, and the Masters are sure it’s the latter.”

“They are often right.” The smug smile of another Master.

“She could have broken my neck in the first instants before they attacked her. I think she’s playing a deeper game than poking Obi-Wan.”

That got his attention. “Do you know who this was?”

“Woman named Ventress, buzz haircut, red blades with enough control to keep me up in the air too when she parried Obi-Wan and Anakin.”

Now that made him feel anger, pain, and shame. “She was my student, and she would like my head on a platter.”

This was the deeper game. “Is it about the dog-eat-dog of the Sith system again?”
Dooku looked away. “It was at the time, despite any other feelings of pride. I was ordered to have her killed, and I thought I did. She had been a Padawan once.”

I head-smacked myself, because she *knew* were Dooku was thanks to their tabloids. “That would make for a serious grudge.”

There was a silence as we both thought.

“I do not see another place to keep me both imprisoned and protected. There aren’t other strongholds anymore.”

“You also should train, sir. I will notify the Council of her probable goal.” This could not wait for our mission report as it affected Temple security.

“Indeed you should, Knight Meyers.” Regret rippled through the cell.

“Vora, I thought I said that long ago.”

“Knight means more.”

Shaking my head, I waved goodbye and began my trudge to the Council chamber. It was much faster than the trip was in battle. I noted to the request for entry that my news was concerning Temple security.

It felt very odd to be the one putting in the request. As I waited, I realized that Obi-Wan was already inside. He must have finished early or been summoned.

The display told me to enter.

My butterflies said to walk, no *run*, the other way.

I walked in.

“Knight Meyers, you have information about Temple security?” Master Windu spoke neutrally.

“Masters,” I bobbed a half-ass bow. “I don’t think this information should wait. The Darksider on Kaller was a bounty hunter who has an excellent motive to kill Dooku. She was his student when he was cultivating his idiocy, and the unlamentable Palpatine ordered her death for a round of the lunatic Sith to-the-death tournament. She *must* know where he is now and I believe she will be pushing to enter the Temple.”

“Your opinions, do tell us. Yes, hmmm.” Yoda’s amusement was clear.

Obi-Wan was amused too, though it did not show on his face.

Mace glared at me and looked at Obi-Wan. “Master Kenobi, I wonder that both of your former students have difficulty with proper language.”

I was peeved at the objection.

“I believe her words were carefully chosen to avoid poor language, even if they are still clear. I have noted that facility in several reports.” Butter would not melt in Obi-Wan’s mouth.

A dark skinned man with bright tattoos and dreads, grinned. “What would you recommend, Knight?”
“Assassination or attempted rescue of Dooku by her would be bad for the Temple. Gathering information should be first. I think she will be coming for him either way.” Now I was wondering if I had jumped the gun a little and my face warmed.

“Anything else to add, Knight Meyers?” Mace’s voice was clipped.

I shook my head, bowed, and left when bid.

Obi-Wan’s thought followed me out. -Excellent, my Padawan. And before six months.-

I nearly wanted to run when I was leaving, I was so glad to be done. I’d have to do it again when we finished our reports, but I was pretty sure Anakin had not given his a thought yet.

It was time to present the baby gifts, but I wasn’t sure the parents’ schedules. We had three months at most, and twins were usually early. I still’d have time for their gift, but I was getting antsy.

Making my way back down to the barracks for the 408th I wondered what I could do for them next. They seemed to accept me but they were… aimless? Unfocused? All the different meanings of dispirited.

Another clone stepped in front of me, and it took a moment to identify blond Rex. We’d never spoken directly before.

“General…” He began, but kind of froze up.

Just in time, I remembered his atypical rank. “Captain? Is there something I can help you with?”

Rex’s pause was painful.

He scratched above his ear, his face briefly red. “I… uh. Wanted to ask to you about something, General Meyers.”

*Did Vod need the Talk?*

I pasted a smile on to encourage him. “Sure. Is this a quick question, or do you need privacy?”

“I don’t know, Sir. This wasn’t in our training, and Wolffe’s tactics don’t make any sense.” His face got a little pinker.

“Someplace private, then. I’ll see what I can do…”

The boy’s relief rang in the Force and he led me to a different barracks tower and an empty office. He frowned. “Do you want some water?”

I checked myself. “I’m fine. What’s the problem? I’m a little surprised you didn’t ask General Skywalker. He’s a much better Jedi and he knows more.”

“He’s… I trust him with my men, Sir. But he gets… weird about some things and I don’t know how he’d react if I asked him about this. And I don’t know anyone else who- shares quarters. This doesn’t have anything to do with my duties, and you shut down the Generals when they started to fight.” Rex’s words flowed better once he got started. “No one knows which way they’re going to jump if an argument gets interrupted. None of us understand what happened that day, so you must be a kind of mission specialist.”

Oh, skills outside military. “I’ll listen. If I don’t know, I’ll find someone who does.”
His smile was relieved. “Thank you, Sir. I would like to see General Tano, Sir. My brothers tell me I look at her, like the General does the Senator. I don’t see her much since her promotion. It was easier to talk to her when we were the same command but old manuals said we should not until we were in separate chains of command. I don’t know what to do now that we are.”

Oh, lord. Dating and young love. “I can give some general guidelines, but every rule has exceptions.”

“Do you mind I’m recording this?” His relief and cheer bubbled up.

“No. Keep in mind this is how it matches my experiences. But I didn’t grow up in the Temple. There may be civilian advice books that might have insight as well.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I held up a hand to give me a moment to think. “First of three principles: friendship. You need to like each other and like spending time together outside your jobs and be comfortable. Can you talk about more than battle and war?

Rex nodded, his face brightening. “We talked about when we were cadets, and dumb things we did.”

Nodding, I held two fingers up. “Second principle: respect. This is not just trusting in combat, but trusting each other with your feelings. They will try to be always kind and not cruel in how they treat you. That you both have the right to object if something hurts. Within the relationship, you should be equal.”

Rex looked a little confused. “But you were a Commander and General Kenobi… of course you weren’t equals.”

“That makes it much harder, to separate duty from how we treat each other in private. Then, I am less unequal.” Explaining was like some minefield. “When they were lost in their anger at each other, their trust made them listen even if they far outrank me.”

The brother still looked lost.

I sighed and walked a quick circle before I spoke. “The safest thing to avoid conflict with duty, is the have no close relationships. That is the strategy the Jedi Order took for centuries. Anakin had trouble hiding that the Senator was more than just duty, right? Can you live with yourself if you have to choose between your best brother and a planet of people? Can you respect that they might have to make that decision for or against you? You cannot control their choices, even if it hurts. Trying becomes destructive in time, destroying both. The rewards of respect are worth it.”

“This is nothing about dating.” That was not quite a whine from the young man.

“You need friendship and respect before you can build anything long term, Rex. The third principle is attraction. You can’t retrofit a bad relationship based on that alone. Attraction changes over time and can be bait for nasty people.”

“Bait?”

“Attractive people become the bait to lure others into trouble, from a blackmailer to serial killers. I think you don’t have to worry about that with General Tano. But relationships are built around what qualities each finds attractive in the other. Some qualities are deal breakers, like if the man I was seeing murdered my- tooka. It’s not attractive and shows no respect. I happen to like nice voices and
my brother liked blonds. What qualities does she have that makes you feel good? If you are both attracted, then congratulations, you get to explore what comes next.”

He scratched an eyebrow. “I hoped there was a manual.”

“Anyone who claims that is either full of shit or selling you something. These are guidelines, not guarantees.”

Rex asked me a few more questions. He wasn’t exactly happy, but he was thoughtful as he left.

I hadn’t gotten the faintest inkling of questions like this from Dice or Shins. They were still guilty and grieving about Order 66 events and not really looking forward yet beyond survival. I should visit them, even as I looked for something they’d be inspired by. This time I was more familiar with the Brothers’ markings and I could pick out the correct path.

Carry was there, and Dice was very relieved to see me.

Before he could say anything, I spoke. “Nothing interesting at the Temple. I’m working on my light saber yet tonight and reports. We can expect a few days leave at least, so what forms would I need to get you squared away?”

Dice crossed his arms. “We haven’t had much to recover from, General, but I’ll get them to you yet today.”

I didn’t need the Force to know he was annoyed. “What’s wrong, Dice?”

“General,” he looked away. “We weren’t made to be ceremonial guards. We live to serve. That was not service.”

“Ending pointless deaths and strengthening the Republic isn’t service?”

I could feel the conflict.

“Yes, Sir, it is.” The Commander finally ground out.

“Fine. For morning, I want a list of ten things that count as service for you or your brothers. Nothing you already routinely have done, new things.” I wanted some ideas and was feeling lost.

No, I was deeply sad. I blunted some of it by sending into the Force, but I would have to think about it later. Right now the 408th needed something and that order was only a stalling tactic.

“Is this a general order, Sir?” Dice’s voice was neutral.

That stymied me for a second, but I remembered their group-think. “It’s your responsibility, Commander. But if you want to work with your brothers to come up with good answers, that would be acceptable. I’d allow an extra day for communication times. Do you wish that option?”

Dice looked at Carry, and agreed.

I made a quick tour of their barracks, trying to meet and memorize more names, but I’d always sucked at that so I wasn’t getting many down. I hoped smiles and good words would help.

With a task, I was almost hoping Dice would let me have the night off, but after a quick speech with Carry, it was clear I had a chaperon again.

He meant well, but I was feeling hemmed in.
I still had my mission report and returned to my quarters where Dice took a hall post while I struggled with my wording. For the section on self-improvement, I was so tired of the damn thing, I just wrote ‘everything.’

“You are permitted to eat, my Padawan.” Obi-Wan seemed tired when he entered and dropped on the sofa.

I waved at the document. “I’m not sure what to include. Selecting which form to study really isn’t relevant to the mission. Even less is my rotten response to jealousy.”

He looked away. “Safest is to include anything important to you, at least in footnotes. Secrets cause more problems. And what feels important is often influenced by the Force, so the Council needs to know as well.”

I would have preferred not hearing that. “Does the 212th seem… disconnected right now, or is it just the 408th?”

Obi-Wan considered a moment, looking inward. “No, they were not exactly satisfied with that mission. But they know it will not last. Your men are still unsettled.”

I was so not interested in missions. But that was not an option, was it?

Then I realized that Obi-Wan didn’t feel right either. “Ben, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, my dear.” He forced some calm.

Looking at my notes, I could play normal, too. I wasn’t attached to seeming that emotionless. “Eating in the cafeteria, or?”

“That would save time for our other duties.”

Duty wasn’t my immediate criteria. “Gimme a minute, I want to finish it tonight. I’m sick of it already.”

He lay back and watched the ceiling silently.

Closing my work files, I thought of that until I moved close enough to sit and snuggle. I tucked in and held him tight. “Penny for your thoughts.”

That got me a smile of amused annoyance. “Was your speech anything but metaphor?”

“You’d probably enjoy the social historical lecture for the usage, but it was a significant amount of money once.” I nudged him in the ribs. “That doesn’t mean you can deflect the question.”

“Council business.”

I could feel my eyebrows skrunching together. “I can feel the fib inside that, but I won’t call you on it.” -This time.-

He gathered me closer and kissed the top of my head. “Thank you.”

“We could skip dinner...”

“Yes, we could.” His hands slid under my tunic with still growing ease.

I wanted to reach skin faster and ruffled his beard with both thumbs. Then I carefully traced the bare
skin on his cheeks.

The furrows on his brow and new infant wrinkles at the sides of his eyes worried me and I massaged them with my fingertips.

That must have helped as I felt him relax into the sofa, his limbs slowing, but not into sleep.

Some time later, Obi-Wan hummed and his arms slid down to slide down and caress my legs. A pulse of determination and he moved me to straddle his lap.

In his shifting me, I ended up with my arms around his neck. His smile shined bright and happy as I wore my goofy smile.

*I love your eyes, Ben, every way they shine and shift as your mood changes even a little.*

His eyes widened with a little surprise and blinked a few extra times. A breath or two and He pulled my head down for a kiss.

I gave him a few extra, chanting his name in my head, but he kept hurrying like any gap between kisses of my face and neck was unacceptable. My fingers were threaded through his hair to hold myself close.

I really, really did not want to let go enough to get more access through his robes, breathing was enough a challenge. I squirmed closer, knees around his waist and tossing my saber to the table and then his.

Some reminder chimed from a comm even as I fell forward to try to get in closer contact. It took some seconds for me to identify which and more to care. “Whose reminder is that?”

“Mine, I’m afraid I have a meeting with some of the Council soon. If I am to train you today, it must be now.”

I felt a little sad and a lot colder. Setting myself for public view again wasn’t as well done as I’d like, but I always needed a shower after light saber.

We found an empty mat in a training room after several tries, then drills and corrections slid into sparring. I hadn’t noticed when unfamiliar faces had made a crowd around us. I’d gotten used to our clone troops as an audience, but these were Jedi. People who’d trained their whole lives.

One of the other Jedi, a dreadlocked Council member I didn’t know, spoke to Obi-Wan, looking serious.

I smiled and nodded and made excuses about finishing a report. Then I got the flock out of there. Editing five months of sometimes hazy recall was a lot more fun than attention.

I hated editing, in a non-passionate state of intense distaste. Still, I decided it was well enough finished, and sent it to Obi-Wan officially before I crawled into my own bed.

In the morning a cluster of messages lit my comm.

Chapter End Notes
Postings will continue to be irregular during NaNo.
Masters in Conflict

Chapter Summary

Vora suspects that there’s nothing sure but death, taxes, and paperwork. And sure enough, the mission report does not go smoothly. Neither does a meet with grouchy Dooku. Nor does a chat with Dice.

She was sure it was going to be THAT kind of day when Yoda said that

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- **Obi-Wan**

I’d finally finished reviewing the preliminary reports about Ventress’ attack on Kaller with Vos. He was angry with me. I was not sure if it was because she was our opponent, still a dark side user, or because of the flirting we’d done at times. He might have cared for her when he was undercover, but he refused to speak about it or her even when we were in private.

I hoped for company in our quarters, but no one was there. I went to sleep in my still, still room.

In the morning I set at the table to work on my backlog of mission reports. Council issues demanded my attention with my return, in the Council chamber when I wasn’t working on reports since we touched down. I’d had summaries for most, but much was clearer when I physically sat at meetings instead of snatched remote sessions when treaty duties did not interfere. Back in Temple, Council issues could and did track me down at almost any time, even in my quarters, unlike Vora or Anakin.

While Anakin had not been criticized as often after the Council had seen the tangible visions and their outcome, most Masters varied in their tolerance for his actions now that the Sith were gone.

My actions gathered more subtle disapproval and I was careful with my responsibilities. I was not anticipating sending Anakin or Vora on missions while I stayed her, as was normal before the war. I would be more willing to send them together, but there just weren’t enough fit for duty with every call to the Order.

Rebuilding was as much if not more important.

I could not claim any reported idea was a surprise, I’d seen a copy of Vora’s suggestions months ago. Watching for new Initiates was an explicit duty for all missions. With the losses from the Temple battle and Order 66, many Padawans had lost their Masters. Neither could we afford for as many to enter the Service Corps without a calling for that service.

If I had to be honest and Vora had been a normal Initiate, the Corps might have been a good fit. She had proven the ability to meet another culture and remain centered in herself and she had a different approach toward mental healing. But, I did not want that great a separation.

Knights and Masters were to take Padawans regularly, unless they had very compelling reasons such as being under medical care. The permitted reasons were already under informal debate, but fewer,
much fewer. I had mixed feelings about another Padawan, as difficult as it was to admit to myself.

_-I am sorry I left you with that belief, Obi-Wan. It was never really you, despite what I foolishly said._-

_-Master? Am I dreaming again?_

_-I am not convinced you have dreamed enough, my Padawan. But I am here for now._-

I had so many things I wanted to tell him, so many questions I wanted to say.

None of them sprang to mind.

_-I am relieved that you have come to accept and even approve of some grayer beliefs._- The unseen smile held warm approval.

_-My Padawans have taught me much._-

_-Ah, yes. Your Padawans. You do seem to have… become an overachiever with your attachments to them, haven’t you?_- His approval faded in a too familiar shift.

I felt cold, all warmth draining away. “I did not take advantage of either of them when I was their Master.”

_-That wasn’t always as well delineated, was it?_

Guilt swelled again at the scorn. “No, Master.”

Vora’s door swung open and she looked around the room, her hair and robes a little askew. “Obi-Wan, what’s wrong?”

I did not know how to answer that.

I did not know if my visitor was real or wishful thinking. “I was thinking…”

_-Padawan…_

Vora glared around. “Council member?”

Qui-Gon laughed. _-No, GrandPadawan. I understand you have been speaking to my Master regularly._-

A pulse of mixed feelings and she asked, “Master Jinn?”

_-Yes._-

Her feelings churned and then settled into a strong hum. “I really wanted to meet you for a long time, but instead I’d rather smack you about the head for the poor care you had for Obi-Wan.” The hum was contempt.

_-Vora!_” I was horrified.

She turned to look at me. “He was either too lazy to promote you, or abandoned you before you were really ready to advance for a shiny toy _he wanted_. I’ll ignore how he compounded that massive load as he died.”

I _didn’t_ want him to leave again.
Hush, Obi-Wan. There is some truth to that. I was proud of our teamwork, so very proud, and I had not prepared you before I announced my intentions.

That made me object. “I understood.”

Vora came over and put an arm around me, gripping tight. “You forgiving him, does not change that he screwed up. You were taught too well, too young, that your life had no value. Every life is of value, including yours.”

“What do you think I should do, Knight?”

“Tell him what you feel, what you felt. For a maverick, you didn’t act like it enough when he was young and needed to hear it, hear what wasn’t Code approved. Being willing to die if necessary is not the same as charging toward martyrdom.”

I was getting very uncomfortable with this, with being the object of their disagreement, but Vora slid closer to put her cheek against my chest. Her arms around me, we swayed a little.

A smile of approval reached me. “I have always been proud of Obi-Wan’s skill and compassion.”

My former Padawan kept a tense silence, waiting.

“I am very proud of you, my Padawan. You have become everything I hoped for when I became your Master.”

Vora rubbed my back, warm against me as my breathing deepened… to my surprise.

“Thank you, Master. I have missed your advice.” I pulled away and made a deep bow for my Master, the one I wanted to give at my Knighting.

There was a silence, but not as if he had departed. That could mean many things and I wasn’t sure as to what.

Vora sighed. “I’d like a philosophical chat another time, Master Jinn, but we have a Council meeting very soon, and I doubt Obi-Wan has been excused.”

“May the Force be with you, my Padawan. Knight.” And he was gone.

I didn’t know if I was amazed or appalled at what happened.

“Obi-Wan, you have to know it was done poorly. He may have meant well, but that doesn’t prevent needless hurt. How well would you have taken it, if it was some other Master disavowed Anakin or me in Council like he did?”

My answer to that was clear. Taking a deep breath, I pulled her close. “Do we have a meeting?”

“I can feel Anakin returning in a rush.”

“I should have checked my comm.”

We ate while Anakin showered.

When he came out, he was nervous. “Padmé is planning to announce our wedding and babies very soon. Should I tell the Council first?”

“Yes.” I’d hoped to lay more groundwork, but I could not blame Padmé for her plan’s timing. “That
should probably be at the end, as there is much to cover, even beyond our mission report.”

Neither of them liked that.

I could not help checking their robes. They both rolled their eyes and continued chewing their breakfast. I’d sent notice to our Commanders that we would be in Council much of the day. I hoped my Padawans had thought to do the same. “Do either of you plan other business that I should be warned of?”

Vora shook her head.

Anakin looked cross. “I don’t need you to intervene for me. I am a Master, too.”

“Congratulations, Anakin. The sunshine and rainbows look uncommonly good on you.” I kept the smile off my face.

Vora stifled a snicker.

“This is a mission debrief. We’ve done hundreds and I don’t need you holding my hand.” Anakin was growing angry.

I sent out calm. “You will be senior soon enough, Anakin. Indulge your old Master for this, if you would.”

“Cheer up Anakin. You’re still senior to me.” Vora grinned.

Outside the Council chamber, the hall remained silent and still as we paused. I could feel their tension about these first reports with their new ranks. One last check that they appeared presentable and we entered.

In the Council chamber, my place was empty for our joint report. For other issues I would take it, but not this report. I recited the summary I’d crafted earlier, little changed after they finished theirs.

Mace started the questions. “Do you believe Ventress remains a Darksider alone, or has she studied under Sidious or Dooku to be a Sith?”

I thought about that. “I don’t believe she has had extensive training or interest. If she had, she could easily claim any Sith name she wanted.”

Vora made a small noise. “I will ask him.”

Vos asked, “Do you believe he will speak truly?”

“Yes, for the most part. He’d rejected while Sithing much of what he believed when here, at least consciously. Scratch him, though, and he still will criticize actions he feels are against the Code. He gets offended by them. Beyond that, his titled family has a strong tradition of service to the Republic, not an Empire. He’d managed to remove most of his attachments within the Order, but not to his Padawan.” Vora crossed her arms.

Master Che leaned forward. “How does that impact his honesty? He attacked his line, which had been very important to him when he was a Master.”

Vora looked at me and then Master Yoda. “Dooku blamed them for Master Jinn’s death and the Order as a whole at least to some degree, even if that is irrational and unconscious. He wants, maybe even needs Master Jinn’s approval.”
The unease in the chamber at the description of a former Master’s attachment did not help my thoughts about my Master. Anakin was watching us with suspicion.

“Master Jinn joined the Force many years ago.” Master Nu observed with a little sorrow. “He cannot approve.”

I did not like the idea of concealing what I knew from other members of the Council. But I had no explanation.

After a pause, Master Yoda spoke. “Fully joined the Force, Master Jinn has not.”

That led to a ripple of consternation in the chamber, and I was sure Anakin was noting that I was not reacting.

Master Windu’s gaze swung back to me. “Were those not metaphors in those visions?”

“No. over the years, I felt his presence a few times since that battle, but I thought it was wishful thinking. It was been clearer of late.”

“The Force less cloudy now is. Always more to learn, we have.” Yoda reminded us with satisfaction and a pause said that topic was over.

Madame Nu touched her hair stake. “The estimation of future treaty success varied between reports. Can you explain that, Master Kenobi?”

“They each have a validity, depending on the views of the writer. I am more satisfied that we agree on the broad swaths, including that most worlds will rejoin the Republic of their own will if the Senate is conciliatory and makes an effort for reform. I do not think a military action should be used on any that don’t, that seems to be an undercurrent of their views of the war’s causes and corruption. We must prove that vengeance is not the Republic’s intent. The other worlds will watch Kaller’s welcome very closely.”

Mace didn’t look convinced. “Some worlds have not joined in the cease fire, and fighting is increasing more than that portion should account for.”

I thought this trend had multiple reasons and not related to the ones that would rejoin.

Master Koon’s interest was not unexpected. “I have seen nothing in the reports substantive about the clone troopers performance on the mission, particularly the ones most affected by the Sith’s order.”

I looked at Vora, both relieved that she had shown compassion, and concerned that problems should be reported. “The talks were refreshingly calm. The Ventress attack was the only mission related incident, and they worked well as guardians, performing very well. One trooper had difficulties, but that was resolved with counseling. Their readjustment was not really tested in battle.”

Master Nu brought up a padd. “The Order will be reaffirming its dedication to teaching and growth. The age limits will be lifted as part of reforms, though still suggested. This also means that all will be teaching what they know to others and the Archives more consistently.”

That last was firmly pointed at Vora, but the older woman continued. “I will send appointments for all of you to record your observations, and I expect members of the Explorer Corps will also speak with you.

Vora’s face had blanched paler than myself, but she did not speak.
Master Yoda nodded. “Heal, more than the Code itself must. Consider too, we must, the traditions passed from Master to Padawan. Comfort, knowledge is not. Search the Force to rediscover what serving the light means without the clouds of darkness, we must. Yessssssss. Our focus, too much the shadows distracted.”

“A conclave will begin one year from the end of Sidious.” Madame Nu stated. “This will ensure enough time has passed to study the past conclaves and their influences.”

“Consider among other duties, selected volunteers will.” Yoda tapped his gimmer stick, which finished the subject. “Compete next week in demonstration duels, initiates will. Set an example, council will in training. Maturing, a pair of twins are.”

Those were always harder to place, often with established teams, and I felt some amusement from Vora directed at Anakin.

Master Windu might have felt my unease when twins were mentioned. “Any further concerns about the mission?” At the silence he gestured toward my usual place.

I had reached it when Anakin spoke, his voice strangled.

“Masters, you became aware of my marriage more than two years ago from the recorded Force visions. The other part of those visions, came to pass and Padmé and I are going to be parents soon...”

-Right on schedule.- Vora smirked and he glared at her.

He took a deep breath into the silence. “What does the Council want me to do?”

“Want, remains not the Jedi way.” Yoda was grave.

“The Senator will be announcing their coming birth and our relationship. I will accept your judgment.” His pang of loss was clear in the Force.

Vora shook before settling again in the heavy silence.

I did not know what to say. I wanted to support my Padawan, but my own actions were not as pure as they once had been.

But Anakin needed to believe he was supported.

He needed it more than I needed to appear perfect. “Masters, this event has been implicit since he was not expelled. There is a great difference between toleration, acceptance, and endorsement. Which path will the Order walk: peace and compassion, or stasis and ignorance. He is a fine Jedi and the...”

Mace glared at me. “You are on shaky ground yourself, Kenobi...”

“That was... something, Master.” Vora spoke with clenched teeth. “Threats... threats are unworthy in debate.”

Master Windu’s glare at her could have melted steel.

Master Yoda thumped his stick against his seat without saying anything and the chamber slowly calmed. “Make a decision in two days, the Council will. Remain in temple, you must. Hold that long, the Senator will, hmm?”
Anakin was pale, but he nodded.

“Remain after this meeting, Knight Meyers will. Herh herh herh.”

Vora stilled, and then her amusement roared through the bond.

- Vora

My jaw hurt with how hard I was holding in my laughter. The Masters wandered off in a leisurely way. I could feel Obi-Wan’s worry.

Yoda had a small smile by the time we were alone. “Amused by my words, you are, hmm?”

“It’s a good thing they’ve been trained to think of you only as very, very old. That sounded very sleazy.”

“Perhaps I test if any listen.” His smile broadened.

“Please don’t leave them hanging, Master. You’ve had two and a half years to decide.”

The smile faded as his eyes focused on me. “Worried about our decision you seem not.”

I wanted to say this right. “If you had been that outraged, he would have been eased out before this. Waiting until the war ends, seems more like exploiting them.”

“The Sith wars, these dangers taught. Dangerous precedents, will you be.”

“Love the boy, but recklessness and temper are bigger problems than sleeping with Padmé because she calms him. How deeply have you searched for precedents? Any bureaucracy that lasts long enough will be able to find precedent for almost anything.”

“Precedents enough there are in Sunrider alone.” He grinned again.

I’d never heard that name, but I’d find out and he knew that. “I can understand wanting them to sweat a little about keeping secrets, but...”

“Keeping secrets are you not, hmm? Of a long flight reports spoke.”

I looked away. “I got upset. Turned it inside. Came real close to pancaking, but Tuess didn’t deserve that. Obi-Wan stopped me. It’s not mission related and the 408th don’t need to know how messed up I am after their troubles.”

“Observe more than most realize, they do, yes?”

That made me sigh. They weren’t children, despite their calendar age, and children could not be protected beyond a certain point. “They’re children also, forced ahead like hothouse flowers into battle and death. In a weird way, they’re like Force-less Jedi allowed to attach to each other. The only softening of the wicked fairy’s curse.”

I still wasn’t sure about telling them, but I had to be open if I wanted them to speak about the damn order.

He let the silence continue, but it wasn’t uncomfortable.

“Did you wish anything else, Master?”
“No, no. May the Force be with you, youngling.”

I exited, a little tired but very glad it was over. Obi-Wan and Anakin were back home under some kind of stress before I got back. Anakin crashed into me, needing the contact of an embrace.

Obi-Wan watched us, hesitant and maybe guilty.

*Get over here, Obi-Wan. I’m fine. Some hint of my flight reached Yoda.*

He got over before he sighed. *-I thought Mace…-*

*He did not stay behind.*

They both relaxed at that.

I was really hungry and wanted some privacy out in public. “Should we go find something good and cheap?”

Anakin was taking something apart, my cell phone. “I’m grounded to the Temple, remember?”

I could tell he was trying not to sound resentful. “I think that was about seeing Padmé, not getting dinner or other tasks. Ask.” I looked at Obi-Wan and took his hand. “Can I help?”

He put on a faint smile. “I am concerned about many things, but I will remain in the present.”

Anakin was on his comm as I tried to choose what concerned me the most.

“A lot of that was about training and indirectly the Code, is there something I wouldn’t know?” I didn’t know the real Masters enough to read between the lines.

“Several things, my dear.” Obi-Wan relaxed into lecture mode. “Madame Nu is serious about the Archives, I expect she will requisition what you brought.”

I waved at the tech pieces Anakin was fiddling with. “It might not be working.”

Anakin looked up and glared as he finished his message, but Obi-Wan hid his smirk.

“And?” I prodded.

“Twins were mentioned and they aren’t split up, so two free Masters who work so much together? Neither of us has a Padawan or a reason not to take another.”

I could see that, especially because I was advocating that essentially no Initiate should be left behind. We were about to lose our current housing set up if twins came, I just didn’t expect being assigned my own room to come so soon. Unless we all slept in Obi-Wan’s room we could not fit in even these enlarged quarters. I doubted Anakin would mind piling in one room.

I was getting my change. *Put up or shut up time.*

Then again, dealing with young twins would not be a bad preview for Anakin.

“Let’s go.” Anakin grinned and headed for the door eager to both get out and to pilot anything.

I wasn’t that sociable when we ate at Obi-Wan’s favorite diner, with the next conversations I had planned. I also still felt awkward with aliens, even if I knew better. They had plenty of tall tales for a public setting. All too soon I was done and needed to get back. “Masters,” I stood and bowed. “I
should return, I have miles to go before I sleep.”

Anakin plainly did not want to return and waved, but Obi-Wan sent affection and a smile.

A taxi back, and I’d decided to check on Dooku before leaving more time for the clone barracks. For a moment, I thought he’d been out, but he’d been looking at some print out of sight. “Did you make that?”

“This, no. I never had the time. I might be reconsidering as something more useful than staring at the walls.” Dooku sat on this sofa instead of flopped.

I almost asked if he’d done any in high school, but then remembered that well rounded electives for enrichment was not much a Jedi thing. “I dabbled in several kinds of art in schools, but none of them took. Creating art is an admired passion.”

That made him smile. “It is here as well.”

“It can be nice to have something tangible at the end of the day. Just pick one you admire and give it a try.”

“Did you come to visit for a reason?” His face was neutral.

“I have one question to confirm, but I would have visited anyway. You don’t need excuses to see relatives.” I scratched my head. “I have to go see my troopers after you. They’re a little unbalanced after they succeeded with that asinine Order 66.”

Dooku stiffened, but was smart enough to stay quiet.

I had to remind myself that he didn’t have the full grandparent experience. “They’re what, about the age of new Padawans, and they were forced to kill the closest thing they had to a Master? You know more Jedi history, how often has that happened?”

He looked away. “A few times, but most turned darker after and left the Order, few reached adulthood.”

I decided it was time for him to start helping with the cleanup. “They’re human beings. How often did you think of them as anything but flesh droids?”

A trace of shame escaped his shielding.

“One of the biggest problems I have is trying to help them understand there is life outside war. It’s worse than Jedi as they remember peace. You remember more years than most I know. Do you want to help?”

“I am the face of their enemy.”

“That wasn’t the question. One war’s enemy can be the next’s firm ally. We can tackle how, but only if you want to.”

We were silent for several moments before his eyes focused on me again. “The Force approves.”

That was good on a second level, that he was asking the Force again.

I considered. “I’ll start bringing Dice, my Commander. Last time he came, he was worried I’d turned Separatist. We can work from there.”
“Your question, GrandPadawan?”

“Was Ventress training to be a Sith?”

Dooku made a face. “She was an eager student for any training as she had not been a Padawan very long. But she was not interested in becoming a Sith lord. She learned much of Makashi and utilitarian skills like Force choking...”

“Yeah, she’s quick on the draw with that one.” I rubbed my neck despite the passage of weeks.

Dooku’s eyes narrowed. “You mentioned that you were held up, but not that you were choked.”

I chuckled. “Isn’t that a preferred skill for Darksiders? Maybe I got an idea in the last thirty years and it helped. It was just nasty bruises then.”

Dooku crossed his arms and was a portrait of disgruntlement.

“Really it isn’t a hard idea, that hard part is holding it and not panicking. Think of a sturdy rubber hose to quietly strengthen the windpipe from the inside. If I’d been alone she would have noticed I was doing something.”

That got a small smile. “Maybe.”

I couldn’t stay any longer and excused myself to get to the 408th barracks. It looked the same as last time, though I recognized Carry, and a few more if not by name.

Dice hurried out to greet me without his helm. “General. We didn’t expect you until tomorrow for that list.”

I felt my face warm. “This isn’t about that, but I wanted to check on you all and talk a few minutes privately.”

Seeing his face was almost distracting after relying on body language and the Force. But he led me to a small communications room.

I took a deep breath. “Okay, I’m trying to do kind of a reboot of Dooku to try and get back most of the Jedi Master that once was. He kind of hated Generals Kenobi and Skywalker, but that’s better now, even if they probably won’t ever be friends.”

Dice nodded, but didn’t seem receptive. Nor was he angry, not exactly. Dooku and Dice were sterling examples of how anger had risen on both sides.

Fixing Dooku was more than him leaving the dark.

Chapter End Notes

Nano’s over but still recovering from the sleep deprivation, here. Still not at end of the story! Posts should resume for Thursday-ish.

Comments welcomed, especially of it’s something bonehead like color changes.
Overextended

Chapter Summary

The Council is displeased with the Team for old secrets, the secret marriage has finally come home to roost. So they are grounded for two days while the Council deliberates their reaction to the birth announcement...

Others have different concerns.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Dice

General Meyers came to the barracks later than usual, but Cody passed news about their Council debriefing. That was a long mission, so we might not see her today.

That was not bad news, her assignment for tomorrow was proving difficult. More than talking about the ethics work we were still passing around.

She arrived in the late afternoon, not long before mess. I wasn’t pleased that she was wandering through Coruscant like it was safe, when she was here to check on us.

Or maybe not just that, when I took her to our Comm room. Worse was her volunteering to try to fix the crazy bastard, a project she’d been working on since before the Order came through, according to the holos.

“No, sir. They won’t be friends, not after trying to kill them over and over by his own hand. How many Generals died on Geonosis? He’s probably caused the death of a million of my brothers. We’re allowed to hate, Sir, and he’s earned it.

She stopped, making me suspect that she was ill. I dragged her over to a chair, worried again about how shiny she was.

It only took a moment for her to recover. “I... I’m sorry, Dice. You’re right. I won’t bring it up again. Numbers that big. are hard for me to feel.” She stared off long enough that I started to worry.

The smile was flat when she spoke. “I hadn’t wanted to tell you, but you have a right to know... maybe a duty. Late on the last mission that flight with Obi-Wan was because I was suicidal. I didn’t want anyone else to get hurt, and that’s why I wanted to get away. It’s hard to talk about and I didn’t want to make it any harder for you all.”

I gripped her shoulder. “We know, Sir. We’ve seen enough of that already. Will it affect your ability to fight?”

The General paused and shook her head. “No, it shouldn’t. I never could accept anyone else getting hurt on my way out.” She met my eyes, hers bleak. “I didn’t crash my Actis because I didn’t want to scrap a damned droid. A living person is so much more important.”
I took a deep breath. “What should I watch for, Sir?”

Her face twitched. “Being rejected by people close to me. I can’t see that being too much a problem against an enemy.”

That left me one big worry. “Are you close to Dooku?”

That surprised her enough that she made a face. “No, I’m not really attached, as the Jedi call it. I trust him with some things but not all. I want to see if someone can recover from the insanity of the Dark path. He’s the asshole relative that everyone has in their family. I’m about as fond of him as I am of a good pair of boots, but only fond. He’d have to prove himself over quite some time before it could become more than fondness.”

That sounded like a short list then, Generals Kenobi and Skywalker...

Then came the worry, how fond was fond? Was that why she let me beat her on Kaller. Did Cody or General Kenobi know this? I’d pass on the general parts to the vod’e, more to my men.

“Sir, you should not be going out on your own...”

She laughed. “I can’t promise anything, Dice. I will keep your concerns in mind for missions, but I’ve lived decades without having to answer to anyone, a hard habit to break. It’s gonna be a little rough compared to other Jedi. I won’t promise if I don’t think I can do it.”

Kriff it. It was just a different set of excuses than my old General. And look what it got him...

Unseeing eyes stared at the sky after a score of pinpoint hits eliminated the traitor. Gates ate his blaster seconds later, the first of us who did. I ordered them all to stand down after the completed mission, despite the smell of burnt flesh.

The cheers from the newer brothers.

The urge to empty my guts.

The crushing feelings of failure despite following orders.

We stood around and waited for orders, until the first counter-orders came. Then a new Chancellor and other Senators affirmed that Jedi were not traitors.

First nearly a score ended their lives, marksmen all and my best brothers. Then dozens, then hundreds until it slowed and we were recalled to base with the body.

I only marked time until we would be deactivated.

Memories crashed and I felt a hug as I shook. I blindly put my forehead against the General’s, wanting his forgiveness for what I’d done to him.

- Padme

Ani and I had a long conversation after the dinner with the other two Jedi. It was a little easier to plan if we had both died than for him to accept my death. I would have to hope they would sit on him if needed. With the reported Force presence of the babies, the Jedi creche seemed likely so that was probably good. I was making plans to ensure they had the resources set aside if they did not become or remain Jedi, safe and secure.
Ending our secret marriage was… a relief. Now I could show how proud I was of him. I could worry openly and not pretend I was as attached to the Order. We could go to a nice restaurant or reception without the pretense that he was my bodyguard.

I might be a target when known to be his wife, but I already was, as a Senator friendly to the Jedi Order.

Giving up the secret was frightening, too.

We had our little cocoon of privacy and safety. Leaving it for the reactions of my people and the Senate was a huge unknown.

Worse was the potential reaction of the Jedi Council. I’d been worried for the first few months after our marriage when I thought no one knew. They knew when Vora arrived, and I disliked her, sight unseen, for those first few months when I rarely saw my husband but he could be charged.

But nothing happened to Ani.

Anakin still went on missions. I worked on legislation and attended conferences.

He seemed worried when we had a chance to meet, but Obi-Wan seemed to approve.

Ani didn’t stop worrying about the Council, but we pretended nothing had changed month after month. Outside getting Obi-Wan’s support.

But now we could not wait, our children deserved a father instead of a visiting Jedi. And I was left to study catalogs of baby goods as Ani hurried off to the Jedi Council to tell them.

My comm chimed.

“Angel…” He sounded upset and he was hunched in on himself. “I karked everything.”

“Come here, Ani. We will be fine.” I’d never believed his wilder fears about them finding out about us.

Ani turned his face up, looking young and lost. “I can’t. They turned on Obi-Wan when he spoke up for me. We got two days before they decide….I’m grounded to the Temple.”

I didn’t see anyone else around him to help him settle, he was already breathing too fast. “Where’s Obi-Wan?”

“He’s trying to meditate.” Anakin’s laugh was bitter. “Obi-Wan tried to negotiate, but Mace attacked him along with us. Vora was to stay afterward like some child and she’s not back yet.”

I wondered why she was kept and knew Anakin missed some detail in the story. “Do something with your hands. Did they ban us from speaking like this?”

“No.” He cast around himself and picked up some tech object out of my view.

“Ani, sometimes it’s months that we haven’t seen each other. We can talk all night if you need me to.”

He relaxed a little, but then looked away. “I don’t know how much trouble Obi-Wan is in. I hadn’t heard of Masters showing anger at him before in Council, but Obi-Wan was used to it. When did that happen?”
Ani always thought his Master always agreed with the other Masters. I knew that was very unlikely, regardless of any united front.

“Visit your Padawan. Talk to Obi-Wan, he’s probably worried too.”

“Ahsoka’s on a mission. Vora’s coming down now, but she’s not upset. Well, not much.” Anakin looked better already and looked torn over continuing our call.

I saw motion behind him, too big to be the woman. “Call me later, Ani.”

He looked a hundred times better than the start.

It might be simpler to send her an invitation for a meal in the evening than wait to get the story from Ani. I was almost surprised to get her agreement with a request for directions some time later.

I was familiar with that stressed look from Anakin when she came in the entry, but she accepted some brandy from the tray.

“I admit to some confusion about the Council meeting.” I started right away.

Vora thought for a moment without moving further inside. Then she seemed surprised her snifter was already empty. “Can I trouble you for a decent place for cheap liquor? It is one thing the quartermaster seems unbelievably unknowing. I need discreet and cheap for the occasional bottle.”

I nodded. “Do you want something in particular tonight?”

“Rum, it makes all the swashbuckling more believable.”

Signaling Threepio, he tottered in to the entry. “Miss Padmé, your dinner will be cooling soon and losing its best flavor if you wait any longer. You know that reheating always ruins the moisture and texture.”

I stood. “Vora has requested rum, please see to it.” I led to an informal area where she laid her cloak aside before sitting on the sofa.

She spun her glass while she perched on the edge. “I’m sorry I didn’t answer right away, Padmé. I don’t know anything official, but I don’t think you have anything to worry about. I think the Council is expressing its… displeasure with Anakin and Obi-Wan’s keeping secrets from them by letting them consider the consequences. That started before I even arrived.”

That made me smile as the food was coming in. “Ani likes being the hero, like the tales he heard as a child.”

“Some of us never stopped, even after decades.” This was the brightest smile the woman ever showed, before her face became calm like most Jedi.

I picked at my food as Vora’s drink arrived.

She picked at her food, finishing some dishes rapidly.

“Your world’s food is very different, isn’t it?”

Her half smile was ironic, much like her Master’s. “Interestingly, alcohol is most similar, it’s just names and brands that differ. Fruit’s pretty safe, sweet and tangy don’t need accenting. Fermented grains make booze, so breads are okay too. Everything else is like a minefield. Some I like. I find one that looks and smells fine, but some seasoning tastes like oil or soap and I cannot convince my little
“...lizard brain that it’s not poison.”

I didn’t think she was a lizard.

Vora turned and saw Threepio setting up the kaf and then topping our differing drinks. “You might find it funny, but I thought the same thing about the equivalent of kaf on my world. Yours is better.”

We ate quietly for a time, but I had to ask. “Am I allowed to tell Ani?”

“No.” Quick and solid. “Master Yoda did not tell me officially and I might be wrong. I’m mostly sure because Master Windu did not get mad at me when I said threats did not belong in a debate. Afterward, Master Yoda and I shared a joke and he spoke to me about a problem with my 408th.”

That was the missing piece. It wasn’t a fight, but a challenge, a challenge to their sincerity. I sighed, Anakin would pick it up if we met. “I won’t interfere.”

“I was just glad they didn’t lecture us.” Vora sipped more of her drink, her eyes dragging. “I may avoid them while they’re grounded, too.”

This was a familiar game, to get a Jedi to rest. I brought fresh drinks when I joined her on the sofa. “Ani said you aren’t sure the Republic should contact your world.”

I didn’t have to be able to read the Force to feel her unhappiness.

She finished her old drink. “It’s a good and bad thing both for my world and the Republic. Republic bad, is the cost in resources if it’s done benevolently, and also the odds that there might be a proto-Sith waiting to be found. I’m not sure there’s much good for the Republic, ‘cause we’re a little crazy. Seven billion people who probably haven’t managed a world wide day of peace in centuries.”

“Sounds like peace would be very good to bring. And if there might be Sith, we know there are potential Jedi. Doesn’t the Order need them, untainted by the Sith?”

Vora’s hand gripped her head, and her fingers shook. “I want to, but logic keeps saying it’s gonna be ugly. Something like hundreds of governments, all mad at someone, everyone else. I don’t even know what has changed in the last few years since I left. For all I know they’ve set off nukes and they started a new ice age,”

I moved next to her and put an arm around her. I had to smile at her scenario. “If they did that, it would reduce the risk for any diplomatic mission. Warm clothing all around.”

She uneasily looked at me with big eyes. I’d hoped she wouldn’t notice my arm.

“Cuddling, The babies like Force-users. I’m getting too big to be as comfortable with Ani for anything more, but he keeps trying.”

She was funny, looking all around the room without answering. “I forgot something.”

When she started to stand, I held on. “It can wait.”

“No, no, no. It’s been waiting months already. I wanted to do this before you deliver, but I doubt we all will be together between missions anytime soon.” Her brown cloak began shifting around and a package floated toward us.

She huffed a breath. “I don’t know what the customs are here, but we get gifts for expectant mothers. I thought you’d like this. Congratulations.”
My eyes started watering when I saw the mama animal and the two blue-eyed babies. “They’re so cute. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Vora sat back with a sleepy smile, her eyelids drooping.

I arranged them on the table where I could see them as I fell asleep cuddled up to the dozing warmth of an infant-soothing Jedi.

- Anakin

It was hard enough reporting to the Council, the group that disapproved of me so many times. I tried to be prepared for their punishment for all the times I knew I was going against the Code, keeping secrets from the Council… keeping secrets from my Master.

They could expel me. That would split my family and I’d be afraid for my Master. Worse would be if they broke our bond as they wanted on promotion. To not feel Obi-Wan in the corner of my mind, alive-and-well, regardless of distance. They could ban my seeing Padmé and our children, they could just keep me too busy on kriffing long missions. There could be other punishments, but those were the worst I could believe now.

I expected punishment, I’d been a poor example of a Jedi for a long time.

I didn’t expect Master Windu to threaten Obi-Wan.

Not this soon after Obi-Wan stopped trying to purge his emotions. I finally had the Master I’d dreamed of, and he was being threatened.

I’d bitten my cheek at the raised words during Council. At Obi-Wan’s strain.

He didn’t deserve my punishment.

Told to leave the chamber, my thoughts raced away faster. I needed to talk to Padmé but Obi-Wan almost staggered out, looking back for Vora. I knew I wanted to know what she thought was kriffing funny.

I could really use a joke.

Obi-Wan came to a stop in the waiting area outside in a mess of guilt, worry, and a foundation of affection that still seemed new to me after these months. He kept leaning toward the chamber entrance, about to hurry back inside, but he stopped every time.

“Come on, old man...” I didn’t know what else to say and just pulled his arm.

Attention still behind us, he started walking normally when the entrance was out of sight.“I’m going to meditate if you care to join me, Anakin.”

That was a joke, but I waved the idea away. “Not right now, Master.”

After yet another sigh over the issue, he went into his room and I called Padmé. Talking to her helped as much as most meditations and she always knew what would help.

I’d almost forgotten the Terran tech for months, Vora never seemed to touch it anymore. I just had to avoid breaking it while I spoke to Padme.

The comm seemed to be broken, until I realized that it had no power. I’d definitely need to open it up
to replace the power units. Listening to Padme’s voice was soothing.

I could probably figure most of it out in my two days, I’d already gotten Vora’s padd running on an inductive power field.

“Ani, we can talk all night if you want.” I looked at her, worried I missed something, and I saw her brush her belly.

Vora’s mood changed and she was moving down from the Council chamber. Obi-Wan was moving, too and Padmé said goodbye.

I barely waited for Vora to get inside before I hugged her close, her Force presence tripling the hug. Obi-Wan joined us and I bathed in it.

I left a message for Ahsoka, away on a mission. Eating outside the Temple was great, though I kept looking off toward Padmé’s apartment as Obi-Wan and I told some of our funnier war stories in the eatery.

Everyone hearing the stories had rotated at least once before my Master got restless to return to being the diligent Master Jedi. Vora had already left some time before, as intent as any creche trained Jedi.

I remembered slower times when I was a new Padawan. It seemed like we almost lived in Dex’s some days. This was the longest time I’d been there since my braid was cut.

“Anakin, we should return.” He was careful not to list the reasons.

I wanted to argue, but who could I convince? I drove, but kept slower, to prolong the illusion of freedom.

Obi-Wan went off on some business, and I was left with empty rooms. I wanted something better than just a comm to Padmé. I decided to send Artoo to Padmé with a token and a broad span recorder so I could pretend it was me visiting. It wasn’t the same, seeing it through Artoo’s comm, the angle was too low and it felt like I could go faster on one leg.

Her apartment wasn’t that far, but it seemed ages until Artoo got there. He rolled through the apartment as Threepio fusssed, until I saw where they’d fallen asleep on the sofa. I didn’t think Vora was having her Soresu lesson today.

I wanted to crawl in between them, needed warm flesh yielding and the Living Force absorbing us deep.

So I just watched.

Watched Padmé breathe.

Watched her sleep, hoping to see a little someone move.

A hand on my shoulder. “You should get some sleep, Anakin.”

I didn’t know how long Obi-Wan had been standing there too. He’d been meditating and felt very calm.

I was quiet, but not really calm. “I’m not sleepy.” I wanted every minute Padmé had at home.

Obi-Wan tightened his lips. “Sleep. Meditation. Sparring. Pick your priority. Change will not mean you can become a puddle at every separation or situation. You know she’s, they’re, safe. Vora’s
more than competent enough to protect them right now while we are under review.”

Looking back at my wife, I was getting tired. And there was no way I would remain here if they were threatened. “Artoo, mute and record.” I stood and moved to his room, shedding my outer robes. “Sleep it is.”

Obi-Wan was touchy, so I settled for barely touching as we slept. He woke me before dawn for meditation. Padmé was sleeping, but she’d moved beside Vora.

While we were meditating, Vora swept in, leaking embarrassment.

I had to glare at her and pretend to reach for my hilt on my belt. “You’ve been sleeping with my wife.”

Chapter End Notes

Slow for the holidays, but not stopped. Hope yours are good!
Chapter Summary

The Jedi Council wants to make a point to the Team about their behavior both during and after the war. It really is too bad that they really haven’t figured out what that point is. Obi-Wan meditates, seeking insight during their house arrest.

Anakin is bored already.

Chapter Notes

Have a side of flailing?

- Vora

I dozed off.

It had been a very long day: the Council meeting, talking to Dooku and Dice, and then this weird meal with Padmé. I had a headache, logically from the alcohol.

Odder was waking up with her curled up beside me.

That made me feel like shit, this was Anakin’s place.

So I made my apologies and exited to the sound of the droids bickering. A taxi was among many premium ones just waiting outside the upper crust lodging. A fare was a fare, even if I doubted Jedi tipped much. I didn’t have wealth.

Obi-Wan was calm, likely meditating. Anakin nearly as much so. They were both awake when I entered.

I felt guilty enough to have skipped my training last night with Obi-Wan. I was about to apologize when Anakin started off about sleeping with Padmé.

“Uh… well, yeah?” My voice came out in a squeak. “I brought my baby shower gift along. I mean I have no idea what the custom is here and it probably wouldn’t feel right, but I didn’t see how a soft and fuzzy mama and babies could go wrong as a gift. But, I, a.. had a bit too much wine or maybe rum after telling her about Terra.” I rubbed my forehead and took a breath. “I couldn’t figure out why she sat so close. I don’t smell masculine, do I?”

Anakin’s face had frozen, and then he started snickering. “No. I wondered what that sculpture was on the table. You two were too cute like that.”

Obi-Wan took pity and gripped my arm. “I believe he sent that astromech of his, but you both were sleeping on the sofa.
My nerves settled and I turned to hold Obi-Wan, taking deep breaths to calm down.

Obi-Wan’s embrace was looser. “You have enough to do, my Padawan, have you eaten?”

I shook my head, and he started porridge. It wasn’t quite, but close enough for someone who preferred cookies over warm slop.

Inhaling it was not greed, I just wanted to get the mushy food over with.

Anakin tried to speak with Padmé, but it seemed that she’d left for some Senate session with guards, so he hugged me instead.

My face warmed. -I’m even more uncomfortable with her... cuddling up, than you.-

-Good.- His arms dropped to lift me up for his embrace.

A pang came when I wasn’t touching the floor. “Let me down, please.”

After Anakin did, he glanced at Obi-Wan.

I felt crappy again, that Anakin was trying to cuddle close right in front of Obi-Wan. Like he wasn’t allowed to have anyone or anything before him. I sent my affections, even if I had no good idea how to reassure Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan coughed. “Your Soresu is overdue. And no, not today, Anakin.”

Peace and quiet. No more double thinking everything, at least for a time.

Taking my arm, he guided me to a quieter training area, without room for an audience. “You have the basics enough for now, my dear. But you are not seizing as much advantage as you can in your ripostes. Winning is your life or the lives of those you protect.”

I nodded, even if I really didn’t want to hurt him.

“As if you could, on your own without another to hide behind?” His presence shifted to anger and dismissal in an old and well worn emotion.

I wanted to curl up and cry after a sob, but he attacked with his saber. I couldn’t think ahead, responding while I tried to even out my breathing. Tried to hold my aching heart protected. Tried to blink away my wet eyes. Parrying without much thought, I didn’t attack either. My heart hurt too much to even think of attack.

I knew something was off, but I just didn’t have time to think...

Obi-Wan backed off and shut off his light saber. “Vora. I’m sorry. I hoped to get you angry, angry enough to fight harder. I don’t know if I’m happy that you didn’t lose your temper or worried that you won’t fight with that ferocity. That is the greatest flaw of Niman, that it encourages moderation instead of survival. Soresu is not passive.”

Dropping to the mat to hunch on my knees, I just panted until I thought I could speak through pain and heartbreak of the possibility. “I’m too attached, Ben.”

I thought of my talk with Dice about rejection, was that only yesterday? I’d probably let Obi-Wan kill me as that was my end. I’d never understood those Mustafar and Sir Alec on the Death Star scenes before. Loss so painful that survival was pointless.
Obi-Wan dropped beside me with a bleat of pain to hold me tight to him. “I need you to survive, my dear. I know you can fight, but you must be willing to strike and strike first when needed. To protect yourself, to protect others, regardless of your feelings.”

“Isn’t that the endgame of the Fall of Vader?” Breathing was getting easier.

He shuddered. “He was wrong. Leaving anyone to burn is against the Code, against the spirit of the Living Force, no matter his feelings.”

I lifted my face up. “You’d jump in the lava with him if you thought it had any chance of helping… I’d jump because of my loss. Not much of a Jedi am I, huh?”

“Perfection is only a goal, my dear.”

The door burst open and Anakin looked worried. “Kriff it, what is it this time? I thought you were up to something, Master, and I hoped was some against-the-rules sex.”

My laughter had a hysterical edge. I wish it was that fun… That sounded so much better than where I was, and I clung harder to Obi-Wan.

A pang behind us and the door sealed. Looking back at Anakin, his eyes were wide with worry and perhaps envy.

Obi-Wan had a need to comfort him, too. Agreement below thoughts, Obi-Wan reached out a beckoning hand to Anakin.

The young man skidded and crashed into us, arms clamping us all together tight. A ripple of dismay came from Ben as lust swamped the embrace.

I slid towards it, eager to leave the recent pain behind.

Arms tangled and breath shortened, sucking Obi-Wan’s lip was my favorite way to make him speechless. Anakin chuckled and pulled himself around my shoulder to nuzzle at Obi-Wan’s neck. Obi-Wan’s hands dropped, scrabbling at fabrics.

I didn’t want fabric, I wanted skin. Bending down to raise his tunic and taste, I got stuck. An unyielding arm braced up my back and locked my head upright, to see how glazed Ben’s eyes were. Cool and heat and curls and wet, wet tongue against my skin.

Breathing was not necessary.

Face in soft and wiry beard, an inhaled groan and I stopped, held up around my waist.

Yanking him upward by his curls, Anakin blinked vaguely. Then he grinned and kissed my nose, moving down for a quick nip.

I felt a smirk forming and I pulled Obi-Wan’s tunic upward and licked along his collarbone.

“P..pada...” Obi-Wan’s voice was smothered into a squawk.

I wanted his tunic off despite the interruption of moans and shifting lovely muscles.

The door behind us slid open and a deep, pissed voice echoed through the bare room. “Kenobi, Skywalker! Meyers.”

I felt a bucket of cold water that should have been dripping all over the floor. Master Windu glared
down at us and Obi-Wan froze like me.

Anakin hunched in on himself.

I flushed all over and opened my mouth, but Mace glared at me. -Quiet!-

I turned to face the Master of the Order, smoothing the tunic I’d just been trying to remove. Obi-Wan grazed my hand that was doing that, though he had dread deep down. Anakin was balanced between a panic attack and cocksure glee.

“One would think a pending review of inappropriate attachments and the examples set by Masters would prompt meditation and more careful actions.” Mace stiffly paced a short path as he spoke.

Shaking my head to clear it, I sent reassurance over the bond. I couldn’t like the rising pressure I felt from them.

“Perhaps the Masters can achieve peace and serenity before the Council makes its decision...” Mace looked at me again. “Knight Meyers will be the first to answer to the Council for today’s session.”

Then he marched out.

I looked at Obi-Wan, and he felt awkward, too. That sudden desire was unexpected and smoothed my bruised heart, but now I ached all over. I felt better, even so. Anakin managed to not appear smug, though he moved stiffly. I knew he wanted to continue. But this wasn’t the time and we looked like a mess.

Getting to my feet got easier every second, and I could feel a turbulence around them as they recentered or whatever horny Jedi did. I collected our blades and made sure the room was clear. Anakin got them standing, too. Obi-Wan fussfed at robes, getting them passable enough for the halls and moved us in a hurry to our quarters and the fresher.

After I went, I was practically shoved out the door to run to the Council chamber. I noted my arrival on the gatekeeper and was almost immediately given entrance,

There were fewer Council present than usual. Yoda was not. I didn’t know if that was good or bad.

The face on the Master with dreads was not pleasant under the golden tattoo. “These secrets were seeded and grew before your arrival, but now...” He sniffed a deep breath. “I am unsure whether these are mere attachments or abuse of a student. Give me your light saber.”

With his hand out, I could feel my calm crack a little and my face twitch. I gave it to him, much more uneasy than if it had been Obi-Wan.

His pupils dilated to all black and I could feel the hush of something in the Force.

His neutral expression became a smile and then a leer. “So what inappropriate attachments are you hiding, like the Council member and the husband have?”

I never liked strangers leering at me. “I’m attached to Obi-Wan and Anakin. And... Padmé, too, but I’m not as sure what’s going on there. I still have a few weaker ones back on my home-world, too. I don’t think I’ve been hiding them, nor am I convinced they are inappropriate instead of positive.”

“Is that all?”

No, I really did not like them poking into my love life.
“What, you think I’m going to confess my undying passion for Mace?” Someone snickered, but I was getting on a roll. “Do you think I’m crazy? It’s enough to keep them from self-destructing in one way or another from really old scars. I think Padmé and I act like outriggers because they both feed on, aggravate, and protect each other. Attachment is not deep enough to describe them and neither is love: eros or agape.”

“Your Force-visions seem to relate to them.”

I had no answer for that non-question and shrugged. “I want them to be happy and the best they can be. Oh, I want that for all of you too, but in some corner of my head, the Jedi Purge never went away.”

The silence stretched out, but it didn’t seem heavy, so I waited. Well, I waited, but the butterflies in my stomach felt like a swarm of Actis star-fighters.

I started getting annoyed. “I thought the stance on lighter emotions was going to soften. Annoyance and lusty affection don’t have much traction for hate and fear.”

“The Conclave is starting soon, and your name is not on the list for consideration.” Master Windu’s face was still sour after my earlier sarcasm.

Oh, kriffin shit. I bowed. “Sorry, Masters, an oversight. I would like enter my name as well. Was there anything else I could help with?”

“You are not to discuss this with Kenobi or Skywalker. You are not being grounded, Meyers, for now.” The first Master with the dreads warned.

“Nor share.” Another Master added.

I barked a laugh. “I will shelter it, but we’re usually in contact. I don’t know how much incidentals they get. Obi-Wan knew when the attack happened to us on Naboo.”

Mace glared as I was waved back out of the chamber. “Two days, Knight.”

I could do that.

Maybe.

It was becoming clear that Master Windu was trying to make a point about secrets and honesty within the Order. Or maybe something deeper. I didn’t like that I had no idea.

I wasn’t sure if I had the nerve to ask the Council or Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan and Anakin were subdued when they arrived outside the chamber for their own scold. Obi-Wan looked calm, but guilt and embarrassment was a silent roar behind his shields.

I made my excuses to get away. Dice and Dooku should be good for the rest of the day, and would use up the time before the Council’s two days.

Did I need another Master for Soresu? I felt bad, I didn’t want my hang-ups to reflect on Obi-Wan’s skill as a teacher. We had so little time to hang out as it was.

I wanted to stay in with them so bad.

But I didn’t want Mace mad at me either.
First stop was Dooku, and he was meditating. “You seem troubled, GrandPadawan.”

What part was safer to share? “My Master was… troubled during the Council meeting earlier.”

“Him? His presence is remarkably solid even in deadly situations. I know.”

“One of the Council members I think, was teasing him. No ill-will, and no one else seemed upset.”

“You don’t know their name?”

I felt my face warm. “I’m terrible with names. And few have been introduced.”

Dooku smiled smugly. “I should know. Could you describe them?”

“Human, male. dark skin, bright gold bar facial tattoo...” I doubted they called them dreadlocks here.

“Armless vest? That is Quinlan Vos. He was a Padawan near when Kenobi was, and was much wilder.” Dooku paused. “He is the Order’s best tracker and was hunting me for some time. He has the unusual talent of psychometry.”

I could feel my blood drain and then flood back when I remembered what that was. I was trying to keep a lid on my panic. I’d given him my light saber. “Obi-Wan is teas-able.”

“Vos and Ventress were working together for a time, looking for me. I thought he had Fallen and would be a fine acolyte like a few others were.” Dooku sighed. “Instead, Vos brought Windu when I expected Kenobi and Skywalker to find me.”

Missing pieces. I should probably meet him for a chat, but I might not be able to speak for my embarrassment. I didn’t know how much touch memory revealed, but I doubted it would be very interesting if it was just what touched my light saber. Me training, a very few fights, including the Apprentice.

I thought Obi-Wan wouldn’t be embarrassed by that.

Murphy’s law dovetailed so well, though, and I knew he would be. And so I was.

I had to cover one thing before Dice found me. “The clones are not interested in dealing with you. They’re holding you responsible for all their brothers’ deaths against the droids, and I think they have a right to be angry.”

“I am.” Dooku spoke with a strained voice. “I also had a hand in the amendment to the fail-safe chip.”

That karma where he was ordered killed too with that order was like a fine wine, but my anger went exponential. I gritted my teeth. “Do you have any useful ideas for after the order to get them back in operational order?”

“No.”

“Get some. You messed up those boys in so many ways. They are not fleshy droids, but people just as much as their parent. He was respected enough to be the model, and so should they be.” I sent my anger swirling away to dissipate into the Force. I sighed. Playing Gepetto was rough. “What happens with abandoned children in the Republic or on your world? Feral children can fight and have to, to survive. They need to learn how to live a fuller life, without denying what they have endured. Be part of a solution, damn it, not a problem.”
He looked away. “I will think on it, Knight. But that will not change how they are perceived.”

“I’ll be working on that, too.” I was quiet for several minutes.

“How are your studies progressing?”

That gave me a faint smile. It wasn’t like he saw much weather down here in the bowels of the Temple to comment on. “I was signed off for the Aethersprites, but did more time in an Actis. Skywalker wants someone to like flying the way he does, but he might have to wait a decade or so…”

Dooku’s jaw set, with annoyance in his brown eyes. “You are aware I meant your Force studies.”

I shrugged. “I’m not really interested in learning any powers. It’s not like I can decide to have a vision at my convenience, and that seems my strong suit. My Soresu is progressing, but he’s planning to find another master…”

“Another Soresu Master?” The older man seemed shocked.

I flushed. “Well, downside of being attached. I never was much for competitive tournaments on my world, either.” Even in less warlike games.

His eyes furrowed. “You didn’t want to prove your skill, prove your value?”

Snorting, I waved at him. “Ha! Prove what? They’re, you’re, masters of their forms. ’do or do not, there is no try,’ right? Better I focus on what I can do. I’m not going to beat them with a light saber. I don’t want pity wins.”

His confusion was amusing. “You defeated the apprentice. You have been on missions.”

“They were not people I cared for, survival trumps any wish to avoid a brawl easily. I don’t think I could try to kill him… nor Anakin.” I scratched by my ear. “He tried to get me angry, too.”

“You should have trained with students at your own level more.”

“Maybe, even more than for Obi-Wan is my own code against attacking children. They’re the only ones at my skill level. It’d be pointless, as some stupid competition to please others just isn’t that important. I’d take the fall. It’d be a waste of time.”

Rubbing between his eyebrows, Dooku glared. “Another Master could work, but only until you become attached again,”

Now I had the beginnings of a headache. “I’m going to run out of Masters.”

“Or a Master you are less likely to get attached to. Several tutors might not be amiss…” His face was neutral again. “You do not trust me, do you?”

“No.” It came out baldly. “You may have been seduced and used far, far from your original intentions, but at some point you are responsible. You ignored that little voice that said it was insane. I believe in recovery and redemption, that you can achieve that. But forgiveness is emotional and that doesn’t happen on a schedule. I trust you to a point.”

“Come here in the evenings, GrandPadawan.”

“I’m surprised you’re still interested.”
He smiled faintly. “A duelist style would not fit one who prefers not to duel. I believe you chose well, at least for now.”

I wondered what he thought would come later, but I suspected I did not want to know. Having an appointment after meeting with Dice would be a good idea. It was another day to go, and hiding with Padmé again just might be suspicious. “Okay. At least for now. I believe we’ll be getting another mission, soon. I’ve seen estimates of losses for the Order over the last decades, so I won’t be here for long.”

He frowned in disapproval. “I would not think you are privy to that as a Knight.”

I could tell he was getting peeved that Obi-Wan might have revealed Council secrets. “I’m not. This was mined from Senate records by non-Jedi. ‘Follow the money’ is a truism. Even here.”

That left him thoughtful, and I hurried off to the barracks of the 408th. They seemed busy for not being on a mission, many were in sort of jumpsuits.

Someone was watching, as Dice reached the door almost as soon as I entered, armored and carrying his helmet. “General.”

“I haven’t heard of a mission yet, two days minimum. We’re waiting for a Council decision.” I could see the others listening in, didn’t like that news. I looked at Dice. “Do you want to go over my assignment in private?”

“No.” He waved around. “They assisted, but I was unable to come up with the full list.”

I took a perch on a half-wall and waved around me for them to relax if they would. “I warned that non-military would be difficult. Not that military and paramilitary is an easier list. What did you discover?”

One was the more familiar Vits from Kaller. “We want to stay together, doing the same work, so that limits the kinds of vocations, it even limits the paramilitary options in some places.”

“I’m not as interested in what you can’t do, as what you can.” I was just glad they were thinking about after war.

Dice brought up his padd. “We did not find many, not even the full unique number you asked for. The two you mentioned are included. Building things for the needs of the republic, things weaker worlds cannot manage by themselves. Maybe a way to hydrate desert worlds, prepare colony worlds, though that would require more training than military options, it would not require a war.”

“We’re going to continue training, no matter what,” another announced.

I raised my hand to speak. “I’m sorry, could you refresh me your names? I’d joke about advancing senility, but you might believe me, instead of the truth that I’ve always been bad at remembering names.”

“Dice, Clone Commander and marksman.” The smirk was razor sharp, at least he seemed recovered.

I could not resist. “I never forget someone to beats me up in sparring.”

We both flushed, but I was glad he was truly smiling now.

“Vits, supply… and cosmetics.” He grinned under his Vulcan eyebrows, or maybe Romulan.
“Carry, communications and cryptography.”

“Turbo, pilot.” He was the training fan.

“Syncho. Demolitions.” His voice was clipped.

“Shins.” His smile was less brash, maybe because he’d had some serious damage to his jawline once.

“Well, gentlemen. Do you like that option, maybe not for yourselves, but for your brothers?” This would improve their rep, people didn’t fear the army corps of engineers.

Carry shook his head. “We are not interested, but vod’e from other units are.”

I was so happy that other Legions were interested too. I was almost high on it. I wanted to shake something. I started siphoning most of it away into the Force to keep on topic and not start fist pumping or singing. “That’s good, the Republic is huge and I don’t think the worlds help each other enough without it getting karked in the Senate.

Dice coughed. “That is like the next idea of disaster relief. It would have to be a quick responding unit or several spread out through the Republic. The disaster could have a military component, due to terror attacks or looters as well.”

I nodded. “You do realize, I’m going to push that you guys get first choice?”

“We appreciate that, General,” Shins said. “We do want to stay in the field as long as we can. But we understand that senior units like the 212th and 501st will serve longer until the war is over.”

“Don’t worry too much about early retirement. I’ve already been requested to ride herd on them taking care of themselves.”

Vits grinned. “That was a great story from Kaller, Sir. Good for a drink in 79’s, especially from Cody or Rex.” He paused. “They have been worried about their Generals these last days.”

How to reassure without spoiling? “They’re under review by the Council right now, and the decision should come tomorrow or the next day. Gimme a moment.” I sent a note to both of them that their men were worried and they should contact them more. “I’m under orders not to say more specifics, but I’m not worried.”

They nodded, understanding.

After a moment, Dice made a show of bringing his padd up again. “One idea is the longest distance from combat, but some units might want the quiet. Farming. A legion could feed a billion and some surplus like that could help the disaster relief group too.”

Neither his voice nor manner said that appealed, so I gestured for a pause. “The Senator passed on an idea that you could be teachers and protectors in the Undercity or similar places where gangs or poverty prevent education or building better lives. Taking care of the shit-heads who endanger the helpless is an added bonus.”

Their surprise said this was new, nor did they have any comments. I sighed and rolled my hand to hear their next idea. Dice looked at the others in appeal. No, he looked at Shins.

Shins spoke next. “I noticed that you went to some effort with the Commander. He could have been deactivated, like others had been who were a danger. We all could have been after… Knight Ta’em’s death. You told Dice you weren’t a warrior, were you some kind of healer?”
I bit my cheek to control my smile. “No, I was a kind of slicer, but it’s far too different here to be a useful skill. So I had to choose a new path, too. My world had no Jedi, no cloning this advanced, but we had many kinds of healers different than the Republic’s. I picked up some knowledge.”

“That is why we were assigned to you, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Jedi weren’t the only ones nearly destroyed by that order. But there aren’t enough Jedi to help you all, and there probably aren’t enough counselors in the entire Republic who don’t have their heads up their asses to help you either.”

Shins looked at me very carefully. “We want to learn that.”

I had to admit. “I’m making this up a lot of the time. I doubt there has been any close models we can build off of and be sure it will be effective. I think you guys and those raised Jedi have similar problems. I will release all the references I brought from my world for you to study, but there are a thousand different ways to approach problems, so keep that in mind. There may be no one way. And this will not be an organized study for many years.”

Dice nodded. “We seem to have more time as the war slows.”

“Divide it among us.” Synchro spoke for the first time.

They were looking forward. I hoped I’d brought enough. What could I find published here? I was sure which Masters to start with. “I’ll see if I can get it converted for tomorrow. You, my friends, are going to get a backdoor introduction to my homeworld.”

“I will collect questions for the General,” Shins said to the others as they turned away.

“General?” Dice picked up his helmet again, ready to go.

They were much more alert than the day I arrived here to meet them. “Yes,” I counted on my fingers. “I need to meet with three to five Masters before we can stop for dinner. After that, it’s more light saber training, remedial, I’m afraid.”

Dice angrily marched me out the door. “Sir, morale would be better, if you were not quite as honest.”

“But it is remedial. Obi-Wan thinks I need a different Master because of my attachment, Dooku thinks I should have trained more with Initiates in tournaments. I wonder what the next Master will decide, if I’m not mastering Soresu properly.”

He put his helmet on. “Sir, your men need to have confidence before the drek hits them. You’re one of three Sith-killers and everyone saw it. Learning a new skill is not remedial.”

This karma was annoying. I wanted clones to be able to help each other, but I didn’t want that attention on me. I sighed. “I need to set up some appointments.”

I started sending requests to meet with Masters Che, Windu, and Yoda. For Anakin I asked for help later with decanting the ebooks from my old laptop for the clones and swapping fonts. He returned a demand that I start speeder training tonight. Going stir crazy was a clear problem for him.

Dice stayed with me when I spoke to the healer. She promised introductory materials and the fewer things that had been focused on clones in smaller batches among the wealthy. The Masters of the Order were not as transparent.

Dice waited outside when I spoke to Master Yoda. “I think the 408th has made a turn in recovering
after the death of their General. They want to help the rest of the vod’e. Already they are thinking about paths and other units seem to be interested. They’re planning to break up and organize study materials when not on mission.”

“Be deployed again, these men should.” His eyes were studying me.

It was already a long day and it was just late afternoon. “I know that. I’ll save my panic attack for later… I’m really more worried about my yelling at Obi-Wan and Anakin when they were fighting on Kaller. I mean, I’m just a Knight. I thought they’d keep on getting nastier and nastier until they drew blood with their words.”

“To make peace, you convinced them. Stubborn, they are stubborn, as Master Che tells me. Yes, hmmm? ”

“Honestly, I think Padmé could do the same someday. She’ll get a Mom voice too, with twins.” It worked really well on Anakin. Thank you, Shmi.

He hummed. “Study Sunrider did you?”

“I’m sorry Master. Is it that urgent?” Curiosity was taking a back seat for me.

He waved the hand that held his stick. “Study her before the Conclave, you should.”

I noted it in on my padd, before I spoke without thinking. “I’m really uncomfortable. I mean, they’re Masters.”

“One price of attachment, this is, young Meyers. More experienced are you with attachments. To the Force, give your fears.”

“I thought you’d be upset about me being a Knight and them Masters.”

He smiled at me. “The only source of wisdom, Masters are not. The Force, as well is.”

After I said farewell, Master Windu was not available today, and tomorrow my question about their grounding should not matter.

Probably. I wasn’t even sure what my question was anymore.

Our quarters could only be a short stop still, I wanted to minimize any need to mislead them. When I left Dice in the hallway, Obi-Wan was quiet and in a light meditation in his room.

Anakin had my laptop out on the table and had it hooked up to his own padd. His signature was a pleased hum. “Speeders are much simpler than you think.”

I’d managed to forget that already and my stomach clenched in panic. “It’s all that open and moving space, far, far above the ground. Adding speed? I’ve had a fear of heights for my whole life, even to an open window too far above concrete when I was a small child. I mean that was about my biggest fear on Ilum.”

“You’ll be fine, Vora. Are you sure you want all of these references? Some don’t look very scholarly.”

Anakin and redirected the display to a larger screen and I could spot the covers that caught his eye. My Kindle collection was large, covering everything from Pimpernel to Future Shock, even before that hasty dump before I left. The most recent psych books had text covers that weren’t interesting.
But the array of sci-fi and romances that made a majority of the cover images had so many cliché covers. Spaceship battles and sensuous flowers were bad enough, but the sheer formula of the romances was embarrassing when he kept scrolling past dozens of holiday and urban fantasy. The bad photoshopped ones were so awful.

My face warmed. “I read a lot, I had hundreds of books.”

He plainly was trying to remember my home.

I was sad at the many favorites that I had to leave behind for bulk. Only now was leaving college textbooks behind painful. “I’ve only read a tiny fraction of the ones on there. Most were samples and free. My favorites were physical copies. I’ll separate the ones for the 408th.” I stood beside him and started moving the targets into a folder.

I couldn’t be sure what weird Terran things he’d find if he went exploring. But if I said anything, it would be a certainty. Nothing to see here, move along.

When I was done marking it, I had to ask, “Something wrong? I don’t want to disturb him.”

Anakin made a face. “We talked. I’m putting my name in for that Conclave if he will, but he’s more likely to be chosen.” Humor rippled at that. “At least I have something to poke around with.”

Then he looked at me suspiciously. “But you’re going out.”

I tried to visualize dancing pink Fantasia elephants. I shrugged like I didn’t know. “Can’t say.”

His presence brushed mine and I added lavender unicorns dancing the Pastoral Symphony.

“Cute.” His smile wasn’t really amused as he leaned back from the table.

“Can’t.” For now I tried not to even think. Casting for another topic I said, “Dooku doesn’t think my problem is just attachment, and has a different approach. And I think he’s over any snit I didn’t pick Form II.”

“Those holos don’t do that much to distract me. I can almost see it now without even trying.”

“Please don’t.” Won’t be long.

“You think I like this kriffing waiting either? All Obi-Wan wants to do is meditate, for two days?”

I was having trouble breathing as he stared at me, pupils dilated. My stomach felt funny and breathing sped up as he pulled me between his legs where he sat on the chair.

His fingers traced from my cheek and around my head to pull my face down from where I stood. “Two days…” The kiss started gently.

My arms were around him with something simmering in my belly. “I have to…”

“Yeah, you have to.”

Kissing him was like doing a cannonball into a cool pool on a hot summer day, I felt a pang of doubt… and guilt.

Was Obi-Wan alone and closed off into painful solitude? He deserved first consideration from someone. Submerging within the Force, I swam toward the deep currents, seeking something, some hint he wasn’t feeling abandoned.
He was there, not alone, not quite, as dispersed as he was into the ocean. He was his own little Sargasso. He was calm and serene and something I could not identify.

Anakin’s presence arrived in a wave, and I could feel puzzlement when he saw, too. But the tide turned, and I was washed to shore.

“Vora?” He lifted his face to grin at me… and grind up just a little.

I leaned back. “You do realize someone can survive without sex for a decade...” I bit my lips to stop that line of speech. “You’re really energetic. Call Padmé and talk dirty to her while I go get my ass handed to me.”

Anakin’s huge grin was sly. “Piloting later, right?”

I scrambled away with a glare at the still horny young man. “Yeah, piloting. Keep an eye on him and talk to Padmé.”

That idea caught Anakin’s attention and he started looking for his comm.

I tried to neaten up in a hurry and exited out into the hall where Dice was waiting. “I don’t really need a guard within the Temple.”

There was a tense silence before he spoke. “I hear you’re a flight risk, sir”

Then came the shaking of silent laughter.

I chuckled too. “Okay, okay. Very funny. All that’s left today is light saber training with Dooku and I’d rather not force you to be near him, and Anakin’s speeder training, which I’d rather not be near myself.”

“The General is a renowned pilot”

“The General is a hotshot and wants company in his mania.” That rang true, and I should make a bigger effort. The only question was what craft would be easiest to handle at speed without my panic.

We reached the security area and I stopped. “I’d rather you stay out here. Speaking with a counselor is supposed to be private.”

Dice drew himself up. “He’s a Sith and a Seppie.”

“He’s been in here for over a year, without trying to escape. I’m not leaving Temple. I’ll send references for you guys to look at as soon as I can get the conversions, so you are done for the day.”

“Yessir.” He did not sound happy, but he left.

I moved in and knocked on the doorjamb. “Sir?”

Dooku turned with another faint smile. “I see that no one could accuse you of keeping your attachment secret.”

I looked down at my robes and they were in order. He waved to the small mirror in the wall still with a snotty snob face. My face flooded even as I identified all the bites at my neck. I was going to kill the boy… or box his ears really hard… or tell Padmé.

Somehow I didn’t think that one would work.
“I didn’t think my GrandPadawan was capable of this.” This time he was smug.

“GreatgrandPadawan.”

His voice held an odd note. “That should disrupt the Council out of its inertia.”

Great, I did not want to be part of that focus. I tried to calm down again. “Shall we start?”

Dooku stood and waved furniture aside. Then he drew his light saber.

I drew mine, now aware that this suite was a little close for Soresu.

He attacked and I parried. That repeated, over and over, his precision carrying even when I didn’t think he was using his favored form. His corrections remained in a terse cold voice.

When he blocked my parry and our faces were closer together, his eyes were a molten metallic gold.

*Palpatine lacked insight for all his plotting. Your fears feed on each of you. One push and you could all Fall together.*

I pushed him back, in a low grade panic that I kept hemmed in. He looked snotty again as he attacked. I parried and returned, trying to plan something or feel what the Force wanted.

I got nothing.

Just parrying and blocking, trying to not get cornered in the smaller room, the only options were fighting or fleeing.

I never was that good at running.

So that left fighting, disarming. Maybe we would join the Skywalker club. That made me grin as I parried his next attack.

Gathering my focus and the Force, I watched for that shift, that delay, that… weariness as I parried and blocked. But this time, I zigged after my parry and his saber hit the floor and slid away.

Two pieces levitated up from the floor and I focused on him more.

His smile was almost genial and eyes brown again. “Excellent, GrandPadawan. This should relieve your Master. You also contained anger and fear quickly.”

Contained was not calm and I panted, trying to think.

Rubbing his wrist, Dooku added, “I am relieved that you had not been tempted into something hot tempered and foolish.”

I finally felt a tiny smile, I wasn’t hot tempered, I was cold. “Was that necessary?”

I was on a glacier.

“It proved attachment is and is not a problem. I still maintain that you should spar with others, and not only Masters. Speak to Skywalker, I believe he did that frequently.”

I was still uneasy, and not happy Dooku could put on and take off that marker. I left him, trying not to stomp down the hall, and went to the cafeteria area and found a quiet corner to eat.

“So the Team’s little pet comes out from under their wings?” That was a leer before I looked up.
“Master Vos.”

“Who told?” He smirked as he looked me up and down.

“Dooku.”

Vos stopped smiling. “Don’t know if you are attached to him.”

“I don’t know either. Though he did mention he had thought you would make a fine acolyte at the time.” His eyes shifted as I looked, into mean and golden.

But he didn’t feel any different, even if his face changed into annoyed without any muscles shifting.

This was giving me a headache. “How can you tell if a vision’s past or present or future?”

That made him shrug. “Experience. You still didn’t answer my original question, Knight.”

“You know why I need to avoid them right now. I don’t like keeping others’ secrets.”

“Nor do I,” Vos snarled. “If you hurt him by taking up with the boy...”

Disbelief was my first impulse. He missed the entire dynamic and I had to laugh. “No one told the boy not to take up with us. I am so looking forward to new parent exhaustion to distract him.”

Vos still didn’t look happy with me.

That’s okay, as I wasn’t happy with him. It was awfully late to start thinking of protecting Obi-Wan. “Well, this little pet does what seems necessary. I thought Knights had a bit more discretion, Master?”

“As long as you exercise it, Meyers.” He stalked away.

Well that ruined what little appetite I had, but I gobbled my meal anyway without interruption. I really was jonesing for a good Alfredo, that was far, far away. Walking back, I tried to get into a cool, cool serenity.

Anakin was still looking at my laptop and his expression was smug. “Speeder lesson.”

“In a few.” I kept walking back to Obi-Wan’s room.

I had to sigh. He was not meditating, but deeply asleep in tangled sheets. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I brushed that lock off his forehead. He also had a crop of hickeys.

I wondered how Padmé managed with that.

Yet another meditation for energy, I returned to our common room. “Can this be a short lesson, Anakin? It’s been a really long day.”

His smug disappeared and after a ripple in the Force, he looked torn. “They’ve been on you, too?”

I could not answer that. “I wanted to pass on Dice’s report, I think Rex and Cody already know unofficially.” I thought the Force was nudging me to tell about Dooku, but tell them what?

“Early morning then, pet.” Anakin grinned with that.

I had enough energy to glare. “I’m not little or helpless. That’s even worse than Padawan.”
He pulled me back toward Obi-Wan. “No one’s gonna think a Sith killer is little or helpless, pet.”
Denying Tension

Chapter Summary

Anakin and Obi-Wan finally talk about their argument on that last diplomatic mission, about those festering wounds. There is some angst.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Obi-Wan

Anakin was quiet as we waited for the Council to finish speaking to Vora after our... misbehavior earlier.

I touched his shoulder, smoothing a last wrinkle. "We chose those actions in the training hall, Anakin. It’s not your fault." I knew it was mine as their Master.

He threw me a doubtful look.

"Meditate as we wait, Anakin." I could feel his irritation with my eyes shut, but he was silent.

The Council gateway chimed. The display said we were to enter.

I could feel that Anakin was little calmer. I would not want to admit that I was worried. Nor how embarrassed I was at how Mace found us in the practice room.

Nor that I did not regret it as much as I should. That they cared that much, wanted that- I dismissed those thoughts firmly as we we entered the central space.

Four Council chairs were empty. One was mine and one was Yoda’s. Quinlan was holding Vora’s light saber, a critical look in his eyes.

I felt my face warm- no, it burned.

Because he knew.

I looked at Vora and she sent calm affection with a wan smile.

She didn’t know.

Anakin and I had taken our places in the center. I was responsible and stood in front, while Vora had faded back a step or two into a proper position.

Mace looked at us. “It may have been a long time coming, but you are all aware of your responsibility to set good examples as Jedi. Masters and Council members are expected to hew to that even more. Do you have anything to say for yourselves?”

Anakin bristled, but was quiet. Vora wanted to roll her eyes. I held myself still despite the acid of my shame, trying not to look at Vos to guess how much he had seen.
After all his mocking of my quiet when I was a Padawan and new Master, this was far more embarrassing than any indiscretion of my youth. Mace was probably sure enough, but Vos would enjoy making full and detailed descriptions, like he had of his own adventures.

“No, Masters. It will not repeat.” I spoke, my chest heavy.

My Padawans agreed more quietly.

Vos grinned and snarked. “I wonder that the pending father and groom is so interested in...”

*No, Anakin!* I could feel his fear and anger swell.

Anakin’s fists shook for a moment. “I talked to Padmé years ago about Obi-Wan. Months for Vora. I would never keep them secret from her.”

Madame Nu spoke like a crack of doom, “Perhaps you could give your brothers in the Order the same kind of consideration for important news, young Skywalker.”

Shame flooded into me. If the Council was to be more clear and forthcoming, we had to be as well.

“You are dismissed for the day, confined to your quarters until our announcement, barring approved tasks.” Mace waved and Vos tossed Vora’s saber back to her.

I moved through the exit, keeping to a calm and measured pace. That lasted only until we were back in our quarters where I stood very still.

Anakin seized us close, frustration clear. “If we can’t do anything else...”

Vora pushed until he released us. “Sorry, I have a lot approved tasks. I had a lot more free time during missions.”

I could still feel a strain on her and touched her cheek. “I will find another Master to continue your training in Soresu.”

She cringed and looked guilty.

Anakin looked at Vora, and then at me as well. “What was that problem in the training room earlier?”

I took a deep breath. “Vora needs to move beyond basics further.” I could feel his objection forming. “Too passive, even for Soresu. Vora will not make lethal ripostes even in sparring and that is a weakness I will not allow.”

Vora’s regret deepened and shaded into embarrassment.

I put my arm around her, this was not intentional. “This is not unusual, my dear. Many Padawans study with another Master when they choose a different form.”

“I’ll miss our time together.” Her arms went around me.

“I’m never far away.” Smiling was a little more, I brushed her cheek. “This will not be permanent.”

“Miles to go...” With a last hug and wave to Anakin, Vora hurried off.

Two Soresu Masters also served in the Council and already familiar with her. I would speak to Mace if they were unable.
A tousled head leaned against mine. Anakin sighed, but remained quiet as we looked over the city.

“Do you love me, Obi-Wan?”

Suddenly I wished for another to moderate what could be a chancy talk, by the hints of the Force. “Yes, of course. Why are you asking? I told you months ago.”

Arm holding tighter, he paused. “I wasn’t sure if that had changed. With Tatooine and Vora and the Council’s displeasure with us...”

I took a deeper breath and held it before letting it go. “I can’t imagine my life without you, Anakin. You’ve grown so strong and bright in the Force. My affection has not and will not change, though it was strained when I realized the Sand People’s deaths were not fictional. It is still so very hard to reconcile that with the Light in you. No one has spoken for those innocents.”

Anger leaked out from behind his shielding. “No one spoke for my mother.”

“You did. You could have spoken for their innocents, in danger from the Dark around them.”

“That didn’t help my mother.” His snarl was whisper-silent and aimed at his feet.

“Grief may be one of the hardest things we must face as Jedi. I think you realize how long I had trouble after my Master passed.”

Turning a little to face into my neck, Anakin cried out. “You cut Maul in half! That was vengeance, too.”

“I was wrong to wallow in my grief during the emergency. Naboo, Padmé, and you were in danger from Maul, and he was the one I washed away with my wrath... The Sand People younglings were not a threat to your mother.”

Anakin’s voice was still muffled. “…I was afraid that you would hate me, that I would be forced to leave, leave you.”

I ran fingers through his hair. “I was- I am very sad and angry and hurt, that I taught you so poorly.”

“S’not your faul,” he mumbled.

I could not believe that, but we needed to seek answers when we were calmer than now. I must get his mind engaged before his anger returned. “Leaving might not be terrible. We could start a splinter Temple on Vora’s world.”

“I have a feeling we’d have more than enough students.” Anakin shook with laughter at that and his mood lightened, probably from the ‘we.’

We needed to resolve one more thing from that fight on Kaller.

I took another deep breath. “I’m sorry I did not allow you to be told about Hardeen. We were already fighting so often in those days. I think I was a little afraid... that you would be glad of my death and happy to be free. That you wouldn’t care that I was gone- It seemed better to cut myself off to better... before it... I had to shut off so mu...”

“I don’t know why any more. I’m so very sorry.” It had been so clear that day.

Anakin stepped back with a pulse of anger. “Of course, I kripping cared. Even when you were always nagging me about my recklessness and attachments. It split me into pieces of pain and
darkness I could not see out of. They shooed younglings out of my path while you were gone.”

I remembered the pain that was bedrock in those days. “My attachment was a bigger problem for
the mission. I couldn’t stop checking on you. I couldn’t keep my Force presence bottled up when you
got involved and I had to keep Bane from killing you when you attacked.”

“That trace or your presence made it worse, like some ghost I’d never talk to again. I couldn’t say
goodbye. I couldn’t save you.” He scowled. “Later I was mad that a bounty hunter had to save you
from me.”

“And this is the another hard lesson, Padawan. One that I still struggle with myself. We can’t always
save everyone, even the ones we care for the most. I could not save Qui-Gon or Satine... At some
point helping you to stand on your own as a Jedi without me, slid right in with Sidious’ plans for
you. I was losing you.”

After a silence, he pulled me over to sit on the sofa with him. “You’re stuck with me now. And my
wife, and our twins. Niece, nephew?”

I had to chuckle. “You’re breeding sets of attachments. That might be a different balance to the
Force. The Force is of the Living, after all...”

That made me stop. Ending Sidious’ rule reduced the darkness, one kind of imbalance. The isolation
and chill of the Code was another. Living beings kept on living. The Force grew with every life
regardless of its attachments. The Order needed to live and be part of that weaving, not separate
weavers only. The negotiators on Kaller saw it in some way when they wanted a Temple, too.

_The Order would grow._

This certainty came from the deep Force, like tectonic plates shifting. I knew it. But would it grow
well?

“Master?” Anakin had taken my hand while I was distracted.

“An insight about the Order’s future would not release me.”

“Will you be at the Conclave, Obi-Wan?”

I looked at the low table in front of me. “I had not thought to. You’re an example of damages from
the Code’s weaknesses and they should consider those deeply. Of how we do not serve the Force as
well as we should. Yesterday’s answers may not serve tomorrow.” _What we almost lost to the Dark._

His doubt grew until I had to look at his face.

Horrified disbelief covered his face. “You think I could influence a debate? I can’t wield words, Obi-
Wan, not like you. I’d lose my temper and get nothing fixed.” His grip on my hand grew painful.

“You’re a better example! You spent how many years trying to be perfect, the perfect Jedi, the
perfect Master. Even you, with all your control and reason couldn’t do it. The ones who could keep
the Code better, the diplomats with Ni-man, were killed in the first battle. You would do a lot more
than me in any argument.”

“I do not think we will be allowed to stack the Conclave, Anakin. There is still wisdom in restraining
darker emotions and striving to be fair in a galaxy full of unbridled bias and hatred.”

“I’ll put my name in, if you will.”
I nodded, though I almost smiled at his bargaining. “At least we talked without being sent away like Initiates this time.”

Anakin laughed a deep belly laugh, but my comm chimed about my men. I gathered my thoughts for Cody.

Anakin had gotten the same and stepped away for his own call.

“Commander?”

“General?” Cody sounded alert.

“Cody, I’m sorry I’ve been out of touch. I should finish a review with the Council tomorrow. I doubt we will have a mission immediately, so you are at liberty for the moment.”

He looked concerned. “Are you all right, General?”

“I am fine. Meditating and perhaps a bit of tutoring while I am in Temple. Any problems with the 212th?”

“No, Sir, just a little boredom.”

“Well, then. Carry on. Not with the boredom, that is. I’m sure you can find something.” I suspected after our call ended that they would go to that bar many of the Clones visited. I looked at Anakin. “How are they?”

“On their way out. He’s supposed to call me if there’s any problem.”

I hadn’t quite realized just how much spending time with Padmé had kept him occupied. Ahsoka was away, too. “I doubt there will be.”

Anakin dropped on the sofa beside me and raked his fingers through his hair. “So now what? And no, I do not want to meditate again to pass the time.”

“Sleep?” I was sure that would hasten the time.

“Eventually.” He grinned.

I sat back and brushed my chin.

“No, no fondling your beard. Just relax back. Sleep, meditate, count foxes leaping a fence, just stay there.”

I didn’t see how that could be a problem, in itself.

Several topics I failed to resolve in my own mind, and meditation might help. Vora’s nearly hidden reluctance to employ the more aggressive aspects of Soresu bothered me. It wasn’t obvious before with the more chaotic Form I, as I had not seen a problem on missions. But I worried that a refusal to make lethal attacks in a saber duel would mean her loss. Nor was I as sure another Master would help unless I understood why.

Anakin still had that chasm around his mother’s death. He needed to understand and accept how and why it happened, but not embrace it. It was far preferable if he could do this before his children were born but I did not know how to help him bridge that chasm.

And myself? If I had many ambitions, I had surely achieved them. Successful Knight, able with my
saber and skilled in negotiation. With necessity I could command missions and legions in battle, though I preferred calm understanding and building compromises. My only remaining expectation about my life as a Jedi was that when my days in the field dwindled, was that I might work more in the archives or or maybe the ExplorerCorps.

I still didn’t want to be a farmer.

And yet I should meditate just what my own deeply-held attachments meant in the Code. What would it mean for my day to day life in the Order? I still felt a lingering guilt that I was breaking the current Code… but not enough to stop. That opposition did not seem to bother either of my former Padawans, though Vora was more amused than the slightly darker frustration Anakin had.

While I’d thought, Anakin had shifted until he was tucked in beside me and dozing. He’d folded up surprisingly small against me.

Ruffling his hair as he slept had been such a rare pleasure. He’d been so loud and determined to claim his maturity, for years. No longer Padawan, nor even Knight, a Master should have his own studies and students.

I could almost pretend that he was still innocent, that Darkness and secrets would never touch my fair haired Padawan. But I was sure Anakin would find his feet again as a Jedi, once he adjusted to fatherhood. He’d have less time, I believed Vora in that, and he would not need any advice from me for those responsibilities. That separation I’d been scolded about by the Council would happen despite our wishes.

Vora was moving away, too. Helping the brothers find a future, and debating the Code. I felt sure she would be a Master, in time. She might become the scholar Jedi that I would have liked to become before the Sith emerged.

I felt like they were reaching the horizon, leaving me here. Wherever ‘here’ was.

-Stop that, Obi-Wan. I’m not going anywhere.- Anakin reached across my chest, his breath warm against my neck now. “Go to sleep, Master.”

More comfortable than expected, I did.

My usually formless dreams were not peaceful. Instants of blue clad clones in the lower levels of Coruscant or another very urban zone, fighting civilians woke me.

Then I realized that my former Padawan was still dreaming. He seemed more trapped, twitching and rigid, his closed eyes tracking things I could not see.

Touching his cheek, I projected calm. “Anakin, wake up. This is only a dream.”

*NO!!*

I traced a longer hair strand and along his neck where his Padawan braid had been, an old comfort. Hush, my Padawan. All is well. Leave that place and wake up.

-Obi-Wan! Stop! Don’t…- Anakin’s breathing was labored and limbs twitched.

Anakin! “Wake up!” I pinched his nose.

I hadn’t completely prepared for his panicky attempt to break free, knocking me off the couch. I held myself low to avoid any more flailing. Explaining bruises was always uncomfortable. “Anakin, wake
He froze. When he found me, he leaned over and gripped me in an embrace that got painful. “I’m awake? It’s not happening?”

“No, dear one. The Force is calm. The worst threat to us at the moment is boredom and frustration. Some say the traditional route to deal with that is alcohol.”

“Sounds good.” That sounded weary, even as he looked away and loosened his grip so I could move back up to the seat.

“I don’t believe we have any on hand…” I wanted to ask what he saw, but he seemed skittish.

“Too bad.” He turned his head to look me in the eyes. “Come sleep with me, Obi-Wan.”

“So soon after a nightmare?” I knew he had trouble sleeping when he dreamed.

He rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t planning on sleeping right away.”

I gripped his shoulder. “Comforting my old Padawan might be all the Force wills for tonight.”

Anakin’s smile was earnest… and shadowed by his dream. “I don’t want comfort as much a comfort. Living in the now, right? I want to hold you close, be held and feel protected, touch my beautiful Master and we feel happy, not guilty.”

“My sunny Pada…” I stopped to correct myself. “My sunny, sweet Anakin. I believe I can do that, further than that is still in motion.”

Another pulse of desire, and Anakin muttered. “I am learning patience, Master.”

“Indeed, it was never a method I would have included in my lesson plans.”

That got me a snort.

I stood up to move to my room, and changed into sleep wear.

Anakin followed and stripped into sleep pants only. He moved sharply and with a kind of determination, taking the other side of the bed with a sigh. Shifting closer to me when I settled beside him, was almost instant.

Putting my arms around him was easy, limbs were more awkward. Not that I didn’t know how, only that doing it consciously and with intention with Anakin was difficult. We’d collapsed into a single bed often enough on missions… but not knowingly. My image of him as a fierce Knight and General still warred with the young, lost boy in a strange land.

My gut felt heavy and calm at once.

I didn’t know what Anakin was feeling, but purring was the only word I could think of.

And he called Vora, ‘pet...’

I ran my fingers through his hair over and over, tracing down his back at times, sending warm sunshine as I did.

Melting against me, his lips traced along my shoulder and settled against my neck for a quick suck, pulling me closer.
Calm and satisfied were so unexpected from him. But Anakin was still, with a content warmth in the belly that glowed as I stroked him carefully. The warmth was so beguiling, I was not sure which of us felt it, as it rippled away to fill our skin.

He was stroking slowly along my side which was...pleasant. Then warmth drained and my fingers froze in his hair when the meaning sank in.

Anakin’s fingers dug in and held me closer, his hurt was clear in the Force and he nuzzled at my neck.

Wanting so badly. -Don’t send me away, Master-

I won’t, I won’t. Guilt grew as I wanted to do more than soothe, and at the same time I shouldn’t. These feelings conflicted, spinning in smaller and smaller circles even as they created a massive pressure to do something.

I should not be here like this.

I could not move.

Anakin stopped. “Kriff it, it was less awkward in the training room than our own rooms! Why is this harder? It’s not fair. I know you longer and I was your Padawan first!” A trace of anger was under the frustration.

I sighed and sent warm affection through our bond as I tugged the hair by his ear. “This is exactly how awkward it was last year with Vora, and she was never a youngling dependent on me. You are a Knight, but still a little bit the young Padawan who depended on me to protect him.”

His disbelief was clear.

“When you came in early after her return from Ilum, all you would have seen was clothing in mere disarray. We’d explored each other’s pasts, nothing that would have excited much comment by the Council if they had walked in.” Mine had been a majority of our delay and I rolled to sit up and re-balance myself.

-Not that patient. No excuses.- Anakin pushed me back down, as if afraid I would float away.

I held him close, tracing along faded injuries that had been sources of old panic, with a feather weight touch,. Not an excuse, merely a caution.

He shivered and then kissed me along my neck, as his hands kept moving lower, playing with the last fabric as breathing got harder. My legs were getting restless. He slowed for a satisfied chuckle when I moaned, a thread of triumph within his desire. -First!-

I woke later, feeling Anakin working on something in our common room in a buzz of concentration. Still tired, nothing seemed urgent enough to force myself awake.

The day seemed endless when I woke again and chose meditation as Anakin was still tinkering. Vora returned and the slightest hints of their conversation followed me into the depths of the Force.

Later my meditations turned to wonder why Vora was coming and going so freely. Was she maintaining some fiction or checking on us? The Force did not reveal that answer.

I heard them coming back into the bedroom as I roused out of my meditation, and I could feel Vora was exhausted. “Anakin...”
As I expected, my warning netted some pouting from Anakin, but Vora dropped down beside me, smelling of sweat and tension. My arms leaped around her and she relaxed with a deep sigh. I relaxed in hers, at peace.

“Oh, God, Ben. I can’t take much more.” Vora’s shields were thick, as she rubbed her forehead against a pain.

This fresh from meditation, I was sure this would pass soon. “This was not intentional, my Vora.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Vos?”

Oh, that. “We were close friends when we were young. He’d always had problems resisting the Dark.”

Anakin dropped beside us. “He’s always full of it.”

“Not that.” Vora held close, her head on my shoulder. “He found me in the food hall to warn me.”

That made Anakin growl with anger. “How dare he?”

Vora patted his arm with sleepy effort. “Anakin, he warned someone he thought could hurt Obi-Wan. I’m glad someone went to the effort... I had a short vision of him while I was talking, and I don’t know if it was past or future. Wasn’t enough to tell me anything.”

She was unsettled still and I wanted to shelter her. I traced my fingers through the very short hair on the side of her head. I even now had trouble imagining a braid there. “Shh, we can talk in the morning.”

My Knight was asleep in my arms before I finished speaking.

Chapter End Notes

I hope it's clear that Obi-Wan is still hung up on the Padawan thing for anything more than cuddling, even if their rank is nearly the same.

Comments treasured like lava cake.
Chapter Summary

The Jedi High Council thought a couple of days of reflection and self-review would bring enlightenment to the Team... Sadly, they are much too good at flailing and taking ninety degree turns from their elders' intentions. At least some are amused.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

- Anakin

Obi-Wan had been calm in meditation, but his constant worry quieted when Vora got home. Padmé had been asleep for hours. The bed was a little crowded, and I desperately wanted this thing over, one way or the other.

We needed a bigger one.

I woke last, while they were drinking tea quietly. Both were in formal robes.

“"The High Council is expecting us soon.”” My former Master studied from a padd.

That made me rush through some milk and toast before I ran for a shower. Obi-Wan did his usual fanatic check of our robes, and Vora’s mood was improving.

It was still early when Obi-Wan led us off. Admitted almost immediately, I saw every Council members’ seat was already filled, except for Obi-Wan’s.

I spun around to look at the Council, and Vos had the closest expression to a smile and it wasn’t one I liked.

Master Gallia looked almost prim, moreso than even the old Master Nu. “Masters Kenobi, Skywalker, before the Council announces its decision, we hope you are aware where our concerns lie. Jedi choose knowledge, not ignorance.”

I really wanted to shout something, that they weren’t responsible for my screw ups. Obi-Wan looked serene, but wasn’t really. Vora was trying to be calm, but her eyes were hard.

Master Tiin met my eyes. “I am still unsure if Skywalker is clear on just what is the problem that the Council was considering.”

“I married Padmé, an attachment I have never regretted. We are expecting children.” I felt no reaction to that, no contempt or judgment. I felt that that was not the answer they wanted.

“Do you know when they are due?” Master Healer Che asked dryly after a moment of silence.

I tried to count back but I wasn’t sure. “Three months?”

That time, I could feel humor ripple around the Council.
That was totally new.

Mace’s jaw set. He looked at Obi-Wan. “Would Master Kenobi be able to amplify on the problem?”

“I have been a poor example, expected from Masters of the Order...”

I felt a pang of denial from Vora and grit my teeth too.

Obi-Wan said, “Initiates and Padawans look to us as examples. I know not to indulge in inappropriate pla...”

Master Nu chopped her hand down. “Enough, young Kenobi. Yesterday is but a part of the whole. The larger issue is that you have not sought harmony and community with your brothers. You have allowed yourselves to continue in isolation, though the war is well over.”

I remembered that image of Mace making a face from a hug and looked at him. “What? You want to be hugged too? You want help finding a date? You’ve never approved of my emotions, so it’s hard to know what you want shared now.”

Obi-Wan seemed to be choking almost much as Windu was.

Shaak Ti looked like she wanted to laugh at their reactions. “No, we do not expect nor want, that you share everything. You are not sharing your discoveries and... milestones with other members of the Order. Too many secrets nearly doomed the Order and that must change.”

I scratched my head rearranging my thoughts. “I think they’re Force sensitive, like in the holos? I’m not sure, and we’re making plans in case we pass.”

“Better,” Master Che approved. “And Master Kenobi?”

He looked down at the floor. “I admit to my own attachments to Skywalker and Meyers. I will allow them the consequences of their own decisions, as they are no longer Padawans.”

I did not like how his presence curdled as he spoke, and Madame Nu frowned.

Vora’s face showed shock too. -Ben!- After that got no reaction from Obi-Wan, she turned to the Council, “Tell him. This is one of the your too many secrets, one I had to keep from my Master. Practice what you’re preaching right now.”

Master Unduli spread her arms and a wave of calm spread through the chamber. “This was about your secrets separating you from your brothers, not you cutting yourself off further. It seems pointless to punish attachments, when our concern is the walls built from war and fear. Few of us honestly deny attachments to our students, Obi-Wan.”

I didn’t know if the knot melting in my belly was worry about Ahsoka or from Obi-Wan, but his face wasn’t as stiff. Vora just looked at Mace and Yoda.

Master Windu nearly sighed. “This exercise was intended to allow you rest and time to contemplate: about your brothers, about your keeping apart for secrets, and if you still wish to serve.”

Being a Jedi wasn’t what I thought it was when Master Jinn found me, but I couldn’t think of anything I wanted to do more, anything my mother would be as proud of. I could not imagine Obi-Wan as anything else.

I didn’t want to leave.
“Over, this review is. No sanctions for the secrecy, but amendments are suggested.” Master Yoda sounded weary. “Dismissed for now, the Council is.”

I beat Vora in getting my arms around Obi-Wan.

Without my noticing, all the other Masters but Vos had exited. He wasn’t grinning as we separated. “Obi-Wan, I was just pulling your chain. I’m glad you’re getting out more… and in and out…” His grin was back.

I couldn’t see if Obi-Wan was flushing because his hand was over his face. Vora was.

“Obi-Wan was such an old man before you met him, Skywalker. He avoided fun. I could not get him to stop for hardly anything fun, no matter what.”

“Quin…” Obi-Wan almost pleaded.

“Several Council members were tired of your keeping such secrets still.” Vos had gotten serious again. “You hole up between missions and don’t come out unless assigned to some task. Your Knight still didn’t know the Council members by name, let alone other Knights and Padawans. That had some merit while Sidious was out there, but shielding has not been a reason for at least a year.”

“I’m sorry.” Vora started to say something else, but stopped.

I didn’t know what she wanted to say, but I wasn’t going to be quiet. The training grind was too familiar. “Master Vos. Constant tutoring. Some subjects still haven’t been covered. I know how kriffing much you miss when you start late!”

“Anakin.” Obi-Wan held my arm. “We almost realized this issue when we joked about another Temple while we were on Kaller.”

“Oh,” Vora said. “I’m not social. Even sparring with an audience is a problem. Remembering names is impossible in a crowd.”

Vos looked at us, plainly considering our differing responses before he spoke again. “Training never ends. You will be receiving assignments starting tomorrow.” Waving his hands that we were to leave, Master Vos watched us exit.

Once we were out in the halls, I realized something. “They said nothing about Padmé.”

“They weren’t really mad about her, just that you weren’t being open with them. Master Windu told me I couldn’t say anything, and that just sucked.” Vora’s voice was flat as her face.

Obi-Wan took her arm, radiating concern. “Perhaps you should invite several more from the Order for any ceremonies, Anakin. I’m sure Ahsoka would like to come, too.”

It seemed so very strange to not be hiding. “I’m going to see Padmé, back in the morning.” Quick hugs and I hurried off to the hangers to get my speeder.

It could wait another day.

Padmé wouldn’t still be in her apartment, so I went to her Senate office to wait until she was free. I found her, speaking with some Senator I didn’t recognize. “Senators,” I bowed.

Her eyes lit up. “Senator Nanid, I’m afraid I will have to continue this another time…”

The Nautolan paused, as a Senator, she was probably as adept at sensing as Master Fisto had been.
Her smile was broad. “I understand, Senator. Of course you need to speak with Master Skywalker at this time.”

As soon as the formalities ended, Padmé was in my arms. “Angel! It seemed like forever. I missed you so much.” What surprised me was the movement from the twins.

“They keep letting me know that they expect you. Or some other Force-user nearby. What happened, Ani?”

“Nothing, really, that affects us. We’re supposed to teach and interact more. Tell them sooner of little things like marriage and coming parenthood.”

Her face lit up. “I can announce it properly now? Call my parents?”

_I could not imagine not telling my mom this long._ “I’m sorry it took so long, Padmé.” I sighed. “Obi-Wan suggested that other Jedi should be invited for some events, not just family.”

Padmé thought. “It’s too late for a dawn announcement today, we will have to do it tomorrow. I want to have most be from Naboo and a few close friends, like Bail. Is three Council guests enough? I could have formal invitations by noon for the Temple, who do you want to invite?”

Suddenly it was real, not some daydream I’d kept hidden close for years. I sat down, overwhelmed.

“Ani?” She sat next to me.

“It’s happening. It’s really happening, Angel. I don’t know why it’s... I’ve wanted to tell the universe we were married. That I was going to be a father. _What do I do now?_”

Leaning against me, the twins glowing in their content, Padmé tangled her fingers in my tunic. “We take it a little at a time, Ani. We’ll announce that I will be cutting back on my Senate duties for several months, because my husband, you, and I, are expecting to be blessed. Before that we need to write the invitations and list who should get them.”

“Obi-Wan, Ahsoka, and Vora, of course. I’d like to bring Rex too. He kept me alive, enough.” I didn’t know who else to invite, most had disapproved of me one time or another. “Master Windu and Yoda… and Master Nu. Madame Nu will be adding it to the Jedi archives, so inviting her will make it easier.” My luck, she’d make a holocron to instruct future generations.

Padmé ran her fingers along my jaw. “If Bail comes, reporters will, too.”

Sometimes I didn’t like them, sometimes I liked the attention. Especially when I was mad at Obi-Wan, he would find something else to do rather than wait for the reporters to leave me alone so he could lecture me.

But that was before I knew I was Sidious’ puppet in that.

Since then, I avoided them.

I swallowed. Holding her, I turned to smell Padmé’s hair. I knew their swarming was part of why the empire did not form, but I didn’t trust their motives. “I don’t want them bothering you or our children.”

“Ani, You are much more famous than I am, as famous as any Jedi in many generations. Reporters follow what people are worried about or love. You’ve won battles with giant beasts and led in battles to save many worlds. I’m sure there’s toys somewhere in the hands of children who want to be pilot
and general to make the monsters go away.”

Toys? Toys?!

Padmé stifled a giggle. “Love, they call you ‘The Hero With No Fear,’ that means more to the Core worlds than just the battles you’ve won. I’m sure millions of children have been told to be good and eat their food so they can be big and strong and handsome just like you.”

I was feeling a little trapped. “What about Obi-Wan? He commanded most of those battles, he… we were a team. It took both of us to stop Sidious.”

“You’re young and dashing, Ani. Children like that and their parents will use you to explain the war to them. They won’t understand about corruption and conspiracies and the clones until they are older. For now, you’re the Hero who’s going to be a daddy. You can’t stop that.”

The explorer Corps sounded much better now. Looking up to me was fine, but toys? More reporters?

A few minutes later, Padmé showed me the invitation we should send for tomorrow morning’s announcement. I didn’t have anything to change and they were sent off. Padmé pretended to let me help with the wording of the actual announcement. The other arrangements were left to Threepio and her aides.

I had to ask. “When are they due?”

“Two and a half months. The healers are not sure if it should be natural or surgical. Are you still having dreams about it?”

Shaking my head, I admitted, “No, just a few old fragments I know are just dreams.”

“What happens with your duties as a Jedi?”

I sighed. “I probably won’t get any real missions for a while. I’ll be teaching. There were some hints that the Council would be looking for a team for taking on twin Padawans, and there just aren’t that many teams left. Vora thought it was funny that I would get some practice with training twins.”

Padmé thought it was funny, too.

I was not going to ask Obi-Wan’s opinion, he’d say something dry while hiding a smile.

I still had to smile. “I will be staying with you more often now. No more silly excuses to see you.”

We had a quiet evening at her apartment, and I was so glad to stay out of the Temple.

Before dawn, I put on my cleaned robes from yesterday’s Council meeting. We arrived at the garden before most of our guests, and I saw a few droids setting out some food and drink.

Padmé greeted every arrival, even the reporters. They followed Bail like some confused ducklings. The Jedi arrived together, and Rex looked calm but he felt nervous.

I stood next to Padmé as she made our announcement. Partway through the questions, I was aware of Obi-Wan sending calm through our bond. Bail’s congratulations were a bit more knowing. Padmé’s handmaidens and staff were also as serene as the Jedi appeared. Surprise and a kind of excitement came from the Senate group.

Calm and stiff came from the Jedi, visibly. Obi-Wan was wearing his diplomatic smile. Vora’s face
had gone flat. Ahsoka got back, and smiled through her travel exhaustion. Rex stayed close to Obi-Wan, though I saw Vora speak to him.

Padmé answered most questions. I could not answer anything about the Order. None of the Council members answered either, Mace hid his irritation.

I was glad when it was over.

Obi-Wan waited for me after the rest of the Jedi left. “Your assignments should have arrived earlier. I approved of those for you in discussion, but they are almost like my own. We’ve been placed in charge of the latest Initiate tournament. You should be teaching piloting and mechanics at various levels until some time after the children are born.”

That was fine. I could do that.

I didn’t know what to do about fatherhood.

“Almost like, Obi-Wan?”

His smile was only the polite one. “I have my Council duties, of course.”

I glared at him, sure he was deceiving under that truth.

He hummed after the silence. “Vora will be sent on a solo mission very soon. I had a lot more gray hair after yours.”

I remembered Ahsoka’s almost a year ago while they’d been recovering. It had been quick and quiet, despite my worries. “Is this the Force warning you? I really don’t think she’d mind you getting gray.”

That made him run fingers through his hair with dismay. “Could that be it? She wants me to get gray?”

I just started laughing at his paranoia. It was only staggered chuckles before he laughed too. “Doesn’t she call you foxy? I don’t think that’s because of gray, is it?”

Obi-Wan relaxed. “More a joke about stealing chicks, not hair color.”

My comm chimed with multiple message arrivals, the newest was to meet with Master Nu within the hour.

“My is this evening. Vora’s has not yet been scheduled.”

I kept flicking back through messages before we left for the Temple. Master Yoda was expecting me in the afternoon. I quickly sent one to Vora for the evening, I’d make a kriffing pilot of her yet.

- Dice

Shins was grouping questions we had for the General, after less than a day with the references. I hadn’t spent much more time on it than reviewing the titles and a few comments on the list. What I found interesting were a few works marked as strategy. Even if the General left no comments on those beyond mentioning primitive weapons. Shins took one on grief.

Later afternoon, the General arrived with another Jedi who dressed more like a civilian. He moved a little stiffly with whitened hair above the dulled olive skin and wrinkled tattoos covering his skin. He
didn’t have a light saber visible, but I had no doubt with his calm.

When they reached the entrance, Carry and Shins were out with me.

Both the Jedi smiled, but the General spoke first. “Guys, this is a senior member of the Jedi Explorer corps: Taqir Kefba.”

“Taq, please. I’m too close to joining the Force to take formalities as anything but a waste of time.” Unlike all the other Jedi, he put his hand out to shake like a civilian.

I took the firm hand, noting the twinkle in the brown eyes. “Sir.”

She added, “This is their Commander, Dice. That’s Shins and Carrier. We’re leaving for a mission in two days, but I don’t know on what ship yet or where.”

Meeting Carry and Shins’ eyes, I nodded to them. Logistics became top priority.

Jedi Taq’s face had dropped. “I understand you gained early access to cultural materials from Knight Meyers’ home world.”

“Taq would like to observe and perhaps participate in your study of the materials. He’s dealt with first contacts for the Republic on the Outer Rim.” General Meyers grinned.

“Usually, we study the world for sometimes years before we decide on how to approach the natives. Leave it to the famous Team to virtually kidnap a native without revealing what they did.” He didn’t seem upset despite shaking his head.

The General stopped smiling. “You’ve seen my recommendation, haven’t you? There’s some puzzles there that should wait for calmer days.”

“An isolated breeding group developing without knowledge of other races? The various scientific societies will clamor for access.” Taq was grinning.

“I’m not entirely sure it was completely isolated.” Knight Meyers sat on the wall again. “Those scientists on Kamino resemble aliens that our military and lunatics have been chasing for decades, for spying and kidn… Oh, that’s gross.”

She shut up, looking like she was about to be ill. “Kamino needs to be put under another microscope.”

Our brothers were our family, but I knew I didn’t respect our creators anymore. I didn’t know if we were just an experiment or just profit to them. “Why, Sir?”

The General looked at Taq and then us. “Remember I said cloning wasn’t as advanced on my world? Last I read it was for domesticated agriculture and a few nuts who wanted to rebirth reptiles somehow from hundreds of millions of years ago. The one thing they needed for every clone was an ova to grow in. They’d need thousands, maybe tens of thousands of women to steal future children from. Thousands of women on my world reported nightmarish kidnappings and probes over decades, many claimed their memories were altered. The ova had to come from somewhere, and I doubt it would not have been noticed nor the women dismissed as insane here. Maybe they were kidnapped by sleemos from Kamino?”

It was a strange thought, that we might have mothers, thousands of them who didn’t even know that we existed.
I looked at Carry and Shins, and they nodded a little. “I don’t think we’d have an objection to Jedi Taq observing our study of mental healing references. Our missions will of course take priority, though. Right now all we have are questions.”

Our questions took almost two hours, well into the time for mess, but I doubted we’d have time again very soon.

General Meyers hurried off, though Taq studied the questions that had multiplied. “I can make good guesses about some with the help of the Force, if you don’t mind.”

I still preferred hearing the General’s answers, and Taq had no rank mentioned. He exited after we began prep for deployment. It was earlier than truly needed, but I didn’t know what the old Jedi wanted. I found Carry. “See if you can find out where we’re going.”

-Vora-

Council was meeting before and during the birth announcement. I was sure I was one of the topics. Anakin had not yet made it back to go with us, nor was I surprised. Rex arrived to wait with me, restless as the only Brother for the event.

The door into the Council Chamber opened and four Masters exited, all solemn and silent. They moved silently toward and outside landing platform where one of the speeders with a cabin was waiting.

I could handle that.

Maybe I could use blinders, like carriage horses had, so I could not see the passing terrain far below me on flights like Anakin’s.

Obi-Wan pointed at the copilot seat with a small smile.

I forced calm and sat beside him to observe. Obi-Wan didn’t have that thread of joy and excitement that Anakin had, no matter what he was piloting. Obi-Wan was tense, but mostly relaxed.

I’d seen the controls on different vehicles often enough that the general operation was familiar. There were still controls I could not identify. I was just feeling a little glum as we crossed to a pleasant garden. I wanted to talk about that odd prophecy of Dooku, but Dark prophecies did not appeal to me.

Nor was I upset about Anakin and Padmé announcing their marriage and babies, those were normal person-issues. Obi-Wan seemed to be settling back into a mentor role again. The Order was rebuilding, not destroyed. The clones were gaining their freedom in pieces, slow enough they should be able to adjust.

Was I bored? Was I an idiot to be bored? There were still enemy forces left. Beyond peace, there was the disposition of Sith-excited humans on Earth. They couldn’t see beyond Romeo and Juliet, or King Lear and Cordelia. Self control is a thing in most philosophies and religions, not selfies.

-King Lear, my dear?- By this time we were waiting for Senators and newsies to arrive in the gray light before dawn.

I don’t have electronic copies of the text. I had a paper copy, but I think I left it behind. It’s one of a collection of plays from about five hundred years ago, and a bedrock that deals with the human condition. It will be on the short list if I can sneak back.
“Master Kenobi, what topic is so distracting that you are so quiet in your discussion?” Master Nu just looked like a school marm, though she was the keeper of many secrets.

“Pardon me, Master Nu. I was curious about some stage plays and the topic spun off into things unrelated to today’s business.” Obi-Wan gave a shallow bow and a smile to the older Master.

“I don’t think I brought them.” I shrugged. “I grabbed what I could and I don’t think we can sneak into the information net from off planet. It worries a lot about authentication because of terrorism. It was in rapid change when I left, from millions to about three billion in few years.”

A group arrived, with the tall and handsome Bail and his built-in camera audience. He was apparently the last to arrive, because the crowd gathered closer to Padmé and Anakin. The announcement got the reporters excited, and they bubbled questions. Most to the Jedi were answered by Obi-Wan with charm, though Mace answered some more briefly.

I didn’t want their attention, and I noticed that Yoda was so detached, it was like he wasn’t even there.

The questions began to slow, answered or parried. Anakin looked zonked out, but Padmé had it covered. When Obi-Wan remained behind, I planned to leave with the other Jedi. A tired Ahsoka told me earlier that she was doing mostly courier missions. I suspected I would too.

Maybe Jedi paid for their Force powers by life sentences under Murphy’s law, because I felt sure mine was not going to be as quiet. I wasn’t addicted to danger like Anakin.

At least not yet.

With Anakin busy, this was my chance to look stuff up without his threatened interruption for speeder lessons.

“You seem preoccupied, Knight Meyers.”

I was surprised by Master Nu’s question. “Another Master suggested I study something and fitting that in has been a problem.”

“Perhaps a trip to the archives would help, you’ve spent little time there.”

Shit. “I’m sorry, Master, if you have the impression that I don’t like books or libraries. I volunteered in my school libraries for over a decade, and later had jobs selling books. I left behind a personal library of at least a thousand real books, and still hadn’t decided what to do with my mother’s similar collection after she passed. I’m usually quiet and bookish.”

She sniffed her doubt. “I would like to learn about your home world. Now, Knight.”

Not that I could blame her. Talk was cheap. “After you, Master.”

So I gave her and her recording droids a lecture of the last century or so on earth, the Wright brothers and Ford seemed a good place to start. Cold wars, civil rights, and terrorism for a hundred different excuses… I tried to include the warts like nisei and McCarthy and evil regimes. My voice was already getting tired before I started Morlocks, Asimov’s laws, IDIC and the final frontier, Hal 9000… and then The New Hope before everything started getting grimmer with recent years in real
life and fiction. How the millennium angst just would not go away. After I got to a break point to take a drink, came the old Master’s demand I return later today to meet someone from the Explorer Corps.

I found a droid aide to find the records I wanted. I copied some of the better rated and a shorter summation to read later. I sipped extra liquid for the long talk.

Visiting Dooku was a relief. “Heya, old guy! Your GreatgrandPadawan’s going to be a father in a couple of months or so.”

“Well?” His voice was very dry.

I made a face. “Why lie? It should be a more visceral bond than Padawan. If he thought Ahsoka and Obi-Wan worried him... It will be interesting, even if he drives us batty as he matures.”

“This attachment is surprising when he didn’t fully train you.”

“In a lot of ways, he’s still a kid. On my world, having children is often the last chance to grow up. Doesn’t always work, but I believe it will for him. My brother was like that about twenty years ago.”

Dooku looked sad. “I have little experience with blood family.”

“That’s not all bad to miss it, some families are toxic.” I wasn’t sure myself. “And how toxic are you?”

He didn’t pretend to misunderstand. “I’m not sure. It was easy to slide into that contempt and superiority. I didn’t actually intend any harm when I started, but even my acolytes were not safe by the end. I don’t know when it changed. I don’t know if you would make a good acolyte.”

“Good, I don’t want to be one. Where’d that comment about us all falling together come from?”

Dooku looked away. “I do not know. That was not planned.”

“Okay, that sucks.”

“I regret the insults, my GrandPadawan.”

“Seems to be my lot right now. You dipped into the darkness again, didn’t you? Did it accomplish what you wanted? Did you still remember what was important to you and why?” I had to press, had to know how much ground he lost…

-It was brief, Knight Meyers. And he promptly meditated- Qui-Gon’s presence was sad.

Dooku stiffened, but was silent for a moment. “I focused on my immediate goal, putting all other thoughts aside as both sides demand. I did not accomplish what I wished. I may have lost more.”

He refused to say more, and I didn’t know him enough to read his expressions that well. Conversation had ground to an uncomfortable halt.

“Well, I scared up some references to Sunrider like Master Yoda suggested.” I’d nearly had to sneak out before Nu asked more diplomacy and alliances than I was sure of on Earth. “Some aspects won’t help as the summary hints nothing about how duty and Code was balanced as she and her husband weren’t both Jedi at the same time.”

-Perhaps Master Yoda was referring more to your late studies. Didn’t my Padawan encourage you to start training in a like way?-
“Yeah, but at least it wasn’t some deathbed promise.” I wanted to glare, but Dooku wasn’t the target.

“Are you still willing to study, Knight?” Dooku asked despite the tension.

I took a deep breath. Lacking any directive from a Master, I could study with any I wished. I just wasn’t sure I trusted Dooku. “Of course, I will study. I’m not cocky enough to think I’m trained.”

“Will you learn from me?”

I nodded. “But I will not...”

Dooku cut me off with a sweep of his hand. “I do not expect you to.

“You must begin sparring with others, Knight. Soresu is useless if you never fully use the blade.”

My stomach was already full of acid. “I will not fight children.”

“There are sparring areas only for Knights. No Initiates may enter, and very few advanced Padawans. I insist that you will start using those facilities, now.”

Retching was becoming a thing to avoid.

I controlled my breathing, or tried. Oh, I knew I was being irrational, but this panic was an old friend.

A hand gripped my shoulder.

-My dear?- Obi-Wan was preoccupied, but worried enough to check.

The hand gripped harder and brown eyes gazed down at me. “Knight Meyers. Vora?”

Not coherent enough to assure Obi-Wan, I just sent affection through the bond.

“Yah.” Talking to Dooku was slower as I shoveled the stage fright into the locomotive burner. I took a deeper breath. “Yes, I know. Logic does not overcome introversion very well.”

His hand had been removed. “Hmm.”

“Hey, I’m fine with being support. Luckily, Anakin loves the spotlight.”

That got me a glare. “He also has a fool’s impatience and is a Master now.” Strong disapproval there, still.

“Being a Master won’t make a difference if I need to box his ears. I don’t care about special.”

Dooku’s smile was slight. “You should bring that to your matches.”

I did roll my eyes. “Don’t be silly, that’s totally different. I’m a rank amateur.”

He took my arm and started towing me out. I didn’t resist and shook off the tow, even if I just followed him. I didn’t have to see his frown to feel it.

We reached a different sparring area than I’d entered before. I wasn’t sure who was being watched more, Dooku or me. I was fine observing and trying to calm down. And really, I had no idea how this worked, I’d never done any kind of pickup competitions in gym classes, only AI setups in games.
“Knight.. Meyers?” A young woman with a slight greenish tint to her skin and facial tattoos stood beside me.

“Hello. Please call me Vora.”

She smiled. “I’m Barriss, Knight Offee.”

The name rang a bell, or felt like it should. It wasn’t a warning. “Nice to meet you.”

“I heard something was going on with your 408th.”

I glanced at Dooku. “They didn’t take the passing of their previous General very well. I’ve got them doing a group study for after the war, though there will be other options for other units, too. They need to learn more than war.”

She looked so relieved “It was hard, waiting and knowing they were twisted to turn, without free will. Some worlds are still fighting, but Kaller made a treaty, right?”

“Yeah, that went well.” I didn’t want her to Pollyanna on me. “It’s not over yet, so we can’t rest. At least two of Sidious’ pets are still unaccounted for.”

She made a face of almost snooty distaste. “I want us to be back at peace.”

I thought for a moment, because I could feel the passion in that want. “My world had a statesman who said there never was a good war or a bad peace. He was sometimes wrong. A peace that is abusive or exploitative will only create more war. And being willing and able to defend your charges when attacked is not a bad war.”

The Jedi and the Republic they protected had been under a siege for a very long time. Hunting Sith was not the best answer, and I didn’t know how to ask the question, I didn’t know who to ask. Easiest for such a speculative question would be Obi-Wan and Anakin.

I was sure she didn’t get that the peace she remembered was a bad one. I said, “Life under Sith control is not a good peace.”

“Are you here to observe, Vora?” Barriss asked after a moment of silence.

“I wish,” I nodded at Dooku. “I’m to spar with more people.”

Barriss looked surprised. “Is he your Master?”

I shook my head. “I’ve studied more with Masters Kenobi and Skywalker...” I floundered with how to refer to him. “Count Dooku is giving me some advice.”

“We could spar, but I’ve never fought a Sith...”

I smiled. “That would be great. I’m not that good; that Apprentice was an idiot boy who defeated himself mostly.”

Then we sparred. I had no idea of any tells for her, not like I’d learned sometimes worked for the Team. I got tagged a lot at first, but did better after I got used to the more public venue.

At one point we were only trading parries, neither getting any touches for some time.

“Hold.” Dooku called. When I pulled back he added, “Soresu is useful if it is sometimes augmented by another form. Meyers, draw on Shii-Cho this time when you reach a stalemate. Offnee, whatever
other form you know well. Begin.”

I listened to the Force more. I was hit a little more until we reached another stalemate and I goosed her.

Barriss’ eyes widened. Her light saber was loosened in her grip and I almost got a disarm. But she then tripped me and got her saber at my throat.

“Okay, you win.” I wanted to giggle. She’d been studying for many times as long as me, so I was just glad to not have made a fool of myself.

She looked at me and at Dooku after letting me up. I flushed when I noticed my audience. Other kids, all closer to Anakin’s age, challenged me to sparring, but their names did not sink in. I started having more trouble from being tired and was drawing from the Force to stay alert. Unlike Barriss, they were not studying Soresu. They got closer to overwhelming me until they started getting more cautious. I thought these youngsters, whatever race or species they were, wanted to prove something.

I was incidental and gave extravagant bows when they won.

My comm beeped with a reminders for the 408th. Dooku had been quietly watching, but left. I hurried off to the Archives for my next meeting and that breathing trick.

By the time I’d left Taq, I was ready for bed. I was so done with secrets, and I was nearly as done with being awake. I wasn’t hungry enough to want dinner and fell face-down on my bed.

Chapter End Notes

Did anyone think the Team would get the answer while standing in the corner?

New chapters should come every seven to ten days. That last chapter of the 'Dear Mom' story is being a pain, as is RL.
Deployment Concerns

Chapter Summary

The Team attempts to settle into Temple life without constant action and battle. But Council meetings, teaching, a tournament, and even visiting others is not helping with their restlessness...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Obi-Wan

I meditated among the fountains instead of our room. It had been far too long since I had been much out within the Temple aside from pressing duties.

We had come so close to losing it to the Sith.

Younglings tiptoed around me, ringing with awe and excitement, questions bubbling up into the Force. These Initiates were still young in a time of great changes, with years before they had any worries about being chosen.

Their minder smiled an apology, but their questions were refreshingly simple. One had come late enough to the Temple that the question about Anakin being married and other Jedi pairs holding hands in the hallways were the only awkward ones.

I was literally saved by a chiming from my comm that the Council was reconvening. Not only that I still needed to address my earlier awkwardness at the reprimand about secrecy. Just as inept was that our reactions to Vos’ comments were unconnected issues. We drifted apart somehow, even through the review. I released my worry carefully.

Council business included a trickle of non-war bodyguard requests and notice of a massive fire in a section of the Undercity a timezone away. The cause was unknown, but seemed to be an issue of overloaded power grid, quickly repaired.

Later I received a message I did not expect from Dooku, reporting on Vora’s use of a training area set aside for Knights. That explained the strain that came earlier, though it had calmed. Vora was quiet. Anakin away from the Temple again, uncomfortable.

When I got back, Vora wasn’t in our room, but collapsed on her narrow bed, deeply asleep.

I sat beside her, wishing for a moment she would wake.

Then I wondered why she chose to sleep here.

Whatever the reason was, dwelling on it now would address nothing. I still had issues to consider before tomorrow’s Council session and an Initiate class and tournament to plan.

I did not plan to nudge her aside enough and lie beside her to face her, holding her close against me and balanced once again on her narrow bed. A small kiss along her cheek, and Vora stirred in her...
dreams enough to hold me as well.

- The clock is ticking... - Vora sank deeper into sleep again.

That phrase had littered her unshielded presence from the day we met, a small pulse in the Force even as we first spoke. It faded as she gained more conscious control of the Force, but always acted as a prod.

Was the Force warning her... or myself?

She would not be at Temple tomorrow night. The only question was what mission, of many that needed attention. There were enough that she could be away for months.

Time was passing, indeed...

The finest of tiny hairs by her ear caught in my mustache and her hands shifted, to slide down my sides. Her waking presence swept around me briefly as our eyes met.

“My dear...” I wanted, far more than a Jedi should, far more than I could say right then. I held her head close to kiss her, as if I was storing her taste and breath before a famine. My breath caught when her cool fingers reached my warmer flesh. Throwing a leg over her to trap her and hold her still...

... to keep her from leaving me.

That raw attachment made me freeze, horrified at myself.

Her head settled against me, her slowing breath flowing through my beard and warming my neck. “Obi-Wan, something wrong?”

Running my fingers through her soft and black curls, I could not speak. Admitting my attachments was hard enough, but knowing it was this strong and deep, to want to own her. The feeling would not dissipate, no matter how much it disturbed me or how much serenity and peace I tried to summon.

Feeling the imperative to meditate properly, I started to pull back to move to a meditation mat.

But Vora did not let go of me and looked me in the eye. “You still haven’t answered me, Ben. You can tell me anything.”

“I need to meditate. I do not own you. You are not my possession.”

She sighed and let go of me. “I don’t think you really believe that. You metaphorically own a very large chunk of my heart, and I hope it’s mutual.”

“But possessiveness leads to the Dark side. I should never think I own someone, never feel I have the right...”

Vora gripped both sides of my head until we were nose to nose. “Stop that right now.”

“I must medit...”

-No-

But
I sighed. “This has disturbed me, my dear. I need to calm and find serenity.”

A pulse of humor came from her. “Making out has nothing to do with serenity, Ben. I don’t want you to freak out over a little possessiveness either. Possessiveness is Anakin’s talent and you are not to compete.”

A chuckle came out before I could stop it, and I felt much better. “I don’t own you. You’re not a slave.”

“No, and I’ll box your ears if you start acting like that, stupid. You should be in the Light, not on the event horizon of a black hole.” Vora glared at me. “Have a bit more faith in yourself and those around you.”

“I did not expect feelings that strong.”

“How about if we’re on loan to each other? Long term loan, revocable at will? Would that work?”

I half-thought she’d offer a contract, and then suddenly I was so proud of her negotiating with my fears. I brushed her cheek with my knuckles. “I am fine now, my dear. I regret that I interrupted your rest with this.”

“I won’t be here for long, I don’t think Anakin will let me skip speeders again tonight.”

I wanted to meditate, but I knew we didn’t have long. I took her hand. “Do you want to sneak out with me, my dear? Less high speed maneuvers…”

Her smile lit up her face. “I’d love to go out with you… even if not as much to be speeding far, far above the ground. Does Coruscant have lover’s lanes?”

“No that I know of. We could ask Anakin, but that would defeat the purpose in sneaking out.” I pulled her to her feet and kept holding her hand as as we moved toward the door and our boots.

“You’ve piloted enough vehicles by now that many controls are similar, even if simpler. Flight paths are at specific altitudes, and you already know that those changing altitudes are held responsible for ensuring the path is clear…”

Initiates who saw us passing them while holding hands, didn’t point, they were taught better manners than that. Still we were a point of intense interest and smaller younglings had big eyes. Beyond our hands, our expressions were appropriately quiet as I spent some time describing the various navigation markers for lane locations and safety guidelines.

“Really, Kenobi! No wonder it was so hard to get you any action when we were between missions. This is enough to put younglings asleep. Right?”

The Initiates gathered around Vos giggled.

Vora let go of my hand and nodded formally to the newer Council member. Her smile was faint when she admitted, “I did not study speeders very well when I was young, so I must study it now. It’s much harder when you’re an old fart like me.”

Some giggled and others looked alarmed.

I caught Quinlan’s eye. “I have been getting more than enough action between missions, as you well know. Teaching speeder piloting will be quite restful.”
I made sure the smirk remained very hidden in my voice. Vora didn’t make a sound, but I could feel her struggle to appear calm.

Vos’s grin was almost evil. “Knight Meyers might be growing tired of you being her ride... until she can pilot a speeder herself, I suppose.”

Vora’s cheeks had high spots of pink. “I’m afraid my time is limited, Masters.”

Fencing with Vos was always amusing, but we could banter more when she was on mission, so I left him to his students. In the hanger to sign out an air speeder, I felt her growing alarm.

Before we lifted off, I gave her a hug and made sure we were strapped in. “My dear, all Jedi are good pilots. It takes some kind of injury, as a rule, to change that.”

I lifted off as I went over the controls, for a tour of the various levels of the urban sprawl that was Coruscant. Numbering of layers was often inconsistent and did not always align. Drop low enough in height and then all sunlight was occluded, and you could not be certain you had not passed into natural caverns. These cold and oily depths put out strange puffs of air and worse stenches in places.

We weren’t set on the ground, but I didn’t think this landing platform that far above it. Accumulated dirt and debris began to sprout life as much as native soil.

Vora looked around with a little shudder in the dimness. “Isn’t there anywhere on this rock that preserved at least some parkland? I mean, what happens to all the water? Who inspects and maintains the water control? There must have been oceans once, there’s still too much water in the air to have been a desert. What happened to the deep waters?”

I looked around. No matter how deep I had been, there had been either directly felt precipitation, or dirty run-off from far above. I hadn’t really thought about these levels, aside from the dangers they hid, in a very long time. “It’s been like this for far longer than my lifetime. I assume droids do the maintenance, but I don’t see any right now.”

In a way, I was relieved that Sidious wanted power instead of annihilation. Potable water could be harder to filter or was harder to make on many worlds after battle. Coruscant’s water supply was just as crucial as its inadequate food supply. He could have easily brought Coruscant to its knees with a siege.

“Sometimes I miss the beaches and even stupid tourists in the parks.” Vora had continued into nostalgia. “We had famous parks in even our largest cities. And storms could wreck large cities from flooding and winds. Artificially controlled weather here seems off, without anything heavier than a drenching rain. Coruscant feels like an inside out spaceship with people living on the hull. If we go down enough, all we’d find is vacuum.”

Leaning closer so we touched, I asked her. “What did you do in these parks?”

She snorted. “I went canoeing with my father, had picnics with family, friends, or coworkers, went camping with the scouts a few times, visited an archaeological dig, charity events and concerts, fireworks... We always had at least a tiny yard at my homes to play in and grow a few tomatoes on, so parks were less often a thing.”

Close enough to feel her nostalgia, I caught glimpses of trees looming over underbrush, pavilions and tents, grassy horizons, and noisy fireworks. Calm enough, I nudged her. “Time to start, my dear.”

It was quieter down here, with much fewer distractions in this partly abandoned zone. Also less obvious was the vertical height to disturb her. There were fewer navigational cues, but I wasn’t
worrying about that. We didn’t have a destination in mind.

Vora moved carefully through the traffic: turning, stopping, starting, tracking movement of other vehicles in this quiet neighborhood. Some had living drivers, and delivery units rushed by that were drones or piloted by droids. When she cautiously turned off the flight lane onto a rubbled landing platform, the set down lurched and she winced.

I’d survived too many crashes to worry about a bump. “That’s fine, Vora.”

When Vora looked sideways at me, I felt an unexpected spike of worry and even fear from her. It came from nowhere. “My dear?”

“Umm,” she finally said, moving back up into traffic. “I don’t quite know how to say it. It might be nothing, but it might be something and I need to tell someone. I don’t think Anakin could take it calmly right now but maybe you know another way and he needs to be warned too. I know someone in the Order should know too, but I’m worried about who and how well they’d react. Doesn’t Yoda say the future is always in motion, but then again I don’t know if this is past or future warning...”

Her piloting became much more casual and effortless as she rambled on, Vora moved to another level up when I gestured midway.

“I mean I had that image of Vos with Yellow eyes and almost blank face. It was enough to startle me, but not enough to be useful. Was what he said another memory or warning and who was it for? I mean, it’s something I don’t want. I’m pretty sure you don’t. I’m almost as sure that he doesn’t either, but I wasn’t sure if I felt alarm from him.”

“Set it down up there.” When we reached the small dock, I reached over to hold her. “Love. You’re babbling beautifully without telling me what happened.”

Vora took a deep breath. “Dooku and I were talking. I was still a little upset about when you tried to get me mad. Not that I was mad at you, it’s my screw-up. Dooku seemed earnest in wanting to help, so we sparred a little, well more like a repetitive live exercise before we would spar. Maybe he hoped to frighten me, but I felt the cold and his eyes changed to that freaky yellow.”

I knew nothing had happened, knew that this had been brief. That didn’t stop my alarm from settling in my stomach.

“He said something, sent it actually and then seemed to attack more in earnest. I forced myself to be calm. By the time we stopped, he’d approved how I calmed down and I realized it was more a scam because ‘bout all I did was defend. The cold and eyes were gone, and he was back to being the jerk-off grandfather.”

“What did he say?”

Vora turned to look me in the eyes, her eyes so blue and big. “Something about Sidious lacking insight despite plotting. That: ‘Your fears feed on each of you. One push and you could all fall together.’ His words had a weight to them. Dooku seemed confused when I asked what he meant and didn’t know any more than I. He even seemed worried and went to meditate right away.”


Straightening up and away from me, Vora’s spike of unhappiness was clear. “I will report it before I leave, Master Kenobi.”
I smothered my unhappiness as she lifted the speeder again.

As her speed and confidence increased, we slowly ascended to encounter more traffic and distractions. As I expected, altitude was the main issue, but she was much calmer than early suggestions. By later evening, we had reached the main entrance of the Temple. “Very nicely done, Padawan.”

That she rolled her eyes and she forced herself to sit back from the controls.

Anakin was waiting at the hanger, tapping his foot when we returned the speeder. He hid his agitation better than sometimes.

I sent fondness through the bond as I held my smile. “I really don’t think you’re that upset to miss a discussion of land use management and water control.”

That surprised him and he made a face. “What? No. That’s what you talk about on a date? The Force must have protected you from falling over in boredom.”

“Importing less food should be a goal. We were thinking that Tatooine feeds its people more.” Vora smirked as her presence got calmer.

Mention of his home world gave Anakin both pangs of sadness, and memories of native foods he still managed to indulge in. “Today started so well...”

Taking his arm, I started walking us toward our quarters. “I am always ready to assist you, Padawan.”

“I don’t know how Padmé does it. I wanted to spend the entire day with her, but I had to get away. They’re at her all the time to try to get favors from me or the Order, she says. She told me to come back here and you were out.” That was spoken so fast it was easily one breath.

“Get away from what, Anakin?” I spoke in a calm voice.

“Reporters and holo-droids, well-wishers, and other Senators! They all want her time and our attention for their problems. Not even real problems. They keep asking the most stupid questions, too. Some might say nice things, but they just. Won’t. Shut. Up. And. Go. Away! The droids kept trying to sneak into her balcony even after I started smashing them.”

“You are their shiny toy right now, Anakin. They are going to be fascinated until something more shiny comes along.” I knew he’d enjoyed this once.

He grumbled. “I could avoid it when I visited her before.”

“People like babies. The birth of a little prince always shores up a king’s popularity. If you two wanted to live in a cage, you could run for king somewhere and maybe win.” Vora wasn’t resisting a smirk.

“Dwang. No. I almost went down to find you for the quiet.” He sighed. “I don’t even have speeder lessons, now, as an excuse do I?”

“I would not wish you to lose the joys of teaching, Anakin. You are still her piloting instructor. Initiates are watching closely anytime they see us. Rumors of the tournament have already spread well and wide.” I could find myself amused by that, even if I was not that eager for another Padawan. Perhaps having one at the proper age would make it simpler. “We should make arrangements and agree on how to divide these duties so they can be posted in the morning.”
Anakin was not excited by the task, but asking about the reporters was enough the change the direction of his ire before we started. He calmed later when he found a new set of revised specs for the Actis models. Vora studied from padds that looked like they came from the Archives, even as I finally had the chance to meditate.

Vora was sleeping before I reached our room and I curled along her back, wishing only to hold her as long as possible, memorizing how she felt. I drowsed as I felt strong arms curl around me in turn as I slept.

I woke early, as I usually did. In the middle, I was quite warm. Vora had turned to face me while I slept, her arms around my neck. I was a little embarrassed at how my former Padawans were clinging to me.

-If we did a proper puppy pile, someone would be more embarrassed.- Vora was barely awake. -Prob’ly me.-

“Be O too’slp.”

The mumble from behind me was clear only from long experience. Anakin’s arms tightened. They both drifted back to sleep and I realized how entangled we were. So I meditated until an alarm chimed and our day began.

Despite my private wishes, we hurried through breakfast in the cafeteria. I entered the Council chamber only shortly before Vora was called in for her mission.

I remained quiet during the previous Council discussion, only answering questions about her training and her clones. I remembered my worries about Anakin’s first solo mission. We’d already been an active field team for a decade and the war still expanding. I knew he was capable and effective with his clones.

I wasn’t as sure Vora was ready.

- Anakin

I used to like crowds of reporters, they admired my success as a General or Jedi, and didn’t criticize or have high expectations. Now they were more like buzzard wasps trying to feed off of us. My assignments said that I’d be seeing Padmé every other day at best. Worse was the crowd that was always around us, whether when Padmé was at the Senate or her apartment. We were safe enough. I didn’t feel any threat in the Force, but I didn’t like it.

They even tried to follow me back to the Temple, but I took them on a high speed tour of Coruscant. I didn’t quite stop in time for the ones who waited for our return, but I would not call them crashes. I was ‘very disappointed’ at the dings on my speeder. They learned to keep out of reserved locations.

Returning to the Temple was almost relaxing.

Well, regarding the holonet. Not when I realized Vora had snuck off with Obi-Wan to avoid her training. They were out in a speeder and tense. I wasn’t sure if it was some kind of date or training, but their tension only lessened very slowly before they returned.

The first meeting for the tournament would be tomorrow afternoon. I’d only helped a few times when I was a Padawan, and later I was always off on missions. Obi-Wan was showing me as much as the Initiates.
In the morning, while they were at the Council meeting, I went down to the hanger looking for something to fix.

Nobody bothered me.

At least until my students arrived for their lesson; I had to hurry for the larger studio to meet the Initiates who were spoiling to become Padawans. The group was definitely smaller than the older Initiates who’d envied, excluded, and taunted me. They were also more serious and quieter.

Obi-Wan had a shade of worry as he viewed the group. *This war has gone on far too long.*

I always had mixed feelings about recruitment. It was an opportunity for poorer children, but giving up family always stuck in my craw.

*You should review the revised guidelines list, before you start on missions again. I believe you will approve of two linked changes that were proposed.* Obi-Wan didn’t feel as calm as he sounded.

The younglings chattered, eager for the first round tomorrow afternoon. The Masters would watch for more than fighting prowess, so each round would take days.

I felt myself frown. *Master, should we have Service Corps members attend too? The will of the Force should be clear, right?*

Obi-Wan’s surprise and approval was clear. *Every one of us might have found a calling in one of the Corps, if it was handled better. I could easily see you designing ships and droids for the Order. I will contact their available Seniors for tomorrow.*

Some of the younglings were talking big at each other and that we broke up, sending them back to their clan halls to eat. Without saying anything specific, Obi-Wan began to hurry off to a more senior food hall. By the time Vora joined us, they both looked strained. Counting back, I was a little jealous when I realized that their last separation had been when we went to Ilum for her crystal. Back then, I wasn’t sure how they’d react to being apart, as Master-Padawan or whatever they were.

I finished eating, while they were only toying with their food. We left the food hall without speaking about it. “So what’s the mission, if you can say?”

Vora’s voice was flat. “Another system wants to start talks. They seem to be worried about pirates, have limited droids, and no army of their own.”

That made me laugh and I had to look at Obi-Wan as we entered a residential hall. “Isn’t this quicker than expected? We’re only been at peace with Kaller for days.”

Obi-Wan smiled slightly, despite his tension. “Other Separatist and Unaligned worlds seem likely to ratify essentially the same treaty. This one’s not a wealthy world and they had a civil war not long before Geonosis. They used to provide certain rare minerals and complex components for some classes of ships. The Confederacy’s economy is falling apart as they split apart. Not enough worlds are self supporting. A half dozen already have Jedi on the way.”

I wanted to know. “When are you shipping out?”

“A couple hours or so.”

“You piloting lesson was supposed to be learning the fine art of chasing…” I projected that early bite at them just to see them blush. *Chasing what is open to… negotiation.*
I thought the way they refused to look at me or each other was cute even with the rising mood.

A pulse of desperate lust echoed through the bond and I had to smirk. “Well, I’ll be seeing you when you get back, Knight Meyers. Keep an eye on your Brothers.”

I wanted to stay, really, but some impulse told me to visit Padmé instead. I managed to sneak into her apartment building without much notice from reporters. I’d take it.

She looked both incandescent like some painting and exhausted, lifting a hand to beckon me over to the lounge. “Ani.”

That was wasted energy as I was already more than halfway there. “My beautiful angel. I missed you, all day.” I sat next to her, carefully pulling her closer. I felt movement and stopped to feel our younglings.

Padmé’s breath caught. “I’m still not sure how they got a bouncie ball inside with them. Is that a Force thing, or did you do it?”

“They seem content, Padmé. I don’t know anything about infants playing.” I could feel how they and Padmé glowed with Life Force. I loved holding her, feeling them growing and slowly becoming little human beings. It was almost a meditation while Padmé read and prepared for the next day.

“You haven’t had any more dreams, have you? I want them to be safe, more than almost anything.” She sounded worried. “This making peace in pieces is tiring.”

Still calm, myself, I projected it to her. “The only dreams I’ve had were about the Clone brothers. Nothing about you.”

“Good.” She kissed my cheek and relaxed. After a few more minutes Padmé asked, “Which Clones?”

I leaned closer to breathe in the scent of perfume and her. “I don’t know. It’s not that clear. I could feel their pain and fear as their lives ended, one by one, and by the lot. It was only images in instants. I knew after the first time that I was missing something important… but.” I shook my head. This wasn’t sure.

“Can you ask for help?”

I was still reluctant, even if I… hadn’t been in trouble lately. “I already meditated with Obi-Wan a time or two. All he saw was even less of what I saw. He felt that it wasn’t urgent… yet.”

Padmé was considering what I’d said. “Is there anyone else? Vora? Master Windu?”

I could imagine his sitting up and reciting the Code to banish a Force-vision. Vora? “No. Master Yoda teaches the introduction class, but I was already using foresight back on Tatooine and didn’t pay much attention.”

“See him, Ani.” Then she looked up at me. “Could you make me hot choco with vinegar soaked mallows?”

I wasn’t sure if she was teasing me with requests like this. “Can’t Threepio make it for you?”

She had a glint of humor in her eyes. “You do it better, and do you really want him chattering at us right now?”
I couldn’t argue against that, quiet time alone with her was so rare, and I made the most of it.

I returned to the Temple early, the reporters keeping a greater distance, though I ruined a few recording droids. Again.

They would learn sooner or later.

The fun of taunting reporters didn’t last long when Obi-Wan’s feelings seeped through my shields, a mix of worry, fear, and self recrimination. Then again, perhaps he wasn’t shielding as well as usual, because the rest of the cafeteria was muted and quiet.

I got a tray of food and hurried over. My old Master looked calm enough, until I checked his signature more closely. “You look like dwang, Master.”

He looked at himself and eyed me. “I am fine, Anakin.”

“Were you this ‘fine’ when I had my first solo mission?”

He shook his head, but didn’t say more.

I knew this would be one of those discussions where he refused to say anything, so I’d pass. “I’ll meet you for the Tournament orientation at lunch.”

Obi-Wan collected himself, getting more cold and stiff as I watched. Had to be a Council meeting he was leaving for.

I’d liked tournaments while I was a Padawan. I could prove I had caught up and passed most of them in something despite starting so late. After the war started, I’d seen only a few rounds of a few competitions. I was either out on a mission or practically strapped down in the healing halls.

I didn’t really want a Padawan right now, I wanted to enjoy Leia and Luke. At least for a while.

I’d set the time for my classes for Initiates and Padawans for most mornings. Some of them would be in the competition rounds into the afternoons.

“Master Skywalker?” An older man, a gray-haired Jedi, stood nearly. His smile was open and friendly, and his wrinkled and worn garb lacked a light saber. “I am Taqir Kefba, senior member of the Explorer corps. I have a few questions if you can spare some time.”

I waved at the seat Obi-Wan had left behind and tried to eat something as he sat. “I don’t have long. Class very soon.”

“I wanted to meet you. Most of my questions can be done by messages after this, but people are more forthcoming if we talk first. Then they can imagine my old wrinkled body with a stupid costume or even naked. They snicker too much to get mad at my questions.” His wide grin was matched by a twinkle in his eyes. “Didn’t work well with the pretty ladies.”

I snickered. “I’ve seen Jedi lots older than you, but I do not want to imagine them without their robes.”

“But you want to, now.”

Bantha stomping on a lizard was a safer mental image for some Masters. A sallow and wrinkly Dooku was hiding body piercings and a rude tattoo if I didn’t focus. “What did you want to ask?”

“You’re technically adept. What would you rate the facilities and risks of that world?”
“They have no facilities.” I had to laugh. “There is no world capital and the tech is well behind ours, less so in a few areas. The only weapons that might cause a problem to a capital ship like the Resolute are nuclear. We had no major problem sneaking in and out, but a few fighters tried to follow us. They stopped before we reached space.” I wasn’t sure if Vora even noticed.

“What did you see that wasn’t military?”

“Most of it, from wheeled speeders to their holonet. Droids only sweep floors and Vora didn’t have one. Their version of Artoo is a puppet remote. Why are you asking me? I didn’t see that much in a few hours.”

“Because she is biased. We must decide if we should make contact, and which alliance or country to approach. We may just observe them for a generation.”

I guffawed. “She’s biased, doesn’t mean she’s wrong. I know she misses it, but she’s admitted contact could get messy. Some of them like the Sith and think me Falling is just great.” I saw no humor in that.

Taqir put his feet up on the table. “So, you should not go there if you might Fall?”

I just looked at him. “Stupid people wouldn’t tempt me, and the Force had been quiet about the whole idea. It might be fun and we could use fun after all this kriffin war.”

“You think we should make contact, then?”

Grinning, I said, “I want to see Master Windu, the actor. He has to be more fun.”

The Corps member checked his padd. “Did you speak to any others, anything military? Did Master Kenobi get any feel for the politics?”

“We didn’t really want to attract attention. There’s a lot of junk in orbit and I wasn’t sure if it was really debris or maybe mines. Vora said once she thought some may have been, but far above her clearance. We were curious, picked her signature so Obi-Wan could talk to someone. There were others, but...” Then, I was still mad about Hardeen and tired about his chiding about my emotions, I wanted him to get off my back. He’d try to solve the puzzles of an isolated world sooner than he would visit a brothel. I didn’t really think he’d get attached after his nagging.

“There were others, but?”

I looked up at Taqir. “Sorry. There were other signatures, but no clustering. Everything seemed decentralized and we could not agree on choosing by even the slightest grouping: population, technology, or cover. There were transmissions through many frequencies. Artoo decrypted some of the audio, but the music had less gibberish.”

“And she recognized you from a Force-vision?”

“Force-vision not hers, commercial holodramas... I can’t say I like civilians wanting to know more about the Dark Side. But.” I sighed. “A world with maybe hundreds of different ages, who might have been Jedi. The Council cannot be as picky. Change is coming.” I could feel the Force in my last statement.

The chime about my class rang and I hurried off while he remained. The speeder students were much more excited than Vora was, but they weren’t as careful about not falling out.

The dining hall was starting to get louder like it was ten years ago. Obi-Wan had two pads and was
reading one. His plates had only been picked at.

I set my tray down, and started eating.

“Have you reviewed the traditional procedures? What should we keep. What shouldn't we?”

I smirked into my juice. “Nope. Most everything. The age out, because these should be fun, not a reason for stress.”

“We cannot announce that change and dash their hopes if that is reversed. That would be crushing, Anakin.” His smile was small and a little sad. “Hopefully we can encourage matches or another tournament before their ages are an issue. This meeting should not be long. You’ll have more time to see Padmé tonight.”

“Double elimination, two matches at a time, you can convince some Padawans who show up to help herd them. They show off their skill and balance. Are any potential Masters known to be coming?”

Obi-Wan fiddled with his beard. “Messages have gone out to eligible Knights and Masters, sent by Mace and Master Yoda this morning for tomorrow’s start.”

I didn’t remember hearing anything and started to check.

-No, you’re not on this year’s list. I am, and so is Vora. Your twins were deemed enough of a challenge on top of lighter duties.-

-And?-

-Mace is encouraging me to meet with a pair of twins, claiming he’s been planning this since Geonosis.-

I knew Obi-Wan would not try to refuse because he didn’t have enough of a break. He took being a good example seriously. Then again, none of our Padawans had come from the normal routine. “Right.”

But then I noticed the heavy silence and intent gazes from the Initiates in the hall around us. I was not trying to hide my grin. “Are we running late, Master Kenobi?”

“Not irredeemably, Master Skywalker. It appears most are here watching us in the dining area instead of ensuring they are not tardy.”

I always enjoyed when Obi-Wan used my rank, it felt more real than when a Senator or reporter did. “Ah, perhaps they expect us to use our stellar light saber skills to defeat the Sith Apprentice hiding behind the puddings.”

Obi-Wan hid his smile with his hand as several Initiates whipped their heads toward the serving area. Others started bolting for the door. By the time we’d returned our trays, the initiates had scurried away to beat us to the hall used for exhibitions and tournaments.

Remembering my childhood, I was always surprised at how quickly Initiates quieted. I counted them as Obi-Wan gave his little speech. Some looked as young as I was when I came here, and there was a cocky boy who looked younger than that. There was no minimum age for the competition. He was getting into the face of a darker Korun boy…

And… there was the twin moving between her brother and the more aggressive youngling. I wanted to keep an eye on the three of them. I really should encourage Ahsoka to attend this, even if she
wasn’t on the list. I wanted to see her first Padawan.

I remembered Obi-Wan’s smirking when I first met Ahsoka.

As they registered, their names populated to the padd I was using, I made a few notes. That didn’t help with my boredom with the formalities. The Initiates had many questions about fighting and a few even asked about Padmé.

By the time they’d left, Obi-Wan sighed and drew himself upward with a small smile that almost looked real.

I told him, “Padmé’s expecting me for dinner, and you’re coming, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Big chapter this time, which helped add to the delay. Many issues are moved forward while they are distracted.
Engaged with the Enemy

Chapter Summary

Vera leaves for her first mission without a more experienced Jedi, but there's a slight problem. Obi-Wan and Anakin get swamped by Initiates and storytelling.

- Vora

I let up on my hug when Obi-Wan’s ribs creaked. “I’m going to miss you. Wish I could take you with me in my coat pocket.”

“You will be fine, my dear.”

Annoyance rippled as I held him. “Stop with the Master for a little, Ben. I’ll be missing you, from your pretty hair to your tippy toes, the best guy, period. I want to store up that comfort, like a ray of sunshine against the winter.”

Enough time passed for a deep breath and then a chuckle. “I find I cannot resist my concern, dear one. It is a finely honed skill that does not respond well to logic.”

I leaned back. “Hey, you can’t have all the worrying to yourself! I hear you’re good at finding trouble too. I want my share of worry. You’re stuck with a half-assed…”

He hushed me. “I will miss my lovely lady as well, who fiercely believes in the Light. who fiercely believes in me.” He brushed a kiss against my forehead. “I wish that she believed in herself as well.”

That made me stifle a giggle as our eyes met. “Now that is the pot calling the kettle black.”

Obi-Wan’s smile was aware of that, and lips so close and breath so warm. “Perhaps if we each try to believe the other is right?”

That pause came from both of us. But the clock was always ticking...

“I believe we can fit in a quickie before I have to go.”

“I believe we can do better than that,” he growled into my neck.

I hurried up the ramp of my transport, still feeling the warm buzz of Obi-Wan’s affection. My report on the possible prophecy went off to Vos, as I figured he’d be more familiar with double thinking and Dooku. I had enough new things to deal with, so I was lent the Negotiator and given space for the 408th and this meet and greet courier run.

I wasn’t sure if I was glad to have clone support or worried someone thought it was needed. I’d seen enough departures, that my faking it went smoothly.

-Take care, my dear. May the Force be with you. Ask…-

His thought thinned quickly as we passed through orbital stations, and I couldn’t tell if he’d gotten
my returned affection. Within minutes, all I could feel in the Force were the usual alive-and-well I got from Obi-Wan and Anakin. I felt sure I should have prepared more, but it was too late now.

Once the ship went into Jump, I had more than three days without communication before we reached the Ando system. I wanted to try to get to know more Vod. And just as important was studying the mission brief.

Dice found me while I was making faces at the files. “General?”

“You’d think being from a wet world would make me less annoyed at humidity. I’m going to need so much deodorant to try to appear diplomatic on Ando.”

He paused. “Our armor helps a little. You’re from a water world?”

“Not like yours, a little under four-fifths of the surface. Parts were desert and permafrost, but I hated humidity in a non-Jedi way.” I looked at my robes, hoping they were good at wicking away sweat. “Have you been to Ando before?”

Dice shook his head and then hesitated. “Will you be doing a briefing? What’s the objective?”

My head hurt and I felt totally inadequate. Rubbing my forehead as I tried to beat down my panic, I took deep breaths. “Set up a briefing in an hour for whichever guys you think best. In short, we’re here to test the waters, to see if they will talk peace enough to receive a proposed treaty to that will let them supply and feed themselves. They import tech and have their own internal frictions, so they need a larger trade partner. Right now, the Republic is the only game in town, so we’re to look confident, play nice, and let them think about the benefits.”

I suspected my fresh face meant that nobody hated me like experienced generals.

“Are we to be a full honor guard or are we here to pull you out?” That was disapproval.

I sent him all my mission files. “Both, I suspect. I think I’ll take a squad, but that might not fly at times.”

Irritation spiked. “Will you wear a battle kit, General? We can’t watch your back if you go out solo.”

I was growing sure that something was going to happen. I closed my eyes to feel if it was good or bad.

“General?”

I opened my eyes, but it wasn’t worth smiling. “Sorry, diplomacy is tops right now, that we don’t demand bloody vengeance for their stupid rebellion. Some of them were earnest about corruption, and they were right about both sides. I can’t do armor as I never got any fitted and my shape’s really off from you all. Ill-fitting would be worse than none. I don’t think a blaster is a good idea either.”

“Kriffing...” That was disgust.

I wasn’t sure, but I wanted them to speak freely. “Dice, it’s less about Jedi love of their phallic symbols. It’s taken years of intense training to be passable after being a civvie so long. I simply have no skill at blasters and I’d probably shoot my foot off.”

One of those got a snicker, but his dismay was palpable. “We can teach you the basics on the way.”

At least I bought some time about the armor.
With that extra time sink went my hopes for some team building, but we were out of time. Nor was I comfortable with his salute when Dice left.

The briefing had a naval officer named Block and over a score of the clones, many I did not know by name and I was already feeling the strain. Every new name slid out of my head as quickly as I heard it. There was no way I would crack my old jokes about aging memory. So I smiled a lot.

The briefing materials were dry and as well organized as some wiki entries. The holos were older and lacking much about the last few years of the war. The holo of the world was marked for so much water, and so little land. The most interesting thing was that the former Senator from this world, Po Nudo, seemed to have been holding a similar post for the Separatists as he had for the Republic. Had he died since the war slowed or was he a pragmatist enough to desert a sinking ship? I didn’t remember the race from the movies, but they weren’t much of an aid anymore, thank God.

Dice went over their known military assets, but there didn’t seem to have that many. I could feel a superiority from the Admiral and clones, Turbo and Hyperware were anticipating seeing what might be stationed in orbit. No major Seppie base was marked, a modest planetary defense of mostly droids.

I could almost feel them planning to take the planet. “Gentleman, really. We’re here to get a treaty rolling. What do you think from this data could cause problems?”

“Another civil war between finned and fingered...” “Some holdouts who worked with the old statue” “Trap of droids” “Weapons smugglers” “Ambush” “What’re gentlemen?”

That last was the easiest, and it made me smile. “Title of respect, usually earned by honor and valor, ranked between commoner and knight. Military was expected to aim to behave like officers and gentlemen, a high standard in my homeland.” Not always met, but a good goal.

Block snorted and shook his head at my definition, mouthing something.

This was Obi-Wan’s subordinate, on loan.

It would be impolite to bust his ass.

Really.

Well, not too much. These boys deserved respect. “Admiral. Do you honestly think anyone serving with the Grand Army values their own life any less? You all lay your lives on the line for love of your friends and the Republic. Give that courage the same respect as your own officers.” Stop there... stop there... “Anyone can be a gentleman, and some forfeit the honor. Wouldn’t you want your younger brother to seek to be credit to your family and to your example? These men are everybody’s younger brothers.”

Feeling queasy, I rubbed my forehead. I probably embarrassed myself, and likely did little to change his mind. “Sorry to get on my... lectern. I’m going to insist on respect for everyone who puts their butt on the line. Think what you want, but show respect... Take five, I’ll be right back.”

Breathing shallow, I hurried to the ‘fresher in my quarters, almost next door. Did they have antacids? I really…

Then it didn’t matter as I lost my last meal.

Seemed like only seconds until I heard someone at the door. “General?”
“In here.” I started to lever myself to my feet, but I felt stiff and old.

Dice’s worry deepened. “You should get to the Sick Bay, sir.”

My stomach seemed to have settled. “It’s no illness, just nerves. Are there antacids in the sickbay?”

“There should be some here, standard issue… Here, take one.”

As I deciphered the labeling, he sprayed something and noted, “This covers mild alcohol reek, too.”

Drinking an entire cup of dull tasting recycled water, I made a face. “Are they all still there?”

He smiled. “Yeah. It’s a highlight of the day in jump.”

Pulling myself together, I returned to my own interrupted briefing. “I won’t argue against the possibility of an ambush on Ando. I don’t think any of them would have any personal hatred for me, beyond being a Jedi.”

“Any faction rebelling against the Separatist government, isn’t likely to attack us.” Dice gazed at the large holo of the world, where land and cities were rotating in and out of view. One military base was marked as possibly abandoned and not that far from the capitol. Others were smaller and definitely abandoned.

I was getting a bad feeling, constantly. “We’ll meet every night around this time. Sparring and drills end well before breakout. We’ll know more when we see them.”

No one admitted to any questions or concerns, so they filed out. Leaving only Dice.

“I’m going to drill with my light saber before bed…” And eat. Could I copyright pizza delivery on Coruscant? I really wanted an extra cheese and some mozz sticks.

“General, you should carry a blaster, too. Don’t Generals Kenobi and Skywalker? Don’t they lose their weapons?”

Obi-Wan never mentioned it, but I believed he had. I hadn’t been immediately comfortable with a live light saber, I was even less so about a blaster. “I never even touched anything like a blaster. I need to master the skills I have.”

Dice sighed. “You need to learn the basics. Lose your weapon, go undercover, lend it… I dunno. Carry one as a backup. Just learn it and I’ll shut up.”

Spring fashion accessories for four hundred, Alex. “Fine, but just the basics. Practice will have to wait until after the mission.”

As was becoming clear, the Republic really was serious about standardization; there was a commonality in markings and controls. It had the same feel as weapon controls on my Actis. Way simpler, but feeling almost intuitive by this point.

Then again, maybe the Force approved.

Dice got calmer as he lectured about the two different blasters he’d brought, one a rifle with sighting accessories. There was a qualm when he explained about optimizing for distance or power. Safeties and power sources. He didn’t have a good idea on where to hide it without getting in my way.

Then I commandeered a space to practice with my light saber. I was never sure I was doing it right solo, like practicing oboe in a sound dampening hall. The practice droids never felt real. Still I
practiced and practiced, working on speed and accuracy, until it was almost too late. Showers before and after sleep were faster than an hour sleep.

Without the blaster training, I had slightly more sleep the next two nights. I wanted to be alert and cheerful for this treaty meeting. Every day I meditated, practiced my light saber, and studied the mission briefing again and again. I even tried to grok a parallel from Earth history to give me a handle on the planet, but only the South Seas cultures came to mind, but cargo cults or singing about diaspora wasn’t much help. Argumentative opportunists felt like my first verdict.

I kept a log on my pad, commenting on thoughts and facts I might want to put in my report. That, and it amused me, even without any stardates.

At nights I went to sleep, imagining Obi-Wan was with me, his breath warm on my skin and beard a sift tickle. In the morning I reached for a missing pillow.

I was awake, early in the morning for the capital of Ando. The ship was on alert, not knowing what we’d find when coming out of Jump in less than an hour. Dice was up in the platform with me, much calmer than I felt.

“A concussion, that’s what I might give…”

“General?” Dice sounded worried. He felt worried.

I felt a half-smile on my lips. “Nothing’s wrong, remembering foods. I think I might trade a concussion for an egg McMuffin, or stuffed french toast with peaches, or even a kiffin bowl of Wheaties. I heard bad things about rations on my world, but they got M&Ms sometimes.

When we dropped out of Jump, I needed to send notice back to the Temple. The bridge crew were poring over readings and I left them to it.

Block announced “We are less than an hour from Ando at system speed, but…”

I didn’t like the suspicion he was almost shouting. “But?”

He gestured at an officer. “Many of the local bands are screaming a distress signal. Others are silent, and a few are only musics. There is a major interference on local comm bands, though we’re still in the clear.”

At his gesture, the distress came up on speakers. Parts were in other languages than Basic, but the strain and fear were clear.

“What do we know? Any chatter of defenses?”

Block seemed to be listening to another band. “We will know more in a few minutes, but what is clear, is that there are two ships in orbit but no active fighting. Recommend we hold station while we are still out-system.”

“Make it so.” My thoughts were racing. I could ignore the distress, the easiest option. But either my gut or the Force said that was a bad idea.

Second, I could call for help and wait three days before help could arrive from Coruscant. Anakin would enjoy the action, but with my luck Padmé would go into labor as soon as he went into Jump. So he’d be six days late to meet his twins. That would be fairly safe for me, especially if we gathered intel and enemy troop estimates without revealing ourselves as sentries. But we didn’t know what the attackers were doing with the population.
The third idea was to take care of the invaders, and use that as a goodwill gesture to help make peace with the locals.

That could be very reckless.

The Force wasn’t much help between the latter two ideas. I admit I wasn’t ecstatic about breaking a siege. I needed more recon before I decided. “Admiral, I want a preliminary briefing in fifteen. I’d rather we do nothing to attract their attention through that time.”

I looked at Dice. “Ship to ship seems likely. Get ready to tie in with Block’s people for that, I don’t know enough to direct tactics up here.”

He carefully asked, “Will you be flying, General?”

I tried to wipe the sweat off my palms. “Yeah, unless they do the sensible thing and leave Ando for some pleasure planet.”

“You need a flight suit, General.”

“After we have our briefing, prepare a coded tactical packet to append when I talk to the Temple. Bounce the distress signals, initial unknown ships in orbit, and anything we discover before I report in.” I had to get this right.

He seemed to be looking at some chrono and edging toward a hatchway. “You have just enough time to suit up, sir. Please. Robes do not handle Starfighter combat very well.” His worry was almost screaming.

I took a deep breath and followed him. A small locker room had multiple lockers marked for Anakin and Obi-Wan as well as me. I couldn’t resist tracing his name with my finger, wishing he was here.

“General, your robe. We’re losing time. Flight groups led by Turbo and Hyperware are prepped.”

I wasn’t comfortable with disrobing like this, but it went faster than I expected. There was even a clip for my light saber on the flight suit. Returning to the bridge, it was filled with a tense hum, but no one else seemed panicky.

“Admiral? What’s the status?” I crossed my arms. After almost three years in the robes, the thinner and lighter weight of fabric was unsettling. I felt odd again being the only female on board.

“We sent a surveillance droid closer. We haven’t cracked the code yet, but there is telemetry flowing to and from the surface, they’ve split their forces. These ships in orbit don’t land or take off well, they’re older designs and surplussed from before the war.”

“Are they a threat to this ship?”

He looked at the large display. “Not by themselves. Even if capital ships landed we will have a window before they can launch to join combat. We will be in combat range before we will see the grounded ships or battle damage.”

“Gentlemen. I only see three options: run away and fail our mission. Call for help and wait, or go in swinging. Any other options or opinions?”

“Tusks are bully boys, fighting each other more than the Republic. I don’t trust them. This could be another round of their continuing civil wars.” Block sounded disgusted.
Another officer claimed, “Unless they’ve done radical upgrades, we can take them. That removes the outer defense and air cover.”

Those sounded like they boiled down to wait or attack. No one else spoke. But I felt an eagerness in their moods. “Get your findings ready to be streamed back when I report in. You have five minutes.”

The comm signal reached the Council. Even with a glance, I saw that Obi-Wan was missing, as were others. “Master Windu, I must report that an unknown third party attacked Ando while we were en route. Two unknown ships remain in orbit, an unknown number have landed and attacked cities according to chatter. Details appended, but I cannot say how widespread this action is or the motives at this point…”

I would not ask permission for what the Force was shouting about, but… “I wanted to advise you what we found on breakout before we make contact.”


The communication ended, and I could feel surprise around me. Telling them that the Force wanted this, would not convince these men, “We’re here to make that treaty with the Ando government. First we’re going to see just who came a knocking and interrupted the party. I think it will turn violent fast.”

“Move us in-system. Open a common channel to them” Waiting a moment, I plastered a smile on my face and sat back to pretend relaxation and innocence, hoping to channel a fictional starship captain. “Good afternoon, this is General Meyers on the Republic ship, the Negotiator, on a diplomatic mission to the Ando government. Can we render assistance?”

We continued coasting inward as the silence seemed to stretch. The intelligence officers and scanners were scrambling to gather data. We were playing tourist fools, or I was.

“No, no, Negotiator. We had a malfunction with some satellites.”

I let myself chuckle at that. “Well, yes. I do note a severe shortage of existing orbital droid defenses and lack of Ando or Confederacy call signs. They would know we were due. Perhaps you would be interested to packing up and calling it a day.”

“One ship, with a second string general instead of Kenobi? I don’t think so.” The channel was cut.

But we were much closer and these looked like beat up ships. “What news from planet side?”

“Imhitill and Yinn may have been destroyed, raised thermals… perhaps parts of Quantill City, General.”

Whatever attack craft they used will be lifting any minute. “We attack now. Admiral, you know operations better so you run the details up here. We need to take out the alpha and beta, before more make orbit. I’ll go out with the interceptors.”

“Acknowledged, General. Red wing is launching.” Block focused on the displays and Dice pulled me away and then into a run for the hanger where slightly different ships were launching as I scrambled.

He fussed, making sure I was strapped in and hooked up. The communication band seemed awkward as voice after voice indulged in unfamiliar chatter.

“Sir!” Dice sounded alarmed, and was still standing on the wing. “If you’re not ready…”
Even with my alarm, that made me smile. “I’ll be fine. I didn’t get a chance to learn the comm chatter with Anakin. Sorry.” I heard a small groan.

“Listen up, General. You’re green one, I’m two. Turbo is red one, and Hyper is blue. The Negotiator is gold one. Listen for me or Block, stay with me this time, okay?”

“I’m real green, huh?” I looked up at him. “No promises, I’ll be riding the Force. If I.. tell Obi-Wan I did what I thought best. Go, get to your ship.”

*I needed an antacid.*

**- Obi-Wan**

Anakin and Padmé seemed worried about me and I was relieved when her family called to arrange a visit. Their surprise at the announcement and wish for an extended visit made for a lengthy discussion after dinner. Their disappointment made for awkward embarrassment from the soon to be parents.

Awkward for witnesses as well.

I appreciated the meal and the entertainment, but I quietly departed. I wasn’t quite in the proper mood for company, and they did not need the irony I wanted to pepper the conversation with. They were so happy about their children, I did not want to spoil that with my worry.

I needed an extended meditation after their well-meaning dinner. I had too many duties to be this distracted. I decided to meditate near one of the fountains where it would be quiet. This part of the garden remained springlike most of the year, with basso loam and cascading, exuberant Life almost exploding from the plants.

Settled into a comfortable pose, my greatest current worry was a consequence of my attachments. I had two that were profound, strong enough that I always had an inkling of their status. My Padawan was still close enough that I knew he was very well and happy to be with Padmé. My other was much further, in Jump, and healthy. I had to admit my worry about her mission to Ando.

I had almost three days until her ship left Jump and she should notify the Council of their arrival. Many newly-made Knights ‘forgot.’ Anakin had been notorious about not reporting in.

*She* would remember.

I cleared my mind, to consider the millions of living grass that carpeted the clearing, a vibrant bubble of life in the city. As much part of the Living Force as myself. Calm spread, sharing the cool moisture of the evening, awaiting the damp and dew to come together to clean everything it touched.

Dust and grime washed away, breathing came easier and deeper.

Irritations and pollen slid off, Light and starlight gave us life. Every blade and life was part of that web, the roots all connected below the surface growing from atoms forged in the light of suns.

I came out of my contemplation, calm, serene and rested, much more able to direct my intentions. Primary were my Council duties, checking on Anakin, and the Initiate competition. I wished to attend to some research as well. I could see the Code debates lasting years. The member of the Explorer corps had questions for his research. I was curious about water management and the underpinnings of Coruscant, though that was least important; perhaps I should save that for a Padawan project.
I was calm and serene and sleep came easily, despite the lateness. I felt rested, and soon after the Council meeting and midday, I hurried to the hall reserved for the tournament. Anakin was in a good mood, speaking to a group of younglings who got far more enthused as he spoke.

Perhaps a hundred Initiates and a few Padawans were in the stands, definitely more than were participating. This would be a high point of the year for many of them. The Padawans seemed as excited as the Initiates, and too many of their faces were unfamiliar to me.

Likewise there were at least a score of Knights and Masters present, maybe two score for the start. A schedule was posted, so the elders could attend specific matches between their duties. A few of them had unfamiliar faces, including some wearing uncommon robes. Anakin, it is time.

He stood and lazily swaggered over to the Masters’ side. His own excitement not hidden by his grin.

“Brothers and sisters,” I made sure to project my voice clearly as soon as the crowd quieted. “This tournament is to demonstrate your maturity, your determination, your connection to and mastery of the Force, and how well you have mastered the basics of the light saber. Your skill with a light saber is not a guarantee you will find a Master today, even a current Council member was not chosen after such a competition. I speak for the Council when I say that we wish all of you to grow into the finest Jedi possible, and today is but a step on that path.”

“What he really means, is that you should have fun and enjoy yourselves.” Anakin laughed. -I notice you made a few changes, Master.-

I resisted sighing. We cannot promise anything, but we can reduce the stakes back to self-improvement instead of desperation and war. “A Padawan spotter will monitor each match for safety and winning points...”

Anakin and I would note their skills and maturity for the potential Masters’ attention. I expected my former Padawan to be terse at best, but he had skill with all the forms but the seventh. The first two matches began, and monitoring took all my attention for afternoon.

They were all so engaged in their hopes and fears, wanting to impress their elders. I remembered it so well. There were so few Masters that year, but we already had many more for this session, at least willing to consider passing on their wisdom. Some of the knights studying them were expressionless, so I was unsure what they sought. Some Masters had already registered their intent. I had hoped more would attend.

Each youngling wanted to do well, so they flashed bursts of triumph and sadness through the Force when each match ended. The first round would take two days, and should not be high stress for the younglings. The second would mean the first eliminations.

I tried not to attend significantly more to the twins, but I did note their emotions echoed through each other. I would not see their matches today, they drew theirs on the second day.

Anakin was greatly focused, and I noticed he made notes between individual matches as well. By the end of today’s matches, I was more tired than I expected to be.

The younger and older Jedi began to mix when the last winner was declared. The younger ones returned to clustering around Anakin again: chattering, bragging, and seeking his approval. He was enjoying it, he’d missed this stage when Ahsoka was an Initiate. Once the Initiates and Padawans remembered their hunger or were summoned by their Masters, they started drifting off. Even Knights and Masters departed, speaking to each other or candidates. It was early evening by the time Anakin and I were alone in the hall.
Almost alone.

A blond Jedi Knight, one not in standard robes, was either meditating or dozing at the top of the Masters’ bleachers. His hair was trimmed short and he had left off the usual browns and tans of robes, wearing a deep green tunic and a nearly hidden light saber.

-Should we wake him, Master, or just lock up with him inside?- Anakin looked mischievous, a welcome shift echoing from happier days.

*He may be from one of the Corps. As we hope to get their cooperation for reform, that might not be the best idea.*

Anakin rolled his eyes, and then looked at the older Jedi.

Taking a step closer, but not enough to startle him, I nudged him in the Force.

The knight’s eyes opened, awake and alert. “Ah, Master Kenobi, I wanted to meet you. I had been advised to contact you, and this tournament reminded me of an old promise.”

Suddenly, I felt Qui-Gon’s presence strongly, though he did not speak. I could feel Anakin’s sudden interest as well.

I smiled. “I’m glad you came, regardless of old memories. I am hoping to make aging out a meaningless curiosity.”

His smile was bright in the Light. “I’m First Officer on the *Vanguard* , and after our refit, word is that we will be visiting that planet you two found on our next great loop. Our Council is already considering petitioning the High Council for your assistance.”

“The *Vanguard*? I don’t remember that ship.” That wasn’t quite a pout from my former Padawan.

“She’s a refitted old dreadnought, with some features of a colony ship. We were overdue by some years and missed your war completely.”

I could feel his embarrassment clearly.

Qui-Gon echoed that feeling as well.

“No big loss...” Anakin scratched his head, unease simmering.

“Actually, Anakin, the *Vanguard* and her sister ship could have supplied hope if we had lost to the Sith.” I had not been as ship-mad as Anakin, but a Jedi ship made for both peace and war was fascinating to many Initiates.

The other Knight waved a hand above his light saber. “There *were* Sith? It’s hard to believe they stopped being horror stories from the creche.”

I could feel a tension building.

“They were here, even hidden in plain sight, screwing with everyone’s heads.” Anakin’s fists shook a little.

“A Sith Lord Master, and three Apprentices were defeated, but there were, and are known missing acolytes. Finding them as well as brokering peace will require more time.” I thought of Vora’s mission for the first time in hours.
The Knight’s smile was kind. “Refit and resupply should take more than a year. We do not need to rush.”

Pointing at the Knight, Anakin accused, “You didn’t even rush to tell us your name.”

His dismay was almost comical. “Oh, I am sorry. I am Knight Feemor, I felt a calling for the Explorer Corps after…” He cut off what he was going to say with a pang of old pain and gave us a half-smile.

Guilt and sorrow swelled from Qui-Gon. -Oh, my Padawan. I am so sorry. I never meant…- Feemor looked around with alarm and confusion. “Master?”

Anakin’s eyes narrowed, while I didn’t know how to explain, to calm the waters.

Taking a deeper breath, I told him. “Master Jinn did not fully join the Force. He speaks infrequently.”

Anakin glared around the hall, without settling on Feemor or myself.

-…When Xanatos was lost to his sire’s madness, I was not very balanced. I removed all listings of my Padawan, scoured records of my failures with Xanatos. I never wanted to be reminded how I failed, never wanted to risk another youngling…- That made Anakin guffaw. “And you kriffed it up. Records only show one Padawan, Obi-Wan.”

-I was careless.- Qui-Gon’s sorrow was almost a tangible thing.

“I came back after a long mission to learn that I had been almost erased from the Archives. Few remembered me outside those I knew from the creche.” Feemor’s face had fallen into sadness. “Most of my records could be found or recreated, but it wasn’t the same. It seemed like a sign from the Force that it was time to find a new path and I chose the Explorer corps.” His smile brightened his face again. “The Force is everywhere, and leads us to wonders.” His Force presence was serene, regardless of his path.

Projecting good will, I touched Feemor’s arm. “Then I am very glad to meet you at last. I’d suggest an evening at Dex’s, but some topics are not for public discussion.”

“I’ll get Padmé, some food, and meet you at our rooms.” Anakin volunteered.

It was a good idea, even if he wanted to bring her into the Temple for more time together. “I might be wiser if she came as Padmé and not her office.”

“Got it, Master… see you there.” Anakin rushed away, bubbling happiness.

Feemor looked at me. “Was there some kind of scandal with him? Masters sharing rooms?”

“We remained a team through the war, less effective when separated… and his liaison with Padmé was an issue. I’m not sure why it was decided, but another room was added when I gained a Padawan from that planet we found.” I was guiding us to the residential area.

-They argue with the Council more than I did. And win more often.- My Master sounded smug.

Feemor seemed almost in a kind of shock as I let us into our rooms, the moment when he realized these had been Qui-Gon’s was clear to me. I gestured for him to take a seat, and I brought out the tea
I had been gifted with on Kaller as the water heated.

I looked at my line-brother. “Finding that planet had led to many changes. Undoubtedly, the Order will change more, and I don’t believe the Republic can fail to change when it discovers what is common knowledge there. Force Visions of our war here were packaged as entertainment and spread worldwide a decade before the war started here. They know more about the Order during the war than the Senate does, and I believe at least a score of the Order are essentially famous holo stars there. Anakin and I were recognized by the first native we met.”

-That would give the Order credit for openness in rebuilding Republic’s trust. We can weather embarrassment.- Qui-Gon’s tone was calming.

I wanted to retort something rude, but held it back in favor of serving the tea.

Feemor asked, “Then why go?”

“Pragmatic necessity, my friend. We lost about sixty percent of the Order in the last ten years to that Sith-spawned war alone. Growing too quickly may be dangerous, but wither any further and the Order becomes an irrelevant religion that cannot protect the Republic from any reborn Sith. There were many relatively strong presences on that planet, and Knight Meyers proved that they can become fine Jedi.”

My Master’s smile was nearly visible. -Though Obi-Wan might be biased.-

“Masters are attached to their Padawans.” I knew that came out defensively.

Feemor laughed. “You cannot honestly argue against that, Master. But how can we still speak to you here?” There was the faintest hint of hurt.

Then came a long pause. -That skill took years to master... I thought you would no longer care after my foolishness.-

“I kept hoping to see you between missions, and then after a long mission, your nameplate was gone, leaving strangers’ names.” Feemor’s voice was flat.

-We can speak as long as you like, Padawan.- Qui-Gon’s regret surrounded us.

We had our tea and compared Qui-Gon as a Master. He snorted and chuffed at our stories, but he was pleased. I could feel Anakin’s return and the tiny lights said Padmé had come as well. An assortment of food packages were letting steam and delicious scents out of his bag.

Padmé appeared calm, but seemed less sure underneath. “Masters...”

“Angel. Feemor was Qui-Gon’s first Padawan and he’s in the Explorer Corps. He’s Jedi family, too. This is Padmé, my wife.”

Even as Feemor started to react to that, Padmé looked at us. “Are Master Jinn and Count Dooku missing?” Her voice had a hint of venom on the last.

Anakin, set out the food. I said, “Master Jinn is present. Dooku is housed in holding cells, low in the Temple.”

“Those infants are very bright...” Feemor looked almost dazed.

“I am pleased the traitor is held.” Padmé’s voice held a deep anger. Many assassins had been sent
after her over the last few years.

I could feel alarm from my Master and Padawan.

Anakin slid over to put a protective arm around her, projecting calm and safety.

“Yes, Feemor, these children have been in Force visions. They will be healthy, and Force willing, have happy childhoods.”

-Some changes are finally coming, my Padawans…-

“Master, I will explain, as Padmé cannot hear you.” I waved everyone at the food and distributed plates and utensils. “The beginnings of the war with the Sith, as far as we Jedi knew, began with the Trade Federation attempting to invade Naboo. The young queen petitioned the Council for assistance, sending Master Jinn and his Padawan…”

Anakin and Padmé took over the story at points, which allowed me to eat and recover from troubling missions. Qui-Gon made a few amused or wise statements, passed to Padmé as well. We made it past Anakin’s early training and by mutual silent agreement, ceased just after Geonosis.

They were about to glowingly tell of their wedding, but I was more ashamed of some events and needed to compose myself before those darkest days of the war. “Perhaps we could continue this another night. While there were a few brighter moments in the next period,” I nodded at Padmé, “there were also too many errors and assumptions even as a Sith Lord was gaining a decisive advantage.”

Feemor looked hurt. “More than Master Dooku’s fall?”

“He was only a disposable apprentice to the Sith Master,” Anakin snarled, scratching at the line of his replacement arm. “He was too effective.”

-Was is a key word, I believe. - Qui-Gon’s ambivalence was clear.

“I do not trust him any freedom.” Padmé was getting angry, deep down, her arm around her torso.

Projecting calm, I stated, “This will have to wait, all is well at the present, Senator. It is late. Anakin, she should rest while we clean up.”

My Padawan escorted her to the ‘fresher again as I tidied up with Feemor’s help.

By this late hour, Feemor was quiet as well. “So this was more than the victories and thwarting Sith…”

“It would not be a balanced account if I told it myself.”

-Obi-Wan is over humble, but I will speak for those who cannot be here.-

I agreed with Anakin, I could not properly glare at my Master like this.

A tiny smile on Feemor’s face said that he understood. “I plan to observe the tournament, perhaps to find a Padawan. May the Force be with you.”

I settled with my padd to finish with my notes for the first day.

Finally they came out, with Anakin supporting his wife toward my room. “Come on, the kids are restless.”
Really?

-They did it with Vora, too. Just cuddling, Obi-Wan.-

Soon I was face to face with a sleeping Padmé, close enough the feel the twins through contact. They settled into a bright happiness like their parents.

A new hope indeed.
Chapter Summary

Temple life, quiet without battle, is still uncomfortable for both Jedi and former Jedi. Initiates do not really have March madness in their tournament, they want to show how mature they are... not all the Jedi are as well behaved.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

-Dooku-

After this many days and months in the bowels of the Temple, I had spent many hours reflecting and meditating on how I had reached this point. The mental healers had been a joke for the most part, as they had scant experience with living outside the Temple or how to come to accept having been so dark and having done such things that horrified me for most of my life.

I knew healer Kohlaes’irn tried, but he could not do, as Master had observed many times. I had already gone further than what his teachings covered. He was more used to healing from errors, than years of blindness. We still spoke nearly daily, but I could feel his suppressed frustrations, for he had few answers more specific than the Code itself.

And that did not enlighten or comfort.

There was a fundamental lack of understanding, and I was growing more sure that there were answers outside the Order, outside civilized peoples. I was not sure if I wished a formal reconciliation with the Order, nor was I sure any would offer that to me. I had murdered so many. Could the Order forgive me? Could I serve the Light again, when I so rarely felt it? Should I deserve trust after I betrayed the Order and Republic so greatly? After I betrayed even the memory of my Padawan and the wary trust of even my acolyte? No one truly trusted me, nor had I wanted that for too many years.

These answers would not come soon, and I must be patient.

I felt for the most part as I always had, and the Dark Side no longer rushed in to encourage violent action. On occasion, I could feel the Living Force fleetingly, much easier if other Jedi were present, their light burning away the Dark fog that tried to cling to me.

I felt a chuckle from my Padawan. -You are attached, my Master.-

That was truth. “Yes. It is somewhat discomforting after this many years of holding to my standards to have failed in this.”

-No one is perfect. And Master-Padawan attachments were rarely criticized, despite our shame. I failed there as well.- Then came a sigh that made no sound.

“At least you did not try to kill your GrandPadawans, repeatedly.” Once, I would have done almost anything to rescue my Padawan.
I knew, that was why I could not visit you as I gained mastery of this state. Your passing would have hurt less. He grinned. Now you have, what, five lineal bonds?

I took a moment. “Six, including a Force-ghost. I don’t believe they will be anything but guarded for Kenobi and Skywalker. I respected their competence, even at my worst,"

-Senator Amidala understands the Dark Side less and she is less inclined to forgive your attacks on her and her husband. As is Knight Ahsoka.-

She was only member of our tight knit line I had not made peace with. Skywalker already trained a capable Padawan during my war. I had not seen her since my relocation here, aside from during the attack on the Temple.

She was a child when I… When she learned how brutal service could be at my hands. Calm and tolerance were not necessarily forgiveness.

-One or both of the Skywalker infants will be Jedi. Padmé is no less important to the Jedi and Republic in the Senate.-

I had to smile. “Qui-Gon, I never expected that you would be setting your Padawans to breed more Jedi. That might be a slower growth than the Order needs.”

Qui-Gon could not actually choke, but the shock and embarrassment were as clear in the silence as if he was actually sputtering.

-Actually, it’s almost finalized, Obi-Wan and Vora will be training a pair of twins. A longer silence. -Feemor has returned to Temple as well and we spoke briefly. He may take a Padawan interested in exploration.-

I’d never felt close enough to his first Padawan to intervene. “Will you speak more with him?”

-They’re all telling him of the events while the Vanguard was away, as many good stories as not. They stopped last night, before Geonosis.-

I had such very mixed feeling about that now, pride and horror. “There were many significant events after that.”

-They will be meeting again after the Initiates’ tournament.-

Temple guards followed me if I left my quarters. Not that they could stop me, but I wanted to see.

After my session with Kohlaes’irn, I arrived early and settled a little off center in a spot on the Masters’ side, with a good view of both contests and the audience. A clear and empty buffer area around me formed as potential Masters kept their distance. A few younglings I had spoken to with young Meyers kept away by their friends or helping with the matches.

Windu arrived before any of my line. “What are you doing here?”

Rising, I looked him in the eye. “Observing the hopes of the Order. While I am too old to take another Padawan, that does not mean I do not take an interest in their success.”

The current Grandmaster of the High Council crossed his arms, very doubtful. “That is not your primary reason.”

I was not fully prepared to admit this to him. “It is of no risk to the younglings, but a matter of
He gazed at me for a long moment, and I could feel the arrivals of Kenobi and Skywalker, with nervous younglings in tow. They nodded at young Feemor before staring at me.

I could almost feel the Force glow with their intent. “Master Windu, I’d prefer to take a seat.”

After a tense moment, he nodded and took one of the empty nearby seats. My GrandPadawan gazed at me suspiciously but then turned with a more openly glaring Skywalker to begin the first round of the day.

I retrieved my padd and the list of participants. In the first hour was one of a set of twins. Their Force presence hinted that there were from Korun, like Windu, which explained his presence for this day. The girl won quickly, but she showed a touch of spitefulness. The boy lost, but was quickly laughing with friends. I was not sure if it was serenity or a shortage of dedication.

By the time I had clarified my notes to send on, only Kenobi remained.

His battle-confidence was muted and his arms crossed. “Dooku.” Unstated was the same question as Windu’s.

“Would you include my comments on the competitors? Anonymous if you think it wiser.”

Kenobi gazed at me, searching.

I was not sure what there was to find. After what seemed long enough, I nodded to him. “I am returning to my quarters, Kenobi.”

He watched me exit with my guard droids, and I considered that I wasn’t sure what I wanted… Wanting had not been eradicated from me as much as I thought.

- Anakin

I wasn’t happy to leave Obi-Wan alone with Dooku, even if he’d behaved down in the holding area. With Padmé visiting more often, I did not want them to meet.

She didn’t mind him as much when he was nearly anonymous in the Jedi group last year when I was promoted. But she wasn’t as happy a few days ago to learn he was moving around within the Temple with light restrictions. I did not want to argue against her intuition. I had no proof either way.

The Force was not telling me he was a threat, nor did it say I should trust him. Today I had trouble concentrating on the matches with him in the hall. The crowd was subtly quieter as well, for all of the older Jedi. Whatever Mace said to him, nothing happened.

The hall also cleared faster, and I made sure the Initiates got back to their clan leaders with Feemor’s help. They chattered of their victories and defeats, not noticing the tension remaining behind them.

“I wasn’t sure what to say, whether he would speak to me.” Feemor looked back. “Is Obi-Wan going to be okay?”

Still no warning. “He’s fine at the moment. We should grab some food for tonight after I check in with my troops.”

It turned out that the 501st was training to integrate the newer brothers. Rex knew we probably wouldn’t have many assignments in the near future. Food wasn’t hard, I knew which dishes my old
Master preferred and traveled well to our rooms.

Obi-Wan was disturbed, but he didn’t say anything when he returned. I started the tale about Geonosis for Feemor, teasing Obi-Wan about getting captured yet again. Neither of us were smiling as much, telling of how many Jedi passed in the arena that started the war and the battle droid multitude that were against us until Master Yoda arrived with troops. It would have been thrilling as a Padawan to see that many in battle.

Then came more stories about battles and missions and learning how to lead troops.

Neither I nor Obi-Wan mentioned Hardeen.

“I almost can’t believe you had that many missions in a three year war.” Feemor was doubtful.

I was surprised too. “Three years? No, these happened in less than a year.”

Obi-Wan was projecting calm. “The pace of Jedi service was multiple that in more peaceful times. I confess, I feel a little restless since it slowed again. You become accustomed to crises.”

“I remember when it was slower before I was fifteen, but my Padawan has never known anything different.” I nodded, resisting the urge to complain, as I wanted no emergencies for the twins’ birth.

Feemor shook his head. “You’re not even old enough to have a Padawan, but yours was already knighted, correct?”

I grinned at Obi-Wan and pointed. “I kept calling him ‘Old Man,’ for years.” I felt someone reach the Temple hanger. *Snips! Glad you’re back. Come on up, it’s tall tale night and I was embarrassing Obi-Wan with… my line uncle is the closest term.*

-Need any high octane fuel? I got some good stuff on my mission.-

*Always, you know Obi-Wan won’t stock it.* “Snips is back. Safe and sound.” I finished my tea. “I think this was her second mission on her own, but they’ve been so much more routine than a year ago. She’s all grown up and standing tall.”

Feemor grinned. “You sound very proud.”


“I wasn’t so sure about you two, from the later stories.” The other Jedi sounded concerned when he looked at us.

Ahsoka came in the door, with a grin and two bottles.

I could feel Obi-Wan casting out into the Force as I spoke. “We weren’t getting along, though our missions were usually successful. We ended up beyond the Rim, and got back with unconfirmed intel that the Order was already backed into a corner that no one saw.”

She went to find some glasses. “Skyguy barely told me anything for weeks and weeks. I thought it was some captured Sith or bounty hunter, because the two of them all but disappeared, and wouldn’t talk about anything outside missions and my training.”

“The Council was undecided, particularly about the reliability of untrained visions. None wanted to miss the debate on such volatile secrets.” Old frustration leached into Obi-Wan’s voice. “It changed the course of the Order’s planning in many ways. The future may be fluid, as Master Yoda teaches,
but we cannot refuse to be fluid in present either.”

Feemor checked the whiskey once it was handed out, and caught the small reaction on Obi-Wan’s face. “Not a fan?”

“Sometimes,” Obi-Wan sipped his with a small smile. “It seems my Padawans have been known to arrive in the most interesting situations. One kept rescuing pretty young girls during natural disasters... with winsome eyes who kept getting attached to him and swooning into his arms. They didn’t even stop when the disaster had passed.”

I rubbed my forehead. “I wasn’t trying to make it happen!” I was *not* going to meet Ahsoka’s eyes.

Obi-Wan traded grins with Feemor. “It usually wasn’t a problem once the mission ended. Though I wasn’t sure if tutorials from professionals might help his flirtation skills or I should let him muddle through on his own...”

“*Somebody* liked his floundering, Master.” Ahsoka’s grin was evil. “He married one of his rescues.”

I wasn’t looking.

At anyone.

Ever again.

“But then my other Padawan showed a taste for young thieves of national treasures. Thinking about it, she also mentioned startling eyes...” Obi-Wan was contemplative as he finished his drink.

“Vora?” I wasn’t sure what shocked me.

Obi-Wan smirked. “You do know people exist outside your company, correct?”

I couldn’t imagine her. “But, Vora? She’s not...” I stopped right there, just realizing anything I wanted to say would get me in more trouble, from Ahsoka no less than the older Jedi. Feemor was only a bit older than her.

Ahsoka started laughing first, saving me from finishing that thought.

Feemor was smiling at us. “Don’t worry, young ones. A young Jedi is pursued on many worlds, exotic far traveling heroes like in holo movies, if the world has Jedi or holos.”

I felt a pang from my Master, and I sent back affection. “She’s quick to remind Obi-Wan she’s older when he gets stuffy.”

Another pang from him and his shields went up.

Feemor and Ahsoka soon left, comparing experiences in the creche.

I waited.

He straightened the minimal mess from the evening.

I crossed my arms and waited.

Finally he stood in front of me and mirrored me. *Negotiation for Initiates.*

That trick was *not* going to fool me. “Out with it. You’re upset about something and I’m waiting
until you tell me.”

All that got was a pleasant, politician’s smile from him before he turned away. “Perhaps you should meditate about why you were so shocked by the revelation about the rogue. I am sure your former Padawan will enjoy the challenge.”

He turned out the lights and retired to his room.

That didn’t work.

A good night message from Padmé and I decided to break pattern to go and check on her. I wasn’t having nightmares about her dying, but I still worried about her health, that she had some obscure disorder. Padmé was surprised when I joined her in bed.

I woke from a nightmare just before dawn with a sinking feeling too close to a ship in free-fall. But my feet were slogging through rubble of broken and damaged platforms of Coruscant, gaps where a ‘Sprite could have fallen through into the Undercity without risking a scratch. The world was hollow after some battle, and enemy Generals were still missing. Almost every dead body was wearing clone armor, but I could not identify any of them. The color had been scrubbed off, leaving them an almost dirty Stormtrooper white.

They were no longer luminous beings, but beyond any help.

I staggered forward looking for someone, seeing multiple troop colors, all dead, Not enough of the one troop that didn’t belong here. Until I found two dead, dead bodies blistered and burnt and dismembered, armor broken open by the rubble on them. Still frozen in close combat. One in 501st blue, and the other without markings.

And each with the faces of my adult children, staring at nothing.

The darkness called again from far away as the wind swept me away into waking.

Padmé came back into our room, and sat beside me, crooning something. I rubbed her belly, just to confirm that they were safe and not about to fight and die.

With the sunlight, I was almost sure it was just a dream. Leia and Luke would never wear the Brothers’ armor. If they could not have peace, I would make sure they had fitted Mando armor. It scared me that it might not be a dream.

But Vora was on her mission and not here to talk, and I was too annoyed with Obi-Wan. So I put all the details I wanted to remember in Artoo’s memory in between my classes.

He chirped his concern and told me I was being an idiot.

I knew Obi-Wan, and if I told him, he’d focus on my stupid nightmare instead of telling me what pooodoo he had in his head. Vora would reach Ando today and we could talk as soon as she had a break.

- Obi-Wan

The Council discussed a Senate motion for wide ranging reform sessions. A bare majority of Senators agreed to mount a dedicated committee, but Chancellor Organa supported the motion and fast tracked it. I was not surprised that newly rejoined Kaller was one of the first to volunteer. The list of volunteers outstripped large meeting rooms and Bail would announce the members later. The
Order was offered a non-voting seat when it began in two days and Master Adi Gallia would put her knowledge to the task of balance and fair negotiations. Others of us suspected that this would require more than a committee, but a new charter.

My midday meal was short, all the Initiates were still competing this round. Only a few would collect their second loss today. The Korun Vanle twins arrived late, the edge of some childish spat clear around them and from the boy’s glares. They were not scheduled, but Adus watched the matches with a more serious focus than his sister.

Fewer potential Masters were present today. Feemor was, and I felt sure he was seeking a student. Dooku was less clear as to why he was present. None interacted with him and soon the chamber was filled with young striving successes and failures. I took note of unbalanced reactions as much as prowess.

I sought compassion and maturity.

Late in the day’s matches there were only four Initiates remaining to fight after the current ones. My match would end soon, the Twilekki girl had much better control of her aggression than the human boy with his overconfidence. He was getting tired enough to make a mistake.

I felt a thin burst of fear and panic, and I found it harder to breathe. Taking deeper breaths I realized it was from Vora.

Forcing another breath, I was too far.

The boy attempted a jump to flank his opponent, but she had turned before he had a stable stance and scored a winning touch.

While the winner was declared, I stepped aside to center and listen to the Force. Vora was tense but not fighting. Anakin met my gaze for an instant, but his match had not ended and my concern was not anything I could act on right now.

It was not.

No one else reacted, so it was not a sudden widespread disaster. I centered again, seeking the still and quiet of deep space, cool to calm my worries.

With my ribs looser that I could breathe, the match Anakin watched had ended. Did you feel that, Anakin?

-Yeah. She’s still okay, Master...-

I found a smile somewhere. Master Yoda nearly sat on me last time when you and she were in that fight on Naboo.

Initiates started shifting for the next match. By the time it ended, my tension kept growing. Thanking all the participants and reminding the Masters of tomorrow’s rounds was done with little thought. The winners could be posted well before commentary could be entered for Knights and Masters to review.

The hall was clearing, though Anakin was speaking to a weeping youngling.

“What happened, Kenobi?”

I looked and saw Dooku standing near me, his force presence quiet and face serene. Suppressing my
irritation, I took another calming breath. “Knight Meyers is in combat.”

He looked surprised, though his own beard concealed nuance too. He turned and noticed Anakin stiffening as well. When Dooku brushed his beard in thought, the gesture was enough like my Master to give a pang.

Anakin noticed us and came over silently, looking wary.

“Did you have the same with his Padawan?” Dooku nodded toward Anakin.

“No. We were not as close. I was not her Master.” I did not know why he was asking but felt no ill-intent.

“But you know as well, Skywalker?”

“What is your problem, Dooku?” Anakin stepped up, clenching his fists.

“Concern about my Great GrandPadawan...” Dooku smiled slightly, and waved at us. “And you as well.”

I did not believe him, but it was nothing I could prove. But now I was sure Vora was fighting, I could almost hear her swearing.

But not enough details to take any comfort.

-Obi-Wan, your comm is blinking...-

A summons from the Council. I centered myself again. “Pardon me, I will see you later.” The Council chamber would be a brisk walk away.

Once there, I saw the outdated data packet. I didn’t need it to know one fact: she was still in combat.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to slow down, but new chapters should not drop below twice a month until I use up my cushion. RL just keeps throwing a spanner in...
... that saved a wretch like me.' War makes for ugly choices, anyone who says otherwise is trying to sell you something.

- Vora

Taking another deep breath I finished the last steps for lift off the flight deck, and glided toward the hanger bay opening. We weren't pulling any G’s, not yet. “Tuess, this is it.”

I knew saying it was silly, just to handle the little butterflies when the fighter wobbled on leaving the bay.

“Tuess, can you mute my foul language as it goes out? I don’t even know I’m doing it and it’s a waste of air time. Thanks.” I flew out to the nearer wing, noting the faint green on the tactical. I tried to not get annoyed that this kind of group fighting really hadn’t been covered in enough training, just solo stuff.

More of the brother’s Headhunters flew out, and I floated on the ocean, feeling the other minnows in the school around me. They all called their readiness even as Blue leader began a run on the alpha. Red Leader went for the beta.

“Green Leader, second wave on the beta.”

I made an acknowledgment.

It felt surreal as I moved through silent space like some VR video game, even as fighters spilled from the enemy ship. Space Invaders without the pixels.

One of the minnows further away winked out, leaving a small turbulence in the water among the barracuda. The barracuda were grouping and I took a look at them, deciding where to aim my next pass. Then I kicked off the acceleration and fired

They were flying Z-95’s too. Either surplussed equipment, stolen, or still piloted by chipped Brothers...

Shit. They better not still have a back door.

I scanned the lake and flew through the barracudas turning to attack me. I twisted into a tight turn for the beta. “Gold one, this is Green Leader. Cycle to new scrambling as soon as practical. They may still be chipped.”

This time I felt the G’s as I raced in something like an Immelman to evade the snot that was getting up my ass. When I fired, I knew one of the barracudas chasing me died. I flew through the expanding cloud of debris before I reoriented and fired at the other one.

The other enemy attackers, I could pretend that they had an escape pod or another’s shot killed them.
But that first one wasn’t any easier than the first death I caused with a saber. It was harder because I could feel the turbulence this time in the Force.

The whirlpool of fighting and death around beta drew me in, and I wanted to end this fight before more reinforcement ships reached orbit. Enemy fighters swooped to defend the beta. I spent more time avoiding fire than attacking anything, ticking me off. Shooting their ships made for limited progress, because the fighters were taking more damage than the beta.

But they could only intercept the damage for so long and they chased my Actis in small swarms. When I got too many, I made a screaming run tangent to orbit, leading a string of barracuda seeking the Jedi ship in a long arc into the path of the Negotiator’s guns. It was target practice.

“Gold one to all squadrons, enemy reinforcements about to reach orbit. No capital ships. Mix of interceptors and a few larger craft.”

These arriving ships felt more like killer whales that hunted in packs, too.

This time the pocket of turbulence in the Force hit me harder, and I looked away toward the alpha where Hyperware had been seconds ago. The first time I knew the clone who died and my throat hurt.

Spikes in fear from the direction of the alpha became a tidal wave that suddenly stopped in the moments after the enemy ship came apart.

Some fought so hard before they died anyway. “There is no death...”

“General!” Dice shouted in the comm.

I’d been practically coasting and the Actis rocked around me when I’d gotten a glancing hit. I made a quick course change and sharp turn and roll, I was still operational. “I’m fine, Dice. Just a few extra friends right now. Alert the medics for survivors.”

Some worried beeping came from my droid copilot.

“No, Tuess, I’m not getting cocky. I’m hoping that some can be captured and brought back to their brothers. The 408th will be sympathetic as it happened to them, too.”

That two tone whine had to be a sigh. I didn’t have the time to wait for translation.

“After the battle.” I saw the larger interceptor had a prettier explosion. I could feel fewer hunting us now, though I still had two. I tuned out most of the chatter.

“Blue Squad, assist with the beta, code S.”

Well, that answered if all Jedi were hotshot pilots. We still hadn’t taken the beta. Ah, well. At least I hadn’t frozen.

I realized Dice was the closest, I could feel some worry.

But we had no immediate opponents and I swung towards the beta. I dipped into the water again, feeling for the current leading me to a weakness. Engines, comm structures, all excellent targets if I knew where they were, but I lacked Anakin’s knowledge.

So I went in low, like a barnstormer, firing at anything that caught my fancy. It wasn’t smooth, like a proper starship, Captain. I flew under some bridges or around some mystery struts.
“Pull up, General.” Dice’s voice was strangled.

I could almost see where I was aiming, and I fired the instant I went by some big turrets that were firing in sync.

Nothing happened when I pulled up, aside from some guns trying to get me as all our ships attacked. I didn’t feel any urgency to return to the attack, so I flew away to leave it to my troops before Dice had a stroke. Fire from Gold One was finishing the last attacking larger craft. I saw that there were no more enemy Headhunters.

Dice’s worry was too sharp.

I took several deep breaths to calm again. “Not to worry too much, Commander. Remember that General Skywalker was my instructor and everyone admits he’s the best pilot.”

“He’s insane… General.”

The ship behind us began to break apart, with small flashes of fire or electricity before there was no oxygen for flames. A swarm of lifepods scattered.

“Dice? Do we have enough space to hold them or should we let them try for reentry?”

He paused.

There had to be more ships for troop carriers and heavy equipment implied in the distress calls. And troops? “One more thing, how many troops could have landed from those ships if this is one of the lost legions?”

“We can check on that during refuel, General. We should collect them. They’re following orders, and the locals weren’t that friendly to the Brothers, even when on the same side.”

“Gold One, collect the pods and lock ‘em up. Separate any Brothers from others. See if anyone on board knows the protocols Cody’s team set loose. Update me fifteen after I dock.” I didn’t want to give the raiders more time to set up defenses or get spiteful in their defeat.

Or could I? Without air cover, further progress by these attackers would slow if even possible. This would sludge into a siege.

*The Negotiator* was growing as I got closer. Smaller wings patrolled and boxier craft swung through the battle zone to collect pilots. The waters of the Force were calming in near space.

I could not tell what was happening on planet. The natives could be, or were, destroyed, just out of spite to salt the well. They could be herded together as a hostage shield. On the other hand, enemy might have fled during the battle and the planet was clear and safe.

Assume nothing.

I landed in the hanger and a mix of droids and flight crew rushed in.

*The clock was ticking.*

I stopped at my room for the fresher and a drink. I was not interested in using a communal bathroom in a jump suit. I always hated jumpsuits.

Nor was I fond of communal bathrooms either.
I made it to the bridge a couple of minutes late. “Sorry, I’m late. What’s your summary for that-phase?”

Dice came to attention. “Minor damage to the *Negotiator*, no effect on operations. Twenty-nine fighters lost. Two enemy ships destroyed, though initial analysis indicates either unfamiliarity or maintenance issues contributed. Seventy-one enemy interceptors and eleven other ships destroyed. Two hundred three surviving prisoners being secured, all seeking to kill the General. Extra guards will be assigned to specific locations and I am assigning a squad as bodyguards on board.”

Bigger numbers than I remembered. “Do we have the protocols to short the chips?”

“I put Axe on it, he can contact the 212th while we are down planet if it’s not on board.”

Our medic fixing the chip would cause less physical injuries, but they would probably need suicide watch and ample PTSD care. We could not afford that many pulled from battle right now, but I would be stupid to *not* try to get info on the ground forces. “Can you estimate which is higher ranked to question?”

I was feeling nauseous and stuffed.

The word ‘necessity’ kept looping in my head.

Dice looked at me and pulled me off the bridge. “General Myers?”

I wanted to puke until I was a hollow shell that felt nothing. *May God have mercy on my soul…* I gritted my teeth to speak. “We’ll need to question some, and quickly. We need to know who’s leading this little conquest. I…” I stuttered to a stop.

“Perhaps the General needs to meditate in quiet. Should I call in Axe?”

By breathing carefully, I hadn’t thrown up.

I met Dice’s brown eyes. “It’s my responsibility, if it’s done on my orders. I don’t know how to torture, I hate what I know from history, how it misleads if they don’t know. I- it must be done. To save the Andoans, and minimize deaths among the Brothers.”

“They will not believe our recordings enough to overcome their orders, General. Taking a Seppie world was a standard mission during wartime. They think Jedi are traitors…” His voice was flat and deep with sorrow.”

We could remove the chip, but not quickly enough for the intel.

*I could not decide not to do it.*

“Leave me be for the next quarter hour, disturb only for fresh attack. Gather intel from high orbit. Put a Commander, or highest rank we can ID in the interrogation room to stew while I meditate.”

The ocean of the Force flowed around me, schools of fish lights swarming. Spikey crabs were trying to burrow into shells, not realizing they’d be trapped inside them. I didn’t think pain would make them talk much, the Spartans would have loved the Brothers. It might work, but it might not work right away or on the first prisoner. We had to convince them, or at least one.

Then I remembered Cody and his dismay on Kamino. Could I do it? *Could I afford not to try?*

No. The alternatives were interrogation without limit or going in blind, when we didn’t have to. My
squeamishness would not protect them. I knew enough history that war forced ugly decisions.

I felt dirty already.

Dice returned quietly.

I asked him, “How long would it take for the protocols?”

“Surgery is sure, but Axe says that it and recovery would be at least hours to a cover the first time he does it. He also says surgery can cause memory issues, that might defeat the purpose. Carry says the hack would take longer as we don’t have samples and materials for testing. We weren’t aware, General.”

A sigh came from deep in my chest. “Obi-Wan broke Cody’s chip using the Force and then a few dozen more on Kamino before Cody made a technical cure. I can try.” I didn’t want to mention that Masters did this before or that I hadn’t been trained for brain surgery. But I really wanted to avoid the more physical forms of interrogation.

“He’s waiting quietly, expecting interrogation.”

“What’s his name?” The clone was an enemy, but still a man.

“CP-9989, he won’t admit to a name or to anything beyond his rank.”

“Where’s the observation room?”

I looked in on the nameless clone. He sat there, looking at the door and the mirrors, wondering if people like me were watching behind one or both of them. Any jacket on him had to be at least a year old and lacking everything we needed to know.

I looked at Dice. “See if there’s any data on the unit he was supposed to be with, Jedi commanding, and known roster. Give me an hour, and call my name for emergencies. See how much we can determine from orbit about their current forces and civilians.”

Then I was alone, looking through the glass at the trooper wearing only the liner for his armor. I knew he wasn’t Dice or Shins or even Cody, despite the resemblance or mannerisms, the Force was very clear with his resentment and bitterness. The fear and rage at his capture were more expected.

This room had a table and I sat on it, cross-legged where I could see him if my eyes were open.

Breathing deeply I waded into the Force ocean looking around me. As I left the beach, a killer whale thrashed in the shallow water, water too shallow to get back to his pod some distance away.

My subconscious was working overtime today.

All he could do was splash, and his chocolate eyes didn’t even see me as I carefully touched a fluke. I looked him over as he moved a little restlessly. Moving fingers over the black and white hide to soothe, I hoped he could calm. Better days were coming for him.

I wanted to find that corrupting chip and all I could remember was how huge a cetatean’s brain was, a very big target. But as I watched him flail in the shallow water, I caught a ripple as he tried to move towards his pod. I followed each ripple and wince as moments passed.

I moved carefully back around him, until I found a huge steel hook embedded deep in his flesh, blood still glistening at the edges of the wound. A dark metal thread tied to the hook and sank deep
into the water, anchoring him. It felt of cold and of automation and something else.

Not sure what the line meant, I wanted to break the hook so he could not be yanked around. Removing it could wait, as long as it was broken.

Very carefully, I used my saber, a searing blue that melted through the hook in an instant. I watched to make sure he was uninjured when he went still.

--

“General. General Meyers...”

I opened my eyes. CP-9989 hadn’t moved much and I looked at Dice. “You should talk to him first, then I’ll go in.”

“I spoke to him already. You only go in with guards, Sir.”

I waved him to go first.

- Dice

Nothing had changed while I checked with Block when the General started on the prisoner. Guards were posted in the hall. I brought team leaders into a conference room to study recon as soon as it came in. We had air power. If these were Seppies and their droids instead of brothers, we could just wipe them into rubble. The General suspected there were hostages as well. A frontal assault would be costly.

Sunset and Barbtop were already looking at the archival plans of the fortress and arguing about the soft soil that would not support our heavier equipment. Like Kamino, the base’s location had the shallow lack of foundation rock of land reclaimed from the oceans. No way to tunnel in, but also no chance of a tunnel escape.

Surveillance droids dropped to lower orbits and began to feed images of broken cities. The civvies were coming out, and I didn’t see any enemy-enforced curfew or patrols in the urban ruins. The base had rapidly shifting emplacements, so they were digging in. There were some personnel transports, but nothing with teeth. They could not leave while we controlled the skies.

Were they expecting reinforcements?

After a few minutes, I left the debate where Turbo and Synchro argued about a frontal attack. The guards were relaxed outside the interrogation room.

General Meyers hadn’t moved since I left, looking calm and remote as our old General had. That gave me a twist of guilt, despite knowing I had no choice.

Now I had more choices, and I wanted to talk to my brother and see if reason might work.

When I entered his cell, Trooper 9989 looked up at me, clenching his fists. “I don’t talk to traitors.”

“There are no traitors assigned to this ship. This is a ship of the Grand Army of the Republic. When was the last time you were in barracks on Coruscant or Kamino with your brothers? What renegade or outsider do you obey? Not all Generals are worth your loyalty. You heard what happened to the Vod’e under Krell. We need this data to save your brothers from wasted deaths.”

“You’re the one with the traitor General. I saw that Jedi ship in battle. A good soldier follows orders.
You are not a good soldier."

I sat on the other chair. “I was where you are. I shot my General, Knight Loreck Ta'em. It was a clean shot. I might feel better if I could pretend mine was a later shot and he was already dead when I pulled the trigger, but that would be a lie. I didn’t feel anything when I shot him, I barely remembered my name or my brothers, a droid more than a Vod.

“I was the best marksman of the 408th, but a good soldier follows orders. A Good soldier kills traitors.” I had to swallow old rage and guilt. “Then we heard the counter-order from the Chancellor and Senate. They order the Grand Army, they put us under the Jedi when we left Kamino. A traitor gave that Order 66, to him we were only tools to destroy our Generals. He declared himself emperor, the greatest traitor of all to the Republic we swore our lives to.”

9989 scoffed. “You weren’t executed or decommissioned?”

“The Jedi don’t blame us. They knew the chip left to ‘keep us sane’ was a poison that took away what little we had and made us droids to kill on command. We can have names. We can make plans for after the war and choosing our futures.

“Do you have that, CT-9989?” I saw he was listening.

He crossed his arms. “This isn’t much of an interrogation.”

“Our new General doesn’t like to fight. She does not want to order interrogations, but will. You went and karked up her peace mission.” That came in a growl, and I left him alone again.

Leading the General in, CT-9989 tensed, but didn’t attack.

She stood a couple steps back and crossed her arms. “So what’s your name, trooper? It took me twenty years to learn my ID number, so I don’t want to memorize more numerals for anyone else.”

“Chops.”

The General smiled slightly. “I think all your brothers will welcome you all back once this madness has passed. You were lost, but now were found. Were chipped, but now you see. If you could answer a few questions, we just want to know who tried to steal your loyalty to make you into pirates.”

Chops looked undecided.

“Look, you obviously are not following GAR or Senate orders. You’re attacking a Seppie world so you’re not working for them. That leave only pirates or Sith to be using your lives.” General Meyers paused.

None of us liked pirates, but openly following a Sith like Dooku…?

“An albino female bounty-hunter who hates the Jedi and her partner. Fett wants vengeance. This was a job to her and Seppies are still a good target for us.”

“Do you know why she was attacking Ando?” The General asked after a sigh.

Chops looked at me. “No. We were to defeat them so they would stop being Seppies. A base to build from. She, neither of them, think much of the Andos. ‘Dumb thugs who would settle with a strong leader.’”
“Dictators make quiet people… not Republics.”

I said, “The bounty hunter isn’t showing a very specific a strategy, General. We know Ando can’t survive without allies. She is planning something.”

The General covered her eyes for a moment. “Commander Chops, you will have to return to detention for now. Your men on board will be returned to barracks on Coruscant for treatment and reintegration with your other brothers. There you can meet with healers or other brothers to talk about what the Sixty-Six did to you all.” She waved us out of the room.

After Chops was locked up again, I found General Meyers on the bridge. It was approaching a hundred twenty minutes since the orbital battle. “General?”

“I’m pretty sure that bounty hunter is Ventress. She’s not a Jedi, which would keep the Order 66 limit quiet. But she’s good, on par with Master Obi-Wan and Anakin. I can’t outfight her.” She looked out at the quiet planet. “That doesn’t mean we can’t send her on her way.”

I did not like the General’s statement. It was so much easier with General Ta’em.
Chapter Summary

Vora struggles through her first mission in the hot seat, with lives in the balance. Snark is another kind of graveyard humor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Obi-Wan

The strain lessened again, but still no updates arrived from Andor. More than two hours passed, seeming far longer than that first attack on Naboo.

I would admit that I listened to the report on Senate business with less than half my attention. Term and power limit reforms came more easily than studies and proposals to simplify and streamline critical issues without losing consensus. Manumission and compensation for the clones was still moving slowly and the distaste we all shared for the banking guilds’ arguments was clear among the others of the Council.

Other systems were studying the Kaller treaty, and reached different sticking points, but Council consensus was that our recommendation would be for no changes, barring some extreme oversight. All the worlds of the Republic should be the same after a time. Returning worlds will have forfeited routine trust and relations, but there should not be different classes of worlds dejure.

Still, no update came from Ando, and I tried to absorb reported events of upset in more urban worlds.

“...ight of the silence since first contact,” Mace was speaking with concern.

I paid more attention, worried about what I’d missed.

“Additional forces will be sent to relieve those already present.”

I straightened up and began to marshal my arguments, woefully sure how difficult it would be, I knew I could not speak too soon or too late.

“I will be going, Obi-Wan. I have worked with one of the Lost Legions before, and I’ve met more of the younger ones than you have.” Shaak Ti leaned forward, showing concern.

“Master Ti will be leaving within the hour, Master Kenobi.” Mace spoke with the weight of a mountain in the Force, more to reinforce that the decision had been already made.

I straightened my legs and crossed my arms. For a moment I did not trust myself to speak, other than with clenched teeth. So I simply nodded and forced myself to breathe deeply and slowly.

Mace dismissed the meeting, though he looked at me warily like he expected an attack or explosion… or something. He seemed to be weighing a thought.

Between one breath and the next my hearing grew hollow and I was dazed with how bright the
chamber suddenly seemed, I was more surprised when Vos stood beside me in nearly empty room.

“Come on, Obi. We all worry about their first missions.” His sing-song came with his pull toward the lifts. “Let’s go get you good and drunk, so you don’t try to sneak aboard the Capable.”

I could do for a late night at a Cantina. I did not want anyone to think they could expect my attention while I listened to the Force.

Vos led me toward his quarters instead of Coruscant’s streets and pulled out a couple of bottles.

I already made a dent in mine before he spoke again.

“You’ve regained some weight since the war there, Obi-Wan. I wasn’t going to haul your drunken arse back up from a Cantina.” His smirk was clear in his voice.

Not listening very closely, I sought Vora in the Force. She was across the room and many light years away. Tension, fear and dread were rising… and there were echoes and hints about heavy combat.

I could not tell if the pain that seemed so distant was real or my fears. Enough to taunt my worries, but nothing else. I shivered as if I had just crossed space both ways.

“Obi! Obi-Wan Kenobi.” Someone shook me.

I blinked open my eyes at Quinlan, my arms crossed to still my shaking hands. I smelled the whiskey all around me. “What?” I snarled.

“Here and now, my friend. I don’t think checking out will help Meyers.” Vos gathered up the low bottle and looked at it sadly, the smell saying I’d spilled more than I noticed. “Have you or wonder-boy had any visions?”

“No, not that I know of.” I took back the bottle and took another swig. It should be enough. “You know I almost never get warnings in detail or scope.”

He took a long pull from his own and belched, intending to provoke me. “At least neither of your Padawans has that limit, and they had no warning. Finish your bottle and drag yourself off to bed.”

I carefully stood, cradling the bottle before I spoke very precisely. “Thank you for the distraction, Vos. I needed this.”

“Anytime, Kenobi, it’s been a while. But I hope next time you’re here and not light years away. The Capable left an hour ago. Do you need help getting back or do you want to sleep here?”

Not as steady after a testing knee bends and a turn, I had another swig. “My balance seems less unsatiz- factory.” Or was that more?

“Skywalker? You want to come get him, you’re the only sober one in the room.”

“Right.” Anakin simmered with not saying more and cut the call.

Vos grinned. “All I have left is the cheap stuff if Skywalker wants to get drunk, too.”

I leaned closer as to share a secret. “He’s finally developing a taste for the better stuff. He wants to look more cultured for his Senator. That works much, much better than my lectures. I should have used that tack long ago.”

Laughing before I finished, he dropped a half-full bottle on the table. “Sit down, Obi. This stuff is
about as good as I found on that sandpile years ago.”

Another slug and I sat on the floor to meditate. Vora lived, but I couldn’t get any closer.

A Force shove tilted me over, and Anakin was just inside the door. “Time to go.” His shields were up and strong.

“Got a bottle if you want one too, Skywalker,” my old friend beamed.

Anakin glared. “The twins are keeping everyone up.”

I wasn’t sure about his pronouncements, but creche duty was supposed to be calming. When I stood, I saw my bottle was almost empty. I was feeling warm from it, so I thanked Vos with an elaborate flourish. Then I carefully glided to the door.

My former apprentice easily caught up at the lift. “And I thought you might be out of practice.”

“I’ve been-” I forgot what I was going to say and stopped, hoping Anakin would let it pass.

He started snickering and nudged me forward when I slowed. When we arrived, Padmé was sitting up in the larger bed, looking sleepy and worried.

I gave a really shallow bow, feeling nothing and my shields tight. “I will say my good nights. Anakin, Senator.” I sent welcome and contentment to the twin suns, locking up my worries inside a small case for disposal. Then I turned away to get some water and seek the newest bedroom.

“Obi-Wan-”

I stopped, but didn’t turn back as I did not want to speak about it. “I reek and I’m not fit company until my body processes the liquor and I have meditated… I have my duties in the morning, after all.”

Then I carefully left them to their mutual content. The smaller bed, the smaller room was not as much a comfort as I hoped and I could not sleep.

Many possessions she brought from her home world remained boxed up still in the corner, from a time when I could not admit that Vora was as much a prisoner as guest. Some had gone to the Archives, and some to an Educorps member who was probably analyzing the culture and technology revealed.

I knew the most important thing: they weren’t that different.

Curious, I went over and opened one box. Inside were the original holos and some books. Madame Nu must have returned them. The other box was mostly empty, and I remembered the clothing stuffed in a hurry. A small image was made of fabric in some sort of formal pattern of the woven base. Another was hand drawn sketch of some birds in a stream or pond. One small sculpture was of a two bladed fighter in combat, though it did not resemble Jar’Kai. These items had been left behind as she grew in the Force. I did not know what these meant.

Vora yet lived, but that did not mean she was well. That did not guarantee she was free.

I knew I needed to meditate to rein in my attachment.

_I could not continue like this._

I was useless, unable to concentrate within mere Council duties. Combat or leadership responsibilities were forsaken. Bitter, bitter was my understanding of my failure.
How could I consider myself a Master, an example to other Jedi and republic citizens when I failed to focus on routine duties? What if a new threat had risen and I was in a daze? Worse: what if it was a consequence of an old mission and I was unable to advise?

The room shrank and a headache threatened for a moment.

Worse, I had been a drain on my former Padawan when he was still worried about his wife.

An echoey voice at the edge of perception chanted a denial, but it was true.

So many saw my failures that denial was pointless. This was no balanced attachment we were hoping to build.

This was passion and bias and loss of any balance.

The test, the experiment with attachment was a failure, at least for me. I could not have a balanced attachment. Every time I’d gotten attached, it grew worse, would I Fall the next time I lost someone? Would someone have to die for it to be any more clear?

This could not continue.

There was no reason to condemn based on my failure. Anakin was thriving. A few others were reported to be dating, but the names made no impression.

I had to prune the thicket of my emotions and reclaim my composure. I dreaded telling my Padawans, neither would take it well. I would tell them once Vora was back, so neither would lack one who understood.

Calm finally came. I had a plan. Meditation and turning a deafer ear to overwhelming emotions. They were not for me. Speak with Anakin and Vora privately as soon as possible. Resuming my proper responsibilities was paramount. I could not continue like this.

Finally, I returned the art items and went to my meditation mat for a more proper mediation so I could clip the undergrowth. I would not sleep tonight, that was clear in the Force, but a plan was calming.

Alarm from the other room broke my meditation much later, Anakin was awake and terrified.

Anakin? Do you need to talk about it?

He was surprised and attempting calm. -Same nightmare, Master. Or maybe two. Bounty hunters and some other threat and Ventress and brothers and Vora and three bloody sabers in the water.-

I forced a deeper breath. Can you feel anything about when?

-The bloody sabers don’t make me want to run somewhere tonight.- A trace of his twin-evoked calm leaked through. Calmly frightened was new.

That left bounty hunters and Ventress in the dream or vision, a common tactic for her. She had a taste for being a warlord of old. I knew nothing to dispute or confirm those links to the current situation on Ando.

After several minutes of quiet, Anakin started moving around. -I’m going to drill, do you want to spar?- 

I needed more meditation to prepare for the Council meeting. Later, I hope.
The conference room was under the weight of fear or doom when I entered. Eight or ten brothers straightened up and saluted. Admiral Block’s was less precise.

But then, he had extensive training and I was promoted above him. I could sympathize and should speak to him as soon as I could.

I waggled my fingers by my head. “Thank you, gentlemen. This attack is being run by the Dark side user Ventress and mercenary Boba Fett, according to one of the prisoners. I don’t know how she transferred their loyalty, even in part, but they were thinking of taking this planet like any GAR mission. Their chips are still active, except now Chops, and I’m not sure how stable they will be. They’ve had much longer under that drek.”

These brothers knew what the prisoners would go through and the mood darkened even more.

“So we’re still left with a decision between wait in a siege while they dig in or take them out. I don’t like the needless body count for the latter. Opinions?” I looked at them carefully.

There was a hesitance, but Axe spoke. “I can build an EMP signal that will force a reset of all settings to original, turning it off. It isn’t as good as the hacking protocol or surgery as it could be ordered again, but it will have a longer range than the permanent fix. An appreciable percent will attempt suicide and we won’t be able to stop it.

That made me feel ill. “Do we know how many places they’ve dug in?” The Force was not encouraging the EMP approach.

Synchro’s arms were crossed as he glared at the map. “Not that well, General. We’re sure about the fort.

“Scouting runs at the least, Sir.” Dice was making notes on a padd quietly.

I looked at the rotating holo. “Do we have many civilian Comm codes? Andos might know more, and I’d prefer any attack with a greater advantage than just air cover.”

Carrier started tying in a remote. “I will send a query back to base. We won’t know many, or if any are operational.

“The attack’s delayed, the scouting will take hours, correct?” I really didn’t want to hesitate if it would cost more lives in the end.

The Navy officer finally spoke. “The Seppies will assume you are commanding the entire operation, General. They will not trust us, blame us for every death that happens as we wait.”

That, that, was the reason I was expecting to push the attack. My headache returned, and I nodded at him. “Thank you. Get all the comm numbers you can in the next half hour. Send scout teams out, make sure they have backup, but I want results in ninety so we can start. I want pilots and reserves held aside, we’ll need the scouting reports before we decide further.”

Dice nodded toward the door, but once we stood in the hall, he asked, “Do I have permission to plan services for casualties?”

I could almost smell the blood over me, but he was so calm and almost blasé about it. “Yes, I want to attend, too.” I had to take a deep breath as there would be more.
I turned away from the bridge.

“General, Vits wants to see you at the Quartermaster’s shop.”

“Right, thanks.” I got there without wasting much time looking.

Vits was peering into a metal cabinet. “General. It’s just about cured.”

That made me stop. “It?”

“Your armor, it’s not perfect, sir, but we really request you have this before you fight any lost brothers.” He swallowed. “Our old General was hit by many snipers, sir.”

I could feel how much he believed what he was saying. But I also knew Obi-Wan had armor in his locker, worn armor.

I couldn’t hide under their wings today, and I should not risk more of these kids to cover my butt. After another few breaths, I managed to speak without anger. “Fine.”

The various symbols seemed passing strange for me: the Order’s winged circle and shining blade, the fleet Circle of loss. There were others that meant little to me. The armor was practical, without chest or hip decorations. The most obvious things were announcing my being a Jedi, and that a female in this battle, this war, said I was important even if they knew nothing else.

I moved around the supply bay to get a feel for it. Problem was, that I didn’t think I’d never worn clothing that had to be strapped on before. I lived for casual Friday and this felt more like a costume than something real and necessary. The biggest thing was the noise difference compared to robes. I’d probably be okay, I didn’t jump around like the Flea.

-Ataru is an effective form, especially with a partner.- Qui-Gon was amused for a moment and then alarmed.

“Well, unless Ventress wants to team up, that’s not happening. That could be an interesting outcome.” I seemed to be alone after that snark and went to the mess for a quick gloop shake before returning to the bridge.

Dice didn’t say anything when he saw me, but his relief was clear. “We have a list of contacts.”

I forced a smile. “I’ll make those calls...”

Half were not working and the other half held frantic people. I wasn’t sure if I was soothing, but we learned that the attackers had pulled back to that fortress. I didn’t know their vocal cues, but I offered to make a call for humanitarian aid back to Coruscant and Kaller.

I should have thought of it sooner, and sent that urgent request both directions. Let Kaller help with the peace.

Then I returned to the briefing room where scouting reports were arriving. Nothing about the old base made it seem any easier. No escape or entrance tunnels through the mud. Not hard-packed for walkers, though I personally didn’t trust them like I would stabler and lower tanks. They had the high ground so to speak, but were such very big targets. A peninsula so there was no real flank.

“Any progress with that EMP?” I wondered.

Shins shook his head. “That seems a dead end, General. We ran a few tests and they stayed with
each other or tried to fight anyone nearby and had to be sedated.”

The hard way.

No matter how much it hurt.

I let them plan the attack, they were the experts. I really had to study this more later. I wanted to get as many on both sides out alive as I could.

The fort had heavy bunkers and artillery suited to flatten a ground attack and shoot troop transport down. It was clear to me that they had to be destroyed, and we could use rocks from orbit with maneuvering jets to target if we had to. Then it came down to bloody melee.

“Sir?” Dice spoke at me.

Forcing a smile, I met his eyes. “So, what’s the plan so far?”

“Straightforward, General. Our main force comes in at an angle away from the landing pads. Our secondary come later in a mirror direction, hopefully to either prevent troopship escapes or encourage Fett and Ventress to flee.” That last was said with loathing.

“Did the scout teams get any idea where they were?” I asked.

Sunset shook his head. “They kept under cover, but I think some were showing stress more than seasoned troops.”

“We can’t count on that. They have nothing to lose. Glory and honor are only sound for them until they return.” Shins looked up at the group. “We know what they forget because we forgot, too.”

“Are there any ways we can knock them out with gas?” I hoped.

“Helmets,” Synchro shook his head.

“What’s the plan if they break out?” I looked at the fort and open sea beyond it, with the one road coming in at an angle between banks.

“Our air cover takes them down, targeting engines. They won’t. We can’t swim too well.” Dice didn’t sound sad, but there was an old pain there.

I felt sure it wouldn’t be just a sweep. “Looks good to me. I will have to chase down Ventress if she hasn’t already fled. Her former master may have words for her.”

Dice frowned and made some notes, a little small to read from here.

“Is that a problem?” I worried a little.

“Changing your guard detail, Sir. Carry’s to take operational command of our main group.”

That guard idea bothered me again, these boys were about a third of my age, and this room held most of the ones I knew the names of. “Fine. Pass to everyone: try for non-lethal damage without risking your own health when you see an option. No one gets decommissioned if we can manage it, even them.”

Nothing else was added, and our transports stayed in high orbit during the bombardment. Cameras from air and our main force were stitched together to give a detailed image of the battleground.
A fire was blazing in the southeast defensive wall, but it didn’t do us much good yet. Carry was at the southwest with a handful of sacrificial drones. The leading troops reached the gate when it blew up.

I could not help wincing and hoping the Force welcomed them, too.

The ground ahead was like a tunnel where wires crisscrossed above rubble. It was clear that they had a kill zone when fire from concealed wall ports shot down a drone. It self destructed.

“We’re pulling back for a few, Commander.” Carry’s name was labeled in the display. “Requesting Turbo clearing it.”

A single bomb landed in the alley, making a crater. Caution was the watchword. Progress was slow as more of the 408th got inside the original perimeter.

I had to speak, I couldn’t keep watching them die from safety. “Time to go in, Commander.”

“Are you sure, Sir?” He spoke quietly.

I was hoping they were shifting toward this group. “Yes.” I projected into the chatter. “Keep them busy. Ventress likes to taunt Jedi.”

Our transport landed beyond the fort’s range just after strafing runs from several. Others also landed in a shell game. First target was their landing pad.

I spread out part of my perceptions to the whitewater rapids ahead of me. Shots were haphazard and batted aside as we fought through defending squads.

A brighter light knocked me aside and went out when hit with multiple blasts. A brother I knew slightly, Barbtop. My eyes burned and stomach lurched with a stifled sob as he died so fast.

There wasn’t enough blood for so fast a death.

“General?”

I looked outward again and saw nasty rocks in the churning water ahead of us, and I held my hand up to stop them. “Mines, back, back.”

Synchro moved up. “Where, General?”

I dropped to a squat. “Line across the trail to the wall. Big and heavy, they feel old.”

He grinned. “Got it. Get cover.”

I moved back, following Dice. Synchro ran until he reached the transport. Then I heard several detonations, not that big, followed by so many it seemed like rolling thunder. They knew we were coming this way, too. I was running back ahead before the echoes faded,

We reached the break in the wall, much larger than hours ago, craters already looked wet from mist. Then the fighting began in earnest.

I felt almost like a pinata for how many took a shot at me, using rifles as clubs if they were close enough. I did not show as much mercy as I would have liked and I lost track of how many died. I could block far better then reflect, Dice was the marksman.

We reached the pad and found a single ship, not very big.
“Two man interceptor, General. Not top of the line, but it is Jump capable.” Dice made sure I knew the important part.

“Someone disable it.” I looked toward the fort, unable to parse much specific from the Force.

Skidding out of the barrier ditch not even seconds later, Ventress and the younger Fett skidded to a stop with us between them and the remaining ship.

“Ah, yes. Kenobi’s pet Jedi.” That was bitterness and spite as she brought up her weapon.

That left me grinning. “Really, Ms. Ventress? Have you considered the possibility that he’s my pet Jedi. He is easy on the eyes, when all is said and done.”

That got me a sneer as she took a guard position. “Why face me? You do not have the experience or skill to be a threat. If Kenobi and the boy cannot defeat me… you?” She laughed.

I didn’t deny that. “If I studied for the rest of my life, I might get as good as they were five years ago. I’m not the warrior or the negotiator. I am the wild card, the flapping butterfly that ends a drought. I was hoping to speak with you sometime. You know a good Cantina?”

“You’re a weak General, I’m sure you know many useful things for my plans.”

I raised my left hand a little, hoping Dice would hold. “Not as many as you might think. I spent most of the last forty years beyond the Rim, so the Holonet knows more than me. I was wondering why bother attacking such a restive planet, more trouble than it’s cost? What’s the point?”

“Power. It’s all about power to have what I want, do what I want.”

At least she hadn’t activated her main blade. I could hear the battle continuing a distance away. “What do you want to do with that power? That was Sidious’ problem. He got off on the power but didn’t really do anything but plot for more. I can get off quite well without his kind of power.”

I heard a snort from behind me and more smothered snickers.

Ventress glared at me, but her mouth twitched. Fett snarled. “Revenge.”

“I’m sorry. But you and your father were in the wrong business if you don’t realize that sooner or later someone will succeed in getting revenge on him for things he’d done. You stay like this and you’ll be eaten by a Sarlacc for a very, very long time.”

Ventress chuckled. “An interesting threat from a Jedi.”

“Merely informing him of a wide Force-Vision of a possible future. I’d prefer he start a family, open a school, or reconcile with his brothers. Estrangement is cold comfort over the years and he is still young enough to have a full life if he wants, as do you.” Now they both glared, and all the brothers made for a quiet audience.

“Power for revenge.” Ventress said while gritting her teeth.

“Someone here on Ando did you wrong?”

“This is about power.” One track programming.

I was beginning to see why Obi-Wan did this kind of poking. “You could cut out the dark side and
grabbing power and just deal with whatever you’re angry with. Dooku admitted you have a good reason to be angry with him.”

She growled, showing teeth. “I take someone, my teacher, ordering my death as very ‘wrong’ as you call it.”

“Right now, you’re free, unlike him. Unlike his idiot master. Sometimes the best revenge is living the good life and pissing on their grave. Dooku is a prisoner in the Temple, and will probably never leave again.”

“Having tea and a light saber isn’t much of a prison,” she spat.

“Think about the boredom and seeing only Jedi for the rest of your life.”

“Maybe I will do something else after I get revenge for my father.” Fett challenged.

He was harder to shift, but a juvvie by earth rules so I’d stall. “People with issues with their fathers are a credit for a dozen. Good parents don’t want their children to throw their lives away for nothing, unless your world likes ending families. Ms. Ventress, I could help you talk to Dooku sometime. He’s changed his views on power and I suspect he’d like to talk to you. Maybe to apologize, but he’s hard to read sometimes for an old coot.”

She showed a baffled shock on her face. 

Achievement gained!

Fett started getting uneasy. “Don’t try your mind tricks on me.”

“Your partner would know if I had, Fett. Sith are very good at persuading people that destruction will profit them and he’s got your six. But it’s all a lie, they’re only out for themselves. Droids are more loyal and honorable.” Here goes. “I won’t, the Order won’t, let you keep this world, even if they are Separatist. You won’t get the revenge you’re dreaming of either, but I can help you get something satisfactory. You tell your men to stand down, we’ll remove the slave collars Sidious put inside them. You set them free and we’ll let you leave.”

Ventress lit her sabers. “We can go right through you. I saw you fight.”

I copied Dooku’s usual opening stance. “I’m sure you did. And I’ve already said you’re better than me, so you won’t prove anything. It’s no more meaningful to show your skill than killing children.”

“It will annoy Kenobi.” She’d almost completely hidden a wince before she spoke.

“Cold soup annoys Kenobi.”

That made her smile. “I never got the chance to finish using that mask on him. I managed to repair it. One size fits any Jedi.”

Shit on a shingle. That rang very Dark somewhere in their past. I was going to twist somebody’s arm until I get more later. “I can’t give you power.”

“I can use the power of fear.” She was gloating. “Your fear and anger will be fed back into you

“Only a fool feels no fear.” The momentum was not in my favor right now, and I didn’t see where I messed up.

A warning came, but I was too tied into reading Ventress and didn’t react fast enough. Surrounded in
pain, the wave front spread all through me and I felt like I could not move or breathe for an instant as I skidded on the ground and blasters rang over me.

“Fool!” Ventress snarled. “We need proo...”

I forced a breath and blinked my eyes as I tried to focus with the weight on me, a clone I didn’t really know.

The light above me passed.

I wanted to cry, wanted to rage.

I didn’t know who it was, but I rolled him off me and rolled the opposite direction. I kept rolling and blaster shots followed me. I hurt, but enough was still working that I got upright into a crouch.

Fett charged closer, his heavy gun swinging to hit me in the head.

Yanking on the blaster with the Force at an angle to disarm him, I heard bones crack over the sound of multiple blasters. But he managed to hold on a moment too long, with a strangled grunt.

I knew he was attached to his weapon, and that was what I hoped for as I lit my saber.

The boy lost his weapon and his arm. Hardening my intent, I shoved hard at his helmet, hoping for a concussion.

Shock or head injury he flopped to the ground.

I beat up a child.

Sadness and anger at myself warred.

That left the Darksider.

Several of my team were down, some dying.

Ventress looked at me with a glint of almost glee, lowering her saber hilt like a hammer to the air below.

I raised my own just a trifle as a Force shove exploded from her.

My men slid and skidded back until they hit something.

I kept to my feet, though I swayed back and forth like a willow.

“Just us now, little Jedi. How long until you break?”

I could feel she had done this before and I tried to clamp down on my fear that was going ballistic. “I never claimed to be brave. That proves nothing.”

Her grin said she was enjoying this. “I can prove to Kenobi that I can break what is important to him. You don’t matter in that.”

Really? She looked roughly Anakin’s age, far too bitter and hateful. “So you decided that you want to copy Dooku in how he treated people who he was responsible for. You want power like the black hole that was Sidious. You want power to destroy me. That’s easy. You think that will destroy Kenobi? Won’t happen. These are all lines in the sand, nothing in the long run. What do you really
She sneered. “I want you to shut up!” She swept down and another from the side.

My block wasn’t fast enough to deflect both and a score went right through my arm plate before her saber was pushed aside. I jumped back. The armor swung wildly.

“God damn it, bitch! What is wrong with you?” I called the little fishies from Ilum as I circled her. I was afraid to look at it and validate the injury.

I wished the fishies to nudge and nibble and have pointy bits as they circled her. Distraction and annoyance.

“Pah. Enough of this.”

The woman raised and closed her fist as her body and terrain shimmered in the shock I was denying.

Oh, shit. I had just enough time to catch a deep breath. A dozen fishies poked her as I tried to breathe.

Dice shouted something I didn’t understand, and multiple blasters tracked to hit her from a half dozen directions. Most she deflected, but a couple hit.

An instant after her cry, I could breathe again.

Another blaster got a bead on her, and I set my fishies to push on her feet and ankles. She made a really long leap and landed next to the interceptor to scramble in. Blasting off as firing continued.

My men kept firing, but I was out of tricks and stumbled to the weakest injured. Whatever calm I could muster, I sent them each to sleep.

“General!” Who was addressing me was unclear for a minute, but then Dice looked at me with shocky eyes.

He looked like he needed a hug, but my arm was not cooperating. So I gripped his shoulder with my good hand.

“Very good, Commander. We got one, and the other lost her foothold.” I swayed again.

“Axe!” he shouted, trying to ease me down. “Get the General!”

I locked by knees and touched my sore throat to whisper. “If I sit, I won’t get up.”

Axe didn’t say anything, he just dragged me to a fallen barrel to sit for his exam. He wrapped my arm in something cool, cooler after a shot. “General, you are not fit for combat.”

Dice gave me my light saber and I had a lot of trouble trying to attach it with the wrong hand. The bandage looked huge.

The pain felt bigger.

“Okay, Dice, you’re the Commander. What’s your plan?”

“Pull back here for the moment, they can’t flee now. Check to see if they will surrender as POWs, that should buy time. They won’t believe us. Then fight. Contact civilians after. Pull back to the Negotiator and resume mission.”
“Sounds good. Make sure they can’t break out.” The pain was only dulled. “I’ll go back up as soon as you think we have enough reinforcements.”

“Yes, Sir.” Dice’s relief was clear.

Soon he was piloting me back, and we had an escort. After docking, I got hurried to medical for the blaster burns, near misses, and the slice in my arm.

I could not look at it.

I could barely read the medical summary, that it went nearly to the bone. I did not want to think about it, that would make it real.

That explained why Dice was so insistent that I be evacuated. I knew I was hurt, but it really hadn’t hurt much worse than the shingles. Rah, rah, shock.

But when it sank in, I had to grit my teeth to keep in the screams. They decided I needed nearly two days in the tank to make sure I behaved. I wasn’t quite sure why they thought I would not obey medical orders. When I woke after those days, the pain was a ghost and my fingers moved sluggishly.

How did they get around regrowing neurons? Or did Force healing act like super stem cells?

My arm was still bundled in bacta, but I was allowed to move around if I had an escort. Dressing was less fun and I needed help with more than I liked.

The clock was still ticking. “Did any reports go back? Did they surrender? Did the locals call?”

Shins was my shadow. “Dice sent a simple notice that there was a pause in the action and you were in medical. No actual report, Sir.” He paused, unhappy. “Too few surrendered. We're going to be in close quarters if we take them back.”

“They will get back. Keep a close watch on them. I'll want to speak to… Chops, was it?”

“He does seem traumatized, Sir.” Shins sounded sure.

That made me smile. “You started getting through those references, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “Little of it applies to soldiers. We don’t have time or opportunity for courting, but improving memory and handling stress look useful. Discussion about grieving has been lively. But I appreciate the more general educational ones.”

“Good, I don’t know as much as I’d like, but I had a good teacher when I was around your age. I’ll get a hold of more.” I guessed Padmé might point me toward civilian counseling programs and remote degrees and certs. I wrote that down quick.

“I’m guessing the Council sent reinforcements as soon as we reported in. We can decide what to do then. Do we have the name of any senior Andor officials?”

Shins didn’t look at any notes. “A Senior Council member Lenzilmuz has been demanding to meet with you while you were in medical, General.”

I checked my appearance, and I appeared normal enough for a stranger. The bandaging just made the sleeve of my cloak look big. The call was placed and I saw the face of one of the water adapted amphibians. “Greetings, this is General Meyers, of the Republic ship the Negotiator. I was sent here
by the Republic Senate to begin negotiations, when we saw the Warlord Ventress’ forces running amuck. They are neutralized. I regret I was in medical until now. How fare your people?”

“We were fine for months, but just before the Republic sends a treaty some third party decides to attack us. Using Clones, too? A hundred thousand died in our surface settlements. Forgive me if I find that a bit suspicious.” His anger required no Force sensitivity to feel.

“I feel sorrow the Warlord picked your world to try for a base. Before the battle I called for assistance from Coruscant. I also requested humanitarian assistance from Kaller.” I sighed, as I doubted they would make peace anytime soon. “We can remain in orbit until allies arrive to prevent additional incursions, if you wish.”

He seemed surprised for an instant, but returned to angry. After some more polite exchanges back and forth I didn’t feel he was in any way receptive to the sample treaty.

So much for emulating Obi-Wan.

I briefly inspected the ruins of the fortress. Those brothers with their neon markings stared or even glared at me. Many lunged, but could not get out that easily. Many were bandaged up and a few of their own checking on them. They seemed afraid and trying not to show it.

At least the fear was dominating the depression.

My own men were also worried about them.

Chops was escorted to my work room on the Negotiator.

He saluted. “General...”

“How are you doing, Commander? The 212th has a permanent cure back on Coruscant.”

Chops looked aside. “It’s hard to remember what we, what I did.”

I tried to project calm and peace. “The Order doesn’t blame you. I was assigned to the 408th after the previous General passed. Allies in the Senate are working to get you all full citizenship, and future careers after peace is negotiated. You will be able to choose as individuals or groups.”

“What will happen to us? What do you expect from me?” He was resigned.

“As the first for your brothers to be freed from those Sith chips, you should be the spokesman for your unit. If they have problems getting assistance or treatment, my Commander Dice, or Shins can help. Quarters will remain close until they can be treated. You will be escorted... I have a few questions.”

Chops nodded, internally uneasy.

“What legion were you in? Can you confirm the name and fate of your General?”

His voice was shaking when he spoke. “The 934th. Our General... died well.”

Records on Coruscant should have more. I waited until he faced me again. “By our count you had 5529 men before your attack, and 3515 survived. We only had a partial count of orbital forces, so I hope you can fill that in. We can arrange a funeral if your men want to say goodbye.”

He sighed, the numbers becoming more real as he heard them.
I spoke to Shins. “Assign a hand to hand specialist to escort him, but let ’im talk to his men. If they turn on him extract him. Plan to bring the prisoners up real soon, I don’t want locals getting a crack at them.”

One more stop before I started writing my summary for the Council: Fett. He was in a much smaller high security cell in the brig.

“Of course you gutless bastards wouldn’t have the balls to kill me! I will escape and make you all bleed.” He spat his bile when he saw me.

I tightened my lips against a trace of amusement at the boy. Without his armor he looked much younger than his brother clones. War had forced them to grow up faster than he aside from the physical hastening, even if they were still painfully young, Not that he was a stranger to violence, but it had been a game his father kept winning.

He still wanted to win, to take his vengeance without consequence. He wasn’t Jedi and he was still a minor in every way, but he had fought and led enemy forces without the forcing of the chips.

“I’m sorry for your loss, but that doesn’t mean you’re allowed to kill hundreds or thousands because you’re mad at one Jedi.” I forced a smile. “And of course I don’t have the balls to execute you, women are a little short of that equipment. You’re staying here. If you have any simple request beyond medical and sustenance, they will depend on your behavior. If you want to talk to someone because small rooms are very boring, take advantage of the opportunity.”

Fett’s hatred overfloweth.

That made me sad. He was about high school age, and a future in whatever prisons offered here wasn’t much of a life.

I returned to my preliminary report, full of numbers and objectives and commendations. By the time I sent it, Dice commed me.

“General, a ship just appeared in-system. They are identifying themselves as the Capable under General Master Ti.”

I thought I would have known it was Obi-Wan only a little quicker than Anakin. “Open a channel if you would.”

Master Ti was not in armor when her blue hologram appeared. “Knight Meyers, I am relieved to see the battle has calmed. What is your status?”

“Dice send Master Ti the preliminary report. Damage to Andor cities has been extensive, and they are reluctant to receive the model treaty in the aftermath of the attack. The attackers included the still suborned 934th, as well as Ventress and the younger Fett. She escaped, Fett captured. The 934th needs to be dechipped. There were a lot of casualties.”

“I see you were injured.”

I looked at my arm. “Yeah, but medical released me for light stuff some hours ago.”

“I will be over shortly, General.” Then she cut the channel.

I was fine with that. I wanted to go home. It was much easier to fly an interceptor than face a Darksider.
I stopped to see Axe before heading for the bay to meet the other Master. Dice wanted to go with me, but I set him to the logistics of the prisoners removal. It would be easier if the Capable could help ferry them back, but I suspected that wasn’t happening.

I bowed as soon as she stepped into view. “Master Ti.”

“Knight Meyers. I would like to discuss this mission with you in detail.” She didn’t smile.

I gestured to the ready room and stepped away. “Vora, if you would when possible. I don’t care for formality much.”

She said nothing to that, which made me nervous. I didn’t feel any better once we were in private.

“You seem unsettled, Knight.”

I took a deep breath, it was like a burr under my saddle, as archaic as that was. “I never have been fond of job reviews. They never went that well for me.”

She looked puzzled. “Your ratings have been more than adequate, considering. Were they incorrect?”

“They were before leaving my home world. Doing what I saw as the right thing got me out on my ass, And the consequences were never fun.”

The female Master hummed. “That is one compelling reason for younger students, there is much less to unlearn.

I could smile at that. “That applies to any knowledge field, not just the Order. Do you hire someone with much training but no experience, or experience with less formal training? Some bodies go to the extreme and just hire any warm body without training or experience to give minimal training to. I don’t have the hubris to sell myself, I’d rather get the job done.”

“And what kind of job do you think you have done for this mission?”

“Well, I was pretty clueless without understanding the chatter in the orbital battle. On the good side, I didn’t get killed. I made effort to get some intelligence from a hostile clone. About all I got was the enemy General and… partner, I guess. The way I got it was slow, but I don’t think I could order torture. I didn’t do well in confronting Ventress and Fett down planet, there were too many casualties. I lost a divot of my arm putting me out of action for too long. The local officials were not happy about anything and I did not soothe them in any timely fashion. They are more than half convinced that Ventress is a subvert Republic force because she attacked when they were expecting us.”

She looked at the blank situation table. “They may not be completely wrong, the timing is suspicious. We expected push back from those who still want to win, but not this way.”

On a personal level, I messed up on an easy solo mission. I was going to go on many more training-wheels missions. I felt embarrassment more than anything else. But I knew better than to say this.

Her eyes focused on me. “Have a seat, Meyers. The situation seems stable enough from the reports I’ve seen so far. Barring further surprises, the Council should be satisfied. I am most interested in your thoughts on these lost clones and what happened to them. I have met more of them on Kamino than almost any other Jedi, and I am fond of the boys.”

Okay, that was very good. “We captured nearly as many from orbit as from the land battle. We could
not… no, *I could not*, figure a way to get them to surrender after Ventress fled. They didn’t want to ‘talk to traitors.’ I didn’t think we could make it a siege without the Andos believing there was collusion and we betrayed the peace process. They almost believe it anyway.” Oh, yeah, about the Brothers. “On a side note, my guys have started studying counseling references, including on normal reactions to grief. They look to be using that to adjust after 66, and are interested in helping their other brothers. Them seeing the 934th in the same state they were in last year seems to be reinforcing that.”

She frowned. “You have references on this?”

“Not exactly. I had an electronic library with assorted works, and maybe fifty were relevant at all. But I figured that discussion of why some are dumb still helps the discussion. I plan to get more counseling references when we got back and find an adviser, though battle and clone issues will be scant. Madame Nu copied them all into the archive with a few annotations.”

“I believe you are proposing they choose retraining to some peaceful careers for after the war.”

I did not want the Jedi to think this was *easily* erased. “They should have other options, even if the created culture was for combat and service. They will never be serene pacifists, the way the Code encourages. I do not think you should try to force it. That would do more damage. Warrior cultures do not go gently into the night, but they do change over generations. Let them. They believe in service and that is a wonderful thing.”

“What options?” The woman looked thoughtful.

“Again there is little rush. I’d be surprised if the peace and suppressing pirate and criminal forces will be finished in five years. And, statistically, they are a minuscule percent of Coruscant’s population alone. My homeland had closer to one percent serving in various peacekeeping forces. But here could be linked services, akin to the Service Corps for Jedi. They could choose one that fits a calling or choose as a group. They would train for skills related to their fields, and remain as reserves in case of emergency as well. We’ve only got a handful of Corps ideas but they’re all public service oriented. That will also rehabilitate their image with the public.”

She turned away for a moment in the silence. “We would want to ensure they were not exploited in mining or other high risk areas or profit.”

“The *same* kinds of guidelines as the Service Corps, in fact some Companies might prefer to work under the AgriCorps building surplus to send to areas of disaster or famine. They’ve fought through too much for their ages. Most of the work would be for worlds and peoples who need help to be productive.”

“Hmm. Obviously your men are aware of your intentions. Have you formalized this?”

“Mostly Anakin, Obi-Wan, and Dice have heard my ideas. Padmé is involved on the emancipation end that is a precondition of any future they choose. I think some of the other units are interested in the Corps ideas already floating around.” I had to grin. “I think the boys gossip a lot.”

“That they do,” she smiled. “Write this up after the mission, a mirror of our own Corps sounds like a good model. I will be taking over the peace mission, you get them back for treatment. And I’m recommending that they be absorbed into your unit as a transition stage, to cut down on suicides. Your men understand and have some exposure to counseling, volunteers I hope.”

I had to talk to Dice and Shins so they could start organizing. I’d need a speech to explain how we could help them.
The biggest thing I worried about was that they had been fighting a bloody battle only yesterday—well three days ago now.

But first we had to arrange funerals.

Chapter End Notes

This was a BIG chapter but I didn't want these events to seem separated in time.

This was the last chapter that was fully drafted from last year's NaNo. So I hope to keep posting to twice a month, but comments feed my muse. :) The cast has gotten large so, let me know if some work/don't. thanks.
Chapter Summary

Coruscant's power couple can't quite catch a break, even if they have little time left. Anakin almost tries to resist derping over his wife instead of planning ahead. (not that this is anything new for him)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Padmé

“All Senator! Senator! All your loyal friends want to know, if you and Master Skywalker will be exchanging names? Polls say your name holds all the colors of peace and moral rights. The General’s name brings the fire of heroism and protection of the mysterious Jedi Order. Have you chosen a baby na...?”

A more aggressive and nasal female human’s voice interrupted the Bothan, holo cameras spinning around her head. “What our viewers really want to know is if Jedi really are that good in bed? Does it mean they can use that ‘force’ to make you feel untold ecstasy? Or was your baby even conceived by sex or some magical di… Stay away from me! The Republic deserves to know what Senators from Naboo do behind closed-” An implausible cry of fatal pain echoed as one of my security team grabbed her and started to haul her away, her words changing from sleazy innuendo to oppressed victim.

“All Senator!” “Your Majesty! Do you…” “Senator Na..” “Sk..” “Senator!” A dozen more voices wanted to interrupt.

I kept moving through the crowd steadily without responding. Today’s mob wasn’t as large or strident as usual.

This morning was committee meetings. One was about how to structure a convention to reform the Senate. A few of the disavowed Separatist Senators in exile, like Ando and Serrano, as well as neutral worlds like Mandalore, were beginning to participate more in discussions instead of observe. I doubted that they were completely out of communication with their home worlds. Kellar was making new allies and visibly eager to help with reforms.

The Senators wanting serious change were not close to a majority yet, but it was still growing. I felt sure almost every returning world will add to that until we have the minimum for a convocation.

I wished it had come sooner, I did not wish to miss anything while my family needed me.

“Padmé! A small block of Separatist worlds ratified a threaty overnight.” Senator Mothma had a grin on her face as we entered the committee chamber early.

We were both among the younger Senators, not that influential through wide family connections or long personal alliances.
I hugged her carefully at our seats. “I know many Jedi have been sent out with the model treaty. It is encouraging that they can return to diplomacy and peaceful pursuits.” I touched my belly, wanting Ani to be safe.

“I will be glad when they return to peacekeepers instead of generals, and all the horrible units and weapons are destroyed.” Mon’s voice was critical.

That illusion I would not encourage. “It remains a terrible war, costing too many clone and Jedi lives to forget. But there have been some harsh lessons on top of the terrible emergency powers.

“Padme. I thought you believed in peace too!” She looked at me with horror.

“I believe in peace as much as you. But Palpatine used that fear of war to manipulate all of us to approve of terrible, abusive powers and cruelty.”

That made her frown as more Senators entered. “Palpatine used whatever powers a Sith had...”

I touched her arm as I shook my head. “No, he played us for fools. If he used the Dark Force that much, the apolitical Jedi would have never missed his using it. He used honeyed words and master persuasion. We were afraid of our sisters and our sons having to risk their lives to protect us in a war. We gave him the power and resources, but no oversight. The Jedi could not when they were made into Generals first.”

“Peace should have been the Jedi’s goal.”

“Peace was their training. It was the exceptional of them who rose to sacrifice so much of themselves to make a living wall between us and our enemies. You’ve seen the casualty numbers that training in peace and diplomacy cost them when war could not be stopped. They should not be the Senate’s sacrificial goats when some enemies will not make honest peace.”

Her lip curled. “You would have us keep armies and battleships? That invites more battles or even coups.”

“No clone units attacked or mutinied of their own free will. Those children practically adopt their Generals, to protect and follow them, and vice versa. Many of the famous and veteran units followed our peacemakers into hell to protect us over and over, traumatizing themselves without time to recover. Think about that loyalty if it had been set to our more venial or selfish leaders.”

Mon paused before she spoke again. “I am not denying their heroism or service. But we did not need an army for centuries, and we can go back to that!”

“Senator, realistically, there are not enough Jedi to make treaties, guard Senators under threat, deal with pirates or warlords on the Rim, and the hundred other problems they deal with for the Republic daily.” Bail spoke as he joined us, looking tired already as the Senators bowed at his entrance. “Their High Council has not stated any plans to withdraw support as they retrench.”

“The rebuilding of the Jedi will take time, and should have started at least a decade ago when they got so few.” I knew they needed Ani too much to let him go as long as they could make peace with him and us. “Many of those delivering our treaties to Separatist worlds were just promoted and are nearly children themselves.”

Bail sighed. “I want peace as well, Mon. but there is only so much we can do when our treaty ambassadors are attacked. One Jedi knight died, another is missing, and another is not yet able to report in after a pitched battle.”
Another Core Senator put in, sounding horrified, “You just said they’ve been sending out children.”

Sitting down as he spoke, Bail’s face smoothed into neutrality. “Only a portion of them are young knights, already tested as Commanders in the war. Others are more experienced. Thousands of worlds allied with the Separatists, others made neutral alliances, and many worlds benefited from the chaos and battle. The latest estimate from our peacekeepers states that a quarter of the worlds that left will not make peace anytime in the near future, or rejoin. Some, like the Hutt systems, have been emboldened and grown in scale and influence during our distraction.”

“They’re interspersed among us!” That Senator’s fear was clear.

“Sit down, Senator Keparn. Almost nothing said has not already been noted in Senate minutes. But slaver worlds will not stop their aggression against our citizens of their own free will. Compromise there, is against the sentient principles. War concerns will remain for another generation, but if you have a concrete alternative that does not compromise our citizens or our principles, I would like to know. We are already stretched thin from war debts and other obligations.

“Making peace and reconciling with opponents just one priority, Senators, for many reasons. I am requesting that teams will be assigned for treaties, but that will slow progress.” Bail looked older.

I wasn’t sure how this affected Ani’s duties. Would he be assigned for missions away from the capital instead of the planned period with our children?

Mon cleared her throat after a moment of silence. “If we cannot prevent conflict, then that needs to be a considerable aspect of Senatorial reforms. The lit match seems to have been the manipulation on Naboo and how that swept him toward the Chancellorship. Before that he was an unremarkable Senator from a Mid-Rim world.”

My face started to warm. I was glad Mon had not mentioned my role in that. But that did not negate those events. “Perhaps there should be a senior committee to screen and direct urgent matters, with a wide membership that includes members for major constituencies. Getting action while my people were dying was irresponsibly slow.”

“Did not the Jedi act without Senate sanction? Was that not enough?”

My fingernails dug into my palms and I raised my brows to limit displaying my growing annoyance. “That limited their response, Senators, and they lost one of their Masters, further losing all the Jedi he might have trained for the Republic.” I paused for a breath and made contact with most of the Senators at the conference table. “Reforms to encourage peace should also include sanctions, if not bans or blocks that attack their fellow members. Trade groups should not have direct political control above their economic influence on both sides of the war. The Treasury must be neutral to politics.”

“Hey, now! The trade guilds are full of good people. Why should they be deprived of their vote in the Senate? They are working very hard to keep our economy afloat.”

Phu N’tst of a Rim and poorer world snorted. “No, not at all. But right now they have double votes. They have direct representatives who promote their interests, and they have members on home worlds who vote for and against most every Senator in this room. I’ll leave out the question of bought elections for now. They never bother with Rim or poorer worlds unless there is a profit. Do we all not swear to work for the Republic as a whole? The Federation should have been impeached after Naboo and monopoly broken up as they think themselves an empire within the Republic, with their own investigators and armed forces.”

Bail looked a little cross, but only watched as the meeting careened toward a fight. I watched more
than spoke for the remaining hour. We didn’t accomplish much, merely learned what issues were going to be problems. I would have to set researchers on the banking issue.

The afternoon full session after lunch was much calmer, with more updates and discussion about the treaties. And so far we had had no direct discussion with worlds that led the other factions. Serreno and Mandalor would be especially prone to other issues but peace itself.

I wanted to punish Seranno for making Dooku possible.

But the weight in my heart told me other worlds would want to do the worse to Naboo for making Sidious possible.

- Anakin

Obi-Wan finally fallen into into a light doze by the time I got back at dawn, and I debated sending his excuses for the Council meeting. But they would have the latest news and he would not like missing that.

We still had the Initiate tournament this afternoon, and I wanted something to do. I liked teaching younglings, and I so looked forward to teaching Leia and Luke. When they got a little older, of course.

I had to smile at that and wanted to tell Padmé tonight. The healers thought it would be only a few days, and that thought alone was enough to make the Force around me feel like it was bubbling lights.

“I don’t need to ask if it has been a good morning, Padawan.” Obi-Wan’s voice came from the tea cabinet. He looked a little tired, but not impaired.

My grin bubbled too. “I want to teach Luke about racing, not just basic skills like my students. I want to race with him… not on Tatooine, though. I want to see Leia shadow her mother in the Senate.”

He looked up from his tea preparations. “Don’t you think you should delay your plans until after they’re born?”

“Will I have any free time, Master? I’ll wait until they’re two.”

Obi-Wan huffed a laugh. “Regardless, you will have many students before that is an issue.” He stood at the counter to enjoy the steam rising, getting more serious by the second. “What do you sense, Anakin?”

“Probably the same as you, Obi-Wan. She’s alive. She will be fine.”

A deeper breath and my Master smiled weakly. “Vora would need sleep, and wakes as easily as you most mornings. Her Commander may not want to force the issue.”

I scratched my head. “Only you, Master, could turn worry about a Padawan into a criticism of my sleeping habits.”

That made him hum, and I could feel the apology coming before he spoke.

“She’s going to be fine, Obi-Wan.” My comm beeped an unneeded reminder just before his. “I’ll see you at the tournament later.”
Obi-Wan waved as he hurried out the door. My class was not meeting today, but I commed Rex to see how he was doing. He seemed distracted and not wanting to talk today.

I wanted to spar with someone challenging, but most of them were in the Council meeting. Making a quick circuit of the open training rooms, all I saw were training Masters and anxious Initiates looking at me with a little anxiety.

That spoiled my mood.

“Hey, Skyguy. Looking for another Padawan?” Her grin was clear in her voice.

“I’m an old, old Master, ready to retire and grow herbs in my quarters.” I wobbled my voice like an old man.

That got me a punch in the arm.

“Seriously, Master. I want to talk to you, outside.” Her voice wobbled too, but not by intention.

“You know I’ll never turn down an excuse to take a speeder out.”

She met my eyes reluctantly. “I want to show you something, too. A speeder is needed.”

My Padawan was nervous and worried about this conversation. Still it didn’t take long to sign out my favorite speeder with boosted speed and responsiveness.

Not too many signed it out a second time.

The air outside was heavy with mist, and it did not take long to get my robes dampish as we drove around aimlessly.

Ahsoka had calmed. “Take that lift zone down, Sky-guy.”

“This isn’t a surprise party? We’re not near any major anniversary I remember.”

“Not that much fun, Master.”

We went lower and lower, and daylight became a shadowy twilight and the mist a wet grit. The people working and selling in open markets and grimy carts, looked too familiar. The desperation and plain or hypergaudy clothing made me feel young and scared for a moment.

A little desperately, I sent that to the Force like some black hole.

“Master, I was sent down here a few days ago to rescue a city official from a gang.”

I threw my focus on her story. “Did you succeed?”

“Of course, Master!” Her voice was scornful. “I am a Knight, taught by the great Jedi General Skywalker.”

I looked at her.

“The gang was holed up in a store. Next to it was a school that recently burnt out from accident or arson. The official didn’t care, students could just travel further to go to school with strangers. One youngling decided pickpocketing was a better replacement. I want to do something.” She directed me to park next to a burnt out shell, a very few scraps of study materials were scattered, though she looked troubled by the ruin.
I felt a pulse of something darker, something less familiar than it once was, but then it was gone. I was sure Ventress was on Andor. Dooku was in the Temple.

I thought so. But this darkness was not new.

A gang passed by us and our speeder. Some glared at us wanting to prove something. Others were smarter and didn’t approach. Others on the street watched the armed gang members and tried not to draw attention by hunching and not making eye contact.

I almost felt sand under my feet and arid air. “I don’t want you coming down here without a partner. At least bring your Commander.” At her look, I stopped. “Have you been assigned troops to work with you? I’m sure you…” I stopped there at her look of shame and pulled my Padawan into a hug.

Bitter guilt flowed from her, and then slowed.

I felt my own that I had not noticed she was unhappy, and I rubbed small circles on her back. “I’m sorry, Snips. I did not mean to neglect you. What happened? How can I make it up to you?”

She sniffed a little to clear her voice. “Nothing happened. I was promoted to Knight, I do missions. Mostly minor stuff, though I was a secure courier to a bunch of worlds in the Council of Neutral Systems. But nothing about Vod’e. I got another secure comm, that looked like I one I had before and a certificate about my rank as general, but nothing else. I’m afraid they’re going to say my promotion was a mistake… And I miss hanging out with the 501st, Master.”

“Shh, there’s nothing wrong with your promotion, Snips. You were already better than most Knights before the war.” I projected soothing toward her, trying to stay calm myself.

It wasn’t working very well.

“What if, what if I did something wrong?”

That hurt made me lean back, anger lapping at my control. “No, I don’t believe that. We don’t make small mistakes. We make great, big, exploding ones.”

A tiny and surprised giggle came from my Padawan.

The Council had never failed to criticize me when I did something they didn’t like, and they liked her. “We can ask Obi-Wan later tonight.”

“But he’s so worried and I didn’t want to bother him. Maybe.. I didn’t want to know.”

That made me grin. “Obi-Wan is a champion worrier, Snips. He worries about you, the price of that tea he likes, and if some planet will have unrest if the price of tea jumps. Not in that order, tea is highest.” I was glad to hear her snort. “We’ll go together. Early tomorrow if Master doesn’t know.”

Ahsoka’s big sigh came at the same time as she relaxed, and then we stepped apart and back to our speeder.

I let her drive and she moved behind the controls. “Well now, I thought you were confess to something very different than the Council keeping secrets.”

The silence was again too long. “Uh, there was one more thing that happened and surprised me.”

“Give, Snips. Don’t make me tickle it out of you.”
“You can’t. We’re in mid-air.” Sticking her tongue out was an added bonus.

I didn’t waste time to let her prepare. Engaging the auto pilot was simple, and I caught her wrists in my hands, though keeping hold of them was harder. She was already laughing, before I could finish the bind or use the Force improperly to tickle her.

“That’s okay, Master.” Her voice was breathless and higher pitched from her giggles.

When I released her, she resumed driving as she slowed her breathing.

We finished a loop of the traffic lanes at this level.

She sighed. “Rex asked me to have a meal with him. At somewhere other than 79’s, or maybe see a holo. Not with his Brothers, he was very clear about that, though his speech wasn’t clear on other points. He hoped to hear from me today.”

I didn’t know what to say and just looked at the urban horizon.

“Sky-guy?” There was a flavor of panic in her voice.

I finally said. “Well. Do you get what he’s asking? Do you like him? Do you miss him? Feel he understands you? Do you want him to be happy, more than other Vod’?”

She took the loop in another direction. “I don’t know, Master. We have fun, but I don’t think I look at him like you look at Padmé.”

“You don’t have to.” I cast for something that would explain what I didn’t completely understand either. “I messed up when I met Padmé the second time. She was always three steps ahead of me. Food, food is a good thing. You won’t want witnesses for when you mess up.”

That got me another small smile.

“And Padawan? Enjoy it.”

We returned to the upper levels of Coruscant, the air less clammy and gritty. Late morning sunshine had warmed the air, and more warmth reflected from the buildings that towered higher. Never as deeply warm as when I was a child, but at least there was no sand.

Changing course for the Temple after our wandering, we arrived just as the cafeterias filled for lunch. I only had a few minutes to consider Rex and Snips together. I worried about them, but I really felt I should not intervene.

The initiates in the tournament made for an excited and loud lunchroom. Slightly fewer adults used this one today.

Obi-Wan looked better when he joined me at a less crowded area, but still had a little strain about his eyes. “Anakin. You seem troubled.”

“I spent the morning with Ahsoka… down in the Undercity. She had some problems she wanted to talk about.” At his inquiring look, I shook my head. “She wants to speak with you later tonight. She wants to help down there, but I’m not happy about her going down there alone when the gangs are getting arrogant. I know she’s able, but I’d feel better if she had backup.”

Obi-Wan chuckled. “That never completely goes away, my Padawan. I was expecting my hair to turn white before Geonosis, but it kept getting worse. Reading your mission reports let me fill in
details all too easily.”

“Sorry, Obi-Wan. I’m going to be a wreck for Luke and Leia.” That truth hit me like a punch.

He rattled a dish. “You get used to it, somewhat. It’s the escapades when off duty that are more worrying, when I am more aware of the dangers than the storyteller was. I got very uneasy when Vora told a story about a trip to a place like our Undercity. I knew she made it out fine and that she was an adult, not an innocent Initiate, but I know she had no training when it happened.”

“She had intuition and Foresight. She still has it over Ando, Obi-Wan.”

“Her Commander sent a combat summary, listing casualties, prisoners, and escapes. She is in a bacta tank for perhaps two days. Master Ti should be arriving soon after that. Now further reports will have to wait.”

I gripped his arm until I could look him in the eye. “We knew she survived. That was important.”

Obi-Wan wiped down his face. “I should have spent more time briefing her on people, especially enemies.”

“What studies would you have cut? Light saber? Defending against Dark Side intrusions? Understanding visions and the Force?”

He shook his head and refused to look me in the eye. “No, you are doing very well with training Ahsoka and letting her go. I have been wallowing in my fears and alcohol, a pathetic and irresponsible example of a wise Master. The Council… Vos… it must be clear to them all how imbalanced I am.”

I was almost dizzied by the shifting words. “Here and now, Master. The battle’s over and the preliminary report isn’t that bad.”

He stopped, with a greater calm after a long moment. “I doubt our little ‘Soka meant to provoke you. Care to give a hint?”

“It’s concerning the Brothers and I think she wants to tell you tonight.”

The nearest Initiates were beginning to close on our table and their excitement was contagious.

The tournament was much more wild with victories and loss. Some were leaving and struggled to control their tears. The winners still had their losses ahead of them, so they were tight wired and their happiness muted.

A portion of the Council drifted in and out, probably to monitor Dooku. He was quiet.

Ahsoka arrived after most of the entrants, smug.

“Padawan?” I wasn’t sure which of us said it first.

Her grin bloomed. “We talked… and. Can we talk someplace quieter?”

I hugged her, and Obi-Wan said something about arranging dinner. We set off from the tournament room.

Dooku inserted himself without saying anything, his presence quiet, No one said anything as the four of us moved up to the residential level. Ahsoka was the most leery, but she see-sawed between excitement and suspicion of Dooku.
Obi-Wan paused when he reached our apartment, wary for a moment before he opened the door and went to the kitchen area.

Dooku sighed and crossed his arms. “I will leave if you wish. I deeply regret not knowing my lineage properly.

*Obi-Wan? Ahsoka?* I didn’t know what I wanted to ask.

Master bowed, shallowly like to a politician. Which was a subtly Ahsoka blinked at before she shrugged.

Dooku’s lips tightened and he returned a deeper one.

“*Padawan? You had some questions?*” Obi-Wan prompted.

She looked at me with worry.

Obi-Wan smiled, a real smile. “I don’t believe Dooku has any plans on leaving, nor that these are highly secret. I don’t think he would disapprove of you taking interest in the Undercity as a Knight.”

Dooku shook his head a little. “Indeed not. It has degraded greatly even during your Master’s lifespan. I urged Council and Senate action on that many years ago.”

My surprise at that statement stopped me, it rang of truth in the Force.

“I was talking to Sky-Guy, but I don’t even know where to start. The burnt out school made me upset. But before we could even start planning any kind of repairs or new ideas, the gangs and violence is the first problem. They pretty much leave me alone, but I wasn’t looking for a fight. Starting one would have been easy.”

Obi-Wan rubbed his beard. “One of the leading ideas for retraining and careers of the Brothers is to train them for cleaning up and help rebuild worn areas like the Undercity. Their martial skills will let them deal with gangs, but even their basic training is more education than many can get in the Undercity. They would teach as well as protect over a period of years, perhaps a decade or more. Up to entire legions will be able to choose to work in the same cause from a list. Once the war ends.” He smiled. “Though I believe some legions are angling for particular missions already.”

Despite his shields, Dooku’s shock was clear.

Ahsoka’s gaze focused on my Master with a little frustration and anger. “Well, I want to know why I haven’t been assigned any Vod’e? Did I do something wrong? I loved working with the 501st. Vora’s had troops for months, and all I get are stupid courier missions.”

I didn’t want her jealous. I’d gotten in enough trouble from that. *Snips...*

That made Council member Obi-Wan flush. “I’m sorry, Knight Tano. The Council has made major operational changes, mostly to prevent younger Jedi, Padawans as well as some Knights like you, from getting battle assignments. You should have time to spend time with friends and old clan members, even as a new Knight. I rarely had more than a mission a month as a new Knight.”

I smiled. *Yeah, you also had a ten year old who thought they would drown from an all day drenching rain.*

Dooku coughed. “My early assignments were mostly the same, Knight Tano. You grew up in a time of war, and so did your Master. That is *not* the norm, and it appears the Council is reviving that.”
“I didn’t do anything wrong?” Her voice sounded small now.

“No, bigger assignments will come in due time, young one. In between, you can continue training on things you want to specialize in or volunteer to work on something that catches your attention. Your cohort should be noticing these changes as well. Master Tahl became an archivist, helping Madame Nu revise classifications.” Obi-Wan seemed far more satisfied as he spoke.

She looked at me. “Master Skywalker doesn’t think I should go down without someone to watch my back.”

I shook my head. “I’m sure some of the 501st would love to go and help you, if you asked. But I’m not sure which project caught their attention.”

“Explosions, Padawan. I received some engineering questions from Appo and Jesse recently. They know how to destroy, maybe they want disaster relief or engineering. I would have thought Rex would have spoken to you.” Obi-Wan looked mildly surprised.

“I haven’t seen him much lately.” That made me frown too, that both Snips and Rex were avoiding me.

“That’s my fault, Master. Well, sort of. He wanted to go on a date and didn’t know how to start.” She smiled. “We talked after lunch and we’re going to watch a holo with popcorn tomorrow.”

After a moment, Obi-Wan said, “The other problem is that the remaining unassigned legions are having trouble coming to terms with what they did. They’re under observation by MediCorps, but most of this is a unique problem so there are no precedents. They won’t be assigned to a General by Master Plo until both Master and Brothers are ready.”

“Or the General has extra experience?” Dooku added with a raised eyebrow.

Obi-Wan nodded.

Or extra crazy?

I didn’t want to miss spending the evening with Padmé so I left their talk about Clone futures for her Senate office. Late afternoon and there were fewer people in the halls to dodge, fewer reporters to slip past. At this rate, I was getting much better at it. I reached the outer room while Sabé was doing some kind of reading or analysis by her concentration.

She looked up with a formal expression for the first instant before relaxing. “Master Skywalker. The Senator was hoping to speak to you about official Senate business today.”

My grin didn’t change much. “Is she free now?”

She glanced at the table. “She should be finishing her conference with the Queen soon. You can go on in if you’re quiet.” A frown appeared on her face. “Only if you won’t interrupt. She’s tying up her projects so her deputy can step in easily during her confinement...”

That gave me a pang and my fist spasmed. “Confined? Who’s confining her? Why would she be arrested? Or questioned? Or...” My lungs were stuck. “Is the Queen upset about our marriage?”

Padmé loved politics. She never talked about anything else she wanted to do.

Even if I hated dealmaking with shutta in gold clothing and two faces.
“Master Skyalker!” Sabé stood now. “Just a routine strategy meeting. There is no law against Senators having a family.”

My next breath was deeper.

“Confinement is a more reserved and… polite term for the time around childbirth. We would not want to use the more shabby or crude terms for a former queen.”

High class manners… great for making things more confused. “I’ll be quiet.”

Sabé waved me toward the inner hall, but I was already past her.

Padmé must have finished, as she sat at her desk while making notes. “Ani! I missed you. Is there an emergency?”

I hurried over to kneel beside her for a kiss. “Nothing you need to worry about. Ahsoka found a problem down in the Undercity and called me to help. She’s fine.”

“Good.” Padmé’s fingers ran down my chest with a smirk. “I wanted to talk to you about the Clones position with the Senate.”

Leaning back was not easy. “It’s been almost a year, Angel.”

“Slicers and accountants have been backtracking the money that was given to Kamino. If there were irregularities in those transactions, it will be easier to unravel the technology and… trademark for lack of better term. We do not want more to be made anytime those people need more money or influence. The clones should decide that for themselves, and I think we just about have a majority ready to treat them as a fugitive or refugee culture.”

“But what about their freedom, their citizenship?” I hated that this was still broken.

My Angel sighed. “Another reason this is a mess. If they are ruled a refugee culture, a lot of this already has precedents. Freed slaves get absorbed into the Republic on an individual basis, done well or done ill.” She nodded at me. “This large a group has never become free, and Senators are afraid of wht they will do. We must do better for these men.”

I couldn’t argue about errors there and pulled a chair over with the Force. “Okay, what can we do to help get them classified as a culture?”

“We need a new name for them. ‘Clone’ is the name of a bitter war and makes them less human. It’s not true, but too easy for the speakers to slide into saying when cloning has been used for animals and medical transplants. Something without bad connotations should be on Senate bills and other paperwork.”

The explanation helped, but this was all still too messy. “They usually call each other brother or Vod.”

Padmé slid her chair closer. “That’s derived from Mando, isn’t it? I’d been hoping they might acknowledge them as citizens or even in a protectorate, but.”

I could feel her spirits drop. “But what?”

“They are already reluctant to consider rejoining the Republic. The new Duchess is very isolationist and pretty much hates how our war washed over her world, both sides trying to draw them in. She doesn’t disdain the Clones as warriors like her sister did, but that they have no clan like real
Mandoloreans. They did not like that ‘Vod’ was used. She will not extend any blessing on the sons of a clanless outlaw.”

That wasn’t totally true. Rex earned honor marks, but I thought he was the only one. “The brothers consider themselves a kind of kin.”

“I’m sorry, Ani. I got the refusal from their ambassador yesterday. I think they might change that someday, but not soon enough for their immediate needs.”

“I don’t know who to ask, Angel. They don’t really have leaders, they’re more or less all equal outside their duties.”

“You’ve met more than I, could you ask of they have a Council or the like? They will need a name, a name that might evoke sympathy would be better.”

- Kithror or Kith has similar meaning as Vod, but might be more politic for the Senate.- Master Jinn was very faintly visible.

I liked that. “They should be allowed to name themselves, Master Qui-Gon.”

Padmé’s eyes widened but she looked the wrong way.

He waved a wispier hand. -They can call each other whatever they want. This is official to please the diplomats in the Senate and bureaucrats. Offer both sides this compromise, Padawan. At least they will be talking.-

I nodded. “That makes sense.”

That made Padmé frown and I repeated what he said.

“Did you make that up?” she asked.

I repeated his reply. “Two old languages, perhaps cognates, but not Mando.” I thought about the Order of Battle for the GAR. “I’ll talk to Rex and see if the Senior Commanders can make a review group for things like this.”

Padmé made a sunny smile that made it seem easy.

“She noted that on a schedule. “Good. As soon as they have a spokesman, we can open talks about compensation and retraining. Citizenship is easier to grant immediately, Ani. Most of the other issues demand funding and there is so much debt from the war.”

I glared out the window.

Her hand ran along my arm. “I’m sorry Ani. It’s not fair to them, maybe not to anyone, but we need to keep financial control to help with worlds ruined and refugees lost ahead of back pay… The banking guild battles will have to be later.”

I hated that they would profit off of all the pain and destruction. “May them pay, Angel. They profited just as much as Sidious.”

“They will be brought in line with the Republic’s ideals. It will be much easier once more Separatist worlds rejoin. They didn’t trust corruption and this cleanup we can work together on. The Kaller Senator revealed in the reform meetings how much of their economies were eaten up. Repudiating
droid debts alone has helped their economy already.”

I could feel my eyes glaze as she spoke about her political passion, but I just loved listening to her voice.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for delays, it's been a long while since I was blocked in three stories at once.
Old Patterns

Chapter Summary

Old patterns become traditions, even bad ones within lineages. Sorrow and grief become communal experiences for virtual strangers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Obi-Wan

Meditation was a must after that uncomfortable lineage dinner. Then sleep would not come. I wasn’t sure of how Ahsoka and Rex would do together, but they knew each other well. Banning it would be hypocritical, and I would never be sure how much banning reduced or hastened Anakin’s romance. As a full citizen, Rex had every right to pursue every part of civilian life, even if it was not yet de jure. Best to leave them alone.

Plo would know more about troops and their assignments. He was always concerned with the younglings during the endless battles. The Master had spoken against the Padawans serving in battle zones, but too many candidates to become Masters for those Padawans, were almost never in Temple. They could not teach what they best knew away from risk. And too many who stayed in Temple, were unable or past the full commitment of a Padawan.

Too many learned to survive and achieve in warfare.

I was equally alarmed when Anakin and his Padawan had survived some spectacular bits of foolhardiness. I suspected Plo nearly voted against her promotion to Knight as being too young. He always had a soft spot for her.

Meditating until morning, I set myself to be more balanced and collected before the Council meeting. I was deeply ashamed at my poor behavior of late. I knew better and had been taught well what was expected of me.

_I would be a good example._ A better example.

I arrived later than I would have liked for the Council meeting. That did not relieve the discreet stares I still received at times. Like today. My ears warmed, but I did not feel my face warm.

Vos didn’t make any comments, thank the Force.

“Is there any new and urgent business?” Mace paused from his list for any response before moving on. “The Commander of the 408th sent a preliminary report on the battle on Ando. One general was captured, as were most of the legion…”

I sent my spasm of panic to the Force.

Mace continued after a glance my way. “The younger Fett took injuries that make combat difficult, so he has been neutralized for at least a time. Evidence is unclear as to whether Ventress has claimed
a Sith name, but she escaped and her vendetta against Dooku is confirmed. General Meyers is in deep medical.”

“I wonder where she learned that talent from,” Master Che said without lowering her voice much and glaring at me.

I had to smile with my relief.

Vos smirked at me before speaking. “It seems clear from recent problems, that more missions should be filled by teams for the extended term.”

“How do companies of the Vod’e count there?” I asked. “If it is a military action, they should. But they are not as helpful for diplomatic missions. More of those have been problematic.”

I turned to Master Plo. “Are units still being assigned to Knights, or has that policy changed? What happens when Knights notice that change and take that as a vote of no confidence from the Council?”

Plo’s dismay was clear for an instant. “This is a deliberate effort to begin reducing the troops in the field and to place them with fewer and experienced Generals. Especially those troops most damaged by the Sith’s order.”

That made Saesee frown. “They are good men and fight well. I respect them all. They have been highly trained for battle, as little as we liked that necessity.”

“We should not deny them hope for purpose inside some limbo. To be disavowed and uncommanded makes for a prison with no future. Despair is not what they deserve.” Lunimara’s voice was cooler and more serene.

My troops got restless too. I should speak with Cody on his views about future training for the 212th.

“Assigned to generals, the troopers should be.” Yoda spoke less in Council since the battle, spending more time with the younglings.

That announced the merging consensus.

“I dislike splitting up any unassigned troops after their traumas, Masters. Assigning groups to other more intact commands may be needed. I am very reluctant to give the most broken to unseasoned Knights.” Plo was worried about them.

Ki nodded. “Perhaps we should give any field-active Jedi without troops the choice if they feel able to take on unassigned units, knowing the risk? I know of a knight or two who barely survived the order, and they should not be assigned if they are not ready.”

“Exactly!” Plo agreed. “I have studied the records of both available knights and troopers, and the Force has not suggested any further matches, not yet.”

“They are good soldiers, and pragmatic the way most citizens are not. Let them choose if they’d rather be split up for quicker assignment or wait for a compatible General.” Saesee’s voice was gruff with irritation.

I thought that letting them decide was more important for their future.

After a long moment of each Master thinking, Master Plo spoke. “One: Knights without troops will
be informed of unassigned troops, and asked if they want to lead them until their future status is resolved. We are as much their Masters as their Generals, and we should treat them as such.”

Those words had weight in the Force, bonds that had been tested. Yes, yes we were. That was what Anakin and Vora had been trying to say.

Mace smiled a little and said, “Two?”

Plo nodded decisively. “They should have some say in their careers after the war, we know this. But some might feel a calling for farming or disaster relief that their troop does not. Not everyone could be the same… campaign for lack of better word, but if there is room in a command that should be permitted. This choice also informs if they want as a group to wait for a commander or to split up. And they need to learn that now, all of them.”

That would make troop assignments more fluid and allow for replacements, as Master Ti was overseeing the last younger batches for some time. Future Brothers should be their choice, though it looked like some might be already striking out, like Rex.

Discussion turned to the frictions with the treaty process and changing assignments. This would require more frequent field assignments, even with teaching. Anakin would not have as few as I’d originally hoped. Adi reported the very slow motion in the committee for fundamental Senate changes. Our own reforms were an unmentioned lesion.

Little time remained for other topics, but Mace nodded to Master Yoda, who spoke sadly. “Remains another darkness. In imbalanced care, shadows hide themselves.”

There was no debate at that, no one doubted that we were not done with Sidious’ legacy. But that finished Mace’s major items.

I still had time before the tournament, or even lunch. But, I had been putting off one conversation for far too long. And so I moved down into the lower Temple, into the secured areas.

There I found Dooku, settled in a meditation mat like I had seen once or twice as a Padawan. When he looked up, I spoke. “Dooku.”

He rose to stand a pace apart. “Master Kenobi.” After a pause of some moments, he spoke. “For what do I owe this visit?”

“Knight Meyers is in a bacta tank above Ando.”

He nodded as the silence began to stretch out. “I suspect the reporting has been sparse. If you are asking, I had no particular interest in that world nor did I know of any long term works there.”

“Thank you.” I meant that, as illogical as I thought it.

He smiled, but not in the arrogant way he had during battle. “That was not why you came here, or at least not the greater reason.”

My intention was clear to me, but the words were sludged in the intersection of sharp memory, compassion, and the Code. “My Padawans seem to have forgiven you.”

That made him hum. “I don’t think that is accurate. Meyers has not, not even hinting that she has. She was outraged that I chose, and was continuing to choose to be… an idiot. I don’t think she feels I hurt her, so her forgiveness is meaningless. And Skywalker? No, he has not forgiven me his hand, but he understands more and will let it go for now. I am sure, that if I cross some line he will have no
mercy. He is giving me a chance to do better...

“Much as he was.” I mused aloud.

“Indeed.”

“You have not been forgiven.” That seemed darker for a moment.

Dooku’s sigh was silent. “Only one has, and I doubt any others will at this point.”

“One?”

“Your Master is pleased.”

Of course he would be. He would not approve of holding on to anger and fear. It had been the better part of a year since Sidious had been defeated, and longer since Dooku had been captured. He had been more than a civil prisoner, despite his saber and free movement before the Temple attack.

That was in itself an admission.

I asked, “Not your Master?”

“No.” Dooku looked away, grief and pain fading fast into the Force. “He has not chosen to speak with me since the attack.”

I knew that grief of rejection as well: so difficult to understand, so long in healing. Then I saw the similarities within our lineage: hasty decisions, cold rejections, grievous errors, injuries, arrogance, angers, fears, and affections. And I saw how the strong links endured better with attachments.

Knowing this might be foolish, I lunged forward to hug him. “Don’t expect me to know what to say.” I could feel a small smile against his shoulder.

Dooku’s arms were slow to come up, his fingers shook when he spoke. “I am sorry, GrandPadawan. It was all so pointless.”

I took a deep breath, surprised at not feeling at risk through the Force. “Ignorance, yet knowledge, Master. You should teach what you learned. Maybe assist with others at risk… You should speak to the Council as well. Fewer there remember before you left well, and they disbelieved for a time.”

He hesitantly moved his arms along my back. “Is this attachment?”

I leaned back and we separated. “Maybe. Maybe the beginnings of it. It does make for a more reliable net of support. But it has no clear path and includes risk. It helps too. If we had come to blows, you know Anakin would be on his way almost before the first hit.”

Dooku’s smile broadened. “Yes, I had noted that years ago. I had not understood the benefit on a personal basis- I would never have thought Sidious would lift a finger if I was in trouble. Him ordering my execution was all too within his character, even if I was willfully blind.”

His smile had disappeared.

“Vora would not be far behind Anakin. She’s not as reckless.”

“Despite your worry about Ando?”

I raised my eyebrow. “Not as reckless in combat or piloting, reckless in other ways. She does try to
have chats with those tainted with the Dark too freely. Despite my orders.”

“Stubborn? Hmm. I seem to recall reports of a certain Jedi Master chatting with an assassin in battle, perhaps even flirting instead of fighting. Witnesses were unsure. I’m sure that was approved by the Council, was it not?” The smirk was not on his face.

My face warmed, Anakin got so angry when he heard about it on the rare occasions when he wasn’t present. I cleared my throat. “Do you truly wish to help with the tournament? Assignments may be shifting with recent missions being attacked.”

“There were more than Ando?” Sharp concern there.

“There have been some problems, whether internal or external in a half dozen but we are shifting for team assignments. At the moment, treaties have been with minor worlds. One knight died, and the others either won through the issue or got out intact.”

Dooku reflected on that, but did not ask further. “Do you think Meyers’ world is able to handle contact, enough for a recruitment visit? She seems to have adapted fairly well for a low tech world. Far better to Core worlds than some from places like Dathomir.”

I had forgotten that he had many missions through the Rim. “The knowledge gaps are sometimes fascinating. Basic science knowledge is there, they won’t fall into thinking we’re deities. She was digging into theory about comms and Jump, but that was reduced for preparation for the attack. Cultures and Geopolitics are very lacking, as I would expect by the isolation, and she is often awkward with non-humans at first.”

“And the Council sent her to Ando?”

I had to sigh. “She became a prominent Jedi in the public eye after the battle at the Temple due to the wide public feeds. Her battle less fearful to the public than fighting Sidious or the Clones. That makes her more influential than her formal rating for diplomacy. She’s new, untainted by earlier battles for either side, and trusted. I dread her reaction if the holonews gifts her with a ‘snappy’ nickname.”

That got a chuckle from him. “Sounds like you don’t think the Explorer-corps should go.”

“That is her recommendation. But several members of the Council believe it is an accident waiting to happen as many there admire their impression of the Sith. The longer we wait the more likely there will be problems. They have some Force-gifted, so a new Sith order could spontaneously erupt. They view it as drama. Not ethics or morals. And on a pragmatic level, the Order needs recruits, so later training could be viable as we rebuild. Morals will be more important than as high a level of training.”

“Knight Meyers recommends against contact because?”

“Volatile politics and religious wars, a pessimist view.”

Dooku didn’t quite hum as he thought. “And then there is the entertainment itself that dramatizes our war.”

“We have enough misleading holos of our own entertainments that rarely get much right. This is enough correct about the last decade to be dangerous. The actors who portray us have other roles, ones we may not be as comfortable with if they appear as we.”

My GrandMaster paused in consideration. “I would admit I would not like to see myself as some
melodramatic lothario, but I may be old enough to take it philosophically. That does hint at some
amusement at seeing Mace or Master Yoda caught like that.”

“Master Yoda was shown with a puppet, he is safe. Vora had only a handful of holos from her
world, few that featured the same actors. I don’t know if any have been converted by Madame Nu
beyond what Anakin did.”

“What about flight? She seems to have started that late.”

“Distaste and minor fear, not lack of understanding. Jets are for business and military, and space
flight a prestige area for nations. Maglev and impellers are primitive, but she did research using
public knowledge as a youngling. They have traveled to their moon and back as exploration, but
most of their astronomical work seems to be for communication satellites and a single manned space
station. A fraction of the population pushes for system exploitation. Cloning is one area they are
much closer, but medicine in general is far, far behind. Keep in mind much of this is from comments
and training issues. For the longest time she did better with verbal studies and kept notes on her own
padd.”

That caught his interest. “Did Nu decant that?”

“Only some has been released in the archives, as much was personal. I expect there may be a slicing
sim as a senior Padawan exercise at some point.” I knew Anakin would have worried at that for as
long as it took.

My reminder went off. We had used up our lunch block and I sent an apology to Anakin as we
climbed up through the Temple.

- Vora

I stomped off to my quarters not long after I saw the final figures, to scream and pound soft things
and mostly to weep until my sinuses were clogged from tears and snot. Sorrow drowned my anger in
a bottomless and airless depth.

These kids were as old as my potential children could have been, and they had been so, so used for a
public and Senate that didn’t really give a damn.

My chest was heavy.

I didn’t even know their names.

The buzzer at my door rang, where Dice waited.

Business for the General waited.

“Come.” I pulled myself upright and mopped off my face, looking for a towel. “Gimme a minute.”

He stood quietly while I found some wipes to scrub my face and a pain tab. I doubted his previous
General had meltdowns. The Knight would have been trained in emotional control and suppression
for their entire life.

I was sure it saved time.

I concentrated on straightening my robe as I spoke. “What’s up, Dice?”

“General Ti’s men are assisting in transport of the 934th and arranging for secure billets. You wanted
“Do we have enough capacity for that many extra for three days?”

He stood formally still. “We laid in more water plus filtration materials, and support systems will be operating at 117% for the three days, General. We are still within emergency conditions, though water showers will be curtailed...”

Suddenly, I was dying for a long hot shower, despite the bandaging.

“... until resupply. The prisoners have been mostly quiet.”

“How are the 408th handling traveling alongside those who just attacked them?” I hoped for an honest answer. This was the other side of Order 66 to them.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead twice. “Okay for the most part. We remember the way they see their enemy. And truly, we were made to serve the enemy with not much more self-will than clankers have. Less than some droids. We still bleed though. We don’t hate them, but we cannot trust our brothers as long as the electronics are running.”

I wanted to phrase this right. “Do you think enough of the 408th would be willing to partner up with one of their survivors for the first part of their recovery? Explain things, cheer them up, get them help if they seem too close to suicide? We’d need to assign someone to oversee this. Maybe introductions before the chip is broken. Make sure Chops is included.”

My Commander thought for a moment. “I think there should be enough, but I would prefer to work from a list of volunteers. Some still lean on their Brothers.”

“I’ll ask for volunteers in a few. I’m hoping to hold a Memorial service at sunset. Do you guys have a custom?”

“Custom varies with each command, though some have started adopting others that fit well. Most Generals are not aware of this.” He had stiffened at the question, inside and out.

I raised my hands. “No, I don’t want to dictate or decide how you grieve. I would like to say a few words or something. I dunno what, but they deserve the respect.”

Dice looked relieved. “That we can arrange.”

Another pang of grief reached me. “I would like to include the 934th in the memorial, or allow them one of their own. They thought they were fighting the good fight. It was their bad luck that they were wrong.”

All he did was nod, but I felt no outrage.

That made two speeches. God, I hated speeches.

The next few hours were frantic, I linked in to speak to my troops about news and issues. This was not the domain of orders and hierarchy. I could not have Dice do it or leave it posted on some bulletin board because it was too important. Leaving Ando after a victory and medical wasn’t the problem. They were much, much calmer about their injuries and deaths than I was. We were shipping out after the memorial service. But I could not decide what to say at the service. There were far too many to list them by name, that would do less good for morale. I hadn’t considered this enough to prepare a live version of what I wanted.
I’d made a simple list to speak about for all the 408th; that I was proud of them, that we would have a memorial service at sunset for all the Vod’e who died here in the line of duty, and… this was the harder one. I was looking for volunteers to buddy with each survivor of the 934th until they were reassigned.

So I frantically searched my files in my padd, searching music for homesick days. There were hundreds, many I no longer recognized the titles of. Finally I found one from “Wrath of Khan,” but it wasn’t quite right. Then I remembered the bugle at my grandfather’s funeral long ago and the honor guard folding and presenting a flag to my grandmother. A folded flag felt right here too, how would I decide next of kin? Just about everyone on board, was next of kin.

I remembered choking up at the song as a Scout, when death had not yet touched my life.

The player was set to repeat the two songs, grace and farewell as I meditated my choice.

Dice returned, and seemed quiet. A question was unspoken.

I explained. “Our armed forces, yes- plural, have many customs to honor those who served when they die, whether they die on duty or later of old age. The one is more about salvation from a God, and I’m not sure the words are appropriate when it’s not your faith. Better the simpler one that is used because it has an eloquent and elegant simplicity. It’s usually only that one instrument in an elegy for the end of a day or the end of a life. The words come down to this: day is over, all is well, and rest safely.”

“What’s it called, General?”

“Taps.”

He thought for a moment. “I believe it was mentioned in that reference on grieving.”

That was a relief.

“General?” A pause until he held my eye. “It is time.”

Setting up the audio was only a moment, and then I walked back to the flight deck, the largest hall we had. Those on duty or in the ersatz brigs could monitor.

I stood near the bay doors and waited for silence to lap the shore after a few spoke their remembrances. I couldn’t quite absorb what they said in my nerves. Their comments settled into quiet silence. After a deep breath, I signaled the audio, then signaled a second time and I did the lyrics I sang as a child, surprised at myself.

Then I had to speak, ready or not.

“That song began as a farewell to comrades and kin lost in a civil war on my home-world, when brother fought brother over things that didn’t matter as much as feeling betrayed. Then it came to mean more, to remember loss and those who fought before, fought honorably, and once their duty has passed, all be welcomed by gods. Likewise, the Jedi believe there is no final death, that the Force welcomes us all. We are luminous beings, not this crude matter. We will always miss our friends, our kin, but we will eventually join them. Treasure what we do have: the sun, the land, the skies, and those we hold dear… Safely rest. Eternity is nigh.”

I wanted to say more, but knew I should stop there.

Dice led a salute and listed the casualties, names and numbers. A ripple went through the ship when
the 934th units were included. I didn’t know the name or number of the clone that died on Ando for me.

I mopped at my eyes, dignity be damned.

The list finally ended an a few more spoke up like a wake, with stories about the deceased. I would never know if they did this before the Kubler-Ross text, but it felt right.

Chops stepped up with a few, and I regretted he was the only one who could.

When the ones on the deck had slowed, Dice ordered Taps again and the Vod’e scattered quietly.

Chapter End Notes

I had larger hopes of finishing more for May4th, but that darn muse choking RL. A short heat wave's leaving me too irritable and lethargic to work on even darker stuff. I have twenty hours in my timezone, but sleep?

Comments are like manna or Palvov's treats, feed all your authors. And get your SW fix today.
Brothers in Transitions

Chapter Summary

Life is change, and not often how or when you expect. Gaining free will can be intimidating. Politics leads to nasty fights, even when no one is really wrong. Responsibility for others is the major test of maturity.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

- Rex, CT7567

I was restless. That meant we were all getting restless. We’d only had one real mission since the Traitor’s Attack, and that was pretty quiet. Other units were seeing action, but we were still on training assignment. General Skywalker was on light medical duty because of his short batch, and we were not being reassigned to another General.

I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad for us, but Appo didn’t even want to think about it. But we couldn’t keep drawing stipend and training for a war that was fading away. What were we for when the war was over?

Our missions, as dangerous and painful as they were, gave us a structure. The General still has that, with teaching little Jedi and then his new batch.

I’m not sure what’s happening with Commander, or maybe General, Tano, but that should not involve our duties. I kept wondering what unit she’ll be assigned and if they’ll take care of her. I don’t want them sent off into the hot spots cropping up, and not know how she is.

She’s been fine on her solo missions so far, but she’s a Jedi.

So I worried, every time she was sent out without anyone to watch her back.

I wasn’t sure who to ask for advice. My brothers have kept any serious relationships quiet, the old duty regs were only partly removed. The Senator wasn’t supposed to get in danger, but the General never took it well when she was, secret relationship or not. General Kenobi hasn’t changed much that I could see, but Kix said he stayed in the healing ward without restraints when his Commander was there and he didn’t speak at all when Dice lost his bolt. Who else knew both of us enough to advise me?

The General showed up at our barracks, looking awake, alert, and clean of mechanical liquids.

I saluted. “General...”

His face lit up in a grin and he waved his usual careless response. “Rex. Wanted to check on you. You can comm me without emergencies, you know. Enjoying your time away from battle?”

Falling into step as we passed training areas, I considered my words. “R&R was enough for a while, but we want to do something. Something worthwhile. Something we can stay together for.”
Skywalker’s face changed. “Have you thought about the group ideas from the 408th?”

“I looked at the packets that came out for all the Senior Commanders. All of us near Temple base are meeting tonight about the Senate’s proposal, even if the whole idea seems strange.”

“Does any corps idea appeal to the 501st at this point?” Our General had big, hopeful eyes.

I had to look away, I didn’t want to disappoint him. “Not really. We’d prefer to keep military duty, but get it. Several Vod were hoping one of them would at least have more explosions if not fighting. We know which ones we don’t want, but most sound okay.”

He looked sympathetic. “Those are only the trial ideas. If you come up with a good one, you’d have first dibs. They’d have to have some approval, maybe a combination of High Council or Senate eventually, but right now, first units get the best selection.”

“We’ll think about it, Sir.”

The General looked at the unarmed sparring wistfully.

I took a deep breath. “Sir, you’re the only married person I know, person with a personal relationship long like that. What do I do when it’s not duty? What do I say when I want to say more?” I stopped there. I didn’t want to whine like a shiny. I also did not want to act like the Vod’e who visited prostitutes.

He scratched his head and laughed soundlessly. “I don’t have much advice, Rex. No one taught me either. I got lucky with one, and everything kept going wrong with the other. I messed up worst often when I would not listen to what they valued. Get used to feeling stupid when you mess up. Laughing together about it later is better. Tell her she’s pretty and talk about things that are import to each of you.”

I mentally tagged and anchored his comments. They weren’t enough, but he was edging away to leave when Appo came with a flight drill question. He stayed for a while, talking and even some hand to hand during our dinner shifts.

The General was waiting for something, but I wasn’t sure he knew what. At least he didn’t tell me.

It was a late, very later when I left the Vod’e board, sooner than some of the others. Bly argued with several Brothers on one side. Cody was still arguing details with Wolffe. Wolffe was having the more fun. A lot of the others had heard less than I had. Unassigned Commanders were mostly angry and not always hiding their worry.

I’d worked with many of these Brothers for missions, but this wasn’t exactly a mission. We were deciding our own futures.

And the arguing suddenly explained better why the Senate and even Jedi Council was so slow. This was our own version. That made becoming citizens suddenly more real.

Some Commanders didn’t quite believe this new… autonomy even now, years after the oldest of us left Kamino. There was about a dozen of us who believed this was happening, that our Jedi wanted this and believed it wasn’t because we failed them. Rumors spread that we were being cut loose as a punishment for the ones that attacked.

What the General and Senator suggested we consider was not always encouraging. Neither Mandalore nor Concord Dawn wanted us. That hit Cody harder than me, approval of his brothers
wasn’t always enough. The Senator’s report suggested we make and name our own cultural group, as not every colony remains linked to a home world’s culture.

I felt that was better than begging. Becoming ‘kith’ was fine. It still meant brother, which was what the Jedi called each other, too. The kith name was approved and we had a lively session as to what to call this group, Board of Review and Command Board were leading.

Fewer planned to attend another meeting. Most of us hoped for missions and could decide from the discussion and then vote.

We now had a list of topics to decide on ranging from recruitment, emigration, new batches and children, and tracking our own brothers. We were assured that our allies in the Senate and Jedi wanted us to have choices in our futures. And we could stay together in units if we wanted and would not become actual homeless refugees.

It was strongly suggested that we choose for each unit the kind of work we wanted, from farming to disaster relief. We’d still be on call of there were military emergencies, if we wanted. This part was newer to most of the others, and Dice, Cody, and I fielded many questions.

By the time Dice was giving the working list of Corps and functions, I was getting restless and ready to get out.

- Anakin

I woke before dawn, the vibration traveling from a baby against my ear, I never tired of feeling them as they grew. I grinned even if it was much too early in the day, and sent affection back. I knew Padmé was still aslee and needed it. That was too important for me to take away from her.

His or her mood was hard to be sure of. Maybe annoyance? Listening to a presence that young was very slippery, and then both were aware of not just their twin but also me. They shifted after a moment or two, and then attention moved off in their endless now of life.

The comparison to my Grandmaster was almost unavoidable and I shook with my suppressed laughter.

I laid back to look at my sleeping family, thanking the Force they were safe and with me.

I was happy.

That was not something I ever really expected. I only had moments of that with my Mom. I had moments as a Padawan, but serenity and contentment among the Jedi were a shallow kind of happiness. I’d held my hopes on seeing Padmé again, but everything was messy for so long. I held on to the fact that Padmé loved me through so much drek.

And I knew Obi-Wan loved me too.

I have everything I wanted five years ago. I can relax, can’t I?

“Ani?”

I only grunted inside my bubble of happiness.

“Ani, I really need to get to the ‘fresher, and you’re on my leg.”
She was not joking, so I rolled off with a frown. “Do you need any help?”

It was too delicate to be called a snort. But my angel did giggle after she reached her goal, her voice echoing a little as she spoke. “By this point, I think I’ve got the balance change down. I don’t think I’ll tire of the alarm on some of the other Senators’ faces when they absorb my pregnancy when they see me close up. Even now, I don’t interact with that many at a close distance...”

I’d been watching dust motes in the dawn light and sat up. “Fewer is better. I don’t want to have to go back to fending of assassins all over again.” Especially now.

Padmé stepped out enough to look at me. “I’m fine. The healers insist on a monitor that I wear all day. They’re considering inducing or surgery in two or three weeks, just because they are twins. But we’re pretty close to optimum progress. Regardless, I can use a blaster as well as ever, and I don’t have much patience for anything these days. Some Senators make attempts to move off in another direction when they see me coming in their direction.” She smirked and returned to her routine.

“Couldn’t you take leave now? They can get along without you for a few months, can’t they?” Months… years… I was fine with forever.

I could not hear her say anything over the water as she started rushing. I sat up along the side of the bed, scratching my head and yawning.

Relaxed waking up still felt new.

Padmé came out, tucking the towel around her head. “Anakin, this work is just as important to me and the future of our family as you using the Force and being a Jedi. You’ve always explained how empty and lost you felt after a mission where you couldn’t feel the Force. I felt some of that frustration and worry in the months between stepping down as queen and taking office in the Senate. They told me I had a special talent for politics, my politics with compassion and fairness. I trained for almost half my life before I was queen, and I’m still learning. I am just gaining the influence and mastery to make a bigger difference than before. How is that different?”

I could feel that this could become a fight.

I did not want that.

“It takes so much of your time and energy, and it hasn’t really changed. Leia and Luke will be new for such a short time.”

My angel frowned. “Is this some Rim thing that women should stay in the home, or you took too much of Obi-Wan’s distaste for politics?”

I was sure Vora would have told me I was digging the hole I was in, deeper. I wasn’t sure what to say and I tried to stall for a safe answer. “I don’t think it’s either of those? Uh-”

Her frown became a glare.

I could feel myself hunch a little. “I don’t like or trust the Senate, you were a good queen. There’s too much graft and corruption. You’ve done your time, and the rest of them are petty little sleemos and not worth your time.”

Padmé came to sit next to me. “If people like me, and Bail, and Mon don’t serve, that means the people like Palpatine, or gods forbid, Jar-Jar, will make the decisions for our children and victims of the war, like Ryloth and the Clones. The Jedi can’t save the Republic alone. More need to be part of responsible decisions, not give it away carelessly to someone who looks good on the surface.”
But that was my biggest problem with the Senate. “It takes far too long to get agreement of ten thousand Senators. Naboo’s invasion showed why it’s too karking slow.”

“That may not be a fair example with how much Palpatine used it for power.” Padmé sighed. “We’re working on it, but the simplest fix is reducing the number of Senators. That’s asking many to give up protecting their people and serving their careers. Whatever we do, will have to be done in stages and may be done when our children are adults.”

“Then why can’t you take time away now?” Even I could feel the whine in my voice.

Her smile was watery. “Because the war is not really over and some debates are simpler while people remember the war. Palpatine’s proxies are reduced and partly defanged right now. We need to welcome the Confederate and Neutral systems back, before any hidden pawns come back out to cause problems. And your men should not have to wait for many years to be free. We must take back our Republic.”

That left me shaking my head. I understood ‘why’ better, but wasn’t as happy about ‘now.’ “You will take leave though, right?”

“Yes, of course I will,” she smiled. “And you’re going to be here more, too. Babies need affection and interaction. Who feeds or changes them isn’t as important as that.”

I had to warn her. “I think I’ll have two or three missions a month, not one after another like before. The Council’s sending pairs out now.”

“I know.” Padmé moved off toward her wardrobe for today’s outfit. “Will you be available for another reception tomorrow night? I would like to show off my handsome husband, the General.”

“I’m still running that tournament in the afternoons, but most evenings are free. The Negotiator is due back that night, but I doubt Obi-Wan wants an audience.” He was very determined to be a good example for the Initiates at the Tournament.

Being a Senator’s husband in a public event still seemed new. The other Senators and influential people admired Padmé’s beauty, and some would try to flirt with her as she glowed.

We could stay close without any excuses now, and her smirk was as good as mine.

-Ahsoka Tano

I came from one of the Knight specific sparring areas, not really finding anyone there right now. I’d used the Padawan ones for a while, where my friends might be if they were free in-Temple, but that kept getting more and more awkward as younglings followed me around now.

That was a lot more funny when it had been Skyguy being followed.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to think about the talk I just had with Master Plo instead of lunch.

“We have not had a chance to chat, young ‘Soka. Commander Wolffe asked to pass on his regards.”

I grinned as that Commander was a little crazy. “I haven’t seen him for a while.”

His smile could be felt. “You don’t need my permission for a visit, General Tano.”
That made me take a deeper breath to resist complaining. I was a Knight now, not a child. “I can’t remember making visits with my Master...”

“There was little time, young one, but the truces are somewhat fragile and I am sure you will be teamed with others more now.” He gestured toward the nearest garden and moved along.

“Because I am a new Knight or for troops?” I tried to keep my voice rational, really I did.

He stopped to face me. “No. Most will be assigned into teams. You have only worked with a relative handful as a Padawan, and none as a Knight. An unfortunate result of so many losses, but now both you and the Council should learn how well you work with others not in your lineage, not only solo missions.”

That gave me a pang. I liked working with Skyguy and Master Obi-Wan.

Master Plo placed a hand on my shoulder. “You will not be cut off, youngling. But can you work closely with knights you do not know and troops you did not mature with? Especially when you do not have cordial relations? Can you keep your serenity when under stress?”

That made me frown at him. “I get along with just about everyone.”

He waited.

“I’ve even been polite to Dooku when he creepy stalks Master Obi-Wan. I don’t think there have been that many I wanted to join the Force right away.”

“If you have any evidence that he has become a threat again in spite of his parole, you can report it to any Council member. Do not be foolhardy as your line.” His hand dropped though his attention was still on me.

I hadn’t really felt worried about him for months. “I’m more worried about my Grandmaster.”

Master Plo hummed. “That he plans to hurt him?”

Shaking my head I didn’t know what to say. “No, not really. They talk about different things... not the war. It’s more like he was on a really long secret mission that no one there wants to mention. Dooku did mention some things to me that he noted in the Undercity before he left.”

“That does not seem an immanent risk. Be sure to meditate on it, young one.” He paused and then spoke more deliberately. “There are few troops remaining who lack a General, and those were all badly damaged by the chips. Guiding and commanding them as they grow healthy and determine their post-war purpose will be difficult and may include risk. Misunderstandings have resulted in brief violence in some cases. So the Council is only assigning these troops if both troops and General are knowing and willing.”

I stood up straighter. “I’m willing! I’ve liked all the Brothers I’ve worked with. They didn’t choose those kriffing chips.”

“Good. I will make sure you are on the list of volunteers, Knight Tano. I doubt you will have any more solo missions for some time.” Master Plo bowed and we parted.

I was looking forward to the challenge, most of the Brothers were cool.

Once I got a late meal, today’s round of the Initiate tournament had already started. It wouldn’t last as long with only about twenty matches. Master thought the final would be in three days. No Master-
Padawan pairings had been announced yet, but a few already had their hopes up yesterday, I just missed being sent to the Corps with the scarcity of Masters in the Temple for me. Now, I could not imagine learning from anyone else.

But almost every day now, Master and Master Obi-Wan had tea or even a dinner afterward, to review the prospects for training or matches. Feemor and Padmé came some days. I wasn’t sure if I liked Dooku in my Master’s quarters, especially if they were alone.

That never ended well, in the old days.

I wanted to get there early so I could talk to Skyguy about the troopers. He might get too protective, and I’m not a Padawan anymore.

Knocking on the door produced only silence, even in the Force. I let myself in and carefully checked there wasn’t a body on the carpet. It really wasn’t funny to find a corpse in Master’s quarters on a mission, especially in a pool of blood.

I didn’t want to have to try to explain it again.

I checked the scraggy plants and gave them a little water. I was sometimes surprised they hadn’t died, and wondered how long they’d been here. I put a pot of water to slowly warm. Tea was always a good way to mellow Master Obi-Wan. I looked at some newer items on the shelf with bright lettering I couldn’t read, and I saw a small sculpture that looked a little like Jar’Kai. My arms were behind me to resist poking into things.

When the outer door opened again, my Grandmaster and Dooku arrived.

Master Obi-Wan smiled. “I wondered if we would see you today, Ahsoka.”

I followed him to the counter. “I talked to Master Plo at lunch about the unassigned units, and I put my name in.”

He hummed as he started brew the tea, his motions a familiar ritual.

I didn’t want to speak about the Vod’s with Dooku here, I was waiting more for Skyguy. “How are these Initiates looking, Master?”

“Much like any cadre, most are closing in on their readiness to become Padawans. A handful have been spoken for since the competition started. Are you thinking of taking a Padawan already?” Master smirked a little.

“No. Nuh-huh, Master.” I waved my hands to push that idea away. “I’m not ready.”

His cheeks shifted, but the smirk did not go away. “I wasn’t sure your Master was ready, and yet here you are, Knight Tano.”

Dooku rumbled. “I was sure he was too foolish and imbalanced to be trusted with a youngling.”

“Fooled ya, didn’t we?” My grin hurt.

Hiding coughs, they almost glared at me, but the tea was ready. No one spoke as I poured the cups our, but I felt no anger or tension. I didn’t take much for myself. I watched them, two men who spent years fighting.

Quietly having tea,
“Are you feeling well, Padawan?” Master Obi-Wan asked. “Is there a problem with the tea?”

I was hoping he would not notice. “I was hoping to have kaf with Master Skywalker when he got back...”

Dooku’s nose lifted a little. “How uncivilized.”

Master Kenobi’s nose twitched too.

Then came a giggle I could not stop, and I almost couldn’t breathe, let alone speak for a minute. “You are alike! I never saw it before. All that high class stuff, not like Master’s greasy engines and droids.”

Neither of them looked happy, and glared at each other before looking away.

My snicker became a belly laugh as they tried to ignore me. When I could speak clearly, I asked, “Where’s Skyguy? Isn’t he done at the tournament?”

Grandmaster grabbed the new topic with both hands. “He might not be back tonight, the Senator had to go to the gestation clinic.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to AlexaHiwatari98 for the inspiration for one scene,

Rex and Ahsoka make their debut as viewpoint characters. The probably won't be featured too often, as this could scatter into more subnovels.

Releases should be every fortnight or so, about Wednesday. At least until I get blocked... :/
Chapter Summary

Vora's back from her solo mission that went off the tracks, and she should check in with so many. She may want a vacation as the temple wasn't as peaceful as she thought while she was gone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

-Vora

Right after weight of the boys’ memorial, I hurried to the bridge to watch us break orbit for Coruscant. I had a little space-happy weeble even as the Admiral gave the orders. I stood near the General’s station, avoiding using Obi-Wan’s cold and empty seat again.

The ship left orbit smoothly and quietly, and my wibble returned. I’d left Earth, and here I was kind of commanding a spaceship, a destroyer. No one else seemed surprised or upset that someone with little military experience was in this spot.

But I was, I was a really big fake, propped up by protocol and Jedi mystique. Had I already cost lives?

“General?”

I looked at Dice with his padd, and he looked worried. Waving into a shrug, I said, “I just like watching leaving orbit. I’ll get to work on the reports after we hit Jump. Sleep and work my arm so I can resume training.”

“The medics have limited your training, sir. At least until the healers at the Temple check you.” He was trying to scold without scolding.

I could feel that I was going to crash now that the service was over despite Force-boosts, but I forced a smile. “Okay, I need some tutoring in the battle comms, too. And least eight hours of sleep real soon now.”

“I’ll get the manual for the General. I would prefer if we could coordinate training sims with the General before our next deployment. We also have many questions accumulating from your references. Can you meet with Shins and the other learners during Jump?” At my nod, Dice read off the next in his list. “Battle recordings have been summarized for your report. Perhaps the General can train with a blaster as well.”

I made a face at that one, his request was a polite demand.

“I will also need the General’s approval for resupply requests before we arrive at base.”

I could feel my squint. “Does the GAR do something like commendations after a battle?”
Dice nodded.

“Please help with an appropriate list, especially all who passed, as a last respect.” I thought about that ‘to do’ list. “Will I have any time to sleep?” I didn’t try very hard not to whine.

His smile was almost invisible. “Yes, Sir. Axe’s instructions were very clear.”

Over the next days, I had time to sleep. I even had time for brief naps when reminded.

I didn’t have much time to mope, even if I could not quite get warm no matter how warm my office or how much I tried to layer my robes. I pulled more old music off my padd and had it playing loud as I worked in paperwork and extracted footage for my report. The seminar on grieving and intro to Terran culture was limited to a couple hours of questions each evening. Many I could not definitively answer, but this was only a start as they would end up writing the manuals for their own care.

Guards went everywhere with me on board and that got real old, though one named Gex wistfully asked about my singing at the service. I stayed near the bridge most of the time. The guards got more numerous when I went to other parts of the ship where the prisoners were contained. There were only a handful of minor incidents, mostly where the prisoners hurt themselves trying to get at me. I winced every time I heard them getting subdued. The prisoners were quieter if they didn’t see me.

The belated training in battle comm and group fighting sims were embarrassing. At least it started clicking for one moment and we all coordinated on a big alpha in the one exercise. But I was usually out of sync with them.

I was happy that I hadn’t pancaked virtually in the sims, though I had been blown up a few times to their upset. And I was wondering if I would be less of a shining target for the enemy if I flew the same interceptor as the troopers. Then it sank in that that would make them target them looking for me, like the boy that died for me on Ando. I’d get better at dodging.

Then I was almost happy to reach Coruscant orbit. We put down at a somewhat isolated landing area in the middle of the night. The thousands of prisoners were marched off to some detention area steadily. The extra guards all seemed to be pulled from other units, a rainbow of colors in the harsh nighttime lighting. I could feel a few guards’ murmurs of greeting, even if the prisoners were too closed to react.

“General.” Dice seemed tired too.

I cracked a yawn. “Back to the Temple for me. I’ll try to catch up in the afternoon, but I don’t know how reporting to the Council will go.” I stepped out, eager to get home, casting around for transportation.

Dice, Gex, and a few others hurried to catch up.

That made me spin around. “We’re safe and home now. I can handle a trip in a taxi.”

“The 934th aren’t fully locked up yet or through surgery, and you are a prime target. Sir.”

“I do not need a bunch of nannies. I don’t even need an audience.”

Gex faded back a little as Dice spoke. “You don’t have full rating with blasters, Sir, and you aren’t wearing armor. You should have someone to watch your back.”

My throat was tight because I wanted to yell at them, but they were doing what they saw as their duty. “Fine, what do you propose as we all won’t fit in a taxi?” I did not want to think about trailing
the ducklings behind me on whatever public transportation Coruscant had.

Dice looked back toward the terminal. “Turbo’s getting transport.”

*Was I the only General who lost these kinds of arguments?* Turbo didn’t drive as carelessly as old friends had, and I could not say I didn’t feel a little guilty to be driven around like Miss Daisy.

Escorted to the Temple entrance, I glared at my Commander until we were safely inside. “I’ll contact you if I leave the Temple.”

At least he didn’t make me more annoyed before he left.

The Temple entrance hall was mostly empty, only a couple guards. Their masks were giving me the creeps this late at night. I took a really, really deep breath of air that felt cooler and cleaner. After sending a message to the Council and the healers that I was back and would report in the morning, I resisted the urge to add anything else and hurried back toward my quarters.

In the lift, I had the horrible idea that I’d been moved out into my own quarters while I was gone. That I was erased from those rooms all too easily, and I shivered in the dimmer hallway. I was breathing shallow through my dread as I reached our doorway.

The door slid open into a darker dim. Anakin was out, but Obi-Wan was close.

“Vora.” He stood up, though he looked half asleep in his nightwear.

I launched myself into almost a tackle. “Ben. Oh, God, I missed you.” Somehow I felt really touch starved after only a week and some change. Obi-Wan’s arms were so *real* and solid, I breathed in linen and tea and him, feeling calmer already. I just wanted to burrow in.

He felt of a sleepy hum more than any urgent thoughts. “I’m relieved you’re back safely, Padawan.”

Maybe I could ask while he’s calm. “Ventress said something about using some mask, but it didn’t sound like much of a threat when I had *no* idea what she was talking about.”

He paled from old pain as he woke. “A powerful Sith torture device. It claws at you and uses the pain and power of the dark emotions as it slithers inside, to attempt to force a Fall. Your senses are cut off as it whispers and shouts your darkest fears. The isolation is profound,”

“I’m sorry, Ben,” I hugged him tighter. “Can’t scare someone who’s ignorant. We captured young Fett for trial. Even better I didn’t crack up in combat. But I *missed* you so much, my fox,”

I didn’t want to let go.

He almost chuckled. “I am glad you are back, Vora. It was almost quiet with only a large number of Initiates to ask unusual questions.”

“Even young-uns can recognize a good teacher.” I was grinning at the image. “They don’t ask as much if they think you’ll look down on them.”

Obi-Wan hummed again and then *did* laugh. “Ahsoka asked a question like that yesterday, but I had no answer.”

Another yawn could not be held in and I started dragging my way to bed. “Can I hear about it after some sleep?”

I barely woke up when we got company in bed.
“Re keepin her for obsera’on. Fake labor.” Anakin’s mumbles were exhausted and frustrated, as his arms went around Obi-Wan as well.

I went back to sleep so quickly, I suspected I had help.

In the morning I woke earlier than I wanted, feeling cold. I could feel that Obi-Wan was washing up and I felt my frown.

Anakin wasn’t awake, but he was twitching a little in his sleep. Whatever it was, he wasn’t feeling like it was a bad dream, much happier. Pressing my mouth to keep from laughing taxed what brainpower I had right then. This suddenly reminded me of how our collie twitched on the sofa as she slept, dreaming of running through the yards and fields in long summers and white drifting winters when I was a kid. At least Anakin wasn’t making little whiny barking noises in his dreams.

If he did, I had to record it for Padmé, Obi-Wan, and embarrassing posterity.

By the time I’d smothered the giggles, I was fully awake and rubbing my eyes and sitting on the side of the bed.

Obi-Wan came out of the ‘fresher, already in under-robes, his face flat and calm. “Council will expect your report, first thing.” His voice was noninflected.

I felt thirsty. “Finished it in Jump, just wanna do a last read through.”

He said nothing else before he left. I washed up before scrounging for something in the kitchenette, not that I felt satisfied by what I found. By then it was late enough that I woke Anakin. “Come on sandy-head. I got to report to the Council, but I bet you want to check on someone soon...”

That was a muffled curse, but he was awake and looked up with a slightly bloodshot eye. “You got through your mission, Vora. Good... Heard you captured a lot of those kriffing chips.”

I felt my own smirk as he sat up. “Yep, and those chips are still kriffing with those boys. There were some attack attempts, even locked up. Vod’e from a lot of troops showed up to welcome them home and get them to holding, I guess. I saw some from your troops there, so they might know more recent details.”

As I said that, I remembered my panic during the questioning of Chops and I stuffed that back into the mental closet. Then I forced myself to take deep even breaths.

“Vora?”

“Haven’t had time to finish processing some things.” I wasn’t sure if I wanted to talk to a healer or an active general. It was a node of guilt and mission necessity. I had wanted to talk to Obi-Wan, but he...

I was supposed to be an adult, by their system too. I could handle feelings, right?

“Solo missions are different, Vora. Especially if they’ve turned violent.”

I hiccuped, clenching my teeth and swallowing. I could not afford a break down right now. “Yeah. Violent. Lotta deaths. Too many. One kid died to save my ass and I didn’t even know his name before he died. I... wasn’t ready. I couldn’t even process the comm chatter. Ventress insinuated things, but I didn’t even know enough to parry that poison. Caught Fett. Nearly lost my arm. That’s
the short version."

“That wasn’t what you haven’t processed, was it?” Anakin was serious.

“No.” I took a deeper breath. “I.. did something for battle necessity that I’m not happy about. It kinda, no, it broke my own code I’ve had for decades. And I’m horribly afraid there was a better solution I was too stupid to see.” I was afraid to even have Chops checked over by the Jedi healers to make sure I hadn't done any damage.

Anakin had stepped over to hug me tight, soothing as I started to weep.

It didn’t last long until I controlled my breathing again. I just needed understanding, and was sad that Obi-Want hadn’t wanted to hear any part of this. My face felt warm, but I’d avoided a mass of tears and snot. “Thanks. I needed that.”

Looking down as we stepped apart, he smirked. “I had been planning to ask if that was a formal curse about fatherhood? Padmé’s fine, but I’m having trouble sleeping.”

“Nightmares?”

“No, the Force is quiet.” He went to dig something out of storage. “We have that late round of the Initiate tournament today after prime lunch, you should go. Dooku’s been observing. Got my mechanics class now.”

And so I slipped back into everyday business and sent my report to the Council. Then I checked my face before leaving for the Council chamber.

I only waited beside the unfamiliar guards for a few minutes. Almost all the Masters were present, only Master Koon and of course Master Ti were present as holographs.

They seemed calm. Then again that was their job.

Master Tiin spoke first. “We received your report about the attack on Ando, Knight Meyers.”

I still didn’t know him at all, so I stayed silent for a moment to be calm, though I noticed that Master Che looked annoyed with me. “Yes, Masters. The planetary defenses were gone and much civilian damage was clear. We.. I didn’t know who was behind it at the first engagement, but I doubted we wanted any warlords to take power as the Confederacy collapses. If they fled, we could turn to humanitarian relief immediately. They did not withdraw...”

My verbal report wasn’t that long, and probably wasn’t that different than the precis of my written one. I’d spent enough time tweaking the final wording. “When I woke from being healed, I checked in with my Commander, and then worked on arrangements for the prisoners. I had to see if contact with the locals seemed likely to allow me to finish my original mission. Then Master Ti arrived.”

She spoke next. “The Andos appear to have recovered from their shock when the first relief supplies arrived the day after the Negotiator departed. They are still wary, but some intermediate officials were receptive to opening talks in the very near future when they had the time to examine the treaty. They suffered considerable destruction in their governing capital, but the mass of their people took shelter in the deep. They were seriously suspicious of the Clone troopers as a group, but that may change as they are more aware of how Republic support affects them in the current unrest.”

At least my mission was accomplished, even if it was no longer a solo mission.

Master Koon spoke next. “Little was said about the surviving 934th so far, how damaged do they
“I think they lost about half their strength since their general, and speaking to them is pretty counterproductive with the chips still in. Axe and Shins are of the opinion they pretty much didn’t do that much while they lost contact and should recover like the 408th did. I really didn’t have the time to speak to their Commander long enough to get their story, and the others usually tried their damnedest to get loose to attack or escape on the way here.”

Obi-Wan spoke, his voice holding a hard edge of ice. “Hmm. I see no explanation about this talking with that enemy Commander. How did you get that information?”

I felt like he punched me in the throat with how cold that was, because this wasn’t calm neutrality but something colder. I wanted to touch my throat to make sure the arctic pain was not physical. Taking a deep breath, I said, “He was separated for questioning, but persuasion wasn’t working when he saw us as traitors and any resistance was valid. I did not want anyone to beat it out of him. Torture on humans on my world presents false or dangerously incomplete intelligence too often. We needed at least who led them before the next action.

I took another breath and squared my shoulders. “Questioning was not productive, and I decided we could not wait. That left short circuiting his chip to get the answers we needed most.”

Master Che felt angry. “That was only cleared for Masters, Knight Meyers.”

My face twitched. “I am sorry, Master. The only alternative I saw was brutal and inaccurate physical torture. Either way he could die, but this had a chance of freeing him.”

Mace’s gaze focused on me. “Did you get the information?”

“Yes, that was how I learned about Ventress and Fett.”

Master Luminara looked at Obi-Wan with a note of suspicion. “Did someone show you how to accomplish that?”

I replied quickly before his face changed from calm. “No. I wasn’t really aware enough at the time on Kamino. I dropped into the Force and felt the dark… harpoon that had to be neutralized. He seemed okay afterwards and after my own recovery spoke for some of his dead brothers at the memorial service.”

Yoda lifted his head and spoke. “To Master Che report this. More questions for Knight Meyers, are there, hmm?”

“The Knight has not yet been released from medical.” Che raised an eyebrow, but no one else spoke.

“Your performance was satisfactory, Knight Meyers. You may go.” Mace’s voice had a little warmth.

I turned and walked away as the next topic started, something about a Council of First Knowledge that they all started arguing about.

My knees wobbled as I walked back out into the entrance hall past the guards. My throat stopped aching before I reached the healing area. The checkup was mostly a formality, as I’d been following Axe’s orders. I was cleared for simple katas now, and Obi-Wan’s friend made me explain my symbolic surgery and the Commander’s behavior.

I still had almost two hours before the tournament, and decided on some more solo katas, there
wasn’t enough time to visit Dooku. Not that I wanted to think in the quiet right now. It would have to wait until I had a longer block of free time for a possible meltdown.

I had to prioritize, after all.

The small studio was quiet and empty and I practiced slowly, trying not to think. I knew I wasn’t anything close to perfect, but I was fine with ‘good enough.’

That got boring and I was attempting to do the ones Dooku wanted me to use. I planned to go back to Soresu katas after that and then food. Sooner if my arm gave much more than a twinge.

“I heard you were seen training with the Sith.”

Another older, scarred man in robes, with gray hair in something like a topknot and buzz cut. He didn’t look familiar but he was much steadier than the Knights I usually ran into here. “Nope. My Grandmaster’s given me some advice. He’s skilled, so he knows what he’s doing. I’m closer to his age than Skywalker’s, so I need to learn how to compensate as he can. Technical advice, not apprenticeship.”

He blinked and then sneered. “This explains Windu’s headaches over that line…”

-What about that line?- Qui-Gon’s offended words came before he appeared.

The stranger just stared at Master Jinn, speechless.

Qui-Gon’s hands were fists as he frowned at the other man like he wanted to start a brawl. -A growing lineage, that has seven living members, Kota, and at least one Padawan about to join.-

“I don’t know how you’re here, Jinn, but you owe me. I called the problems with cloned sentients twenty-five years ago when they were only designed heirs for Senators, regardless of Life Force they showed.” Kota sneered back.

Qui-Gon grinned. -I left my credits in my other robes, you old war-hawk.- And then faded out of sight.

Kota lost the smile; his lips compressed as he looked at me. Then he demanded, “What was that? What did you do?”.

“He passed into the Force, but he kinda stayed in the shallows.”

I sat down on the mat, tired suddenly, and wondered how to ask the obvious.

The Jedi nodded, stiff enough that he had some extra internal support. “Master Kota. We were sent to vital battle areas before that sabotage triggered. We haven’t been back to Coruscant in almost two years.”

I knew even less how to talk to this guy and he reminded me of an old Marine I knew once.

He just looked at me. “I hear you commanded your first action.”

“Yes, sir. Mostly turned them loose, they have more training.

Master Kota made a face. “Templates and repetition. How could they not react from the same physiology? The same training? You cannot train creative brilliance or battle realities from a book.”

“They fought a real war and real losses for years, with distinction. Don’t you dare deny them that.”
They don’t act in lockstep, any more than other soldiers after long training and discipline. Or would you argue that other military units have never betrayed their oaths?"

His lip curled. “No one would have been surprised if they all turned the same way.”

“People can be controlled many ways, that doesn’t mean they’re worthless.” I was irritated. Had I found my first red-neck Jedi?

Kota crossed his arms. “Time will tell if they surpass their created purpose. I prefer my less regimented militia.”

Three deep breaths and my anger ebbed. “They will grow like any group of young people out in the real world after childhood. Their childhood unfortunately included total futile war.”

“You are deeply involved, perhaps attached.”

“Perhaps. The Order is really the majority who care about them. Being pawns must be corrected with compassion. The Republic must learn this because bias against makes you stupid.”

He scoffed. “I’ll be more impressed when they can compete against non-Clones in advanced areas.”

“They will. Someday, their own culture will have a tradition of service, not chips to force it. Will you help with reforming the GAR?”

That made him pause. “I thought the GAR would dissolve with the war?”

I shook my head. “Has merging war into Jedi duties been good for the Order and its purpose? Master Kenobi, and Skywalker seem to have taken to it better than most, but plans cannot be based on the exceptions. Some warriors are needed, even in times of peace, just to remain prepared and handle would-be warlords, pirate fleets, and the like.”

He stood and shallow bowed. “I am sure I will see you again, Knight. May the Force be with you.”

“And with you, Master.” I’d returned the courtesy, unsure if I’d convinced him of anything.

Rushing through the sparse cafeteria and nearly inhaling some food, I followed the Force to Obi-Wan’s location and the tournament for middle-schoolers. Most Jedi present were spectators, and I thought I saw only a score or so in practice gear. The seating rows contained scores of Jedi I did not know, all watching the kids. Obi-Wan and Dooku seemed to be playing judges, though I saw a couple of Council members watching Dooku more than the matches.

Anakin was missing again, and all I could feel from him was stress and worry, but not quite panic. Did fathers help in the delivery room here or would he be reduced to floating objects in the waiting room as he paced?

A match ended, and Dooku noted the verdict as another Jedi, probably a healer, checked for injuries. Obi-Wan’s match between two girls, one a dark-skinned human and another orange-ish Twi'lek, where the latter was clearly more steady.

Even I could see the end coming for this match and I winced when it came with a weapon bound and unusable. A very similar boy hurried out to console her, with a cute little snarl on his face at the winner. Obi-Wan interrupted their words, shooing them in different directions after their check.

A few minutes’ pause and new matches were being set up.
“I’m sorry, I should know you, Knight Meyers.” A tall Jedi, a blonder mountain, even compared to Anakin, spoke.

I waved that off. “That’s okay. I’m not the best at remembering names either.”

His smile was warm and uncomplicated. “I’m Feemor, first of Master Jinn’s Padawans, I was away with the Vanguard for several years, though Taq said he spoke with you before your mission.”

I could feel my face brighten, this guy was as close to Star Trek as the Order got. Then I tried to figure out what the lineage thing meant with him. It was still cool. “Sorry I messed up your first contact stuff, then.”

“It was clearly the will of the Force that we be forewarned in both directions.” He seemed way calmer than most who knew about it. Probably made him the oddball.

The next match started and side chat quieted. I could follow the matches, more or less. I wasn’t that good at identifying who was better, so I just watched and copied the crowd’s muted reactions.

One of the other children spotted Feemor and came over after the matches ended, towing a young black boy who caught my eye. The rusty Twi’lek beamed at Feemor. “I’d like for you to meet my friend Adus, Master. He’s already finished with the tournament, but I told him he’ll be fine. Everyone knows about twins and they’re only eleven.”

“Padawan, greet Knight Meyers first.” Feemor’s voice was neutral, but there was a trace of humor.

The girl hunched in embarrassment, her lekku hiding her face for an instant. Then she bowed. “I’m sorry, Knight Meyers, Master. I am honored to meet you. This is the biggest tournament I remember seeing, with so many Knights and Masters. There’s Council members here, too. Will they be taking Padawans, too? I heard they will! I only hope Emcee and Livwebb can find Masters too, this time. Livwebb will be thirteen next month!”

The other was grinning by the time the Padawan took a breath.

“Hush, Padawan Elewcici. They will all find Masters in their own time.”

I had to smile at them. “I would have loved being in the exploration Corps when I was your age. They were my favorite holonovels.”

She grinned. “I already know five languages, I hope to learn new ones.”

“She can yell at you in more than that,” Adus smirked. “Especially when she gets hurt in sparring.”

I nodded to the boy, but said, “Then I think you will be learning a bunch of new ones soon enough.”

Feemor’s smile was mild. “Care to give us a preview, Meyers?”

I could feel my face flush. “I never really mastered anything but my native language. And every time I try to think about why basic is similar I get a headache. There’s a lot of idiom, like what you call holonovels is different. I know mostly fragments and cognates, many from songs.”

“Cici could use the puzzle.” The snark was hidden on this face.

“Okay, ‘Siwwe und achsich Yaahre zerick, hen unsere Foaheldra en neies Land aus dere Kontinent vorgebrocht, begriffe in Freiheit un eigweidt zum Gedenk as alle zat Mennah gleich erschaft sin. Nau, sin mir in en grosse Folksgrieg gedriwwe, nausfoddere eb sell Land, odder eenich Land so
erschaft un so eigweit, lang aushalde kann...” I had to pause when I lost track of where I was. “That was a battlefield eulogy about a hundred and fifty years ago during a bloody civil war. The speech is about grief, and horror, and resolve to honor those who died for freedom and to continue their work in their honor. The speech may have been more important than the battle.”

Feemor seemed to be considering more. “The Councils are still undecided at this point, we may leave to sweep in another direction for other planets within a few weeks. “Cici will discover much studying on the Vanguard.”

Aldus swallowed and looked like he wanted to cry.

Cici’s smile of excitement drooped as she noticed.

“Come, younglings,” Feemor started to shoo them along. “You should return to the dorms. I’m sure more of your friends will be meeting Masters in the next days. Force be with you, Knight.”

“And with you also.”

I looked around the sparring hall after they left, and found that Dooku was the only other present. “Heya, Grandmaster.”

He looked up from his seat. “I am relieved you survived your mission, Vora.”

“Can’t say I liked it, but it was what it was.”

“Many missions are like that.” His smile was small with sad eyes.

That gave me the idea. “You know anything about a mask that Ventress had? She was counting on it frightening me.”

Dooku winced the tiniest bit in the Force and looked away. “Yes, too much. I gave it to her originally to use on Master Kenobi. I.. coveted his allegiance and grew frustrated that persuasion and battle weren’t effective. He was cunning and I remembered a few comments from his Master about his talent. I wanted him at my side to destroy Palpatine.”

“Funny how that worked out.”

“Yes. There may still be records of it in the Archives, but they may have been hidden by time or intent. I will check.”

That really wasn’t anything I wanted to see. “I hope it stays an academic exercise.”

Dooku looked me in the eye. “Does the Force tell you that or wishful thinking?”

I was trying to decide which would be the lie when my comm buzzed. I excused myself with a gesture and turned away. “Knight Meyers?”

“Report to the Council Chamber, Meyers,” Mace Windu growled.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay but work and sleep stress has been beating on my poor muse. Hope
it worked and thanks for reading.

Translation was courtesy of Dr. Richard Beam and also Mr. Madenford at padutch101.com. Any errors are my own. Our languages would be as opaque as theirs are for us, lacking all the cognates and connections most Earth languages have to each other. The text quoted is the first part of the Gettysburg address, in case you did not spot it, and that war has a lot of resonances to the prequel trilogy. Some may be deliberate, with the very names of the factions.
These Little Lights of Mine

Chapter Summary

Finishing one mission leads to new expectations, and some things are universal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Obi-Wan

Traffic control gave notice that the Negotiator was landing late in the night, presumably to transfer the chipped brothers directly into secured holding. The Force was quiet as I settled in to meditate.

I was a Master, a High Council member. My responsibility was to guide the Order, teach, and be a good example to other Jedi.

That should be enough.

I could have affection, I could even show it. But I was clearly not able to balance that under separation, even as well as Anakin had during a war. That was an embarrassing lack of control. I should eschew closer attachment from this evidence.

Part of me, a small childish part was pouting because I missed her so much. But I must be under control before the new Padawan became a reality. Before almost tomorrow.

That part wanted to rush to the Negotiator at the hanger amid the breezes laden with coolants and fuels to assure my fears, to wait by the Temple entrance to see her health with my own eyes and be sure she was my fierce and untainted Padawan. To know she was well and not just living. But I would be calm and steady for my Padawan’s return.

I wasn’t quite ready when she entered our quarters, bandages still visible. Her steps were a little slow and presence a little quiet. She looked tired, eye sockets deep and bruised in the dim light. Her arms held close around her midsection and shoulders hunched.

Vora launched herself at me, gripping me close, her presence sad and grieving. I wanted to hold her, to feel sure she hadn’t changed, hadn’t lost something after facing Ventress. I looked at her tired face.

My own face held still as I demanded.

She shivered from no breeze, looking for something in my face before holding me closer again.

I was controlled and still as the Code approved. I could not prevent an interior pang of something. I sent that pang and pouting child into the Force where they belonged.

Vora winced in my arms, her eyes blinking too fast.

I could express concern. “You were injured, how are you, really?”

“Fine, ‘M fine.” Vora’s voice was muffled against me as she spoke.
I moved us toward bed and rest when she mentioned Ventress and that vile mask.

That was a brittle and rending period that I was uncomfortable remembering. Even worse was the idea of Ventress reusing it on another Jedi. I deflected Vora’s attention by mentioning the broad curiosity of the Initiates and moving us along for sleep that we both needed.

The early morning Council meeting was almost a routine now, no immediate major actions detracted from reports about treaty and diplomatic missions. I was aware that key split away worlds had not made treaties yet, even if they had agreed on cease-fires. The Force showed only ripples and no turbulence on that. Some Council Members were examining the Initiates as potential Padawans, while Mace’s stare reminded me of need.

Vora reported detail about how her mission went astray.

I was **appalled** that she’d risked the opposing Commander’s health without training or approvals. That it sounded like she’d succeeded, was that was only luck and did not change the offense.

That arrogance was all too familiar.

I did not think I could allow myself to turn a blind eye and shield another again as they moved away from the Light. It had not helped last time and I could not force myself to go through that again.

I would not enable that behavior, let the Knight reap their sowing.

Even if my heart was cracking.

Vora departed as I considered this.

The often heated discussion of the format for the Council of First Knowledge grew-*lively* again.

Persuading a portion of Corps to participate was more difficult than I expected. Many simply were not interested in devoting large blocks of time for issues beyond their duties. Only a few Medical members volunteered, claiming higher priority patient confidentiality and distance issues. They were reassured when learning attendance was not that absolute, and they could select a trusted proxy who was aware of their concerns. AgriCorps didn’t care much, being far less connected to the concerns of the Order entire. ExplorCorps did not want to ground their praxium ship for the months of debates. They were not sure about how well remote attendance would suffice over distance. Proxies might serve if they fell out of contact, but they were more interested in taking part aside from those concerns.

The Educational Corps, working with teaching, research, and design were often as apathetic as the AgriCorps if stationed away from the Temple. The ones here in the Temple for the younglings were more aware, but had no more free time than mental healers. The dozens of makers and tinkerers who designed things as for the Order’s use and for war, such as our light armor, were a small subset. The hundreds who researched and taught at non-Jedi museums and schools had less interaction with the Order over time than the average Senator. The Council had not gotten a single volunteer, not even from lecturers attached to Coruscanti universities on the other side of the world.

“I have contacted nearly a hex-ed, even off-planet,” Master Luminara stated. “One had actually passed, and the rest did not care enough to take an interest. They were not dark, merely detached from the Order and our duties. They are nearly non-Jedi, and their fate should become part of the full discussion. I believe they should be reintegrated more or encouraged to find another life.”

I had never seen Master Nu at such a loss for words.
“Held in a half-state, they should not be.” The Grandmaster’s words were sad at this additional loss.

Saesee nodded. “None of us wish to force any away from the Order, but we all have the duty to serve the Force and our brothers, no matter our path. Gasses drift apart and disperse, but that is not our purpose.” He paused. “I have made no secret that I do not approve of changing the Code, but we have been drifting apart longer than the war. Change.”

“Change need not be destruction or revolution, but evolution. How long did the last reformation take?” I had my preferences, but persuasion was slower.

“Records are sparse. Few recorded their experiences and knowledge as the current Republic and traditions formed after generations of war.” Madame Nu had recovered.

Master Tiin crossed his arms. “At least we have gotten more volunteers from the active roster. Master Rahm Kota notified me of his interest a few days ago.”

Mace did not look surprised. “I’d expected his interest more in the Grand Army than the Order. He is… fond of his men.”

“Who of us are not?” Shaak Ti said with a small and tired smile through her holo.

“A topic that is, for another day,” Master Yoda said as he stood up to end the session and depart. “Inspect younglings we must.”

The Initiate tournament was well past the midway point, with only perhaps a score still in competition. I was observing the Vanle twins as Mace expected, but the Force was not clear about my becoming a master again. I was unsettled enough about my previous Padawans.

Vora arrived, her unease not showing to the eye, but Feemor introduced himself and his new Padawan. They seemed to chat amiably enough and I could see that Initiate Adus Vanle was present too.

It occurred to me that my lack of interest in another Padawan was rooted in something other than weariness.

Not knowing what it was, was a bitter truth that I must address.

- Vora

I walked toward the Council chamber, wondering how I could have possibly managed to get in trouble since my mission review only this morning. As other Jedi got on and off the elevator, all I could come up with was Bant or Che’s reports on damage I’d done to Chops or if that Marine Master earlier had been more offended than I thought.

The Master was standing outside the concourse below and looked up when I approached. “Walk with me, Meyers.”

Okay, this didn’t feel exactly like a dressing down, so I fell in a little behind as I had no idea where this was going.

He slowed enough to turn and face me. “Have you made plans to continue your studies? You have areas that are lacking compared to other new knights, for your progress as a Jedi.”

Progress? Umm. “Yeah, I’m very aware of holes in my knowledge. I’ve never been ambitious. This is a big job and I doubt I could catch up with others my age. I don’t want to obsess. Mostly I’ve been
filling in on topics and customs related to missions and continuing with my saber training and tactics with the Brothers. I hope to get the boys adjusted to life after the war.”

“Which boys are you thinking of, Meyers?” Mace had started walking again heading away from these public areas. “Would that be the troopers or Kenobi and Skywalker? I heard a rumor that you smacked those Masters when they were arguing on Keller.”

I knew my eyes had gotten bigger and I restrained an ‘eep.’ I wanted to ask who’d told him, but realized it had to be Vod’e gossip. There was no way those two would have confessed. “It wasn’t mission related and they were hurting each other too much to allow it to boil over or fester.”

“But it was worked out?”

“Mostly, but I’m not sure Anakin truly understands atonement or reparations after big screw ups. Obi-Wan punishes himself, so he needs to be watched against being too harsh.” Maybe that was what was going on with him… I shook my head. “War has been bad for all of you.”

He looked at me sharply. “Not for you?”

“I’ve been living under existential doom and war terrors almost my entire life.” I knew my smile was edged. “Destruction had been poised for more than my lifetime, and hatred over ideology and religions kept flaring into wars and random violence. Adding spaceflight, alien races, and the Force didn’t change the mindset much. You came of age under peace. I didn’t have skills, but the mindset. I can learn skills. The different mindset has been harder for many Jedi.”

Windu hummed as he walked. “You should select other areas to study, I suspect our methodology is too linked to younger students and that seems likely to be changing. That does not mean you should learn only patchworks as you have. Your early statements indicated an interest in healing, though that is usually a talent bound more to the Living Force, which you are not.”

I thought for a moment, absorbing the strange feeling of others bowing to the Grandmaster as we walked. “I don’t know. It’s not an instinctual reaction to heal. I don’t think I could be fully detached from the people I’m trying to help. Losing a patient well could not happen. I stayed out of related fields, knowing that on my homeworld, I’d burn out if it was my main career.”

“Masters can provide suggestions for your study.”

That dry tone made me snicker. “Oh, and you want to, don’t you? I don’t have any plans aside from light saber, getting the Clones set up as free and productive citizens and getting the old coot closer to something like normal. That absorbs my time in Temple. I wasn’t interfacing with the brothers or battle operations too well… I think I’d like to learn a bit more first aid, especially stabilizing others. Maybe twist Obi-Wan and Anakin’s arms too, they get badly hurt too often.”

He snorted. “That might not be as useful, with Skywalker on light duty and Kenobi gaining new duties...”

That made me feel awkward to hear about new duties. I’d felt lonely enough last night. “Maybe after the reforms?”

Mace came to a stop beside a door, like any other in the corridor and opened it, leading me in. Inside a simple apartment with rich colors. “You speak strongly about the need to recruit and train Force users, correct?”

The shift from talking about my training seemed large to me, and I nodded. I followed to a seating group and sat at his gesture.
“Meyers, we have a pair of twin initiates who need guidance from partnered Masters...” His voice tone was softer than usual.

I started grinning, as Obi-Wan and small children was an easy image. An image that probably wasn’t true, as he would never be a father. Suddenly that made me sad.

“...dertake to take a Padawan, Meyers?”

*That snapped me back with a vengeance. *“Who, me?” My voice squeaked, I could feel it. “I haven’t... I don’t...” *Take a breath. *“I don’t know enough to teach.”

Was that a faint smile on his face? “A Master learns as much as the Padawan. The Order needs more... mindsets, as you just called them in some things. You will be able to fill in missing areas in your own education and from a more experienced Master. There are few field partnerships for this need remaining, and Obi-Wan is in two of them.

“The last twin pairing had one pass into the Force during the war, and I am concerned their training was not sufficient. New Master-Padawan teams usually spend more time in the Temple before going into the field, and at least the first year should include time for the Council of First Knowledge.” He must have thought all this was clear.

I was getting lost. “The what?... Sir... err, Master?”

“The High Council has been debating the format of reforms for months. A gathering to make those decisions is named Council of First Knowledge, customarily. With the Order’s losses, that Council cannot be sequestered during these debates, but missions will be shifted for members. You have as much to teach a Padawan as well as bring to the debates when they start in earnest.” This was clearly a set of marching orders.

I was kind of expecting the congress, but not the other thing at all. My brain had stopped, I wasn’t ready for Jedi parenthood.

“Are you refusing these tasks?” Windu’s voice had a tiny growl.

“No?” My voice squeaked again. “I just didn’t expect to ever have a Padawan or child.” *Glad I was to already be sitting down.*

A hysterical giggle tried to fight free at that string of words.

Mace had moved away to a counter. “The First Knowledge Council should be convening in about three months, that should allow you some time to get settled with your Padawan.”

If it had been nine months, I thought I would have skitzed. “Does Obi-Wan know?”

The Master brought back a pair of cups. “Yes, but he has been claiming exhaustion after his previous Padawans.”

The cool liquid was a strong tea with a little sweet, and I sipped. “I... uh. He’s pretty young to be on his third isn’t he?” I had to sigh. “He knows not to complain about his age in my hearing.”

I didn’t know what was wrong with Obi-Wan, but I had hoped for a nicer homecoming than tea with Mace Windu. “What’s next for this mystery Padawan?”

“Master Yoda and myself would prefer the ceremony to come at the same time as the others after the tournament, so that should be in five days. Meeting and selection I leave to Kenobi and you.”
“Point me to any useful guides, Master Windu? I’m not that clear at what normal progress is.”

He nodded and told me an anecdote about an unnamed Padawan, not that I felt any better about this at the moment.

It wasn’t the children making me unsettled.

- Anakin

I reached Padmé’s apartment just as Sabé, Eirtaé, and Versé were trying to urge her into a speeder.

She planted her feet and looked up at me with a smile. “Ani! Tell them I’m fine. I don’t want another pointless fuss like last time, there’s too much to do! I’m hoping my mother and sister can make it here to help. I’ve always wanted their company, just like for my birth.”

I gave her a hug and a kiss before I did anything else. Someone told me once that a closed mouth gathers no feet. My vision lost focus as I centered on the babies. They were unhappy at a wave of pressure and warmth they didn’t like.

This felt different than the other night. I went deeper into the Force, into the winds and eddies as it flowed around us. The Force was poised and waiting, almost eager. Padmé was cross. Sabé and Eirtaé were irritated. And Leia and Luke were projecting their displeasure, even if they didn’t understand what was happening. This was already the longest I’d felt their unhappiness.

I didn’t like that.

“Angel, It’s real this time.” Did I say that so calmly when I wanted to shout my eagerness?

_We had to get moving._ I linked arms with Padmé and carried her items to my speeder with the Force, removing the monogrammed garment bag from Threepio’s grip. I hummed, my grin hurting my cheeks and my babies’ dislike of pressure making my stomach roll.

Eirtaé and Versé were speaking some kind of ritual words in a steady stream, but I could feel the wave pass through Leia and Luke. _Now, now, now!_

“Ani, it’s not that big a rush, not for a first time mother. Calm down.” Padmé was chuckling over her strain.

I knew better.

Women died in childbirth. I remembered barely understood agony in the slave quarter, when there were no masters to murder the babies or healers to save anyone. This might be a top clinic with living experts but dwang still happened. I started to lift Padmé as I got her to the speeder.

She could not trip. Not up here so high where a kriffing disaster was still possible and far more likely than things I’d pulled off in battle.

“Master Skywalker! The Senator needs to be arranged properly and anchored before you take off...” Sabé’s eyes were insistent inside her outrage.

“I’m fine Ani. We practiced this before. We don’t even have to drive fast...” My angel patted my arm with a faint smile.

I forced myself to swallow. “Do you need anything else? A lap blanket? I can run and get you one. Your favorite tea? An embroidered pillow? The ones in clinics are really skinny.”
“No, those skinny ones are disposable, Ani. I want to keep Great-grandmother’s handiwork nice for Leia, too.” Padmé grunted. “Well, maybe it is time this time…”

That sounded like permission, and I made sure she was settled and safety straps secured.

Sabé looked worried but moved to get in.

I lifted off first and saluted her. “Meet you there!”

“Ani!” My angel was trying not to laugh at me as we lifted into the air. “You have room for Sabé and Threepio in here!”

I looked back at the wealthy housing complex below us, shrinking from distance. “Too late,” I laughed, that sound seeming a little muffled even to me.

Padmé hit my shoulder, still grinning. “Eirtäé and Sabé were bringing my favorite things. I need them for this, Anakin.”

“Angel, I want you in the best care as soon as possible.” I’d stopped smiling, memories of visions and disaster played by actors. I knew there was no emperor, no slaughter looming over us, but I still... worried about the unexpected and her dying. We’d made plans together, but thinking about it still made me feel sick.

*She’d have better care in a staffed and experienced medical center.* I drove fast, darting in and out of the traffic stream, my Force senses stretched in all directions.

Padmé hummed as she rubbed her fingers over my shoulder. I smiled back at her as I heard a traffic proctor roared to move to intercept. Seconds were passing too fast.

It moved away, probably once the Temple transponder was confirmed.

I parked the speeder and carried Padmé into the entrance. I could feel that she was embarrassed, too bad.

Healers and droids swarmed around us, and everyone else insisted I allow her to be transported in a float.

They all ignored my frowns and objections.

Next thing I realized, we were inside a cheery and clean chamber. The colors were akin to colors common on Naboo, the air cool and moist, I saw a couple of small fountains along the walls with their cheerful splashing and herbal scents.

I could not help staring at them as the healers started examining Padmé.

She gripped my hand, her fingernails digging in for the first time. Padmé was more uncomfortable than in pain, but her first thread of fear was clear.

Those bright little lights of our children picked that up. Her fear and the pressure frightened them. Their fear pulsed outward, wanting everything to go back the way it was *before*.

My angel was feeling at least a little of it, her breathing and heart speeding already. The healers were counting and spreading calm to my family.

*They* needed to calm down. I could not concentrate at all, I couldn’t even put up any kind of shields. A tiny voice sounding like Obi-Wan in my head, said *I needed* to calm down, but he was easy to
We gripped each other’s hands, and I tried to imagine warm and soothing honey-light surrounding us. Each time I could feel one of them catch on, another wave moved through, moving slowly from annoyance to pain.

“...ster Skywalker, we need to free her hand to change her robes. Please let go, just for a few moments.”

“Now, Padmé, this is the time for some final decisions. Do you wish all pain to be...”

A droid was quietly narrating heart rates, oxygen and pain levels.

A spike of sharp pain roared through me. I did not know who it was from, and I was thrown into hyper-alertness.

Crashes rose from all around us and my head swung up, scanning for the threat. My free hand scrambled at the wrong angle for my light saber as the crashing continued.

“Master Skywalker!” A stranger’s hand touched my arm and was shaken off.

I felt no assassin, not clanker, no Darksider, as I grew lightheaded trying to scan and assess the entire hospital without letting go of my Angel. There were so many touched by the Dark, far too close. I wanted to get them away from my family, before... None felt like they were focused on this chamber, but that didn’t make me feel safe, Sidious had been closer.

“Ani! Ani! Can you hear me?” Padmé sounded strained.

I looked back down at her.

She took a careful breath. “Ani, everything is fine. The healers say everything is normal.”

I could feel my shoulders lose some tension. “But you’re, they’re, hurting! I can feel it. I don’t know how to stop it and I can’t...”

“You cannot stop it, Ani. That’s part of the mysteries of how we come into this life.” Padmé was gripping my hand hard now.

I dimly heard another crash and murmurs around us, and then realized how fast my breathing was.

Sabé and then a very solemn Versé came in, whispers of chanting under their breaths and Padmé relaxed.

Another wave and Padmé’s mouth flattened in anger. “I’m sorry, Ani. But I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

My heart stopped and I could not draw a breath. “Angel. Please don…”

She looked like she wanted to cry. “I can’t help you, too. I need space and we have to come first now.”

“I think the infants are echoing your unrest, Master Skywalker. Birth is stressful enough. Please go to the family waiting area.” The healer was projecting calm in her voice. “It will be much better, much healthier for them.”

My throat hurt. I wanted to be the first to greet my children, welcome them into a better world that I
was still working so hard to make for them.

I wanted to cry now and had to still the wobble in my chest. I caressed Padmé’s hand one last time before letting go. My fear as large as a krayt dragon again.

Harder, far harder than killing a Sith.

Someone must have guided me to the waiting area. Some of the others there must have recognized me, but they left me alone after I was rude enough. I didn’t care.

I could still feel them, the eddies of their pain from here as hours passed.

Nothing would stop my return if something happened.

My comm beeped. “Skywalker.”

“Padawan. May I be of assistance?” Obi-Wan’s voice was carefully neutral and presence flat and controlled.

“Force, yes, Master! I’ve been exiled, again. I’m going to miss it just like in… that holo. And what if something happens to her this time, too?” My hair was a mess from all the times I grabbed it to stop myself. “I can’t concentrate enough to shield at all, and it all just kept reflecting.”

I could hear his sigh and noticed how late it was.

“I will be there directly, Anakin. I can help you shield perhaps?”

I took my first deep breath in so many hours. “Thank you, thank you, Master!”

His arrival seemed to take forever, but before he spoke he merged his shields around mine, like he hadn’t for a long time.

Everything was quieter and breathing got easier with every moment. I started rebuilding my own shields, but I didn’t really trust them right now.

I noticed the some of the others beings waiting or pacing, seemed confused by us just standing there in silence. One of the sleeping children were clutching toy Jedi figures, they’d be again staring at us in robes if they woke up.

-Anakin?-

I was really glad he wasn’t speaking as my Master or Council member. - Yeah?-

-Your shielding should be strong enough that you may be able to visit Padmé. I want you to work at remaining calm, or we will end up back here.-

Negotiation was never more important to me. I needed to be there.

I could feel how thick the shields around me were, and I arrived not that long before my own little Luke and Leia were born.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry to be running so slow, RL is just frying my brain. I think we're going to hold at every two to three weeks as we've already been hitting 100F degrees at the end of June after a cool and wet spring. Our water stains are steaming us. (Ravenloft is not helping as that requires less planning)

Any comments are welcome and I love talking about canon and head canons!
Coruscanti Peoplewatch brings you the hottest news on all levels and all zones of the heart of the Republic. Fresh every hour, on the hour, what you want to know!

Fellow travelers, we don’t even know to call this as Senate-watch, G.A.R. watch or just watching the often mysterious Jedi. Only a few years ago, Peoplewatch didn’t know much more than the names of the most revered leaders of that religion… they had ‘Grandmasters’ in their belief in some universal mystic one-ness, which made them such diplomats and rescue when there was trouble in the Republic. I mean, who really believed they were plugged into the gods and how everyone was connected? Everyone from Mando to feral wookies? And what difference would a Jedi make in a crisis, one girl legally barely old enough to pilot a speeder in Coruscant traffic, fighting against unfeeling invaders even with a laser sword? I didn’t think Jedi worthy of whatever line item in the Republic budget they used.

Then the war came, a war that seemed inevitable despite the reasonable words and prominent efforts of the our wonderful Chancellor... These monks came out of the shadows and commanded armies and won battles, incredible battles over our cringing heads. It was hard to see them as just people and not fear them with their secrets and might in combat. Battle over, and they’d rush off to the next hot spot without pausing for medals or thanks, disguising how few they really were…

Some Generals became household words, some battles the stuff of holodramas, but it didn’t always seem real unless you were the one suddenly a refugee from battle.

But then we were all on the edges of the battle as an empire was declared and troops marshaled, the sovereign elected Senate’s authority ignored in one day.

Did they march to finish the rebellious Seppies? No.

Did the troops march destroy the Senate? No.

They invaded the school of the Generals and monks who were still away and dying in the war, through their little ones’ halls inside their Temple. The biggest threat to an empire.

We all saw that footage and saw the Senate analysis of the costs for the war. But those costs were mostly in taxes and tariffs here, unless you had friends and relatives in the war zones.

Those empty halls as Jedi defended against a larger force, right down to the breaching of their wall for more attackers to pour into their home, their school. I didn’t want to imagine if those halls had been full of young ones as the furnishings and artwork declared.

I could not help thinking, what if that was my home, my children, under my fear of saying anything
that day.

They defended themselves and their home, and stopped the man who would be Emperor, serving the Republic and making peace with the coming peace with Seppies possible.

All this isn’t anything new, unless you have been hiding in the Undercity for over a year. What’s so interesting today to watch in all this about the Jedi in recent history?

Why so ambiguous about which department to tag this news?

The news involves all three, the Senate, the Grand Army, and the Jedi Order of course.

And that narrows our news topic immediately.

Peoplewatch is glad to note the announcement of the births of the children of Senator Amidala of Naboo and the famous Hero-Without-Fear, General Skywalker. They were both in the center of events for over fifteen years, and I can’t say it should have been a surprise at their involvement or marriage. They now have a son and daughter, and healers have stated all are in good health… Peoplewatch wishes them all the best and we hope to get official holos for you of the happy family within the day.

If we had that holo, this would be a Babywatch story too.

Peoplewatch will get the news, about prominent Jedi families for you, what you want to know! Council Masters Windu and Gallia are still in the public eye as Grandmaster and Senate liaison. Is there anything between them? Will wedding colors fly for Jedi like Master Quinlan Vos or lesser known Jedi like Brirgi Je?

Our Cereanwatch reporter is tracking the family of Master Ki-Adi-Mundi. Peoplewatch will know about Jedi families, what you want to know!

Our Crowdwatch department has a report on a trend that the General and Senate star are leading again. Children. The census department has already noted a bump, a baby bump, raising the birthrate here in the Heart of the Republic. Population experts admit this is not just common, but expected when a war ends. It indicates that most believe the war is essentially over, even if there is still some fighting… What does our audience think today? Are you planning to start a family now that the Republic is safer? Or, you haven’t thought about it at all as you kriff everything that moves? With us today is the learned sociologist and Coruscanti professor…

- Anakin

The healers insisted. They wanted to take Luke and then Leia away as I held them. They didn’t mean any harm, I could feel that. But they wanted to do tests and get them back to Padmé again as soon as possible.

They could have tested me however they liked if I could have slid into bed with them.

But that didn’t happen. Padmé fell into sleep, uncaring of all the healers that crowded around us. So I sat on a chair beside their bed under the gimlet eye of one healer still in the quiet room. Without the healer’s perception, I wrapped my Force presence around my family.

I was so happy, like an overload I didn’t want to end, especially when the little lights calmed at my touch before settling into an exhausted sleep again.
I didn’t sleep, I just watched each of them breathe for what seemed like hours. There were checks, and feeding, and everything, but I finally felt safe from that Sith-damned vision. They were safe, I was still me… Being a Master and killing the Sith wasn’t even close to how I felt right now.

That quiet didn’t last when Jobal and Ruwee Nabberie arrived with Sabé and other handmaidens’ return. Suddenly everything was loud and energetic and crowded. Padmé woke and everyone started talking as the twins ate for the first time.

Even more arrived after they were done, Padmé’s sister Sola arrived with younglings. Leia and Luke didn’t seem to mind the people or chatter, but I wasn’t happy to be crowded away. Padmé took a few steps for the healers, and I wasn’t even close enough to hold her or the twins as everyone kept admiring our babies.

They didn’t know how bright these little lights were in my vision.

After maybe another two hours, I was getting knifed that I was practically pushed back into a corner, but my Angel called me over to hold Luke. I couldn’t see any resemblances in their faces, but Luke was so like happy sunshine. I could not look away from his brightness, whatever happened to me. Holding Leia made my eyes water too, she such adorably cute little angry faces at whatever it was that infants didn’t like.

Nothing I could tell was wrong, even when I touched her presence. And the experts started shooing family away, making the room quieter and calmer.

I finally noticed that Obi-Wan had slipped away, and I had no idea when. I had not thought of anyone outside my sight in hours. He wasn’t injured, just not here.

More checks and the healers began their routines of teaching and preparing for our departure to Padmé’s apartment. An infant specialist droid could continue teaching us but bonding with parents was lectured as high importance.

I wanted to hug the medical droid 11-11-1111. I was afraid I’d mess things up after we got home and it was just us, but this older navy-toned droid was calm and pleasant, even if it didn’t seem to have much personality.

I should not tinker with it, really I should not. This was too important right now.

Late evening and we were home again.

The normally spacious rooms were crowded with so many in our bedroom. Some didn’t want to meet my eyes, and the cheer was thinning enough I could feel an argument brewing somewhere. I was getting tired of the crowd when I wanted to be closer.

I wanted to hold them with my own hands, instead of soaking in their sleepy brightness.

I didn’t know what the crowd had to be ticked at.

“Ani?” Padmé sounded hesitant and tired in the room full of people telling baby stories to each other.

“Yes, my angel?” I darted over beside her. “Do you need anything?”

She smiled and blinked her eyes with coming sleep. “No, I think we have more than enough of everything. They’re going to be like this for a few days. Mother has a lecture waiting to give me when things quiet down and Father will have practiced, too. You might want to go back to the
Temple tonight so I can get the scold over with.”

I looked over to her parents, who were taking holos. “Why? How could you have done anything wrong when you gave birth to two wonderful children?”

“I skipped over a lot of traditions for weddings and infants, cutting them out of the exoperience and feelings. It should be quite a scold.”

“But...” I thought they had no right to scold her now.

Padmé patted my arm. “Sooner done, sooner over. Everything will be fine. We’ll cry and hug, Father will shake a finger. Grounding me for a few days about keeping secrets would be silly as I doubt I’ll have the energy to go out for at least a week.”

Oh. That was more like my grounding by the Council. I could not imagine hugging Master Windu at the end of a punishment. Nor Master Yoda.

So I left, while Leia and Luke were still asleep. I could feel their relief even as I stepped out, and I tried to shove the irritation away in favor of reviewing how Luke and Leia felt.

I was still excited and happy.

My speeder entered the higher traffic lane and I looked at the night sky. It wasn’t too late to visit the 501st barracks. It probably wasn’t too late to check on Rex and Ahsoka, and I had to smile as I changed course.

Appo was glad to see me and told me Rex was backing up Ahsoka in the mornings, so that could wait. Then he rattled off their recent training activities and interest in demolitions over pirate hunting missions. Appo clearly had a long list of training options to get my opinion on, angling for my future intentions. I asked for a written report that I hoped I could pawn off.

Dogma and Fives were heading out and asked me along to celebrate my new cadets.

I almost said yes before I got a warning. I looked over at the launching pad and saw troops moving toward transports. A closer look and check in the Force confirmed that one was Obi-Wan.

I hurried over, worry suddenly hitting my gut. “Master! Where are you going?”

He turned, a calm smile, one of his polite ones only. “I have been teamed with Knight Brirgi Je and her 279th to help her initiate relations with Raxus. Raxulon was a central hub of the Confederation, and should be approached with all care, don’t you agree, Anakin?”

I could see Cody hovering nearby, his scar twisted in a clear grimace but unable to speak plainly. “What about the tournament we were assigned? It’s not done yet.”

He patted my arm as if to soothe me. “You will do fine. It was decided that their capital needed a more impressive delegation for this. There should be no problem.”

My worry had not gone away, even if the mission didn’t feel like it was dangerous. I saw the Knight didn’t seem excited for such an important mission, either. “Be careful, Master. I don’t want you to get yourself kidnapped or something stupid like that.”

That broke his serenity and he frowned. “I do not do that, Anakin. I will be seeing you soon enough. May the Force be with you.” Then he turned and marched on the transport, the other Knight following along, leaking frustration.
Cody did not follow, clearly upset.

“Cody, when did he get the mission?” *Obi-Wan wasn’t even taking his own, proven ship to Raxus.*

“General, the first I heard of the mission was this afternoon when I thought he was to be at that cadet challenge. Was he?”

“I dunno. I was at the medical center. I will find out,” I looked at the dark behind the lit sky, “Tomorrow. Raxus is Outer Rim… we have time.” *Too much time.*

The troops had finished loading and the transport lifted off.

Cody was a cloud of worry and anger.

Fives asked. “Do you still want to go and celebrate, General?” He looked at Cody and the now gone transport.

I could still feel my Master and that he was alive and healthy, but nothing else through tight shielding. I looked at my men, wanting back my earlier joy. “Yeah. You come, too, Cody. Anything else can wait for morning and I have some really bright and adorable cadets to show off to you.”

We went off to 79’s on foot. It wasn’t far. They smirked or at least smiled at my holos and stories, even Cody eventually. I wasn’t drunk when I left to retrieve my speeder, but I was ready to sleep.

I slowed suddenly without planning it, rising a traffic level into clearer air space and the sounds of several metal vehicles colliding at speed into explosion and falling debris. Then I realized the Force rang with danger, but there was no direction or nearby source.

It was dark! Black, like nights in a sandstorm with Mom. The lights on buildings and platforms and everything grounded nearby were gone. Speeder lights seemed so dim against all that dark.

Sirens started wailing and I dove my speeder to see if I could help. Emergency flashing lights of emergency droids flashed, arriving at higher acceleration. Living healers would take longer.

The split and broken half of a sightseeing lift teetered on the edge of a platform as people screamed and I could feel one light go out.

Others were too close to following. I didn’t know if I could help that, but I grit my teeth and stabilized the frame and chassis as one unit. So many hurt and dying within my sight, fallen free from different vehicles onto the platforms far below. Pulling from the Force as more lives faded out, I lifted the vehicle in a hop to an empty place.

All the remaining pieces of vehicles were on stable ground and I landed to help with extraction of victims from hulks. The lives’ ending slowed and finally stopped by the time the area was swarming with emergency droids and healers. Holodroids and the curious were a little slower this late.

I looked around, nearby buildings finally had emergency power, but everything was dimmer. I took off for the Temple, and saw the power loss was not widespread.

It seemed almost wrong that these halls were serene. Most Jedi were sleeping, what could they do if I woke them now? The crash was over.

I needed sleep too. Forty-eight hours wasn’t any kind of record for me, but it was a long day with that weird crash on top. I really wanted to talk about it with O…
Obi-Wan was gone, like a hole in the room. Padmé and Vora were’t awake and I wanted company more than a lecture.

Getting back, Vora was calmly and deeply asleep.

That feeling made me feel better, and I showered off the grime of the accident scene to crawl in and lay behind her. She didn’t wake, but only snuggled a little when my arms went around her. I followed her into a deep sleep moments later.

- Vora

That talk with Mace Windu left me in a kind of shock and I really wanted to talk to Obi-Wan about it. I had no idea what the traditions were, and I wanted it to make it as seamless as possible.

Even more I had no idea how human Initiates and Padawans normally matured. Anakin and Obi-Wan seemed too atypical and I didn’t want to repeat the mistakes from them. A visit to the Archives and I had a well regarded collection of essays.

Not that I didn’t expect to include my knowledge when there were conflicts. They’d decided I was a fit Master to young minds. I reminded myself to tag my glossing for collection, in case there was a report on my intentions in my future.

Study and notes filled my evening until it was very late, and neither of the Jedi had come home. Anakin was very excited and scared, clear even from a distance, so this felt like baby time. I felt happy that I had accomplished my original mission when I left Earth, and that made sleep so much easier.

I woke to feeling a little sad, this was the first time I’d felt alone in an apartment since I left quarantine. Later, I didn’t mention the impending Padawans to Dooku when I went to train in light saber. With his official state as prisoner for massively high crimes, I didn’t know if consulting him would be wise, insane, or cruel to a lonely old man.

Yet another thing I wanted to talk to Obi-Wan about.

While we spoke cautiously about battle and breaking sieges, I got the equivalent of a text from the Council, or GAR, the division wasn’t that clear in the message. When I read it, the breath seemed to flee my lungs even if my chest kept moving. I wanted to sit down with a stiff drink.

“Knight Meyers? Vora?” The older man sounded worried.

I looked up at the Fallen Sith, my mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. Then I shook my head to clear it. “Nothing horrible. Just fleet notice that the new replacement ship attached to the 408th has been finished. I’m to meet with them and Dice in the very near future for a shakedown cruise.”

His hand on my shoulder was an odd comfort. “Hmm, I would have expected a refitted one for budget reasons.”

I scanned the notice again, trying to read between the lines. “It was ordered over a year and a half ago and is the ‘pride’ of Kuat Drive Yards… with the latest upgraded tech. They really emphasized their diligence and pride.”

Dooku snorted at the reflected PR. Then he frowned. “This was ordered for an empire. You should study this tech for the His expectations.”
I didn’t know ships. I didn’t know who to consult right now. “Huh. I even get to name it. They probably would not like Sargent Pepper or the H.R. Puffenstuff… Enterprise is too good to not already be taken...”

“Shall we have luncheon as you explain those?” Dooku smiled at my giggles in the Force.

I managed to avoid spazzing about Padawans or Venator-class destroyers as we ate in a sparse area, though I got what I thought was the bright idea to convince Anakin or Obi-Wan to swap ships as higher Generals.

Then came a notice that the Initiate tournament was canceled for the day. The Initiates’ disappointment soaked the dining hall. I was annoyed I would not be able to attach myself to my former Master until we had talked. The Initiates scattered for more practice or an unexpected holiday. Dooku claimed ironic age when he left, too.

I looked up to see Knight Feemor looming over me.

“Knight Meyers, the ExploraCorps Council would like to speak with you about the Council of First Knowledge.”

Damn, another hole in my knowledge. Or was this a forming conspiracy? “How many councils are there?”

“We usually meet for Corps affairs on the Vanguard, not here in the Temple outside refits. Any of us not stationed on board are more scouts and analysts of leads from others in the Order or Republic. Only the High Council meets with frequency, we’re much more informal.” He smiled at that.

“Okay, where and when is this?” Whoever thought the Temple was serene just plain missed that it was busy.

“All of us are monitoring the tournament between refit and training tasks.” Feemor gestured that I come along with him, into a section of the Temple that had an almost disused feel, even if it wasn’t any louder.

The meeting in a lounge was definitely different, as there were snacks and drinks and chatter. I knew Taq better than Feemor, but I met another dozen or so explorers. They weren’t that subtle in asking questions about Earth, and I hadn’t even noticed Madame Nu at first when I spotted a Master Altis who seemed to have two Padawans.

I could feel he really wanted to speak to me later.

I did too.

My impression was that they were sounding me out more on my views about changes to the Code despite the overt questions about Earth. I wasn’t sure if they were pumping for opinions on Obi-Wan and Anakin’s views. Their opinions were far more opaque, despite the more casual setting. I didn’t know much more than when I arrived when the really placid meeting scattered.

I took that into meditation. From that I ended up pretty sure I had to be patient, and the name Sirocco. I marked more of my vigil to pigeonhole Master Kenobi by studying with music cranked up.

Perhaps I should have gone out as the room echoed.

I woke, with arms around me, warm body spooning me. The sleeper was not the Master I hoped for.
or expected. Anakin wasn’t quite unexpected, either, but he usually clung to Obi-Wan or Padmé.

And if I wasn’t quite comfortable with his attraction when awake, I was even less so when he was imagining someone else in his sleep. So I turned and slid a little away.

He whined drowsily, and pulled us together again, even closer, with limbs all around me.

Then he settled deeper into sleep again.

Sleep was getting further away every second with him tightly pressed against my butt, but his very warm hand held me too close and too low. A move in any direction and he’d wake up, and I didn’t think I wanted that kind of waking.

“Anakin...” That caused no reaction, and I repeated his name.

He didn’t freeze or stiffen with waking, but with a sleepy hum of drowsy contentment, tiny shifts became more deliberate.

That annoyed me. “Anakin Skywalker, you stop that right now.”

With an almost audible ‘eep,’ He woke and pulled back a little. “Vora? Vora. I’m sorry! I-” His drowsy presence raced through embarrassment and clogged on some new level of panic. “Tell me how I can fix it.”

The wordless plea, -tell me, tell me, tell me tellme telme telme telme- sped into a blur as he froze in a clogged mess of emotions.

That made me reach up awkwardly to hold his left shoulder. “Shh. I’m not really angry, just peeved that was more than a little cuddle. It’s not like I’m going to tie you down so you don’t get too clingy...”

His relief ratcheted down as he slid arms around me again. After a moment he started rambling in my ear. “Too much happened today, like some racing engine. So much is happening over at Padmé’s apartment. Her parents say one thing, but everyone is feeling so- much they aren’t saying. She’s still tired and sore and has people in and out of her room, so I can’t really talk to her now about any of it. I love Leia and Luke, but I don’t ever want them to see fighting. Obi-Wan just left early for a diplomatic mission, and I don’t even know the other Jedi or their vod’e he’s going with. It’s not me, not even you or someone I trust to keep an eye on him when they left for the Seppie Core. Even Cody seemed worried when he watched the ship leave...”

That made me more than peeved and right on into pissed, but not at Anakin, so I smothered it. “Not you, but go on.”

Embarrassment returned. “I was a bad husband today...”

“In what way?” The harshness hopefully smothered my own doubts this was rational.

“I left Padmé with her parents when they were angry, and Obi-Wan was hiding something and I let him go without calling him on it because I was too excited to even notice in time.” His voice was earnest.

I hummed to buy myself time. “You can call Padmé later, like after breakfast. This was a lot of stress, you are probably fine there.”

Neither of us touched the problem of Obi-Wan.
“Padmé usually...” He cracked a huge yawn.

I could easily hear his jaw crack and I cut that off with a squeeze of his shoulder. “I am not Padmé, though we all should talk about this again really soon.”

His nodding was almost comical.

“Goodnight, Anakin.”

“But, Vora...” A need was clearing.

“Later, maybe, when you’re not wasted.” And I’m not about to have a tantrum, Anakin. My anger would not be fair to him.

Anakin sighed, and pulled us closer together again. He dropped into an exhausted sleep, and soon his arms slid as he slept and we were in almost the same positions as I woke in. His hand was quietly settled even lower, content.

Took me longer to get to breathe calmly and sleep too.

Waking later in the dim light of dawn to ear-nibbling, he asked, “Vora?”

I made an agreeable hum, only half awake but less annoyed with everything.

“Vora.” That added intentions.

“Uh-huh.” I smiled at the window.

Anakin snapped like a rubber band stretched too far. He pulled my shoulder so I was flat on the bed and he rolled on top of me for a sizzling kiss, all need and thwarted passion. His hips ground against me as my breath sped up too. A brief tangle of our limbs and nightwear lost badly.

It felt good, it was a relief to have this without the doubts and fear growing since Ando. It was over and he seemed calmer as he started moving again. This time was was more like the tide instead of typhoon.

Only in the afterglow, did I remember he’d been chanting my name under his breath.

I still didn’t quite believe it.

Anakin sighed, his full weight draped over me. “Vora. You are as bad as Obi-Wan at this. I really wish these doubts could be kicked right into the Force. I don’t really care about them, only that you get upset. I am not going to stop being attracted when your hair goes gray or my metal hand gets rusty.”

That sounded like poor planning and I started to speak.

“No deflections. I want you. Like Padmé. Like Obi-Wan. Like, even if different. No more arguments.”

“But I don’t want Padmé like...” My face felt red. I did not think this lack of reciprocity was fair to her.

“She’s okay with that. I’m not close to her handmaidens either. You still can’t seem to get that I want you.”
I sighed. “I’ll work on it.”

Anakin traced along my shoulder. “You got upset about Obi-Wan’s mission, didn’t you?”

I deflated enough to feel blue again. “He got upset at something the other day at the Council meeting, but didn’t talk to me about it that day. It wasn’t a Council thing as Mace talked to me about those twins later. Then came all the excitement with the babies and you in the hospital. But it was clear that between that ‘Council of First Knowledge’ and formally getting Padawans, neither of us were likely to be assigned any routine missions for the foreseeable future.”

He paused and then frowned. “You’re right. He’s escaping what he doesn’t want to talk about. That had to be why Cody was extra upset Obi-Wan was going alone.”

I was glad that it wasn’t just me. “I guess I’ll go meet Adus and Mirran today, if they attend even if they dropped out. But… Can I take them on a project before it’s official? I need to see how our personalities mesh and which might be better fit for me at least. Mace said we have about three days before he wants the ceremony with the other new Padawans…”

Anakin’s face looked surprised and worried about something else. “I really don’t know, neither Ahsoka nor I had the normal procedure. I don’t see why not. Masters…” he made the same face I’d been feeling for a day and a half. “Masters have a lot of discretion…”

The apartment door chime rang, even if it was near dawn. The Force presence was a clear tell, and I could feel a panic start.

The presence was amused.

We scrambled to get towels on and get to the door. I was red faced but not much behind Anakin.

The Grandmaster was outside, a smirk not quite on his face. “Morning it is. Council meets soon, but speak with you first, I must.”

I gestured him in, feeling like I was wearing a sign about our recent activity. I probably was. “Do you want juice or something?”

Anakin just waffled.

Yoda tapped his stick as he entered. “The first time I arrived thusly, you think this is, hmm? Delayed yesterday, the Initiate tournament was. A first. Expected Master Kenobi to elect a Knight’s mission assignment, the Council did not. To attachments is this related?” Here he waved at us.

I looked at Anakin, at a loss for words, but how often did he have them for the Masters? One thing I was sure of. “No, not related to any intimate relations among the four of us… Anakin needed something else last night. Obi-Wan left without any warning. Ben and I didn’t even really talk when I got back, and I don’t know why.”

“We were talking about it when you got here.” Anakin said bluntly. “I think it’s something else.”

“Consult on the formal mission intentions, Obi-Wan did not.” Yoda paused and looked at Anakin with authority. “Younglings to nurture, you have, hmm? Meet at the tournament again we will.”

And the other Grandmaster took a hand in our mess. I hoped we were entertaining, at least.

Anakin threw me a doubtful look and hurried back to the bedroom. He quickly returned, dressed, and threw me an apologetic look as he departed. “I’ll check on that with Padmé like you asked.”
Silence of several minutes passed, and I could tell Anakin was out of easy monitoring distance.

“For my GrandPadawan, another Master’s test this is. Clearer now where one issue of sharing originated.” Sad disapproval there.

I knew I was rising like a carp to this, but I wasn’t going to resist. “That excessive self-control to avoid disapproval of others stretches back a lot further than his getting a Padawan. No quick fix.”

“This test, do not interfere. As a Master, Obi-Wan neglects duties. The test, that is, not the causes. Hmmmmmm.”

“Honestly, Master Yoda, I think he got some stupid idea stuck in his head and thinks someone will pull it out of him and make him stop.” I took a breath. “I was counting on his helping me with the whole Padawan stuff.”


“I’d wanted to meet them yesterday with Obi-Wan at the competition and see who hits off better with whom. But now that I know he’s off planet, I thought I might borrow their help this morning, if I can. I’m not skilled enough to judge their progress in the Force or light sabers, but I can see how well they learn and analyze and cooperate with others.” I grimaced. “And check their maturity and diplomacy, can they resist getting snotty smug if they know something I don’t know?”

“My approval you need not, Knight Meyers. Quiet during tournaments, classes are. Yes, hmmm. Find harmony, your master must. Masters, the Force guides.”

My heart ached. Whatever caused it, this was yet another time I was shut out without any warning. I couldn’t fix it for him this time, he had to want change.

And it wasn’t my job to make him understand how messed up this was, no matter how much I wanted him to be happy. He was clearly not talking.

Yoda’s ears had drooped. “Your path to becoming a Jedi Master, on this is.”

My head snapped up, doing my best imitation of a deer in headlights.

Yoda chuckled. “To a Padawan you are passing on your knowledge, this a surprise is, how?”

Now I felt like I had eaten a lemon. “One of you is a sneaky bastard, care to tell me which one?”

Yoda didn’t have to shake his head, but he seemed cheerful.

“Any more cryptic advice, GrandMaster?”

“Attend the council meeting now, I must. My gimmer stick today moves, how many watch, hmm?” Without a wink, he departed.

I sat down and took a deep breath. All that talking hadn’t taken that long. I needed some calories and to requisition some research assistants. The water run off felt like a good idea, but not the most immediately helpful for suddenly acquiring two kids. Sam Beckett had it right: Oh, boy...

Chapter End Notes
Sorry, no Obikin feels this time, not when Obi-Wan is as incommunicado as he can manage.

This month has had another big project, so postings eighteen days apart should drop to two weeks again. There is just so much going on, is there? :)

I asore hearing what people like or don't get, and every writer needs feedback. [imagine a tip jar here]
Tea With Masters

Chapter Summary

Not everything is about the Skywalker twins, other members of the lineage can get in trouble too...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-Dooku

The Initiate tournament was comforting in a way, something my mental healer approved. I had meditated on that several times already, but was not satisfied with the answers I found. A large part of me approved of the change and renewal inherent in a new generation, but that wasn’t the only or best answer, and I wasn’t sure I liked where my meditations were taking me.

I found I was not convinced the Sith methods were effective long term, that abusing and failing to pass on valuable lessons to so few was wise. Accident or opponents brought the Sith down to nothing, and the adversarial lineage meant too much experience was lost and extinction always loomed. Witness the case now. One who knew he was little trained and a very few who know barely more than how to use a light saber. How many skills, valuable skills were lost just from premature loss of a Master and lack of redundancy? How much had Plagueis not passed on yet when Sidious proved his power? How many times in the last millennium had the same loss of knowledge occurred?

The Jedi may have diminished themselves, but the Sith crippled themselves just as much by constantly culling, an odd balance. Sidious caused the failure of how many potential Sith through mismanagement?

I was clearly declared a liability and expended pawn at the end, though he ordered the death of my apprentice before myself. I would never have considered the same for my Padawan. Was it more a change in me, or change in the quality of a Sith apprentice bond? I suspected the former as I held only a weak attachment to Asaaj, when she was always competent and diligent. More attachments were growing of late as a ‘prisoner,’ than in all my years away.

But these were of affection and not anger or fear.

The shrinking pool of Initiates were all the usual eddies of fear, pride, frustration, and joy. Dozens of these tournaments over my lifetime, and they all looked so young. So did most watching them, most Knights looking as young as the Initiates.

Meyers much less so than the two younglings leaning toward her with tentative proprietary presences. She wasn’t as calm as she appeared on the surface, but they did not seem to notice.

Kenobi was missing, and Skywalker swung between surly and an explosive joy that seemed to be affecting most Jedi when they entered the hall. I had not seen anyone outside this competition for days,
By this point, my participation as a judge was provoking less excitement, and few disputed my calls. These matches were hard fought and took much longer than the earlier rounds. Tomorrow would be the deciding match. The Initiates holding an understanding with a Master were clear in the Force as much as with young Feemor. The ones without only a little less clear.

A small hard lesson in control.

When the match was over and I finished my notes, few remained beside my GrandPadawan and her younglings, outside my old Master who spoke about the last reformation with an unknown Master. When I moved to speak with Meyers, she was telling some improbable tale about a run through a jungle tomb and a giant boulder to their wide eyes.

I hid my smile as I interrupted at a good spot, a tunnel with light too far away. My timing was greeted by a smirk on the Knight and dismay from the younglings. “Knight Meyers, will you have the opportunity to train today?”

“Later today, Grandmaster? I will run into Ventress again and would appreciate your insight.” Her nerves were revealed more in the formality. “I would like to introduce you to these whimsical and literate young Initiates, Adus and Mirran Vanle.”

Their surprise at that description made me want to smile.

Meyer’s smile was less amused, and nervous energy spiked. “I hope they would be consent in becoming our Padawans.”

The girl asked, “Our?” while looking at myself with some worry. The boy just had big fearful eyes.

“No, no,” the Knight was quick to say. “Master Kenobi is in a diplomatic mission and the Council wants everyone settled before his return. I wanted you guys to be aware ahead of time that we do have a black sheep in the lineage, in all fairness.”

“What if Gen- Master Kenobi doesn’t want a Padawan? He never spoke to us about this at all during the tournament even after we lost. What happens then?” The boy seemed to be trying to resist stuttering his quiet question.

“We’ll figure something out. Master Altis and Master Yoda have promised assistance with any problems, so you’d be stuck with me regardless. Not that being my Padawans won’t be a stiff challenge already. I want you to be sure first, so think about it. I’d appreciate if you could let be know before the end of tom...”

“We’d like you to be our Master.” Mirran looked surer than Meyers.

“I am sure other members of the lineage will assist.” Sending comfort was still sluggish, even almost a year and a half after my arrival.

Meyers seemed surprised, but smiled. “I will try my best, guys.” She slid her eyes to glare at me a little as she cautiously hugged them. “Don’t say it.”

I wasn’t about to, the Force about them already felt settled, even satisfied. I could even feel a trace of more satisfaction from my old Master, though he did not seem to be attending. “Tries are better than falling into apathy, a needed precondition to success.”

“Huh.” Meyers shook her head. “Wasn’t expecting this quick an answer. What now, my young research assistants?”
“We get our Padawan braids and leave the Initiate dorms and get a training bond and learn how to fight like you...” Adus piped up. “Not sure what order though, Master.”

Meyers blinked at that, and I remembered that stage clearly with my Padawan.

-We all have had that vertigo, have we not, Master? I felt much the same about Feemor. Master Yoda was concerned about Vora leaving the Order as well.- Qui-Gon’s immediate departure was as quick as his arrival, making his meddling more subtle than Master’s.

She had not seemed likely to fall.

Meyers chuckled. “I’m not sure either. But I’m still learning, so Master Kenobi...”

“The lineage has ample Blade masters, do not be concerned about finding training, Initiate. Braids and bonds come with the ceremony.” No need for her to disillusion them as yet, maturity will.

“Moving you in, it is. Grandmaster, seems we need to visit the Quartermaster next, train after dinner?”

I nodded and watched them hustle away.

“With me walk, Padawan..”

Suddenly, the old Master below and beside me seemed so small and old, and I remembered the holo-Vision of him dying nearly alone in a swamp. “Master, you need to take care of yourself.”

He hobbled off. “Always been ready to join the Force, have I. Lived a long life too, you have, Dooku. Hnnnnnnnn?”

“For all my years, I feel no satisfaction for accomplishing what the Force intended for me, Master. My meditations are elusive.”

“Of the Force perhaps you ask the wrong questions. Consider what duties remain untended.”

I thought about this until we reached the door of his quarters. I had been inside many times as Padawan and Master, but this time I was uneasy. Timid was the wrong word, but all I had as I saw a low table prepared for tea. That routine had not been forgotten and I prepared the herbal mix that few preferred. Those familiar motions proved a comfort as well while Master meditated.

“Considered the Code have you, Padawan?” Master Yoda asked neutrally.

I put down my cup. “I consider many things, Master. I learn startling things even in this retirement. Even that you held concern that Meyers would leave.”

Yoda smiled. “As well, your Padawan studies meddling.”

-Only through imitation of you, Master. I hope to match you one day.- Shining blue Qui-Gon appeared, settled on another cushion.

“More attached to Obi-Wan than to the Order, Meyers is. Yeesssssss. Stronger than dejection, I wonder if attachments are.”

“So, Kenobi’s mission was not urgent?” I could feel my jaw set.

Yoda’s ears drooped. “An urgent mission, it was, but to another assigned by Mace. While younglings, assigned Knights served on Raxus.”
"Master, this was more a courier mission to seed amiable relations. Obi-Wan’s last visit to Raxus was far less peaceful, and the Jedi to reopen relations were enjoined to make only small steps toward peace." 

“Sending General Kenobi may only aggravate them. Little choice has he left the Council.” My old Master was showing more irritation, even if it wasn’t anger.

I would have been angry, and I was sure *Grandmaster Windu* was angry.

Raising a hand for calm, Qui-Gon spoke to soothe. *-Obi-Wan is still an able negotiator.-*

“Balanced, he is not.”

I had nothing to add to that, so I changed topics. “Master, the Initiates have accepted Meyers’ offer. She cannot be their only Master, and...” I did not know how to phrase this doubt.

“Learn from their mistakes, even Masters must. As the Force intends, will it be.” Yoda was serene now.

I could feel the irony directed at my words as well.

Qui-Gon interrupted my thoughts. *-They will be fine, Master. She has already spoken to Master Altis, and he has experience with multiple Padawans. Vora was not raised properly herself to miss tradition, so it never was to be a usual apprenticeship.-*

That was a note of finality in my Padawan’s words. More than he usually spoke as Master or ghost. I wasn’t sure how much was colored by his thoughts and how much by the Force itself.

A disturbing thought in its own right.

I raised my teacup to allow me to center my thoughts again.

“Troubled, you are, young Dooku. Yes?” Master was lowering his cup as well.

I found myself sighing. “Master, may I consult the oldest Archives?”

“Explain.”

“I’m not really a Jedi. Though some hope otherwise, I do not believe I could return to the Order in a proper sense. I struggle for serenity, but affection and lighter emotions return easier. I do not believe I can achieve more than calm. Few trust me at all and I’m not sure they should. That would only harm the Order if it was thought I had become an active Master.” Too late I was grieving the family I had discarded.

My master deflated, grief clear.

“No, Master!” Before they could get alarmed, I rushed out half-formed thoughts. “I think I... may become something else. Not what Sidious wanted. My incarceration here has been more than fair for all I did. Perhaps I feel envy at how Skywalker lit up the Force with his children’s birth. Your lineage is full of mavericks, Master, and I still have much to learn. Neither Code fits stated or unstated goals of Jedi or Sith very well. I’m not sure the current dualism of serenity against rage is good for either the Republic or Force-users. The Sith Code is even more broken, damaging its followers and the universe around them. Maybe that passion in the Sith Code need not be destructive. Can I learn to access the Force with benevolent emotions? What is the freedom in service because I choose? What is the power in teaching well? What is even the purpose in power without
context?"

I took a breath, but neither of the Masters had shifted away from familiar listening states.

At least they were not rejecting these thoughts in total.

Now came the more radical thought I hadn’t allowed myself to think often.

“I am coming the believe that reforming the Code and Senate is not enough to prevent what Sidious did, Master… I would like to petition to reform the Sith and make it a subsidiary school. That would not negate any penalties previously earned from the war, and make it less antagonistic as time passes. Crimes against sentients would be just crimes, no matter what school a Force-user follows. The Order cannot control or guide something they totally reject. As with those worlds that forcibly ban Spice, they have the most violent and active Spice trades.”

-So you want to split the Sith away from the practices most would deem evil and replace with some Jedi-like precepts?- Qui-Gon’s face was unusually neutral. -The Order essentially absorbs the Sith instead of erasing it?- I raised my hands into almost a shrug, “How many wars and purges has there been? This would take time. Longer than my life, to study and edit what is known. We pick what to keep, with Council approval in the planning years and finding a cleaner purpose. Then the Sith would become as the Corellians, but I would hope closer. I am fond of some Jedi and don’t wish them harm. This might break the cycle. ...And Darth Bane’s rule of two would be the first to go, even if I have no expectations of an apprentice.”

The silence seemed to last for hours, though we hadn’t moved.

Master broke the quiet. “Consider it we will. You may consult the Archives. Companion Knight to remind of balance, you must have in the Archives. Hmmm.”

I was almost surprised he agreed this much.

-He had expected arguments about the Order’s involvement in Senate affairs.- I smiled at my Padawan, this topic I was more prepared for. “I have many of those objections. The Rausseen reforms were to assure the Senate and ensure the Order gave up political power, but it clearly went too far if the Order could not deal with deep corruption and abuses within the Senate. I may have been blind about the causes, but the effects were clear decades before the war. The Order must own it’s influence and responsibilities, or become pawns of the short-sighted and the corrupt. Then the people the Order most wants to protect, from innocents to Jedi younglings are left unprotected.” I had to swallow a little bile. “Sidious stepped in, and you were willingly blind to the Senate abuses. It was almost pitiful, Grandmaster.”

Silence greeted my rant, and I worried that I spoke too much too soon after my idea for the Sith.

Qui-Gon grinned at my fulfilling his expectations. -Tell us what you really think Master.-

I took a breath and saw my teacup was empty. “The outward facing responsibilities will require negotiation, best after the Senate and Order change, but we should be prepared. We must prepare for push back from remaining puppets of Sidious. There were many handles to discredit the Order and I found them so easy to exploit. Many were true enough. I don’t know how many remain.”

We sat in silence for some minutes before Master Yoda spoke. “Merit these thoughts hold for meditations. A contentious debate, Senate relations may prove. About the Code, speak you nothing.”
The younglings believe some change to the Code itself is needed. That the rootstock needs nurturing, not only pruning the branches.

My smile at my Padawan’s phrasing was almost nonexistent. “I don’t know. My understanding seems more intellectual than visionary. I never really had anything like their visions, no impression of where I was going. They may be right that some sort of light embracing aspect should be in the Code itself. The Council became far too apathetic and forgot that calm was not the goal, but serving the the light side of Force was. Calm is a tactic to use the Force, but is not a strategy. You were almost gray with detachment before that invasion of Naboo.”

“Sidious seemed calm, his greatest deception, it was. Yeessssss.”

“The Sith code also doesn’t reflect the reality taught and enacted by the Bane line. Seek power, seek passion, seek unfettered actions.” I looked at my fist and unclenched it with a wave, sending frustrations away like seed-puffs. “That wasn’t reality either, Sidious was a dismal teacher, manipulating and fettering my actions constantly. What good is passion to me if I have no friends and a line does not mean lineage? Accessing the Force through emotions IS powerful but sustaining rage gets exhausting and makes its own bias. I was forgetting what other emotions were like, even curiosity.”

Master Yoda smirked. “That sounds not like you.”

My former Padawan was just a glowing blue smirk.

I prepared more tea, a little annoyed I could not hand it off to the youngest of us. After I poured it came my last topic. “Thank you, Master, for listening. I am so deeply sorry, sorry that I disappointed you so much, that I was such a pimple for so long.”

Qui-Gon was surprised into a laugh.

Master smiled and nodded as his ears relaxed. “To visit Archives and Master Nu, I wonder if you require a chaperon, hmm? Herh herh herh..”

I would not let my ears warm.

Nearly mid-evening and Meyers arrived, already tired. Our walk to the training halls was enlivened by chatter about arranging the usual Padawan room of their quarters for bunk beds. What that meant for the small third room was unclear.

With her return, I’d ended her sparring with droids completely. After katas to check her, came sparring. She was improving, but I was beginning to doubt she’d truly master even the defensive third form.

She was sweating and looked exhausted when I called a break. “Good, GrandPadawan. You still need to project more aggression and seize the advantage more quickly. Asaaj is very skilled and even more bitter.”

“Well, if I can fix the bitter, maybe we can go drinking instead of waving plasma around.” She mopped her brow, still in a good mood. “In case you hadn’t guessed, I took the kids to help me research materials about Padawan 101 this morning, and it went well. I still have to find out if you guys have a healer like Piaget here, I don’t know if benchmarks for development are the same for my world.”

“The Archives or the creche should be most helpful, but I suspect you already knew that. What is
My GrandPadawan sighed and settled back on her heels. “Nerves. I’m agreeing to basically become a parent. That’s not quite it, I know, but I won’t have the first few years and infant lack of comprehension to mute my screw ups. I miss Obi-Wan and I’m really ticked he left. I’m too sure it won’t be any better when he’s back. It feels final. It’s like I’ve landed in the middle of a divorce before the adoption was final. I don’t know anymore what to say to a couple of kids just getting used to the idea of finding the Masters they need. I really don’t want to lie to them, but I don’t know what will happen when he gets back.”

“Padawans often forgive terrible acts, you are over worrying there.” That I knew.

-Focus on the present and trust the Force. Whatever happens with my Padawan is not your doing. Your Padawans are your responsibility.-

“The essays I found are not terribly helpful, they don’t intersect with my experiences...”

-Record these issues. Even if they are addressed elsewhere these issues should be collected.”

-I am certain you will be adding essays and tomes to the archives.- Qui-Gon’s smile could be felt.

That was clearly a new understanding for the Knight. “Huh. I hadn’t realized I was as much a guinea pig as Anakin.” Eyebrows knitted as Vora thought. “I really want to prevent the strained relations that keep cropping up in this lineage. Not really the independence and coming of age squalls, but the deeper issues. You both have been eyebrow deep in this, and I’d love some input.”

That answered my earlier question, Qui-Gon’s presence was embarrassed. The Force wasn’t that personal.

“I will meditate on that, Meyers.” I hoped I was concealing mine better.

Vora waved an acknowledgment. “Anakin with Ahsoka seem to be an exception, so I’m talking to them, too.”

The unnamed bantha was the strained relation with her own Master.

-Are those your main concerns, strained relations in the future, and not feeling ready?- My Padawan was feeling of amusement.

“Yeah, that covers it, mostly.” Meyers smile was small.

“Then the break is over, Meyers.” I moved to a ready stance. “We also should discuss your use of the Dun Möch in serious fights. I don’t know yet if you use it as frequently as your Master, but that can be needlessly risky. Asajj is not that easily provoked.”

The Knight appeared confused and missed a parry, leaping back quickly. Another missing lesson to fill in, though I knew she already used the sometimes disapproved technique. It had been clear in the recordings from the Temple battle.

Meyers slashed and got close enough to have caught my cloak if I’d had one.

“Good. The Dun Möch relies on provoking your opponent into losing their temper. Your Master is too fond of it, and is not as good as he thinks he is at exploiting that manipulation without serious injury. There is a crest in the irritation’s progression to full anger but not berserker fury that you need to learn to balance...” I explained the technique leading to even small mistakes, long before
something overt. Then practical exercises would harsh on the Knight, but emotionality in a duel was too big a weakness to ignore.

*Ventress excelled at this.*

As we worked after midnight, the Knight’s growing exhaustion made it all the easier to poke at sore places. Pulling back from fear got faster and her sword work improved compared to when I’d first provoked her months ago. She did not waste the breath to challenge me this time, nor did she fold. Progress came in resisting the technique, even if teaching the line between stupid-anger and brutal-berserk was difficult outside true combat.

I had much to consider after the day as well.

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**- Rex**

Woke up before my morning call after last night’s Command Review meeting. Someone got the bright idea to bring enough for everyone to have a couple cans to lubricate the talking.

We weren’t exactly agreeing on some things, like where to base ourselves. I didn’t want to leave my General to do something insane without backup, even if he’s preoccupied. That never lasts with the General. Others were more eager for a place for recruits and… retirement. I wondered if a base closer to the Jedi’s Temple here would be better than a remote location even if it was *ours.*

I fiddled with my new cap, hat, whatever this floppy thing was. I liked it better than going bareheaded.

*Inks was correct there. He brought boxes of them to the Board meeting so we could all try them out, and he grinned when he presented mine with the fine blue honor-marks stitching along the brim. Mark for rank was clear on the right side.*

*Ponds managed to be smug with a totally neutral tone of voice as he looked at them. “Hiding our faces seems to be a problem with the civvies, but we can set some things into the berets if we’re careful.”*

*“Making the beret color match the color of each legion would only help a little with identification and leave too many of our brothers without their own color.” Dice’s jaw was set. “They are our bothers, no matter the color marking.”*

*“We’d look like clowns in a spectrum of colors, or a mime convention!” That sounded too much like Wolffe’s laughter.*

*Making a face, Inks paused in handing them out. “We can modify these and replace them cheaply enough. Being mostly white feels like my helmet.”*

*“But it’s useless for protec...” one of us said.*

*“It’s much more useful to confirm we are not mindless killing machines to the civvies. We want them to accept us as fellow citizens. I can live with a hat that I have to wash every day.” Cody was scratching his chin and not noticing some of us snickering at that.*

*Bly grinned. “Maybe the band or cuff thing could match our colors, but they would look better if not cluttered. Most of us would just have rank and legion band. Only a few like Rex would have anything more.”*
I got some ribbing for that, though I earned them.

Unlike some of the other Commanders I wasn’t sure what our consensus would send us to as ‘kith.’ Ponds was looking at disaster reconstruction and they were researching what they would need to know. Cody expected to stay right here for the most part, aside from whatever missions a new cadet would need to learn. Dice was slicing into Coruscant University for training in healing and his men were debating their General’s texts. Other Commanders hadn’t decided their direction.

Or they didn’t think we have value outside the Sith’s plan for us. If a good soldier follows orders, what does a good soldier do when the orders slow or stop?

Me? I remembered Kadavo and that karking Queen from Zygerria. Slavery was worse than being a brother because they could not count on others not selling you out. General Kenobi angered the bosses with his stubbornness, it was his talent, but it would have gotten him killed. Those who profited from slavery might as well be Palpatine’s stooges. Wiping those kriffing wastes out will be a pleasure.

I doubted our General would object.

My worry was the next person I wanted to talk to about it. Should I talk to Ahsoka about our plans before the General? After? She might have her own Legion and they would not like my making their job harder.

At least I had clearance for most of the Temple and I passed out of the gray light of dawn into the reflected light in the Temple hallways. A query of the system provided directions to her quarters.

The drowsy Jedi I passed were funny and my hands free without my helmet, but I felt a little lost without the displays. I hit the door signal for General Tano’s quarters.

I heard a small thump and then silence.

I waited, the odds of an intruder seemed low.

Ahsoka was in sleepwear or undress, and just looked grumpy as she glared at me.

“Good morning, General.”

“Why so early, Rexter?”

“You mentioned planning to go into the Undercity today, and did not say when.”

Ahsoka rubbed her eyes and gave me a halfhearted glare. “You could have commed.”

“And wake you even earlier?” I was not smiling at her.

Not at all.

Her pout had no real target. “Fine, be ready in a few.”

Once she was dressed and we’d stopped by the commissary, we left the Temple. She was not very talkative, and I didn’t spot any of the more familiar faces before we left.

Moving down levels started making me feel more and more exposed. After a few dozen levels with Ahsoka casting about like Jedi did, we started passing through damaged or decayed neighborhoods. I started to spot combatants who wore no uniform, and wishing I had more backup as damages got much more recent, smelling of burnt insulation.
“Ahsoka. Wait a minute. I don’t like this, General. Let me ready vod for retrieval if we need it.” I was checking for recent news on my comm as well.

She looked around us, surprised at the dim light and worn industrial feel, away from the sky. “We’re not in danger now.”

*Right. That never changed fast around Jedi.* “This is not a date, Sir. We’re missing the whole fun part.”

Ahsoka smirked and threw her arms around me and kissed me.

When I opened my eyes again, my arms were around her, too, and my heart rate running high. “That was fun, but that wasn’t what I meant. I don’t know if we should do that in an area that had a riot the other day.”

She looked smug, “Can you honestly say Skyguy hasn’t?”

Some things were not going to change, but holding her like this was nice. I shook my head. “No, but what about General Kenobi? He had something with that Duchess once, right?”

That made Ahsoka pull back. “I dunno, he never talks about it.”

I pulled her closer this time, keeping my eyes alert. “I meant this was feeling more like a mission, but without even a kriiffin’ briefing. This area was in the middle of that large blackout, with rioting and damages.”

She looked upward. “Wonder how close we are to the Senator’s apartment? That might be why the Force is leading me here? Last time I was led to a wet and burnt out school and gangs, but this isn’t it.”

I sighed, and sent an alert to my men. The first could be here in two minutes. “Lead on, General.”

Ahsoka squared her shoulders and it wasn’t long until we reached a power node, blackened and smelling of char and burnt equipment. She walked inside the junction, the security door only rubble. I’d seen reports of dozens, if not hundreds that failed in a cascade.

Her hands drifted closer to her sabers. “This is important.”

I looked around, more of my experience was blowing things like this up on Seppie worlds. This didn’t look like it could be made operational any time soon, If it was simple, it would have already been repaired.

Ahsoka focused on the bank of equipment and moved closer. “That doesn’t belong here.”

Chapter End Notes

I am writing steadily, but these chapters keep getting bigger. And the bigger my chapters are, the slower. Things will speed a bit, soon. Let me know if anything is unclear, I’m surprised I have this many chainsaws... er, plot-threads in the air.
Comments are adored, need those to get better.
More I Cannot Give You

Chapter Summary

Vora's kind of been sucked into the whirlwind of gaining Padawans... more cramming!

Chapter Notes

Jumping back a little to get the Padawans introduced proper...

Sorry this was so slow, but longer chapters always take longer and there was a lot of things going on...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-Vora

I moved through the less familiar halls of the creche, and I found the hall with most of the kids from the tournament. Adus and Mirran Vanle perked up, no less than the other kids.

So many desperate children stared at me with need, but I could not help them all. I knew aging-out was already in the process of changing, but not officially.

Asking for the twins’ assistance with a research project met with bubbly younglings as we walked to the Archives. Master Nu smiled slightly when she saw us, amused at my excuse.

Inside a small study room, I gathered my thoughts. “I would like some assistance for not just relevant sources on a topic, but the ones with the best reputation. Now I have two topics for study, one is an academic question, wondering what happened to the oceans and rivers of Coruscant? They must still exist somehow, the atmosphere is too humid for them to have evaporated.”

Adus looked interested and Mirran rolled her eyes. Neither spoke.

What did I forget? Oh. “Call me Vora. Well, I’m Knight Meyers if any Masters are about. Ask me questions too, my homeworld is way more casual than the Temple. I have to be careful to remember to say ‘Master’ ‘cause I forget. We stopped using that word centuries ago in normal conversation.”

Mirran asked, “What world is that?”

“Terra, but it’s far, far away from Republic space, even by Jump. The Force is a legend there, and we didn’t know about any other intelligent races.”

“The other topic?” Adus asked.

“Master Windu prompted something else, so I need to learn about the usual issues for a first Padawan. I’m not satisfied with the books I found myself. I want not just good references now, but clear and concise.”
“One more thing.” I wanted to channel Columbo’s gravelly line with a straight face. “Could you also check for references on twin Padawans?”

Before lunch time I had a pile of six books. The oldest and thickest was a collection of essays addressing issues kinda like Analects. A more general manual was briefer. Persuading Master Nu for custody of that oldest took me into lunch. I was only minutes late for the next to last tournament round’s start.

After Jedi dispersed, I finally gathered the nerve to ask the twins if they would be my Padawans. I wanted to warn them I really didn’t know what I was doing, but the time in the Archives should have made that clear.

The twins hurried off to tell their friends, their news transparent to any who crossed their path.

I looked over Anakin’s room and commed him, seeing him look frazzled. Gave sympathy for new-dad, as Padmé had gone to see off her folks. He’d got Leia and Luke settled… for now.

Outside the babies’ bedroom, Anakin’s looked more sharply at me. “Why did you call?”

“Windu gave compelling reasons for me to take a Padawan, one of twins. I’m continuing anyway.”

That made him frown. “Are you sure about this?”

“No, but they don’t deserve to be left hanging because of Obi-Wan. They seem good kids, and I’m not too proud to ask for help.”

“And, line-sister dear?” Anakin prodded.

“I’m thinking of using your room for them. It’s bigger than mine.”

“Oh. I’ll come over late tomorrow to help clear it out. I sleep in the big room anyway.”

I had a pang and saw he caught it. “I don’t think I will be, soon.”

Anakin looked torn.

Forcing a smile hurt. “Well, that will tell us if this is a general meltdown or me.” I did not want people to take sides. I wanted no sides again.

Training with Dooku for unthinking reaction was slow. That seemed to irritate him.

I studied the manuals and essays and meditated, feeling a pressure in the Force. I was running out of time and did not know why.

A chirpy droid delivered thin packet. Behind came a solemn Master Yoda, feeling of expectation.

“Master?” My nerves ramped up. “Uh, what brings you here?”

“Traditions you have not seen. Both timeless and living, tradition is. Yes, hmmm.

“I figured I’d copy the other people and wing the rest.” I didn’t want to mention I was in denial, that Obi-Wan would somehow miraculously get back in time and he’d know what to do.

He settled on a meditation mat. “Resent your Master, you do...”
“I don’t want to prejudice the twins with that. I just want to know why.” I laughed nervously as I settled near him. “I don’t feel very adequate to mentor students who’ve been studying at least twice as long as I have.”

“Knowledge where ignorance was, you held. Much wisdom from each other every Padawan and Master gains. Confidence in this, the Council has. The Force will be with you.”

I could feel the unstated question. “Nothing. Just that… something’s gonna happen or even is already happening. Nothing to do with Mirran and Adus.”

The old Master hummed before he spoke. “Questions you have?”

“I’ve never stopped. What’s this packet?”

“For the braids to start their apprenticeships, these are…”

I’d been expecting four. Yoda was not expecting Obi-Wan as the fourth and that made me sad. Was there even a standard for if a Master ran off, or did Obi-Wan even realize he was replicating what happened to him?

I was still nervous when he left and I fingered the pair of beads and thread to tie off the braids. I hadn’t braided anything since my long hair era, but I worried I’d forget with an audience.

Morning came too soon and with too little sleep. I was not the only soon-to-be Master trekking down to the creche. Nor was I the only one yawning at the early hour. Many picked at their robes from nerves. We became a steady stream rising through the tower toward the Council chamber.

Finally we reached that concourse area where the would-be Emperor died and I could not be sure if there was a chill or that was my imagination. I spotted Feemor looking far more alert than his unusually quiet Initiate, Cici. The banks of seats made much more sense than just for a student center. The Council arranged themselves along the one opposing wall.

When Mace stepped forward, the quiet comments among the scores of Jedi old and young quieted. “Today marks the promotion of Initiates to full Jedi Padawans, with mature responsibilities and dangers. Before you reached this point, you passed through trials to confirm that your understanding of the Code has guided the construction of your three pillars for becoming a Jedi Knight. Knowledge, self-discipline, and connection to the Force are only the foundation of this life-long mission…”

As he talked, I scanned the ‘bleachers,’ and noticed there were many more spectators present than I realized. I even spotted Dooku and perhaps Qui-Gon up near the top, and the old man nodded at me.

“Your Masters will teach you the practicalities of service, that wisdom and determination that no manual can teach. They will also guide you toward service to the Republic and the Force, even when that service costs more than you can fathom today.” Mace paused and scanned the crowd. “Promotion of a group of Initiates to Padawans is always a momentous occasion, but it is especially so today. These are the first peacetime ceremonies in too many years, and it will be too many years again until those peaceful days fully return. But you, like your predecessors and Masters will be part of that rebirth.”

He spoke two names, and a younger and older Jedi stepped forward with some nerves. I heard the oaths that each gave, I know I did, but the words didn’t really sink in. The Master wove a tiny little braid, and they turn around with the Master’s hand resting on the kid’s shoulder.

Then it was repeated with another pair. And another. By a dozen times the oaths had begun to
imprint into my memory. By thirty, I had trouble not mouthing the words when Feemor and Cici made their oaths over a string of those silka beads.

By forty, the three of us were restless more than nervous as the hall had thinned as new partnerships departed. Then Mace called our names, with a small smile that wasn’t visible.

Mirran spoke first in a clear voice with determination. “I, Mirran Vanle, Padawan learner, promise to uphold the Jedi Code. I promise to respect all lives and defend those who cannot protect themselves. I promise to keep seeking to improve myself so I can be an example to others. And I promise to use my gifts in the Force to serve the Light.”

With a gulp, Adus got stuck with the words, and I squeezed his shoulder before he finished.

Then it was my turn, and my nerves narrowed to just not flubbing my lines. A teleprompter would be a nice addition. “I, Vora Meyers, Jedi Knight, take Mirran Vanle and Adus Vanle as my Padawans. I promise to protect and guide them on their paths to becoming Jedi Knights in service to the Republic.” Making their braids seemed to take forever and I hugged them.

The clock stopped ticking sometime as we spoke. I could finally take a deeper breath as Mace moved on to the next pair of names.

Flipping their braids back and forth, Adus and Mirran beamed until Yoda led a procession for belated breakfast food, even if it was closer to dinner.

I had Padawans.

But it felt more like being a single mom. At least I didn’t have to worry about the rent or health plan.

Dice arrived as my charges looked over their bunks, and he wore a bright white felt beret with an off-green headband, the 408th colors. “General. Do you have a moment?”

“Yeah. These younglings are my Padawans, Mirran and Adus Vanle. They are to be kept away from more dangerous situations until older.” Seeing their faces, I made one back at them. “You know that already. Don’t pretend you don’t. Dice, while they are technically Commanders, any of you veterans outrank them when there’s combat and I’m not available. I don’t want to hear that any Vod was hurt because you did something stupid, Padawans.”

Before they had more than a second to be disappointed, I swapped targets. “I also expect Padawans to take care of Vod’e when they can safely. I hope that you passed first aid and healing techniques, Axe can use the help.”

Dice recovered quicker. “General, permission to board and inspect the Sirocco?”

“Why?”

He looked at his padd. “Generals should be aboard before troops.”

Oh. “Go ahead. Arrange whatever you need.” I saw Mirran had a mad pilot-glint in her eyes. “We will be over to inspect it sometime tomorrow afternoon and a shakedown cruise the next day.”

Adus showed off his little stubby braid to Dice, but the Vod didn’t stay long.

I felt more than a little awkward after they’d gotten into sleepwear. I wanted to do this right, better than mine. “Okay. Do you have any questions for me? Even the one you’re uncomfortable asking. There’s no stupid ones.”
After a minute of silence, Adus finally asked. “Master, why do you like Count Dooku more than Master Windu?” There was a little fear in that.

I stalled for a second, wondering what the answer was. “I’m not sure. I don’t dislike Master Windu. I haven’t spent much time with him. I always thought he was intimidating since I first saw him. Dooku, made idiot choices for too many years, but I feel sorry for him. He saw a corrupt Senate looking out for the rich and powerful only. He lost his Padawan tragically. He’s seeing a healer now, and I like him. Cutting him off from human contact only makes insanity more likely. Can you understand that part?”

The boy nodded doubtfully.

I’d let him think about that. “Mirran?”

“Do Jedi lie?”

Where did that come from? “That’s too big a question for a simple answer. Jedi are not supposed to routinely lie. Many lies grow out of darker and selfish motives. Those lies always come back to bite you. Some lies are for kindness, like if you comfort someone who’s about to die. Fear and anger don’t help the dying. Some lies are diplomatic, like not spoiling a surprise. Truth is a better default, and lying not be for selfish reasons. Be able to defend it.” I was going to be getting in trouble over her thoughtful absorption and I had one more barometer.

“What upset you today and why?” I saw frightened deer in headlights. “You can get upset, you just can’t hold onto emotions. If you were studying an exotic dodo, you’d have to study then deal with it. Identify emotion and its cause. Deal with it, like sending passions into the Force. I don’t want you to get upset and bury emotions or run away. Problems will come back like little cockroaches. Or as big ones. Understand your emotions, okay?”

Mirran blurted out. “I stubbed my toe when I was getting ready and I was afraid I broke it and I’d miss becoming a Padawan.”

I patted her arm. “I would have fetched you, Mirran. Adus?”

He looked down at his feet as he brushed his braid. “I was afraid someone would come tell us we couldn’t become Padawans, if there wasn’t a Master for each of us. Mirran did better in the tournament. Then I would be sent away.”

I tapped his chin to look up. “I said you were stuck with me. Aging out thing will be changing. I doubt I’m a preferred Master for clever twins, who are probably as good as I am with a light saber.”

“But you’re our Master!”

Turning that into an awkward hug was needed. “Good. Letsee bad things, good things. What good things, made you happy and Lighter today?”

That made them babble about becoming Padawans.

I remembered my own shock and laughed. “Okay, okay. Try not to duplicate answers too much. Wouldn’t want some uninformed cretin to think one of you cheated, do we?”

That left them giggling and they settled into the bunks, still excited.

“Goodnight, Padawans Vanle. I’m off for my own training, comm me if you have any problems before I return.”
Dooku seemed amused, but not enough to go easy, forcing me to handle and recover from disarms and other tricks. Still stronger, I doubted I would live long enough for his strength to atrophy. My good mood made it hard for slippery words to bother me.

Morning seemed almost suburban, sending them off to classes while I studied Padawan training references and logs about the *Sirocco*. Lunch with Mirran and Adus also seemed normal, aside from congratulating us.

Kids waking me the next morning felt unreal. They eagerly followed me after morning classes when I went to the 408th barracks for Dice’s briefing and tour. My armor kit and fighter had been transferred, and Mirran was abuzz. I didn’t think I could train *anyone* in combat piloting.

The end of day questions and bedtime came so quickly. I settled to study until leaving for my own training.

Master Windu waited in the practice room that Dooku and I usually used. “Meyers. You are not working with the Vanles?” He sounded like he wanted to ground me.

“Uhh.” I felt my face twitch and scratched my neck. “I don’t know enough to even critique what they already know. I intend them to continue primary lessons with blademasters. Ease them into a routine in steps, so they somethings are constant during change.”

“You must admit, these younglings will have extra challenges.” Dooku’s arrival had been quiet.

-*More importantly, my GrandPadawan is seeking to avoid conflict with my Padawan.*-

Mace’s ire spun him, looking for the invisible Jinn while Dooku smiled a little.

Qui-Gon faded in, less humor on his face.

Now Windu glared at the Force ghost. “If Kenobi faces consequences, that is his responsibility. The Padawans have a Master and should not have to wait for attention or training. Find them a tutor now, if you see the need. You are their Master first. *He* agreed to these duties.”

-*Patience, Mace. It will be as the Force requires.*-

“There are my responsibility to see settled.” Windu stopped with an expression of worry.

I bit my lip. “Master, this is *more* than just light sabers. Anyone around here could teach them more lightsaber than me, you knew that. They need security after these uncertainties. A droid can teach facts, not important things.”

Master Windu focused on me. “This situation is… volatile.”

“Tomorrow, I’m taking the *Sirocco* out on a shakedown cruise. A lightsaber tutor can wait a few days. I’ll hunt down Skywalker.”

Windu seemed satisfied. “At least that means he should be in Temple more. I’m not convinced he should live away from the Temple.”

-*Do you really want his excitement flooding the Temple?*- Master Jinn sounded amused again.

“Maybe not.” Windu made another face. Then he looked at myself and Dooku. “So you *are* studying from a Sith?”
“I am studying from my GrandMaster, an expert who can teach me more about dealing with aging. Most at my skill level are forty years younger and have different concerns than arthritis.”

Dooku spoke up, still calmly. “I would estimate it more to be like thirty years. I am putting more emphasis on efficiency. I would prefer recordings of the Ando battle for training direction.”

Mace hummed at that. “Demonstrate.”

I resisted making a face showing my complete lack of joy at that. It didn’t fly well due to nerves. When I realized the Grandmaster had departed, I flopped onto the exercise mat.

“Please, have some dignity, Meyers.” The old man sounded pained.

I thought Dooku seemed uneasy. “You okay?”

A small smile flashed. “I am well enough. I plan to research in the Archives but it is not yet an urgent investigation.”

My smirk could not be stopped. “Guess they would keep the porn locked up, huh? Little ears.” That time I could feel his reaction.

Shock morphed as Dooku smiled a rare full smile. “No, it is more related to Code revisions. I’m also considering the contrasts where both Codes get it wrong. I think there is little in the Archives about the Baneite line that was not seized from myself. I hope to examine earlier schisms and see if anything can be salvaged.”

I felt my grin drop away. Salvaged?

-No- “No, GrandPadawan. That Banite line dabbled too much in annihilation. I no longer want that. Being the last one standing is not a satisfying goal. I cannot espouse the Jedi Code for myself, and the Sith Code is even worse. Was there ever a better one? One that did not demand war?”

That made me snort a laugh. “An iconoclastic Sith? Somebody somewhere is spinning in their grave.”

“That is a satisfying image.” Dooku’s laughter was only in the Force.

Later, very late, I sent a message to Anakin about tutoring. My darker-skinned Padawans were asleep and I meditated only briefly before I slept.

Short sleep led to vivid, wrenching dreams.

Fear on an empty dim stage where nothing I said or did made any difference in the fears... with Obi-Wan angry or afraid about me. I was on my own, and someone else was close and trying to hide their own fear. He was afraid of me, and my own frustration with him not listening was pissing me off. I kept feeling heavier and heavier, hard to make any move, my feet anchored to the hazy ground, I was grieving almost as much as I was afraid and I could not feel anyone in the Force.

The dream dissolved into warmth and I woke briefly. A deeply sleeping Anakin wrapped around me. I was exhausted enough to drop back into sleep.

“Master? Masters?” Mirran’s uncertain voice came from right in front of me.

I rubbed my eyes before panic arrived. Leaning upward, I blinked with trying to focus on her. “Hiya. Somethin’ wrong?”
Anakin groaned.

“Why is… Master Skywalker in your bed?”

This I hadn’t prepped them for. “These are his quarters, too. He sleeps here when he’s not visiting his wife.”

Anakin sat up, bare-chested. “Don’t know how often I can can be here with our twins.”

Adus’ eyes got bigger. “You have twins too? Are they Initiates? Can we meet them?”

That made Anakin frown. “No, they aren’t Initiates. Padmé and I want them to have a family…”

-We’re not family, Adus.- That was bitter anger from a new presence in my head.

I lunged to pull Mirran closer for a hug and sent my annoyance right at Anakin. I wanted to smack him, but my arms were tangled in Padawan robes. -We will speak of this later, Anakin.- “He’s new at this, guys. But you can ask any of us in here your questions, as long as we’re awake. Okay?”

“Aren’t lineages like families, Master?”

Brain a little cobwebbed, I pulled Mirran to sit on the edge of the bed while stalling. “Yes, they are like. But parents are more like Grandmasters, that they make decisions about their children and others don’t get to interfere, unless there is some kind of abuse or emergency. Senator Padmé’s family will have customs different for children than the Order’s. My family was very different than Anakin’s. Once an adult, my family was more like a lineage. I had crazy relatives there, too.”

“Do- did you have a lot of relatives, Master?”

I had to stop and think. “I didn’t have a lot, by the standards of the culture. Some families have huge reunions that collect hundreds. You lose touch due to arguments and people passing, but I had four cousins, no, six. Seven aunts and uncles. Three grandparents and two great-grandparents that I remember and assorted children I lost track of. Double that total if you include adoptions, remarriages, and second cousins.”

Anakin looked startled.

“We’re a big lineage, aren’t we, Master? The best?” Adus sat beside his twin.

I traced the cheek next to his braid. “We could look it up. But everyone should be striving to be their best. Remember to be compassionate, even with people we think are mistaken.

Completely awake now, I stretched. “Now scram. Today’s a big day."

The kids scrambled out for study or whatever.

“I forget you have family, too.” Anakin hadn’t moved and his voice was thoughtful.

“Mostly had. Disease is not much kinder than violence sometimes.” I paused for the bigger issue. “Anakin, you forget that lineage is family for most Jedi. Dooku is a harder pill, but Adus and Mirran are just as much family as Ahsoka. You just told them they weren’t good enough to even meet your children. They’re not old enough to swallow carelessness like Obi-Wan tries to.”

“I’m sorry, Vora. I didn’t mean it like that.” He’d hunched before he spoke.

“I know you didn’t. Kids misunderstand and get hurt, and Force-sensitivity will make bigger messes.
This will happen to Luke and Leia too. You are going to have to learn to watch what you say. Language is only an obvious issue.

Anakin smirked after a moment. “Padmé told me to go find something to burn off my energy here at the Temple. Training should do.”

Envy bit me with that simple comment and I felt alone again in that industrial wasteland from my dream where pain was a bone-deep ache. I wanted to cry from echoes of black despair and fear.

“Vora?!?” Anakin sounded panicked.

“Bad dream,” I shook my head. “I was on my own and couldn’t feel the Force. Obi-Wan was upset and gone. Someone else was afraid close-by.”

Fingers slid to rub my back. “Was it a vision?”

“I don’t know. It was mashed up like dreams.” I wanted to ask about his visions.

Anakin hugged me, worried. “Nothing lately, aside from something formless about Ahsoka. Doesn’t feel urgent, either.”

I forced myself to take a deep breath. “It’s part and parcel of my fear about Obi-Wan, I think it’s a dream.” I heard a thump from the main room.

“I’ll call my Padawan while you shower...” Anakin rolled his eyes as a comm floated over to him.

Preparing their travel bags was an amusing exercise. I’d chosen a close destination for our shakedown cruise almost randomly from a short list.

Anakin was dressed moments after me, grinning. Both kids were still a little agog to see him this casual. Hurrying to eat, Anakin talked to them about their tournament duels. I felt qualms about taking them along. The only similar shakedown cruise I remembered was disrupted by Khan.

Anakin kept talking to them about dueling. The whole way to the boarding ramp, I kept expecting him to peel off.

He looked at me with smirk. -I’m stowing away. I promise not to destroy a command battle node today.-

Mirran was telling him about the different forms, and not very excited about the second or third.

-What about Padmé and your twins?-  

-Already called her, and Appo’s coming too, just to keep Rex happy.- Smug, smug, thy name is Skywalker.

Dice didn’t seem surprised to see Anakin. Anakin had more technical questions for Admiral Sherton, who didn’t think much of any of us, but hid it behind crisp formality. Our Commanders escorted us to… my quarters and office, with Appo doubtfully watching Anakin.

“I’m sorry I didn’t warn you about his attitude, General.” Dice apologized, “I thought it was the usual about Brothers.”

“He doesn’t have to like me, as long as we can work together.” I looked at the twins. “Meditate in quarters and we’ll find food.”
They looked disappointed.

Anakin added. “Drill and assessment tonight. I’ll be be your Blademaster, and I have your undivided attention on this trip.”

Excitement and relief was clear as they trotted off.

“Wanna see how you’re doing too, Vora.” Again with the smug.

I felt a pang of sadness instead.

Dice put in, “The Admiral is planning a series of drills…”

“Yeah, he seems the type to spring surprise drills on us. Lotta Admirals did that after first Geonosis.” He looked around.

For the next two days, I was on a treadmill of studying up more on the Sirocco’s systems, both officer and technical, and watching Anakin teaching. He was quick to pick up on their frustrations and issues. He really seemed to like it. I could see that much more clearly than when he was pushing me.

At least I felt a little more composed as he kept pushing after they were sent to bed. The second night I scored a touch. One that felt dissonant in the Force.

I got angry. “You stop that right now, Anakin Skywalker! That was bantha-droppings. I don’t want pity wins.”

He looked cross, too. “That’s how we’re all taught.”

“Pity wins are not victories. They’re depressing and aggravating.” I had to look away. “Look, I know it’s neurotic. That’s a reason for me not to teach them.”

“We all aren’t overconfident.”

“Thank the Force, there’s already enough cocky people in the lineage.” My grin became less forced.

Pantolomin was another water world, but I could see many lights shining as we approached orbit and the Admiral greeted the portmaster formally.

That local official wanted to know about leaves, perhaps expectantly.

Sherton looked at me.

I didn’t know what the answer should be and shrugged.

“The Generals have not decided if there will be the opportunity, Portmaster.” The Admiral closed the channel. “Will the General allow leave?”

“Would two days be enough time, Admiral?” What would he recommend?

He looked at the water world through the huge portholes. “Not really, General. Landing exercises might allow a handful, but that isn’t enough time to provide any morale relief, only resentment.”

When I looked at Dice, saw he had no objections. “We still have time for exercises, though?”

That made Sherton smile. He was almost ecstatic to devise combat exercises and shipboard drills. A
few included interceptors. Mirran and Adus watched from the bridge while I showed off as sluggish compared to Anakin in flight. He was in a good mood after racking up kill counts.

I survived, and I didn’t fly into anything. That was probably all Tuess’ fault. Anakin could have all the attention. The nighttime surprise attack drill was less fun, except for the Admiral.

Enjoying his work was not a flaw, really.

At least my handling of combat patter improved. Dice and Appo seemed preoccupied when we left orbit for home. More study and prepping my Council report occupied the Jump back. Six days total, and we were back home in time for bedtime. I was almost in shock.

My report on the *Sirocco’s* readiness and training exercises was a formality, and I could almost feel the boredom from the Council as my Padawans fidgeted. The Masters had no comments. The twins grew less excited and settled into classes and I reviewed their class materials, especially in my weaker areas. Our bedtime chats got lively.

Anakin came by most days to train them before dinner, pulling me in sometimes. His eyes were getting baggy from being tired, though he stayed cheerful.

The exhaustion was creeping up.

I really *should* not laugh at him…

Studying combat at night with Dooku, and Padawan care wasn’t enough to do. I seemed to be on the organizational memo list for the coming convocation, or First Knowledge Council. That came with a suggested reading list from different directions like Altis and the Council. Dice reported daily and many afternoons we went to the 408th barracks for a psych and Earth culture seminar. The twins seemed fascinated by Kubler-Ross and Sun-Tzu but not equally. Adus was talking to a group including Shins and Axe about the former. And his sister was prying flight stories from the pilots, both enthralled in their discussions. Dice agreed to get them some rations and back for bed.

I didn’t know what else I should be doing.

Stepping outside the barracks, I felt a little odd to be solo again. I still had hours before my own lesson to check on the new daddy when he wasn’t putting on his game face in the Temple.

He did not answer my ring of the bell, Threepio did. The golden droid had what looked like electrical tape over his mouth speaker. He emoted dejection very well and led me toward the babys’ room.

Inside the dimmed room sat Anakin, no, slumped Anakin, yet he held the babies steady.

Anakin was barely aware.

Anakin was barely awake.

The room was a droid-free mess and he threw a tired glare at his first creation, as much as he loved droids.

“Did something break?” I whispered. I’d thought Anakin would be upset if someone else worked on Threepio.

Threepio’s eyes flashed three times and he shook his head.
That left something deliberate.

I sighed. “He will calm down when he’s less exhausted...”

Threepio flashed sharply. He could not be happy.

“Really. It’s all exhaustion and worry. Make sure he gets food, too.”

The droid bowed a little and tottered off.

Anakin’s tunic was stained by baby stuff. Eyes opening to only half mast, his glare washed away almost instantly when a baby shifted. -You are enjoying this far too much.-

I warned you about three years ago. I can’t help you didn’t believe me.

His smile was tired. -Still worth it.-

And that’s why babies and baby animals are cute.

-I want to see Obi-Wan like this...-

Drooling on your shoulder as he sleeps?

Anakin’s shoulders shook for a moment. -Saw that already. He’d be a good father.-

I looked away and took a deeper breath. Not with me.

His mouth opened to object, but he remembered his sleeping babies. -Why not?- It almost came through as a growl.

I forced a smile. Not even with Padawans. Obi-Wan has no long term beliefs about relationships. Certainly nothing like yours. He barely believed long term could exist for him. Now, I don’t know if there is a relationship anymore. Children deserve both parents’ attention.

-You were pushing me to plan for solo parenting.- Calm resentment was new.

We don’t know if Leia’s fated for Mr. Solo... I grinned as I deflected.

He rolled his eyes.

You two went in to parent hood with a long term commitment, the greatest sign for a happy and healthy childhood.

Anakin looked down at his children then looked up with a big grin. -Then you need to get married.-

Big mistake. You cannot force it. He had so much trouble with a lover.

I did not need the Force to know his dissatisfaction. Please, Anakin. Many relationships break up over having children. Hasn’t Padmé mentioned how sad she is about Bail and Breha? Many, many couples break after even longer over these issues. Let it go for now.

He set his jaw but stayed quiet. Leia shifted in his arms. -They are so perfect, I can pity Vader.-

Parents are so biased. I could feel his love and happiness flowing around. And why is Threepio gagged? Getting a taste for kink?
The laughter was barely restrained. -Noooo. He just kept talking when we finally got one to sleep. The speakers work fine. He’s just been ordered to stay quiet outside life and death emergency as long as the tape is there.-

I suspected Leia would yank it off if he waited long enough, because she woke and woke Luke.

Anakin cuddled them both and pushed Luke into my arms. “Here, you had the crush on him.”

Irony was steaming there as I rocked Luke as he wriggled around seeking to latch on breakfast. I shot a quick glare at the father who carefully ignored me as he chattered about sunshine and the sky in a sing-song. I wanted the location of whatever bottle system they had. Padmé was probably doing Senate shit, so I just had to find the backup.

I found an incubator-like case and brought a bottle out. “Now what, Master Skywalker?”

He smirked, he was expert compared to me about what he wanted for feeding and changing. Anakin smirked. “I’m off for a looong shower, Padawan. Talk to them, tell them stories. They’re particularly enjoying the one about droid maintenance.”

“I might remind you that I was never actually your Padawan.”

“But I am a Master.”

“Please’ would have worked so much better.”

He wandered off with a smirk toward the shower.

Luke and Leia’s eyes followed our sounds, but moving their heads and arms was kind of hit or miss.

Hmm, fairy tales or songs? I had more songs in my head, and no one knew if I sang them wrong. After a few nursery songs, I went to Christmas carols. As I sang each song, I wracked my brain for the next one, and I was a little annoyed that I knew I’d forgotten parts. Then I shifted to quiet ones like Shenandoah.

The babies seemed happy and nearly asleep, when I realized Anakin had sacked out by the doorway. Humming finished getting them to sleep.

About to nudge him awake, his eyes snapped open to speak quietly. “Obi-Wan can sing too, but most of what he knows are in Mando, so they’re not much fun.”

I moved past him into the living room. “Actually, I didn’t just come for a visit. I wanted to see if you heard anything more about Obi-Wan’s mission. Nobody’s told me anything since the Padawan ceremony”

Anakin shrugged as he grabbed a toy absentmindedly from underfoot. “The Council’s always been secretive.”

Closing on two Earth weeks passed since Obi-Wan went AWOL.

After a particularly good day I broke out The Raiders movie and some munchies for something like a slumber party in jammies. The conversion to holo looked good, and I had to explain a lot of Nazi era facts, but not that much more than extremely young Millennials before I left Earth.

They made it to almost the end before they fell asleep curled around me. It didn’t seem worth the effort to wake them to go to bed so I dozed too. Knowing I would ache by morning.
I woke to the absence of sound. To seeing Obi-Wan just inside the doorway.

He was silent and his eyes were shadowed.

*Welcome back Ben. Wanna give me a hand with getting a Padawan to bed?*

-Which one?-

*Whichever, they are both squishy and hard to wake at this point.*

Adus snuffled but didn’t wake while I lifted his sister away as she murmured something incoherent. Lifting her up to the upper bunk required drawing on the Force but she settled deeper into sleep even as we left their room.

Obi-Wan’s voice was flat with a hint of disbelief. “They are your Padawans?”

I smothered my first response. “Splitting them up or delaying was deemed unnecessarily stressful. Mace was agitated enough at how it went.”

He sighed without meeting my eyes. “...Am I listed?”

I sat and adjusted the snack bowl, aching. “I don’t know what the Council decided. We went after Feemor and his ship crazy kid. We’re still getting used to each other, but they’re less jittery with their braided talismans.”

“I see.” His feelings were shut down or shielded.

This wasn’t anything with more substance than if it was Master Tiin. I stood to grab the snack debris and return it to the kitchenette. “I have training now.

Hurt crossed his face and I tried to resist enjoying that.

“Who with?” Obi-Wan looked away.

“Dooku. He has the time and he knows the better adaptations for an aging body without losing effectiveness.” I didn’t want him to really worry… despite. “Masters Yoda, Jinn and he had tea and a long talk the other day, and they all seemed satisfied.”

That noise was not satisfaction, but I could not tell any more.

“I will be back in an hour or two.” I left before I would start a fight.

Dooku seemed to have guessed, and accurately, the direction of my mood. I was really glad he didn’t pick at it. I was getting a little less wonky about sparring, and his comments and suggestions, if not commands, distracted me for a while. When he called a halt, I said goodnight and lurched back toward our rooms hoping maybe we could get off to a better start.

Maybe in a crowded shower.

I got back and he wasn’t there. If it weren’t for the travel bag tucked to the side, I’d wonder if seeing him was a dreamlet. One hot shower later and I crawled into bed, hoping to wake when he returned.

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I woke early. He was lying flat on his back and asleep, fingers laced across his chest, legs straight and kind of lifeless. We were touching, barely, but only because it looked like I’d shifted in my sleep, not because he wanted to be engaged in any way.
My heart didn’t hurt as much as my throat. This was like I had the cooties.

I swallowed any noise.

I really wished my previous bad feeling was wrong. I put that aside to dress for the day.

Maybe he was just exhausted.

I could hope, right?

Mirran and Adus were stirring and I went to check on them and begin the day. Today was a day in the Archives to try to dig out the water mystery. I asked for reports on how the water system could have been used by enemy and what could be done to reduce the risk. A trip to the barracks later for us to meet Dice and I saw Cody leaving, seeming annoyed.

Anakin could not make it today to the dojo in the Temple so I decided to ask Dooku to help me with at least overseeing their work with droids. They were happy to show me their skill, and crowing their pride every time they won some point against each other.

Obi-Wan entered, a mini-storm around him without saying a word.

“Continue Padawans,” Dooku said gravely.

I could feel something trying to crest and just watched Obi-Wan.

When Adus won his rarer point, he beamed even as his sister made a face.

“Spar with me Vora,” my old Master demanded.

Dooku’s faint hum was clearly doubtful as he ushered Mirran and Adus out of the hall despite their disappointment.

Stretching for a moment or two, I felt the sparring hall made for cavernous echoes.

I had a bad feeling about this.

Not much seemed to happen at first, I wasn’t inclined to attack, making blocks and parries only. I was waiting for something…

“I believe congratulations for Ando are in order, Knight Meyers.”

“Thank you, Master. I wished you were there.”

His smile was more mocking as we continued.

I hated that smile now, having it directed at me.

“You must be proud of how you treated the Vod.”

That struck guilt, that so many had died, that one I knew died to save me. “I did my best, and I grieved with them.”

“Some best,” he snorted.

“Best is best.” My pain was becoming anger and I shifted toward more aggression, like I had been working on. “I stand behind my actions, good or bad. At least I stand behind my actions, instead of
running away from my responsibilities like some chickenshit.”

“You do? As if that is enough to mean something.” He was pushing, angry as well.

“That must be enough. I don’t hide like some kid for weeks, leaving people hanging and having to pick up the slack for you…

*Because. You. Can’t. Be. Bothered.*”

I saw a wobble, a wince, and it required no thought or emotion to react swiftly.

The take-down worked to my shock and he half sprawled, with my boot on his wrist and saber at his throat.

But this wasn’t a triumph or accomplishment, I felt sick. Moving back, I muttered an apology, and nodded to Dooku before leaving. I wanted to settle my stomach before I decorated some blameless carpet.

I felt sure Mirran and Adus were in the caf at this time, and went back to our rooms. It was past time to pack and I was mopping my eyes before I reached the rooms.

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Chapter End Notes

Starting prep of NaNo soon and I had a burst ulcer and gall stones in immediate family. Can't neglect the angst even in a sometimes fluffy take. Please comment on this and support all your authors!
Chapter Summary

Not all family reunions have fried chicken and potato salad with their fireworks... OR will there be drinking when an entire lineage has a meal together?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Obi-Wan

Dooku just stared at me and I waited for him to speak, to say something—anything cutting about my poor showing while sparring with a knight he’d had unrestricted access to.

I wanted to taunt him, but I could not think of any barbs.

Dooku spoke in a voice leached of all color. “Master Gard and his new Padawan are to be sharing dinner with the lineage later tonight. Perhaps you can balance yourself before then.” His very gravity was a reprimand.

He departed before I said anything.

I looked around the now-empty training space, and no one was in the observation area. I wasn’t sure what had happened.

Oh, I knew the tactic that had cost me the match, I had used some variant many times myself in training and on the battlefield. Maintaining my self-control had been a point of pride through so many battles.

My report to the Council had not gone well earlier in the day.

The delivery of the master treaty to Raxulon’s planetary Council for consideration provoked little outright violence, but their officials and politicians nearly vibrated with anger when they caught sight of me. Knight Je had their work but out to soothe the meeting. It took longer than I expected to acquire an agreement for a full treaty delegation from the Republic.

Their major demand was that I not be part of it.

When I reported on this to the Council, I made sure to laud the Knight’s efforts, along with the efforts of her troops. The Council had few questions for us and there was a pending tension in the Council.

When Knight Je was dismissed with thanks, I was not waved to my seat.

I composed myself, aware I had seized another’s mission without the Council’s approval. I was also aware that I had not taken the Padawans that were being urged on me and I had been preparing for.

I composed myself into calm serenity, aware these transgressions merited censure.
Mace looked at Master Yoda, who nodded. The younger Grandmaster grimaced slightly at me before speaking. “Kenobi, at point before the Council is your execution of your assignment after your censure for keeping secrets- and then haring off of a mission without consulting with other Masters. You were assigned one task as part of that censure with Master Skywalker, to oversee the Initiate Tournament to its natural conclusion...”

Force. I could feel the air drain out of my lungs and I had to control myself for my embarrassment as I gazed at the floor.

“Fail this task we expected of Skywalker.” Master Yoda’s disappointment was clear. “A Master’s test this has proven. Been completed your censure has not. Leave the temple until completed you may not. Yeesssssss.”

Usually severe censure was measured in days or weeks, open-ended was very unusual. Unknown since the war started.

I glanced upward as I was dismissed and saw a too-familiar blue haze behind Master Yoda, and felt like a very small Initiate myself.

Outside the High Council, I felt myself at a loss, unsure what to do. I returned back to my suite, assured briefly that my name remained on the label with Anakin and Vora’s. When I entered, nothing seemed to have changed in the main room. The smallest bedroom seemed to have containers and piles of personal objects, mostly things from Anakin’s bedroom.

That left me uneasy, and I attempted meditation in my room, with no lessening of my unrest afterwards.

Cody commed me. “General. Are you available for reports this afternoon?” His neutrality was clear, any irritation from when we last spoke was gone.

“Yes, Cody. I can meet you at the barra...” I remembered my active censure. “Report to my quarters at your convenience.”

Shortly after that he arrived. He wore a felted beret with the 212th troop color on the brim.

“General?”

I waved him inside. “Come in. Is that cap new?”

He removed and examined it. “Our Command Review Board elected these to show our humanity instead of solely wearing our buckets when on base for light duties or leave. Many are not comfortable like this, but one Commander insists showing faces will make us less remote to the civvies.”

“How are our troops adapting to fewer missions?”

“All of our troops have finished rehabilitation and reassignment within the 212th. We are considering what service we will choose when battle is no longer an option and training involved. We want to fight as long as needed for the war, and we want some duty posting here on Coruscant after...” His emphasis on their location echoed his frequent concern about my health.

His reports were routine. The brothers regained on Ando from Ventress had recovered from the immediate effects of deactivating their chips. Vod’e based here were very careful before allowing them outside their barracks where they might react to Jedi.
Cody did not mention the Commander of the 934th in his report. I worried about that Vod, even more I felt almost ill again at the callousness of his treatment in the name of expedience. The Darkness was reaching out again, without any other Jedi or Vod being aware of that Darkness.

Evidence could be too late this time.

Weeks of meditation did nothing to calm this in me, but it was clear GAR operations and the Order were busy with many tasks. I had no proof, only a surety that the click click click of dominoes were falling out of my vision.

...I did not think I could survive if someone close to me Fell.

Cody asked for approvals on repairs and minor upgrades to the Negotiator. He was quite convinced we would see battle again.

Finally, I mentioned the bantha in the room, that I was under censure for my recent actions. He nodded, without any other reaction and stated he would visit daily for status reports.

After he departed, I meditated again and concluded that hiding away could not answer my concerns about Padawans Falling. Anakin was safe, his buzz of happiness and amused annoyance was clear right now. The guilt and darker irritation in Vora acted like a spur for my actions.

The Dark poison needed to be exposed to the light.

It was my duty.

Now I knelt in the training room, disturbed at how things, how people, were changing around me. How blind were those around me to the danger I could see?

I rose to my feet, thankful no one had interrupted my thoughts nearing dinner hour. As I approached our quarters, I realized the rooms were full of presences, almost all very familiar.

As I entered, the rooms seemed almost crowded, with younglings to elderly Sith present and talking to each other. I was not surprised that Padmé was in a far corner near the windows, with Anakin, Master Yoda, and the infants… as far apart as possible from Dooku. Three Padawans with tiny braids and beads were talking about a holo or some game with excitement. Ahsoka and Rex were telling Master Gard and Vora about some interesting things they’d seen in the Undercity.

-Missing something, aren’t they?- My Master faded into view.

I could smell something tasty coming from the kitchen nook, making me wonder where it had been gathered from. I was also aware I probably reeked from the earlier sparring.

A ripple passed through the group, and some smiles aimed toward me were strained. Others were clearly unaware.

 Summoning an apologetic smile, I said, “I’m sorry but I must freshen up first.” I moved though the group and no one reacted.

Master Qui-Gon followed me, passing through doors or walls as needed. -Here and now, Padawan...-

Half disrobed, I turned to glare at him. “What does that even mean, Master? I must do better to listen to the warnings as they are granted to me. ‘Bad feelings’ alone have never convinced anyone in time before things go to the Sith hells. Too many have died when I did not listen to the threads! I
My next breath was an instant of old agony that I barely managed to banish.

-That was not the lesson, Obi-Wan. Your vision is clouded by your attachments. I cannot teach when you do not listen. Calm yourself and listen to the Force.-

A pause. -And me.-

That was not helpful and I turned my back on him to begin a fast shower and his presence moved away.

Feeling cleaner, even if no more settled, I returned to the common room. Current Padawans were at a smaller table, and a larger one had been assembled for the adults and multiple pitchers and conversations were flowing.

I saw that a seat between Ahsoka and Master Qui-Gon was the only empty one. My Master had no food in front of him, but he seemed to be seated on the chair.

When I seated myself at the table, Ahsoka passed me a pitcher that offered a nice kick. Feemor and Vora were joined by the Padawans in moving food so chaos erupted. One container spilled, but the youngling quickly calmed after a quick glance at the elder Masters to see if we noticed the lapse.

Anakin acquired a sleepy Leia from the carrier with a wide grin and returned to his chair and he started eating with one hand and some use of the Force. Padmé had Luke resting against her shoulder as she ate watching the opposite corner with Dooku. Rex was a little edged out by Master Yoda’s hover-chair, but he was talking ships with Feemor and a nearly whispering Anakin beyond him.

When most were eating their meals, Qui-Gon smirked briefly. -Young Tano, I believe you and your friend discovered something about that blackout recently.-

She perked up at his comment and swallowed quickly. “Yeah, Master. I didn’t have a mission or anything and took Rex as backup to look around in the Undercity where the blackout and looting happened.” She looked embarrassed and glared at Anakin. “I guess the Force wanted me there because I found evidence of some kind of control jacked into a power grid station and then ripped out. We checked all the similar stations in and around the burned out areas and found several more with signs of where similar hardware was ripped out as well. Removed because there was no charring or fire suppressant damage in a clean area in the open.”

“The power grid had no flags blown that there were enemy processes running.” Rex added in a quiet voice. “No other hardware had been authorized for those stations.”

“Was anything particularly important damaged…?” I asked, uneasy about this already and refilled the spiked punch.

“Or anyone?” Dooku added with a frown.

Ahsoka shrugged. “Nothing important. Critical locations like hospitals and barracks had backups. Nothing that any kripping Seppies would want to...” She winced and looked at Dooku.

He smiled slightly and waved her to go on.

“Patience, young Ahsoka.” Master Yoda said from next to the Senator and Luke.

“I had some Vod slice into the maintenance records and many of those stations had been behind in their maintenance, like much of the Undercity. There’s been many smaller outages, but not as large or reaching healing centers, sirs.” Rex seemed quiet for him.
I didn’t remember a blackout. “Did this happen while I was on Raxulon?”

Ahsoka grinned again, brightening. “You were a bit preoccupied, Master Obi-Wan. Master was lighting up the city with his panic at the time… about two itty-bitty little younglings being born.”

Every adult at the table either smirked at Anakin or rolled their eyes.

Anakin frowned, about to object that he had not been panicking, but Leia made a tiny noise and he stopped cold with only glares at the rest of the amused group.

“Wish to be assigned as an investigator do you, Knight Tano, hmm?” Yoda didn’t seem to be attending closely, but few Masters believed that pose.

“I want to help end the war, Master.” Ahsoka had learned some of Anakin’s wariness about the Council, which was not a good thing.

Snorting, Dooku said, “There was nothing like this planned, Coruscant was to be the throne. The… beings that reported to me did not seem to have strayed far from existing campaign plans for empire after I departed. They took orders but were weak in making long-term strategy.”

Anakin snorted at that, but I didn’t feel any falsehood in that statement.

“Sabotage can be from others than Seppies, too. Right, Generals? There’s pirates or slavers, like Zygerria or the Hutts?” Rex was more worried than usual.

Vora made a face. “Organized crime and gangs can be all locals who got cocky, too.”

“All I know is that it was deliberate sabotage.” My GrandPadawan was glum. “I don’t have specific evidence, not yet.”

A brief silence fell while the younglings debated some far past heroes.

“You all have to hear this.” Anakin’s voice was quiet, but the feeling was a familiar disgust. “Some holo investigator kept messaging me over and over, through Padmé’s office too. I agreed to a short interview, just to get her to leave me alone. It seemed okay when she came to Padmé’s office. But after the usual questions about fighting and being a General, her questions started in on my Padawan days.

“She must have done some digging because she mentioned that world we went to where a super-volcano destroyed the largest land mass, Obi-Wan.”

I remembered that early mission, when his confidence shifted with the wind. “Wasn’t that the one with the desperate young woman offered to keep your quarters neat? An impossible goal, to be sure.”

Padmé hid a giggle.

Anakin scowled. “She would have gone with anyone to get away from other refugees… even old Jedi Masters.”

“Gangs formed up in the camps rapidly, and she was clearly taken with his skills and appearance.” I shook my head as I explained. “But it all came to naught, she grew incensed and committed assault on my poor, poor Padawan.” Saluting him with my drink helped hide my grin.

His glare was a wonder to behold amid muffled chuckles. “She got taken away to see mental healers.”
But this reporter had a bunch of stories like that and was asking about how Senators treated me after the battle of Naboo.”

Most at the table got quiet, and I wasn’t the only one to look at Qui-Gon.

- *There is no death, there is the Force.* - He smiled serenely.

Padmé frowned with suspicion. “What Senators did she ask about?”

Her husband’s smile was weak… and relieved. “Yeah. Took me a while to notice because we talked about you, but after a while I realized she was trying for anything about Sidious…”

Feemor’s laugh boomed. “She’s doing a karking biography of the Sith!”

“The Monster Who Would Be Emperor…” but no one in the Senate or from Naboo really wanted to answer her questions about his personality. She couldn’t find ‘honest’ records about his real goals and actions.” Anakin raked fingers through his hair.

Master Yoda sighed. “Full of secrets were Sith, to be publicized not.”

Huffing annoyance, Anakin said, “I know that.”

“The Order should cooperate on Senate and political aspects and acquire her raw materials for the Archives when she is finished.” I topped my drink, as I really did not wish another Dark emperor to come from nowhere in destruction due to lack of understanding.

Qui-Gon nodded while holding my eyes.

By this time those around the adult table were slowing in their eating, the Padawans were comparing experiences in flight sims on their Master’s ships.

The former queen spoke next. “The progress for the Kith rights is near final, with the official announcement in a day or two. Full compensation right now with the war costs cannot be offered except in long term, but I believe the Senate will offer all or most of a homeworld immediately instead of a large portion of the proposed amount.”

“They’d better offer something better than sand,” Anakin growled.

“You mentioned that in the last brief for the Review Board, Senator.” Rex spoke carefully. “We found and considered a similar world to Kamino for a home base with little population or development. It’s not far from Coruscant itself in case of crisis. I can forward the information.”

Sighing, Padmé admitted, “There’s talk of austerity and budget cuts in almost all departments. A few Senators are attacking profiteers, I think one Senator is spearheading fining of profiteers and so acquire entire business to divide and sell for the budget.” She did not look pleased.

I could only agree with the prospect of sanctioned greed within the Senate but reform was even more complex for the Senate than the Order. A strong penalty for war profiteering would serve more purposes than just enforcing fair competition. I did not envy Bail’s duty as Chancellor.

Shaking his head, Feemor rose. “My Padawan and I have an early day, she’s to be practicing with alien technology forms.”

“Cool!” Either Adus or Mirran said to that.

Vora rolled her eyes at her idiom being used, but she rose and beckoned the twins. They started
gathering meal debris as our guests started to leave, talking as they did.

Master Yoda paused to look at me expectantly, but them left when I refused the break the silence and sipped my nearly empty drink.

Anakin was the last, as Vora and the twins left to one of the bedrooms for sleep. He gave me the eyeball as he disassembled the table.

“What is it Anakin?” I really didn’t want to talk to him about my inebriated state nearly the last time we spoke.

“You seem off, Master.”

I barely shrugged. “Tensions were high on Raxulon. I remained on high alert at all times due to the unrest at my presence.”

His frown was clear before I could see it. “That’s not it. I’ve seen you flirt your way through worse negotiations than Knight Je reported.”

My frown returned and my forehead hurt. I didn’t want to say this, some remnant of wanting to remain a good example for him. “My censure from the Council has been compounded as I fled my assigned task of the Tournament.” Now my unrest made my meal unsettled in my stomach.

His shock made me want to shrink.

“I must meditate.” I turned toward my room wanting solitude desperately.

Anakin’s annoyance joined the chorus from so many today and I left it dissipate away from me.

In my room, I was relieved to see I was alone and I settled into a meditation pose and closed my eyes.

_The currents of the Force tossed me about like the oceans on Kamino. It was dim around me, but not really dark. Nor was it bright. There were islands beyond the horizon with singing life, but I didn’t feel any guidance for which way to swim in the deep currents._

_Perhaps worse, I had no idea how I’d gotten washed into this ocean and I could sense no one nearby, not the Nova-bright Anakin or the lesser brightnesses of Vora or Ahsoka. No lives were close to me, and I started to panic that they were lost to the dimness and depths of the Kamino ocean._

_I thought I heard a call from Cody among the waves, and opened my eyes._

Vora curled up in an armchair, reading a pad, her presence very quiet. “I really think we need to talk.”

“About what?” My voice was calm.

“I need to know your intentions. You were supposed to be Mirran and Adus’s Master too. SOP is partners for twin Padawans, are we partners? Do you want to have Padawans again?” Her voice was also calm as she spoke quickly without mentioning our sparring.

I didn’t know what my answer was. I wasn’t comfortable with these questions, no substance that had truly been considered… for many days. Maybe too many days.

I was a Master, I should know this and my own distress was clear to even me. “I- I do not know. I
was censured for not completing my sanctioned task, the Initiate Tournament. My detention has been restated and I was relieved of my Council duties.”

I was ashamed of the wobble in my voice when I stated it aloud.

The first emotion I felt from her was pity.

Her face smoothed. “I’m sorry you’re in hot water, but I really need to know if you want a Padawan or Padawans. If you want to partner with me on this. I’ve been stalling for weeks now and these kids deserve an honest answer.” -I want an explanation, too.-

“...I am aware Padawan Masters are desperately needed at present.” My voice was flat to hide my fears even from myself for a moment.

For a long moment, Vora looked at me in silence. What she saw wasn’t clear when she sighed as a sharp pang of grief echoed through the Force. “I will speak to Master Windu about whatever transitions are needed to make this as seamless as possible.”

I felt massive relief that they would be away from the risk she posed, and mustered a smile.

She glared at me and her anger rose quickly. “So that’s clear, now.” Standing up suddenly, she brushed her robes straight. “If you will excuse me, Master Kenobi, I have much to do while they sleep.”

Vora was out the door almost before her words were out.

Apparently, she didn’t return to sleep as the rest of the bed was undisturbed when I woke. I felt a little chilly and an itch in my beard along my left jaw.

When I got to the fresher, I became thoroughly awake when I saw that half my beard was gone, with my right jawline and lip now bare.

Chapter End Notes

Just over two weeks this time! I'm working on a seat of the pants outline again, instead of the spreadsheet that helped choreograph the Skywalker twins' arrival. I have a writing class and NaNo yet for the rest of the year, so this is as fast as this will be for a while.

Comments are manna!
Talk To Me

Chapter Summary

Padmé speaks to her husband on his fears about the twins and the Order’s creche. Unrest on Coruscant and threats for the Senate follows blackouts, that Ahsoka and Rex are supposed to be investigating. While Vora is coming to terms with what was.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Vora

I probably should feel a little guilty for what I did, but I didn’t. Shaking him until his head rattled would not be taken well, and a shave wouldn’t harm him at all. A couple of weeks and he should be fuzzy again.

I left a fresh, new shaver in its packaging in the fresher so he could finish the job before he goes out. This was not about embarrassing him… much.

That should prevent a totally boring day without company or Council to keep him busy. Then again maybe he needed a lack of distraction.

After some deep thought among the fountains getting close to dawn, I sent in a request for quarters suitable for a new Knight. I didn’t want to be around him like this, it hurt too much. The request to the Council to consider shifting the kids to Obi-Wan as Master was a lot harder to write when I did not know what was wrong.

-Was that necessary?- Qui-Gon appeared in the green plants, with eyebrows lifted with doubt.

“Yes.” I was sure something this strong was. “He’s stuck in his own head running in little circles like a hamster. This is a harmless slap at a stuck mindset.” My smile was more like a grimace. “And if he’s going to act like an aggressive punk teen in a snit, he should be beardless.”

His chuckle was clear without hearing it, but the Master brushed his own beard. “Just as well you couldn’t do that to me, considering your words when we met.”

That made me laugh too. “You’re a mental construct of yourself. I don’t think I could change that.”

Jinn’s appearance faded into the Force before before his amusement.

As soon as Adus and Mirran were out for their classes in the morning, I left our rooms for the day. My morning was as full of studying as theirs, but pedagogy was never my thing so I nearly dozed off in the garden.

Maybe I had, because a bright eyed, curly-haired tween woke me, all smug. “Master?”

I playacted being more drowsy. “Yeah? I’m too tired today, how ’bout if we…?”

Smiles faded.
But I wasn’t mad at them and the laugh burst out before I could finish my sentence. “...We’ll check on Dice and run some sims with the boys. I don’t know if Anakin is free for lightsaber today. Would you rather find people to spar with?”

“Can you you help us use the Force better?” Adus had liquid brown entreating eyes like every pup I’d ever cared for.

_Puppy eyes for the win._

I could feel panic nibbling at me, and I took a breath. “I’d love to, but my strengths seem to be mostly in Foresight, not a skill you can demand. Gimme a few days to figure something out, okay?

“Sparring’s okay.” Mirran’s disappointment was cloaked in less respect, but not enough to call her on.

The honeymoon was over. They were teens, or almost.

“Lunch then, then to the Sirocco.”

Anakin wasn’t available and I got a summons from the Council. I didn’t know if I was upset or glad that the summons specifically included only me, late in the afternoon.

When I presented myself, my knees wanted to wobble as I walked to the center, where only Masters Billaba, Windu, and Yoda remained. “Masters.”

“Request denied,” Mace said first.

I barely kept from crumpling my face for tears. I’d pinned my hopes on a change. “Which request?”

“The same request are they not, hmm?” Yoda said quietly.

Yes- no. “My knowledge of lightsaber and Force abilities is simply not enough without the partner I’d been sold on having for this. I can’t just farm _everything_ out to other Jedi, I won’t inspire any confidence in my instruction. Why bother having me as Master when someone else, everyone else knows more to teach? Obi-Wan knows all this stuff they need, and he’s back now.” I took another calming breath. “He can’t talk with me without some kind of meltdown, and Mirran and Adus should not be caught in the middle.”

“Kenobi seems to have lost his beard. Did you have anything to do with that?” Mace’s face was neutral, but his voice wobbled.

My face heated. “I was so angry with him. I couldn’t get through to whatever dippy, crapola idea got stuck in his head _any_ time we’ve talked. He would not explain, _hiding_ whatever triggered this while I was away on Ando. But nothing he’s hinted made any sense and he has to talk to _someone_. His refusals made him more like a ‘bare faced liar.’ Well, that and I’ve wondered if he had a dimple on his chin like the actor, but that wasn’t as important.”

The Masters were silent now.

Finally, Mace spoke again. “Whatever censure Master Kenobi is under, is not your responsibility, Meyers. You are not the only one displeased by his silences.

“To this behavior would you condemn younglings, hmm?”

Master Billaba finally spoke. “The Council is more inclined to have Master Kenobi move quarters as he is not in a fit state to take on Padawans, and that is an important consideration. The suite is not an
issue in its own right.”

Oh shit. I hadn’t wanted to get Obi-Wan evicted from his home of thirty years.

“Trust the Force.” Yoda didn’t say anything else, though his eyes had a twinkle in them.

“I took a Padawan recently. Would you like to join us for some of the exercises?” Master Billaba said with a small smile.

“Yes!” I paused, embarrassed by my near shout. “I mean, I know how irregular my instruction was. And what worked for me is unlikely to be needed for them. And could do harm.”

The Masters exchanged more glances, but I would not unsay it now.

Mace stood up. “Continue as you have been, Meyers. Record your decisions and considerations for the Archives. Their classes will shift to practical experiences and supplemented as you see fit. Master Kenobi’s Council duties are his own responsibility.”

That both made me feel better and feel bad for Ben.

Nothing really happened for the next few days. I avoided him, as much as possible in the same apartment and without bringing my Padawans into the arena.

Depa and her Padawan, Caleb, showed up the next afternoon Anakin didn’t. She and Dooku exchanged nods I didn’t understand before she spoke. “These Padawans of ours could do with additional practical exercises in moving and manipulating objects with the Force. Other skills useful in the field, such as abilities to remain unnoticed and perceiving the flow of intent and honesty with the Force are the building blocks of our service. Caleb, see if you can demonstrate your control on that bench...”

I absorbed what she had them doing, even if kept feeling like I should also be following her calm instruction as well.

More research.

Dooku remained as quiet as I, observing the other Master. They stopped when Mirran and Caleb started to talk trash more than just compete in their strength and finesse. The kids chattered as Master Billaba came over to her audience.

“You only have to ask, Knight Meyers. There are many in Temple like that one,” she nodded serenely at Dooku, “who would be delighted to be of assistance.”

Dooku’s smile was grimmer. “You survived a skirmish with my foolish student, even as you continue to study. Every first-time Master has their doubts.” His smile faded.

Reminded of a major reason for my doubts, my neutral expression felt frozen.

When we returned to our quarters after eating, Ben was out again. I was relieved and worried that there was some kind of deadline for him that the Council would never tell me.

He may not be my responsibility, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t worried about him.

I’d decided that critical thought was something to work on for the kids, not paranoia like Vader but understanding between the lines. Perhaps relying on the Force too much for that was a flaw? I was still less familiar with swaths of the culture, but movies and holos seemed similar enough. I
remembered a tech and culture class in college, but instead of tech or geek subjects in holos, I wanted them to look closer at views of the Jedi and Republic. And using holos should lessen reading the Force for answers.

Their classwork kept them busy long enough for me to look for what I wanted: a popular dramatization of the invasion of Naboo “Blood in the Waters.” We kept pausing to discuss everything from incorrect details about Jedi and small details that seemed odd. Especially how things like this would feed the Senate and civilian opinions of the Order.

For me, parts were less familiar, centering much more on Padmé and the destruction of her world when she was seeking help from the Senate. Events on Tatooine and in Temple were missing, so little Ani’s role in the middle of a space battle became a little frightening. The saddest part was that it lacked Williams’ soundtrack.

That left these youngsters thoughtful and with a list of questions to check in the Archives. I sent notes to Padmé and Anakin about the likelihood and purposes of little investigators, for observation and critical thought so they might help. I sent a briefer one to Obi-Wan as a head’s up.

As we went through their bedtime question routine, Obi-Wan returned and only paused briefly before entering his own room. I left for my own training once they slept, feeling very lonely.

- Anakin

Padmé was going to leave early again and I was trying to stay awake. Since my duties at the Temple were minimal right now, which was a shock in itself, I was taking nighttime hours so she could sleep.

I had trouble believing either Leia or Luke got enough sleep, they spent so much time crying.

Checking everything including their feelings, sometimes told me the problem. But it just seemed like they liked wailing all night long. Sometimes I used a sleep command so they wouldn’t wake Padmé too, but I worried about that and kept watch until they woke again on their own.

“Good morning, my husband.” Padmé kissed me as she entered the kitchen with Threepio trailing behind.

I only grunted at the table, my head too heavy to lift above my bracing hand.

She chuckled, a beautiful sound to listen to forever. “Ani, perhaps you should consult with the Crechemasters? They must have experience with infants who are sensitive that young.”

My thoughts were slow to make words, but I opened my mouth.

Then came the laughter as she patted my shoulder. “They believe as they do because they have the experience, love. I’m sure I would be very worried if they did things or reacted to things I didn’t understand without you to help. I can ask you or Master Kenobi. Don’t spurn their knowledge because they know more.”

I looked up, rubbing my eyes. “I don’t want them getting ideas that they own Leia and Luke.”

She sat down with the meal Threepio had gathered. “Have they made any threats of taking them? You’re a Master and Obi-Wan is on the Council… Wouldn’t that dinner a few days ago have been the ideal time, if they wanted to take them?”
I sat up straight, a breath of panic and anger at the idea.

“Eat,” she said as she pushed her toast in front of me. “You’re going to be on that reform committee, correct? And if they want to become Jedi like their father, will you have the heart to tell them you won’t let them? Your mother gave you her blessing, didn’t she? Even if it frightens you.”

That holo implied strongly that Luke would and he’d be an even better Jedi with better training. “I don’t want them to be cut off from their feelings, to know you, unlike how I missed my Mom.”

She smiled. “Really? I live how far from the Temple and I am a ranking Senator now. I’m sure I could pull a few strings if it was a problem.” Nudging my foot under the table, she smirked. “What safer place could there be if we have a dangerous diplomatic mission or want a honeymoon? Asking a few childcare questions isn’t signing over custody, Ani.”

I just wished I knew more about what Mom really thought about my leaving. I knew even then that I was leaving her in slavery, and felt guilty even as we said goodbye.

We traded smiles and ate, and she turned on the news commentary. Nothing particularly surprising, the Vod’e were now emancipated with full voting rights. One of the commentators started a discussion about selection of names, sounding shocked they started with only numbers as they grew. A near argument from the studio started on whether they should have patronymics or clan names or what. One Senate expert thought their names should be chosen for them like babies. One hothead said they bled enough for our war, and let them choose their own custom.

*I liked him.*

The argument quickly shifted to the war and the continuing costs in resources of a cease fire without peace.

Padmé sighed. “We’re starting to get demonstrations against the war and GAR. Especially on worlds like Alderaan and Coruscant which were hit lightly in battles compared to others. Food prices are up even here because many worlds can’t feed themselves right now.”

I remembered when even the cheap foods Mom bought got too expensive for a while. I hadn’t had to really worry about that since then, whatever else the Order did that made me angry.

*“Husa Bay sector is dealing with a sudden power outage. No reported cause, but investigators are arriving. Power is expected to be restored in hours. Contact your local representative if the need is urgent. Call backs will be in order received, follow the instructions and save energy in your powercells.”*

I did not like this. Padmé was frowning too.

“That’s not close to here or the Senate, Angel. Do you want me to guard you?” I had to grin at our old excuse to spend time together.

Padmé was fighting a smug smile as well. “No. You need to stay with them. How many times have enemies come here?”

Being divided as to just who to protect was a new pain. “Be careful, Angel. If anything happens, call Obi-Wan. He’ll arrive far faster than anything official.”

“Think again about the creche, Ani. Do you doubt we will visit you in the Temple frequently? Doubt that Luke and Leia might make friends among the other children there when they do? Would you
want the only friends they would make be children of politicians?”

Even I could feel the face I made. *How could they meet normal younglings without exposing them to danger from who their parents are?*

“Just think about it, Anakin. I’ll return after the main session and meetings finish.”

I had training with Padawans today. After she left, I got bored as my younglings slept. Studying from the First Knowledge Council’s archives put me to sleep, too.

Until they woke up hungry and wet and wanted my attention. Aside from a few encounters, I’d never spent much time with younglings this young. They kept telling me to ‘hush’ when I was sent down to learn some youngling basics in the Creche. I hadn’t made a sound at the time. Now I could see how sensitive infants were to any distraction.

By the time Luke and Leia settled into sleep for the second time since Padmé left, I felt dissatisfied but wasn’t sure why. It was a nagging feeling I’d felt more often after I sleep. But I was awake, so it had to be the Force.

In the kitchen with some caff, I commed Vora. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, Anakin.” She seemed to be in a corner of the Archives.

“Is this Obi-Wan ‘fine,’ or being in good health and no problems?”

Vora smiled. “A bit of both, but nothing extreme that I want to talk about in here.” Then she frowned. “You’re upset about something, too.”

I knew Padmé wasn’t due home for many hours, so it was time to trust her judgment. “I’ll be there soon.”

For all my paranoia, taking Leia and Luke to the creche didn’t raise any alarms in the Force.

The Crechemaster spoke with me, explaining things I was only guessing on. She did ask permission to test their counts along with having healers checking them.

She almost laughed at my irritation. “I understand, Master Skywalker. I hope you understand that the creche is an opportunity for most younglings to get the care and training they need. We have seen too many younglings traumatized by families who didn’t understand or worse, exploited them. That is why the laws are set up as they are, to protect them from ignorance.”

Padmé would want me to ask.

“Would it be possible for them to spend time here, during emergencies? Make friends later? I-” I had to close my eyes to finish. “Visions warn that one may be a Jedi, but the other may not and I will not commit them to not having a family, not yet.”

She projected a sad calm. “We always welcome younglings, Master, and miss them when their paths take them away.”

I could feel the truth in her words and let her gather health data. They were sleeping when I felt Vora and her Padawans approaching. She must have warned them as the Padawans were all quiet and only waved.

“Master Skywalker, I would like to do some tests when they wake. May I have permission?” The
Crechemaster spoke soothingly.

I could recognize one of my Master’s negotiation techniques. “This is not permission for their custody!”

“Yes, yes. Only temporary custody so we have permission to protect and care for them, if that is acceptable?”

Vora hid a smile behind a nose scratch.

Feeling a pang, I watched as Crechemaster scooped up Leia and another Jedi cooed at Luke as he woke.

I just stood there as they were carried off by calmer Jedi than me.

A hand gripped my shoulder. “Let’s go somewhere quieter,” said Vora.

The now excited Padawans led the way until we found a small training room and I was glad to think about only that for a while. I managed to convince her to spar as a demonstration and could see some improvements. Though she was still very conservative.

Mirran and Adus brimmed with energy and a foolhardiness I could see so much clearer than when it was Ahsoka. Already sure they were good enough to face Darksiders, they coordinated well against me. They were not ready for dangerous opponents or missions until they had a little caution.

After a rest break and some water, I announced, “I’m pleased with your skills, but you must start taking the danger seriously…”

Vora blinked, and laughed into the bond. That wasn’t going to last.

“Fights are not like the pretty duels we play at in the training halls, Padawans. Those are more exercise than life and death, rehearsing stopping some sculag, or protecting someone who is helpless. I got this at first Geonosis when I was sure I could defeat a Sith lord, just like my Master had.” I waved my mech hand. “You are nowhere ready to face that. Knight Meyers, convince them they overestimate their skills.”

Vora paled. -Anakin! I can’t fight children, not them!- She waved a hand as if to hand it back. “You are the Blademaster, Anakin, I’m not…”

Vora, do you want them to keep with being so cocky? Ventress, we already know of.-

That made her stop and she glared at me as her Padawans spread out around her.

Her face smoothed into her Soresu defense as I stood back to watch them.

She used her height and reach to keep from being cornered, and a few Force shoves ended up with the twins not spread out enough to flank her at all. Adus was too close to his sister to attack freely.

That made him smarter, as Mirran hadn’t seemed to notice the issue and they didn’t move to spread out.

Vora… “Winner gets to drive my upgraded speeder.”

Her squawk came instantly. “Anakin!”

I grinned. “Just to make sure they try harder.”
Then came instants of lunges and parries. Mirran dropped when she had been disarmed, and her blade flew to Vora’s off hand. Adus’ hurried lunge became face plant and his saber already off.

The glare was back. *Not interested in racing, Anakin.*

“Meyers.” I applauded. “Padawans, you know your Master does not consider herself a duelist. Note she has been studying saber for less than four years. How long have you been studying? There’s still at least two darkside duelists at large. We want you to fight well when you must fight.”

Adus’ hunger pang after that was clear to all four of us.

Vora said, “Go, go. We don’t want to stunt your growth. Imagine how tall Skywalker could have been.”

As soon as we were the only ones in the training hall. I asked, “So what’s the ‘not fine’ you didn’t want to say?”

“Obi-Wan. He won’t talk to me. He doesn’t trust me, or about the kids and picked a fight the day of that dinner.” She paused. “I requested a change in quarters and reassignment of Mirran and Adus to him because he knows what they need to learn, but they were both turned down.” Vora looked away with a nervous laugh, her presence raw. “Is that ‘not fine’ enough? Don’t spend much time in quarters since then.”

Reaching out I pulled her into my arms for a hug. After a moment, I said, “You can some over to our apartment.”

“Thanks.” The woman’s voice was muffled. “I don’t know what to do. All Councilors say is to be patient.” Then came unexpected humor. “Sorry, you missed seeing the half-beard.”

*What?*

At that she pulled back and brought out an image of a sleeping Obi-Wan missing half his beard.

At first I couldn’t absorb it. I remembered my own daydreams when he got me mad when I was a Padawan, but I was too worried he’d send me away, but not back to Mom.

Then my laugh exploded out and my face hurt, I was grinning so hard. “What did he say?”

Vora’s smile faded. “The same as since I came back from Ando. Nothing. It’s like random college roommates with whom I had nothing in common. I wouldn’t mind a return prank as long as we started interacting again.”

That left me very uneasy. He was too damn good at enduring anything. The war made that worse, and a prank didn’t even count as a blip compared to being captured. “This is karking stupid. He was happier than I ever knew him. I’ll think of something...”

“Wait! Wait.” Vora took a breath. “He has to decide he wants a relationship, to choose it, to fight for it. Every other argument, he was kinda strong armed to makeup. But I can’t keep it up forever, it’s his decision too. That’s why I’m keeping my distance until he decides. If he can’t or won’t, and enough time it will just fade into something unrequited and then wither and die if he doesn’t care. I’ll fight if I had any evidence he actually felt anything, if he really wants it too. But he looks at me more like he looks at Dooku than he looks at you and it hurts every time. At this point, I’d be happy if he just lightened up.”

“I dunno, Vora. If losing his beloved beard didn’t get his attention... He can obsess about Council
business for months.”

She slumped. “It’s a waiting game. Whatever set this off is some deep dark secret... well probably not Dark, but hidden. I’d hoped you knew what happened while I was gone.”

“Nope.” I popped the ‘p’ when I said that. “He was really worried about you, especially when we could feel you were fighting. I think Vos got him drunk, but that happened once or twice before. By the time your dispatches came in, he seemed almost normal.”

“So my presence overrode the previous concern. Seeing me changed it.” Her pained pang in the Force was clear and deep. “I think now I’m more upset he left Adus and Mirran hanging. I’ve had a broken heart before.”

“Something...” I never was any good at some things with my former Master.

Vora forced a smile. “You need to get more rest, Daddy Skywalker. Are you getting any sleep right now, or is it dreams again?”

I counted back. “I think I slept deep the other night. I’m used to that already. Giving Mirran and Adus some help is almost relaxing.”

She smacked my arm and stepped back. “You’ve got plenty of help. Sleep! I’d rather do without than have you crash.”

Grinning, I rubbed my arm. “Padmé is expecting us back tonight. I’ll sleep then.” I didn’t want to tempt any visions.

-Visions?— Her glare as sharper than her voice. “Did you have any visions?”

“No recently. But I’m almost overdue for another nightmare about Mom’s death.” My grin had vanished into deep space.

Vora frowned. “There’s a pattern?”

“Every couple of months, usually. Sometimes the body isn’t just hers. Doesn’t feel heavy like a Force-vision though.” I just wanted them to go away.

Vora’s silence got heavy.

I frowned at her... “Don’t you say it too.”

“Look, I’m not happy to hear it either. If you find some other way to encourage or clarify visions, I’m all ears.” Vora swung her leg to kick at an imaginary rock. “I’m not even getting any hints of visions about Padawans or Ben. I’d love some clues on what to do. Until you come up with an alternate, meditation is at least a proven method.”

Shoving my fingers through my hair, I really didn’t want to do that. “All I know is that whatever it is, I won’t like it.”

The older Knight looked sadly at me. “And what if that is a warning you need to protect someone you love? Can you ignore that?”

“I still don’t like it.”

“Sometimes I hear the clock ticking again. There is no peace yet, despite what the Masters would prefer.”
Neither of us had anything to say after this and she hurried off to the eating halls and her Padawans. I returned to the creche to collect my little lights. I was going to use my Masterly prerogative to interfere.

Absolutely no one would be surprised at me, excepting for a new Senator from some small mid-Rim world

Babies and supplies made a hefty cargo when I returned to our quarters.

I knew Obi-Wan was already there. I swept in while holding my children, dumping supplies and looking to see what occupied him.

He sat on the sofa reading from a book and looked up with a neutral expression, practically daring me to start an argument.

Not this time. I had better weapons who were quick to react to cross words. I handed him Luke. “I want to check their pads and feed them before I pack them up for longer travel.”

His -Oh.- was silent.

“Padme’s got some big meetings, one’s about some commissioned study about response time for GAR and Senate issues and later is the debate about Vod’e compensation and homeworlds. A few Vod are invited guests. I’d hoped to run into Snips here, but she’s down below with Rex.” As I checked Leia, I could tell Obi-Wan was calming, which was an odd change.

She didn’t need changed.

Obi-Wan was not interrupting me to speak duty or events. Very unusual.

I swapped babies to check Luke. They were waking and irritable now that they were closer to him. He wasn’t blocking them like me.

At least that hadn’t changed.

With both awake and clean, I settled Luke on the sofa with me and decided to be blunt. “Are you going to help with training the twins?”

Examining Leia’s serious face, he said, “I don’t believe there is any rush until they can walk and talk.”

“Wrong twins, Master. I was going to help as blademaster until you were back from your mission. You’ve been back for almost a week.”

“I am not their Master, I asked for no arrangement from you.”

“That’s not how I remember the tournament. What set you against these new Padawans?”

He looked away from the fussing baby in his lap. “Nothing. I feel no calling from the Force for them as Padawans.”

I had to laugh. “As if I had anything like that when Snips was assigned to me. We hit it off soon enough. What was it you said to me when I complained about her slowing us down?”

“That was different. Master Yoda was sure you would be a good fit, Anakin. It was during the war. We don’t have that pressure now.” This didn’t sound like Obi-Wan, he rarely forgot when he was annoyed with me.
Leia was hiccuping to prepare for a wail as he spoke and he did not know the signs.

“The war’s not over Master. Ventress is still out there, and more agents of Sidious. There’s a lot fewer of us now.” I always felt a little sick when the former Chancellor was mentioned. Even now I felt awkward and guilty that I never noticed.

First Leia and after a moment came Luke, their crying ending our talk.

- Rex

The Comman- General Tano and I moved down into the Undercity early in the day. Ahsoka was not in any kind of supplemental armor, and I didn’t like that.

I wasn’t happy to leave my bucket back at the barracks either, to wear the new fabric cap. I was on duty, even if this wasn’t an official mission. The General would be very unhappy with me if something happened to her.

Not as much as I would be.

No one bothered us, though I did not like how some glared at her. Other civvies were in lines that stretched out of certain buildings. Some of those glared at Ahsoka and muttered.

I rested my hands on my blasters and glared back.

Once we moved past them, we did not move toward the next power station on the list we’d made.

“General?”

Ahsoka grinned when she looked at me. “Yeah, Rexter?” The nickname was a reprimand.

I coughed. “Sorry, Ahsoka. This isn’t a date, is it?”

“No. But no one down here will care if we break protocol. Master would probably approve, with how he was...”

That made me smile even if I could not imagine getting as… dizzy as my General got when the Senator was around. “Understood. But I don’t want anyone, even here, to think you aren’t worthy of the rank.”

When she nodded, I asked my original question. Why aren’t we heading for the next substation on the list, or to check stations around the Husa Bay sector?

“I’d already reported the jacking evidence, Jedi investigators will be careful. I’m following something else right now.” She stopped scanning ahead to look at me. “Sorry, the Force is pulling at me, like an itch.”

Well, at least this was a reason, even if statements like this usually came before Generals found trouble. I tapped my comm to summon a squad to rendezvous with us.

Ahsoka moved through this level, where few seemed to be moving with a destination. One group of young beings followed us without closing for a few minutes, but dropped away before my squad caught up.

“You used to be a lot more sympathetic when I had a solo task from the Council.”
“General, you don’t have even *that* much intel, and I can’t even start to protect you from a riot. Can’t you feel the anger in those people?”

She frowned and looked away for something. “Yes, but they weren’t a danger.” She kept us moving along this level, though our larger escort meant no gangs dared get close anymore.

Finally the light improved as we got closer to one of the lift columns and more sunlight came down to reflect among the buildings. These buildings also got more colorful, with low energy flashing and dance music barely audible. Entertainments and places to lure fools looking for adventure down here.

Ahsoka quickly entered a lesser crosspath and ran into what looked like a run-down apartment building. I signaled the men and followed.

I heard shouting and the sound of a saber lighting up as I ran forward.

Inside there was a group of... thugs were in the room and the General was parrying blasts. I skidded to a stop and started to target any with weapons out for attack. The ones already in motion were harder to target, but I whittled down those only waiting for their chance.

A few ran away, but they were not a problem. A couple didn’t figure out their real danger, and lost appendages. Now, the fighting ended into wails and moaning.

The General looked as if she was about to get sick.

I moved next to her to check for injuries as my men arrived. A Twi'lek was huddled behind a bench beside a dance-pole. Only now did the sleazy music roaring get my attention.

“Charger, Dogma, bind them up and then stabilize them. Jesse call in civic authorities including medical droids.

Ahsoka put away her saber and approached the Twilek woman, who looked beautiful with dark grey stripes, but had the shortest lekku I had ever seen. Her eyebrows were an exaggerated green tracery that matched her eyes. She looked frightened and had blooming bruises as she held a smaller girl.

“You’re okay, now. They can’t do anything to you now. What’re your names?” Ahsoka asked softly

“Chet’fawu. I needed this pay for my rent. It’s overdue and Jazi is so hungry. A- and they wanted me to- us to-” The woman’s eyes were still large with panic and maybe some narcotic.

The youngling was even more frightened than the mother, so I pulled my emergency ration bars out to hand over to Ahsoka. I could easily get more.

The General’s voice was soothing. “I can help you, if you want to get far from these sleemos. I know people who will help you get a new start.”

The little girl with the same striped skin, but blue eyes and no brows whimpered. “Mama!”

Holding her fiercely, the dancer got suspicious. “Why are you doing this? No one does helps us for free.”

Ahsoka looked doubtful for a moment. “Chet’fawu, your daughter is very bright in my eyes or any Jedi’s. I think she would be welcome as one of us, where she would be educated and trained to serve the Force and the Republic. Either way you decide or tests come out, I can get you both to another sector. At least get some breathing space...”
“I don’t want my daughter to be thrown into war, for politicians to think her life has no value. I saw what happened on Ryloth.” Her words were firmer than her eyes tracked us and she clutched the youngling closer. “I haven’t worked this hard, endured this much to let baby stealers and clones split up my family.”

I could see Ahsoka wince and I gripped her shoulder until she relaxed a little.

General Tano forced a bright smile. “I’m sorry you feel that way. Not all of us saw battle, and a larger peace is coming. One of our Masters will want to tell you more. Rex, have the guys find out an agency a good distance away who can help them get a new home.”

The Twilek woman watched us warily, but she was, they were, escorted to a new area past a small protest without any more incidents.

Once she had left, I put my arms around Ahsoka and put our foreheads together.

After a few minutes, she mumbled, “I karked that one up, Rex. She was fine, then she got so afraid. Was that what happened to my family? Did they die? Did they ever learn I had a great home? That I studied under a great Master?”

“That you are happy?” I asked.

She snuffled and looked up. “Yeah, I am happy.”

Chapter End Notes

aka 'Like sands through the hourglass, so too are the days of our Jedi...' I sometimes wonder if Jango Fett would have enough family feeling to feel good if any of his mini-mes ever found happiness?

Note: NaNo starts in a little over a week, so any new chapters will be unlikely before December. But not impossible, depends on my muse and interruptions.
Breaking News

Chapter Summary

While Kith manumissions and compensation are finally in motion, Count Dooku cannot remain within this drifting without committing himself. His Master and his Padawan expect answers. Master Kenobi has worn himself into a wreck, without any Council duties or missions to distract him from the small monomania about another's Fall, while those around him are very busy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This is the late night wrap-up of Republic news for the Senate sector, brought to you by Bantha Burger, in every better spaceport- with a clean and well stocked cantina in a neighborhood near you. I’m Adamisr Dolmil and this is Aina d’Duhe, here to bring you the most exciting and important news you can trust.

“...Today there was major news about the young clones who fought the Separatists to protect you and me. The Senate announced their citizenship only a few days ago...”

“Really, Adamisr, I never liked the idea of clones. What if they cloned you? All the rest of us would be out of a job! I don’t want to live in the mid-levels like when I was a student if they get all the jobs.” Aina’s breath puffed with fear and her rose lekku swayed without messing her makeup or artful clothing.

Dolmil barely resisted rolling his eyes. “I wouldn’t worry about that Aina, your... assets are too valuable to our audience.”

His bitterness wasn’t completely hidden though the words were genial. He continued. “At a joint announcement earlier, acting Chancellor Organa and the Senators from Naboo and Keller represented the Senate, and Masters General Windu and General Gallia for the Grand Army and Jedi Order, presented citizenship records to representatives of the Kith community.”

“How can we tell which is which?” Aina whined with a visible curl of disgust.

The older ‘caster made a face. “The same ways you can tell any twins or close relatives apart. They have names, they have ID numbers, they adorn themselves with markings or haircuts, they act different, and most importantly, they have different scars from defending us.” Dolmil was clearly losing patience with d’Duhe. “You can see it even with those three. One is blond, that one lost an eye, that that one looks as sad as if someone just shot his mother.”

Aina pouted. “You don’t have to bite my head off.”

“Today’s announcement included just the Chancellor and a larger group of Kith representatives...” Dolmil did the next lead-in after resisting glaring for any more than an instant.

“Today I have the great honor to announce a homeland for the brave young men who have fought and continue to fight to defend us.” Organa smiled a little tiredly. “A large portion of a world similar
Organa waved a hand, and the holo of a water world appeared in front of him. “A majority of the surface of Pantolomin has been deeded as thanks and overdue compensation for their honorable service in the war against the Confederation, and in hope the Republic is never so duped again. After the kith decide to retire from service they have a home of their own if they choose. When the war ends kith may as individuals and units choose another service, such as disaster relief, hunting pirates, or build their world as they wish. Any questions?”

The recording ended and Aina spoke with her pastel lekku snapping in anger. “That’s all well and good Adamisr, but this doesn’t help with shortages and rising taxes when the Senate gives them a world. I was almost caught in a kriffing protest the other day. I can’t even afford my favorite aged primals anymore, and these clones got a world given to them by the Senate?”

Adamisr took a breath and clenched his teeth to keep something that looked like a smile. “Darling girl, the Chancellor mentioned compensation. How can you have afforded those fine foods imported from Corellia if you were not being compensated more than you needed to be comfortable? These young men had nothing like your pay or future retirement options, and they bled and died to keep your little self alive through the war. The Grand Army was essentially free, unlike your decorative self, as neither the Jedi nor the kith were compensated enough for their lives. There is always a cost for battle and freedom.”

He visibly bit off the words, ‘you karking ninny.’

Media veteran Dolmil gathered himself to resume his job. “In other news, a collapse a broad swath in a mid level sector two time-zones east in the industrial and gentrifying Hariz sector resulted in the destruction of a massive Gensys agri-warehouse and loss of many, many tons of raw foods. The collapse of support pillars is being investigated by Jedi and civil authorities but food markets reacted wildly with an immediate spike...”

- Dooku

I finished my late night tea with a smile. I could sympathize with Dolmil, I’d been forced to work with incompetent and idiotic beings many times, as Jedi and Sith. I was more disturbed by the collapse of support structures of the city itself. So much depended on these supports holding for everyday activity and even ship landings. Crashes from battles were too likely, as I knew too well. The Temple had settled into its usual quiet hive of activity, but I didn’t interact with many people. I still saw my great GrandPadawan nearly daily, often with her Padawans in the training hall as well. She didn’t speak much about anything beyond training and the younglings. That was proper enough for a new Master with Padawans, but unusual. I’d accompanied them to the Archives several times for my own research, as the younglings dug into old records for some project their Master set them on.

One morning, I was surprised to be summoned to the Council chamber, almost as if I was still in service.

After some thought, I decided to leave my ersatz lightsaber in my cell. It would not be politic with my status as a prisoner, and remind them of when I wielded a screaming red one.

I noted that it was not a full Council this time. Kenobi’s seat was empty. I had not heard that he had a
mission at the moment.

That mystery became irrelevant when Windu spoke. “It has come time for the High Council to be certain of your intentions, Dooku. Do you have plans or intent to resume your standing as a leader on Serenno again?”

“Be certain,” was all my old Master added.

I took a moment to meditate on the question. I had not contemplated that question before. That, in itself was the beginning of the answer. I had remained in the Temple for well over a year, and outside the first few days, I had not felt any particular restlessness or need to return to my homeworld. My concerns were with my lineage and the Force, with the Republic and the Order to a lesser extent.

Looking at Windu and then the other Masters in the eyes, I spoke carefully. “I have little wish to return to leadership there. I did not have enough care for the consequences of my actions for them. I would appreciate seeing my homeworld again, but they have fully justifiable reasons to exile me.”

Windu’s face nor presence revealed anything at my words, but a ripple of something passed through the Council chamber. Gallia nodded, exuding satisfaction.

Master seemed pleased. I probably should be less pleased he approved of my words, though I was not feeling much more confident than when I was a new Knight before a very different Council.

I wondered who would have attempted to pick up the pieces after I was captured, and all I could think of was my brother’s wife, Kostanza. She never liked my return as she wanted power from her marriage. “Do I know this Count?”

“We do not know,” Gallia said. “He styled himself Adan Dooku in the petition.”

That was my young nephew’s name, and I had to think back. He was about the age of young Skywalker, and he was a Master and father. *When had the boy grown up?* “He would be my heir, though claiming the title when I yet live could be problematic for him.”

“Assist young Dooku with these problems, would you, hmm?” My Master’s doubt was its own reprimand.

“I will renounce my titles and place on Serenno,” I announced, without requiring thought. I had brought only ill to that beautiful world, abdicating my responsibility to *them*.

Windu nodded. “Good. That would be timely, as the Council is preparing a mission to negotiate their treaty in a few days.”

Gallia noted, “There will need to be witnessed, third party witnesses to any abdication. Senate members and perhaps representatives of Confederation worlds.”

Master Koon finally added, “We will need to arrange considerable security for the witnesses.”

Jocasta wasn’t quite glaring at me. “It must be in Temple grounds, if the Order does not wish to break the precedent already established for internment.”

“Security will need precedence, both to make sure the witnesses don’t wander off to disrupt Temple activity, and to ensure they feel secure with the supposed leader of the Seppies.” Vos glared at me, clearly remembering our darker association in my drive to find an assassin to end Sidious.
Feeling regret, I said, “I can only give my word, as little as it may mean now. I give my formal parole that I do not intend harm to the Republic or the Order.”

A hum rippled through the chamber, but Windu spoke next. “A witnessed ceremony will take place tomorrow. I will lead the treaty group to Serenno the day after that. May the Force be with you.”

I bowed and turned to leave as the others stood, but Master interrupted my departure. “Stay.”

When I turned, his mood had retreated into a painful neutrality as the rest of the Council filed out. I waited, and a seeking pulse rang out in the Force.

My Padawan faded into blue visibility, standing beside Master’s hover chair. His face was also closed.

“Passed nearly a year since the Sith you chose to follow was defeated. Patience the Council has extended for healing and learning. Passing that time is.” His voice held the centuries of service and mastery. “Answers we must have. Who are you?”

- Vora

It had been over a week since I had that talk with Obi-Wan, but not yet a fortnight. Mirran and Adus were restive during their lesson with Anakin, and I was feeling a little like a candle burnt at both ends when I finished my own tutoring with Dooku after they were settled in bed. So I just dropped into bed, checking yet again to see if Obi-Wan had bothered to comm me, but the message wasn’t from him. I was a little disgusted with myself as soon as I realized how pathetic that was. I kept busy enough I could forget how much I missed him usually.

The Council sent a notice that we were to meet with them about a mission in the afternoon. The kids would be pleased, but I was sad.

But now in that twilight before I slept, I still missed him.

I hadn’t even dreamed about him, hadn’t had any revisits of pleasant memories. With the alarming things Force-dreams showed I guessed that no dreams was a good thing, but it would have been nice to enjoy some warm nostalgia of just being happy for a while. Hearing him come and go at odd hours did not help my overall mood. Knowing he was alive and uninjured wasn’t enough for the heartache.

After a few minutes indulging my blues, I finally got to sleep.

I blinked my sleep-heavy eyes open, feeling heated skin, a hand, cupping my cheek. The mattress was weighted from Obi-Wan seated on the edge of the bed. It took longer than that first instant to be sure this really was Ben.

Even as I blinked the sleep out, he spoke, his whisper rough with disuse or emotion. “They’re still blue, not green… I don’t think I could…” Obi-Wan clamped his jaw shut and looked almost frightened.

Was I dreaming?

I shook my head and let my mouth babble as I rubbed at my eyes. “Yep. Well, blue-grey sometimes. Though I considered getting colored contacts to have purple like Liz Taylor more than green. Maybe if I had red hair I’d try for green for Saint Paddy’s day… but I like blue.”
I had to keep him talking, as he looked terrible: rings around his eyes, skin that didn’t look right, sleepwear out of order, and hair all astray. “...But I’d be willing to try a different color for a while. There were some cool looking contacts that looked like dragon or cat eyes back home, but...”

“No! No, Vora. Blue is fine. Blue is more than fine.” He pulled me closer, but still stiffly, like it was rigor mortis. “I don’t want you to Fall. I don’t think I could survive that, any more than for Anakin.”

The fear was crashing from him and I held him too, rubbing his back. “No, I don’t want to Fall either. Is that what all this has been about? What the hell? Whatever gave you that stupid idea?”

He was silent for a very long moment as I tried to deliberately drop my shields, surprisingly hard after all this time.

“When you questioned that Commander on Ando with little care for how you were mucking in his brain for your convenience. That just stank of Dark in your report. And you showed little regret.” His voice was quiet and flat.

I tried to count back the weeks, that had to be over a month already.

I was very awake now, in a soup of emotions I tried to fight down. “I am very sorry that happened. I agonized over trying that, you can ask Dice. I was flipping out on him and we needed to know if this was Grievous, Ventress, or some weird, unknown blue guy who had seven fingers and a fluffy tail. Physical constraints would not have given anything reliable or any safer for the Commander or my team, and using the Force had a small chance of success. I don’t think I could face torturing anyone, even as a witness. I spent the next week in bacta and feeling guilty. This was never guilt free, but I wanted to seem calm for my report to the Council.”

He wasn’t listening and his face and presence didn’t shift after explanation. “I felt it. I’d hoped getting away for that mission would help, but now I’m seeing it in dreams or anytime I slow down enough. Or are they Visions? How did Anakin stand this about his mother?”

I pulled him closer again, hoping he could feel my alarm. “Anakin didn’t. He messed up badly when he didn’t talk about it enough. Talk to anyone who can listen without judging. You don’t have to talk to Anakin or me, just find someone. You know other Masters, right? Who has first-hand experience with Force-Visions?”

He sighed and relaxed a trifle. “Few get Visions, our lineage and Mace have the most reliable ones I know of, and Master Yoda discounts visions heavily.”

“How can I convince you I’m fine?” I tucked my head against him, breathing a little easier and feeling I was so shallow that this little helped me.

Leaning back, Obi-Wan met my eyes. “I don’t know. I had some terrible dreams and visions as an Initiate, but they faded.”

Stretching to kiss his cheek, I whispered, “We can work with this. Come on, time for me to irritate someone else...”

I got up and chivied him into drinking some water, and at least smoothing his clothing and hair a little. I left a message for Mirran and Adus to meet me for lunch and then dragged Obi-Wan along with me as I tried to remember where I wanted to go.

“Really, Vora? He’s not of much comfort when Visions are strong.” Obi-Wan’s voice sounded better.
The hall was empty at this hour aside from a mouse droid scurrying to avoid cat droids, I guessed.

I paused until he caught up and stopped as well. “Yeah, this isn’t for his bedside manner, but his perceptions. Is there anyone you would trust more to decide if I am a danger?”

Ben sighed and relaxed a little, shaking his head.

Pulling him to the right door, it was a few minutes until the door opened.

“Early, it is.”

“Finally figured out what thorn is in his paw, and it’s gone on long enough. We need your help, Master.”

Yoda stepped aside and gestured at us with his stick to follow him to a cushioned seating area on the floor. I looked around, comparing it to Lucas’ vision. Ben was silent and I could feel embarrassment, or the ghost of that from him.

I took a moment to seek the best words in the silence. There really weren’t any, and even the prospect of saying this was making me ill. “Obi-Wan got focused on the immanence of my Fall with my Ando report. I believe his ongoing nightmares are bantha crud, but he can’t seem to believe me. Can you like, check me that I haven’t Fallen? He’s stuck in a feedback loop.”

That made Yoda stare at Obi-Wan more than me. “With this stick, should I hit you, Padawan? Think you the Council watches not such a Knight closely? Assigned younglings yet?”

Obi-Wan bent over to place his forehead against the floor. “Thank you, Master.”

The eldest Jedi snorted. “Answered this, any Council member could have. Hmmmmmm? My age was needed not. Work with your brothers in the Order you forget.”

“Master, it started as a warning in the Council chamber. But it has not faded, it has grown stronger, unlike dreams. I missed warnings from the Force so badly when Anakin was knighted. I cannot allow that to happen again.”

The crack against Ben’s shin was no surprise. “Difficult to see. Always in motion is the future.”

I almost wanted to grin at hearing him say that for real, but Obi-Wan hunched into himself.

The room was silent. Yoda might have been meditating, but I would not know if he fell asleep. Obi-Wan’s eyes were open, but he seemed to be only surface calm. I would sleep if I tried to meditate this late.

I started mental planning to keep awake and alert, plans for minimum footprint hydroponics farms, something else the twins and I could study. Maybe we could find some AgriCorps people and see if retired vod’e truck gardens were possible. I remembered seeing footage of fugitive cannabis farms on Earth, but there had to be some edible crop that could be farmed like that on Coruscant. Water wasn’t a shortage in the Undercity but open land was. There had to be an ocean bed somewhere. Maybe the tides were far below the inhabited levels, and the worldwide city was essentially built on the outside of a Dyson sphere and the inside abandoned? But producing food locally had to be a win.

After the long silence, the old Master said, “The fear of loss is a path to the Dark Side.”

That got my attention. I went from zero to sixty worry in an instant. I really, really didn’t want to lose Ben. The last month had been bad enough, and I was beginning to think it would become an
unrequited love that would never fade. My id was really stubborn and did *not* listen to reason.

“Clear whose fear is crippling, this is.

That made me blink.

The Master gazed at Ben. “Face your fear, you must. Your fear accept, or your vision will it dominate. Young Kenobi, meditate jointly daily.”

That was a demand, an order.

*Oh.*

“With you, Master?” Obi-Wan didn’t sound happy, not for someone who usually pushed meditation.

“Matters not who, matters only jointly.”

I could feel the panic in Ben now.

“Must it be with another Master? I would not wish to distract them from their own duties.”

Yoda smiled a little. “Not Initiates or Padawans. Wary of your negotiations they would not be.”

“Will I be able to end th- resume my duties?”

“Barred from Council duties. Summoned not for missions. Remained other duties, other teachings, unheeded. Your punishment you made.”

I winced at that.

“What should I do, Grandmaster?” Obi-Wan almost pleaded.

“Meditate. When you see the Dark, careful you must be. For the Dark Side looks back.”

It sounded so simple, but Obi-Wan didn’t seem any happier.

I bowed carefully. “Thank you, Master. I’m sorry we interrupted your rest.”

“A teacher Yoda is. Yoda teaches like drunkards drink, like killers kill.”

My eyes almost popped at that unexpected humor. “Like readers read, I guess.”

“Yesssss. Indeed, like sleepers sleep. Summons for a mission, you have, young Meyers. Go, go!”

Ben’s tired eyes looked lost and he dawdled when I moved to the door. I waited in the hallway and saw the day had begun with the quiet non-noise of Jedi moving around the Temple. Dawn had already passed and I hoped I could grab a nap before lunch.

Obi-Wan exited, still not happy.

Forcing a smile I asked, “Can I help?”

His smile looked better. “Sleep with me?”

My happiness returned for the first time in forever, and I grabbed Ben in a tight hug. “God, I missed you.”
Much more relaxed than our arrival, he held me just as close and I could breathe so much deeper finally. Our quarters were not far and I could tell Adus and Mirran had left for the morning.

Sleep did not take long and it was so nice to be held again, feel him closer and at least a little content. I could pretend for a little while this was better.

But I doubted more now.

How real was it? How real had it ever been?

When I woke to the alarm later, I blinked, again wondering if I was dreaming like I’d hoped for. But no, I was cuddled in Ben’s arms, looking at his chest. When I looked up, he was gazing at me, his eyes a little clearer. We had to scramble to get washed and dressed and to the cafeteria.

I was surprised when Obi-Wan didn’t peel off, but came along to lunch. I felt awkward introducing them to him as my Master, but they seemed impressed and he managed to be more pleasant and asked about their studies.

My own anxiety returned as I waited with the twins and Ben outside the Council chamber. That was not lessened when he entered a step behind me and did not move to his own seat. I tried to glare at him without catching the eyes of the other Masters.

“Howyers, another Confederation world has petitioned for peace, and the new leader, a young Count Dooku hopes to peacefully rejoin the body of the Republic. You will be second on this mission that should leave for Serenno tomorrow. They presumably already have copies of the treaties from other worlds, and non-negotiable aspects for Republic worlds will be noted in your briefs.” Mace’s voice was businesslike.

Worried, I asked, “Who will be lead?”

“I will.” Mace’s voice was flat with only the slightest flicker at the silent Ben.

“Mace!” he objected.

The Grandmaster’s stare gave no quarter. “With your actions on the mission to Raxulon, you are not cleared to lead any negotiating missions at this time.”

“Better he collect fleet analysis, several Separatist worlds seem to have lost home fleets from under their command. Their petitions for treaties have gotten almost frantic.” Master Tiin was either vindictive or snarking.

Obi-Wan subsided, but I could feel his dissatisfaction.

Feeling that again was a welcome change, even if a mission with Master Windu was unnerving.

“Is there anything else I should know, Masters?” Biting my lip was a tell, but I could not stop it right then.

Mace looked at Yoda, and I suddenly realized he wasn’t that much older than me in years. That was a little dizzying.

Master Yoda added. “Renounced his rule, Dooku has today. Uncontested, the young Count is.”

I didn’t know how the old coot would be taking this. “Thank you, Masters.” I bowed, and twitched
my hands so my quiet Padawans bowed too.

I couldn’t see what Obi-Wan did.

He exited into the hallway with us and pulled me into a desperate kiss. “I hoped to come along, my dear. Especially after your last treaty mission.”

Pulling myself up into his arms was bittersweet. “That would be nice. Maybe next time?”

Ben’s thoughts weren’t clear, but he was planning something. He asked me, “What’s next for our day?”

“Mirran?” They knew our usual choices, of lessons and meeting with others.

She bounced on her feet. “We go and check on the Brothers of the 408th and get tutored by Master Anakin if he’s available. Sometimes Master Billaba or Grandmaster Dooku and he’s real fast…” -for an old man.-

Adus looked at Ben holding me, with a thoughtful expression.

I knew he was about to say something I wouldn’t want to hear, but I could not open my mouth in time...

The boy piped up. “Are you married like Master Anakin and his Senator?”

My face flooded with my flush.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing like a little strain for the holiday, but not exactly horror. This will probably be the last new chapter until December, because of NaNo.

I thought the first half went so well last week I'd still have 4-5 days to do my NaNo prep, but I have less than a day. Eek! But Obi-Wan got very stubborn, as if he enjoyed his time off. My muse sent me Adus ending question and that was a good place to stop.

Please, please drop a note if you're enjoying this. I'm working to keep events and reforms plausibly challenging, once you build from the cracky start.
An attack from a remnant of the Separatist navy on their capital has kicked over a beehive in the Temple. Fleets are being deployed, and Skywalker—despite being on parental leave—has been put in command of the Coruscant home fleet. Peace missions continue on, though, and the cast scatters.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

- Obi-Wan

If I had no other useful duties to attend to, I saw no reason not to spend time with Vora. That short nap after Master Yoda was the deepest sleep I had had in far too long. I’d rested, but a meditative doze that answered no questions, gave no comfort, never left me feeling truly rested.

So I relaxed into her presence, ashamed that I had become so removed that I could fear for her, fear her, so much. All I could feel from her was relief and fading annoyance as I held her close. I didn’t want to stop, as irresponsible as that made me right now.

Feeling a dim pride with Mirran’s recitation, my response was very different for Adus’ question.

It had been a long time since a Padawan’s question left me embarrassed like this. I set Vora down. “No. We have been very close, but Anakin is one of very few who are married.”

Vora seemed as embarrassed as I now, but she smiled. “And really, Anakin is like no one else in the galaxy. I’d bet he’d tried to launder his robes in some weird way when he was a Padawan…”

“That is a very safe bet and you know it, my dear. She knows he grew up very poor on a desert world and would not be as familiar with soap, water, and liquid detergents.” I slid my arm around her waist, she relaxed into it.

Placing her index finger in a hushing gesture at her lips, Vora fake whispered. “Shh, Obi-Wan. I wanted to teach them about sucker bets and that people don’t offer bets spontaneously if they aren’t pretty sure they will win. They need to always consider what could be in it for the other person to be that generous with no visible reason.”

“Indeed. Hidden motives lead to much suffering.” Somehow the Order’s teachings on this had not taken with Anakin. “What bet would have been the carrot to make your Padawans less wary?”

She pretended to ponder. “I was thinking of flight time from the Sirocco instead of sims.”

That made Mirran perk up even more than her brother, and I nodded as I hid my smile behind my hand. “What would they lose?”

“Nothing truly horrible just cleaning something.” Vora’s grin wasn’t visible either. “Maybe a thorough cleaning of the shower… without any droid help.”
“That doesn’t sound too bad for that payoff,” Mirran said.

I could feel her brother get suspicious.

“Master’s hiding something else about it, listen!” The boy frowned.

Vora smiled. “Good. I hadn’t specified the details and you did not negotiate methods, I could have said to scrub it with your toothbrush. I’ve made a lot of silly bets, but many want to get more out of winning a bet than bragging rights. Listen to what I didn’t say, especially if I was a someone who seeks political power.”

After a beat of silence I wondered, “Do you visit Anakin or comm him for lessons?”

“He comes here and tracks us down, especially if he’s getting on Padmé’s nerves. He was here for a long visit yesterday so it’d usually be sparring their friends, remotes, or with Dooku supervising...”

Not you, my dear? Maybe I’d assumed she’d overcome that issue.

But there was no reaction or response to my question.

Vora?

Nothing.

Casting back the last time we’d exchanged thoughts routinely, it had to be months now. I could not remember the same with Anakin either.

When had that happened? That alone made me uneasy.

“...but he’s more of a convenience of last resort. I know I...” Vora was rambling again.

“Vora,” I knew what she would say next and it wasn’t necessary. I had probably done the same too many times, and had become a poor example. “I’m not questioning your decisions, I am presently too far behind in my understanding. I would be delighted to assist, my dear.”

Her shock was painful, that she didn’t believe she could speak to me about her concerns. I remembered how isolated I felt after I insisted on training Anakin, without even my Master to guide me.

“You are doing well, my Padawan.” I tried to project my pride, but I could feel the impatience from the younglings. “Your briefing materials should reach you before we return.”

Vora’s smile was a little wobbly. “I wish you were coming.”

“I still have a day to convince the Council.”...or to find a loophole.

It didn’t require any plotting on my part. A buzz of concentration and intent moved through the Temple late that night when I was curled around Vora.

I sat up, hearing a Council priority signal from my comm, even as I read the notice of an emergency Council session. An alert rang from her comm a moment later. Reading my notice, I was called immediately.

Vora was called in half an hour. “Do I wake them for this?”
Grabbing fresh robes, I threw them on. “Yes, this is part of learning.”

She cursed and commed Mirran and Adus to get ready quickly, scrambling herself.

With a last embrace and deep, centering breath of her, I forced myself to hurry for the Council chamber, feeling right for the first time in too long. I arrived before some members, and felt a little hesitant taking my seat, but no one commented.

By the time Master Nu was seated, Mace looked like he wanted to pace. Instead he hit the control on the arm of his seat. “This message squirt was interrupted from Knight Je and Knight Doyye, still on Raxus finalizing their treaty. Communication has not been resumed. Other open and covert contacts have not responded.”

The blue holo showed Knight Doyye looking tired but pleased as he spoke. “...ments are nearly finalized on approximately ninety percent of issues. As was expected financial costs and remunerations are the largest sticking point, but the Confederate reliance on automated combatants has weakened many of the counter compensations from the Senate. Their officials seem optimistic and we believe it more a matter of haggling. Reactions from citizens has smoothed and Brirgi thinks she has spotted a gifted youn...”

The holo figure of Knight Je reacted as Doyye spoke, tackling him away from where he stood. As they rolled out of view an explosion hit and then another that sounded quieter. Debris and a huge beam fell in front of the recorder where Doyye had stood seconds before.

Then explosions muffled by distance or walls could be heard in the recording as lights dimmed to only emergency ones. Je helped the bleeding Doyye to his feet with a slightly lingering touch, without noticing the layer of construction powders all over her cracked skin. She found the recorder and reset it as the Mirialan touched the broken tattoos on his face and stepped aside to speak urgently into a comm about practice regrouping near a park.

Knight Je wavered on her feet, further injuries nearly certain despite the clouded situation. She looked at the comm and said, “Masters, this is surely a state of emergency. Many lives have passed in the last minute. Identities of these attackers are unknown. There was no warning or awareness of trouble in any officials at the meeting which just end-”

The recording ended there.

Master Yoda drooped. “Joined the Force have Knights Je and Doyye.”

The missing fleet had shown itself.

“The kriffing war has heated up again, Masters,” Mace said. “Diplomatic missions will be lower priority, but they will not stop. Assignments will be shifted immediately for all capable Jedi and in pending assignments. A fleet will be sent to Raxulon under High General Kenobi to assist and discover what happened. General Skywalker will put in command the Home fleet. I will take a fleet to patrol other rejoined worlds.

Master Gallia looked irritated more than Mace’s anger. “I will take another fleet on a... goodwill tour in a different direction. We do not know how big the attacking fleet was, or if it was the only one. I will take a few friendly Senators and check on pending issues as well.”

I started making notes, wondering what tonnage I would command. I would have assistance from several more Jedi, but none of my lineage. The ships would be decided later, but the Negotiator as flag ship was a given. I doubted Ventress would repeat the siege she’d started on Andor, if she was
the commander, the Republic still had the greater resources.

Repeating a losing play was not her style.

So, I needed to prepare us for everything from a siege to a ground war to an air war. I would prefer having Anakin’s help for that, but he was long past sneaking along on a mission, he had his own.

After the brief silence Mace said, “We have collected the Jedi on active duty, or could be returned for this and sent it to you. Unless there is a particular skill needed, no present assignments are changing. Padawans’ rank as Commanders are courtesy they will not be assigned to known battle missions. Masters have the right to return them to the Temple, that is to be clear for all battle-likely missions.”

I looked at my copy and saw about a third of the Council did not have an assignment as yet. Master Tiin’s piloting was on par with Anakin’s and Plo got better reactions to non-humans. The discussion to endorse that roster was brief. I knew Cody and Wolffe worked well together, but I did not know Tiin’s Commander.

“My fleet will have more pilot knights from those available after these other assignments.” Mace looked down at a display, “Send the Master in.”

Anakin arrived, looking tired already and a little surprised to see me here. He bowed. “Masters.”

“Skywalker, an unknown fleet has attacked Raxulon, possibly a fleet made up of missing Separatist fleets. Some Separatist systems had already notified the Senate that their home or retiring fleets may have gone rogue. As we have no intel on their leaders or goals, fleets are being sent out to succor allies and member worlds. Attacks on Coruscant itself had been very effective during the height of the war, so you are being named High General of the Home Fleet for this crisis.”

Hr straightened up a little and looked serious.

“Fleets and Missions will be departing before the end of the day. You will be able to organize your defenses from those able and available after fleets depart. A list of available personnel will be forwarded after this meeting finishes. Any questions?”

Anakin looked at me, and I shook my head a trifle. Then he asked, “Is Knight Tano available?”

“She is listed as unassigned.”

“Good I want her, my 501st and any available vod… kith units whose Generals are on other missions as well. Any attacking the Core should draw back a stump, Masters.”

I could feel him starting his planning and I was so proud of him.

Luminara asked, “Should the General remain as observer for reassignments?”

Master Tiin looked at Master Yoda and hummed. “Yes, but only an observer.”

Anakin leaned against the entrance wall with his arms crossed. I wondered how it felt to be here in the chamber as an observer when he had wanted so badly to be on the Council at one point.

Plo said, “Which missions are to be reallocated?”

“Only one pending mission immediately,” Master Gallia admitted. “The treaties with the major worlds of the Confederacy are higher importance than lesser worlds like Keller or the wooing the coy Independent systems. Raxus was the official capital, but very influential Serenno and Geonosis
would also solidify the peacemaking the Chancellor and Senate intend. The mission to Serenno must continue promptly now that Adan Dooku is Count.”

Mace sighed. “There were too many ships missing for just one attack, and we have a severe shortage of experienced Shadows presently. This fleet or fleets are remnants of the Confederate forces, but we have far less knowledge about their overt goals or leaders. The known remaining leaders are Ventress and Grievous, but we have little intel on either of them. Someone else could have taken advantage of the power vacuum.”

Master Unduli calmed herself after feeling the passing of the Knights. “Peace is not surrender but rejoining our friends in amity. This was an attack on the peace process, uncaring of Raxus’ capital and sentients.”

With our enemy unknown, we had to diversify our strategies.

“Most allocations will be from Jedi not on missions.” Mace glanced at Anakin and then me. “I would prefer an experienced General and diplomat to lead Serenno negotiations.”

I had to smother a smile. “She would probably agree about her experience.”

Anakin’s snort was almost silent.

“Another there is...”

Mace just stared at Master Yoda and you could see he was about to say something pithy when he reined it back. “That step is too soon.”

Madame Nu looked angrier. “That is far too soon. He has made no oaths. I doubt many would trust him inside or outside the Order.”

I missed something, something important and did not particularly like what the Force hinting me toward either.

“He has been helping with the Vanle twins for a month. I haven’t felt any Dark from him other than a trace during the attack on the Temple.” Anakin was grimacing. “However long he had a lightsaber before that attack, he acted only to defend the Temple or himself.”

“If he officially reconciles, he would only be granted the rank of Knight with today as his start. He is to be aware that this is provisional.” Mace looked like he wanted to grind his teeth.


That told me enough. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hold in a grin of pride, or hide worry about a relapse and return to darker ways with temptations... “I’m not sure she takes ranks all that seriously, though she values manners more.”

Yoda tapped his stick. “My Padawan takes rank very seriously. Good for him, a more humble rank will be. Yeesssssss. A good experience it will be.”

I could not honestly object about her safety, they were friendly since they met. I didn’t need to recuse myself, Mace voted for the minority.

“Briefing materials should change for this including directives if his appearance causes problems with the new Count. Oaths can be in the afternoon before the Sirocco leaves for Serenno.” Plo seemed to think this was a complete decision, while Mace and Jocasta had been the Masters most
objecting.

Talk turned to other active missions, a few I still remembered from before… I remained quiet for the most part.

“Resume after a break, we will.” Yoda looked at me and then at Anakin. “Business of the lineage, this is.”

The other Council Masters stood up, perhaps to get breakfast or at least tea.

Master Yoda moved his hover-chair and Anakin and I fell in behind. The journey to the cells was not long, and Master Yoda rapped on the door jamb.

I felt Dooku becoming aware and then approaching the doorway. He did not appear to be very drowsy.

“Hmm, interesting cortege for so early in the day.” He gestured us inside to the table, where there were enough seats for everyone.

“Ready to be reconciled and make your oaths today are you, hmm?”

Dooku looked surprised, and I noted Master had faded into view as well.

My Grandmaster coughed. “I had expected this to move more slowly after we spoke.”

-**The Force moves as it wills, Master. Do you want to make a difference again?**- Master Jinn was solemn.

Dooku looked at his own hands with surprise. “I do not know if I can maintain serenity outside my routines here.”

“Do, or do not, my Padawan. Know then, you will.” Yoda said quietly.


“Matters not if you stay in your shell.”

That made Dooku look at myself and my Padawan. “Some are not approving, I am sure.”

Anakin waved his mechanical hand. “I understand. I’m not always sure either after what I did. But I remember all those who helped me. My mother would have been very disappointed if I stopped being kind.”

“I fought you too often on the battlefield to feel comfortable as yet.” I was aware I was crossing my arms across my chest. “But I am unsure if that is my own concerns or the Force. I am aware you have been exemplary since you were incarcerated.”

Qui-Gon smiled serenely. -**You have made friendships and attachments, Master.**-

“True.” Dooku almost rolled his eyes at my Master. “You always preferred bending the rules, despite our talks.”

He grinned. -**Lectures, Master.**-

Master Yoda looked stern. “Know this, only reinstated as a knight, will you be. Today's oaths, your seniority, will take.”
“I should expect that,” Dooku admitted with a grim smile. “Will my proposed partner resist taking advantage of that discrepancy?”

Anakin started laughing, and then could not stop.

“I do hope I will not be assigned to missions with Skywalker. That could be awkward.” Dooku looked horrified as my Padawan bent over and clutched his belly, still snickering.

“No, we are all Masters here.” I should be more regretful at what I was saying, but taunting him was an old pleasure. “You will be assigned to a more senior Knight for a mission that cannot be delayed due a new crisis.”

The older again-Jedi straightened up, looking satisfied.

This was more a certain point if view than a lie, Vora was older for a Knight.

“I accept, Masters.” Dooku picked at lint on his sleeve,

-Prepare for travel, Master. You have promises to keep before you sleep.- Master was enjoying stringing his own Master along.

“He will have some time after the Council meeting for that.” I thought he’d have a couple of hours, though maybe he should contact the quartermaster before Council. Maybe not. “Perhaps you should order any gear you need for a travel pack to a temperate world and fine tune after your assignment.”

“Surely you could explain the mission now.”

That was almost a complaint, but all Dooku got were some smothered grins as we left for the cafeteria.

Anakin was the only one to eat much, but we did not stay long. The rest of the Council waited for us, and there were a group of Knights and Masters waiting for meetings for assignment, including Vora and her Padawans.

All were invited in for this ceremony. I caught Yoda peeking at something on his display. I’d only studied these rare events once when I was a Padawan, worried if I would have to petition that abjectly after Melida/Dann. I doubted now if I could have persevered if I had to do this much.

The Council was annoyed with me at the time. One or two thought I should have done the ceremony as I let my attachment to that world and people overrule my duty.

A ripple passed through the crowd when his rank was announced. The rumor mill should spread this throughout most of the Order in a matter of days.

Most were dismissed and Anakin left too, his mind abuzz again.

That left Vora, her Padawans, and Dooku.

He looked more startled and was eyeing the grinning Master Qui-Gon again.

“An unknown fleet has attacked Raxus, even as their treaty was nearing completion. Two fleets are being deployed immediately. The mission to Serenno will not be delayed...” Mace said.

My Grandmaster frowned at his Master.

“...because of its importance. Knight Dooku’s extensive knowledge of the system should help solve
remaining issues they have internally and with the Republic,” Mace said plainly.

Vora snorted. “Or it will set them off like a bomb.”

“They will know if their peacemaking is in earnest or if this was a trap for the Order and GAR,”
Luminara seemed calm.

I was alarmed at this point of view.

Flares of anger came from both of the Knights. The brevity was comforting.

I had to count on the attachments my Grandmaster had.

Master Yoda added with a twinkle in his eye, “Knight Meyers has command of this mission.”

Her shock was stronger than the anger had been.

Dooku had the faintest smile. “Of course Master. I will prepare for travel. We live to serve.” Bowing, he took Vora’s arm and led her away, Adus and Mirran following after with big eyes.

Master Ti spoke. “With the return to a more active combat stance...”

I sent a glance at the chronometer. These missions should be rearranged by lunchtime and I needed to speak to Vora. I commed a message for during meal break.

_I didn’t have much time._

I hurried back to our rooms, hoping we could snatch some privacy before we had to ship out in different directions. That pang had to be controlled, as we had no choice. It was my own fault that I had wasted a month on my fears.

The fears no others saw.

I set tea to steep, and had to smile at the nearly hideous amount of sweetener Vora preferred for hers. I could feel her approach, and she was alone as I’d hoped.

Once she entered, my hope became something more demanding and I rushed to her, pushing her against the door for an urgent kiss. I didn’t want to think about how _little_ I wanted her to leave me for another mission after her last one.

I wanted to feel her breathing against my ear. I wanted to taste, to savor her neck and skin and her presence tangling with mine. I wanted to feel her fingers snagging my belt to dig into my skin. I wanted to feel her legs sliding, balancing on me, depending on me.

I _wanted_ our robes to be gone.

It was more like fumbling as her back slid up the door, my ear bitten even as I found her. Right where she’d been.

We were _connected_ again and our feelings and sensations echoed back and forth more than they had in a long time. Life and living energy exploded between us like the squeal of a feedback loop. Until I could not feel, could not see anything else.

My own knees wobbled for an instant which would make us fall in an embarrassing heap. Instead, I kissed her, more sedately this time. “Hmm.”
She kissed my nose. “Yeah.” -Warn me next time you get horny in Council. I could have hurried.-

I slid my fingers over her rounded behind. -Wasn’t quite aware of it. Nor would I wish to be required to explain.-

I could feel there was little darkness below the surface, old sadesses and a newer one that was very shielded. I should not root any deeper.

“Well, yes. I suppose I might have sent bawdy suggestions to you while you were all grim and silent High Councilor. I’d count it a win if I could get you to flush.” Vora’s eyes shined.

I was sure she could do that. “Please do not. I was quieter because I was so behind on Council business since Raxus. I’ve been on barred since then.

Vora looked worried. “I missed feeling you perhaps even more than spending time with you.

“Fear can take the strongest of us, my dear.” I kissed her on her forehead and set her back down on the floor so we could straighten our robes.

The tea was probably still warm in its pot.

Vora grinned. “Does the Code have some rule about tea after a make-out session?”

“Not that I know of, other than the general guideline to be a good example. Shall we, my dove?” I escorted her toward my room. We didn’t speak at first, brushing against each other like this was unexpectedly titillating.

I started. “I was considering sneaking along on your mission to Serenno if I could not convince Mace to give permission.” That would not be hard unless he was looking for it.

Vora smirked. “You cannot let us be the worst renegades in the lineage all the time, eh?”

“But the sad reality is that the crisis allowed me to finish containing my fears.” I was not proud of this.

She slid a little closer. “Let me help, Ben. You don’t have to be so self-contained. You must know Anakin would have come if you gave him any kind of hint what was wrong. You are not the last Jedi standing after empire. You do have friends from before the war, right?”

I had to laugh. “Yes. Yes, of course. Some are too disreputable to visit casually, others very busy with changed duties.”

“That leaves family… err, lineage, then.”

“More foolishness, my dear. I was not really against a new Padawan or two. You have been doing well, from my impressions.”

“I still have too many holes...” Her voice was bitter.

I held Vora close sad at the reflection. “That is my fault. I am very sorry. I felt the same with Anakin as my Padawan, and I had my full experience to draw on.”

Vora settled comfortably in my arms and laid her head on my shoulder. “You should probably get Mirran’s and Adus’ approvals.” -They were more excited by you.-

That was fair. ‘I’m sorry, but we will need to sound them out after these missions. Our missions are
too disjoint right now.” *Be my kar'taylir darasuun, before we must part again…*

“Obi-Wan?”

I cupped her cheek and projected my hope.

Her kiss was a splendid answer and I could feel her self nestled against mine in the Force, and I was more than content.

-Vora

It felt like things were ‘all’ better. It looked like I was getting what I’d wanted so badly weeks ago, but I knew a part of me wasn’t sure he wasn’t going to freak out and leave me hanging again. Doing something stupid because you were afraid is not an awful sin. I think everyone has. But I didn’t trust him not to bail on me for nothing again.

I had the current moment. I just didn’t have any certainty.

But that was what I had.

It *had* to be enough.

I could hear the chatter of Adus and Mirran as they brought someone toward the apartment…

*Shit.* That smacked of old lectures from my grandmother when I saw ‘strange’ boys in college. I shoved Ben’s shoulder to let go so I could go pack. My clothing was over in the tiny bedroom still crammed with Anakin’s junk. “Come *on.*”

Ben chuckled as he sat up. “First one back fixes that?” His whisper was hopeful.

My throat hurt. “Are you sure? I—”

“I wasted too much time.”

“I know you don’t get a lot of this stuff, You were too...” I had to swallow because I could not find the word. “...in some ways and I don’t want to push you.”

Obi-Wan’s smile was lopsided as the chatterers filled the outer room. “I am sure. I missed you, and those were the longest hours of the day.” He cocked his head, listening too. “I believe my beard *should* be safe now.”

“Hey, it got your attention when I was pissed. I *wanted* to shake you until your head rattled.” I went to the door to go and get packed. “I made *sure* you could shave off the rest so you could go out.”

“That was appreciated as soon as I calmed down. Some younglings were surprised at my beardless state.” Obi-Wan’s smile was wry.

“You are *real* cute under that fur, I was tempted to jump your bones, which would have ruined the effect. I’m rather not have the competition, either.”

Ben’s grin faded a little at that as a knock echoed at the door and he moved to answer it. -*We will speak later, my dear.* - “Ah. We will be out in a moment...”

Dooku wasn’t exactly warm, though he was in more standard Jedi robes now. He didn’t look uncomfortable, but he also seemed stiff. Maybe he was disapproving of *us.* Or maybe it felt that way
to me.

I bit the bullet as I looked for my missing comm. “Sorry about the delay. So do I need to know anything?”

Mirran and Adus were trying to hide their grins.

Dooku scratched his beard. “I believe your Commander attempted to reach you moments ago. Master Kenobi was more popular, with at least three different callers. I doubt you have time to spare.”

My comm had the details of the mission as well as a worried call from Dice on the Sirocco. Most of the proposed treaty points were familiar, and I made sure to grab a copy of the Keller one for comparison. The last packet was marked for ‘my eyes only’ once we were in Jump.

That had uncomfortable implications.

Obi-Wan was no longer cheery after his. “Raxus has been razed, the legislative and cultural capital. Survivor count is unknown, but readings suggest it is close to zero.”

“Who’d want to anger the Republic and the Seppies?” Adus asked while his sister shrugged.

Dooku answered. “That is a very good question, Padawan. I do not think there was a third side in the war. Some Warlord or Admiral has probably decided to seize power for himself.

“We’re not going to Raxulon, Adus.” Mirran was a little scornful. “We have a dumb treaty.”

“Treaties are not silly, Padawan.” Obi-Wan sounded amused. Then he looked at Dooku and quieted. “This treaty is one of the more important ones, the Council will be watching closely. Raxon was nearing final treaty approval when this attack came, we can hope to find Knights Doyye, Je, and the 279th if the Force wills it. There were many who benefited from war.”

“Seek the hidden motives, even more so when it comes to war. The winner usually has the deepest secrets. The Confederacy had a secret pipeline, a helping hand from the hidden Sith in the Senate. The Republic had the Force-given blueprints of the war.” Dooku seemed calm.

“We must finish packing, Padawans. This will have to wait for another day.” Obi-Wan’s comm went off again with an urgent shrill.

The next was hurried confusion as I learned the Sirocco was slated to leave in less than an hour. Mirran and Adus’ packing had to be checked. They were less sensitive to food allergies than I was.

I was hoping they’d be older when they found out, and they weren’t prankish.

When I parked the speeder, I forced myself to walk in an unpanicky pace.

This was just another treaty mission.

My third.

Hopefully it went better than the last one. That was a worry to examine in solitude.

The Brothers on guard paused when they saw Dooku, a little slower to salute me. They didn’t say anything and I decided to detour to officer quarters and drop off our satchels.

Dice arrived before I picked an empty room in the same corridor for the new Jedi.
“General, Commanders.” He just stared at Dooku without saying anything to the old man.

I did not know what to say. Hating a superior officer isn’t necessarily a problem, but Dice had a right to be angry. As did just about everyone.

Dooku stated, “I have been reconciled to the Order, and quite demoted from my previous rank. I am the lowest ranked Knight in the Order, with the irony of my Great-grandpadawan as my mission superior. My knowledge was deemed necessary for this mission, with the crisis on Raxulon.”

Dice frowned, but didn’t reply to that. “Leaving orbit in about ten minutes, sir. Travel to Serenno should take five hundred and four days.”

I’d already tossed my bag on the bed before that sank in and I turned to look at Dice, where he wasn’t grinning yet.

He was about to.

“Very funny, Commander. You’d better start up some kind of hydroponics in your spare time if you want me to panic like that. Maybe even an official still, if people can behave.” Earth wasn’t that many days away. I waved Mirran and Adus to take their bags to the rooms they’d used before.

My Commander saluted and left.

I looked at Dooku. “I’ve never told them to reject emotions, only controlling them. They’ve already felt the lashes of too many chains. I ask for basic manners only.”

The old man grimaced. “I have been hated for years.”

“He blames the Sith for the death of his previous General. That was the clearest way for him to live with 66.” I sighed. “I don’t have any illusions that you aren’t the better leader than me. I would appreciate discretion, though.”

We entered the corridor, and the bridge wasn’t far.

Dooku said, “I am not resentful, Vora. I’d thought I would not see my homeland again, If I had thought about it, I would have expected a mission to be matched with Master Windu or another Council member. A… relaxing partner will make it that much easier not to slip.”

“Once more into the breach, dear friends…” I entered the bridge, still a little in awe at seeing infinite space as we accelerated towards Jump.

The Admiral nodded to me, careful to ignore Dooku. “Ready to leave, General. Shall I take us out?”

“Go for it” I waved my hand.

Coruscant’s masses were already a distant hum, the siren call of the Temple remained a harmony after the bulk of life was fading. The ship seemed to slow down as it moved away from the density of shipping and then the universe seemed to stop moving.

That was only distance and illusion of value,

Adus and Mirran arrived. I wasn’t going to say anything, I loved watching this just as much.

Once we were in Jump, I looked at the Padawans. “Check with Turbo and see if you can do flight sims with the Brothers before or after dinner. In the afternoon we’ll go over the model treaty and see what you think could be issues.” I’d have to remember to bring some movies next mission. They
should still have some fun...

I looked over the bridge, very glad there hadn’t been any issues as yet. “Briefing in the morning, as usual. Any concerns?”

The silence was almost deafening, a silence for what they wanted to say.

I sighed and told the Admiral I would be in my office with the revised mission brief. I was embarrassed when the old man followed along. “I’m sorry sir, but I’m supposed to view this alone.”

“Oh, yes.” He hummed. “I understand.”

I felt guilty when he moved to his quarters.

I felt even worse when I was given a blank check in dealing with Dooku during this mission. He would be under oversight for missions, and I was to understand that if he Fell again mercy would not be possible a second time.

The rest of the package held little new, I planned to share everything else with my Padawan and Dooku. There wasn’t much to do once we settled in our routine, we trained and drilled every day.

No one attacked Dooku, and he resisted any urge to provoke them.

When we left Jump, we were still a leisurely loop away from the planet, and us four Jedi were on the bridge. Dooku seemed very pleased to see even the clouds as soon as we got close enough.

I hailed the Port master. Remembering what Obi-Wan had said on Keller, I mentioned that I was senior representatives for the Republic and Senate, which included my Padawans and would appreciate assistance in meeting representatives of the Count or Senate to open the peace negotiations.

Even as I said that, my stomach dropped to my feet.

I could not do this.

Chapter End Notes

Took me longer to recover from NaNo this year. On the good side, a bunch of plot bunnies were pretty strong... One died and I may send flowers.

Love any comments, they are the best way to appreciate any writer's efforts. There should be another chapter by the new year. Have a nice holiday.
Gathering Storms, pt 1

Chapter Summary

Jedi have scattered to the four winds after unknown parties attacked the Raxulon treaty convention at the CIS capital. Other treaties and investigations cannot be abandoned, despite the shortage of active Jedi. So Obi-Wan takes an Open Circle fleet to discover what happened at Raxulon and provide relief if desired. Generals Windu and Billaba take fleets out on patrols seeking missing military forces, while General Skywalker commands the home defense fleet and plays public poster boy for his wife.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Obi-Wan

Vora entered the Sirocco with Knight Dooku beside her. I was not particularly happy about that development while I was under censure. Life marched on, regardless of my… sulking.

I wasn’t sure if I was happy my Masters and Padawans had left me alone as I demanded. But they had for too long for my present comfort.

Coordinating a staff meeting for at least a quick meeting by holo before we went to Jump ate into limited prep time. I had to review the assigned ships and Generals, and most were less familiar outside Council reporting. We’d have the most time during the lift and passage to Jump. My task force had much to accomplish before then. The Cydonnia had just finished a mission and was rushing their replenishment as it was. The Dauntless was as ready as the Negotiator. The Herald and Garen’s cruiser, the Silent Ace, would rendezvous with us outside the system. The Council was still assigning ships to other tasks when I left, but I doubted they would add more to this fleet.

Once we reached Jump, communication was minimal. My Force bonds told me that both my Padawans were preoccupied. With so many ships leaving, and this would be a better time to attack Coruscant than any time in the last year when GAR forces were at their home base. That would not only keep Anakin too busy for much time to worry. With Padmé’s help, he would be the confident public face of these sudden changes. He’d remain closer to his family as we’d intended.

Vora was worried, but not distressed. None in the Council were completely convinced that Serenno wanted to rejoin the Republic peacefully. But it would have to have been a very, very deep plan for Dooku to be involved after this long and such events.

Master Yoda and my Master were convinced. Dooku had been very sure of everything up to his last days as a Jedi Master. Sending him would test his sincerity and ability to endure whatever public aftereffects came after his defections. He was also the one who knew that world the best in the Order, after all. Even if he sought power, I had to believe that he was fond of Vora and was unlikely to harm her.

Both Masters told me that.

If his nephew was planning some kind of betrayal to some CIS remnant, again Dooku was canny,
experienced, and most importantly, attached to the rest of his party.

That assignment should be less fraught than major fleet actions, and I should not worry about her.

Should being the key word.

After the supposed routine Ando mission and its aftereffects, I could not resist worrying. I still did not fully trust Dooku with Anakin’s or my health. I turned from the porthole, annoyed at myself.

I should trust the Force and worry about my own mission.

Massive bombardment said the enemy was punishing civilians not gaining their allegiance. Straight military attacks were simpler than this chaos. We could not use bombardment as civilians were soon to be citizens again. We had strategy meetings based on not the latest intel here and the actions of worlds where violence flared up like on Ando. There still were an unknown count of missing Vod’e, it could be anything up to a million as too many deaths were not properly documented during the war. It would be easy to fan hatred of the Republic with clones on Separatist or Neutral worlds.

The bigger problem was the lack of a strategic goal was for this invasion. Raxus was already worn out by the time of Sidious’ attempted coup from previous battle losses. Taking the CIS capital would have a large effect on morale, but not as useful from a supply or peacemaking view for the Republic. Attackers had not asked for surrender. Bombardment would have ruined any desired factories.

The more I studied the attack on a planet whose time may have passed, the more this felt like a game of Dejarik on a larger scale. What did they really want?

What would we find?

I doubted this was Ventress, or if she was here, she was not in command. We still did not know what happened to Grievous, and he had far less care for living beings than her.

I forced myself to consider Maul, who had been considered dead too many times already. He willingly brought this much destruction to increase his power. That was enough to wake personal grief again, that grief I had packed away deep to disastrously become Hardeen.

“General?” Cody’s voice interrupted my introspection.

I shook my head. “Yes, Commander?”

“Have you eaten recently, Sir?”

That made me smile. “Was that at the promptings of another General, Cody?”

“No, Sir. I do not need their prompting to know your habits. You did not answer my question.” The young-old soldier looked at me with doubt.

“I had breakfast with General Meyers.” I said it with a smile, sure of his reaction to come.

He stood up straighter, as expected. “General, it’s mid-evening Coruscant time. You have a choice. Come with me to a mess hall to eat and relax, or I will order a hearty meal brought and I will not leave until you finish it and have gone to sleep.”

His threat was a little stronger than before.

“I would prefer the quiet, Cody.”
He smirked at me. “Right.”

I didn’t want to parse that tone of voice.

Or ask the Force.

After days of Jump our fleet met just outside the system and the inner system seemed quiet from a distance as we moved inward. “Commanders, battle stations. Yellow alert. Hold action.”

Interceptors waited for launch orders. But I kept my face flat and attentive to perceptions from the Force. Knowledge, not ignorance.

A single capital ship seemed to be in orbit according to scanners. This was too few ships for an important planet. This world had been bristling with defenses last time I’d been here. One ship was far too little.

No hail came from the ship… Nor threat or attack.

Just a single ship. Silent in orbit.

I stared at the tactical as I reached out for direction from the Force.

Where were the threats?

“Negotiator, Dauntless, and Ace’s fighter wings launch in patrols. Cydonnia and Herald hold station.” That ship felt fractured and mostly dead from here. I felt a need to send rescue crews over.

But that didn’t mean it wasn’t a threat in some way.

“General, should I launch the drones?” Cody’s emphasis was a reminder that the ship had re purposed CIS resources.

Waving a go-ahead, I doubted they were a crucial piece. “Do we have any signs of activity, of living crew on that ship?”

One of the other officers spoke in the stressed quiet. “We spotted atmo leak, and there’s swarms of droids on the hull.”

They could be repairs. But I couldn’t buy it. “Do not approach. Let the drones...”

Even as drones’ got close enough for clearer images, showing clouds of debris starting to make micro gravity clouds around the ship, showing bodies, the droids on the hull shifted operations, showing they were battle droids, not repair by shooting at our scouting drones.

The worst part was seeing someone waving and pounding on the transparent steel of a porthole in the last seconds before the feed ended.

And not being able to do anything.

“General! Unidentified ships appearing from Jump.”

There was the contact I was looking for and I shifted to view that officer’s screen. A dozen ships, more than I’d hoped. But not as many as I feared. “Dauntless, Ace, and Negotiator, engage at will. Stay away from the hulk. It’s a trap.”

“Smaller ships.” Cody said from my side as fighter wings wheeled to begin attacks. “Not too many.”
I had to smile a little. It wasn’t just Anakin who got restless. “We don’t know their reserves.”

Vulture interceptors launched from the enemy ships along with battle droids. This wasn’t exactly a shock, but I could feel a ripple of emotion on the bridge, before the hurt became determination from these new citizens of the Republic.

“Will the General be taking out an interceptor?” Cody asked, with worry almost hidden.

An instant’s thought, and I was sure my skills were needed more here… at the moment. “Not at this time, I wish a clearer view. Cody, is there any way we can send the chip deactivation from a distance?”

He frowned. “Lack of air isn’t the issue, it’s a radio pulse. We could make it saturate the battleground. Distance and strength of the signal… We don’t know how they will react if this happens in mid combat. Suicides are more common, the longer under the chip’s control.” The Commander was getting worried by leaps and bounds.

I gripped his shoulder and tried to send calm.

After a few seconds Cody met my eyes again. “We should try. Some suicides is more Vod surviving than finishing battle the hard way.”

“Sirs?” Redeye interrupted from the near console. At Cody’s nod, the Vod said, “We could send a message through one of the sub-channels for the Vultures. That the Republic and Senate are not fallen. That we’re making clans like our buir lost. That we want our brothers home again with us.”

“Record a draft immediately and update until we’re ready to deploym...” Cody broke off, looking and feeling mortified.

“Excellent,” I said to the bridge at large. “Even a better addition. They are not at fault. Cydonnia and Herald, keep them busy. We want intel about their commanders.”

With that, I saw Garen’s wings from the Ace had engaged one of the ships. I hoped he was alright.

Cody spoke into a comm ordering a fast rebuild to send out a signal for the entire battlefield. When finished, he sighed and looked at the chrono.

“Cody, my friend, you will have to get used to commanding non-Vod, and even Jedi in battle. I’m sure you are on any short-list for promotion once the GAR finishes its reorganization. You have more experience than a majority of Jedi.”

“Not you, Sir,” he said gruffly.

“I learned much of that from you, whether you realize it or not. Jedi are far more trained around skirmish and scouting. Much of what I learned about infantry and fleet operation was from my Vod’e. Old theory was not always helpful.”

Now Cody frowned at me. “Many Generals did not try to learn and ordered without understanding. We know the difference.” Then he smiled slightly. “I still have trouble understanding Jedi abilities, General. So you should stay in command.”

Interceptors were reaching our position as defense guns picked them off.

His comm chimed. “Commander. We have a prototype, but the radius is not wide enough for the field, five clicks, maybe more.”
Now the Force was clear. “You’re in command of the fleet. Deploy the signals as soon as you can. Warn the rest of the fleet.” I started to hurry off.

Cody reached frantic worry in bare seconds. “General!”

I smiled back at him. “How else are we to lure their fighters close enough but chasing a traitor Jedi?”

With that I hurried out before he got the bright idea to have a Vod play target, as that was a death sentence.

A wing was ordered to follow along and watch my back. I never liked that only Anakin usually managed to survive a battle like that, so I made use of my greater speed and maneuverability to keep ahead of them so my attackers would make themselves plain. I was playing target.

I half-listened to the chatter, making sure my interceptor was in clear view of enemy ships and then luring them closer to the Negotiator. It might have been exciting, all this evasion, but I was deep in the Force as I was both preferred target and fanged attacker in my turn.

After a time I realized this was too quiet, and I missed Anakin’s snark when I scraped the hull once, resisting blackout.

When Cody announced the deployment, a buzz came from the interceptor’s comm system.

At first nothing happened, there were still plenty taking shots at me. But first one, then another just sort of drifted off, away from the battle, then entire groups withdrew.

I was shocked when one of the enemy vultures turned around and rammed its own ship. The quick transfer of that crew into the Force felt like a tired sigh.

My chest heavy, I commed Cody, “Add something to Redeye’s message against suicide, if you would...”

“Yes, Sir. On it.” He sounded subdued.

The rest of the battle was not exactly mop up, but with the defections from any that approached the Negotiator and then the other larger ships as they also made transmitters, we kept gaining ground. Once all the enemy interceptors had either bowed out or been destroyed, there were only three larger enemy ships left. Then it was a matter of cornering each ship until it was completely inside overlapping chip fields.

Attacks came to a staggering halt and I returned to my ship.

We were left with clouds of floating interceptors and enemy capital ships, along with hundreds of escape pods. Separating the confused from the enemy would take time. Time I did not want to waste.

It had already been too many days since the treaty team lost contact. That ship’s hulk could not be ignored. The Cydonnia and Herald had more relief supplies, but I didn’t plan on clearing their landing on the planet until the hulk was cleared.

“General? We have supplementary images of that other ship.”

The fleet in full command of the air space around Raxus itself. I felt certain we had time, and meditated on the GAR future.

It almost felt odd after a year of mostly diplomatic missions and Council business. Battle command
would not be through the Order as a rule when we pulled back from GAR routine operations, we should become advisers, command level for emergencies when needed. Promotions and tracks for full Command were needed. Perhaps Jedi could be assigned as co-Commanders if Jedi were needed? More needed to be consulted than just the Generals, I should speak to Bail when things settled.

First drones were sent to the derelict ship, but those inside had kept telling us to stay back. Eventually flimsi cards spelled out that it had been bait and trapped. All locks were rigged to destroy the ship and whoever came close.

Making a new hatch to get survivors out only took a little longer than if Cody had let me go over and use my light saber. Twenty-three survived and we put warning buoys out, Locals would need to do their own salvage.

That left the planet itself. I did not wish for us to be taken as an invading force, though we would resemble one too much.

We sent hailing messages to the planet and got little more than static. The Raxus capital, Raxulon, was revealed to be a nearly flattened wasteland, lightless in the nighttime horizon. A dark from orbit landscape was eerie and spoke of terrible devastation.

I sent volunteer troops down, including troopers from the Cydonnia and Dauntless who had begun disaster relief training

Sending a few discreet probes took hours to find anyone willing to speak with us, a minor official. One the good side, she also had been reporting in as the attack happened. They watched live reports as a droid army rolled over their own capital. Battle droids had no loyalty and would not question attacks on civilians as a vod would.

She rather frantically begged to rejoin the Republic, on any terms.

That was unexpected. We had not planned for surrender at this late date.

But it was true. I did not like it, even as I called for humanitarian aid and wanted to set up meetings to ratify the standard treaty as soon as there had been some recovery.

This mission could take months.

That, I did not like.

I knew that was far too long.

- Anakin

I was up very late with other Generals reviewing the planetary defenses, looking for weaknesses while Padmé worked away on the flurry of motions and panic that came from sudden fleet deployment for a Confederate world. She didn’t object to GAR involvement for humanitarian reasons, but she was in the minority.

Luke was sleeping longer than Leia, but I was taking them with me to the Temple in the morning with Appo. The creche masters could protect them far better than Threepio and Artoo. I had to ‘suck it up’ as that was the safest place for them when we could not be with them.

Coruscant defenses were good, though I did find a weakness in the shielding power systems under
heavy load. I didn’t know if it was age, wear, or sabotage, but I ordered them all tested and replaced with assistance from my men. The ongoing gang efforts now seemed less of a coincidence. Ordering that correction was argued by some budget droid. Not that I cared. With so many ships leaving I was holding briefings twice a day with many commanders.

Obi-Wan would be proud.

Then the Vice-Chancellor’s office arranged for an interview for me.

Padmé said there was a near riot in the Senate when the other fleets left.

She said I had to make an appearance to assure the public.

I was the hero of the victory and they would believe me she said.

I wasn’t as sure, I usually kriffed up interviews, at least those without Padmé or Obi-Wan to cover for me. This was to be live with a popular droid interviewer.

As if them being a droid made it any easier. It only made popping their head off with the Force not a crime.

I was glad when Ahsoka commed me that she was working on overdue investigations about unrest and rioting down in the Undercity. Master Che mentioned during Council allocations that some infectious disease was making the round of all near-humans. Too many med centers had been overloaded for weeks with illness on top of the brawls. I’d rather to go down there and do something useful than all these meetings.

I did not want to tell my Padawan that I had a bad feeling about this, not like Obi-Wan had so many times.

The Force was vague and Padmé made me promise to make the public appearance.

I had to make nice with some reporter.

I didn’t have the time.

After checking on Leia late that night, I went to the more squat tower that hosted the constant news show called ‘Coruscant Live.’ The studio had only a handful of living people, not even the supposed audience was alive. Artoo got almost as many greetings from the droids as I did from gawping people.

The host ignored us, more like the usual protocol droids and Artoo was in a miff from that. Once I was seated at the guest bench, the area lit and the hosting droid’s appearance almost made me sick, like it was doing a bad imitation of people.

“Good presently, Coruscant! This is the always alert and dedicated simulcasting Jerryn Waters, here to find all the dirt on the Senate and stink in high places of the Republic. What scandal and crimes are hidden from you, the discerning public?” It spoke brightly despite its words. The droid sat behind a desk, so only above the waist was visible on the shimmer silk-wearing droid. A narrow smile was on display and it showed teeth.

I had to force a smile as some music and holo theme played.

“Here tonight we have the famous General, the youngest Jedi Master, the Hero of Naboo and the Hero Without Fear, Anakin Skywalker!” The droid waved his arm at the me, its sleeve flapping a
little as recorded laughter came from off stage.

I nodded.

“Look how modest he is gentle beings. Must come from his humble beginnings as a child from some dirt-poor backwater in the outer Rim. More than most Jedi brats, we have vids from that far back, and they make fascinating viewing, let me tell you.”

Jerryn leaned forward, but was not quite within reach. “Can we talk? What everyone really wants to know about this human is just how did a Jedi manage to catch the beautiful and dark-haired Senator from Naboo who is now Vice-Chancellor? Did you use the Force to get her attention when she was a sweet itty-bitty queen, or did you use that juju when not in the public view?

My face warmed, but I held my face stiff as I heard a quiet mocking whistle among the faked amusement.

“And you were named High General in charge of planetary defenses for Coruscant while more senior Jedi Masters left us all alone here....Maybe it wasn’t the Force that got you this promotion, but something more smutty with the Vice-Chancellor in bed? Just how did you buy this favoritism?”

I wanted to yell, but it might have been a snarl. “No!! I’d never do that. The High Council decided my assignment.” I had to take a breath. “And if you think I could persuade these old Masters like that, you have not been paying attention.”

“Hah! Ha-hah!” Then Jerryn repeated the awkward laugh at a higher pitch. “Our polls say a lot of these ‘old’ Masters you claim are unpersuadable, are quite attractive.” A graphic showing most of the Jedi Council Masters with popularity with the audience as sex partners rotated in midair as the proportions changed.

“Of course the famous Team always rank near the top as individuals, but also as a… Team.” More recorded laughter and droid squawks joined the nasal laughter coming from the droid as holos showing both Obi-Wan and I from some diplomatic event animated.

Jumping up, I tried to throttle my anger down. “That has nothing to do with my commanding the Defense Fleet!”

The droid nodded, but the unchanging smile seemed even more mocking as it nodded. “If you say so, General. Who am I to argue?ay”

That made me stop as I ran that word over in my head. That wasn’t Huttese or Basic. I didn’t want to look like a schtupa with an audience. “Each deployed Fleet has a highly capable General in command. The defense fleet remains larger than it was during the hottest days of the war.”

Wagging its finger as if to scold, the droid said, “Youyay avehay oremay ieldfay experienceyay anthay osethay ighHay eneralsGay. Ouryay avehay youyay eenbay onyay extendedyay edicalmay afteryay athay ightfay gainsthay alpatinePay?”

As the fake laughter dragged on, I knew I was clenching my jaw. “Jerryn, execute override maintenance. Duration since last reset and model name?”

As the laughter slowly faded and I heard more whistles, the droid froze. “JRN RV-09. Three thousand, fifty standard days...”

“Reset and clear registers and shut down.” I shook my head as familiar binary snarking continued. “Artoo? Stop laughing, and get a mechanic assigned. And get that nose-sim replaced, it looks
broken.” *And creepy, I wanted to say.*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay, holiday-nano-flu exhaustion got extended by a touch of block. It also was running far too long a chapter. I've found that the longer the chapter the slower my writing, so a 5k chapter takes at least twice as long as a 4k chapter. This chapter had hit 8k and for a week or two, by the time I had read and edited enough to get restarted on new draft text, I was tired and had to stop. The next chapter should take a week.

Reviews and comments are valued like a fine wine or good cheese.

End Notes

I do not own Star Wars nor it's characters, George Lucas and Disney do. References are made to many other properties. Star Trek is owned by Paramount. Other pop culture references abound. No infringement on any property is intended or profit has been made from this story.

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