The Masterplan
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Summary

In the midst of the endless galactic conflict, Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala have made a shocking discovery that brings more questions than answers. And maybe, just maybe, an end to the never-ending war.

Notes

This story is a sort-of sequel to a previous story of mine, Give Me a Signal. However, I realize that some people may be interested in this fic specifically without wanting to read GMAS, so I got you covered! I have pretty much gone out of my way to fill in any blanks, keep the references to a minimum, and craft the story so that it also MOSTLY fits with tcw canon, so if you don't feel like reading GMAS, you don't have to.

Then again, if GMAS sounds like something you might enjoy, I recommend you read it first, because this first chapter WILL MOST DEFINITELY SPOIL a very specific event at the end of GMAS.

Timeline-wise, the story takes place right after the TCW S6 Clovis arc/my version of the
events (GMAS). As stated above, canon-divergent events will be briefly alluded to in the first few chapters. However, despite the canon connection, this story will start off an AU that will pretty much completely ignore all the canon that follows, with the exception of the (unfinished) Crystal Crisis on Utapau arc. And even that will be dealt with in a more or less AU sort of way.

Let it be said for any readers of Give Me a Signal – despite being a sort-of sequel, this one will be a bit darker or maybe even way darker in tone, considering the premise. However, as always I'll try to sprinkle in some moments of levity and humor because it's the only way I myself can deal with angst and hurt and whatever ordeals our heroes have to face this time.

And don't worry guys – Clovis is NOT coming back. :)


It was supposed to be just another covert mission.

Well, that wasn’t really true. But however extraordinary the circumstances might have been, it was not as though they had been a great deviation from the normal amount of extraordinary in the daily lives of Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala.

“I think… the truth is not on the battlefield.”

And logically, they should have expected something like this.

“But – can we – to put our trust in someone like – “

They had come looking for information.

”My Lord…”

They had quite literally been spying on covert networks, listening to an unknown frequency on top of the main reception tower of Scipio, to try and expose the truth behind the rise and fall of the newly-crowned Head of the Banking Clan.

“I feel as though your plans concerning young Skywalker are becoming increasingly… specific.”

So why were they so shocked to find it? Should they not have rejoiced in their success?

“He already holds an abundance of darkness within. This entire takeover could have been accomplished without him unwittingly playing his part.”

Had they not struck kyber?

”And do you know what they say about little drops and mighty oceans, Tyranus?”

What did they say about little drops and mighty oceans?

That one could drink a thousand drops, and it wouldn’t make a difference?

Or poison a single droplet, and kill all life in the ocean?

“So are you guys about done packing yet??”

Anakin could hardly hear himself for the barrage of blaster fire as he screamed into his comlink. He could just about picture Obi-Wan recoiling on the other end with disgust and impatience. And somehow, Anakin knew exactly how his Master would respond.
Believe it or not, we have something of a situation over here as well! I specifically told you not to go there, Anakin, especially without back-up!

Admitting that Obi-Wan was right did not get easier over time. And neither was this battle: what had started out as a simple, if slightly defiant-spirited bit of scouting had turned into a skirmish against what felt like at least a company of B2-series super battle droids. And a company, normally, he would have still been able to handle, or at least survive – he was Anakin Skywalker – but this specific batch seemed to be either increasing in number or magically regenerating at regular intervals. The worst part was, the thickset clankers would have probably remained dormant had it not been for Anakin's unauthorized intrusion into this stupid cave.

At least he had been right about it looking suspicious.

Usually, at this point, the young General would have already been joined by those much-needed back-up forces. Or rescued, more like... But naturally, the one time he needed it, no one could be spared to help him. He would meet his end on this tiny, inconsequential shrimp of a moon, that had somehow become the most critically important site of war overnight, and whose new-found significance would then quickly fade with his own rotting remains.

Indeed, there were plenty of parallels to be drawn between himself and Vanqor 1 – Anakin felt like he could almost relate to it: its mildly poisonous air, ominously hanging mist, faintly glowing, hard and uneven surface – pretty package, sharp edges.

Anakin would have retreated long ago, but truthfully his sense of direction was failing him, and even the Force was of no help in the heat of the battle, with no respite nor room for distraction. His defeat was imminent – unless, of course, his skin would be saved by the surprising secondary programming that some of the droids were suddenly starting to exhibit.

"Is this not Anakin Skywalker?" a back-row silver soldier wondered to a fellow slacker, as their more industrious friends kept closing in on Anakin. "One of the Generals we have permission to apprehend alive?"

"Fool!" the other one reprimanded. "Killing a Jedi is way easier than capturing one."

"But killing a Jedi is almost impossible," the first one pointed out.

Normally, Anakin would have gleefully agreed, maybe quipped about how they sounded just like their lesser B1 cousins. Now, there just seemed to be a cruel irony to the statement, and an alarming emphasis on the word 'almost'.

- Commander Cody," Obi-Wan let his mask of stoicism waver ever so slightly while giving orders to his second-in-command, "I'm sorry, but you must take over from here. No one is more tired than I am of General Skywalker's whims, but I'm afraid there is no one better-qualified to neutralize them, either."

Cody nodded, already multitasking; shooting down gray-plated droids and avoiding their fire while receiving a report from his comlink.

"Crys says the weapon is almost loaded. The team request permission for take-off with no commanding officer on board."

"Granted," Obi-Wan grunted with a hand-wave. It was not his preferred plan of action, but what had he expected, with his former Padawan co-leading? Where on this puny excuse for a moon had
Anakin even found this many B2's to set into the wild? Not far, apparently, since they had found their way to pester him and Cody at the command center, and almost compromise the entire operation.

Obi-Wan laid an encouraging hand on Cody's shoulder before starting towards a long-awaited opening in the enemy lines. He nodded at the rest of the squad as well, and they returned the gesture from behind their screaming blasters, unable to salute at the present moment.

“ THEIR NUMBERS ARE DECREASING,” the General observed. “I'm going to go get Anakin.”

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Rarely, if ever, had Anakin found himself this exhausted with a swarm of simplistic destructive programming with ridiculous swollen torsos. There were simply too many. He was already on the ground, inhaling way too much of the musty, toxic oxygen, leaning onto some kind of crystalline structure, sharp enough to impale him should he lean too far behind. What wouldn't have he given to be able to send Padmé some kind of goodbye message through the Force (“I love you, my angel – tell Obi-Wan to tone it down with the jokes at my funeral – and if Ahsoka isn't invited to attend, what is even the point? – also, I was the one who poured wine on that cream-colored senate gown.”)

Anakin was already going through his remaining options, the truly desperate ones, such as requesting to be taken prisoner instead, like the two droids had discussed – when it suddenly struck him again.

A vague sense of paranoia - a sense of everything happening for a reason. The feeling of being controlled - of everything being carefully calculated.

Was there a reason behind the droids' alternate set of orders? Anakin had long known himself to be valuable – but now he knew something he was never supposed to. That he was not just wanted by the enemy for information, or for leverage. He was wanted by the Sith.

By Dooku – if reluctantly – and his Sith Master.

Wanted as an ally – an asset.

Wanted for his 'darkness'.

Padmé had heard it too, on top of that tower. In the heat of the moment, they had sought comfort in each other, promised wordlessly to face this next ordeal together.

But the moment had passed, and real world had awaited them on the ground. The war had ravaged on without them, he’d been on assigned on another mission, she invited to a thousand more meetings, and suddenly, surrounded by hundreds of people – hundreds of ‘allies’ – they had both found themselves alone.

And Anakin had realized that the ‘darkness’ was his and his alone. His cross to carry, his burden to bear. All of this was his fault, none of it hers. And he didn’t even know what ‘all of it’ was.

But Padmé had not given up. She had begged and begged him to talk about it – fearing that he would try to block it all out, to deny what he’d heard. And for good reason – those sickening words would pop into his head, uninvited, at the worst possible times and situations, making him want to vomit whatever terrible ration food he'd had that day, and then his empty stomach. And yet, he was already having trouble recalling what the words had been about, why he was upset at all – and it had only been a few days.
Now he remembered, in perfect detail, and it was hardly any better.

Admitting Padmé was right actually had gotten easier over time – not that she’d ever given him a choice. Or been wrong very often.

What wouldn’t have he given to be able to sit down with her right now to have any unpleasant conversation – if only he’d been able to deflect that specific blaster bolt, aimed at his heart, but he only had two hands and a single glowing kyber stick –

“Anakin!”

Involuntarily, Anakin turned his head towards the familiar voice, to just be able to discern Obi-Wan through the darkness, and somehow, miraculously, the movement made him miss the fatal bolt.

Instead, the blaster fire hit the crystal formation behind him, and then everything went black.

“Anakin, can you hear me?”

Obi-Wan sighed. When had gentle suggestions and cautious inquiries ever worked with this boy?

“Anakin!” he screamed at his apprentice's bandaged face, stopping just short of slapping it and potentially causing more damage. Obi-Wan sensed Cody starting behind him (when did his even-tempered General ever lose his cool like that?), but Anakin still remained unresponsive.

Obi-Wan shot an accusing glance at the ship's medbay crew.

“You told me he was okay!”

“And he is, General Kenobi,” a young nurse reassured him, then added with a sardonic edge, “Please feel free to consult the Force on that. And maybe run him by the Jedi healers once we get to Coruscant.”

Obi-Wan nodded, too worried to question the girl’s attitude. But really – a bruise here, probably a minor fracture there, and of course, the bi-weekly concussion – come on, he told himself, he had seen Anakin in much worse shapes and situations. So why was he feeling so anxious, and why did all his anxious feelings seem to revolve around Anakin lately?

They had literally just stolen a mysterious Separatist weapon – why not fret about that instead?

Obi-Wan scanned the room for a seat, when Anakin suddenly drew a deep and hoarse breath, eyes flicking open, and immediately jolted up on the bed to his elbows.

“Anakin!” Obi-Wan exclaimed in relief, while the nurse tried to convince the patient to keep lying down.

Bad at following orders as usual, Anakin just stared at Obi-Wan with his mouth open, blinking – as though he had expected to wake up to something else – or had not expected to wake up at all.

“I'm sorry!” he then cried without warning, gripping his Master by the upper arm. The nurse threw up her hands in resignation. Obi-Wan made a mildly confused face at Anakin, then turned towards Cody. The commander nodded, then proceeded to kindly ask the medical staff to excuse themselves, following in their wake.
“About what?” Obi-Wan asked Anakin once they were alone.

“I shouldn't have left my post, Master,” Anakin spluttered, not letting go of Obi-Wan's arm. “The droids – I might have activated–“

“Two companies’ worth of them, yes,” Obi-Wan interrupted. Anakin looked horrified. “But don't worry,” Obi-Wan added. “We looked into it, and it now appears that the weapon might not have been abandoned at all – in which case it stands to reason that there would be safety measures in place. Whether or not you personally activated them, we may never know, but –“

“At least tell me there were no casualties.”

“No casualties,” Obi-Wan reassured him. “I must say, this is all very… odd. The droids might have put up quite an impressive fight, but I don't understand why they would be stationed at half a klick's distance from the weapon they were guarding. And without sentient commanding officers? No… no, the weapon must have been abandoned after a–“

Obi-Wan caught himself only as Anakin inclined his head back again, hissing in pain and gritting his teeth. They both probably should have taken it a little slower.

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Anakin should have been back by now. There were plenty of reasons to hate the war, to oppose it, and this was the most selfish one, Padmé realized – but still, oh, she'd never get used to this feeling. Mentally preparing herself for the worst, while also denying the mere possibility of it – because her husband was a survivor, he was superhuman, certainly far more immortal than she would ever prove to be… and yet, he always made her wait. For a reunion that, while an immense relief and joy, always played out much the same way.

He’d greet her cheerfully, put up a brave face while pretending he didn't have half a dozen brand new stories about what had almost happened. Sometimes accidentally share one such story. Squirm awkwardly before her and then change the subject. Same thing every time. Only, this time… well, 'same' wasn't the word for it. Nothing had been 'the same' since Scipio.

For fear that Anakin would try to forget (which she could understand), Padmé had taken it upon herself to memorize everything perfectly: every word they had heard; every syllable and every intonation, and even that awful, chilling voice that had seemed to devour the whole room. Without understanding a single thing, she had committed herself to do so anyway. To follow her thoughts through to a logical conclusion. And in the end, the truth had appeared remarkably simple: the Sith wanted Anakin.

Dooku and… whoever. ‘Tyranus’ and whoever. Dooku, and who surely must be the most despicable being in the Galaxy.

For his ‘darkness’. For his powers. Powers that she – once again – didn’t really understand.

Anakin’s darkness, on the other hand – she had slowly come to understand a little. Or perhaps she had always understood it. Perhaps she had been too understanding.

Padmé gave a forlorn sigh as she made towards the window to admire the beautiful and anxiety-inducing night sky of Coruscant. It was difficult not to wallow in self-blame when Anakin had completely closed himself off, and was probably feeling something far more profoundly terrible than guilt. She wished he would just come home now, even just to be silent, just sulk in the corner,
while she would gently stroke his shoulder, run her fingers through his hair, tell him everything was okay, that she was here for him and would always be –

“Uh, I’m home…”

Padmé whirled around toward her husband’s voice, coming from the balcony as usual, before she could even process her relief.

But the creature standing on the ledge – against the backdrop of swooping skyspeeders that suddenly looked like blaster bolts – then made that relief disappear like smoke.

“Anakin, what happened to you?” Padmé cried as she darted towards him, extending both her arms. Anakin was shaking his head dismissively as he obediently took both her hands in his and allowed himself to be helped down.

“No, no,” he reassured her, his gaze wandering. “The doctor said I’m fine.”

Padmé stared at him incredulously – mostly at the widespread, deep violet bruises on both his cheeks, his neck, and – she didn’t even dare imagine what was hiding underneath those filthy Jedi tunics. She wanted to embrace him, squeeze him tight, touch him everywhere, but she could have sworn she had seen Anakin suppress a wince when she had clasped his hands.

“I know it looks bad,” Anakin grunted while still avoiding her gaze. “The bruises appeared later… think I kinda freaked some people out before I realized.”

“You’re freaking me out right now!” Padmé nearly shouted. “I’ve never seen you like this – don’t you usually have those – go to those – Jedi treatments?”

She couldn’t help but gently touch his cheek, even at the risk of making him flinch – Anakin had often said she had a healing touch. Oh, how she wished that wasn’t just a metaphor now.

“I’m fine,” Anakin insisted. “They’re just bruises.”

“They don’t even look like regular bruises –“

“Listen, I would have gone to the temple healers, but I needed to see you. I… I had to.”

Padmé stopped her fussing for a moment.

“I think…” Anakin began, still mostly staring at her squeaky clean floor. “I think it’s maybe time we… talked about it. This war is – this whole time, I thought I knew what I was doing. What I was fighting for. And now I’m just… confused. Nothing makes sense anymore. I…”

Padmé was already nodding, in intense agreement, but also mentally shaking her head. Now he wanted to have this conversation?

“Let me just get my medical droid. I love you, Anakin, but you’re crazy, you know that? And I swear, if you say ‘crazy about you’ one more time…”

He gave a laughter that turned into a cough.
“Young Skywalker is not superhuman,” Dooku declared haughtily. “I have personally had the great pleasure to defeat him on more than one occasion.” The Count extended his right arm and studied it in a knowing manner. “Some defeats more humiliating than others.”

Sidious smirked at the words, delivered with such absolute self-assurance.

“You may twist and turn that arm to your heart's content, but do you truly believe you can twist mine?”

“What I mean to say, My Lord, is that I have had several opportunities to kill him. Skywalker may be powerful, but he is undisciplined, impulsive, and incredibly careless. I realize that this is all a test for him, but it is one that he has already failed as many times, and in as many ways as he has triumphed. And obviously, you intend to keep him alive until you can find a way to harness that… raw potential.”

“Oh, where there’s a will, there’s a way. And please do not worry about young Skywalker being ‘careless’. I do not believe I have misjudged his abilities, even if you are still the superior swordsman, Tyranus. But if I have, well, I have little interest in someone who’ll perish by a single stray blaster bolt. Those modified droids did their job admirably back when we still took Jedi prisoners, but I think it is time we retired them, and focused our energies on the Jedi’s extinction… don’t you think?”

“Quite, My Lord. Then it shall be up to Skywalker to prove his own worth…” Dooku gave a deep sigh. “And Master Kenobi to keep him alive.”

Padmé was still alternating between looking away with a grimace and staring at the swollen, lavender lump that had still a few hours ago been Anakin’s face, as her GH-series medidroid whirred into the room.

“Good evening, Master Skywalker,” the lamp-eyed little machine greeted, and Anakin smiled at it. “Is there anything I can help you with today?”

“First you need to explain to him what happened,” Padmé instructed, and Anakin couldn’t help but shoot her an 'I know that!' sort of look. He could tell that she was worried sick – a state of mind that the former Queen had rarely exhibited before, ever – not until very, very recently.

Strangely, the longer the war had gone on, the less accustomed she had grown to Anakin's prominent role in it, and the more vividly she seemed to picture what exactly went on every day in his perilous life. Sure, she had never been under any illusions about the horrors of warfare, and they had even been in a few tight spots together. But that was different – it was the fear of what she didn't see, what he wouldn't tell her, that seemed to be getting to her sometimes.

Although, at the moment, Anakin was nothing if not extremely visible and present, and still she was not happy.

“We were on the first moon of Vanqor,” Anakin recounted to the droid, trying to remember to meet his wife's eyes at times, and not be annoyed when she flinched at the sight. “The one with the somewhat breathable air… somewhat.”
“Accessing database – Vanqor 1,” the droid peeped up.

“So I was fighting a bunch of B2-series battle droids. With some funny programming, but that's besides the point.” He deliberately looked at Padmé again. She seemed to have now calmed down a little, perhaps even gotten used to her husband's new jogan fruit colored face. “…I was in some sort of cave, where they had stored the droids, or…” Anakin paused as he felt a sudden headache somewhere around his forehead, and it immediately cost him his train of thought. 

*Come on...* It had been a fairly simple mission – even if he had ended up complicating it – so why was he having trouble remembering the details? “They might have been guarding this weapon, or… I don't know!”

He caught himself screaming out the last few words. Padmé had now completely regained her composure, and instead of looking shocked, she merely raised an eyebrow at him. Right… the anger issues.

But the truth was – the problem was – that he didn't know. No matter how he looked at it, something inside him had changed profoundly since Scipio. Somehow, it felt as though his eyes had been opened – or maybe just cracked ajar – that he was slowly realizing he was fighting a war he didn't completely understand, and could never completely control – perhaps, never end. Conducting missions he didn't really know the true purpose of… just like he hadn't known his own.

Not the way the Sith did.

“Vanqor 1 – primary terrain: caves and crystalline formations similar to those found on the mother planet.”

“Yeah, that's right,” Anakin tried to focus again.

“Would you like to hear my analysis, Master Skywalker?” the droid asked.

“Huh? I haven't even gotten to the part where I… lose consciousness, I think? Not that I remember any of it.”

“Analysis complete: inside the caves on the first moon of Vanqor, there is typically a lower level of oxygen and a higher concentration of toxins. Human skin, particularly when the body is strained, will be more vulnerable to absorb the toxins in this environment. Scanners are currently detecting… mild levels of toxic substance in the patient's blood. However, it is likely that the level will rise to... moderate, as most of the toxins will take up to 72 hours to take effect or even show in a scan.”

Padmé shook her head and got up from her bed before Anakin could say a word.

“Ohay, I've heard enough, thank you, GH-8.” The droid tried to protest, but Padmé sent it on its way, before turning back to Anakin, and gently taking his 'bruised' hand in hers. There was little gentleness in her expression, however.

“Come on, to the medcenter we go.”

“I'm,” Anakin objected, “I'm really supposed to go to the temple for these things. And I already skipped that to come talk to you…”

“Did you even hear what he said? You have toxins in your blood. Temple or medcenter, your choice.”
Padmé's visible worry and anxiety were now gone, and instead she had assumed her full-on no-prisoners problem solving mode. And in this case, Anakin was the problem.

But she was right – coming here had been a bad idea. Obi-Wan had probably sent an admission note to the Halls of Healing hours before they had even landed, and yet, here Anakin was, once again, avoiding the temple to be with his wife. And possibly dying as a result.

“Fine, temple it is.”

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Too soon, they were already kissing goodbye in the temple courtyard. In Anakin’s fantasies, anyway. Toxins, and all.

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An awful lot of Anakin's life these days seemed to pass by in a complete blur. Although he recognized Master Windu's face, Anakin couldn’t for the life of him figure out why that would be the first thing he saw upon waking up – instead of Padmé, Obi-Wan, Ahsoka, or a torture device.

“We don't normally find our Jedi Knights sprawled unconscious on the floor,” the Jedi Master observed.

Before Anakin had time to prepare for the contact, or even remember his hands were hurting along with the rest of his body, Windu had already grabbed them both and helped him to a standing position – which Anakin could just barely maintain.

“I'm sorry, Master Windu,” he apologized. “I was on my way to the Halls of Healing…”

“Where you should have been admitted about 12 hours ago. And where you clearly should stay for the better part of the week…” Windu's voice trailed off as he reassessed the statement. Anakin could sense his meaning – more Jedi Generals were needed on the battlefield, as always.

“Let me show you the way, Skywalker,” Windu volunteered, emphasizing every word as though talking to a small child, or a clueless tourist, as he started leading him down the hallway.

“You were the one who found me?” Anakin asked groggily.

“No… I was alerted by a very frightened group of younglings and their trainer. May I ask what is wrong with you, Skywalker?”

It took Anakin a second before he realized Master Windu meant health-wise – probably.

“Got some kind of poisoning on Vanqor 1.”

“Ah, yes… the Separatist weapon.”

Anakin had almost forgotten about the weapon. He sensed some rare uncertainty floating around the usually self-assured Windu, and ventured to ask about it.

“And have you started studying the weapon, Master? I have yet to see it, myself.”

“Please, do not trouble yourself with that right now.”

As they arrived at the entrance to the Halls, Windu summoned an attendant, and at their swift arrival, wouldn’t let Anakin speak for himself, but immediately ordered an examination, a body
scan, as well as a bacta tank to be filled – and no, he didn’t care if they were all taken, he was a member of the Jedi Council and this was one of the Republic’s best Generals.

Anakin couldn’t help a small smirk at the compliment, even if it was mostly just an argument that wasn’t even directed at him.

Before Windu could practically shove him into through the entrance to follow the attendant, Anakin remembered something with a jolt.

“Master Windu, where is Obi-Wan?”

“On his way back to Vanqor 1,” Windu replied impatiently. “For further investigation. Please –“

“What?” Anakin gasped. “No, that can’t be right – why would he have taken the ship back here only to –“

“Because you were on that ship, young one, and you were injured. Trust me, Kenobi and I already had this conversation, and it did not end in a very Jedi-like manner.”

“No, no, no, no, you don’t understand,” Anakin protested, trying the patience of yet another nurse that was waiting to attend to him. “You need to contact them now. It was Master Obi-Wan who rescued me from that cave.” At least, Anakin assumed it had been, and suddenly sidetracked into wondering how Obi-Wan had even managed that. Just how many droids had he... “Long story short, turns out the air on Vanqor 1 is way more poisonous than we initially thought, especially in the caves. You need to tell them to put masks on and get themselves checked at the medbay, now.”

Windu seemed mildly affronted by Anakin’s openly authoritative tone, but seemed inclined to believe him. Anakin's current appearance was probably lending him credibility.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Skywalker.” He then placed a firm hand on Anakin’s arm and pointed at the attendant. “Examination, now.”

- All non-Jedi were obviously prohibited from entering the temple, so Padmé had little choice but to assume that her dear daredevil of a husband was currently sleeping peacefully on the softest of beds, receiving the best treatment possible, and no one was needlessly chastising him for anything. Sometimes it truly felt as though she was the only one who knew how to confront Anakin in a way that didn’t leave him feeling completely humiliated and vaguely angry – no offense. Even Obi-Wan was a bit hit-and-miss.

While scrolling through the notes on her holopad to prepare for the morning session at the Senate, Padmé’s mind wandered. If only Anakin had led a slightly less hazardous life, and they could have talked things through last night.

For Padmé already had a theory – or at least the beginning of a suspicion. She had remembered something else – or rather, something had finally clicked into place – about the mysterious holo call they had intercepted on Scipio. Something that – had she only been an intrepid politician and not the wife of a powerful Jedi – would have probably caught her attention from the beginning.

“This entire takeover could have been accomplished without him unwittingly playing his part.”

Dooku had said that. Dooku, the leader of the Separatists. Only… that didn’t make any sense, not even a little. To be sure, the Confederacy had been blackmailing the newly stated head of the Clan, but… 'takeover'? Was it not the Republic that had 'taken over'? The Republic that had declared
ownership of the banks only hours later?

What possible ‘takeover’ on the Confederacy's part could Dooku have been referring to? Were they still working from behind the scenes? Not a far-fetched thought, but one that terrified Padmé to her core.

“The Sith control everything. You just don’t know it.”

Dooku had said that too, to Anakin. It was when he had dueled Dooku on Naboo a few months ago, before being taken hostage by the Count and eventually traded for General Grievous – by Padmé’s selfish decision. Anakin had then been forced to report the entire series of events to the Council, and once again gotten blamed for everything.

Only Padmé (and Jar Jar) had asked him if he was okay – mostly referring to the torture – but instead Anakin had told them what the Count had said to him before the duel, about the incident that started it all – the Battle of Naboo all those years ago. And how little had changed since then.

"The Sith control everything. You just don’t –"

“Senator Amidala, are you quite ready?”

Padmé started, afraid that she had just made a very un-politician-like face. Moteé, sitting next to her, was looking at her funnily, as though asking if she should answer the Chancellor’s question for her. Padmé raised her gaze embarrassedly.

“Yes, of course, Chancellor.”
The morning session at the Senate wasn't great, but it was only now that Padmé realized how desensitized she'd become to them not going great. It wasn't that she had given up on fighting for her beliefs, or let her principles be compromised in the face of blunt reality – it was just that sometimes it seemed she was just fighting out of principle, and the reality was that no one was listening. Sure, she'd had a few small victories, but even those, the highlights of her career, she had lately come to question and re-evaluate – had they ultimately been just that, her moments, her triumphs, a few rounds of applause for a well-spoken, well-dressed – well-looking – young politician? In the end, had they really benefited the causes she had advocated, the people she'd been trying to champion? It had been a while since she had asked Teckla how her family was doing, if they could afford water this month.

Meanwhile, most of the Senate was busy deliberating how much funds should go into studying and possibly re-purposing an enemy weapon, and how much into developing new ones – of course they were. And with the Republic's new ownership of the banks… Padmé was starting to feel physically ill. She slouched into the seat on her pod, regretting that she had wasted her speaking turn on her ready-made notes, instead of reacting to the maddening discussion. She thought about how her own husband had been with the team who retrieved the weapon, gotten poisoned as a result, and seemed to be the only one questioning the sense behind it all.

With the session about to end, Padmé finished up her notes – that, again, she would only get to present at the next gathering, shove them into an even more heated discussion about financing the enemy's utter decimation.

No. Not this time.

Knowing that Chancellor Palpatine would be free for the next half-hour, she quickly crafted a map in her mind that would get her to him the fastest. She did not always agree with the Chancellor's 'hard decisions', and wasn't sure he was always jumping up and down about her 'soft values', but at least the Republic leader always seemed willing to lend an ear.

As the politicians streamed out the doors into the corridors, Padmé (with Moteé's welcome help) virtually elbowed her way through about twenty other people trying to catch up to and claim a private chat with the Chancellor. Thankfully she was faster, more passionate, and more motivated than anybody else. And thankfully the Chancellor didn't seem to mind her company at all.

"Senator Amidala, what wise words you shared once again today. Something for all of us to think about, indeed."

"Yes… think about, act on…” She took a deep breath and lowered her voice before fire would start gushing out. There was a lot to say, about how ordinary people were suffering because of the war, about poverty and crime on the Outer Rim, about the water supply on Naboo - a water-based
planet, for goodness' sake! - and how some funds could be directed towards… but she had to start with something. She had to pick a theme.

But the Chancellor was faster.

"It is a greater responsibility than I could have imagined, leading the banks… I do wonder just how many sessions we yet have to dedicate to exactly how we will divide the funds. You brought up such excellent points, Senator Amidala, truly. To have to accept this duty under such deeply regrettable circumstances…” He gave her a long, sympathetic look. "Rush Clovis was your friend, was he not? Pardon my –" he hesitated, but Padmé knew exactly what was coming. "After we were unable to apprehend – well, you must have heard the reports that the poor man took his own life."

Padmé swallowed. She wondered how much 'funds' would go into replacing this sea-foam senate gown should she throw up on it. She quickly decided that if that happened, she would donate the sum to charity instead. In fact, she would donate to a charity today either way. The problem would be picking which charity.

Oblivious to her discomfort, the Chancellor was waiting for a response. Padmé thought back on the tower – the sky-high tower on Scipio, where everything had changed. Not just for her and Anakin, but for the man who had been deceived and lost everything as a result. The sky-high tower…

"Ahm," she uttered weakly, "I… they never found a body, did they?"

"No, they did not."

Then again, they never found many a body, which tended to happen in the aftermath of a violent planetary occupation. Padmé was still having trouble gathering up her thoughts. What wouldn't she have given to be that triumphant, well-spoken Senator now, instead of a stuttering little trauma survivor.

"Any news on General Skywalker?" the Chancellor asked. "I heard he was injured while retrieving the weapon. A brave soul, that young man."

- In the span of 48 hours, Anakin had been reprimanded four separate times by three separate Council members (all in holo form) for having 'waited' 12 hours before checking into the Halls and reporting on his condition. Still, according to Master Yoda, Obi-Wan and the rest of the current Vanqor team were in excellent health and had been able to get the proper treatment and don protective gear before any symptoms like Anakin's had appeared.

He had also been lauded for his 'quick thinking in his compromised condition', and for possibly having saved the very lives of his comrades – by Master Windu, who had actually talked to him in person.

Anakin himself didn't know which side to listen to. He had been wrong to go to Padmé first, but then, it felt nice to appreciated by Master Windu, for once… and most importantly; Obi-Wan, Rex, Cody, and the rest of the task team were alright. And thanks to the quick-acting bacta healing agents, Anakin could somewhat recognize himself in the mirror again – not that it mattered. It had been a while since he had even looked in a mirror, to the point that he had needed Padmé to point out he wasn't actually supposed to resemble a dried fruit.

Which reminded him, it was time for the morning checkup – or it had been about 15 minutes ago. He sat up on his bed and looked around the sterile white room.
"SH-9, you there?"

A matching medical white little droid scuttled into the room, its pale pink lamp eyes flickering. Anakin raised an eyebrow.

"General Skywalker, I am sorry, I was distracted. How are you feeling?"

"Fine, I guess."

"Please wait until my scanners warm up."

The cybernetic nurse placed its claw-like hands to the sides of his head, lamp-eyes blinking, as though in deep concentration. Anakin felt sorry for the poor thing – it clearly could have used an oil bath and some tuning up.

"Scanners warm. Currently detecting… very mild to… mild levels of toxic presence in the patient's blood. It is likely that most of the remaining toxins have been rendered harmless, and will leave the body via natural bodily functions."

Anakin smirked at the euphemism, suddenly reminded of another mechanical friend who tended to be a little too proper with their phrasing. Now he really wanted to do some tuning up, mess with the staff just a little...

"You can just say urine."

Instead of starting to over-explain like Threepio would have, the droid whirred closer to Anakin's bedside and placed a metallic paw on his flesh hand.

"I am sorry. Secondary scanner in need of maintenance, requires bodily contact to operate."

"No problem." Except that Anakin was going crazy thinking up all the modifications, reparations and improvements he wanted to give to this droid, who was supposed to be a newer and specialized model of the standard GH-series. It was no accident that Padmé's droid had diagnosed him so quickly and efficiently, to the point of surprising Anakin himself.

"Detecting – detecting – detecting -"

"Take your time."

"Detecting – detecting – detecting -"

Exactly what was being detected, Anakin never found out, as the droid suddenly froze completely and didn't react as Anakin withdrew his hand. Great... Anakin picked up the feather light healthcare professional, who was now making a funny whizzing noise, turning it over to try to find the off switch.

While he did, Anakin felt a familiar presence approaching, and soon enough there was a knock on the door.

"Come in."

It was Master Windu again. Anakin knew full well what most of the Council members thought about his grease monkey tendencies and un-Jedi-like hobbies, but he was too engrossed with the droid to put it down.

"Skywalker, we – something wrong with that droid?"
"Maybe," Anakin said vaguely, realizing that he would have to put it down in the honorable presence of a Council member. "Can you take it to maintenance?"

Windu, forced to give up the spot he had specifically chosen to stand on, in a specific ceremonious position, walked over and awkwardly picked up the droid. Immediately, it turned back on – momentarily, as though to purposely startle the Jedi Master – and it was all Anakin could do to suppress a loud, snorting laughter. As the droid shut back down, it sounded a little sad.

Windu quickly regained his composure, as a seasoned Jedi should.

"Ahem… you look a lot better, Skywalker. Obi-Wan sends his regards, and will be in touch with you later today."

Anakin shrugged. "I'll probably be free."

"Yes… that is why I'm here, actually. Were you, uh, cleared by the droid before it…?"

Anakin's face perked up. Master Windu was finding him something to do? He'd take anything over sitting up here twiddling his non-matching thumbs.

"Yes, absolutely. Fit as a fiddle."

Windu cast him a skeptical look, but Anakin was used to shielding his mind from Council members. If anything, it was his smarmy smile that was about to give him away.

"Good… well, I would like you to rest for the remainder of the day, at least. But considering your potentially unstable condition… as long as you have to remain on Coruscant, you might as well make yourself useful. I seem to remember you asking me about the weapon yesterday. A team of scientists and engineers have now begun examining it, and… well, there is a very specific problem they have encountered. One that might just require the combined skills of a Jedi, as well as someone with… mechanical inclinations."

Anakin was nodding, trying to disguise his eagerness as concentration.

"It's probably a long shot. But the Senate have taken an unusually high interest in the weapon, for whatever reason, and it took some power play on my part to even get a Jedi representative on the team."

"Jedi… representative?"

"Well, more of a… honorary member, or a…” Windu cracked a rare smile, and added with a hand-wave, "Guest star."

Anakin could no longer hide his grin from Windu, or his enthusiasm from the Force. The corners of his mouth only shot downwards as soon as Windu left, and Anakin remembered he wasn't supposed to be this excited about an unknown weapon, or feel this much purpose in his life.

Obi-Wan kept his promise and holo called Anakin later in the afternoon. He was wearing a heavy set of protective gear, but even through the thick glass of his helmet, Anakin could see the Jedi Master's… openly relieved expression? Who was this sappy old man, and what had he done with Anakin's emotionless Master?

"Anakin, we are very thankful for your helpful instructions. And a little embarrassed that we failed
to conduct proper research before coming here…”

Well, that made two thank-you's versus three reprimands. *Not bad.*

”You sure you okay, Master? I took a bacta bath, but I'm guessing you didn't pack a tank.”

”We had some travel-sized solutions, don't worry, Anakin. Oh, it's that way, Captain Rex.”

Anakin waved a hello to his second-in-command, who flashed a smile and thumped a fist against his chest in a gesture of admiration, then walked off-screen.

”Anakin,” Obi-Wan continued, ”I could just give you a simple mission report, but I already gave one to the Council and we…” He was shifting uneasily, as though constantly checking the time, or whether his surroundings were still safe, or whether someone was hurrying him up.”I have to go soon. I just thought it right to thank you.”

Thank... *him*? Suddenly Anakin remembered. (What was even going on with his memory these days? This had better be temporary side effect from the toxins.)

”Master, wait!”

”Yes?”

”I, I never thanked you. For the… rescue.”

”Think nothing of it.”

”I never asked you how you pulled that off, either. I really thought I was a goner.”

”Anakin, I have to be a goner now. And it's called dual wielding. Quite useful against multiple enemies at once.” He said the last few words with a smug smirk, which Anakin couldn't help but mirror.

Hours later, Anakin found he felt an odd sense of… fullness, which he didn't think had anything to do with the remaining toxins in his body or their effect on his appetite. He racked his brain for the right word; satisfaction, *no*; gratification, *no*; complacency, now why in the world would he have felt *that*?

Contentment was a nicer word for sure, but that maybe seemed a bit too strong for the circumstances. Maybe this was just… hopefulness.

He waved awkwardly at the group of younglings that had appeared in his doorway, assuming they were the ones who had found him passed out on the floor. One of them was even holding what looked like a bouquet of self-picked flowers (from the indoor gardens? Was that even allowed?). Before Anakin could beckon them inside, the younglings' trainer appeared, and shoved them away from view.

-  

Determined to make the most of his improved mood (and possibly ruin it), Anakin decided to skip his second scheduled bacta dip and sneak out to see Padmé. According to the droid, he was mostly fine, and the tanks were all technically taken anyway… He was almost sure he would get caught sooner or later, but then, he could just say he had wanted some fresh air. As long as he didn’t say he had *just* wanted some fresh air.
No mind tricks were needed (and not that they would have worked) when one had mastered the old ‘look like you belong’ trick. With freshly washed tunics that were only slightly damp, and an unhurting skin that was only lightly blue, he greeted one temple dweller after another while making his way outside. Reaching the courtyard, he was even handed his due flower bouquet, while the trainer looked on with suspicion.

Both Padmé and Anakin were intimately familiar with each other’s daily schedules, but only when they were both on Coruscant, and had some semblance of an everyday routine at all. And ‘intimately’ was indeed often the key word… not this time, though. Anakin had tried to push it out of his mind, but there was really no point. It was time.

Still, he would have probably been proud of his tracking skills – there she was, sitting in her office, alone, while Motéé had her break – if he hadn’t also sensed her through the Force – but more importantly, had that weird sense of accomplishment not immediately crumbled at the sight of her slumped in her chair, softly wiping away tears.

“Padmé!” he exclaimed, ready to fight whomever had brought this about. "What’s wrong?"

He had sneaked in like a ghost without realizing it, and Padmé started. “Anakin!”

She swept up the last of the sticky, salty water from her cheeks.

“Oh, it’s just– it's stupid-” She only now seemed to properly register her husband’s presence, and sprung up from the chair to meet him across the room. Anakin jerked back a little - he might still be poisonous - but took both her hands as she offered them.

“You look so much better," Padmé remarked. "How are you feeling?’’

Anakin stared at her. Up close, he could see her red, puffed-up cheeks, and sense in the Force that she had been shedding more than a single 'stupid' tear.

“Uh… how are you?” He suddenly remembered what he had stashed away in his tunic, and reached underneath to produce a lovely bouquet of assorted flowers. “You have a vase?”

Surprised and delighted, Padmé gave a heartfelt laughter - which did a lot to ease Anakin's mind - and immediately started looking for one.

“You silly old romantic…” She had her back turned as she delved into one of her cupboards. “I’m... fine, really. It’s just… I haven't seen you for two days… and… well, I was having lunch with – with Bail and the Chancellor, and…” She paused for a moment. "You know, sometimes Bail can just be really, really harsh."

“Yeah? Isn’t he like… your best friend?”

“And most trusted ally. In the Senate, anyway. It’s just…” She spun around, with a lovely vase in hand. “Well, he doesn’t seem nearly as concerned as I am of the Republic’s takeover of the Banking Clan. Sure, he still advocates for peace, but… after Clovis, he’s gotten more… suspicious of everyone - not paranoid, but suspicious… and somehow less… optimistic. About everything.”

Anakin shifted at the mention of Clovis – why was Obi-Wan always telling him to get over things, without ever teaching him how? – but kept listening.

“I know Clovis wasn’t your favorite person either, and I still can't believe he did what he did, but at least he told you the truth about what happened. And…”
She paused again, and Anakin really, really wanted to clench his fist harder, and say a few choice words about Clovis, but it was so obviously beside Padmé’s point, that he could just barely stop himself.

“You know, even if he had turned out to be a traitor - again - or a Separatist… I think I would have still wanted to talk to him. To try to understand.”

Okay, now she was being too nice.

“I wouldn’t.”

Padmé raised her gaze, suddenly energized again, and suddenly confrontational again. She marched up to Anakin, snatched up the flower bouquet with a discontented sound, and went to find water.

“Clovis was probably a bad example. You remember my friend Mina Bonteri… the Separatist?”

“I do.”

“And how she… passed away?”

“Yes…”

Padmé stopped in her tracks, looking as though she had forgotten her point. She slowly turned towards Anakin. The Force around her now registered as a little more forgiving, but also more unsettled. “Anakin, you still look a little pale. Shouldn’t you go back to the temple?”

“Padmé, you know why I’m here.”

She nodded slowly, biting her lip. “Anakin, I don’t know if I… if I can have that conversation right now. It’s just…” She wiped away a fresh tear, this time just the one. Then she met his eyes again. “Okay, let’s have a quick version. I trust you, do you trust me?”

“I… of course I trust you…”

“Good, good.” She filled the vase with her own drinking water and placed the finished composition on her desk, gazing at it with a sad smile. “Then that’s all we need, I think. For now.”

Anakin sighed. Once again, he realized just how much he depended on Padmé, on her being the strong one, on her always being consistent and stable and ready to take on the world… because whenever she wasn’t, what did he have to offer in the way of compensation?

And she was wrong, too. He knew that the trust between them went at least three ways. It was that constantly wavering fourth line of trust that was the problem.

Because, in the end, did Anakin really trust himself?
Worthless

Padmé had a rudimentary understanding of the Force – Anakin had explained it to her any number of times. At some point, she had simply accepted that with every explanation, the concept would inevitably seem even more confusing and contradictory and mythical, and even a Force user as powerful as her husband was still in many ways a learner, seeking to understand its secrets as well as respect its certain mystery.

Their contrasting relationships with the Force rarely ever created friction between the spouses. Sometimes Anakin would sense what Padmé was feeling and make a very inaccurate approximation of her thoughts, and she'd get annoyed with his trying to 'read her mind'. But this mostly happened when she was already upset with him over something else, and he was just trying to understand where she was coming from. Padmé knew that Anakin would never, ever purposely or maliciously invade her head.

Then there were things like the nightmares Anakin had had about his mother. Nightmares that had become reality – as little as she liked to look back on that horrid, horrid day. But there were things he just kind of knew. 'Bad feelings' he'd occasionally have about something.

Padmé had had bad feelings before. (Good ones, too, thankfully.) She'd had premonitions before. Some of them had come true, too. The main difference, really, between her bad feelings and Anakin's, was that she couldn't credit the Force for their eventual accuracy. Occasionally, she'd just have a feeling. An ordinary, mundane, unspiritual feeling.

An unshakable feeling.

She was having one now. She couldn't quite give it words yet. But the essence of it was that something was wrong. And not just the everyday kind of wrong – they were in the middle of a war, one would be hard-pressed to find something right these days – and even her and Anakin's shocking discovery on top of the tower seemed less the substance, and more the trigger.

It was as though something was wrong – and she was standing right next to it. Looking at it. Talking to it. Respecting it, admiring it – not always in harmony or agreement with it – but enabling it.

And all the while, completely blind to it. Completely blind to its utter wrongness.

It was as though she was staring at it, and seeing – not a right – but reason. Listening to it, and hearing – not an ideal – but a solution. Smiling at it, and believing – not in an utopia – but a future.

Something was wrong, and she was looking right at it.

It seemed that Anakin had built up perhaps too optimistic an image of this first meeting with the weapon investigation team. After yesterday's non-talk with Padmé, seeing his wife uncharacteristically upset and fragile – and later, being scolded for 'running away' from the temple like some naughty youngling – he'd been looking forward to finally getting to be useful, actually good for something. Making amends for his past mistakes, making his Master proud and wife happy – somehow – finally finding his place within the Order – all in one go. An instant fix-all.

Things were not off to a very good start. Master Windu was accompanying him to the research area (close to the facility where the infamous Zillo Beast had been studied), and the Jedi Master seemed
to have gone back to his usual wary, skeptical and irritable presence. Wary and skeptical towards Anakin, specifically. For no apparent reason – except Anakin's running away from the temple, of course. But honestly, he wasn't nine anymore.

Plus, Anakin's headache was back. But he retained enough of his initial enthusiasm that he hardly noticed it.

Inside the large, high-ceilinged hall, he was introduced to the rest of the weapon research team, and they welcomed the 'Jedi representative' warmly enough. In fact, he soon learned that one of them, a young assistant, was an admirer of his – and had a somewhat forward way of expressing it – which in and of itself would have made Anakin uncomfortable enough, but was somehow made worse by the fact that his good friend Chancellor Palpatine was present, and casting the pair mildly amused looks.

"General Skywalker, welcome,” Palpatine greeted, walking over to intervene, and cutting short the poor girl's seventh pick-up line. Anakin reached forward to formally shake his hand, as they usually did, but Palpatine seemed to be in a good mood, and have no qualms about openly exhibiting their friendship, and leaned for a casual hug.

Anakin had not received many hugs, especially of the friendly or familial kind, since he had left his mother – and the odd exception still had a way of surprising him. Usually, the surprise was of pleasant sort – not many of his enemies either wanted or dared to hug him – but this time, something else happened.

Something suddenly felt wrong. Anakin's heart started pounding fast. His breathing became uneven. His headache was gone – replaced by something far more vague, yet far worse. All of a sudden, he felt unsafe, unprotected, useless, helpless and worthless, all at once. He felt trapped, smothered, stifled.

The hug hardly lasted longer than a second. The feeling disappeared as quickly as it had come, so quickly that Anakin was almost certain he'd imagined it. He'd certainly been able to conceal it, at least from the onlookers. The flirtatious assistant girl cast an aching look towards the handsome General – me next! – while the rest of the team merely smiled at the odd pair of friends. Windu quite obviously disapproved, and seemed impatient to get down to business.

Anakin didn't know what to make of the Chancellor's face, either, as the Republic leader withdrew and gave a chummy tap on Anakin's shoulder. His expression was still open, smiling, warm, neutral – and yet...

It was as though he had –

It was as though –

As Windu led them further across the hall, launching into an explanation about the weapon's mysterious origins and the retrieval mission, Anakin quickly lost track of his thoughts again.

The weapon had been dubbed Crys, apparently to honor the clone who had more or less personally seen to its safe transportation, while all his commanding officers had been… busy. Anakin was amazed that for once, a single clone trooper's achievements were being recognized like this. The weapon was much, much smaller than Anakin had anticipated, about the size and shape of a well-fed bantha, while its exterior surface and color were more reminiscent of the B2 series' design.

As he circled and gestured towards their new metallic friend, Windu hardly shared any new information. The scientists and engineers were making faces as though they had actually been the
ones to explain all of this to Windu, and were obviously much better-informed and better-versed in the field. Still, Windu was apparently accurate enough in his briefing that no one thought it appropriate or necessary to interrupt him, and soon he got to the part that he thought would be of special interest to Anakin. He halted in his tracks and gave Anakin a significant look.

"You can feel it too… can you not, Skywalker?"

"Uh, feel what?"

"Inside the weapon. The…” He searched for the word. "…rippling. Very reminiscent of that of a kyber crystal, do you not agree? Perhaps impure kyberite, or a mutated form of ranite?"

Anakin tried to concentrate. The Force around him suddenly felt very indistinct, and nondescript. Technically the same – inasmuch as it ever was – but somehow… blank. He closed his eyes.

Anakin reached towards the weapon, and suddenly felt it with a thump. The weapon's essence, the source of its power… it did resemble that of a kyber crystal – that luminous, boundless energy. Yet, what he sensed hardly felt either luminous or boundless – quite the opposite, in fact. Powerful, of great potential… but weakened, tied down. Smothered, almost.

Anakin opened his eyes and nodded. He also realized that the weapon's nickname probably stemmed from the crystal after all, and not Crys the clone trooper, mostly known by his number. Still, it was a funny coincidence.

"I feel it, Master Windu."

The scientists looked confused. The girl was trying to find excuses to move closer to Anakin while asking, "Feel what?"

"The core,” Anakin said vaguely. "But… it's not kyber, is it?”

"No, I don't think it is,” Windu said. "Similar… but not the same."

"I'm guessing you need me to take the weapon apart… and try to figure out how it works, how it harnesses the power of the… whatever."

"That's exactly right. For years, we thought the crystals on the first moon of Vanqor were worthless, inhabiting such… modest surroundings… but now it appears we might have been wrong. It appears that something very similar to the most powerful mineral in the galaxy itself resides inside this frail metal exterior."

Anakin nodded, then suddenly remembered something. "Master Windu… I usually prefer to use my own tools."

Windu gave a deep sigh. "I'm guessing you left them in your temple quarters."

"And in my freighter, my starfighter…” Senator Amidala's office…

"You could have said something earlier, Skywalker. I am not going to play errand boy for you.”

The assistant girl volunteered, but Windu ordered all of them take a break while a very forgetful General goes to get his tools. He was needed elsewhere now, good day!

Anakin normally did not mind the Chancellor's company at all, but now he found himself cursing the fact that he could not go to Padmé's office first – he had left some of his best tools there when
he had fixed the built-in holo screen on her desk last week. Was there any excuse he could think of to accompany the Chancellor to the Senate building? (And it would soon be an opportune time to see Padmé too, maybe try to lift her spirits, or maybe even –)

"Do you mind if I accompany you as far as the Jedi temple?" the Chancellor asked, then added with a laughter, "That is, as far as us laymen are allowed to go. I happen to have some spare time on my hands, and was thinking of visiting the market nearby."

Anakin stared at him. He was pretty sure the Chancellor had at least three personal chauffeurs… but sure?

Suddenly, his strange feeling was back – even though his anxiety was gone – it was just an empty feeling, utterly devoid of substance or a theme. It was as though he sensed something, and felt silly about it, because there was nothing to sense, just blankness. And he didn't really know what it had to do with the Chancellor, either – he was just asking a simple, friendly question.

And saying yes would not even inconvenience him that much – he needed tools from the temple, too. And the Twilight.

"Sure. If you don't mind riding in my freighter, that is. Obi-Wan maintains it's a worthless heap of refuse."

"Oh, I'm sure your Master is exaggerating."

The ride to the temple was hardly any less odd than Anakin's current mindspace. The Chancellor did have exactly three personal chauffeurs, one of whom rode with them, silently and without as much as greeting Anakin. Anakin caught himself giving the Chancellor long, idle stares that didn't mean anything, and didn't communicate anything. Odder still, the elderly politician appeared completely unaffected by this behavior, expression neutral at all times, countenance jovial more often than not. It was only once that he asked Anakin whether he was okay – that was when he was about to take the wrong direction, too distracted to even remember he was piloting a vehicle.

Never mind remembering what the Chancellor had been saying.

- Anakin was not able to catch Padmé that afternoon. It was one of her busiest weekdays, and he only sensed her in another room as he sneaked into her newly flower-decorated office. Her presence felt calmer, more centered – yet more turbulent. It was as though she was fighting with herself – trying to decide what to do, or what to think.

Anakin shook his head. That was awfully precise from this distance, with at least two hundred more people in that very room. Perhaps he was again confusing his own thoughts and feelings with his wife's.

- As Anakin arrived back to work, the scientists and engineers had all scattered across the hall to their other duties – even the flirtatious girl had found something to busy herself with, and thankfully did not notice Anakin's return at all. It seemed that Anakin was, after all, more of a 'chief operative' rather than 'a guest star', at least as far as studying this weapon went.

Anakin briefly went over his tools. He had brought many that he wouldn't actually need – it seemed that earlier he'd just been in a mood for a brief spin in his freighter. And it seemed that he still couldn't quite decide whether to put his best effort forward and impress everyone, or treat this
as just another assignment for a recovering military officer.

It didn't take him long to remove the weapon's metal exterior, and inside he found a fairly standardly built gun system. He had seen a thousand more complicated variations – this model looked at least a few years old.

He suddenly remembered that Master Windu had mentioned 'a problem', and as he carefully disassembled the weapon piece by piece, he soon found out what it was – the innermost core of Crys was shielded with a wall made from the same mineral, the mysterious crystal. It was tethered to the machinery so that if one did not cut through carefully, the entire weapon could break down beyond repair, and beyond any further study.

It was at this point that Anakin realized that even though he was inches away from actually touching the crystal, its presence in the Force had hardly grown stronger – it was still indistinct, suggesting a great potential, but as though… shriveled somehow. Not unlike the crystals on Vanqor 1, which he had hardly even paid attention to, except unconsciously as part of the landscape.

Anakin's estimation of the crystal's properties turned out to be correct – his lightsaber was able to easily cut through the mineral, and though he felt a certain 'protest' in the Force as the protective wall was severed in half, it was as though the faux kyber had given up on trying to resist the destructive power of its superior elder sibling.

Anakin reached to grab the core crystal. He was able to remove it easily – in the end, he felt like anyone could have done this job. But he was intrigued. The crystal was very small, had a watery blue color; emitting a faint glow, its rippling feel in the Force not translating to the tangible sense of touch.

So… was it worthless? Was that why the weapon had been abandoned? Had someone simply mistaken this ornate piece of rock for a kyber crystal, or another weaponizable mineral – it did have something of a signature in the Force – and placed it inside a gun that had probably never fired a shot in its life?

Yes, Anakin was now curious – mostly purely from an engineer's viewpoint. He still didn't quite now why he was here, whom he was helping by performing this service. He suddenly kind of wanted to go back to Vanqor, or at least hear that mission report from Obi-Wan. Had they found out more about the properties of these crystals? Could there be another weapon like this – one with the real deal at its core?

Although, mostly, he just wanted to see Obi-Wan, and Rex, and the rest of the gang. For all their faults, their Force presences always felt comfortably constant – consistent, unwavering. And stronger – far stronger than the weak little thing resting on Anakin's palm.

Always the same. Sometimes, same was quite enough. Sometimes, he just really didn't care to be surprised.
"Is this not a prime example of what I have been saying, My Lord? Always in need of a rescue, never quite on top of the situation. I fear that for all his power, he will one day make a miscalculation we had not foreseen, and all of our careful planning will go to waste."

Sidious found himself amused. Amused that his apprentice should have grown so bold lately, so open in his disapproval of Skywalker – but mostly amused that Tyranus still seemed to believe that his Master wanted someone independent, someone invincible, someone polished and precise. That couldn’t have been further from the truth. Sidious wanted the chaos, the raw destructive power, the anger, the hate, and even the fatal flaw – no, he needed the fatal flaw, he was counting on it. He wanted the storm so he could trap it in a bottle, re-purpose it for his own use, remake it in his own image. He wanted someone he could rescue from the darkest of pits, offer a hand of salvation when all else was lost.

Tyranus was foolish to want the opposite. Ironically, it would ultimately prove his undoing. He was an independent thinker, but evidently not independent enough, to constantly betray himself in this manner.

"You still have your heart set on Kenobi."

"I shall, of course, do as –"

"I must wonder whether your reasons are strategic… or sentimental. I understand – Kenobi is your last remaining link to your dear old Jedi apprentice."

"I assure you, My Lord, my reasons are strategic and strategic only."

Sidious privately considered the notion. He didn't have the least intention of deviating from his design – he had spent all this time cultivating Skywalker and plotting Kenobi's death. But then, he had lately sensed some disturbances in the Force that could prove problematic towards either outcome. And he always relished the opportunity to put Tyranus in his place. Rapidly, a scheme began to take shape in his head – a delightful side project, which could kill multiple birds with one stone.

Thankfully, Tyranus' thoughts were ever so easy to read.

"You believe… if Skywalker were to be killed… that could trigger Kenobi's defection." Sidious chuckled quietly. "You would sacrifice my chosen apprentice to merely try to prove your point? Risk losing everything for nothing? Losing willing excellence for grudging mediocrity?"

"Perhaps, My Lord – we could test my theory."

"Yes – your theory as well as mine. See which of the two potential apprentices we can better bend to our will – who will more readily embrace the dark side in a time of crisis. A crisis of the heart. War, you see, has a numbing effect – it takes something personal to truly break a Jedi."

"What, pray tell, do you have in mind, My Lord?"

Obi-Wan hoped all this sweating would be worth it. Truthfully, he was not completely sure what he was still doing on this abandoned poisonous moon, why he was still encased in this clammy suit.
He spun around, sensing a tentative hopefulness from his troops – *time to go home?*

“Just a little farther, men, then we’ll set up camp and take a break,” the General announced. Cody nodded, his helmet-clad countenance giving away nothing, but the Force around him betraying some impatience. Impatience, from *Cody.* The Commander nevertheless made a reaffirming gesture at the rest of the task team, trudging behind them, and some of them gave tired salutes and noises.

Obi-Wan tried to think of excuses to contact the Council before they reached the next check-point. Here he was, in the middle of another barren plain (no matter how austerely beautiful), tiring out these good men in search of clues that could never turn up. Or turn up in the form of another company of those infernal B2’s that Anakin had barely survived (there had been about 30 left by the time Obi-Wan had shown up. The kid had done good.) But until something happened, Obi-Wan had to wonder just exactly what he would report about next.

In his report on their preceding mission, he had ‘forgotten’ to mention Anakin's role in triggering the droid attack, in order to spare him - this once - from the Council’s reprimands. He already received plenty from his Master, every single day, and it *had* been a mere accident (caused by insubordination, *but…*) that had almost cost him his life. Enough was enough.

But while the droid incident might have been a mischance, Obi-Wan knew that Anakin got into plenty of trouble quite by design. Obi-Wan had a pretty good idea where (or to whom) Anakin had gone before checking into the Halls of Healing an astonishing 12 hours late (the mistake had been made when no one had strapped him onto a stretcher when the ship had landed).

There were many things about Anakin and Padmé that Obi-Wan still had a difficult time thinking consciously about. For a long time, he’d been comfortable pretending he didn't know. And Anakin pretending that he didn’t know Obi-Wan knew.

Scipio had changed that – Rush Clovis had changed that. The Jedi weren’t supposed to get attached, therefore they weren’t supposed to act jealous. Feel jealousy, maybe, but Anakin always did have a very outward, aggressive sort of way of expressing his feelings.

It was then that Obi-Wan had known he’d have to reach out to Anakin. To somehow, however discreetly, let him know that he knew. It was the only way he could give him advice – which had basically boiled down to *whatever you do, please don’t murder her ex.*

To Obi-Wan’s great surprise, Anakin had all but admitted the relationship. The – the *marriage.*

Marriage.

Obi-Wan searched his feelings. He’d had some time to consider his stance. His first instinct had been disbelief – but had it *really?* Anakin and Padmé being marital spouses, instead of just devoted lovers, considering how they acted towards one another – had it really been *that* much of a surprise? (It just made it more official – the relationship *and* the utter disregard of the Jedi code. Oh well.)

Obi-Wan had to confess – however reluctantly – that he might have also felt a little… envious. He had never meant to say a word to Satine about his fantasies of resigning from the Jedi order, not after they’d grown apart so fatefully – but he had, out loud, and now he’d hear those words replaying in his head long, long after she’d decayed in her grave.

But Anakin… he had just jumped right in. Probably without a second thought. He’d taken one look at Padmé and seen his future… *seized* his future.
Without giving up his honorable Jedi title – for now.

It was unfair – but Obi-Wan had gotten past it – and now he… well.

Could he now finally admit to himself that he was happy for his former Padawan? Just as Anakin would have been so, so happy for him and Satine, teased them mercilessly like there was no tomorrow…(And there had not been.)

He wondered what Anakin was up to now. Apparently he was recovering well, and Master Windu had apparently put him in the weapon investigation team. Good… there was nothing Anakin liked better than getting to be useful, and – Obi-Wan supposed – getting to be himself. His Jedi skills, he had been taught. His mechanical prowess, he’d cultivated himself, started way back when as a puny slave boy. He’d made himself valuable, before he’d technically had any value at all.

All of these thoughts, Obi-Wan cherished. He cherished being happy for Anakin, as he cherished Anakin. But the Jedi in him, the upright Council member in him was still there. There was a reason for every rule in the Order, a reasoning behind every verse in the Code. There were a billion different ways this could all eventually destroy Anakin. Not his attachment… but the depth of it. Not his feelings… but their magnitude. Not his impulses… but his actions.

And when that day came, Obi-Wan would blame himself. For having been lenient. For having been 'happy for him.'

- 

“So basically, yes, the weapon draws power from the core crystal, while the crystal wall does double duty as a protective shield, and a secondary energy source. At least, that was the designer’s intention, I think. The crystal is very weak… and I don’t even really know what it is. It’s like a…”

Anakin caught himself. He realized he had already explained the same thing, with slightly different words, at least three times to the team and his two supervisors. And none of them seemed all that surprised or drastically enlightened by his analysis. As Anakin had surmised, anyone could’ve done this job. Why was he still here?

“And would you like to hear our analysis of the crystal, Master Jedi?” the assistant girl – who had actually turned out to be a brilliant budding scientist – asked in a very professional and serious tone. Anakin nodded, warily.

The girl held up a holopad, and scrolled down. This only seemed to be for show, however, so that she could look up from it with a very deliberate and sensuous expression, and gaze at Anakin while explaining, “It is kyberite. In fact, it is a very rare and powerful mutation of kyber crystal that naturally emits a color even before bonding with a Force-sensitive. Many have believed this mutation to be merely the stuff of legends and conjecture.”

“I am one of those many,” Master Windu confessed, looking stern as ever. “Powerful? Its presence in the Force comes and goes, and even that blue glow is barely a color.”

Anakin opened his fist for all to see. The crystal seemed to be growing smaller and smaller every time he gazed down at it, and indeed, the glow fainter and fainter.

“We currently believe that despite the crystal’s extraordinary properties, it is vulnerable to a specific toxic substance that occurs in the atmosphere of the first moon of Vanqor. We saw what those toxins did to General Skywalker. We also believe that since most of our databases were not up to date in regards to the moon’s climate, the toxins must have grown stronger and more
widespread over time.”

Anakin sighed. He would have probably had greater respect for the girl’s intelligence, were it not for her fluttering her eyelashes at him at the end of every sentence. Or winking. Yeah, the winking was probably worse.

“According to General Kenobi’s recent report, the crystal formations found on Vanqor 1 are not kyberite,” Windu stated matter-of-factly.

“Yes, Master Windu, but we already agreed that this is a rare variant. And we don’t know whether it originates from Vanqor 1 at all.”

“But if it were found somewhere else… somewhere where it has not been subject to corrosion…”

“It would be quite a different story. I can’t even begin to imagine how powerful it would be – how beautiful it would look.”

Palpatine glanced at Anakin. The girl had, of course, been looking at the Jedi while stressing the word ‘beautiful’. Anakin wished his wife would appear crashing through the ceiling in her slick star skiff, jump off and smooch him full on the mouth right then and there, so hard he’d arch backwards. Then he would carry her in his arms to the ship, and together they would fly far, far away from here.

“I see,” Windu mused. He looked at Palpatine, proceeding to ask in a coldly professional manner, “Should we perhaps be looking to… expand our search? We know that there are similar crystalline formations on the mother planet, many of whose areas still remain uncharted and unstudied. And – Force forbid – if there is another gun like this with an unadulterated crystal at its heart – perhaps still with the Separatists…”

“Yes, I shudder to think of the implications,” Palpatine agreed. He turned his gaze to Anakin, and for a brief moment, Anakin remembered yesterday – and how there was nothing to really remember. “Say, how fare you today, my boy?” the Chancellor asked. “Feeling up to another adventure?”

Anakin hesitated, a little taken aback by the proposal (and so was Windu, who had obviously not been consulted first). Anakin actually had been cleared by a medical droid this morning (“detecting no toxic presence in the patient’s blood”, it had said), and he missed Obi-Wan and Rex, and retained a childlike curiosity in this miraculous crystal, and most definitely wanted to keep it from falling into the wrong hands…

But he wanted – no, desperately needed to talk to Padmé first. He knew now that there was more to this war than it appeared on the surface, and more of his very soul that was no longer private, that his enemies saw and wanted for their own, and he desperately needed to know just what she was thinking when she looked at him now, how they could ever combat this, with all the time they spent apart, and how – how –

“Um… is it alright if I leave tomorrow? I need to… get my ship back in order… maybe get a second opinion on my health, just in case…”

Windu was nodding at this completely valid reasoning, but he didn’t seem quite on the same page with the Chancellor just yet. The Chancellor seemed to sense this, and replied to Anakin, “But of course. That will give us time to make some preparations… and for the Council to give their approval as well.”
“Indeed… our approval,” Windu muttered as he turned to leave.

- 

“You know… we have this whole night to ourselves.”

“Yes, we do.”

“And… once we start talking, it'll probably ruin the mood.”

“Probably.”

Anakin rolled on the bed to his side, resting his head on his cybernetic hand. Padmé followed his example, rolling towards him as well, and found herself staring. *When had he even* - well. He was already dressed appropriately for the occasion… save for one minute detail, covering a not-so-minute one.

“And you're in the mood now.”

“M-hm.”

“Should one of us start talking dirty now? I feel like this is a very mundane way to start.”

“Well, let's see…”

She caressed his bare skin with the back of her hand. First his shoulder, moving slowly towards his chest…

“Before you leave for your mission, Master Jedi, just to be sure you've regained your vigor…” Anakin closed his eyes. *Good,* he was liking it. “I need to conduct one last… full-body search on you.”

To her surprise, Anakin grinned, then burst into laughter. Playfully swatting her hand away, he rolled to his back, covering that impish smile in his hands.

“You're mixing up police terms and medical terms. Just pick a theme, Padmé.”

Padmé gasped, mock offended. She grabbed a cushion from the foot of her bed and began pounding Anakin with it – whom she hadn’t heard laugh like this since they had rolled in the grass on Naboo, which seemed a lifetime ago. As he shielded his head, still laughing, she hesitated for a while – a couple of days ago, his whole body had been hurting – until he raised his eyes and shot her a *‘what gives?’* sort of look.

*Now* she was in the mood.
Deception

Chapter Notes

Some of you may have already noticed, but the lore about Vanqor and its moons is just kind of an amalgamation of the tcw canon and legends and stuff I made up… I needed a crystal-based planet and I like Vanqor. It has gundarks. But for example, I'm not completely sure it has moons in tcw (like it does in legends) and depending on the canon it has either a crystalline terrain or a desert one (I'm using the former, the tcw one).

There's some more background/plot stuff about Vanqor in this chapter, so just that everyone knows, I mostly try to operate within the tcw/prequels canon but I also enjoy building upon it :)

The conversation went much better than Padmé had dared to anticipate. Normally, avoiding any obligation for long was never a good sign, or a good way to start. And postponing the topic for yet another two hours to spend the time on carnal pleasures instead was hardly the most mature approach. But this time – she didn't know how she could have better communicated what he’d wanted to know. What she thought of him now – the absolute world – or how she looked at him – like he was the brightest of suns, the rarest of crystals, the most precious of treasures. What she couldn’t give words, she said with her eyes, with her touch, her kisses.

And what she did give words – she knew he heard, loud and clear.

Still...

"But it makes sense, doesn't it? You're powerful. And you've told me the Sith don't ask for permission, they take what they want."

"...What they can get."

"Exactly. Which is why they'll never have you."

"'Unwittingly'. I remember Dooku saying that. That I've been 'unwittingly' playing my part."

Padmé fell silent for a while. Yeah, she remembered that too. And it reminded her of something else Dooku had said… in the same breath.

"I wonder… if we've all been unwittingly playing our parts. If all this time… we've all been deceived somehow."

Next to her, Anakin shifted. He seemed to feel a little chilly all of a sudden, and tugged the dreamsilk covers up over his neck. "What do you mean?"

"'This entire takeover could have been accomplished'… that's what Dooku said. Remember? But the only 'takeover' he could have been referring to…"

"Was the Republic's takeover of the banks," Anakin completed her thought, and his mouth stayed open. He frowned – something seemed to click with him for the first time. "That's… very strange.
Do you think…”

"Yes, Anakin, I do think. The Republic – something is –”

"The Sith control everything…”

"You just don't know it.’”

Moving in closer towards her husband, the silk sheets stroking against her bare shoulders, she waited until Anakin raised his gaze again. She thought he suddenly looked very scared. And alone.

"Anakin – you told me the Sith have a way of shielding their minds – of hiding their true intentions, and identity, if they so choose. And that it's very difficult even for a seasoned Jedi to identify a Sith who employs this technique. Isn't that correct?"

"Yes…"

"Well, then I have to wonder… if perhaps… I'm better positioned to identify the Sith, if there is one prowling amongst our own in the Senate.”

Up until now, Anakin had hardly bothered to hide his anxiety, but now absolute and utter horror overtook his features.

"Pamé, no,” he cried hoarsely, his eyes fervent. “Pamé, you… you can't.”

Escaping his shocked stare, Pamé tossed aside the cover and sat up on the bed just so she could cross her arms, and give him a stern look of her own. She had expected this reaction, but didn't he ever learn?

"Excuse me?"

"Pamé, I can't… no,” Anakin rose to sit as well. He was shaking his head frantically, sandy curls whisking against his forehead. "You don't… you don't know them like I do. Not even Dooku.” He stared into her eyes, his own burning. “And this is Dooku's Master we're talking about. I can't let you –”

"What do you expect me to do, then? Resign from the Senate? Anakin, it's possible I'm…” She felt sick to her very core, but she had to say it out loud. ”…Already working with him. In fact, it's… very likely. It's possible I –” Anakin opened his mouth, but Pamé cut him short, ”that I know him better than you do.”

Anakin didn't seem to want to listen. He turned his eyes away, twisting and turning and shaking his head. Pamé reached to touch his cheek, and he stopped.

"I'm sorry, Ani. I wish – I wish I could protect you, too, you know. Every day, when you're… out there. But we're both going to have to trust each other. Like we agreed, remember?”

She thought of the vase of flowers on her desk, which she had insisted to her handmaidens on watering herself, every day, and which had yet to show any signs of wilting.

Anakin tried to nod, tried to agree, but it mostly came off as more distressed motioning. Pamé knew that he had seen her in danger before, multiple times, first-hand, but somehow – this was something he couldn't seem to reconcile with, that he just couldn't seem to accept.

"Just don't take any unnecessary risks, okay?” he finally forced himself to say.
Padmé gave a small smile. *He was one to talk…*

"I won't." She took his hands in hers, and he lifted his gaze again. "You be careful, too."

Anakin nodded. Padmé leaned in to embrace him, and they stayed like that for a long while – which still felt too brief, too fleeting. But despite his fears, despite his reluctance – despite her fears – it felt as though they had come to an agreement. It felt as though they were a team again. In love, they were always – but teamwork, well – that often took a lifetime of practice.

- 

Anakin wasn’t sure the conversation had helped in the least, done anything at all to ease his mind. In fact, it might have just made everything worse. Not only was he worried sick over Padmé and her safety now – a Sith Lord in the *Galactic Senate?* Running the Republic? *His* Republic? *Her* Republic? – he suddenly felt very unintelligent and self-centered. Up until now, he’d only been focusing on himself – how he was in danger, how he was a terrible Jedi and how he’d blackened his soul long ago and made himself a tempting prey for the Sith – and that part still terrified him, so much he couldn’t bear to think about it most of the time. But the thought of Padmé being in danger – from the very same enemy, an enemy that *he* might never be able to conquer – was so, *so* much worse, so utterly horrifying, he couldn’t even will himself not to think about it. There was nothing else he *could* think about - or *would* think about, for the entire journey, a journey he had to survive, *had* to, so that he could come back and sweep her in his arms and protect her forever.

He had not even wanted to go. It wasn’t that he no longer cared about the mission. It wasn’t even his newly-awakened questions about just what he was protecting, and whom he was serving in this war (on some level, he *had* heard and registered what he had needed Padmé to articulate - the Republic was not all it seemed on the surface). And he knew that had he stayed, he still wouldn’t have been able to ‘protect’ Padmé, to keep her from doing her job, or from being the bravest, cleverest woman in the Galaxy.

He just wished he could have been as brave. Or as clever. He was sure, had he been clever, he’d been able to uncover the Sith Lord by now. If Padmé had met him, he must have, too.

Well, he’d find out eventually, wouldn’t he? *He* certainly couldn’t wait to meet Anakin.

Obi-Wan was always telling him to let go of things – and people. Anakin wasn’t entirely sure Obi-Wan had ever let go of Master Qui-Gon, or Satine Kryze, but he was certainly much better at pretending he had. Maybe Anakin needed to start pretending, too. Maybe that was the trick to being the perfect Jedi – just fooling everyone around you. Obi-Wan was often accused of all manner of trickery.

Maybe Anakin could trick himself. Maybe if he could convince Artoo, whirring cheerfully on the floor of his ship, that he was okay leaving Padmé and going to look for some shiny piece of rock, maybe he could convince himself too.

“Sorry I’ve been quiet, buddy,” he chatted to the astromech. “How was maintenance? Have a lot of oil baths?”

“You betcha. A bit second-rate, the oil.”

“I really could’ve used your help on Scipio, you know. *And* Vanqor 1, incidentally. Had a couple of close calls.”

“None of you guys would even be alive without me.”
“Modest as always.”

“Wait. Anakin is on his way… here?” Obi-Wan frowned at the blue holofigure of Master Windu.
“Does this mean you are behind schedule, General Kenobi? I was under the impression that you’d be able to meet him on Vanqor. Are you absolutely sure your men are too sick to be moved? I could tell Skywalker to change course, but…”

But it would be pointless – there was nothing Anakin could do for them here, except worry himself sick over Captain Rex’s less than ideal condition. He already knew Mace’s opinion. They were currently a hindrance, and locating any other weapons and/or legendary crystals was a top priority assignment. Anakin was a big boy, he’d been on solo missions before…

Suddenly, a suffocating sensation gripped at Obi-Wan’s throat. And somehow he knew it had nothing to do with the toxins. There it was again. A bad feeling.

Last time he’d had one of these, it had been about Anakin then, too – who else? And everything had turned out… mostly well. Actually… he had no idea. He still didn’t have a clue just what had gone down on Anakin's second journey to Scipio, or even whether he’d personally… taken care of Rush Clovis while there. He didn’t think he had – Obi-Wan would have surely sensed the change in his apprentice – but he didn’t know. He only knew that he had allowed Anakin to go. He had made the decision to trust in him.

He really wanted to tell Mace to order Anakin to come here instead. But there was very little he could base it on.

“General Kenobi! Please contact Skywalker as soon as you are able to leave the moon. He has his astromech for company, so I’ll trust he’ll be okay. I know from experience that little fellow is a bit of an overachiever.”

Obi-Wan nodded, slowly. He knew that from experience, too. Surely the two of them could handle a couple of gundarks, and a few days of boredom. He was just being silly.

“I will, Master Windu. Thank you…”
This time, it was the Chancellor who approached Padmé on the crowded corridor after another long and grueling session at the Galactic Senate. She really hoped it would be about lowering the water rates on Naboo – which she'd dedicated her entire speaking turn to – the two of them at least had Naboo in common, right? Spotting an off-duty Teckla in the crowd, Padmé briefly locked eyes with her over the Chancellor's shoulder, and young woman looked genuinely touched. Even if her situation hadn't improved all that much, at least her Ladyship still remembered her…

“Senator Amidala… ever so articulate. Might I trouble you with a word, in my office?”

Padmé gestured at the on-duty Motéé to take her break now. This might take a while, and would hardly require any back-up or emergency preparation. But then… as the two politicians walked along, exchanging some small talk, toward a little-known shortcut to the Chancellor's office, Padmé suddenly remembered. She'd been so caught up in her regular work woes, that she'd completely forgotten.

She was in constant danger. They all were. There might be a Sith Lord working from the inside in the Galactic Senate, masquerading as one of their own, an ally to their cause… possibly in some way manipulating, or influencing the Supreme Chancellor himself.

It had to be someone in a prominent position. Someone discreet. It was too late to signal Motéé now, but she'd have to keep her eyes open. If there was any legitimacy to her theory at all, the truth would soon become palpable. Who was constantly around the Chancellor, or someone else with power?

They had to hold some power too. She held some power, and still faced ridicule and opposition. To directly influence the Senate's decisions… one would have to be…

In the Chancellor's office, she had to put her conspiracy theories aside for a moment to hear what the leader of the Republic had to say. For some reason, she felt relieved to find a handful of other Senators and their aides there, as well as a Representative from the Outer Rim.

“Senator Amidala… there is a certain matter that needs to be handled… with discretion,” the Chancellor began to explain. "I know you have the necessary experience and competence, as well as the diplomatic skills. I'm sorry to give you such short notice… but we'll have to act now.”

Padmé tried to rack her brain for something urgent they'd discussed at the session. In her opinion, most of it was urgent, but the most of the Senate didn't quite share her passion.

“What's the matter, Chancellor?”

The elderly man smiled at her spirit before taking on a serious and concerned tone.

“The Vanqor government has caught wind of the Republic activity on their first moon… a moon they had mostly abandoned, or rather gifted to the Confederacy for free access and use. Seeing as the planet is currently aligned with the Separatists…”

“That means they have caught wind of it as well.”

“I regret to inform you that General Kenobi and his task team are currently not in the best fighting condition, should someone come to investigate… or attack. While a potential attack might reveal to us the location of another crystal gun, if there is one, I'd hate to waste these good men's lives… I feel the situation might require a diplomatic touch, before they choose to do something drastic. I have arranged for you to meet with a government representative in the capital city. But be warned – any of the Separatist leaders might also be skulking around.”
Dooku.

Padmé considered the assignment. She’d been on similar diplomatic missions innumerable times before. In fact, the assignment seemed tailor-made for her skillset. She trusted her ability and her resourcefulness. She trusted her bodyguards and her pilot.

But…

Dooku. She might cross paths with Dooku.

Padmé wasn't sure she was prepared to see the man, at all. For all his Sith powers and imposing presence, she'd never, ever been afraid of him. But now… it was as though she was staring into his soul, his deeply depraved, tainted soul, for the first time. And he was conspiring with another Sith to poison Anakin's heart and soul too, to take him without asking, to take him from her.

How could she ever, ever face a man like that? While on duty, while acting as a 'diplomat'?

But…

Anakin was on Vanqor, too, though quite a ways from the capital city. And if what the Chancellor was saying was true, he was in a more immediate danger as well.

The Outer Rim Representative began explaining the situation from Vanqor's viewpoint, to brief her on the necessary information she'd need for the mission.

Padmé would not let her husband get attacked on her account. She had to go.

-  

“Wait… Obi-Wan and the others are not on Vanqor?” Anakin echoed in disbelief at the blue miniature Master Windu. “But… they're right next to it, and I won't get there until – are they okay, shouldn't I go and help?”

“Skywalker, listen to me very carefully. Your orders are to go to Vanqor directly. We'll transmit the specific coordinates. There are three separate locations. Two of them, 1 and 2, are areas with known Separatist activity, in other words, where we suspect they could be hiding another crystal gun. Location 3 is an area with high mineral occurrence, where the scientists suspect rare forms of kyberite could have developed. Normally, we'd prioritize finding the weapons, but since you are on your own for now, you are to head to Location 3. Do you understand?”

“So I'll just… go on a treasure hunt?” Something occurred to him. "Are we… are we building a weapon, too?”

“That is for later discussion.”

That Anakin wouldn't necessarily be a part of.

“We apologize that you'll have to make do on your own for now, that was not the plan. But it just so happens that you are also exceptionally qualified to handle this mission.”

“Master Windu, are Obi-Wan and the rest of the team okay?”

“They'll join you in a few days' time.”

“Let go of your friends, you must,” Master Yoda chimed in.”On the task ahead of you, focus your
energy.”

“Yes, Master Yoda… Master Windu.”

...

Anakin held out hope that he would find Obi-Wan, Rex, Cody, and the rest of the task team waiting by the time he reached Vanqor, despite the fact that he had holocalled them three times during his hyperspace journey, and always received an unfavorable answer. They were in the middle of nowhere, and more than half of them had developed symptoms from the toxins, after all.

He hadn't been able to help anyone. He would have, if he'd just gone to the Halls first. This was all his fault.

Strangely, Anakin found it easier to 'focus on the task ahead' now. He'd caused yet another problem – he'd have to make amends again. He had done a good enough job with the gun, but in the end, it had turned out to be a dud. Perhaps, if he could find another crystal, he would have finally done more good than harm.

Except then he'd have to hand the crystal to the Republic, which might be corrupt. Under the influence and watchful eye of a Sith Lord. In a momentary fantasy, he thought about finding the crystal, stashing it into his freighter and never telling a single soul. He thought about finding the Sith Lord, ambushing him, and silently stabbing through his heart with his saber, and never telling a single soul.

“I just don't know who I can trust anymore, Artoo,” Anakin sighed, as he pulled out of hyperspace and prepared for landing on the specified area. From up here, the gray orb of Vanqor looked as dull and underwhelming as ever.

“You can always trust me,” the astromech peeped up.

“I know, Artoo. I know.”

The landing was one of Anakin's smoothest ones of late. As he'd suspected, 'Location 3' was just another uncharted plain of hard crystalline rock, veiled in a thick layer of mist and humidity. Upon exiting the ship, he felt a certain sense of nostalgia washing over him – he'd had so many adventures and misadventures with Obi-Wan here. Like that time when they had been chasing Dooku, and gotten stuck in a cavern, traded barbs, nearly gotten eaten by a gundark, then inhaled poisonous gas, before being rescued by Ahs –

Well, there it was again – something he was only allowed to think about when near death and making last wishes. Whether that constituted as 'letting go', he really didn't know.

Anakin wiped off something from the corner of his eye. It was just the mist… the dampness…

It was then that Anakin turned around, and sensed something. No… sensed something, then turned around. In that order, surely.

He squinted his eyes to try to see through the mist.

It was Dooku.
A very gen chapter… but it is that for a reason. At least it’s all trying to lead up to a common purpose, hehe. Mostly. I hope.

Still not quite sure whether this is an anidala fic with a very gen plot or a gen fic with a heavy anidala focus. We’ll see. Anyway, I might update the tags to match the content at some point, as I’ve already explored wayyyyy more relationships/characters/aspects than I initially planned, and there’s some more of that in this chapter… but my outline for this story is still very much focused on the anidala/ani&obi/maybe-also-fix-that one-thing-that-happens-in-canon, so. yea.

Anakin had long suspected that he had surpassed Dooku as a duelist. On at least two occasions, Dooku had enlisted the help of his towering Magnaguards to gain the upper hand against him – which in Anakin’s opinion was cheating, and cowardice.

Or good strategy. And clearly Dooku favored strategy over fair play, for the mist soon cleared around him to reveal not one, not four – but six tall, golden, empty-eyed droids, electrostaffs ready and pointing skyward.

Anakin could scarcely believe the sight. How… why was Dooku here? Had Anakin walked into a trap again, just like back Naboo? Who had set it up for him? The Senate had sent him here… with the Council’s approval. (Or was it vice versa?) The scientists had given him the coordinates. Windu had told him to start here.

Obi-Wan and the rest… had stayed on the moon…

Was this it? Had the Sith come for him?

Did they know that he knew?

As Dooku drew closer in slow, self-assured strides, Anakin forced himself together, trying to decide whether it had been good or bad strategy on his part to leave Artoo on the ship to do a post-landing check-up. The little madcap had rescued him from armed opponents before, but this was Dooku and half a dozen of droid answers to playground bullies –

“Young Skywalker,” Dooku greeted smugly, halting in his tracks. Anakin tried to measure his distance to his ship in against the meters between him and Dooku, as if a math exercise was going to save him. This whole ambush reeked of careful calculation, and it definitely wasn’t on Anakin’s part.

But if there was any chance at all that Dooku didn’t know that Anakin knew, the Jedi quickly decided, he must not let him into his head, or his thoughts spill out. He’d have to pretend again. He’d have to pretend to be that insolent brat that had almost wisecracked Dooku to his timely death in that prison cell back on Florrum. Whatever had happened to that cheeky little scamp?

“Pirates dump you here, Dooku? No one would pay the ransom? …I’m not surprised.”
Well, that was a bit old and tired. It would have probably made a good burn back when he was still that brat. Dooku must see right through him. He must know, why else would he be here?

The count gave a smirk, but remained silent – and remained immobile. The Magnaguards’ electrostaffs fizzed menacingly. It was almost as though he was expecting Anakin to surrender – as though he expected him to know as well as him how any impending skirmish would turn out. Why waste energy?

Anakin began beckpedaling, to at least buy some time, though somehow he knew no help would arrive on time, no distress signal would reach anyone within any helpful distance. He’d have to fight – but Dooku was a gentleman, he’d wait for his opponent to draw his weapon. Once he did, chaos would ensue – and Anakin needed answers, not chaos.

“What do you want, Dooku?”

He knew what.

“You’ve grown cowardly since we last met, Skywalker,” Dooku scoffed, drawing closer, the droids at his sides seeming to grow as impatient and as blood-lusting as their programming allowed.

Not cowardly, smarter.

Maybe too much smarter.

“You know, I’m not sure I really like your friends. And don’t you think it’s kinda unfair, relying on their assistance in a duel? With a duo, two people?”

Dooku's smirk grew wider. He seemed to be relishing every moment. “Oh, I assure you this isn't a duel.”

It’s an abduction.

Not if Anakin could help it.

The blue saber erupted to life with a dramatic flare; its red opponent following suit unceremoniously. Anakin tried to make some last calculations – six of them, really? – but when had that ever been his forte?

Not only did Dooku favor strategy over fair play – this time, he also favored it over style. For all of Anakin’s skillful swings, equally aggressive as they were precise, Dooku was perfectly and maddeningly prepared, and wouldn’t even let his younger adversary anywhere near him. He caught a couple of sweeps with his saber – seemingly out of pity – then immediately took cover behind two of the guards, the remaining four stationing themselves at either side of Anakin, as well as behind him.

“Who’s the coward now?” Anakin snapped in frustration, until the first stab of crackling electricity caught him at his back and he screamed. Upon the second jab, he fell to his knees, convulsing wildly as the destructive energy surged through his body. But he willed himself to overcome the pain, and escaped his assailants by taking cover behind their metallic legs. The guards were slow to react, and with a single well-aimed swish of his saber, Anakin just managed to fatally strike two; buying time for himself to get up as they tumbled to the crystalline ground with a crash.

Anakin could just catch the disbelieving expression on Dooku’s ugly face. Good – he still stood a chance –
Then it came. The lightning. Far more painful than a regular electric shock – Anakin was something of an expert by now – as much a torture method as a battle strategy. Still on his knees, Anakin convulsed, frozen and helpless against the onslaught. It hurt… the lightning seemed to carry with it an undercurrent of the deepest, most depraved secrets of the dark side, a power beyond his imagination, drowning him, scorching him…

Anakin tried to force himself to move again, to break free, but the pain was just too much. For some reason, Dooku wouldn’t even command the Magnaguards to prod him with their sticks anymore – that combination would have had him down and out for the count within seconds – but when he did pause the lightning, Anakin didn’t even realize it. He was still convulsing, still shaking, still feeling it in his very bones – in every single midichlorian in his body –

“Are we done here, Skywalker?” Dooku inquired casually, somewhere far far above him, if Anakin's ears were to be trusted at the present moment.

“What happens… when we… are?” Anakin coughed on the ground.

“I expected more from you,” he chided, wagging his finger.

Dooku would regret not knocking him out when he had the chance. Summoning all his strength, and whatever extra he could borrow from the Force, Anakin shot up and parried the Magnaguards’ swift strikes with his saber. With another precise stab, another one was down.

Three of them remained…

And Dooku…

Anakin panted. Maybe there was no point… but he had to make a point. He also really, really wanted to fight Dooku already. Drawing from the Force, Anakin spread out his arms and sent the droids flying with the very same move that had nearly saved him the last time.

He was soon reminded how he’d lost that duel too, as he felt himself lifted into the air, meters above the still-active Magnas, as an invisible hand closed around his throat.

“I told you this isn’t a duel,” Dooku said dryly, as Anakin struggled in vain against the hold. “I sense your fear, Skywalker… and I rather agree with you – you are not a great strategist.”

Even as he writhed in the grip, his face rumpling in pain, Anakin’s eyes flew open at the words. Dooku knew. If Anakin had betrayed his thoughts on his strategy, he’d betrayed that he knew about the Siths’ plans, too.

But he wasn’t going to join them. Dooku had to sense that, too. Maybe he was going to kill him, after all – for all its downsides, that would at least put a definite end to all this.

Still holding him in that infernal grip, Dooku slowly lowered his arm to deposit Anakin down on the ground. Anakin’s fingers scraped wildly at the intangible choke. That was the problem with this technique – what was he supposed to do to fight it? Thankfully, that very helplessness went two ways – sometimes, it felt like the only useful move Anakin possessed… At least it got him information, instead of endless questions and confusion.

Dooku had no plans to finish the job. Instead, he had two of his minions stand at Anakin's sides, staffs ready, as the third moved up behind him and crouched down, metal knees clanking, to grab Anakin’s limply hanging hands. Once again, he had not even noticed when Dooku had freed him.

Durasteel cuffs closed around the Jedi's wrists, and he was yanked up to stand by the hair.
Dooku could have at least knocked him out. More than anything, he could have used the sweet release of sleep.

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Mace was starting to feel as though Skywalker should have stayed on Coruscant, after all. Considering Kenobi's task team's current condition, Skywalker had to be at least still shaky – someone obviously needed to study the Vanqor 1 toxins with the same dedication the scientists were showing to Crys. The Jedi Master also couldn't help but feeling that in the latter environment, Skywalker had fitted in better than he ever had with the Jedi – which was a somewhat discomforting thought in and of itself. And for Force's sake, if this was another distress signal that signaled *his* distress specifically, he'd even have to question the young Knight's much-reputed piloting skills.

“I came as soon as I could,” he announced to the room, where he was unsurprised to find Council members as well as Senators - the Senate had apparently recently formed some sort of 'weapons supervision committee', who apparently felt they deserved a say in whatever this was about. Most distress signals from Jedi ships were in any case received by the Council as well as the Senate, and even some of the Republic frigates in the field, even if the distressed party was technically under the Council's command (emphasis on 'technically').

The Chancellor - naturally - was also present. For a man of his schedule, he seemed awfully omnipresent these days.

“It's Skywalker, isn't it? Please tell me he at least made it to Vanqor.”

“Perilous, his journey has proved,” Master Yoda explained, as an unmistakable wave of sadness washed over his presence. “Vanqor, he reached… where carried off by Dooku… Skywalker was.”

Mace stared at him. The rest of the officials present seemed to be already discussing possible plans of action, while he was still trying to comprehend what he'd heard. How… why? *Already?*

“Does this not confirm the existence of other weapons?” Master Mundi pointed out. “And we already have hold of one. This reeks of a ransoming attempt waiting to happen.”

“Who was it that freed him on Naboo, in exchange for General Grievous?” Senator Paulness tried to remember. “Without consulting us? *Or* the Jedi Council? Was it not Senator Amidala?”

“Wait,” Mace cut into the heated discussion, “Who sent the distress signal?”

“Skywalker's astromech, apparently.”

Of course. Why had he bothered asking? For a fleeting moment, Mace was filled with a sense of baseless optimism. That droid had all but personally dug them up from under that rubble back on Vanqor - clearly that planet invited trouble - surely he must have a solution to this dilemma as well.

“Looks like a trap to me,” Senator Robb said. “If Skywalker was captured, wouldn't his droid be incapacitated, too?”

“How do we even know it was the droid that signaled us?”

“No…” Mace hurried to theatrically shake his head before anyone else could answer. “Trust me on this… if there's a trap, it's not because the droid has been compromised.” He thought about the situation for a while and added, “However, it worries me that Dooku has yet to make any demands. He must want the weapons, correct?”
"Why would he even let him live? We know how Jedi captures usually end."

"Masters, please… should we not at least consider a rescue mission?" the Chancellor cut in. "Are not Kenobi and his men right nearby? Have they recovered yet?"

Mace and Yoda looked at each other, sensing each other's thoughts. They had actually long suspected that Kenobi was actually experiencing some symptoms as well, and was too compassionate towards his troops to complain, or ask for permission to abort. Perhaps not even realize he was sick.

"My good Masters… what is their status?" the Chancellor pressed on. "Are they truly making a recovery, or should we be looking to evacuate them?"

"I say evacuate them," a holo figure of Master Koon chimed in. "And I’m afraid… we're all tied up here on Felucia."

"Agreed," one of the Senators said. "Too many Jedi have been lost on rescue missions for another Jedi. That's double the damage, sometimes triple."

"I hate to state the facts," Mace said with a wary nod, "but Kenobi's track record of falling into enemy hands is nearly as bad as Skywalker's."

"To be fair, surely that is because the Republic's two best generals always have the most dangerous assignments," Chancellor Palpatine remarked. "And yet they continue to survive, do they not?"

"This was hardly supposed to be a dangerous assignment…"

"Skywalker was alone!"

"And do we want Kenobi to meet the same fate? If the troopers are ailing, he would technically be alone as well. And if he's sick… this can only end badly."

"So we should definitely tell Kenobi to abort?"

"Skywalker was treated for his illness at the Halls. If the medkits are insufficient…"

"And when we do pull him out, Kenobi will ask 'what about Skywalker?" Mace pointed out, somewhat alarmed by his own prediction. He dared not judge such an accomplished Jedi and a fellow Master for his soft spots – Mace himself had a few – but Kenobi's former Padawan was more of a colossal black hole of his affection.

"I am asking 'what about Skywalker' right now," the Chancellor still insisted. Mace glared at him, involuntarily. Those two really shared a worrisome relationship… "Are you truly suggesting we leave him to his own devices? Leave him with this maniac?"

"The situation is regrettable, but we must."

The situation was regrettable in more ways than one – as Mace suddenly realized. Abandoning Skywalker was certainly one – but there was also Kenobi to consider. If he were to learn of his apprentice's predicament, he would forsake his orders right then and there. Just like he had when Skywalker had been loaded onto that ship on the weapon retrieval mission, and he'd been ordered to stay on the moon. And then, Kenobi had done so knowing that he wouldn't even be able to help him.

Was Kenobi due a lecture at this point? Master Yoda always had a way with words, about one's
emotions clouding their judgment. Mace was certain everyone slipped now and then, but to have to keep information from a Council member and a mostly exemplary Jedi…

“'Pulling them out' may not be as simple as some of you seem to think,” Mace remarked. “We might have to send someone to help the troopers. Possibly a full medical crew.”

“And Skywalker?"

“What if we were to… fail to mention this to Kenobi, until Dooku contacts us and demands something? Only then can we determine a plan of action. We didn't send Kenobi on a rescue mission, and his current one is going awry. The sooner we get the troops back in fighting condition, the better. Surely there is no need to add to Kenobi's worries.”

“So abandon Skywalker?”

“Skywalker and Skywalker! If he could just once in his life not get himself into a mess first thing upon landing, or flying, or crashing, I'd be very happy.”

"And we don't even know his exact location, only where he was taken."

"Exactly."

The Senators were now whispering about something. Mace didn't want to pry into their thoughts – it seemed mostly unrelated anyway – but he felt a definite sense of… ugh, gossiping.

“Where's Senator Amidala?” someone asked, in a knowing tone of voice. Mace had a vague idea what it meant. It was another, very different kind of Skywalker mess. Master Yoda and Master Kenobi had both expressed concern over it before, and nothing quite ever stayed secret between the Council members. Or within the Senate, it seemed.

“On Vanqor, on diplomatic business,” the Chancellor answered.

“No one contact her,” someone said sternly. “These two situations have nothing to do with each other, and we don't want a repeat of Naboo.”

“Didn't we lose General Grievous because of those two? Really, who gave her the authority to make that trade?”

“Yeah, nobody say a peep to her.” The Senator leaned to whisper in his colleague's ear, making very suggestive and obvious hand motions, and his colleague made a scandalized face. Some of the Senators smirked.

Hondo Ohnaka rarely took an interest in that one person at his party sitting quietly in the corner, staring dead-eyed into the bottom of his bottle and his own existential dread all at once. Not unless they could somehow be turned into credits. And the pirate captain was pretty good at turning anyone or anything into credits.

Not this one though, Jiro of his own gang, a professional slacker, double-crosser, and an all-around good fellow. And Hondo probably wouldn't have bothered leaving his very lovely company anyway had it not been for the metal box on Jiro's lap that he was fiddling with, or rather trying not to drop, while the box was making an absolutely insufferable sound that was threatening to ruin the whole party. Thankfully a good half of his men had gone half-deaf that one time way back when on Corellia (or was it Tatooine), so that was half the atmosphere still intact.
“Hey! Can't you make that thing shut up?”

“You shut up!” Jiro retorted, throwing a broken bottle at his captain (which Hondo easily dodged, as his aim sucked), until realizing it was the captain.

“Oh, boss, sorry about that. Hey, Can you understand… twinsy?”

“Can I understand what now?” Hondo frowned at him, then at the device, which had technically quit with the first noise, only to start spouting weird beep sounds.

“The – the – what's it called – droid-speak –“

“Oh! Binary.” No, he didn't. Now twins, he could understand. Sometimes really, really well. “Where'd you even dig that up from? It's very annoying, I don't like it.”

“Oh, I found it when we raided that Republic ship a few days ago, when they stopped here to refuel, or something.”

“Indeed?” Hondo wondered aloud, scratching his head. Mukmuk on his shoulder copied the movement. It was actually helpful when he did that – many times his loyal pet had solved a problem before he did, or gotten him out of a sticky situation.

“You were pret-ty hammered, boss,” Jiro filled in with a snorting laughter.

“No, I remember. Wasn't really a raid… ” He motioned vaguely towards the box that had more buttons than his mother had horns on her chin. “Doesn't look valuable, can't you just get rid of it?”

“Wait, no, now it's sending some… text. Can you read, boss?”

Hondo whacked him on the head with his hat. “’Course I can, and so can you!”

“Oh. Right. Just hold on a moment, now I'm really curious.” Jiro gave his ugly head a shake, in an effort to clear it, probably. That, or lose his last two brain cells, and just enjoy the evening. Hondo hoped the latter. “It says… a 'Skywalker' has been kidnapped by a… 'Dorky'. What's a Skywalker, some kind of ship?”

Hondo put a hand to his chin. “… Don't we know a Skywalker? Didn't we throw a party for him and Kenobi once? Remember Kenobi, the greatest friend I ever had?”

“…Don't we know a Dorky too? No wait, that was Dooku. Remember Dooku?”

“Let me see that!” Hondo commanded, grabbing the device from his dense friend. “It says 'Dooku' here. Then there's some coordinates… pretty sure that's on Vanqor. Wait, what did the message say again?”

Hondo waited until the coordinates disappeared from the screen for the message to start from the beginning. By now he'd deduced this was some kind of communication device (possibly a back-up one, if the Republic hadn't noticed its mysterious disappearance), and it was transmitting what strongly looked like a distress signal.

“Yeah, it definitely says 'Skywalker kidnapped by Dooku' here.” The captain gave him another smack with his hat (poor hat), and Jiro just laughed hysterically. Hondo considered the message. He and his party guests were obviously not the intended recipients, and he'd never felt quite the same connection with the short-tempered little Jedi as he had with Kenobi. The boy had an unfortunate tendency to threaten him with his laser sword while he was just trying to make some
money. Hondo had never understood his deal.

Then again, if he hadn't always gotten along with the Jedi whelp, he'd gotten along with the Count worse.

“So a… droid sent this message? What kind of droid… valuable?”

Jiro just shrugged. He seemed to have forgotten what they had been talking about, and was trying to remember where to get another bottle of Chadian rum, or possibly how to stand up.

“How… I assume he sent it from Skywalker's ship. We could at least go and check it out, see if there's something of value there. Now that the big man's out of the house, heh.” Hondo didn't think he had a conscience, but something about the idea was tugging at him somewhere deeper than his long-spoiled liver and those other organs, whatever their purpose was. “And while we're there, maybe… ask the droid where the Count took him… so when the cavalry arrives, we can… be of some help, I suppose…”

Throwing his arms up, Hondo spun around dramatically and addressed his gang and his guests, “How would everyone like a pleasure cruise to Vanqor?”

It was only after the medical crew arrived on Vanqor 1 that Obi-Wan realized how he'd failed his men. He should have requested to abort long ago. If they'd said no, he should have disregarded the orders and done so anyway, just get his troops on a ship and to the nearest proper medcenter to receive treatment.

Not all medcenters even admitted clones. That had actually proved problematic in the past. At least that wouldn't happen now. The medcrew's timely arrival had been authorized by both the Senate and the Jedi Council, and for once, these brave men would receive, if not the best, at least quality treatment.

With the suits and the medkits, none of them had been in life-threatening danger, he didn't think. Before the medcrew had arrived, most of them had actually started to show signs of recovery. But did that really matter? For all the harsh words Anakin had to deal with, at least he'd been treated with kid gloves in regards to his poisoning, comfortably carried on a stretcher away from the moon that had poisoned him, to receive the best treatment available in the Galaxy – which the brat had had the gall to refuse at first, to go be with his… wife situation.

But the clones? Kenobi heard the echoes in his head, he words he'd heard million times from the Jedi, the politicians, as well as the troopers themselves.

Just clones… meant to be expendable…

Obi-Wan did not realize for a while his holoprojector was demanding his attention. But as he answered the call – moving a little farther away from his troops just in case this was outside their clearance level – he felt his heart sink even before he saw the four blue figures that appeared on his palm. Somehow, he knew.

It was Dooku – and beside him, between two Magnaguards, was Anakin, on his knees. Beaten, bound, and – strangely – wearing some kind of muzzle.

“Anakin!”

“And a good day to you, Master Kenobi. Say, have you lost a padawan?”
trying not to over-explain too much (my favorite hobby) but things will progressively
get less fluffy and dare I say darker from here on out, for a while. probably still
nothing will happen that wouldn’t happen in canon (and some pretty wild stuff
happens in canon), but just a fair warning, as I’d hate to accidentally upset anyone. and
I promise there’s still some light at the end of the tunnel – SW is all about that hope,
right?

“'It's bad enough that we have to be in the same cell… but could you at least spare me the sound of
your constant chatter'?”

Well, at least Dooku remembered Anakin’s greatest hits from simpler times, even if it was just for
the purpose of throwing the words back at his bound and gagged prisoner. Very clever – but
honestly, Anakin didn’t really see the point of silencing him. If this was going to be some manner
of forced conversion, would he not want him able to give a favorable reply? And how was any of
this – hovering over him menacingly while he was busy numbing out his rear end on the floor – the
best method of convincing him? Why not just chop off his other arm and then ask him?

Dooku was now going through the very few possessions he’d confiscated from Anakin – which
thankfully did not include Artoo, who would have surely realized something was wrong by now –
how long had it been now? – and Anakin made a hasty decision to change his strategy. Apparently
it needed revamping anyway, and he simply had to know. Why did Dooku and his Master think he
would ever join them, and what would happen when he said no? How long were they going to keep
him here? Until he said yes?

Anakin was by now used to fighting the Force-suppressing effects of durasteel cuffs, and his high
midichlorian count probably helped, too. If Dooku didn't want him speaking, but he could read his
mind no problem, what did he think of this?

It took Dooku a while to realize what Anakin was doing – when he did, he looked down at his
captive and frowned – and another while to register the message. And when he did, the frown
cleared from his face and transformed into an awful, awful smile.

“How egotistical of you, Skywalker,” he said quietly, “to be under such illusions. How truly
extraordinary that you should hold yourself in such high esteem, especially in your present
situation.”

Huh?

No, wait… this must be yet another strategy. Anakin really needed more practice on this front –
Obi-Wan was usually in charge of that, while he just… charged. Which was exactly what he was
doing right now, in a way.

Dooku seemed to grow more and more amused as Anakin pressed on with the telepathy, and
Anakin glared at him through the only parts of his face that were visible. He only now noticed that
this… apparatus… not only made his breathing heavier and more difficult, but also gave it a
chilling, metallic sound. He wanted it off, off, off.

“Did I not make myself clear? Why would I, a mighty Sith Lord,” he shot a pitying look at the floor – not even necessarily at Anakin, “want you – a weakling – as an ally?”

Now this was getting rich. Granted, Anakin hadn't exactly been at the top of his game lately – somehow, he seemed to repeatedly find his way into the most perilous corners of the Galaxy – but coming from a man who refused to duel him in favor of ambushing him, really?

But Anakin had proof, he'd heard them. But before he could communicate this knowledge through the Force, Dooku sensed it coming, and had apparently had enough. In his least predictable move since at least two and a half 'duels' – he kicked Anakin in the face with his boot.

Anakin quickly recovered from the impact – though the pressure from the mask thingy somehow made it worse, and the cold hard wall was no fun either – but the humiliation took the longest to get over. Dooku still seemed to be preparing something – he called for his Magnaguards to join them in the cell, which was just fantastic – and Anakin was now more puzzled than ever.

What if Dooku was telling the truth? What if he and Padmé had misinterpreted the words they'd heard at the tower? Anakin couldn't even clearly recall what Dooku had said anymore – something about 'darkness'. About Anakin 'playing his part'.

Was his 'darkness' needed for something else – not for an alliance with the Sith? Was he but a means to some other end?

Somehow – the mere notion of it was – insulting. It wasn't as though the Jedi always appreciated him, but at least they respected his talents. But Dooku – really? – Anakin wasn't good enough for the Sith? Had that not-duel been some kind of job interview – that he'd failed?

The Magnaguards – just two of them this time – entered, and Dooku gestured them to stand at Anakin's sides again. As they marched over awkwardly to fill their positions, Anakin noticed Dooku was now holding his holoprojector.

“Now, before we contact Master Kenobi –“ (What?) “I would like to share with you… a secret.”

Well, about time.

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Padmé wasn't sure at all what to make of her diplomatic mission to Vanqor. In many ways, it had turned out quite… unprecedented. Hopefully, in all the best ways?

At first, the government representative – all the government representatives, apparently all ministers of some kind – had been absolutely impossible, completely refusing to listen to any and all reason. She had never known the Vanqors to be such war-mongering brutes – even if they were currently aligned with the enemy – and it was not as though the Separatists were all like that, at all.

She had been tempted to contact Anakin a couple of times – they were on the same planet, albeit at opposite ends – but she simply had not dared to risk it. If these barbarians were to learn that the Republic Senator was secretly in contact with an on-duty Jedi General that was currently scouring through their caves for crystals, or weapons – that would have been the end of this diplomatic visit. Since when had they cared so deeply about those abandoned, gundark-ridden plains anyway?

Then – without warning – the Vanqors' tone had suddenly changed completely, as if on a timer, or
fresh from brainwashing. But of course they understood the urgent need to remove any potentially unstable weapons from the planet, and Article 97 indeed allowed scientific exploration on the planet so long as Articles 98 and 102 were observed... And yes, technically, they had forfeited their ownership of both their moons when they had failed to honor the Environment Protection Pact... And no, of course they wouldn’t attack any peaceful explorers (who, they had insisted a minute ago, were dangerous military officers… which they were!) ... No, no, all was well, now would you like to try a local delicacy, Senator Amidala?

So… success? Another victory for peace… for the very articulate and very wise Senator Amidala? Padmé couldn’t shake the feeling that something was amiss. As the party made their way to her skiff, Teckla and Captain Typho next to her making similar skeptical comments, she thought about calling Anakin again – supposedly that was safe now – but she thought better of it as she realized the rest of the task team must have joined him by now. They really couldn’t afford to get too sloppy with their secret (so Obi-Wan knew now? Officially? How did he feel about it? Was he going to be that friend they so desperately needed, or not?)

As soon as they were on the ship and preparing for take-off, on a whim, Padmé decided to contact her husband anyway (Teckla and Captain Typho knew, like the rest of her trusted Naboo staff). As she took out the holoprojector, Teckla even gave her a small smile – or more of a suppressed grin.

I’m leaving the planet Ani, nice not seeing you here… I suppose you’ll be away for months again… I’ll miss you…

He didn’t answer.

Well… he must be busy… She was always busy…

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The muzzle on Anakin was evidently of the voice-muffling kind, which immediately unsettled and fascinated Obi-Wan the most. Why not just knock out the prisoner, if Dooku didn’t want him speaking?

And Anakin obviously wanted to speak. He was trying to be subtle about it (with the usual level of success), but he was clearly trying to communicate something to Obi-Wan by motioning vaguely with his head, and sometimes blinking. And whenever he blinked – even through the tiny, flickering holographic image, Obi-Wan could see it – tears would fall down his cheeks.

Uh-oh. Anakin might be a crier, but he was also as tough as nails. And this wasn’t the type of situation to make him crack, at all.

“That does look like my Padawan, Dooku,” the Jedi Master finally replied calmly, “however, a hologram can be faked. Would you be so kind as to remove that,” Obi-Wan waved his hand over his mouth, “contraption, so I could properly see his face, and perhaps ask him a personal question?”

Dooku grinned, and nodded, although apparently not in agreement, but rather in recognition of Obi-Wan’s all-too expected trickery attempts. Dooku also now took notice of Anakin’s desperate motioning (he seemed to be trying to spell something in the air), and commanded his guards to shock him. What shocked Obi-Wan was how little noise passed through the muzzle - virtually none.

“Alright, let’s calm down here, shall we?” Obi-Wan proposed. “It seems to be Anakin alright. I expect you want something, Dooku. What is it?”
”Why, perhaps we could… negotiate about that in person,” Dooku replied with matching icy tranquility, in stark contrast to Anakin’s wildly trashing figure next to him. No amount of electric shocks were going to keep him down, apparently. If Obi-Wan had to guess, Anakin was trying to tell him this was a trap, which he could have deduced for himself.

“And I’m guessing you expect me to come alone, and not inform the Council, or else?”

“Oh… I assure you, your precious Council is perfectly aware of Skywalker’s present predicament. And not only have they opted to do naught… they have also kept you in the dark, it seems, Master Kenobi.”

Obi-Wan stared at the hologram. Anakin had no more tears left, but plenty of energy in him still, and the guards seemed happy to shock him even without orders. And the Jedi Master was still trying to make sense of what he’d just heard.

“…I don’t believe you.”

“Please,” Dooku waved a hand at him, “feel free to contact them, and ask.”

Anakin had now stopped trashing, and had closed his eyes, apparently in an effort to reach the Force. Obi-Wan shook his head.

“Anakin, I know it’s a trap, please stop.”

Anakin’s eyes snapped open. He now looked absolutely livid. All of a sudden, he shot both of his unbound feet up to kick one of the guards – with great success – then another – and before Dooku could react, both of them were down and the Count was a hair’s breadth away from receiving a whack to the face as well.

And he probably would have – had it not been for one of the electrostaffs toppling over so that it hit Anakin in the neck. And down he went.

Dooku sighed and swept some dust off his cape, with an enduring appearance of calmness, but his expression was that of irritation.

“I must apologize for my guest, he is quite impatient to see you. Where were we? Oh yes, the Council. Make the call if you so wish, Master Kenobi – and risk receiving an order to abandon your student, so as to not walk into a ‘trap’. And we know how deeply you respect orders.”

Obi-Wan lowered his gaze. This was not only a trap – this was some kind of game.

And the worst part was, Dooku was winning. Or at least, he’d already claimed a very important card before the game had even started. And Obi-Wan’s deck, while never totally empty, suddenly felt very exposed and unfairly dealt.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll come. Alone.”

Dooku gave a nod of satisfaction, when his eyes suddenly lit up in realization. “Oh. Pardon me, I almost forgot. I think we can both agree it would be preferable if you did not contact Senator Amidala. She is presently here on Vanqor on diplomatic business, and I fear it might… interfere with her work performance.”

Obi-Wan had no time to dwell on the fact that apparently everyone and their pet kaadu knew about Anakin and Padmé – because Anakin suddenly came alive again, now desperately trying to make noises through the mask, but only managing – Obi-Wan now registered it for the first time –
labored, metallic breathing. Something about the sound sent chills down the Jedi Master's spine.

“Please… please leave Senator Amidala out of this.”

Obi-Wan couldn’t make any sense of Anakin’s reaction at all. He was now being held in place, about as still as he could be made – but his eyes – Obi-Wan had rarely seen him looking so utterly furious, so completely consumed by rage. And he was suddenly starting to suspect – Anakin wasn’t even furious at Dooku. Anakin was furious at him.

Dooku promised not to involve the Senator, and the call ended with him transmitting the coordinates of his current location.

Captain Rex, who normally had excellent timing, now approached from the medbay, which was protected from the poisonous atmosphere by a penetrable ray shield. Obi-Wan hurried to regain his composure, and could only hope he had kept enough distance to any and all members of the 501st.

Rex seemed to have made a near-full recovery. He saluted the General and asked, “How are you feeling, General Kenobi?”

Obi-Wan didn’t know how to answer, until he realized the Captain was asking about his health.

“Oh… I refused treatment, actually. I never developed any symptoms at all. I suppose I was just lucky.”

“Well, we are all very grateful for all that you've done for us, General,” Rex smiled.

Obi-Wan stared at him warily. He was trying to compartmentalize – which, he’d heard, he was excellent at – trying to recall what he’d been thinking before Dooku had interrupted his musings. He'd have to hurry and go get Anakin – but if Dooku had let his prisoner live up to this point, Obi-Wan trusted he would find him alive even if he arrived five minutes later.

“No,” he said emphatically. “Please… don’t be.”

“Beg pardon, sir?”

Obi-Wan didn't repeat his words, and a good while passed in silence. Rex was now looking at him as though waiting for an order from his acting commanding officer, who always wore the same neutral expression, and had maybe said something kind of strange a minute ago. Good – Obi-Wan wasn’t accustomed to being this upset at all – not often, anyway – and he wasn’t sure his subordinates were ready for the sight, or experience.

“Captain Rex – I have some new orders.”

“Yes, General.”

“You’re acting on General Kenobi’s authority, if anyone asks. I will assume full responsibility. Gather all the troopers that have recovered enough to travel, and take course to Coruscant. I will arrange for individual check-ups for everyone at the medcenter. And please see to it that someone stays behind to make sure that the rest of the patients are removed from Vanqor 1 as soon they have recovered their strength.”

As soon as the troopers had started to show signs of recovery – and he’d reported the development to the Council – the Council’s orders had changed from ‘evacuation’ into ‘continue investigation on Vanqor’. That simply wouldn’t do now – for more than one good reason.
“But, General – “

“This is an order.”

“Yes, General.” Rex hesitated for a while, then narrowed his eyes. Obi-Wan could sense he was going to risk overstepping boundaries. “Are you sure you’re alright, General?”

Obi-Wan reached underneath his tunic, produced a small, flat disk, and handed it to Rex.

“Please… take this.”

“What is it?”

“Something that will change the Republic’s collective perception of this mission’s success.”

Rex gave a slow nod.

“You were the one who found it, Captain Rex,” Obi-Wan told him, patting Rex’s hand so that it closed around the disk. “You, or Cody, or… not me.”

Rex didn’t bother asking any more questions.
Obi-Wan had barked reprimands at Anakin, over his comlink no less, when he had disobeyed orders on Vanqor 1 that day – and those had almost become his very last words to his stupid, stupid, arrogant apprentice.

It didn't matter that it had been Anakin's own doing. “I told you not to go there” might have a certain ironic echo - Anakin had a sense of humor - but still, it was just not how Obi-Wan wanted to be remembered in the Netherworld by his student, at all.

(It wasn't even a particularly witty line.)

But he had yelled at him because that day had just been like any other day on the battlefield. One of those days that kind of just melded together at this point – blaster bolts, battle droids, running and fighting and taking cover. And yet it had almost ended right then and there, on a day just like any other.

Thankfully, it had not, but it had been a close call - Anakin had not been awake to joke about just how close. Perhaps that had made all the difference. Usually in these situations, they at least had time to trade some quips.

He did have to suppose, if the prophecy was to be believed, that somehow by Anakin's death, the Force would have been set into balance.

But Obi-Wan? He would have just lost Anakin, his friend and his brother, and his student. And after everyone else he'd lost – he wondered how that would have ever brought balance to his own heart.

It was almost as though through Anakin, he'd been forced to admit certain things to himself lately. That he loved selfishly. That he loved Anakin enough to let him love selfishly – not just let him, but be happy for him. That he loved him enough to be – it was a taboo word, but he had to say it – attached to him. That he loved him enough to mourn him – if he was to go before he did.

Realizing his selfish love had opened his mind – or maybe just cracked it ajar – to something else too. It still came at odd moments – and he still didn't quite know what to do with it, or what to even call it – but somehow – it just felt right. Maybe the Force was just finally demanding more from him. He wouldn't want to go stale.

Although, the idea of a 'new Obi-Wan' frightened him to his core. Anything but that – Anakin was still something of a mystery to him, he liked to at least think he knew himself. And there were plenty of advantages to being himself – such as the fact that despite the current circumstances, he felt completely calm, and knew that if things were to go awry, it wouldn't be because he didn't have a command of his feelings, even if he couldn't always name them.

But he supposed it was a 'blue moon Obi-Wan' that had disregarded the Council's orders, aborted the mission and come here on Vanqor alone. But he would get away with it, easily. He already knew how to make his case, if even needed – technically, he'd obeyed their first order – to evacuate, which was what they had done. The Council had been the ones to change it. He had simply used common sense to adjust to the circumstances. And common sense dictated his troops
needed a proper check-up before returning to the field. Now, look what Captain Rex found.

But then there was that other order from the Council, the one he had never received - that they had not trusted him with. If what Dooku had said was true (and he might have been lying) and the Council had known of Anakin's capture, chosen to ignore it, and kept Obi-Wan in the dark – well, he knew the truth had to be a bit more complicated than that. But still he had to wonder… why?

Maybe somehow it was a strategically sound decision – he knew none of the details. But what did it really mean? Was their distrust of Anakin enough reason to abandon him? And to make sure he did, too?

Was their distrust of Anakin finally starting to reflect on him, too? After what had happened with Anakin's Padawan, was it now his Master's turn to be under scrutiny? Were they worried about Anakin's influence on him?

(Ugh, if there was any truth to that notion, they might have a point there.)

He agreed with the Council more often than not, and respected them always. But this was where they differed. Obi-Wan trusted Anakin. His student had yet to let him down, at least where it really mattered.

Even now, that he may once again be literally walking off to his death because of that boy (he had predicted that ages ago anyway), he didn't blame Anakin. He didn't know what had happened, but the last time he'd checked, it was actually very difficult to kidnap oneself, single-handedly, without outside assistance. Plenty of things were Anakin's fault - for each and every day, he could have collected an entire library's worth of material – but not this.

In fact, there were many things about the whole incident that seemed far too deliberate, far too calculated. The situation hardly seemed like the direct result of Anakin's usual recklessness.

And neither did the Twilight at the present moment, currently in pristine condition somehow, parked neatly next to a cave near the coordinates Dooku had provided him. He could see Dooku's ship, too, farther in the horizon – and he could already sense the Count's presence inside. But the reason he had picked this spot to land was because he was sensing something else in the area, too – something that just didn't belong.

He hated making Anakin wait, but there was clearly something more to this affair, and he was not going to be deceived by any ploy or trick that he could have neutralized in advance. This would only take another extra five minutes, anyway.

On the ramp to Anakin's ship he was greeted by one very distraught astromech. He couldn't understand a single beep it was making, but judging by its less-than-pristine condition and the random parts and tools that were sticking out of its rounded form, it had either recently been in a fight or made several unsuccessful attempts at infiltrating Dooku's ship by itself.

Inside the ship, the droid proceeded to plug itself into some kind of translation device, and text soon began appearing on the screen. Obi-Wan didn't think the droid was what he'd come looking for, and only momentarily glanced at the screen – yes, yes, he knew about Anakin, now calm down, little one.

As Obi-Wan already turned to leave, the droid apparently hit a button that turned the translated text into computer-generated speech. Obi-Wan started at the sound of the voice. It resembled Anakin's – except it was affected, artificial – metallic.
“Then there's also the pirates,” the voice explained simultaneously with R2's unintelligible beeps.

“What?”

“It was one against five, but I was victorious. I dumped them in the cave – that's where they hid their ship. They said they came to help – yeah, sure.”

“I'm sorry, I don't quite follow, but clearly you're more than qualified to guard this ship while I go get the pilot. Now, I really must –”

“Let me come with you.”

“I'm afraid our teamwork might not be quite as smooth as I imagine –“

“I'm coming with you.”

“I have to go alone.”

As Obi-Wan left, he wondered how he had even sensed the droid's concern over its master. It was not as though non-organics were connected to the Force.

He made a small private smirk as he heard another ironic echo of his own words from the past.

*It's just a droid.*

As he set off towards Dooku's ship, he passed by the cave R2 had mentioned, and sure enough, now sensed the distinct presence of five half-awake and intoxicated individuals. For a thing that didn't belong, it was really kind of disappointing.

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"Welcome, dear Obi-Wan. We've been expecting you."

Obi-Wan took in the inside of the ship that looked more like a great hall – something one wouldn't expect to see even in the grand flagship of a Separatist leader. The ship had to be brand new – Obi-Wan didn't think he'd ever seen it before on the battlefield, or in the skies.

The hall, while impressive, was nearly empty. Dooku was standing in the back of it, in front of a containment field that was peculiar in many ways – it was far less translucent than the standard model, and very wide – it extended all the way from one wall to the other. Anakin hung in the very middle, arms and legs stretched out. He was awake – and maskless once more – but other than that his situation had only gotten worse, as the field apparently didn't let him move or make any sound at all. Only his eyes were moving – and the expression frozen on his face was that of calm, enduring fury.

"I was beginning to worry you were going to abandon your protégé… as your fellow Jedi appear to have done," Dooku taunted, warning Obi-Wan not to get any closer with his hand. Obi-Wan suddenly became aware of the Magnaguards on either side of the room, standing at attention - six of them in total.

"I am not here for chatter, Dooku. I am here, as you said, to negotiate his release. What do you want?"

Dooku gave him a long, studying look. Obi-Wan suspected that his wants were not of the simple kind, which immediately worried him. Once again, the whole setting of the room gave Obi-Wan a
definite sense of deliberation, of everything being calculated – and he also seemed to sense, even through the containment field that supposedly sealed away all the information about Anakin – that the prisoner could hear everything the two negotiation parties were saying.

"I've never been overly fond of the boy," Dooku said, glancing at Anakin, who met his gaze with his still-mobile irises. "After all… is he not just some desert rat that Qui-Gon… stumbled across… then bequeathed to you? I truly miss him, Qui-Gon… and I believe you do, too, Obi-Wan. If only he'd lived, and you'd been able to finish your training…” He gestured towards Anakin again. “Instead of being cursed with… this.”

Obi-Wan couldn't think of a way to respond, but he didn't think he needed to.

Dooku studied him again. Then, without warning, he turned on the electric current on the energy field, and for a while, Anakin's limbs were free to move again in the most terrible of ways.

"I wonder how much more of this he can take." Dooku looked straight at Obi-Wan. "That is to say… being a Jedi. No one would understand better than myself if he were to give it up, someday. How would that make you feel, Obi-Wan? If he were to leave you?"

"What do you want from me, Dooku? From the Republic? The weapon? For us to leave the planet?"

"I hear his dear little Padawan already did the smart thing and left… and do you truly believe he is content? One way or another… he'll turn on you. Leave you and your precious Order.”

Obi-Wan knew he would, eventually. Anakin had told him as much – masking it as a joke – when he'd confronted him about Clovis some time ago. That he wanted to leave the Order when the war ended, to pursue a family with Padmé. Obi-Wan still held out hope that he would change his mind. But he was starting to think, none of that was what Dooku was talking about.

"It is my only hope that when he does, Master Yoda and the Council will love you better than he ever did.” He tapped his fingers against his sleeve. "How about I just spare you that pain… while he's still technically your comrade.”

The electricity surged through the field once more, Anakin's screams still unsettlingly silent. To distract himself, Obi-Wan turned his gaze to the Magnaguards that still remained frozen between them.

"I imagine you can benefit far more from his release than his death!”

Even the torture seemed calculated – enough to cause pain, not enough to stun the prisoner. Although at this point, Anakin probably could have chosen unconsciousness, but there was still that fervent look in his eyes that wouldn't let the rest of his body give in.

Obi-Wan remembered how utterly enraged and distressed Anakin had appeared when Dooku had called to make his demands. Obi-Wan had almost forgotten that this was all some sort of game - but it was as though he was missing an important puzzle piece.

"This… is not about the weapon, is it?"

"Tell me, Obi-Wan… what is so great about the Order? What is it that Qui-Gon believed in with such zeal that he insisted on abducting yet another innocent and insignificant life form? And ruining him like this?"
The torture was getting harder to watch, mostly because Anakin still insisted on staying awake. Obi-Wan didn't believe falling unconscious in this scenario would have provided him much respite, but the extra effort needed to keep his eyes open had to take some willpower.

"After all… the Sith have a choice."

And Dooku was just resorting to blatant lies at this point. And Obi-Wan knew he should have not humored all this pointless sentimental talk, at all, but he'd finally had enough, and did so anyway.

"He might have been your Padawan, but you never knew Master Qui-Gon like I did."

"Didn't I? Perhaps you can enlighten me. What was he like?"

"If this is about me joining you, the answer is no."

He shocked Anakin again. Obi-Wan now started towards them - and finally one of the giant, golden droids moved, electrostaff ready. Obi-Wan stopped. He was beginning to have a pretty good idea how Anakin had lost to Dooku, and this time, it had not been because he had charged in without thinking.

"This isn't you giving me a choice, this is coercion. And it will not work on me. It never has."

More shocks followed.

It was a miracle Anakin was still alive at all. He had to have a limit - he would soon die. Obi-Wan couldn't bear to think about it. He'd already made himself too vulnerable, his famed calmness was but a facade anymore - this was too much, the mere thought was too much, and Dooku had to know it.

Obi-Wan could see it unfold before him. That would do it. He'd lose control, just like he had when Qui-Gon had died. This… this would break him. Unleash all that suppressed anger, all that darkness, and whatever else hid beneath. He wouldn't join them - they were deluded to think he would - but one way or another, he would fall. Anakin would probably resent him if he didn't.

While his heart braced itself - in vain - his head was wondering why Dooku just kept on talking, and wouldn't finish the job.

Then, without warning, or even his usual Makashi salute, Dooku charged at him. Obi-Wan drew his saber - hesitating - but the droids now made no move to thwart him at all. His immediate concern instead became finding a way to free Anakin. The prisoner's eyes had finally closed – but he looked anything but peaceful.

The swordsmen clashed sabers in a meaningless little skirmish. Obi-Wan easily warded off all of Dooku's half-hearted swings, and Dooku was still mostly in a talkative mood.

"I grow impatient, Obi-Wan."

"You could learn some patience from the Jedi. It would come in handy… as I'll never join you."

They both parried a couple more strikes, then Dooku suddenly backpedaled towards Anakin again - signaling for the guards to follow him - Obi-Wan warily in their wake.

"Then it seems… I have lost a bet."

Dooku held up his hand – again, as a warning – and as he was right next to Anakin again, Obi-Wan
put down his weapon.

With a zap and a flash, the containment field was gone, and Anakin fell to the floor, coughing – and still conscious!

Leaving his prisoner to sort himself out, Dooku kept on retreating, Magnaguards following their master – for the non-transparent energy field had not been on the back wall of the room at all – but there was at least a quarter of the room still left behind the now-vanished contraption. In the back of the room was actually door – and something else – but Obi-Wan had no time to study it closer, because his priority was Anakin, whose presence had returned to the Force – and it was still blazing and furious and –

“Anakin!”

Obi-Wan tried to help his friend up, but the younger Jedi struck his hand away – with more far more force than anyone should have had in his condition – still groaning and coughing out unintelligible syllables. And at that moment, without any thought behind it, Obi-Wan raised his gaze towards Dooku, opening the door at the back of the room –

And he couldn't believe his eyes. The door had swiftly slammed shut – but he had just caught a glimpse.

Of Dooku, with Senator Amidala in tow.

Chapter End Notes

alright, from here on out, updates will be a little slower. I know I've been crazy fast so far, I've had some time, but now it's gonna be thesis city (thesis town?) for me for a while (with fanfic roadtrips here and there).

Thanks for all the support so far! <3
The Anakin now staring back at Obi-Wan not only didn't look weakened – on the contrary, he appeared fortified, galvanized, as though he'd been just been plugged out of a power charger, and not a power-based torture device. He looked almost feral – as though he had never been a prisoner waiting for a rescue, but a missile waiting to launch.

And launch, he did – towards the door where Dooku and his other captive had disappeared into – but this idea was short-lived when the floor suddenly began shaking, and both of the Jedi fell down. And still Anakin tried to get up, desperately, yet with frightening confidence, only to tumble down as the ground beneath them vibrated.

"What's going on?" Obi-Wan wanted to know. "Are we… taking off?"

Repeatedly hitting his head on the floor, Anakin shot up again and again, over and over, until the two of them were virtually levitating, and then whisked violently against the floor again. It was then that Anakin finally turned to Obi-Wan – eyes on fire – and screamed at the top of his lungs, "You should have known!"

Trying to process the words amidst the shaking and tumbling, Obi-Wan frowned and shouted into the noise, "What?"

"YOU SHOULD HAVE KNOWN!" Anakin yelled, as the quake continued and unmistakable engine sounds could now be heard. "And we're not taking off – " he pointed to the door, arm shaking, "they are!"

"Explain, please", Obi-Wan urged, as the floor now took a major impact, and the Jedi fell closer towards one another, almost bumping heads. "And calm down, please."

"Really, you are so incredibly dense," Anakin, 'calmed down', hissed between his teeth, "Don't you see? This," he motioned all around the shuddering room with his arms, "is what's called a 'reverse escape pod'. As you can probably guess, when activated, it – " A painful groan suddenly escaped his throat, but Obi-Wan had caught on.

"Stays put. While the rest of the ship takes flight."

"And they – Padmé-" The engine roared into life behind the door, and Obi-Wan could no longer hear Anakin's words at all, or whether he was just trying to suppress a sob.

When the noise finally cleared, and the floor stopped quivering, Obi-Wan tried to get up and help Anakin – stand, or something concrete, he didn't know what to do with his already-dried emotional outburst – but Anakin was faster, already up, suddenly electrified all over again. And as he turned to face his Master, something flashed across his face, and he pointed an accusing finger at him, teeth together and eyes flaring.

"You should have known she was here! You should have sensed it! You should have saved her, not me!"

"… Anakin, I didn't know she was here," Obi-Wan spluttered, something inside him splintering.
Anakin wiped off the last of his tears with exasperation and urgency, and then he was all pure fire and rage again.

"Liar!" he roared. "I heard you – he told you!"

"No, he didn't –"

"Yes, he did, you just didn't listen!" Completely without warning, he grabbed Obi-Wan by the collar. Eyes wide, Obi-Wan instinctively reached for his weapon, before catching himself. He then tried to yank himself free from the grip - which was still oddly gentle, almost respectful - but Anakin jerked his hand away before he had the chance.

"Anakin –"

The younger Jedi had suddenly descended into an unsettling, resentful quietude.

"You've never…” Anakin said barely audibly. "You've never approved, haven't you? You've always hated that we're together, you've always wanted her gone… just like –" Anakin glared at him from under his brows, and above a very alarming pair of dark circles. Then came the screaming again. "Now you got your wish! Happy?"

"Anakin, that's not –"

But while still processing what was happening, Obi-Wan suddenly understood what he meant. Dooku's call. The motioning, the pointless struggling, the furious eyes – Anakin had known all along. He'd known Padmé was here – and he'd been trying to tell him. It had never been about signaling a trap – about trying to prevent a doomed rescue attempt.

But… nothing about the whole set-up still made no sense. Obi-Wan could tell something was up, something more than the most unpleasant job offer he had ever received – what in all the Sith infernos did the Senator have to do with any of this –

Anakin stood still. He looked oddly together and in command of himself again. But Obi-Wan could sense it – he was about to do something stupid. But he also appeared exhausted again. The electroshocks had done their job after all, and his adrenaline rush was waning. He looked like he was going to fall into a heap on the floor. But he'd gone too far already, and Obi-Wan wouldn't give him that luxury. He was the dense one.

"Don't you see," he tried to keep his voice even, but it came out louder and more shaky than he'd planned, "this was all a trap! Dooku used you to – he wanted me to – he's – he's planning something!"

But Anakin clearly thought he'd just had the final word, as he swiftly turned on his heels and made towards the back door, that would presumably open into a crystalline landscape now. Obi-Wan couldn't blame him for not being convinced by his pathetic stuttering, but really, it was high time he came to his senses.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan shouted after him, as Anakin kept marching on, trying to outpace him, "they'll have made the jump to hyperspace by now. We have to –"

"Let me guess," he momentarily turned towards his Master, only to shove him backwards with a forceful hand to the chest, which Obi-Wan was even less prepared for than the collar-grab, "Ask the Council for approval?"

Obi-Wan couldn't for the life of him understand where Anakin was drawing all this strength from.
For just a moment, the Jedi Master had thought he'd been dying up on the energy field.

What was this boy made of?

Padmé shot up from the floor as soon as she heard footsteps. It was Dooku – casually opening the cell door with a wave of his hand.

Determined not to be intimidated, Padmé straightened her back before the Sith Lord. "Where's Anakin? What have you done with him?"

Dooku smirked, which alarmed and disgusted Padmé, and yet she still couldn't bear to ask that question – why her Anakin?

"My sweet young Senator," he mercifully graced her with a verbal answer, "you need not worry about your… husband."

Padmé looked away. She had guessed correctly – she wouldn't have wound up in Dooku's custody in the first place, unless they knew. He'd already hinted at holding this knowledge back on Naboo, with all those taunts about 'getting emotional' over Anakin – and somehow knowing she would forsake her duty to the Republic to save him. But somehow, it no longer mattered if the whole Galaxy knew. After all, she'd given it up once, she'd do it again in a heartbeat.

Except –

Padmé drew a sharp gasp.

"Teckla! Typho!" Fists at her sides, she marched right up close to Dooku, and his gaze followed her as if she were a somewhat pungent little pet. "My pilot and my aide - where are they?"

Her memories of the past few hours – or days? - were hazy. The last thing she clearly recalled before waking up in imprisonment was calling Anakin from her ship, just as they were preparing to take off from Vanqor. He had not answered. Teckla had smiled at her – they'd been conversing about the Vanqors' bizarre politics –

Dooku didn't seem to think her aides even worth mentioning. Padmé couldn’t bear to think about the possibility that they were dead. She knew that Dooku was merciless – but at least Anakin was alive, if she had correctly interpreted his cryptic words – but her loyal Captain and her most courageous friend…

He would pay for this.

"Where. Is Anakin?" she pressed on, hoping her Jedi husband was at least important enough to warrant another hint, or something.

Dooku was already turning to leave. "Do not fret, Senator, for I am certain he will come for you."

The door flipped shut behind him, and he was gone.

Come… for her? Did that mean he was free? The last time she'd seen him, it had been in a prison cell like this one. She had only just regained consciousness, and had barely had time to comprehend what was happening. She'd been brought in by two… big golden musclehead droids – and that's when she'd seen Anakin. On the floor, with all those contraptions on him, eyes widening at the sight of her. He'd started trashing, and she'd called his name, and that's when they'd shoved her
away and she'd heard crackling and thumping but no screams.

And still she could not wrap her head around any of it – because it didn't even feel real – but like something from her nightmares. The ones she'd started having since Scipio. Anakin at their mercy – unable to escape. Padmé, ever so close to him, yet so far away. The Sith – victorious.

It was the one thing she just couldn't share with Anakin. She knew how her husband felt about bad dreams. Somehow, she doubted he really differentiated whether they were sent by the Force or not.

But if he was free now – or Dooku at least assumed he would 'come for her' – what did it even mean? It sounded like a baiting attempt – but he'd had Anakin.

What had happened in that room, before she'd been brought here? She'd been unconscious – or maybe just sedated. Then the ship had taken off – and she couldn't shake feeling that she had seen Anakin there somewhere. That was when he must have escaped, she reasoned. It was her only wish that he had, somehow.

Except – oh no.

Dooku was right – Anakin wouldn't just abandon her. She could only imagine how distraught – no, how furious – he must be right now. Furious that he'd gotten away, but she hadn't. His worst fears had become reality.

Once again.

Her mind wandered to Tatooine, to Anakin's mother – that awful day that she kidded herself again and again that she'd completely repressed away. But she remembered everything – everything. The way his eyes had burned. How tears had rolled down his cheeks. What he'd said – what he'd confessed to.

*Her* Anakin never frightened her. Her Anakin was kind and generous. But there was at least one other version of the same person – and it was still her Anakin, too. But there was a pain that Anakin carried, a burden… a 'darkness', as their enemies called it. A darkness he had already succumbed to, once.

No, not once. She didn't like to think about it, but she knew. He was a soldier now. It wasn't just his safety that she worried about every day. It was his heart. Of course, he was fighting for peace – but war had a way of taking its toll on a gentle soul. Did she really even really want him 'fighting' – committing violence every day?

Padmé dared not think any further. Was there any way for her to escape? There had to be. If Anakin had somehow gotten away, she would, too. Anakin might be the Jedi, but they had both agreed many times that she was the superior escape artist. And Dooku was already underestimating her, she didn't need the Force to know that. In contrast to all the ridiculous instruments it apparently took to restrain Anakin, she was allowed full use of her arms and legs and mouth – because she was just that small and weak and harmless.

Dooku had confiscated most of her belongings – but even the aristocratic Count still had a lot to learn about a gentlewoman's hair and dress.

-

What would happen next seemed remarkably simple and obvious for Anakin. He resolutely stomped his way through the crystalline plains toward his ship, in utter and complete silence. Obi-Wan came in his wake – trying to inspect the so-called reverse escape pod while he did. It was
quite large – definitely designed to stay in place rather than break away – and it was smaller than it
had looked like from the inside, and of a different shape – more oval. He didn't think he'd ever
heard of such a thing – he imagined it must be very hard to build. He also now realized, thinking
back on the route he had taken to the room where Anakin had been held, that despite its size one
couldn't see the compartment from the outside at all. That made sense – that would have in many
ways defeated the purpose. Either it had a ghost mode or the ship was just that ingeniously built.

Even Anakin's loyal astromech, whom he still believed had at least tried to break into the ship,
hadn't been able to tell.

Reaching the Twilight, Anakin all but ignored the astromech in question – the happiest and most
expressive little droid that Obi-Wan had ever seen. He sprinted up the ramp, about to shut the door
on his Master, but Obi-Wan reached to Force it open. Anakin stared at him – his eyes now blank.

"Anakin, we have to stick together. I don't know where you're going, but I refuse to let you go
alone. The reason this happened is because you were alone."

Anakin tried to shut the door by whisking his hand, but Obi-Wan made a countermove. For a
moment, Anakin looked like he was going to walk down the ramp and assault him again. But still
he remained, completely silent, suddenly as though in deep thought.

Then he reached to slam the door down before Obi-Wan could prevent it again. The engine gave
an angry roar, and gone he was into the sky.

Obi-Wan suddenly heard rustling from the nearby cave. The pirates – he'd completely forgotten.
Drawing his saber ready, Obi-Wan gave a deep sigh. He had a pretty good idea who the brigands
in question would turn out to be, and his guess was soon proved correct.

"Why, do my eyes – " Hondo Ohnaka reached to adjust his goggles, four very groggy henchmen
following in his wake. " – deceive me? Kenobi!!"

Hondo came towards him, apparently to greet him with a chummy tap on the shoulder, or – Force
forbid – a hug, but Obi-Wan backed away and acknowledged the cave-dwellers with a pitying nod
instead.

"What happened, boss?" one of the drunkards asked. He was carrying some kind of metal box
under his arm, which looked vaguely familiar.

"You were pillaging my friend's ship," Obi-Wan filled in icily, "and were defeated by a droid about
a quarter your size."

Hondo blinked, turning to consider himself and his men.

"Sorry, I never learned math."

"Quarter the size of a single pirate," Obi-Wan clarified. "Now, kindly vacate the planet. I am a
little pressed for time, and –"

"Hey," the box-holder suddenly interjected, his finger up, "Ain't that Starcrosser fella your friend
or something?"

"Yes he is –"

Hondo suddenly snapped his fingers, then pointed towards Obi-Wan, who just wanted this
interaction to be over with as soon as possible. "That's right! I don't know if you've heard but –"
"I rescued him and he took off," Obi-Wan said quickly, gesturing towards the ship that was no longer here.

Hondo scratched his neck.

"He took off? Without you? Why?"

Obi-Wan didn't answer. Hondo now took notice of Obi-Wan's ship and Obi-Wan could easily sense his greedy train of thought – several alternatives, actually. He spun on his heels towards the ship.

"Don't even think about it."

"You know, we weren't really –" Hondo hesitated, and Obi-Wan didn't know why he bothered to listen. "We weren't really… we weren't 'pillaging'."

"Oh. Pardon me. 'Stealing' then. 'Raiding'…whatever it is that you brigands do."

"I'll have you know, there's actually a veeeery specific terminology that comes with the profession," Hondo explained, following with his gang as Obi-Wan set off again. "Well, maybe we wanted to 'pillage' a little. Just a tiiiiny bit. But we – we thought maybe – we could do something."

R2 had told him as much, and the assertion was just as believable the second time. Then again, if nothing else, at least they had come all the way here.

Two calls from Obi-Wan now. He'd usually make two, then give up. Then try again when Anakin no longer needed his help.

And he really was so stupid.

"Listen to reason."

Reason and reason. When was the last time the enemy had been reasonable? The last time they'd played fair? Not once during the past few days alone – for Anakin now realized it had been days since his fateful landing to Vanqor. Days. Padmé could have been imprisoned for days. And he couldn't –

"Not now, Artoo," Anakin brushed off the droid as he came offering consolation to a matter he was not familiar with, and would not be until it was solved, for he couldn’t bear to talk about it. Artoo made a sad beep and buzzed off.

The hyperdrive was now stable again, and Anakin was finally free to make his sixth call within the last hour. He'd found his holoprojector abandoned on the REP's floor, but his lightsaber Dooku had kept.

His lightsaber… Anakin scratched his head. But he had no time to dwell on anything now. The motions came so robotically, with such unthinking automation, that Anakin forgot what he was doing while doing it. His sole thought was that if he kept doing this, everything would soon be set right, and his pain finally gone.

Still no answer. Anakin felt rage rise up within as he was forced to remember again. Dooku had to have her projector too, he had to, he had to – he'd beg, he'd kneel, he'd do anything, no matter what, trade places with her, whatever he wanted, why had he taken her and not him, it made no sense, and if something were to happen to her, he –
He couldn't live without her. He just couldn't go on. That would be the end of him. The Sith would have won. He couldn't –

And he wouldn't get to trade places with her. It was Obi-Wan the Sith wanted. They'd only used him to get to him – or try. The fools. Obi-Wan was perfect – untouchable. Detached and unemotional. The Sith drew their power from their selfish desires and impulses, and what did Obi-Wan know about those? About the dark side? He didn't have a single murky midichlorian in his stiff, Jedi-shaped body. And yet – he was apparently a better candidate than him. A – a weakling. Only good for dangling motionlessly in a rack – or shrinking away before a circle of scary old people in their red chairs – while the bigshots decided his fate. It wasn't about light or dark at all, not his choice between the two, anyway.

And the Council had abandoned him. Obi-Wan had barely fought for him.

Well, he'd fight for Padmé.

He didn't know how much time had passed when he snapped back to reality. He had broken something on the control table again. But the ship was still shooting through hyperspace no problem, so all was well. Even though nothing was. And would never, ever be again, unless he –

Closing his eyes and mumbling some kind of mantra – he couldn't quite recall, but it was either a nursery rhyme or a poem taught to him by his mother – Anakin made a seventh call.

No answer.

He cursed. And down went another button. And he didn't know where he was going.

“"We received the weapon’s plans from the squad Captains,” a blue miniature Mace informed Obi-Wan. “Excellent work, General Kenobi. However, I must ask, is there a reason why the medcenter is currently teeming with already well-recovered clone troopers from the Vanqor 1 task team?”

“The medcrew you sent made for excellent first aid, but I do think it’s ultimately unwise to treat a poisoning while stuck in the very place that caused it. And I believe they're all due a general health examination anyway… it has been a while.”

That had to sound at least moderately logical and well-reasoned, and Mace seemed moderately convinced.

“It is natural to feel compassion for your men, General Kenobi,” Mace reminded him. “If you thought they needed a few days’ leave…”

Obi-Wan knew Mace meant what he said, but his voice had trailed off in a manner that suggested they still needed all available manpower in the field. Obi-Wan felt a twinge of guilt, but he wasn't quite sure what about anymore. So much had happened between then and now. “Here in the field, situations change so very rapidly. Sometimes, immediate action has to be taken,” he explained. “However, please relay to Master Yoda my formal apologies for my recent… immediate actions.”

Mace nodded calmly.

Obi-Wan sighed. There was no ideal way to bring up Anakin, but he decided he might try the truth for a change – or something similar, at least. He suspected a good half of his guilt had to do with him somehow, but there were other, more complicated ingredients mixed in. This was why he still fundamentally disapproved of attachment – it was because of his attachment to Anakin that he'd
gone on this unsanctioned, ill-advised rescue mission, and now had to clean up the mess after Anakin's attachment had driven him after Padmé. This had to stop – he’d have to put a stop to this chaos. He was done running after Anakin at every turn – the results were getting increasingly unpredictable – but he'd cover for him one last time.

And only because he'd failed him – somehow. He couldn't explain it.

“About Anakin – I know. I tracked him down and tried to save him. But Dooku got away.” Technically, this was all true.

A mild surprise flashed across Mace's face. Then the pieces, at least some of them, seemed to come together in his head.

"The Council owes you an apology, Obi-Wan,” he said. “I’m afraid we jumped into the conclusion that Skywalker’s capture was a ransoming attempt – not unlike the unfortunate incident on Naboo some time ago – and erroneously kept waiting for Dooku to contact and lay out his demands. We also didn’t want you taking any unnecessary risks while ill. Have you learned the true reason behind this unfortunate development?”

“No… I’m afraid not.” Mace's explanation sounded reasonable to his ears.

“We would like to stage another rescue mission, with you leading, and any members from either the 501st or the 212th for reinforcement. We are sorry that we cannot spare another Jedi – I have to stay behind on Coruscant because of the weapon, and…”

“I… accept, only… as things stand now, I don’t know where he is.” He looked away for a moment. “And I should inform you that Dooku is presently holding someone else, too. Senator Amidala.”

Mace's eyes widened. ”Senator Amidala? Then why… Then I truly must wonder why the Count has yet to come forward and make any demands at all, with two prisoners this valuable? Obi-Wan, are you sure?” Mace stopped to think. ”If he's not ransoming them, then what is he doing? They can't possibly still be alive.”

“Master Windu, this is a madman, I shudder to think what he does to his prisoners. But I suspect they are being tortured for information – about the weapons, I would imagine.” This was all valid speculation.

Mace seemed partially accepting of this explanation, but there was really no fooling another Jedi Master.

“Is there something on your mind, Obi-Wan?”

“…I have reason to suspect that there is something more to this double capture than meets the eye,” Obi-Wan mused, glad he could finally be sincere. "And I think it's best I start the investigation here. Due to an… interesting development, almost a quarter of Dooku's new ship remains here on Vanqor.”

Mace was now confused beyond all need to even ask. “The Council will need a detailed report on these 'developments' later, but I think I can grant you permission.”

Mace went on to explain that any action the Senate should choose to take in regards to Amidala was out of his hands, but that that they'd send a rescue team to help him investigate and track down Dooku, and – while they were on Vanqor – a crystal task team as well, to resume the search for the weapons. To Obi-Wan the latter sounded like something that needed to be done to grant full legitimization to the former, and he had no reason not to agree.
It took full two hours for Anakin's rational self to catch up to the amnesiac, forlorn, rage-consumed ghost he'd become.

It was too bad that his rational self was still amnesiac. Something was tugging at him in the back of his head. Before Dooku had put the mask on him and humiliated him – before he had dangled Padmé in front of him – while he'd still been thinking somewhat clearly, he'd been trying to remember something then, too. Something that would have comforted him at the time. An idea that he'd had some time ago – as ingenious as it was sacrilegious. Something that would have amazed Obi-Wan, and warranted a lecture from him.

Dooku had been rummaging his belongings – which included his holoprojector and his lightsaber, which Dooku still had in his possession –

*His lightsaber.*

“First rule of war: listen and obey your superiors,” he'd told Ahsoka long ago. (Well, that had gone out the airlock even longer ago.) First rule of espionage: put trackers everywhere, and on everything. There was nothing too sacred nor too obvious to put a tracker on. Not even your own life.

Dooku had thought he could mock him by taking his weapon again. The idiot. It wasn't actually with him at all. Anakin had already given his lightsaber to Padmé once. His whole life. Now it was hers once more, and it would save her. His life would save hers.

He activated the tracker from the control table – hoping he hadn't broken that specific spot in his blind anger.

A red error message appeared on the screen.

They were still in hyperspace.

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uuuuhhhh I tried to update the tags to match the newly-bloated nature of this fic but I didn't want to overdo it either (can you tell I'm still pretty green here). also after getting such a great response after posting Ch. 9 I just had to finish this one today, still not sure how quick/slow future updates might be, or how many chapters there are left, but the outline is finished now and I know how this one will end :)

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Something Greater than Yourself

Chapter Notes

I often have these unnamed background characters in my fics purely for exposition or to further the main characters' story in a specific way, well here I finally felt the need to name one of them, because 'scientist girl' was getting ridiculous. so I christened her after a character from 'Jedi Quest' who's also a scientist (and interestingly this fic actually borrows some elements from 'Moment of Truth', one of the books she appears in) … aaaand the similarities really end there. so just to be clear, NOT THE SAME PERSON, and anyone who has read those books knows that it would be veeeery disturbing if it were, so… merely a cute allusion going on there. (how my brain works: scientist + female + star wars = oh they must all be called that, like some Nurse Joy/Officer Jenny thing.)

"Now do you perceive the difference between your preferred apprentice and mine, Tyranus?"

"I believe I do, My Lord."

Sidious smirked. In truth, he sensed very mixed sentiments from his atrophying apprentice, but also a new readiness to follow through with his Master's plan. That was all he needed, for Tyranus’ time breathing the Living Force was running short. But in the very unlikely scenario that Skywalker was not ready to take his enviable position just yet, perhaps a little more coaching would do no harm. For all Tyranus’ perfectly adequate attempts at the art of manipulation, he was still so very unrefined. (Although at this point, Sidious expected mediocrity from him, and could easily take it into account in his plans.)

"I commend your efforts with Kenobi, I truly do. Very few indeed are tempted to the dark side by logic and reason only. Very few are able to tap into it while in harmony with themselves. And certainly, very, very few able to use it… while as calm and collected as yourself, Tyranus."

Sidious could feel the pride swelling up in his student. These were the words he craved hearing. That he was special. That not only was he a ‘mighty Sith Lord’, he was also a superior dark side user, above everyone else, above those who needed to ‘fall’, be ensnared. Quite unlike him, who had chosen this; just as he had chosen to leave the Jedi, chosen his apprentices, chosen his values and principles. To him his lofty ideals and drastic methods were prized possessions, unique integrants of his unique persona – and to Sidious mere self-delusions and exploitable weaknesses like anyone else's. They could play this game forever, it gave Sidious great pleasure – but the Sith Master had a whole Empire to establish and little patience left for temporary placeholders.

Tyranus’ pride soon waned as he had to face his undeniable failure.

"Then I must wonder… what went wrong?"

Sidious started the holo recording from the beginning. Besides the educational aspect, he quite enjoyed watching it for the torture alone. He was always happy to deliver some by his own hands, but he especially loved when someone else the dirty work for him. He preferred the emotional kind to physical, but Kenobi’s quietly suppressed anguish was hardly his idea of entertainment. Skywalker's torment on the other hand, now that was at least diverting. But above all, it was a great
testament to Skywalker's power, to his resilience, as well as a demonstration of his drives – his weaknesses.

"What went wrong happened a long time ago. Kenobi is too old, too far gone. Too principled. Too… disciplined." He pointed to the holo, circling his hand around the older Jedi. "A true Jedi is, as they say… detached, and yet curiously self-involved. Always concerned with retaining their… purity… and under the right circumstances, hesitant to take any action for fear of calling upon dark forces to save the day. You see, that is their idea of inner harmony, surpassing in importance even all their ideals of… compassion."

As Tyranus kept nodding with growing agreement, Sidious privately scoffed. No wonder he was growing tired of this bore – at least Skywalker was proving to be something of a challenge, and mostly likely too easy still. He could have had Kenobi, if he’d so wished. He could have had anyone.

"Whereas Skywalker…"

"Never hesitates… already embraces the dark far more readily than he realizes. Especially when left with no other choice… although that is not an absolute requirement."

They watched the prisoner drop to the floor like the broken little puppet he was, as Tyranus vanished off-screen to secure his blissfully oblivious wife; and then swatting his friend's hand away, trying to get up, again and again – unsuccessfully. Unsuccessfully until Sidious would personally grant him permission. Everyone was constantly on his timer, going through the motions Sidious had choreographed, and it was both very dull and very enjoyable to watch.

"Willingly blinds himself to all truth and nuance when his narrow perception of reality is challenged… or his… shall we say happiness… threatened. Prefers simplicity… Immediacy."

"Well… let us then hope that it is with immediacy that he will seek our remedies to his quite glaring imperfections."

"Indeed. Now… I think it's high time the Confederacy had a reason for holding a Republic Senator in custody. What would you suggest, as its bona fide leader?"

- 

Mace’s normally excellent focus was tested over and over with Jenna. He really hoped this jargon-filled analysis of Crys's technical properties and construction would eventually yield something worth reporting to his superiors. The assistant – secretary – intern – whatever she was, had a curious way of starting any and every explanation from a far-fetched and barely related piece of trivia, and casually sprinkling the most significant details in between somewhere. It didn’t really help that every now and then, she would inquire after Skywalker – whose mysterious situation and its larger implications Mace was not at liberty to discuss.

But he felt it in the Force too – as did Master Yoda – something was about to happen. A murky shadow had fallen over the nebulae – leave it to the Chosen One to find himself in the center of it. Indeed, Mace suddenly felt as though he was barely gripping onto the edges of it all, and he was on Coruscant, the actual center of the Galaxy – guarding these weapons, which Jenna was trying very hard to convince him were just as important as rumored. They better be – Mace was bound by his duty, but he couldn't help but feeling that his time would have been better occupied somewhere else. On Felucia, the conflict had escalated to the point that they’d had to dispatch the 501st there instead of Vanqor with the 212th. Skywalker’s men had seemed oddly distrustful of the new temporary leadership, and Mace honestly believed he would have made a better replacement.
Maybe not a ‘fun’ General as he imagined that oddball Skywalker to be – but a competent one.

Jenna was now silent, scrolling through the seemingly never-ending notes on her holopad. Mace knew this look – she was starting to get to the point. Why were the most brilliant minds always like this?

“And now that I’ve had some time to study the plans – thanks, by the way – I believe General Skywalker – as clearly gifted as he is – was wrong in his initial assessment that the weapon is unserviceable, and always was. I assure you it is most definitely functional, when properly handled. It is simply a little old, neglected and in need of some minor touch-ups. But the crystal is just…” She shook her head. “It’s simply too powerful. Underwhelming as it might appear in its present state, it’s still an incredibly potent power source, and with some further investigation, I may even be able to create a synthetic image of its original appearance – which… I can’t even imagine. I have a hard time believing another crystal like this even exists.”

“Well, General Kenobi’s team is currently looking into that possibility,” Mace said dryly. “Would you say that it’s – “


“Miss, with all due respect – I am still not authorized to elaborate on General Skywalker’s current whereabouts.” For the eleventh time today...

Jenna seemed pensive, but hardly discouraged. “I just thought – whenever he gets back – I really think he could still make some valuable contributions to the research. I think he was just a little off his game when he was still recovering from the poisoning. You Jedi work your Knights on a pretty crazy schedule, you know.”

Mace made a wary nod that probably came across a little condescending. In theory, he agreed, but it was wartime and it simply couldn’t be helped. He himself would have loved to dedicate some more time to meditation and rest and to appreciating the finer things in life, but unless they all worked a ‘crazy schedule’ there would soon be no finer things left.

“Is he single, do you know?”

“All Jedi are single.”

“Then do you think – “

“That does not mean they’re available.”

Mace’s comlink beeped. He felt a wave of relief, before remembering it rarely signaled any good news.

“–

“Well, they’re demanding the weapon now. Great,” Senator Paulness huffed.

“Wait – we are giving up the weapon?” some other Senator agonized, motioning at Mace. “But Master Jedi here just said it’s still functional, and potentially very dangerous.”

“Is anyone wondering what it was doing abandoned on the moon in the first place? Did they use us to confirm its functionality – “

“– and study it with the Republic’s resources – “
Senator Organa’s towering presence cut through the room, silencing everyone for a moment. Somehow the known pacifist had talked his way into a ‘weapon supervision committee’, which actually made a lot of sense, when one considered the ‘supervision’ part.

“They and they. We need Senator Amidala back. She’s the only one here still fighting for peace, instead of fussing about rusty weapons. They already had weapons, and will continue to have weapons in the foreseeable future. Have you all lost your humanity? We probably already lost General Skywalker because all anyone cared about was weapons.”

Soon enough another heated discussion broke out about how weapons had the power to destroy multiple lives instead of one, to which Organa countered that the statement was true regardless of which side owned the weapon, or used it.

“It is very odd – and alarming – that the Confederacy should refuse to disclose any details on Skywalker,” the Chancellor then mused, “but since we have to transport the weapon to them anyway, we might be able to – “ the Chancellor fell into a long silence, to the point that his aides seemed concerned. “I wonder. These are two individuals I care deeply… deeply about. I wonder if it might be best if I were to lead the hostage negotiations myself. In person.”

All debaters now stared incredulously.

“I think that’s a terrible idea, Chancellor.”

“Oh it could be the best we’ve ever had.”

- Weak. At first glance, the suggestion was as ludicrous as they got. Him, the Hero with No Fear, the Chosen One… not that he much cared for either of those titles – they did feel like a bit of an oversell – but he must have done something right, or been born somewhat right, to earn them. And he was a respected General, an accomplished Jedi Knight, and always, always at least a formidable opponent in a fight, if not the overwhelming victor. Weak was not what he would have called most warriors he’d defeated.

And yet –

There was some indisputable truth to Dooku’s taunts. If Anakin’s enemies could just ambush him whenever – remove him from the battlefield for days – toy with his very life and use it to further their goals – then it logically followed that he was, to some degree, weak. If his power could be taken away from him like this, suffocated in a mask, stashed away in a cell or hung to dry on a rack, then whatever power he did have didn’t really matter. To be ‘at someone’s mercy’, as they said, by definition meant that it was the ‘mercy’ that mattered. And Anakin now realized – he’d often been shown ‘mercy’. Or been ‘lucky’. And when either ‘mercy’ or ‘luck’ became the sole determining factor between life and death – they were really one and the same thing.

And what did it mean to be ‘saved’, if not to depend on someone else’s ‘power’, or ‘luck’. He’d been saved by Obi-Wan and Ahsoka innumerable times, from the darkest of pits and tightest of spots. A sickening number of clone troopers had taken blaster bolts for him. Padmé had come to his rescue before. Really, he should have known this day would come. A day when Obi-Wan could only stand still and watch – Ahsoka would not be there – and Anakin would be shown ‘mercy’ when it would have been just as easy not to. And Padmé – because he had been dependent on ‘mercy’, Padmé would –
In the end, it would only take one blaster bolt. A bolt he could have taken to the chest in that damned poison cave, and probably would have, if he had not been 'lucky' – if some malfunctioning swarm of droids had not begun debating whether Jedi General Anakin Skywalker was valuable enough to be shown 'mercy' – to be taken against his will and used for some other, revolting purpose. If Obi-Wan had not shown up and 'saved' him.

And then on Vanqor, the cavalry had never come, and he'd lost. Because he had been alone, and he alone had not been powerful enough. Not powerful enough to work his way around 'strategy' or be immune to 'unfair', not powerful enough not to need 'mercy' or 'luck'.

There were simply too many variables, too much of what he'd come to rely on, and what he, for whatever reason, lacked now – which had led to him having to watch helplessly as Dooku had carried off his wife.

A 'good duelist' did not equal powerful. A 'respected General' did not equal powerful. And how was a weakling ever supposed to bring balance to the Force? Surely the Chosen One was meant to carry the weight of the Galaxy on his very fingertip – not be carried on a stretcher to be fixed, by someone else's arm strength.

You're not all-powerful, Padmé had told him once – the last time he'd lost someone he loved to beings that knew no mercy. Or that perhaps just had not felt like showing mercy that day.

He'd done something terrible that day. Something truly horrifying.

But if he could have somehow prevented his loss – he wouldn't have had to. Back then, he'd been too late. And he wasn't supposed to be there in the first place. What happened had not happened because he'd lacked power – but because he'd lacked… a different kind of power. Because he'd been bound – as surely as by durasteel – by his duty, by the rules. Held back - kept 'in his place' - by the Jedi.

Back in Zygerria… he'd been accused of being a slave. A slave to the Republic.

If his enemies could remove him from the battlefield – and take Padmé –

If the Republic could send him to the battlefield and keep him away from Padmé –

If the Jedi could take him and keep him away from his mother –

The screen beeped. Dooku's ship had come out of hyperspace.

There came the footsteps again. Padmé recognized the pace and the pressure now – it was Dooku. This was her chance. They had come out of hyperspace a while ago, and it didn't matter where, anywhere was better than in here. There had to be escape pods on this ship somewhere, or a communication device, anything. She refused to be bait, she refused to be a pawn, she was a Republic Senator and she had better things to do. She was an agent of her own destiny and her destiny was to bring peace to the Galaxy and live a long and happy life with her husband. Her husband, whom Dooku wanted to hurt. Had hurt. As he had hurt her friends.

Dooku was a mere obstacle. No more daunting than the door before her, which she’d observed last time, didn’t close automatically – if he could only have a moment of carelessness…

Padmé drew a deep breath. She'd have to time this right – and she probably couldn't aim where she really wanted to. Dooku was too tall, and he would see it coming, sense it coming even. He would sense this coming, if she wasn't quick enough.
She positioned herself close enough to the door to have a fair shot at an escape, but far enough for everything to look natural. Then she willed herself to think delicate and distressed thoughts, of Anakin, of rescue, of how… new this cell smelled? She wouldn't need her cognition, her muscle memory would do the rest.

"Senator, I bid you good morning," Dooku greeted as he came in. Padmé let him walk up to a certain distance, so he wouldn't block the door – which thankfully he left ajar. So far there was no indication of him sensing her intentions.

"Where are we?" she asked sternly, stomping up to him – and while her captor was busy coming up with a non-answer, she swiftly drew the knife from her hidden pocket and plunged it into his stomach. And while he was busy sensing that too late, with one of his more corporeal senses, she aimed a swift kick at his ankles, visualizing him hitting the floor with a thud and the blade sinking deeper upon impact.
Padmé never heard a thud – only a groan and a momentary stumble – and she had a millisecond to decide whether she should attempt to lock Dooku in or just run. She vaguely registered Dooku calling her names under his breath, which brought a very premature smirk on her lips. Bolting out the half-closed door, the Senator threw her hand on the wall button next to the cell, praying it would shut the door rather than open it wide – the button flashed red, and the mechanism activated with a promising swoosh, but she didn't even check, for now it was time to just run.

*She'd done it, she'd succeeded…*

Cell after cell after cell – the detention block seemed to go on forever, with identical prison units on either side of her, and more than a few doors separating the block into corridors, which thankfully (and oddly) kept opening automatically, one after another. Just how many prisoners did one ruthless Sith Lord –

*Teckla and Typho. And… Anakin.*

*No,* Padmé told herself, none of them were here. Teckla and Typho were dead, and the quicker she accepted it, the sooner she could mourn them with the honor and dignity they deserved.

But Anakin…

She found her steps halting as soon as she reached what she assumed to be the end of block, one last door before her. What was she doing? Anakin could still be here. Dooku had never given her a definitive answer. *Come for her,* he'd said… from *where?* It was only her wishful thinking that he'd gotten away – the last time she'd seen him, he was being tortured. The last time she'd *thought* she'd seen him, the ship was taking flight. What if he was still here? She couldn't possibly risk leaving him behind.

And even if he wasn't –

She could already hear heavy footsteps approaching, only a door between her and her pursuer. It suddenly occurred to her that Dooku must be armed – with a lightsaber. Of course he'd escaped, easily – all he'd needed to do was draw a circle on the door. How naive was she? And judging by the sheer massiveness of the detention block alone, this ship was enormous. She was an adequate pilot and knew her way around two or three standard models, but she couldn't possibly navigate her way through Dooku's private frigate. And whenever she went, he could *sense* her, for Galaxy's sake, and that was just one of his Force-sponsored unfair advantages.

She'd known this was going to happen. She'd known Dooku would catch her easily. If all it took to bring down a Sith Lord were the wily ways of an imprisoned politician, this nightmare would have been over back in the Petranaki arena.

She had never sought to escape. And she now realized, with some horror, what she *had* sought. She had sought revenge. She, a voice of peace and reason, in a moment of passion and anger, had sought *revenge.* Revenge for her friends. Revenge for Anakin – and in Anakin's stead.

She slowly turned around as Dooku appeared in the doorway at the opposite end of the corridor, lightsaber in one hand, and the other hovering over his open wound, blade still lodged in. She deduced it must be a Force thing – *great.* Not only had she failed – doomed herself to failure from the beginning – her unreasonably advantaged victim was just going to heal himself, or something,
and she would have accomplished nothing.

“Senator, are you mocking me?” Dooku asked her in a chilly voice.

Padmé clenched her fists. Her so-called plan had left no room for second thoughts, and now she was caught, but for one last moment, she desired freedom more than common sense recommended. In a moment of panic, she dashed toward the blast door, hoping against hope that it would open and she'd –

The door stayed shut. She drummed her fist against it, as Dooku quietly glided to her side and grabbed her by the arm.

His steps were clumsy and trudging as he escorted her back – the handle still sticking out his abdomen, blood wetting his tunic, as his free hand moved shakily over the injury.

She felt a degree of satisfaction – but she had not gotten revenge. And if she couldn't have revenge, answers would have to do. And if she couldn't have answers – perhaps she just finally wanted to demand them anyway, or just say his name, as though that could somehow bring him closer, or farther, wherever was safe – as though that could cast some kind of protective spell over him, and perhaps, over her, too.

“Why Anakin? Why can't you just leave him alone? Or fight him, if that's all you know how to do – he has a hard enough life just being your enemy.”

She heard a low, dreadful snicker. She glanced at the wound – the blood was already clotting, the blade stopping a portion of the outpour, the Force – presumably – keeping him alive.

“I would call you noble, Senator, but I'm inclined to believe your worrying about Master Skywalker is but to divert you from your own troubles.”

Not happy with the response, Padmé writhed one arm free and elbowed the butt of the knife inside him, thrusting it deeper into his intestines. The Sith Lord wailed in agony.

Master Yoda was the polar opposite of Jenna – while always wise and insightful, he tended to be a little sparse and enigmatic with his words, even after having spent four consecutive days in pensive meditation. As the two Jedi Masters approached the spaceport – the Chancellor's daring departure had gathered quite a crowd – Mace had to make one last inquiry.

“Anything on Skywalker?”

“Alive, he is,” Master Yoda announced.

“Is he with Dooku?”

“Hmm,” Master Yoda mused. “Complicated, it is. Perhaps, in a different kind of prison… young Skywalker is.”

“What does that mean?”

“Imagine… can you not?”

Mace gave a private sigh – assuming the Grand Master couldn't sense it anyway – fair enough, he made it no secret that imagination had never been one of his strongest suits. But he did not like the
words 'complicated' and 'different kind', especially when they were associated with Skywalker, and he still, for whatever reason, did not like the Chancellor's plan at all. Palpatine clearly wanted to present himself as a noble, hands-on leader, putting his life on the line for 'two individuals he cared deeply about' – and perhaps he did, that was hardly for a Jedi to judge – but Count Dooku had threatened his life before on several occasions and used it just as he was using Amidala now.

Mace couldn't shake the feeling that this mission was doomed to go horribly wrong – and while he wasn't a great 'imaginator', he had the distinct feeling that the Chancellor's capture might only be the second worst case scenario.

“A peacekeeper, you wish to be,” Master Yoda suddenly continued just as they reached the crowd comprised mostly of fellow Senators and news outlets that were not supposed to be there, “a guardian of weapons… they made you.”

“Master Yoda, it is wartime and I will readily accept each and every duty that I am –“

“A guardian of weapons… you still are.”

Mace stared at the Grand Master for a while, before he caught on to his meaning. He'd just been granted permission. Mace gave a quick but respectful nod, to thank him, then dove into the crowd and writhed his way to the Chancellor. The elderly leader acknowledged him with a smile.

“Chancellor, I – I insist on accompanying you as your Jedi protection. No disrespect to your bodyguards, of course. Officially, I'm still tasked with supervising the weapon and unlike the scientists you rejected, I am obviously combat-trained and –“

To Mace's surprise, Palpatine thanked him for volunteering and invited him aboard immediately.

Several hours passed before Dooku re-emerged. His face was now harder, more wary – understandably – and Padmé assumed some kind of medical droid had fixed his wound, as it appeared clean and stitched together underneath a fresh brown tunic. She had to face her failure once more. Some dark part within her had kept wishing he would faint and bleed out and that would somehow prove her salvation.

“Well, Senator Amidala,” Dooku spoke, evidently with some effort, “despite our past differences, I consider myself a gentleman–“ Padmé straightened herself and lifted her chin, “but seeing your great love for pain,” she suddenly felt herself rising from the floor, fighting panic as she did, “and a certain Skywalker,” she was gasping for breath in an invisible grip, then thrown against the wall, “I thought I might give you a demonstration - “ her head thumped against the wall again – harder – then lost all weight altogether, “of the kind of hospitality - “ She was falling into an abyss. She had failed – and Anakin – “– I habitually show to your husband.”

Fighting against unconsciousness, hands clapping at her throat, she glared down at her captor. To her surprise, his breathing had become labored as well – and quite abruptly, he dropped her to the floor, panting and grunting and hands shaking. Padmé yelped from the impact, as underneath her dress layers her ankle made a horrible snap, twisting into a painful angle.

Dooku now stood motionless – he was holding up a hand and peering towards the closed door – as though expecting something, and at the same time doubting its very existence.

Padmé tried to get up – she'd had to defend herself somehow – but the back of her head was still throbbing, and the whole world suddenly spinning. She scarcely realized it when the door came
down with a crash, and straight toward Dooku - hurling him into the wall, and somehow missing her entirely. She must be dreaming, she thought, and she couldn't even tell whether it was a nightmare or not.

Then she felt herself being shaken awake.

“Padmé! Padmé!”

Padmé blinked. She couldn't believe her eyes, but she'd know those sky-blue crystal springs anywhere. Somehow Anakin was here - he had heard her silent plea. He had escaped and come back and now he was here with her. But if this was a nightmare, he would be caught and then he would suffer –

“Skywalker…”

Then he vanished like a ghost – no, he turned towards Dooku, who had recovered from the blow –

“I'll kill you.”

Padmé saw, but only barely processed, what happened during the next few minutes, or perhaps only seconds. Anakin reached out his hand toward Dooku - Dooku resisted, but Anakin pressed on harder and harder – until Dooku, with a bellow, shot up his arm, and the Jedi was lifted into the air and then tossed to the floor, then lifted again and whisked against the wall. Mid-air, Anakin broke out of Dooku’s hold and aimed a kick at his chest, and Dooku fell back and again Anakin extended his hand, now to snatch Dooku’s lightsaber from his belt, but Dooku was able to claim the weapon first, igniting it, before suddenly recoiling and feeling the wound on his stomach. Anakin, taking notice, reached out to place pressure on the injury, and Dooku nearly doubled over in agony, hand still roaming over the cut – that Padmé could have sworn had grown larger and was bleeding once again.

Red saber flashing, Dooku took a swing at Anakin, who dodged it, then another, and he dodged it again. Dooku then turned towards Padmé – she never comprehended the danger, only saw the action – but Anakin reacted faster than lightspeed, somehow managing to grab him by the collar and throw him sideways into the wall.

“No lightning today?”

“No lightsaber today?” Dooku coughed in retort.

“Come on, Artoo,” she heard Anakin plead into his comlink. Again he tried to snatch the lightsaber from Dooku, but his hold was firm and he charged forward, now chasing him into the corridor. Anakin dodged and crouched and jumped around as the saber pursued him, as his opponent endeavored to keep his breathing even. Finally the Jedi managed to leap high enough so as to kick him again, the kick landed with a thud, and the Count fell backwards.

Padmé tried to clear her head. She was now beginning to grasp that all of this was really unfolding right before her eyes, not in some half-comatose rescue fantasy. She’d have to get up and fight – Anakin needed her. She couldn’t really process her own pain, or whatever damage Dooku had inflicted upon her body – and she didn’t have time. Slowly she scrambled up from the floor, willing herself to snap back to reality.

“Padmé,” Anakin turned to her as she limped out of the cell, as he still ducked and leaped to evade Dooku’s labored swings as the Sith groaned at every movement he made. But it was only now that Padmé really saw Anakin - and he looked terrible. Covered in sweat and grime, injured; his face
was gaunt and pale and his eyes – they still shone the same familiar blue, yet they were no longer
the soothing crystalline wells she'd looked into just now – they were burning, blazing; as though
they had sucked out all the color, all the Living Force from the rest of his body, as though he had
indeed vanished while she wasn't looking and turned into a ghost. She looked upon the sight in
utter horror, until the apparition was forced to turn his back as Dooku came at him again.

“Anakin!” Padmé cried. “We have to go!”

Dooku was now fiddling with his comlink, which gave her the distinct feeling he was calling for
reinforcement. It was only at this point that she truly grasped that Anakin was fighting Dooku
completely unarmed.

“I came here to kill him!” he roared in response. Dooku was now backpedaling, seemingly just
trying to buy time, and Anakin was still somehow trying to attack, with nothing but himself for a
weapon.

Padmé tried to limp closer to them, but her ankle protested vehemently.

“I thought you came here for me!”

Anakin halted, turning to her momentarily. Dooku was now at a safe distance from them, evidently
no longer in a fighting condition, trying to avoid his opponent just long enough for the
reinforcements to arrive. Her husband's face was still hard to look at – it wasn't a vague purple like
it had been from the poisoning, his cheeks weren't gory and clotted like Dooku's abdomen, nor his
cheekbones broken like her ankle – and yet he looked more damaged than she'd ever seen him,
more intense and ferocious and –

Then, quite abruptly, he appeared to calm down. The peaceful blue was back in his eyes,
something settling into place inside the feral warrior.

“O-okay. Let's… let's go.”

Dooku was still stalling. Anakin muttered into his comlink for Artoo to secure his lightsaber with
haste, then meet them at ‘the hangar’. Padmé had no idea where the hangar even was - and she still
couldn't understand how Anakin was here and what had happened to him. Had he been on the ship
all along, and only now escaped?

And at that exact moment, the towering golden droids stormed in, with their electrocution staffs,
from either end of the long corridor. Dooku immediately took advantage of the commotion and
vanished through the door as three droids charged in from Anakin's side – and another three from
Padmé's. Anakin screamed after Dooku, but Padmé screamed Anakin's name louder and he
immediately reacted. Spreading his arms wide, he sent all three droids on his side flying against the
wall, then summoned one of their staffs to him, then spun around and tossed it at Padmé, “Catch!”

“Anakin, I can't – “ she tried to protest, seizing hold of the weapon while hating the fact that she
could stand but barely move. Anakin was about to shout further instructions but one of the droids
was now up and hit Anakin with the staff, and he screamed and fell over.

Soon he was back up, trying to claim their staffs as Padmé made a clumsy swish at her three
opponents – hitting one, which fell backwards, as the other two came at her, about to surround her
-

And suddenly she was scooped up in Anakin's arms and he was running down the corridor at
unimaginable speed. She heard a vague clatter of armor from behind her, then a swoosh as a door
closed behind them, and another long corridor opened in front of them, then another, then another –

“Artoo,” Anakin yelled orders into his comm, “close doors 6 and 7 in the detention block, hurry! Yeah, still no lockdown – yeah yeah, I'm still very touched.”

“Ani,” Padmé softly uttered, “how did you – “

“Did he hurt you?! What did he do to you?!” Anakin screamed at her, or rather at their common enemy who was no longer there.

Padmé frowned at his misplaced anger, as he ran and ran and stared back at his wife, safe and sound in his arms, expecting a response to a question that suddenly mattered so very little.

“You're welcome, by the way!”

“What?”

“What, did you think Dooku stabbed himself?”

“What?“

"The wound, genius!"

"That was you? Padmé, that's -"

“The only reason you didn't get yourself killed just now! What were you thinking, facing him without your lightsaber?!”

“He stole it – “

“And you came to face him before – “

“I came to get you!“

“That's not what you said just now!”

Anakin's comlink beeped.

“Artoo has it. He's right above us now.”

Securing a tighter hold of his wife, Anakin darted towards yet another door, expecting it to open automatically just like the others had, and almost crashed them both into the thick metal plate when it did not.

“Anakin, careful!” Padmé warned him too late, looping her arms around his neck tighter, wishing she wasn't so completely physically dependent on him at the present moment.

“Oh, now he activated the lockdown,” Anakin hissed into his comm. “Artoo, buddy, can you override it? No? Then I need you to cut some holes. We're right below you. You're quite handy with a lightsaber, you can do it!”

Padmé could hardly believe what she was hearing – this was such a typical Anakin plan if there ever was one – but she was slowly starting to regain her energy and recover from her most superficial injuries. And she thought - as she witnessed for the first time as a hypercompetent astromech cut a hole above them with a Jedi Knight's sacred weapon, then landed on two circular pieces of floor like some celestial savior – she really loved this Anakin. She loved all the Anakins,
or rather the one and only – all his facets and dimensions, and even that which was hidden from her – but all too often, she perhaps valued her independence a little too much, asserted her self-sufficiency a little too harshly, when he came offering his protection and fierce devotion. She vowed to never again either disregard nor underestimate this Anakin - the Anakin with a plan – or without a plan, one never knew – never out of his element, always on top of the situation. And as relieved and utterly astonished she was by the rescue – it wasn't the rescue she loved, not the incredible feats her incredible husband was somehow able to perform in record time and scarcely recovered from his own capture – it was the resilient, resourceful, devoted and loving man. And somehow, she felt, that wasn't Anakin Skywalker, Jedi Knight; or General Skywalker, military mastermind. It was her Ani – the boy with the soothing blue eyes.

“The hangar is just ahead. Artoo figured out a shortcut.”

Padmé reached up to kiss him, which completely took him by surprise.
Even in his weakened state, Dooku was less than willing to let his guests leave early. The hangar was soon swarming with a seemingly endless supply of B1's and B2's. Reunited with his lightsaber and taking full advantage of the open space, Anakin sliced through the droids with relative ease, but more than once he was forced to toss his wife yet another borrowed weapon for her protection, and trust Artoo to handle the rest. Finally, as a rumpled pile of metal lay immobile on the floor, the trio clambered into the Twilight and started the engine.

“Anakin!” Padmé suddenly gasped, looking more distressed than she had been throughout the whole ordeal. “I know we have to go, but – “

“Yeah, kinda!”

“Listen to me! My bodyguard and my handmaiden – Captain Typho and Teckla Minnau – they were with me when I was captured – I think – please, can you – with the Force – “

“Padmé, I've met them and I like them, but that doesn't mean I can –“

“Can you please try?”

Activating the autopilot far too early after they'd shot into space, Anakin closed his eyes and concentrated. His thoughts were scrambled and most of them elsewhere, interrupting his focus, but he gave his best effort to reach the Living Force flowing through two good souls that had protected his wife far longer than he had, often more competently than he had, and still found time to protect their secret, too – what was left of the secrecy, anyway.

There was no response. Just blankness, and Padmé next to him, bracing herself.

“Padmé, I – “ He was forced to open his eyes when the autopilot started protesting, making the ship shake uncomfortably.

“Don't say it,” she said quietly, looking away. ”I already know.”

”They might not – maybe I just couldn't - ” His voice trailed off. ”They died protecting you.”

“They died thinking they failed me.”

Padmé silently wiped away a tear. Artoo scuttled over to offer condolences, but Anakin didn't know what to do or say. His head was still in the frenzy of the battle, his mind still a cyclone of images and feelings, most of them unpleasant, and revolving around his own failure to kill Dooku. He willed himself to accept the fact that it was impossible for the time being – and would be for some time – and that he'd gotten Padmé out of there and that was all that mattered. She was really here, right beside him, he'd vowed to return from Vanqor so he could see her again – everything was okay, nothing else was even real –
Padmé shook her head.

"What will I tell Teckla's family? Who will take care of them now? They barely have – they barely have water – “

“I'm sorry,” Anakin said quietly, trying to keep the freighter stable.

“Sometimes I wonder,” Padmé continued, voice still quivering, "How is – how is anyone supposed to defeat the Sith, or even stand up to them, unless they're you, Anakin, or – ” She paused as she turned to look out the window to see a large, light-green orb emerge into the vast blackness of space. "Where are we?"

“Just above Utapau,” Anakin informed. “I'm sorry, but we have to land. The – the hyperdrive's busted. I activated it too early when I located Dooku's ship, and then I almost couldn't get out.”

“Utapau?” Padmé echoed. “We're on the other side of the Outer Rim? 'Located'? Anakin… you did get away. How did you –”

Anakin explained about the tracker, trying to lighten up the mood again by making the fairly lame joke about the first rule of espionage – which Padmé was quick to correct; attempting a smile; was actually putting bugs on everything, whereas trackers would be the first rule of… well, tracking. To which Anakin observed that there was still some overlap between the two, and Padmé's sad smile turned sly, and she leaned towards his seat and whispered, "Overlap, you say?" and he leaned toward her and for a moment as perfect as it was fleeting, everything was right in the world.

The ship shook again, and Padmé pulled away, and Anakin found comfort in her momentarily lifted spirits, even if his had not so much lifted as risen to an abrupt peak, exploded inside his soul and were now scattered around him, lukewarm and indistinct.

“Did you remember to remove the tracker, Artoo?” Anakin turned to his loyal companion.

“I may be old, I'm not senile!”

“Nobody thinks that. Well done bud, that's gonna help us apprehend Dooku once we – “

Apprehend Dooku.

Anakin supposed that was the Jedi in him speaking. And it was quite possibly the best plan of action in the grand scheme of things.

But he'd been so close. Padmé had been so close. And yet the bastard lived on, after what he'd done to her – after what he'd done to the Galaxy – it was not fair -

”Anakin,” Padmé then confessed, ”I don't really understand what's going on. I thought I did, to a degree… but…”

Anakin wasn't even sure about the degree, and he was reluctant to speculate – or disclose the circumstances of his own captivity – and suddenly, with a shiver in the Force, he remembered Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan, whom he'd yelled at and left behind on Vanqor. It now seemed a lifetime ago, although a day or two was probably closer to the truth.

Anakin attempted to 'search his feelings' as he was so often told to. Was he still mad at his Master?
Had he ever been, and about what? Was 'mad' the right word?

He tried to remove Dooku entirely from his labored recollections. With Dooku, his thoughts just hurled into an instant and intrusive loop that blocked out everything else. It didn't matter what the wretch had said to Obi-Wan. It was unrelated, and only clouded Anakin's focus.

But **Obi-Wan**… Anakin had said some awful things to him. Had he meant them? What had he even said? He'd… he'd **attacked** him. At least, he was fairly sure he had.

The Master and Padawan been at odds before, and always been able to put it behind them. But this time… Anakin wished he could have at least recalled his words, had a recording, or something. He bet Obi-Wan remembered. Anakin just wished everything could be back to normal again, without him having to **really face** his Master.

"Uh," Anakin changed the subject, "they're probably worried sick about you back on Coruscant. I guess one of us should –"

Padmé nodded. "I should notify the Senate. I'm guessing this wasn't exactly a Council-sanctioned rescue mission."

*The Council.* So many things and people that had not remotely mattered to Anakin during the past 48 hours were now flooding back into his life, and inevitably mattered once again. Anakin suddenly felt exhausted at the mere thought of having to process his feelings toward the Council, and quickly decided they were irrelevant. He was still a Jedi, there was still a war, and he had survived and he was back in the field. And that was all there was to it.

"No, it was not. It's okay. I'll just gloss over it in my report… if anyone still reads them." He volunteered to make the call, and on a whim, he chose Windu's channel. He could have sworn he suddenly felt the Jedi Master closer in the Force.

Soon enough, a blue translucent Windu appeared above the control table.

"Skywalker!" he exclaimed in evident surprise. "I am… glad to see you safe."

"Thank you, Master Windu," Anakin nodded, then gestured towards Padmé. "I apologize for failing to report for the past few days, but I've just rescued Senator Amidala –"

He stopped himself short as another familiar face came into view on the other end.

"Chancellor!"

"Can it be true? You're both safe and sound?"

"Yes, uh - it's a long story –"

As it turned out, Windu and the Chancellor had quite a tale to tell as well, as they informed the newly liberated hostage that the Confederacy had demanded the crystal weapon as ransom for her release – and that they had, in fact, been en route to the prisoner negotiations, before the journey's objective had obviously proved moot.

Padmé cast her husband a confused look, but Anakin had no answers. Before Anakin was forced to end the call to start landing preparations, he informed Windu of the tracker and Dooku's last known coordinates, and their impending emergency landing on Utapau.

The Chancellor seemed particularly intrigued by this information, and promised they'd soon be in
The last Obi-Wan had heard of Anakin and Padmé, there was going to be a rescue mission without his involvement, despite the Jedi General's earlier acceptance of the task. He supposed he had not appeared enthusiastic enough about the idea, which was fair - and it was not as though Anakin had wanted him along. Now he was being informed by Mace that the captives had rescued themselves and an immense relief filled his heart, while more thorny sort of feelings kept poking at its door.

His 'investigation' of the REP had revealed exactly naught. Inside, he had found nothing but an inoperable holocamera on the ceiling, and that the torture mechanism in the center of the room was no longer functional either – both had probably been powered by the mother ship.

The Jedi Master also couldn't quite fathom how a broken weapon figured into Dooku's plans, but to learn that that had been the reason for the Senator's capture gave him an odd sense of ease - of normalcy. Although he had to admit that if this particular situation was the new 'normal', then the war really had gone on too long.

But once again, mixed with that ease, trying to penetrate his heart and soul, there was still something else. His confrontation with Dooku, and all its implications. He'd had a lot of time to think since Anakin had left - to replay the events in his head, over and over, trying to analyze what had really happened.

Obi-Wan been determined to face Dooku as a Jedi, rising above the circumstances – and as himself, always trying to think strategically. But he'd been sorely ill-prepared, and as soon as he'd found there was no viable strategy – that he was not only outnumbered, but being tested – and when he'd realized Anakin might pay the ultimate price for that test – his focus had faltered, and suddenly his thoughts had not been with Anakin at all, but exactly where Dooku had wanted them – with himself; and what his heart could and could not take anymore.

For one critical moment, he'd given into fear – selfish fear; born from the most selfish place of all – selfish love. And selfish love – what the Jedi called attachment – was never about the person one loved; whom one wanted to protect. It was always about self and self only, selfish desires and selfish despair.

He'd been wrong to love that way. He'd been too lenient with himself. He'd slipped, he'd allowed himself to feel too much.

It was too late now to regret his enduring attachment to Qui-Gon, and he'd been gone too long for Obi-Wan to ever want to seek comfort or common ground with a Sith Lord. He'd passed one half of the trial.

But Anakin?

This, he could still stop. One day his Padawan would die, and Obi-Wan had to be ready to let him go. And if he were to live, a broken shell of a Master wouldn't be of much help to him. Already he was reaping the rotten fruits of possession and selfishness, and if he didn't stop now, how could he ever set a good example?

There would be no new Obi-Wan - and clouds would gather to eclipse the blue moon until everyone was once again convinced of its grayness. Its dull, consistent, familiar grayness.

“One last thing, Obi-Wan,” Mace said to him over the holo. “The Chancellor, as it happens, has
just received some very interesting intel on Utapau. He is currently having a private
holoconference in his cabin, but from what I understand, we might have to expand the weapon
search once again.”

“To Utapau?”

“Yes… the problem is, we're short on manpower again, and we absolutely cannot afford to
discontinue the search on Vanqor. The scientists all agree that the weapon and all its potential
siblings are not only dangerous, but actually functional.”

“Dangerous enough to possibly turn the tide of the war?”

“Possibly.”

“Well, I am here, aren't I?”

“Yes… however, considering Skywalker's current whereabouts, I expect he'll be assigned to lead
the investigation on Utapau. And… well…”

Obi-Wan immediately understood his meaning, and gave a slight frown. One minute they wouldn't
tell him that his former student was in mortal peril, and now they wanted him to babysit him again?

“You wish for me to join him? Master Windu, despite recent… mishaps, I have no doubt that my
former Padawan can take care of himself. And what about his battalion?”

“Still on Felucia, and they're staying. As for your team, having the 212th operate without a General
is not ideal, but if your reviews on Commander Cody's work performance are anything to go by,
we're willing to trust Vanqor in his capable hands. And as for Skywalker… we simply find that you
two work well together.”

Obi-Wan reminded himself of the lessons he'd learned on this very planet. The Council's word was
law, and it was his job as Master to be an example, and to obey. What reason did he even have to
object? He'd have to confront Anakin eventually – and for all he knew, the Republic’s future
depended on this participation on this trip. But he had to admit, it was the Anakin part of the
equation that gave him some pause. It wasn't as though the petulant youth scared him in any way.
He just didn't really know how to approach him this time, how to approach what had happened
between them, or even decide what he should approach first. Sure, he could start with reprimands,
but what about? Their… uh… fight? Padmé? Or should he try to convince him, without any
concrete proof behind his lingering fear, that something was amiss? That for once Anakin could
stand to discard his intense feelings about everything, and start thinking with logic and rationality?
Or should he just ask him whether he was okay after a very stressful two weeks?
Or all three? In what order?

“… Understood. Let me know when you've checked with the Chancellor, and I shall leave for
Utapau.”

Later in the afternoon, Obi-Wan spotted one of the morning teams heading back to the REP (their
temporary base of operations) for their break. Of all the teams, they had met with the most success
so far, with no crystal discoveries to speak of, but they had fended off a gundark attack and lived to
tell the tale. Given his and Anakin's less than impressive track record with gundarks (the mere
thought of Anakin still pained him), it had to count for something.

Obi-Wan was already turning on his heels, planning to go check whether the pirates had finally left
after trying to sneak into their ships for two consecutive days, when his Jedi senses picked up a mysterious conversation between two troopers.

"Well, do you want to be the one to ask him? Didn't you hear what happened to Fives?"

"I only heard rumors… but this has nothing to do with that."

"Then why are you nervous?"

"Is something the matter, gentlemen?" Obi-Wan called to them, just barely in their earshot and probably coming across as a eavesdropper. The clones – Crys and Wooley – started, but were quick to spew denials and reassurances.

"Nothing is the matter, General."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, General."

"Alright. Carry on, then."

- 

Anakin initially wanted to land on the Pau City spaceport, as the two survivors were in dire need of nourishment, rest, a bath and other luxuries the big city could easily provide. But at this point the ship was making noises whose origin neither Anakin nor Artoo could immediately identify, and probably fearing it would explode before he reached the urban area, the pilot instead settled for a secluded plain about a hundred klicks from Pau City.

Once on solid ground, the spouses began to rummage the ship for anything that bore some semblance to food, and soon discovered an unexciting but vitally important box of ration bars and water bottles. Showering, at first, seemed a bit trickier to accomplish without wasting all the drinking water, but a quick computer scan of their surroundings revealed that there was a small lake close by. And thanks to the their previous, far more pleasurable adventures on the freighter, the husband and wife also found some reasonably clean clothes in the wall compartments.

Anakin examined his wife's ankle with what expertise he'd absorbed in the field, suspecting it sprained and maybe fractured. Wrapping the injury in a somewhat awkward bundle of bandages, he reassured her help would surely be arriving soon and she'd receive proper treatment once back home.

"You know," he said, "some Jedi work at the temple as healers. Now more than ever… I wish I had their powers."

"Me too," Padmé agreed. "I’m sure if I was a Jedi, I would want to be a healer."

"When the war started, though… some of them were re-assigned to the field."

"You would think that'd be the other way around."

"Yeah…"

Padmé wanted to scour the ship further in hopes of unearthing something that could pass for a temporary set of crutches, but Anakin still insisted on carrying her in his arms, although Padmé objected that he himself looked just about stretcher-ready.
Once they set off from the ship, however – leaving Artoo to work out and somehow solve yet another Twilight problem – she soon stopped protesting. The landscape of golden-green grass and a drowsy late afternoon sky was soothing to her eye, and it seemed to have some effect on Anakin as well, as a weary tranquility had once again settled on his features, and an idle smile was playing about his lips. Lips that she once again, rocking back and forth to the rhythm of his tired yet steady steps, found too beautiful to resist.

No longer chased by droids, nor stuck in an unstable spacecraft, the lovers could afford to linger, and soon Padmé found herself kissing her sweaty and filthy husband with such passion and ardor, claiming his neck and hair and anything of his that her hands could reach, that he deemed it appropriate to halt his advance and slowly and gently lay her down in the grass. Padmé never broke contact, arms tightening around his neck, as she desperately pulled him closer and closer until his torso was pressed against hers and their mouths all but melted together. A muffled moan escaped him - but as soon as Padmé rolled up from the ground, turning him over and climbing on top of him, it was Anakin's turn to voice a very half-hearted protest.

"This – this will be more enjoyable once we've bathed. Or while we bathe. I smell gross. You - smell wonderful."

Padmé rose up to her elbows, regarding the 'gross' creature beneath her as he finally found room to breathe, cheeks scarlet and eyes shining with enjoyment of what could have followed next.

"Or after we've slept… for a month, or so."

"We're not young anymore," Anakin joked, and Padmé laughed.

But as fatigued as she was – as they both must be – she was suddenly afraid to close her eyes - close her eyes without feeling his lips, his touch, his anything. Afraid that once she opened them, her Ani would be gone and there would not even be a ghost in his place, no distorted apparition to comfort her and reassure her that Anakin was away fighting in the field but would be back soon, and she only needed to wait.

- 

"As they say… an early Knight claims the Queen.”

Sidious studied his quietly groveling apprentice through the blue flickering image. It gave him a certain satisfaction to see him in that state – this would teach him to question his Master’s authority and revel in his own superiority – but it could not bring back the chess pieces nor reset the game, this round was lost as surely as though Tyranus had started chasing an insect and swept the board clean.

“My Lord, I do not -” Tyranus, on one knee, gave his best imitation of composure and dignity, but Sidious cut him short.

“We could have accomplished so much today,” he snarled. “Skywalker could have been ours by now.”

He was speaking hyperbolically, but Tyranus did not need to know that. Sidious was certain he could have turned the Jedi's heart today – set him down on a path of no return – but some of the game pieces had still been missing, most notably a certain White Knight - who could have been removed from the board by now. The Sith Master did not quite understand why Kenobi was suddenly more interested in digging up nonexistent treasures in murky caves than breathing down his Padawan’s neck, the one time his sickening loyalty would have been more than welcome. And
even Windu, who had volunteered to take his place, lived on and continued to stare daggers at Sidious. Well, let him have his suspicions. They would yet serve their purpose and then be rendered meaningless once he perished, along with the entire Jedi Order.

"My Lord, I am at a loss as to how Skywalker was able to track down the ship prematurely – “

"Of course you are… because you are a simpleton. There is a tracker on your ship. Have your droids locate it, and dispose of it.”

Tyranus bowed his head, a pale hand resting on his tunic. He claimed Skywalker had injured him, but Sidious felt a distinct sense of shame in his words, and was inclined to doubt them. Had he tripped and hit a sharp rock?

"Not to worry. In spite of your incompetence, I have a new plan prepared and ready to be set in motion.”

Sidious had devoted his whole life to accumulating power, and more than ten years to preparing Skywalker for his destiny – time was not the issue. But as he watched Tyranus rise from the floor on the other end, once again proud and no less stupid than before, knees straightening before being granted permission – Sidious realized how his own pride had suffered. He'd lowered himself to make a bet with his student and they both had lost. He could blame it on Tyranus to save face, but the truth was, with just a little more effort, more precise calculations, he could have ensured his success. This was his plan, not his aging minion's, and he should have made sure.

Sidious was now more adamant than ever. Tyranus needed to die by Skywalker's hand, and only then would he know that his Master had indeed won, and truly comprehend the irony of that victory. And Skywalker, he grew more resolute by the minute, would belong to him. This so-called bet had sealed it. From beyond the grave, from within the Cosmic Force, Tyranus would witness his successor's fall to the dark and ascension to glory.

If the boy were to die tomorrow by blaster or mishap, then so be it. But he wouldn't, Skywalker knew it as well as his future Master – he was the Chosen One, chosen by Sidious for a sublime purpose.

And when the time came for him to make the choice – no longer would it be between Sidious or death; glory or destruction. Even death was a choice – a wasteful one – and Chosens could not be choosers.

There would be no yes or no.

Only yes, Master… or yes, Master.
Our Most Important Allies

Anakin heaved a deep, hoarse breath; with a sudden relief and a lingering panic. Relief at being able to draw that breath. And that terrible, irrational sense of panic upon waking up and realizing it had all just been a dream, without truly feeling it.

Anakin looked around. His heightened Jedi vision could easily penetrate the dark. It was still the same ship; his dear, bruised and battered Twilight. He was still the same person, a little roughed up himself but in essence, unaltered. Padmé was still there, sleeping soundly next to him; head turned away, dark curls spreading over the covers like rivers of silk.

And yet, what was and wasn't real suddenly appeared very abstract and inconsequential. His surroundings and consciousness felt but a mere opinion, a point of view – no more valid than the antechambers of his mind, the dark attics of the unperceived but not unfelt.

It was barely even a dream, he told himself, and certainly no Force-sent vision. It wasn't as though he'd actually seen anything. Maybe he'd just slept in an awkward position, and that had obstructed his breathing. And now he could breathe just fine – Padmé was here, everything was okay –

Anakin was reassured of this conclusion when he next opened his eyes, and saw Padmé gazing into them with her own sparkling jewels. The morning sun invaded the cockpit, dazzling him for a moment, and still she surpassed its radiance, and he never wanted to look away.

"Sleep well?" she asked softly.

Anakin stretched his arm toward the ceiling, with a languid smile.

"Did you?"

She nodded, and Anakin felt a lovely warmth flowing from her in the Force. Not only did she look genuinely well-rested and re-energized, he sensed in her a new fighting spirit, ready for the day and its challenges. But there was something else, too. A strange sense of… balance. Of acceptance. He didn't really know what of.

"It almost feels like we're just… camping out here," she chuckled into her pillow. "Like we're on a vacation."

He leaned in toward her, drowning his hand in her curls, losing the rest of himself in her lips.

"A well-deserved one."

But vacations, much like relief and pleasure, were never meant to last, and their spontaneous getaway to Utapau was no exception. Last night, after they had bathed, and Padmé had gone to sleep, Windu had called Anakin again. He had informed the younger Jedi that they'd been unable to locate Dooku last night, and Anakin had quietly responded that the tracker had gone offline as well. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he still plotted revenge, yet the notion already felt more distant, and the past few days more and more fragmented. It was probably a good thing in the circumstances. And he was a Jedi, he was better than this… Yet he knew that if Dooku were to materialize in front of him right now, he'd end it. With or without a lightsaber, with or without the Force even, with his bare hands if he needed to –

Windu had then proceeded to announce that he and the Chancellor would be staying the night on Sluis Van – a high-risk decision considering the planet's alliance with the Confederacy. Windu
however assured him that he had some Republic-sympathizing connections on the planet, and through them he would try and find a medical crew to bring with them to Utapau to examine the two captivity survivors. Anakin had thanked him, and rejected the idea of hiring a mechanic, too – he’d get his ship sorted, he always did – which for some reason made Windu give his best approximation of a smile. To end the call, Windu had stressed upon the importance of a good night’s sleep (well, Anakin had tried) and said with a somewhat mysterious tone that they might need Anakin back in the field sooner than later.

Anakin grudgingly relayed the news to Padmé that they would be getting visitors today – and afterward it would be time for him to rejoin the battle and for her to go home. He swallowed a bitter lump into his throat. *The last time he’d left her at home –*

Padmé considered the announcement with a pensive look, then reached toward him again. ”So… if I want to kiss you, I should do it now?” Anakin didn’t object, and he got lost in her once more, in that parallel universe of peace and bliss where they dreamed of living one day. But as she finally freed his mouth and his silence still remained, she frowned in concern.

”What is it?”

”So I suppose… you’re… okay now.”

”You sound almost offended at the idea.”

”I don’t want you to go,” Anakin blurted out the simple truth. He racked his brain for solutions that weren’t there. This wasn’t even about their secret status – right now they were just like any devoted wartime couple – and he wasn’t ready to send long letters and gaze wistfully at the stars at night. And it was naive of him to assume they would even be afforded that luxury – because they weren’t like any other couple. Anakin had sensed it, even if he only now realized it. Their enemies *knew.*

”And I don’t – I have to – “

Padmé’s cheek rubbed against the pillow as she shook her head, “Yes, Anakin, you have to. And I have to. We already had this conversation. I know it may feel like everything’s changed since then, but it hasn’t.” Her voice had grown stern, and she paused for a while before continuing, more gently, ”Anakin, I… I fear for your sake just as much as you fear for mine. But we have to take heart, do our duty and end this war. That’s the only way we can,” she softened her next words with a silly tone, “live happily ever after.”

Anakin sensed that her courage was genuine, but that she was also putting up a brave face. It was such a Padmé thing to do. He really had nothing useful to contribute to the conversation anymore, when, out of the blue, the spouses remembered something at the exact same time – their theory about the Sith Lord lurking in the Galactic Senate. In his obsession over Dooku, Anakin realized, he had completely forgotten about his Master.

Padmé sighed. A part of her remained terrified, Anakin could sense it in her words and in her silence, and she had to concede, ”So… I guess home is hardly any safer.”

Anakin wanted nothing more than to keep her safe and to kill the person responsible for their suffering - for which reason his next words surprised him, and they came spilling out of his mouth before he could trace their origin or reasoning.

”You know… maybe we jumped to the conclusion that it's a politician. Politicians aren't the only ones with power.”
The unexpected nature of the statement was not lost on Padmé.

"Where's this coming from, Anakin? I thought you didn't trust politicians."

"I don't."

"Then who else do you not trust?"

Anakin didn't answer.

Preparing to leave for Utapau, Obi-Wan took it upon himself to personally inspect his ship and its immediate surroundings one last time. He'd been ordered to take one of the large freighters that the 212th had arrived in, and he wanted to make sure everything was in top condition and there would be no unpleasant surprises awaiting his troopers.

And sure enough, there was one right outside – and it was hardly a surprise - the persistent pirates were engrossed in yet another card game. This one Obi-Wan didn’t even recognize, but it seemed to involve at least drinking, dares and reluctant parting with property – most of it junk, and arranged into an ill-defined pile that they kept poking at and sometimes pocketing something from.

The Jedi Master had finally had enough.

“What, pray tell, are you still doing here?” he demanded, striding towards their gambling circle established in the middle of nowhere. “It’s been days, and trust me, no one is getting any richer around here.”

“W'e're out of fuel,” Hondo explained matter-of-factly, as though offended that Obi-Wan had not asked him before. He hit one of his henchmen with his hat - as though to suggest it was his fault - and underneath the garment's default spot awaited a sight Obi-Wan could’ve gone his whole life without seeing.

Looking away until the hat was back in its rightful place, Obi-Wan slapped a hand to his forehead in realization. "So that's what you've been trying to steal from our ships. Have you ever heard of asking nicely?"

"We call that the 'desperate times' protocol."

And being stranded on a barren gundark colony didn't qualify? What had they even been eating? The Republic's rations? Had they packed nothing but booze? Did they sustain themselves by the power of guffaw and brotherly hat-smacking alone? Obi-Wan thought he’d figured some of this stuff out while undercover as Rako Hardeen, but apparently he'd barely scraped the surface.

Then - as the pirates went on with their game, currently debating whether Hondo betting his monkey lizard was undeniable proof that he was cheating (they all were!) - something else caught Obi-Wan's eye. There, on top of the big pile of trumpery, lay a shiny, sky blue piece of mineral, translucent and barely larger than a raindrop. He gazed at it, at once mesmerized. Strangely, it was almost as though only after Obi-Wan recognized its value – or at least questioned its litter status – did it reveal its true form to him. It appeared larger, glimmered brighter… and he felt something radiating from the inside – something rippling in the Force.

Hondo caught him staring at the pile, which, interestingly, also seemed to contain a Republic-issued transmission radio. He patted the ground beside him, “See something you like? You're welcome to join in. Bet that drab robe of yours, maybe some spare change, a couple of your ships
while you're at it.”

Obi-Wan sighed. He'd had to gamble his way out of situations before, but right now, he simply didn’t have the time, or the favorable odds. He’d have to play a different game. “What if I were to trade with you instead? An item of my choosing for two tanks of fuel.”

“It depends. Which item?”

“Of my choosing.”

Hondo considered the heap of questionable treasures. He squinted, as though he himself couldn't quite make out what was there besides a radio and a few trinkets. “The radio? It’s the radio, isn't it? Three tanks.”

“No deal, and it’s not the radio.”

Hondo took a better look, then shot up his chin at Obi-Wan and narrowed his eyes, estimating. Without looking, he then threw his hand on a seemingly random spot in the pile – and sure enough, plucked up the sky-blue crystal and held it out in the faint daylight.

“What, this?” Obi-Wan didn't answer, but Hondo pointed a triumphant finger at him. “A-ha! Years of practice, Kenobi. Years of practice.”

“Two tanks for the… stone. An extra tank if you show me where you found it.”

“Ah… quite the businessman as always, Kenobi. I respect that. Now I’m intrigued why the Republic is interested in this… shiny… pebble? Have you taken up gardening? Mother used to trim her flowerbeds –“

“Three tanks of fuel, and two more as soon as you get back to Florrum - for your next foray.”

“See, the truth is is, we like it here,” Hondo assured him, to an eager round of nods. “We’ve survived worse places. And the way I see it, you want the rock, and you want us to leave, so the deal is a win-win for you. For us it’s a potential lose-neutral.”

Obi-Wan privately cursed the fact that Vanqor was only now beginning to show promise. He’d probably receive permission to stay if he reported a crystal finding, but so long as it remained in the pirates' lawful (?) possession, it would be no use. Finders, keepers.

Then he had an idea – completely absurd, but potentially his only option apart from stealing, which he did not agree with. And he was fairly sure he had the authority. The Senate would work out the details later.

“Have you ever done an honest day’s work in your lives? Is there a protocol for that?”

“Excuse me, have you ever heard of smuggling? Or spice trade?”

“Find me more shiny pebbles like that, the larger and shinier the better, and the Republic will reward you handsomely. You don’t even have to tell or report to any of the commanders, only me. Trust me, none of your friends in the underworld will pay anywhere close what the Republic will - or find a prettier garden.”

It seemed as though he had just recited at least two of the five magic words that yielded a response in the brigands. “Alright, now you have a deal. Can we have some advance?” Obi-Wan delved into his tunic, making a mental note to double the guard on their ships. It wasn't as though he had much
on him, but out of principle, he would not let them take the money and run. These crooks worked for the Republic now.

Later, as Obi-Wan got onto the freighter to leave, it suddenly struck him that he had just hired a band of pirates to do the clones' job – for a reward – while said clones had never received a reward for anything in their rapidly shortening lives. Had it been a clone picking up that 'pebble' - finders, troopers.

Chancellor Palpatine and Jedi Master Windu arrived on Utapau late in the evening, when a blue and orange twilight had spread upon the golden green lands. The small medcrew they had brought immediately turned their attentions to Padmé, who insisted upon insisting they examine Anakin as well, who kept turning it down to the point of literally having to run from the nurses and take shelter in his ship. Anakin expected to begin talks with Windu about the mission, but the Jedi Master turned out to be stuck in a very long holoconference with the weapon investigation team, and Anakin invited the Chancellor to keep him company on his ship, instead.

“How’s she doing, Artoo?” Anakin inquired from his astromech as he entered.

Artoo just shook his domed head.

“With this nonsense,” he held up his metal appendages, “there’s only so much you can do.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of the rest. And hey, maybe we can do some tinkering with you later.”

“And I just got back from maintenance!”

“No disrespecting the maintenance guys, alright? I like those guys. I actually gave them some pointers while I was staying at the Halls. There was this little – “

Remembering the Chancellor, Anakin spun around apologetically, leaving Artoo to its own devices. “Sorry.” The elderly politician gave a warm smile at the interaction, but Anakin furrowed his brows. Why had he forgotten that the Chancellor was there? Normally he felt the presence of his friends stronger in the Force, even when he wasn’t consciously thinking about them. It was almost as though he felt from him - and he remembered feeling it before, back on Coruscant – a sense of emptiness. Vacancy. As though there was nothing there to perceive, or feel, except the barest template of a person, the just-recognizable outlines of his friend the Chancellor.

Anakin shook his head. People’s presences flickered and wavered all the time in the Force, and the elderly often did have a slightly frailer feel to them. For a moment, he considered asking the Chancellor to have himself examined as well, while the medcrew was here – he could be dying of a tumor for all he knew – but he didn’t want to accidentally insult him, and was fairly sure a man of his status was getting regular check-ups anyway.

For a good while, the Chancellor just kept reaffirming his great relief at the two prisoners’ escape, and joked (?) that the Republic would have given all their entire arsenal just to get them back. Anakin appreciated the sentiments, but he’d really rather not have talked about the rescue at all, because it just made him think of Dooku and the Sith and completely jumbled up his mind. The Chancellor seemed to sense his discomfort, and tried to ask him a couple of times what was wrong, or if the experience had been very traumatic, and Anakin assured him that wasn’t the case. Then the Chancellor appeared to grow thoughtful, and he stroked his chin and looked him seriously in the eye as he said, “I’m afraid certain… rumors have recently resurfaced about you – “
“And Senator Amidala,” Anakin completed the sentence. “I’m aware of those rumors, they’ve always been there. Trust me, I know.”

The Chancellor nodded gravely. “So there is nothing – “

“We’re just friends, close friends. I… care about her a great deal.”

“Remember my boy, you can tell me anything,” the Chancellor said, laying a reassuring hand on Anakin’s shoulder. Anakin started, without knowing why – the gesture was benevolent, his movement slow, and he could see most attacks coming. “I know these things are taboo in the Jedi Order, but I am not your boss.”

“Thank you, Chancellor. But there really is nothing to tell.”

“The Jedi Council believe in these rumors?”

“Well… “ Anakin motioned with his hands in an avoiding gesture. He knew his and Padmé’s relationship had caused both speculation and concern in the Order, as well as between Padmé’s closest colleagues in the Senate, but none of them really knew, he didn't think. With the exception of Obi-Wan, which was bound to complicate things at some point. But as for the rest, as long as they neither knew nor had proof, he didn't really care what they believed.

“But they wouldn't excommunicate you based on rumors only? Surely not?”

Sometimes Anakin felt they were ready to excommunicate him based on just about anything – or hope he’d die and prove his worth in a blaze of glory in the field. He hated that just as he had resolved to make peace with the Order and the Council, he had to be reminded of his struggles with them once more. He said nothing.

This time, the Chancellor didn’t seem to notice the shift in atmosphere, but instead his gaze idly wandered around the ship and toward the cockpit window. His eyes were glazed and absent almost as though he was admiring the ship - which had seen better days.

“You've never wanted a different life?” he then inquired casually. Anakin was caught off-guard, and he gave an answer that was perhaps a little uncalled-for, “Well… I used to have a different life…”

“Pardon me,” the Chancellor quickly apologized. “I meant… well, something like the life you had, in a way. A family.”

Anakin's Jedi shields and walls were still in place – back in the day, he wasn’t really even allowed to talk about his past, and even now, no one ever really dared ask him questions this personal.

“You find these questions inappropriate,” Palpatine aptly guessed.

“More… inapplicable. Irrelevant.”

“I understand. You wholly embrace your identity as a Jedi. I'm glad.”

“Well… truthfully…” Anakin wasn’t quite sure what possessed him to start his response like this, but he couldn’t take it back.

“You've considered leaving?”

“I didn't say that. But I have… thought about what it'd be like… to have a different life. After the
war ends – *hypothetically.* Obi-Wan always said it’s a trial you need to overcome. To – like you said – to truly embrace your identity.”

Palpatine nodded, but as he did, a sudden heaviness seemed to land on his wrinkled features. “As long as we’re being truthful… Sometimes I wonder if this war ever *will* end. The Jedi are giving their best effort, I’m sure… but sometimes I wonder if it's going to take something… *more.* Something that could bring down Dooku with a snap of a finger. But he *is* so very powerful, truly.”

“That he is…”

"The dark side of the Force is a pathway to many abilities some consider to be unnatural."

Anakin stared at the politician, whose face was as blank as his presence in the Force. It surprised him that the Chancellor was familiar enough with the dark side to make this assertion with such confidence, but he didn't question it - Obi-Wan never wanted to discuss the dark side with him, except to parrot Master Yoda's wisdom and warnings. And lately, Anakin had formed lots and lots of opinions about the subject. “Yeah, I mean… they can conjure lightning.”

“Ah… indeed, a powerful tool at their disposal.”

“I've lost to Dooku several times because of it,” Anakin snapped, clenching his fist. “And because he favors quantity over quality.”

“But if one were to combine quality and quantity… imagine what could be accomplished.”

Anakin frowned again. He wasn’t really sure what they were discussing anymore.

“How do you mean?”

“Just a rhetorical thought,” the Chancellor said airily. “But for the record,” he again looked Anakin directly in the eye, “I've always viewed you as a quality person. Truly unique… perhaps too good for the Jedi, even.” He said the last few words with a breezy laughter, and Anakin laughed with him, with some unease.

“I thank you, sir, but…”

“And modest, too. Ah, the Jedi… I fear what the war has done to them, sometimes. I've sought closer cooperation with the Order lately, but it is always a challenge,” he mused. “So much power… so little supervision.” He raised his gaze and fixed it on Anakin again, and even as he paused he kept drawing breaths as though he wanted to add something.

Anakin suddenly became aware of a budding suspicion, slowly taking root in his gut. But it was just that – a mere bud – and vying for his attention was another feeling, juggling constantly between his heart and his head. Perhaps stronger, perhaps weaker… and most certainly very *taboo.*

Windu returned from the holoconference huffing and puffing and looking mentally exhausted, and to Anakin's surprise he summoned all three of them to attend the mission briefing. Anakin listened somewhat inattentively to his impassive explanation about a Sugi weapons dealer on Utapau who was rumored to be in possession of a large crystal – an actual, bona fide kyber crystal – and was planning on selling it to the Confederacy.

“Your first priority will be to find the crystal. General Kenobi will arrive – “

Anakin had to stop him here. “Obi-Wan is coming?”
“That is correct. And then there is the whole diplomatic aspect.” He nodded towards the Chancellor in an icily professional gesture, who took over from there.

“It is hardly a secret that the planet is looking to align themselves with the Confederacy, and we believe this business transaction is meant to seal the deal. The Sugi dealer is disreputable, but several of our sources suggest that a government representative will be overseeing the affair within the next few days. And while the Separatist sympathizers in the government are tricked into assuming that the removal of the dangerous crystal would bring peace to the planet - as well as added financial stability - we believe that the Confederacy plan to turn the planet into nothing but a large military base. From here, they could then easily expand the occupation, and eventually seize control of the Outer Rim in its entirety. Time is of the essence now, as we must gather evidence of these developments, and convince the dealers and the government not to sell the crystal to the Separatists. The Republic must seek to gain their favor, or at least their sympathy.”

“Well, Obi-Wan is a skilled diplomat,” Anakin said.

“Oh, I agree, but at the end of the day, he is still a Jedi. There is a general distrust of the Jedi in these corners of the Galaxy, and naturally it's getting worse now that it's common knowledge that the government have openly approached the Confederacy. However, let me be clear, the alliance is still under consideration. Many of the Republic Senators are still quite popular on Utapau, especially those who have advocated for humanitarian aid for the Outer Rim territories. Therefore we have contacted Coruscant, and the Senate are currently looking into sending a representative to join the mission as a Republic ambassador, while Masters Skywalker and Kenobi will act as their bodyguards.”

“But Chancellor… I am already here, am I not?”

In utter silence, everyone turned towards Padmé, who was currently balancing on a set of crutches, and now limped forward. Anakin opened his mouth without knowing what he wanted to argue against, or for. Windu eyed him suspiciously.

“But Senator Amidala, surely…” the Chancellor protested in his place. “You need to take time to heal, you must – “

“You said we need to win over their 'sympathy'. What is more sympathetic than a pacifist Senator with a fractured ankle?” She waved one crutch in the air to empathize her point.

“A-absolutely not, Senator,” Palpatine continued to splutter objections, and even Windu, outside his jurisdiction, was making an incredulous face at her.

“You said the matter is urgent, and that Master Kenobi is already on his way. We do not have time to look into other possibilities. Do you have a list of Senators that are 'sympathetic' in the locals' eyes?”

“You are most certainly on that list, Senator, but –“

“I believe it is settled, then.”

Once again, there was no overcoming the former Queen's will. Anakin gaped at her. He could scarcely believe it. He'd get to watch over her just a little longer… but this time, he's have to do it right. His wife was taking an enormous risk - he'd have to get his act together. He couldn't let her be less safe in his arms than she would be at home. 

Since Scipio, he'd wondered what it was he was truly fighting for. But he'd known the answer all
along.

He was doing it all for her. To protect her.
Evidently Dooku had decided that if the Sith couldn’t have Obi-Wan, no one could. *Six* starfighters against his lumbering freighter, the Jedi Master thought, was downright petty, but maybe also a little flattering: the Count apparently thought Obi-Wan could have survived *five*.

Obi-Wan wasn’t so sure. There was fire hurtling from all sides of him now – there weren’t enough windows or sensors on the ship to see just how many sides. At this point the unenthusiastic pilot was just steering the freighter back and forth, up and down, wherever he wouldn’t immediately meet an explosive end, making himself spacesick in the process.

He figured he might as well pass the time with regrets – it was customary in the circumstances. Of course he should have asked for a fighter escort. He was smarter than this. Hadn't he just lectured Anakin about the strength in numbers? He could just barely fly this big, clumsy, overcomplicated metal bantha, but trying to fire and evade fire at the same time; from half a dozen enemy fighters, all faster and sleeker than his ride, and actually *designed* for the very purpose of firing? More of an Anakin kind of feat. Now there was another goldmine for last laments…

The ship shook violently as he felt a shot scrape against the back of the spacecraft. So far he'd evaded demise by the mini armada, but their battle formation was extremely well-structured and effectively blocked his entry to Utapau. He wondered if his distress signal to Anakin had gotten through. Too occupied with staying alive, he only vaguely felt Anakin’s presence in the Force, the flesh being situated somewhere on the green orb just barely out his reach. Involuntarily, he imagined a scenario where Anakin would be too angry with him to come to his rescue.

Of course, that would never happen. Despite their differences, they were a *team*. *The* team.

But the notion was still awful.

Obi-Wan reclaimed his focus. He was so close, he couldn’t rely on Anakin, somehow he’d have to zigzag his way through to him. The freighter clearly wasn’t designed for a single pilot – there was room for one co-pilot and not one but three gunners – but the AI autoshoooter would have to do. He had six targets zooming around him, surely he’d hit at least *one*. Clenching his teeth, he fired two “warning shots”, mostly just reminding the enemy that the ship wasn’t completely naked of defensive measures. The pilots must be wetting their seats, he sighed to himself.

The AI shooter’s aim was terrible, but as he twirled and swirled about some more (boy, was he glad he hadn't given Hondo a single tank of gas), he soon learned how to adjust its destination by steering the ship. By some miracle, he managed to take down two fighters. But four was still plenty, and the fighters still much lighter and faster, forcing him to retreat once again from his intended route and soar around the sky in evasive circles. Obi-Wan barely flinched as he sensed another shot missing him by millimeters - he didn't have long. His ally the Force and his good friend adrenaline had gotten him this far, and he’d probably already discovered most of his hidden talents as a pilot, now to *survive* this attack would be defying all laws of cruel reality.

Ironically, in all the vastness of space, there wasn’t much room for him to run anymore. The fighters had him surrounded, he couldn’t jump into hyperspace, an escape pod wouldn’t help him – they’d just shoot it down all the same. There were no surprises left, not in him, not in the ship – and he doubted, in the enemy’s objectives.

The next hit managed to surprise him anyway. It came right at him, grazing against the side of the cockpit – just stopping short of tearing it open and sending him flying into cold space. The front of
the ship just barely held together, and Obi-Wan was thrown to the floor.

If there was a single good quality to his awkward flying giant, it was apparently its tenacity. A cold consolation in the circumstances, but compared to the chills he’d soon get to experience, it was sounded almost lukewarm to his ears. Just one more hit at the same spot and -

And still he tried to get up, over and over, but the ship had given up all pretenses of balance and kept knocking him over again and again. From the floor, he couldn’t even see out the window. He felt the ship wildly skewing up and down without his control. He was just target practice at this point.

He heard the computer indicating three more hits. He vaguely wondered why he hadn’t felt any.

And thus he jinxed his luck, as the cockpit was blasted open, and Obi-Wan shot into the glacial void - only stopping as he tumbled into a space-suited Anakin, before the blackness of space was painted a shade darker.

-  

The crutch-reliant Senator could hardly blame Obi-Wan for insisting on carrying through with the mission, although their respective injuries or their causes were hardly comparable. According to Anakin, he’d been exposed to space for just under two minutes (a Jedi could survive that? What else had these lunatics survived?), and according to the Jedi Master, he felt *just fine*. The medcrew from Sluis Van, on the other hand, were visibly freaked out, but they agreed in unison that the heroic pilot at least needed some rest. The doctor and nurses promised to do their best with the equipment they had brought, mostly suited for treating a fractured ankle.

“Anakin?” the Jedi Master called from the folding bed as everyone turned to leave, and his rescuer spun around, clandestinely stroking Padmé’s hand as he did. “…Thank you.”

“Oh,” Anakin uttered, somehow managing to stumble on the very few words he said, “It’s, uh… don’t mention it.”

Padmé frowned at the exchange. She pretended to struggle with her crutches until Windu and the Chancellor were out of their earshot, then whispered sharply to Anakin, “What was that about?”

“What was what?” Anakin asked, volunteering to carry her again, oblivious to her tactical moves.

“Did something happen between you and Obi-Wan?”

One head above her, Anakin made an indistinct sound, then hid behind his wide shoulders. His face was involuntarily making that expression where he clearly wanted to lie, only to remember he despised the activity.

“Maybe,” he sighed.

“Is this about me?”

Anakin shook his head. “It’s not. I promise I’ll tell you later, alright?”

Padmé didn’t like that he was avoiding the subject, but she deduced it was probably another one of their stupid spats, and if their chosen method of reconciliation was temporary awkwardness, that was good enough for her. She was more concerned for Obi-Wan’s health anyway – which abruptly reminded her of something else.
Intentionally falling further behind, Padmé gestured towards the pair sauntering in front of them. Anakin was starting to look frustrated, offering his arms and trying to snatch away the inadequate walking support. Padmé gently smacked him on the head with it.

“The Chancellor… seems to care for you a great deal, Anakin,” she then said quietly.

Anakin turned his gaze sharply, as though he was being insulted or accused of something. “I… suppose so…”

“When you went to Obi-Wan’s rescue…” she continued, her own words weighing heavily on her heart, “Didn’t you… didn’t you think it was strange, what the Chancellor said to you? ‘Leave him’?”

“No, he said ‘Leave him to Master Windu’.”

“No…” Padmé insisted. “He definitely said ‘Leave him’, before correcting himself.”

“What are you trying to say?”

Padmé didn’t really know herself – or perhaps, she knew exactly what. The problem was, to ‘know’ things one had to rely on facts and not one’s overactive imagination, and she had none of the former and a sudden overdose of the latter. The notion was absurd. Where was she getting all this, from a silly ill-phrased suggestion? She should have known better than anyone how the media liked to take words out of context and turn them into monstrous scandals.

“I don’t know,” she finally confessed, “but… his voice, when he said that… I can’t get it out of my head.” She tried to meet Anakin’s gaze, but his mind was still somewhere else. “Did it not sound… different to you?”

“It was inconsiderate of him to say,” he conceded, unhelpfully.

Padmé realized that once again, she simply had a bad feeling. As much as she valued evidence, she wasn’t immune to baseless hunches, and this one just wouldn’t stop jabbing at her. But she needed more than that, and right now, she was committed to this mission, and the Chancellor and all the other potential suspects would still be out of her reach for a little while longer.

Still, she felt a little frustrated with Anakin – the Chancellor was his friend and mentor as well as hers, and she could understand his reluctance to even consider the possibility, but speculations were nothing more than air without proof, and definitely not a personal attack on him. But she decided he might just need some time and space, so instead of pressing the subject, she asked to borrow his holoprojector (hers remained in Dooku’s possession) so she could contact Naboo, and relay the tragic news about her aides. Her heart hurt in her chest when she thought about her fallen (murdered) companions, guilt simmering somewhere deep within. She had convinced herself that she was staying as much for the mission as for Anakin – but in the circumstances, it felt like running away.

- Obi-Wan was officially declared healthy in the afternoon, and after one last mission briefing; Anakin simply couldn’t wait another minute - he needed to talk to his Master, properly; in private. He thought he’d earned the right, after saving his life this morning - but sure enough, Master Windu claimed first turn, invoking “Council business”. When Anakin expressed some frustration, Palpatine's aides of all people had to see the non-Master removed from the, uh… Council zone? Which to Anakin looked an awful lot like a rock and a mound. How the mighty red-chairs had
The aides and the medcrew soon vanished to prepare the party’s departure. Padmé immediately went back to her Naboo holoconference, casting a concerned glance at Anakin as he was left alone with the Chancellor.

Anakin wasn't all that surprised that she was suspicious of Palpatine too – she spent a lot more time with the man, and he doubted her sudden distrust actually stemmed from just a few thoughtless words. But for him the development was too soon. If he knew his wife at all, whenever she had ‘a feeling’, it didn't take her long to leap into action. And if this man truly was a Sith, 'action' was the last thing he wanted, and her utter and complete safety, the first.

And as immensely relieved and happy as he was to be allowed this extra time with his wife, he also felt a little bit trapped in the current situation. He finally had a suspect (whose identity upset him to his core) and now he would be out of his reach again.

But Anakin still had a very hard time reconciling his kindly mentor as - fury filled his veins again - Dooku's Master. He'd always been taught that the Sith were evil, and Dooku made no secret of his depraved nature. He'd kidnapped Anakin, tortured him, tormented Obi-Wan, taken Padmé, tortured her, murdered her aides, killed Jedi and innocents. And those were just the last two weeks. And Palpatine… seemed much the same as always. As Supreme Chancellor, did he not have near-unlimited resources to wreak all the havoc he wanted, at any time, anywhere?

Surely a secret Sith Lord would want to remain secret for a reason. But… all this time? A proud man like Dooku wouldn't accept any newly fallen dark side novice for a Master. If Palpatine was the Sith, he must've been one all along. The thought made Anakin sick. He'd first met the man when he was nine years old.

As the Chancellor turned to speak to him, Anakin made extra efforts to shield his mind. But his presence felt fairly normal in the Force again – an elderly man with a great deal of responsibility on his shoulders. Anakin shook his head. Surely he had just imagined everything.

“You truly are something special,” he beamed. Anakin was fairly sure he was referring to the rescue.

“Just… did what I had to.”

“And more, dear boy. I can tell that at times, the burden of being a Jedi weighs heavily on your shoulders.”

“I… I manage.”

The Republic leader then delved into his robes, and produced a holoprojector. Anakin took the communication device as he offered it. “Say, I think you and I should… talk more.”

“Sir?”

“I might have forgotten to empty it,” the Chancellor said as Anakin studied the projector that slightly differed from the standard model, “but it connects directly to my private channel. Or shall we say – personal channel. Only for… friends.”

Anakin raised his gaze, feeling something strange in the Force again, which he feared was just his own suspicion reasserting itself, and leaking into the air between them. If he was a Sith, he'd sense it… then kill him…
No such drastic actions followed, and instead Palpatine calmly went on, about how it was difficult for busy individuals like themselves to find time to just sit down and talk, but for him he'd always find time, how of all the Jedi, he held his greatest trust…

Anakin barely listened. He was confused. This would allow him direct access to his number one suspect, but… he'd thought the Sith were interested in Obi-Wan. Was Anakin a consolation prize?

Well, not for a man who kept calling him special and unique, for sure.

Good, he thought. This would allow him to spy on him, dig a little deeper. If he was a Sith Lord and was interested in him, he'd eventually have to say it.

And Anakin wouldn't have to involve his wife. She didn't need to even know.

- "Call me crazy, Obi-Wan, but what happened up there looked like a murder attempt to me. Premeditated."

"Oh… yes," the fellow Master agreed, almost casually. He adjusted the bandage on his head. "This is the second time in the last two weeks that we've been ambushed at our most vulnerable. I thought it was strange when it happened to Anakin… But I've no doubt now. Someone is either listening to our calls… or leaking information."

Mace mused on the suggestion. During the past two weeks, he had transformed into quite a conspiracy theorist himself, but unlike Obi-Wan, he didn't have much in the way of proof, not yet. And Obi-Wan wasn't finished, “I must come clean to you about something, Master Windu.”

Mace listened in silence (fighting the urge to interrupt several times), as Obi-Wan calmly related to him the true circumstances behind Skywalker's kidnapping, of which the ambush was hardly the most abnormal. At the end of his recount, the younger Master's composure seemed to waver ever so slightly – as though he was nervous someone was listening.

"Skywalker… was freed by Dooku?"

"Dooku's actions, I can't explain. As for Anakin's, he did nothing that I wouldn't have done. He went on an unsanctioned rescue mission, and lied about it. If you're going to reprimand him, you must reprimand me too."

Mace was uninterested in either activity. There were far more bizarre elements at play here. “And Dooku tried to use him… to bring you over to the dark side?”

“'I'm afraid so.”

Mace nodded. “Thank you for telling me, Obi-Wan. While you evidently passed Dooku's trial admirably, I see that the Council have not been completely mistaken in their recent concerns about you. But right now we have more pressing matters to consider.” Mace was silent for a while. He'd have to phrase this right, to avoid getting into yet another game of personal loyalty versus Jedi duty. “Given your… confessions… you must grant me that it's not completely unreasonable to assume… that young Skywalker might be withholding some critical information as well.”

Obi-Wan seemed wary, but he nodded dutifully - and he even seemed to agree. “No… it is not. I… I worry about him.”

“Master Yoda has sensed something. A… a secret, something… something that he is unwilling to
disclose. And no, we are not referring to his obvious and dangerous attachment to the Senator. Perhaps in this case, it has even worked out for the best. *In this case.* Obi-Wan kept on nodding, his gaze lowered. He seemed oddly… ashamed, but Mace went on, “You're his mentor, he respects you. We're not asking you to *spy* on him. But please – try to…”

“Keep an eye on him?”

“*Reach out* to him. Try to find out what's going on.”

“I understand.”

Mace gazed into the orange horizion separating the golden plain from the boundless sky, against which, in the distance, stood two contrasting silhouettes, belonging to two individuals at the height of their powers.

“And if you can… do discourage his relationship with the Chancellor. I have a strange – we don't want politicians interfering with Jedi affairs.”
Tyranus had, among other things, accused Sidious' plans of being 'specific'. While the Sith Master preferred the word 'precise', his trainee was only half wrong. Sidious didn't have 'plans', he had a plan. It might be latching onto semantics, but it was an important distinction. He never had a 'plan B', or a 'worst case scenario' – the former was for sloppy amateurs, and the latter for fundamentally incompetent, undeserving morons. He had but a single plan, a single vision; as precise as a Force-guided saber edge, as self-fulfilling as the void inside a Jedi's soul, and as self-correcting as Skywalker's Jedi-indoctrinated sense of ethics.

The specifics of it – what Tyranus probably mistook for 'plans' – he had turned into a fun game. It was a game of choices and possibilities – which, contrary to popular belief, were not endless, not even close – and traps. A trap ready for every wrong choice Skywalker could possibly make, an alternative for every demise his friends could possibly survive. Some of them he'd planned years beforehand, others he'd only recently improvised. (He took equal pleasure and found equal ingenuity in both approaches.)

Weaker minds could have dismissed such methods as dishonorable, but Sidious disagreed. It wasn't the boy's fault that he was a Jedi, but it was his misfortune, and clearly he would need all the guidance Sidious could mercifully provide. Someday, he would thank him, and it would be within the same breath of calling him 'Master'. He'd accept 'My Lord', once the pledge was made and Skywalker's fate sealed. At present, 'My Lord' was nothing but a mild old man making polite nods at whatever was not a direct threat to his power. While one of Sidious' proudest creations, Chancellor Palpatine was a means to an end – a specific in a grand design.

"So have we come to an agreement?" he asked the brainless little baggage before him, the walls of the research facility echoing a voice that never needed to ask for permission.

"My Lord," the girl shook her empty head, "with all due – we can't thank you enough for bringing Crys back to us – but you cannot – it's not ready for 'practical testing', as you so casually call it. It's too dangerous – too unstable - we have yet to determine - I forbid it."

"Not to worry, miss," responded the Supreme Chancellor, while Sidious had to suppress his laughter. "We will be sure to take all the possible precautions."

"But –"

He gestured for his assistants to present the cargo, and they began unloading the containers.

"In the meantime, I would like you to give you a new assignment. We suspect the toxins on Vanqor 1 might have weakened the crystal's destructive power by chemical corrosion. For comparison, we would like you to study the toxins' effects on these battle droids we salvaged from the moon. The droids were found fully functional, and we are hoping to reprogram them to serve the Republic, and we need you to determine their current programming and the amount of damage done in their central processing unit. Please report your findings directly to Jedi Master Mace Windu."

"Would it not be more beneficial to study the toxins' effects on organic beings? I mean –"

'Beings', she called them. Such idealistic talk. For Sidious, 'organic' was just another kind of machine, the most powerful kind – and indeed, the easiest to reprogram.
After the awkward start, the three Republic servants were seemingly back to being their competent, professional selves. They glided across the remote plains of Utapau, following the tracks to the Sugi villages in a timely and methodical fashion. Either Anakin or Artoo would occasionally request they stop and make some repairs to the Twilight (as Padmé and Obi-Wan bonded over their lost starships and cautious appreciation of Anakin's loyal old girl). Padmé revised her notes on Sugi culture and the socio-political atmosphere on Utapau and devoted all her spare time to funeral arrangements with her Naboo contacts and their families – without ever wiping a single tear, in quite a Jedi-like display. Obi-Wan had become indistinguishable from an anthropomorphic protocol droid, except, to Anakin it seemed, with 25% less personality (which Artoo no doubt welcomed).

But besides his duty to the Republic, Anakin had to consider his duty to his friends. And for each and every thing Anakin wanted to say to Obi-Wan, for every new theory that crossed his mind that he could shared with Padmé, he found ten good reasons not to.

Topping the list was their safety, mostly Padmé's. Initially, amidst all the shock, he'd found a certain solace in their shared secret – the more sinister of the two - but she'd said it herself, everything had changed since then. He would never let another Sith Lord near her again, whether Palpatine or someone else entirely; it didn't matter, because he would kill them before they got the chance. In the meantime, he just needed to keep her safe, safe, safe; far away from any potential suspects, because she would never back down on her own, she never listened when he needed her to, she could never begin to comprehend how much he feared losing her, how thoroughly it would destroy him...

Obi-Wan... was a slightly more complicated case. It wasn't as though Anakin didn't want to confide in him, rather he felt he should have done so ages ago; when he'd first heard the Sith Master's voice on Scipio (and remembered what he'd said).

And that wasn't the only issue. Anakin found himself giving it words on their first evening together when Padmé approached her husband in a clandestine fashion while Obi-Wan had gone scouting with Artoo.

"Anakin," she addressed him in a resolute voice while he was buried inside the control table, occasionally wiping an oil stain from his face, "I think we should... I think we should talk to Obi-Wan."

"About what?"

"You know what."

"Us? What, because he knows now? Ask for his blessing, for your hand in marriage? Is he your dad now?"

He masked it as (terrible) jokes, but Anakin tasted the venom on his lips, and wished he could have taken it back and swallowed it. What was he doing? He never mocked her like this.

"No... about what happened on Scipio, what we've found out since."

"And what have we found out, exactly?"

"Don't be like that. Since there are no secrets between us anymore, he could help us --" Anakin cut her short as he (in a deliberately noisy fashion) slid back into view from under the table.
He sat up cross-legged on the floor, determined to get this over with quickly and get back to work.

"Here's why involving Obi-Wan is problematic. He would then involve the Council, who would either ignore this absurd and baseless conjecture, or act on it in highly unpredictable ways." Under his breath, he added, "Or somehow make me the villain."

"He wouldn't betray our trust –"

"I don't think he appreciates being put into an awkward position over and over –"

"Act on it in unpredictable ways? Anakin, the Jedi are heroes, they care about the fate of the Republic and they care about –"

"No, they don't!"

Anakin heard himself screaming. He was floating off somewhere outside his body.

"You don't think they care about the Republic?"

Anakin shook his head, neither in agreement nor disagreement, trying to call the ghost back into its corporal home. He stood up from the floor and held up his hands in frustration, avoiding her sharp gaze.

"Padmé, we can't just jump to conclusions – about the Supreme Chancellor, no less! And trust me, having to explain to the Council that the Sith want me as their ally – I'm not exactly their favorite!"

"Don't do this. You can't just shut everybody out –"

"They shut me out first!"

"Who did?!"

Anakin was forced to look at his wife as she would not turn her eyes away. Oh, only the Council; the Jedi, his comrades and his 'true family'. Had it been up to them, he'd probably belong to the Sith by now. They'd basically handed him over to Dooku; Obi-Wan at least had done him the courtesy of showing up and telling Dooku he could torture his prisoner all he liked, kill him even; it would not affect him. Like the perfect Jedi he was.

Padmé's eyes were wide and saddened. He sensed she desperately wanted to comfort him. But he didn't think she had the kind of comfort he needed. His wife loved him unconditionally. The Council's esteem, one needed to earn. And he had not. Not after all this time, after everything he'd done for the Republic, all the planets he'd freed from the Separatists, all the people he'd saved… None of it was ever enough, and he was now realizing, never would be.

He could not face them now, not yet. He needed proof, and fast, or he would never be taken seriously.

Or alternatively, he'd be taken too seriously. Padmé could never understand.

Obi-Wan returned shortly, and the three of them reverted to their work personas and exchanged some news. Obi-Wan announced that he had located the first Sugi village, and suggested they set off first thing in the morning – the Sugi, as far as he knew, were early risers. Padmé informed her bodyguards that according to her intel (from sources she would not reveal) the prime minister had departed from Pau City, and was indeed expected to oversee the weapon transaction somewhere in the nearby area within the coming days. No new sightings of the crystal itself had been made,
though, or its owners, or indeed, of its existence.

Finally, Obi-Wan turned to Anakin with a wary expression, to inform him that Captain Rex had been trying to contact General Skywalker for two hours, adding that the Captain had sounded uncharacteristically anxious, and had, with as much defiance as his inferior rank could afford, insisted on speaking directly to his General.

Anakin recognized the concern in his voice, and more importantly, he seemed to pick up something off in the Force as well. He excused himself outside so he could speak with Rex in confidence, ill at ease but at the same time glad of the excuse to be left alone for a while. He was worried about his men, naturally, but he'd been playing with the idea of calling Palpatine as well. It was as though he was begging to be investigated, and so he should be – Anakin needed to know the truth.

Padmé had not expected to be left alone with Obi-Wan – not now, in this needlessly convoluted situation, with Anakin preoccupied with matters bigger than himself, bigger than the whole Galaxy, it seemed – and suddenly feeling as though both she and Obi-Wan only knew one half of the truth, maybe less. But as soon as Anakin had gone and Obi-Wan made friendly eye-contact with her, she immediately decided on two things. First, despite their disagreement on the matter, she was not going to betray Anakin's trust in any way. Second – this was not going to be awkward in any way. So Obi-Wan knew about the forbidden marriage, she would not be intimidated by such trifling details, he was hardly going to bring it up anyway and even if he was, she was more than ready, she had spent the last two hours honing her diplomatic skills, she could handle one grumpy Jedi Master –

"You have some nerve seducing my padawan, Senator."

Padmé's mouth fell open at the deadpan accusation, delivered with a sort of jocular cynicism; and she involuntarily made a high-pitched, offended sound. Obi-Wan was giving her a dry smirk, amused at his own audacity, apparently.

"That is... that is not what happened," she muttered. She found herself staring at the floor, sweeping dust off her combat trousers, and picking up one of Anakin's tools for no reason. She quickly put it back; the shape was not helping her case.

Obi-Wan cleared his throat, as though already regretting his playfully brazen opener, but Padmé knew that behind every joke, there was always a tinge of the truth – in hurt feelings, if nowhere else. And suddenly she understood. Her little Ani from Tatooine had never been hers alone. She'd stolen him away; taken him from the Jedi, before any Sith Lord had ever made a bid.

"Can we start over?" Obi-Wan asked, rubbing his forehead.

"Certainly."

"I have no plans at present to report your forbidden marriage to the Council or the Senate, nor is there a need for any lectures or punishments. We're all adults here."

"Thank... you?"

Obi-Wan walked up closer to her and lowered his voice. He suddenly appeared nervous.

"Let me cut to the chase. If either you or Anakin have recently acquired any sensitive information, while in Dooku's custody or through other means – pertaining to the war, the Sith, Dooku,
Padmé regarded him warily. Somewhere within her, disappointment reared its ugly head. Perhaps Anakin was right. Maybe this man was a Jedi before he was Anakin's friend – Master Kenobi before he was Obi-Wan. He wasn't even trying to hide that he was acting on the Council's orders; or his distrust of his own padawan, as he'd affectionately called him a minute ago. And as she looked into the Jedi Master's friendly but stern eyes – fear penetrated her heart. She'd stolen Anakin, and now the Council wanted him back – to interrogate, and to assess. Anakin was right – neither of them truly knew anything about the Sith Lord, nothing that didn't directly involve her husband, or what the Sith had planned for him.

"I am on your side," Obi-Wan declared earnestly into the sudden silence, laying a warm hand on the Senator's shoulder. "I believe we're all on the side of good. But I simply fear that if you and Anakin are not careful, you might wind up as your own worst enemy. I wish you both well. That's all I'll say."

A fair while passed until Anakin (and Artoo) returned. Padmé and Obi-Wan had already grown worried, and as he finally waved the door open, something seemed off – his face was pale and he appeared tired and irritable, his eyes wandering to his sides and right past his companions' uneasy gazes.

Padmé recognized the creature immediately – she'd had several encounters with him now. The apparition was back.

Anakin quickly brushed off their concerns, and proceeded to relay some alarming news from Felucia. The battlefield had at last grown quiet, however, something very strange was simmering under the surface. During the last few days, several clone troopers of the 501st (all of whom General Skywalker knew by name) had exhibited very odd and very alarming behavior. Several had deserted. Those who had stayed were often seen whispering to each other, losing focus on the field, complaining about headaches and other minor ailments, and even getting panic attacks. There were rumors that something strange had happened during their recent health check-up on Coruscant.

"Wait… would that be the one I mandated on them?" Obi-Wan asked, and Anakin nodded. Obi-Wan fell silent for a while, "What could it possibly be? I arranged for the best possible treatment… I don't understand."

He cast a studying look at Anakin, long enough to make him uncomfortable.

"What?"

"We still don't know a great deal about the toxins… Anakin, are you…?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. That was ages ago."

"Hm," the Jedi Master stroked his beard. "We do know that the clone biology is not completely homogeneous with ours, I wonder if they are reacting to the poisons differently…"

"I should be there with them, Master," Anakin mumbled.
"Anakin, we are on a mission here, and we must follow the – "

"Council's orders, right. Shocker."

They set up camp outside – the Twilight's 'sleeping quarters' were a bit too tight for three people and a droid that weren't all romantically involved – and the adventurers, besides being tired, weren't feeling quite *that* adventurous.

Obi-Wan woke up to a distinct sensation that something was going badly off the rails. His eyes snapped open and he shot up and squinted into the morning mist that had spread above the plain. In the distance he saw ten silhouettes, engaged in combat. Nine of them were alien beings with insect-like bodies, hovering above the tenth figure in circular battle formation. The tenth figure – disarmed and nearly subdued – was Anakin.

Obi-Wan quickly put two and two together. Early risers, indeed. He shot a look at the Senator, already stirring awake on her travel bed. Summoning his lightsaber to him, he rushed to shake her awake, despite knowing she wouldn't listen to his kindly meant instructions, "Senator, please stay where you are."

"…What?"

But Obi-Wan had already rushed to Anakin's aid, who had managed to break free and reclaimed his weapon – which he now was lifting with the distinct intention of –

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan cried, and in a moment of alarm and hasty decision-making, he reached out to Force-lift his padawan like a ragdoll and tossed him away from the attackers – or attackees? Anakin grunted in protest as he tumbled into the grass, and Obi-Wan dashed over to stand between him and the Sugi squad, catching two or three blaster bolts from the belligerent locals before they halted for a moment and weighed their chances against two Jedi – one of whom was once again drawing his weapon –

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan grabbed his frenzied student by the arm. Padmé was already limping to the scene, weapon poised, and her entrance only seemed to provoke Anakin further, ("Get her away from here!" he screamed at his Master, shaky finger pointed at his wife) and Obi-Wan was forced to do double duty warding off enemy fire and restraining their other adversary. Finally he grew tired, and once again shoved the younger Jedi to the ground with assistance from the Force.

The Sugi warriors started to flee the scene on their hover-raft, and Padmé, her blaster now lowered, tried to call after them, apparently in their native language. But the hostiles soon disappeared into the mist-veiled horizon.

"What happened?" Obi-Wan demanded from Anakin, who remained sprawled on the ground, at last resigned to his Master's 'orders'.

"They were going to attack us!" he yelled in response, looking at Padmé, who was staring back at him with her mouth open.

"So you attacked them first? Anakin, this is a diplomatic mission! The Sugi might be criminals and arms dealers, but we must consider the bigger picture! We are trying to bring them over to our side!"

"They were going to take us captive! Or worse!"
Obi-Wan blinked at him. The 'worse' had already happened, had he missed it somehow?

"Yes, and do you remember how we discussed that in the strategy meeting? Let them 'capture' us, and take us to their village? These are businessmen we're dealing with, they wouldn't try to kill two Jedi and a Senator before trying to profit off them first!"

"I wasn't going to let them anywhere near her!" Anakin motioned wildly towards his wife.

"Anakin…" Padmé was still searching for words. "You can't… you should have woken us up."

Finding himself opposite two peacemakers, Anakin bit his lip and looked away. "I'm sorry."

Later, when Anakin had (ostensibly) calmed down, the three of them gathered for another strategy meeting and agreed that they should try and approach the Sugi village anyway – for all they knew, the crystal was in their possession and the village was to be the site of the coming transaction – but that perhaps Anakin should take a backseat and focus on repairing the ship while Obi-Wan and Padmé would attempt to pour oil on troubled waters. At the end of the meeting, Obi-Wan requested to talk to Anakin alone (and Padmé sincerely seemed to support the idea) and took him aside while Padmé and Artoo prepared their departure.

"Anakin, are you quite alright?" he asked the young man sitting on the ground, staring down what appeared to be a particularly interesting rock formation.

"I'm sorry if I caused trouble – "

"Are you really? Because to me it seems like you didn't really consider other options."

"It's just," he said weakly, "I'm done putting Padmé in harm's way. I can't – "

"The good Senator chose to take on this mission while injured. She insisted on staying on a hostile planet currently being invaded by the enemy while having to rely on walking support and two bodyguards. She put herself in harm's way. Have you… have you met your wife?"

Anakin glared at him. Obi-Wan tried to consult the Force as to how to best address the situation, but at the present moment Anakin was giving him nothing. It was almost as though there was a cold, static emptiness floating around his normally dynamic presence.

"Surely she at least count on her bodyguards not to complicate her job while she is thus compromised?"

Anakin craned back his neck, then lowered his chin in a way that could be interpreted as half-hearted agreement. Obi-Wan reached into the Force again. Normally, he would have told Anakin to try and let go of whatever was troubling him. But his current orders were to try and identify those troubles.

"Anakin, I sense that Dooku still weighs heavily on your mind."

Anakin was silent. The sun had barely risen, and the boy looked as though he'd already exhausted all his destructive energy for the day. But looks could be deceiving.

"Why do you think that is?"

"Oh I don't know, Master; he's evil, he keeps terrorizing the galaxy."

"No, Anakin. Those are the reasons we are fighting this war."
"Well, then. You know why, and you don't approve."

Obi-Wan sighed.

"Let go of your hate, Anakin. Just… let go."
Diplomatic Solution

Sheev Palpatine, the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic. A native of the idyllic, beautiful Naboo. Elected into office following the invasion of Naboo, replacing the ineffectual Chancellor Valorum. Known as much for his great modesty and humility as his political prowess. A wise and generous mentor to herself, Padmé Amidala, his fellow Naboo citizen and representative. Reluctant to embrace power; a lover of peace, harmony and democracy, forced to rule a warring galaxy.

A native of the idyllic, beautiful Naboo.

Where the war had begun.

Who had then whispered into his Queen's ear that they needed 'a strong Chancellor'. 'One that will not let our tragedy continue.'

How come then, after the appropriately 'strong' leader had been identified, the tragedy had not only continued, but spread like wildfire into every corner of the Galaxy? For so long, she'd turned a blind eye, perhaps peeked through her fingers once or twice, but she now saw a pattern, clear as day. Wherever Palpatine extended a cordial hand, only discord and disorder seemed to follow, like arms and shoulders accompanying a punching fist. Only, he was never the instigator – neither an arm nor a shoulder nor a fist. Ever the pacifist, always the reluctant receiver of power and applause.

He'd personally supported Rush Clovis as the new head of the Banking Clan, only to be betrayed scandalously, seemingly by Clovis himself, who had fallen into a clever trap by the Separatists. But how clever of a trap had it been, really, when all it had brought about was their immediate defeat on Scipio and the Republic's new ownership of the banks? Funds to be spent largely on weaponry and the military, and their own inevitable downfall?

And Rush Clovis was just one individual. The wrongdoer, over time, had had many names. The Trade Federation, Valorum, the Confederacy, Count Dooku… she'd forgotten many, because a great majority of the villains were no more. There was always someone else to take the blame for the conflict; conflict that over and over again, without fail, seemed to result in his hesitant acceptance of power and public favor.

Meanwhile, when he was busy managing the war, only a small minority – herself, Senator Organa, Senator Mothma, Senator Chuchi, a few others – were actively focusing their efforts on the pursuit of peace. Granted, none of them were doing a perfect job of it. It wasn't accidental that the former Queen often found herself preoccupied with Naboo's problems – she was their representative, and her own people's suffering often hit a little bit closer to home than that of the distant Outer Rim, so riddled with problems to begin with that she wouldn't know where to start.

And they'd tried – with assistance from Alderaan, they'd launched a few successful aid campaigns – which had apparently made her 'popular' here. What did it even mean, she wondered, for a well-off Senator to be 'popular' among the downtrodden and underprivileged? Somehow, it reminded her of that distant yet haunting day on Tatooine, when a little slave boy had called her an angel, and she'd felt sorry for him.

And what little the angels gave back, it was never enough. While reviewing her notes on Utapau and its neighboring systems, and the truly desperate circumstances that were driving them into Separatist arms – or fists – she'd come to an epiphany. There would never be peace so long as there was inequality. Sure, it was easy for her to judge smugglers and bounty hunters and felons, but no
poor career choice was made in a vacuum. While the rich hogged the banks, the poor had nowhere to turn to but crime. It was eat or be eaten - and those being eaten had a name, too.

Truthfully, she sometimes forgot that her husband was a former slave, because he rarely ever talked about it and when he did, it was with a bitterness and and resentment that Padmé couldn't help feeling was – if not directed at her – deserved by her. She wondered, had he'd been allowed to openly combat slavery like he'd always wanted to, if she had joined him in that battle… it often took a personal connection to gain passion for a cause.

Sheev Palpatine, the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic. Where were his passions, the causes he was fighting for? (Peace and democracy, supposedly?) If he'd wanted to be a 'strong' leader, why was he always making compromises and submitting to the 'people's' will? And who were the 'people', besides a privileged few with loud enough voices? Who were the 'people', the children of democracy, besides those promoting the war effort and weapons and armies?

He'd created his own echo chamber; a room where he, by feigning reluctance, could profess pacifism, while still having his way. And what a small room it was. Communications with the enemy were banned. She'd had to break the law to even talk to her friend Mina Bonteri. She'd only been allowed to associate with Rush Clovis to spy on him, or to, no matter how indirectly, ensure his downfall.

How was peace ever to be achieved without communication? Conflict only bred more conflict. It made no sense.

It made no sense, unless…

Unless conflict was what Palpatine wanted.

Unless this man was truly was the Sith Master. The Master of Count Dooku, the leader of the Separatists. The mastermind who had plotted one 'takeover' after another, who'd orchestrated a pointless war to rip apart the Galaxy, corrupt the Senate, turn peacekeepers into soldiers and leave the oppressed forgotten. Slowly occupy the whole Galaxy, remaking it piece by piece in his image, under the guise of saving planets from the 'evil' Separatists.

Which was the very purpose of their current mission.

- The Sugi village was a very simple settlement of about two dozen huts, situated at the base of a hill with built-in storage rooms. The village seemed to be populated entirely by armed warriors and shady-looking mob types, and as Obi-Wan and Padmé approached the hamlet, they soon saw that the Sugi were not actually an insectoid species at all, but the extra legs were actually a part of their armor.

The Sugi spotted the visitors from an impressively long distance and readied their weapons, and Obi-Wan discreetly readied his, while the Senator opted to keep hers entirely hidden.

''How's the foot?'' Obi-Wan asked her casually just before they reached the welcoming committee.

''I've stepped on it a few times by accident,'' Padmé lamented. ''In the event that we have to make a quick escape, I'm afraid you'll have to carry me.''

Obi-Wan gave her a long look, which she knowingly returned, then cast a glance at the Twilight, hidden behind a mound at few dozen meters' distance. He hoped that Anakin's jealous streak was exclusive to raven-haired bankers of ambiguous loyalties. He was also starting to miss the security
brought by his long-time partner at his side. While he admired Amidala's bravery, perhaps this was no place for an injured Forceless politician after all.

A short and stout armorless leader came to meet the pair, gesturing for the warriors to put down their weapons and stand behind him.

"Greetings," Obi-Wan said. "I'm afraid we weren't properly introduced earlier. I'm Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi, and this is Senator Padmé Amidala."

The Sugi leader appeared to understand Galactic Basic, but Amidala still followed the introduction with what Obi-Wan assumed to be salutations and expressions of goodwill in the Sugi's native language. The warriors made cautiously approving nods.

"And the third one?" the leader asked.

"Our comrade Anakin Skywalker sends his regards, and is very sorry for the misunderstanding this morning."

The leader narrowed his eyes and made a shrewd nod as he circled and eyed the pair.

"I assume you are after the crystal."

"I assume you are its current owners?"

"Not for long," the Sugi leader announced. "I'm afraid your aspirations are a little tardy. We have already agreed to sell the crystal to the Confederacy of Independent Systems."

"The Confederacy is here already?"

"We're expecting them today."

"And the prime minister?" Padmé asked.

"He's expected today as well."

Padmé cleared her throat, and opened her mouth several times without saying anything. The leader regarded her expectantly.

Obi-Wan turned his head, suddenly sensing something off around her presence. Eyes wandering, she bit her lip, hesitating long enough to create an awkward silence between the negotiation parties.

"Please," she finally began in a small voice, "please don't sell the crystal to the Separatists. We have seen what the Confederacy has done to the systems they've 'allied with'. They make big promises of safety and prosperity to cover up their true intentions, which is to occupy the planet and take advantage of its people. We have caught wind of a Separatist plot to take over Utapau and turn it into a military base —"

Padmé's voice trailed off weakly. She was now delving through her equipment for her holopad, but the Sugi leader cut her short, apparently uninterested. Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow at the normally well-spoken and self-assured Senator.

"Well, if you make a better offer," the leader said, none too concerned with Amidala's work performance, "I suppose there's still some time to reconsider…"

"First, we'd very much like to ascertain that you do have the crystal," Obi-Wan said. He'd been scanning through the Force for a while now, having anticipated he'd be able to sense something as
conspicuous as an enormous chunk of kyberite, but he was getting nothing.

"Oh… you're one of those."

At that moment, two other non-armored Sugi appeared, and the leader beckoned them over. One of them whispered something into the leader's ear, he nodded once, and the newcomers went on their way again. Obi-Wan grunted in frustration – the leader was very hard to read, through the Force or other means.

"Say," the leader said, "now that we know that you come in… peace… we would feel much more comfortable if you summoned Master Skywalker here as well."

"Are you showing us the crystal?"

"Please summon him here."

Padmé gave Obi-Wan a troubled look, but Obi-Wan couldn't help but feel relieved and pleased by the idea. He opened his comlink and Anakin answered immediately, sounding concerned and agitated. Within thirty seconds, the younger Jedi joined them at the village gates.

"Uh, hi."

Insincere apologies were quickly exchanged, and the Sugi conferred between themselves for a while again. Anakin and Padmé locked gazes and hands – with all the discretion of a pair of shaaks in heat stumbling across a live-broadcast holodrama premiere. Obi-Wan exhaled loudly, before realizing he'd turned soundless and invisible. Well, it was a welcome restoration of the team morale.

Finally the Sugi announced at the trio, "We will consider your counter-offer, however, we do not trust politicians and we do not trust Jedi." Obi-Wan had an argument prepared, but the leader continued, suddenly pointing at Anakin, "However, we quite like this fellow and his candid style. We wish to present the crystal to Master Skywalker only."

"Unacceptable," Padmé declared immediately, while the two Jedi still hesitated, trading glances.

"Then it's no deal – no crystal. Your choice."

Obi-Wan and Anakin conferred wordlessly while Padmé reasserted her aversion to the idea. Both of the Jedi now felt a vague rippling in the Force – the kyber crystal was somewhere close – with a hundred or so armed warriors between them and the prize.

"Fine, let's get on with it then," Anakin said. Padmé looked horrified.

"Good. No weapons, as per diplomatic customs," the leader ordered.

Anakin surrendered his lightsaber to Padmé in a very deliberate and significant gesture – but this time, instead of feeling discomfited by their closeness, Obi-Wan sensed a strange solemnity from the action. It was as though the husband and wife were expecting to part for a small lifetime. Then he realized that they probably said their goodbyes like this every time, in the face of every forced separation, no matter how brief. Catching himself intruding on a private moment, Obi-Wan quickly turned his gaze away, but at the same time, he was suddenly reminded of everything he'd observed between the two through the years – of all the ways in which Padmé had made Anakin happy, that he only witnessed through an elated laughter or a persistent grin. (Both of which were increasingly rare occurrences.)
When had it all become so very sad?

Did it need to be?

With some persuasion, the Sugi chief agreed to show all three of the visitors where the crystal was being kept. He took them to them round the hill to the outskirts of the village and pointed across the golden plains. On top of another hill, a few stone's throws from the village, there was some kind of facility – a factory, perhaps, or a space station.

Obi-Wan nodded. Padmé was shifting uneasily.

Two unarmed Sugi then led Anakin away, while about a dozen stayed behind to watch his comrades.

- 

It had been a snap decision, but Anakin had figured that humoring the Sugi's whims would probably at least move things along. Probably.

Anakin sighed. Truthfully, he just wanted everything to be over with so he could go home and face Palpatine. According to the Chancellor, the friction was thickening between him and the Jedi Order, and he was questioning whether such an autonomous institution could function well within a democratic system. He feared that the Jedi Generals were keeping secrets and even covering up war crimes from the Senate, and the Council, apparently, had given up all pretenses of goodwill and cooperative spirit.

Discreetly, Anakin had tried to find out whether the Chancellor was aware of the alarming situation on Felucia without revealing anything (he didn't want anyone to be sent to reconditioning without getting to the bottom of the mystery first). He was not aware. Anakin felt relieved, but at the same time, was he not making the Chancellor's point for him, was he not very much complicit in 'covering things up'? And he wasn't even part of the Council, who were privy to war intelligence (and Force knowledge) kept from the rest of the Order.

He had to remind himself that he believed this man to be a Sith Lord. Otherwise, in his growing resentment, he might have been inclined to agree with him.

The Sugi led the Jedi into the facility on top of the hill, and a narrow dimly lit corridor opened before them. At that moment he abruptly became aware of four near-simultaneous clicking sounds behind him, followed by the sensation of something cold grazing his back. Four armed and armored Sugi had quietly crept into the hallway.

"You have got to be kidding me."

He put his hands up, sighing. The corridor seemed to go on forever.

"Look, I'm sorry I attacked you. But there's really no need. I'm already coming."

The Sugi warriors didn't seem to understand Basic.

"I see how it is."

One of the Sugi smacked him on the head with his rifle. Anakin grunted, but even without his weapon, he felt pretty good about his chances. Based on the shape and the design of the door they were approaching, they were about to enter a larger room. In there, he would have the space to Force-jump to their throats and steal their blasters and escape.
Well, he was correct that the room was larger.

"Skywalker," Dooku nodded faux politely as he spun around in the center of the circular, otherwise empty hall.

Anakin's breath hissed into his mouth. He didn't care that there were blasters pointed at him. His teeth gritted together as his hand shot up of its own volition to choke the Sith.

The blaster barrels met his back as Dooku casually waved the pressure away from his neck – but instead of gawking in disbelief, Anakin immediately crouched down and stole behind his captors as they reacted too late and fired into the air. Before they could catch him, he kicked at them, smacked their heads together, and while they were dazed, grabbed a weapon for each hand, and just barely evaded their unarmed comrades before knocking all six back with the Force.

Dooku now stretched his arm toward him, and in a moment of clumsiness and panic, Anakin dropped one blaster. The accident turned out to be a blessing in disguise, however, when Anakin's free hand moved instinctively to protect his neck, and to his utter astonishment, he was somehow able to copy his opponent's trick and deflect the pressure building around his throat.

Next thing he knew, the remaining weapon was shot off his hand and the six Sugi surrounded him, blasters ramming into his temples. They grabbed his arms and pinned him down to his knees, dragging him across the floor to Dooku.

"What do you want now?!" he screamed at the Sith. "Haven't you had enough of humiliating me?!!"

"Once again, you quite misunderstand, Skywalker," Dooku muttered, hardly looking at him. "If anything, I am here to humiliate myself."
"Obi-Wan, we've made a mistake. Something is not right. We have to go after Anakin."

Obi-Wan turned his head. The Senator's voice was firm and decisive – and her words, according to the Force, objectively true.

"Yes… I sense that he's in danger."

Padmé shook her head. "No… you don't understand."

Obi-Wan frowned, but didn't pursue the subject, as some of the Sugi warriors were now taking an interest in the conversation, and their weapons shifting in their grips.

Obi-Wan discreetly motioned their escape plan in the air. *You stand behind me while they do their worst, then I Force-throw them over there and cut through anyone who still gets in the way, while you provide back-up fire, then I suppose I do have to carry you because you, truly the wife of Anakin Skywalker, just had to enter a danger zone with that darned foot of yours, I swear neither of you has any sense of self-preservation, you two really are meant to be.*

He wasn't sure the last few points had translated into nods and hand waves, or were at all relevant to the situation at hand, but he smirked anyway as Padmé gave an acknowledging nod.

As expected, their Sugi guards didn't appreciate the idea of a surprise retreat, and tried to summon the entire village to assist in its prevention, but the two diplomats were swift and strategic in their movements and their collaborative efforts ended up working out almost as smoothly as his and Anakin's tried-and-true teamwork. The Jedi Master had completely forgotten what an unnecessarily excellent shot the Senator was (even if he'd never warmed up to such an inelegant weapon of choice), and by the time she was safely swooped up in his arms, trying to balance her crutches in one hand while firing at their pursuers, she was starting to feel less and less like a hindrance and more and more a valuable teammate.

"Watch out!"

The warning came too late as Obi-Wan's foot sank into a hole hidden amid the tall grass and he immediately lost balance, and they both tumbled onto the ground. Forcing himself up before they could be caught, he picked up the Senator (who was still shooting) and only now realized that she'd actually tried to warn him of the hidden sniper perched up on a nearby mound, and he'd only avoided being hit *because* he'd fallen down. In their haste to make up for the lost seconds, they were forced to abandon Padmé's walking support (they couldn't have given her a hover-chair or something?).

Anakin's astromech had already opened the door and started the engine when they reached the Twilight, and as the pair scrambled inside, Padmé couldn't help chuckling. "I can't believe you dropped me."

"It's… tradition," he grinned in response, wistfully.

"What does that mean?"

"Inside joke." He could distinctly hear Satine roaring with laughter somewhere beyond the grave.

R2 had plugged itself into the translation device again, the one with the eerie metallic imitation of
his Master's voice.

"Where to?! And where's Anakin?!"

"We're… working on it."

"What?! Where is he?!"

Padmé quickly elbowed Obi-Wan away from the pilot seat. "No offense, but I, uh… I know my way around this ship."

A faint scarlet rose up on her cheeks as she grabbed the yoke. Obi-Wan grimaced at the passenger seat before sitting down. “Of course you do."

While the ship soared up from the ground, the wind knocking over the last of their Sugi pursuers, Obi-Wan opened his comlink and called Anakin. There was no answer. He exchanged worried glances with Padmé before she abruptly nodded toward the window. They were now above the Sugi village (still being shot at) with a wide view all the way to the mysterious facility.

"There's a ship down there about to take off," she observed, and Obi-Wan peered closer, following the Force’s guidance.

As Dooku had the Sugi drag his reluctant guest onto the ship awaiting them in the hangar, while said guest made futile resistance and barraged his host with meaningless insults, he realized that his brand of hospitality most likely made no difference at this point. This was about to be the first and final time the old enemies met on 'amicable' terms, and he would miss tormenting Kenobi's little protégé. Given how he kept on lunging headfirst into the most obvious traps imaginable, the Count had a feeling that Skywalker’s eventual death would be almost too quick and easy.

Besides, some light prodding and poking would actually help Dooku make his point.

On the bridge, the pilot droids started the engine, while Dooku had Skywalker's attendants place the Jedi in a containment field in the back of the room – immobilizing him, at last.

As soon as the Sugi realized that the ship was about to take flight, they panicked and began demanding their reward for the Jedi's capture, pointing their blasters at Dooku. The Count sighed, Force-threw their crude laser toys to the wall, and with one elegant sweep of his saber, did away with the greedy, disgusting pack of aliens while Skywalker glared. He then commanded one of the pilots to dispose of the bodies through the airlock.

Once the ship was airborne and stabilized, Dooku summoned in two droids of the B2 special series, programmed to capture rather than kill Jedi under certain circumstances – and also equipped with a range of torture functions. He'd turned off the speaking function – he'd never much valued machinery except as a (primitive) tool, and he really didn't see the point of listening to the inconsequential babbles of the non-self-aware. He wasn't always sure Skywalker was completely self-aware.

He was fairly sure, however, that by now Skywalker must have built up some resistance to electric shocks (save his powerful lightning), so instead he first stuck him with some hypos, to render him more cooperative and to give him a first taste of what was to come. Skywalker barely grunted at the fluids' effects, so Dooku moved on to more the elaborate and unpleasant variety such as illusions that imitated the sensation of burning to death. While Skywalker was busy screaming, the cybernetic pilots informed their Master that a small freighter was presently on their tail.
Dooku sighed, absentmindedly ordering the pilots to fire on the freighter in question. He'd have to cut to the chase earlier than expected. But there was one thing in particular he wanted to try, to help him introduce today’s theme and put Skywalker in his place before he’d have to humble himself before him. (What a disgrace.) He had the droids wrest Skywalker's repulsive mechanical arm outside the containment field while the rest of his body remained fixed in place, and remove his protective glove. Then he ordered his assistants to grab a good hold of the robotic extension and rip away at it and at Skywalker's very nerves as hard as they possibly could, while just refraining from actually tearing the distasteful contraption off.

Judging by Skywalker's screams, he was really quite fond of the fake arm.

Sensing his prisoner on the verge of unconsciousness, Dooku had the droids electrocute him awake and he seized and screamed some more.

Anakin and Artoo had done a good job with the ship's repairs, and Padmé could easily elude the haphazard shots hurling from their target – she just couldn't return the fire for fear of murdering her husband (who was obviously not flying the ship, since they were being shot at, and with poor aim, too).

"Are you absolutely sure Anakin is on that ship?" she inquired from the resident Force-sensitive for the tenth time. They were presently caught in an endless pursuit across the plains as the ship ahead of them refused to ascend into space. "Is their hyperdrive broken, too?"

"Hey! We're 'working on it'," Artoo interjected, somehow managing to do a mocking tone with the computer-generated voice.

Obi-Wan nodded, shadows weighing down his gaze. "I'm sure. And I fear Count Dooku is as well."

"What?!" Padmé cried, almost losing control of the ship and skewing it sideways.

"Easy, Senator!"

"Just call me Padmé," she said dryly as she steered the ship into balance again.

Padmé bit her lip. The lump in her throat tasted of self-blame. Ever since she and Anakin had escaped Dooku's ship to literally the first planet they saw (and had their stay extended, too), she'd been looking over her shoulder, waiting for the Sith Lord to materialize from nowhere at any given minute. She should have never let Anakin leave with the Sugi. She should have –

She glanced at Obi-Wan. There was no end in sight for the low-altitude chase. *I'm sorry, Anakin,* she lamented to herself as she took a deep breath. Without communication, there would never be peace.

Obi-Wan listened with almost frightening composure as she told him everything. She could still recite word for word what she and Anakin had heard on the communication tower on Scipio. She told him how Anakin had blamed himself, how he'd first repressed it all away, how obsessive of his wife's safety he had since become. How she'd been sent on some kind of fake mission just so that she could be captured, and, she assumed, used against Anakin. *That's how the Sith operated, right? Embracing their anger and passion to gain strength, isn't that right? Would it not stand to reason that that's how they would train their recruits too, especially reluctant ones? Warping their innocent love and boundless devotion into something ugly and violent?*
She omitted what had happened on Tatooine with Shmi while Anakin had still been Master Kenobi's wide-eyed Padawan, how Anakin's actions on that day had no doubt magnified his guilt and shame, as well as his obsession. No matter how she might have misjudged the Jedi Master and the depth of his love for Anakin, it was not for her to disclose. And she just couldn't come terms (and she didn't see how Anakin ever could) with the distinct possibility that they Sith had somehow been responsible for Shmi's murder, as well. The events just bore too much resemblance to what (she assumed) had almost happened to her.

She also made no mention of her suspicions toward Chancellor, for now. She was now quite confident in her theory, but they really needed Anakin back first, and with Obi-Wan in the know, her sulking husband would have no choice but to have that conversation.

As she neared the end of the recount, she could see Obi-Wan's Jedi mask starting to crack, and a semblance of deep sorrow and great shock land on his war-hardened features. It was almost as though he wanted to cry, but didn't know how, as though it was a skill he'd only distantly heard of and wished to learn back when he was a little boy.

Padmé was silent, turning her attentions to steering the ship again. The shots were growing sparser, but the target's speed remained stable – apparently Dooku was just going to wait for them to run out of fuel.

Obi-Wan remained speechless for a long while. Artoo made a vague beep that completely stumped the translation device.

"Why didn't I see it?" Obi-Wan finally whispered. "Why else would Dooku have – I'd never seen Anakin so angry."

"Please don't think less of Anakin for keeping it from you," Padmé said quietly. "You're his best friend, he trusts you more than anyone. But you have a duty to the Jedi Council, and – well, Anakin doesn't like to talk about it, but I know they've never quite approved of him, and this – he's been so distraught, he thinks the whole world is against him –"

Obi-Wan hardly seemed to register the plea, still too stunned over the last news.

"I don't believe it," he said. "They want him for their own, to – to – to train as a… a Sith. Anakin, the – the Chosen One. And they've been using me, using you – Ever since I took him under my wing I've known him to be vulnerable to his emotions, but this – I never thought –" He suddenly got up from the seat. "Is there any way we can get into that ship? I could get up on the – I think I can make the jump –"

"Let me try!" Artoo volunteered, without staying to wait for permission. The two organics glanced at each other, unable to argue the suggestion.

"Well, he did beat up a band of pirates," Obi-Wan said.

Padmé got the feeling this was another 'inside joke'. In a desperate attempt to lighten up the mood while they tried to work out a plan B, she inquired from the Jedi Master if he and Anakin had any. Obi-Wan responded by asking whether she would like to hear them in thematic or chronological order.

As soon as he deemed his captive conscious enough, Dooku sauntered up close to him, ordering the droids to stand aside as he himself Force-pulled at the piece of scrap metal that was still
dangling limp outside the field, as its unlucky owner whined insufferably.

"Let it be said that I've never particularly sought your approval, Skywalker," he said calmly, letting go of the arm as Skywalker huffed and hissed in pain. "Regardless… let me ask you a simple question: have I earned it?"

The prisoner didn't grace him with an answer, but he did seem to be working on some kind of expressive gesture with his ‘hand’. Dooku nodded knowingly, "…And my Master? Has he earned your respect?"

"Who is…" Skywalker coughed. "Who is… your Master?"

Dooku shook his head. “I appreciate that you’re unintelligent, but I did not think you were this committed.’

He reached out towards the prisoner and closed his eyes, easily overcoming the weakened Jedi’s defenses to invade his mind, making sure to do so in as painful a fashion as he could. Skywalker gave a faint whimper, twisting and turning his head.

"I sense mixed sentiments… among them a vague curiosity towards the dark side. So he has succeeded. It's no wonder… for years you’ve associated him with generosity, solicitude… wisdom. For years he has showered you with praises and empty promises. Stroking your fragile ego, telling you what you want to hear. His true identity is but an abstraction to you, utterly removed from the dear friend you so deeply respect, whose approval you so crave, whose counsel you seek. All the while…”

Skywalker coughed again, eyes closed. It occurred to Dooku that he might have overdone the demonstration – besides needing his guest awake to hear his proposition, he most definitely required him alive to realize it. Nevertheless continuing to test his resilience, the Count probed deeper into his captive’s muddled mindscape as Skywalker writhed and resisted.

"As I suspected. It is your most desperate desire to kill me, and you’ve deliberated on this intention in great detail, I see. Ever since I took your hand you’ve plotted vengeance – but after I took your wife, your resolve was solidified and your vision narrowed.” Dooku sneered and paused for a while. “I never questioned my orders – not the slaughter, nor the torture, not the injury nor the insult. Torture, you see, is an integral part of Sith training – the resulting agony allows one to access their darkest desires and the powers that lie within. My Master and I might have had our disagreements on your… suitability… but in the end I had no reason not to comply with his wishes, and so for years upon years I took an active part in your schooling. And all along I failed to perceive one critical detail - that in making you suffer… I was making it personal. Little by little feeding a hatred that I would never be able to harness for my purposes – because I was the purpose, and the harness had been fastened tight long ago. You seem to be operating under the illusion that you possess free will, Skywalker. I assure you that is not how my Master views you. All your petty revenge fantasies, he has put in your head. Make no mistake.”

Dooku scoffed. “For so long I thought we had equal roles to play in this war. But I now see mine has been that of the designated villain – his the Galaxy's lifeline and sole hope. With the public falling over his feet, his rise to power will be laughably swift and effortless. As he no doubt assumed my murder would be. Yet here you are, once again, quite neutralized.”

Skywalker groaned vaguely, once again attempting to lift his arm replacement. Dooku could see some of the metal joints hanging loose from their flesh tethers. Perhaps he had been wrong to sever the boy's arm – he still couldn't see how something as magnificent as the Force – particularly the dark side – would ever lend its power to a pitiful stub of muscle attached to some rusty spare
debris. But Skywalker's raw power and ruthless style of combat spoke for themselves. For all his deficiencies, with the appropriate guidance and right timing, he might just succeed.

"But mind you, you may yet elude your fate as his next lapdog. And to this end I find myself compelled to ask you for a favor."

He had his droids zap Skywalker again.

“I need you to kill Sidious.”
Anakin’s head was swimming, submerged in fluids sticky and prickly and scalding all at the same time. He couldn’t feel several of his body parts, he wasn’t even sure his limbs were there anymore.

Dooku was still talking. His voice was so loud. But Anakin was paying attention. Sidious, he’d said. Kill Sidious. So now he wasn’t weak anymore, but some kind of errand boy?

“Sidious,” Anakin mumbled, and the name tasted like a prayer to a demon in his mouth. He was fairly sure Sidious was in the room with them. This funny room that kept shaking and crumbling and building itself anew.

“Is that understood?” Dooku demanded, and Anakin felt his body seizing without any sensation of the cause. “A Sith Master will always look for signs of treachery in their apprentice. I sense that he has already foreseen mine – but he knows not the nature of it. He will never allow me to take his life. But you… if you do exactly as I instruct, he will never see it coming. And that is why I am asking you, even at the cost of my pride and against my better judgment.”

Anakin snickered faintly, and was rewarded with a shock again. Or pretty firework effects. It could’ve been either.

So Dooku wanted a favor. Why couldn't the bastard just admit that he was getting old, that Anakin was better than him, more powerful than him?

“I have grand visions for the future of the Galaxy, and no murderous traitor shall stand in my way,” Dooku droned on. “The Empire of his dreams and design will pale in comparison to mine, all the more so now that it is never to be.”

“The… Empire?” Anakin echoed the words, without knowing why, only knowing that it hurt to do so. Oddly, the last electric shock seemed to have brought back some of his sensation – mostly the excruciating pain on his right arm. But the room was back to its original shape.

“That is correct,” Dooku nodded. “Once he has secured you as his new apprentice… he will establish the First Galactic Empire and declare himself the Emperor. You will most likely be clapping. Or despairing. Or both.”

The room, Anakin slowly realized, it wasn’t a room, but a spaceship. Anakin pulled against the energy confining him, but the sticky fluids seemed to have cascaded right out of his ears and transformed into his legs.

“You see, the problem is that as things stand now, you will inevitably side with him. He will make it so that you cannot refuse. You may scoff at me now, but he has bent you to his will before, and he will do so again. You will watch as your friends meet pitiful ends, your Jedi identity crumbles to dust and your entire life falls apart, and that is when he will strike. You will pledge loyalty to him and believe me when I tell you, he will find good use for it. You will have no purpose left but to serve him, and for this great mercy you will thank him.”

The fluids were circulating inside him again, but the Jedi had taught Anakin to detach himself from the pain and observe it from the outside - at least until he could learn to do the opposite and find the alleviation within himself. Anakin often wondered if they only meant certain kinds of pain. Most of the time, he was just staring at his own anger.

“But if you were to act immediately – and I do mean immediately, before he can unleash his silver
tongue on your impressionable little head – he will not expect it. Do not challenge him - ambush him. Hesitate for even a moment, and you will be a slave to his machinations once more."

Not that there wasn't plenty of anger left in him still.

“And – heed my words of warning – it is vital you act alone, relying on none but yourself and the element of surprise. Kenobi will complicate matters and the Jedi Order is sorely ill-prepared for the coming threat. I must impress upon this advice one more time: do not waste time thinking, meditating nor consulting the Council nor even the Force. Act." Dooku had been circling in place for a while, but now he turned back to Anakin and looked into his foggy and wandering eyes. “Once you’ve killed him, you are free to come after me if you should feel so inclined. I might even engage you in an even duel. You seem to think I play unfair. I say I play smart. So… have we come to an agreement?”

Anakin gave his proposal some thought.

Finally he concluded that he was glad they were in a spaceship.

“So, I guess you’re letting me go again then. How very nice of you.”

“Once you’ve agreed to my request, I will set you free, yes. If you fail to follow through, your friends will be the ones to pay.”

Anakin closed his eyes and drew on the Force. With him, always. It was time to put another lesson to the test. He felt a great wave surging through him, filling him with a comforting warmth, yet a burning fever.

“Here’s what I’m thinking,” the Jedi coughed out in a small voice. “You don’t get to do that anymore. You don’t get to set me free, and you don’t get to hurt my friends.”

Anakin could no longer see nor hear nor sense the Sith. And soon Anakin was lost to himself, too – no longer submerged but wrapped in his utter and complete reliance on the Force.

The Force had a will, he'd been taught, and, Anakin was certain, it did not want him here. It did not want the war, the terror, the suffering, the meaningless deaths nor false peace talks.

It desired a balance.

Maybe he could not grant it today – maybe he could grant it never. Not everybody believed in the Chosen One – countless times he'd heard that he was unreliable and unpredictable and dangerous, his future clouded and his very existence only throwing things out of balance.

Today, he could at least do that much. The Jedi might be protectors of harmony, and perhaps harmony he would someday find. But he had been trained as an agent of chaos unknowingly to even himself, and if chaos was what they desired, then chaos they would get.

Slowly, the Jedi lifted, at least he thought he lifted, his only available limb, the one that wasn’t there, whose replacement was presently hanging loose from his nerves and that shouldn’t have been able to obey his commands at all.

“And you definitely don't get to…” Anakin chuckled, his mind and body one with the Force but his pettiness still his own, "Twist my arm.”

Then the Force set him free and his nerves screamed out.
“Can you see him, Artoo?” Obi-Wan inquired from the outside as the astromech flew higher into the depths of the spaceship sunken nose-first into the ground. In response he got an assortment of barely audible beeps, and turned to Padmé, shaking his head. “I don't know why I asked.”

Padmé was still immobile, covering her mouth with her hands. Her eyes were wide.

“I told you not to worry, Sen… Padmé. He's alive, I can sense him.”

Artoo returned shortly, to bombard the pair with some more beeps and high-pitched sounds. Through some extremely awkward motioning and pointing, the Jedi finally understood the droid wanted him to… ride on his back. He drew a deep breath, rather more exasperated than the circumstances called for.

“I told you not to teach your dog any more tricks, Anakin,” he sighed as he climbed onto the surprisingly sturdy droid, even finding an apt foothold in its cover shield.

On their way up, Obi-Wan soon saw that the only light in the upturned ship was coming from Anakin – or rather the energy field that was still holding him, and that had most likely saved his life. He soon learned why Artoo had found it difficult to free his Master himself – the mechanism was broken and had (whether luckily or unluckily) frozen him in place rather than released him.

He also saw that the unconscious Jedi was missing a near-half of his right arm, and the other half was hanging outside the containment field and bleeding – with just enough remaining metal joints and tethers to stop the worst of the outpour. Cautiously balancing on Artoo's slippery domed head, he took a gentle yet firm hold of the arm-stub and drew on the Force to pull him out, heaving him on his shoulders.

The two Jedis' combined weight was too much for Artoo, and it was all he could do to keep balance while plummeting clumsily back toward the ground. Once there, while exiting the ship through the broken front window, Obi-Wan caught a glimpse of Dooku in the dark. His presence departed from the Living Force, the Sith was buried under a pile of distorted debris, with something sticking out of his stomach with a sharper metallic reflection.

They took Anakin back to the Twilight and put some distance between the freighter and the crash site, for fear that the ill-fated ship would explode. Padmé attended to her husband in complete silence, even as Obi-Wan tried to make some conversation (without really knowing what he was saying). But to her credit – and a little to Obi-Wan's unease – she seemed to know exactly how to treat a bleeding arm-stub that had recently parted with a cybernetic extension.

Obi-Wan also sensed something off with the patient's brain functions, and, suspecting hypos, suggested she'd try a very specific liquid in the first aid kit. The mandatory contents in a Jedi General's kit had become more and more weirdly specific as the war had progressed.

It was the third time Obi-Wan had delivered Anakin from harm within the last three weeks, or at least been present, contributing towards that end. Somewhat horrified (and embarrassed), he realized the number wasn't even very high, usually it was just Anakin saving him.

Or the two of them in trouble together. Or doing one of those fake-out plans. It was another one of those things that had somehow become the norm during the war. Like a morale-building trust exercise. (That they always still bickered during.)

He now realized what was different about those three times. All along, his Padawan been carrying
a somber secret, unknown to his Master but not his enemies. Forced on him by his enemies. Just what sort of 'harm' had threatened him before the ship had inexplicably crashed?

Anakin looked awful, but not quite as awful as he could have looked. Or perhaps 'awful' had become the norm as well, and that was why it had taken Obi-Wan this long to notice. The Jedi Master guessed he wasn't exactly looking his best, either. He'd been blasted into space a couple of days ago. He mostly kept silent about his constant headache and neck pain.

So many Jedi and clones and innocents had died in all of these scenarios they had accumulated and somehow survived. Did they deserve to live on while others passed on into the Cosmic Force? What good could he do for the Galaxy that Master Qui-Gon couldn't have done much better? Anakin was supposed to save the Galaxy, and yet the Sith had apparently been keeping him alive to bend to their design. The war was terrible enough, but it suddenly struck him that all along he'd been part of another war far more personal.

He knelt down next to Padmé at Anakin's bedside. The Senator had finished treating and bandaging her husband's arm, and was now stroking his white cheek, as an oddly peaceful expression spread on the patient's face.

“You know, Dooku asked me to join them, too.”

“What?” Padmé turned her head.

“Twice, actually.” It was better to spare her the details. “Mostly because of Master Qui-Gon – Dooku's former Padawan. It's almost as though in his death, he wrote me a recommendation letter and mailed it to his old internship company, that had since gone under and made a deal with the mob.”

“Does Anakin ever tell you that your jokes are horrible?” she asked, smiling and shaking her head. He could have sworn he saw Anakin smiling as well, even if his mouth didn't move.

“What I'm trying to say is, the Sith preying on the Jedi is not unheard of, at all. I just never thought…”

“Yeah.”

Obi-Wan suddenly remembered another interesting aspect in her recount. “So you… you heard the Sith Master's voice.”

Padmé was silent for a while. Then she withdrew her hand from Anakin's cheek and looked Obi-Wan in the eye. “I have a suspect. And I know Anakin suspects him too. He's just being… Anakin about it.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “Who is it?”

Padmé paused again, weighing her words carefully, and making a couple of false starts before speaking. “What if I told you… he has the Republic Senate under his control?”

Obi-Wan drew his head back. It took a while for the implication to register. But when it did, it immediately found a foothold in an unpleasant memory he'd just been forced to recall.

“…I would probably say that this is the second time I've been told that.”
Padmé was thankful that Obi-Wan had not yet contacted or even mentioned the Jedi Council, as much as she believed that they needed all the allies they could find and informing the Council was most likely the next logical step. Dooku would still be dead by the time Anakin woke up, their lives still hard and their mission still ruined – and probably rigged to go wrong anyway. From here on, they'd have all the conversations together, make all the decisions together, stick together. She and Anakin were a team; Obi-Wan and Anakin were the team, she'd been told. They were destined to join forces at some point.

Now was that point. She'd officially had enough. No more. This war had to come to an end. She couldn't take it anymore.

Artoo informed them that the old hyperdrive was not so much broken as completely destroyed to shreds, and its successor half-way built from scratch. He was 'fairly sure' he could complete it once Anakin woke up and provided him instructions. Padmé was proud of her husband's great skill, but at present quite regretful and shocked how much they depended on him for everything. Saving her from Dooku, saving Obi-Wan from space, saving the Galaxy, and getting them off the planet, too, all in the day's work…

Padmé shook her head and decided to contact the Senate office and request a ride home. She completely glossed over the details and only hinted that there might have been some minor complications with the mission. She tried to sound casual yet firm as she urged the secretary 'not to trouble the Chancellor with these silly trifles.'

Soon, they were approaching the facility where Anakin had been captured. Obi-Wan had somehow convinced her to angle all the way back to the Sugi village – saying he had an 'idea that might or might not work'. She was about to ask the Jedi about it, when Artoo whirred back to the bridge from… wherever he had been, and Obi-Wan asked if 'it had worked.' Artoo made motions and sounds indicating that 'it had’… 'well, maybe.'

“That's good enough for me,” Obi-Wan said while calmly sitting down and activating the ship's guns.

Padmé gave him a questioning look, mildly concerned.

Obi-Wan was squeezing his eyes shut and mumbled absently, “I sense that the facility is almost empty. That… or the crystal's presence is drowning out everything else.”

Padmé gaped at him. “We're here for the crystal? I thought you could barely sense it before.”

“Well, it wasn't there this morning. Now it's quite impossible to miss. A Jedi will often sense their destined crystal companion calling out to them, but just as I suspected, this… this is something else.” He turned to her with a grave look. "It's… it's massive.”

Padmé was starting to catch on. “You mean – you're going to – “

“Well, if what you've told me is true – and perhaps, even if it is not - we can't the Republic get their hands on a power source of this magnitude. And in any case, our current orders are to stop the Separatist purchase from happening, isn't that correct?”

“But – you can't possibly – I'm no expert on giant kyber crystals, but are you sure the guns will do the trick?”

“I'm fairly sure they will not.” He nodded at Artoo. “Which is why I had this little fella install a secret ingredient into the ship's gun system. A… filter of sorts, or a - a magnifier.”
Padmé blinked at him. “You sound like Anakin. Where did you even -”

“I won it in a card game. A game where anything goes, including theft when co-players are not looking. Technically, I paid for it.”

“Now you’ve lost me. And you’re sure the crystal is inside?”

“As I said – it’s impossible to miss.”

Padmé steered the ship so that they were now perfectly positioned to shoot. The villagers had already taken notice of them, and if they wanted to cut casualties, they needed to do this now. Padmé considered the idea. If nothing else, she was extremely relieved that Obi-Wan had believed her and was thinking and acting accordingly.

“Fine. I suppose it's worth a… shot.”

Obi-Wan told her to brace herself. Then he fired.

Padmé had assumed the villagers were still out of harm's way. She’d thought they themselves had maintained a safe distance in the air.

But the explosion sent the ship hurtling into the beginnings of the stratosphere, knocked her and Obi-Wan back across the bridge and Anakin from his bed to the floor with them. Artoo screamed.

For what felt like several minutes they just spun uncontrollably across the air and inside the ship. Obi-Wan tried to keep Anakin's head from bumping into things while constantly hitting his own. Padmé was thrown up and down and back and forth as Artoo in turn tried to soften her landings.

Finally, when the momentum ran out, there was still some scrambling and stumbling until Padmé could claim the pilot seat again, and bring the ship into balance. A thick cloud of smoke was blocking all visibility.

But the Twilight was still in one piece.
And still Kenobi continued to escape death. Sidious found himself quite perplexed. Tyranus had said it himself: they could have chosen to kill Skywalker many times over. What was Kenobi next to him? Immortal?

The plan had been laughably simple: "No need for time-consuming duels. Relieve them of their weapons under the guise of diplomacy. Leave the wife be for now. Subdue Skywalker and kill Kenobi in front of his eyes. No explanations are necessary, other than perhaps 'if we can't have him, no one can'. Skywalker will be left a broken shell, more helpless and lost than ever, and his heart darker than burning coal. Eventually he will come to wonder what this garden-variety Jedi had that he didn't have. Then I will –"

At least Tyranus was dead, most likely by Skywalker's hand. Sidious was sorry he'd missed it. Well, he would have missed it either way, occupied up to his neck with preparations for his glorious Empire. He really had devoted far too much time to securing his apprentice lately, and neglected the political sphere. Well, 'neglected' inasmuch as an overweight aristocrat might neglect to finish his dinner at times after stuffing himself with dessert. He had many dinners to look forward to, why not enjoy the zherry on top?

Besides, with Tyranus and his incompetence out of the picture, he'd surely find it easier to multitask from now on.

And he'd just had the most extraordinary idea.

- 

"What… what have we done?" Padmé whispered as the smoke finally began to clear, and she steered the ship back toward the ground, in a sudden rush of empathy for beings that had delivered her husband to a Sith Lord.

"Relax," Obi-Wan urged her while lifting Anakin back to his bed. "The explosion sent us flying instead of – well… so it most likely had the same effect on our ground-level friends."

"Relax? You just blew up –" Padmé cried, but then stopped - for as soon as she was low enough to make observations, she saw that the Jedi Master was right. The Sugi were all still there, sprawled across the golden fields, most of them already showing shaky signs of life. Most shockingly, the group wasn’t even that far from the facility that had been reduced to a mere pile of… almost nothing. In fact, there was only a massive crater occupying the spot where she could only assume the crystal had been – extremely clean and defined in shape. However, despite the totality of the destruction, it appeared as though the impact of explosion had been almost entirely upward in direction, and they’d suffered the worst of it – and still lived.

Sitting down next to her, Obi-Wan urged her to go back up, and within the same breath provided her coordinates for a less populated region on Utapau that they could flee to. Still gaping at him, the Senator absently typed the coordinates into the computer.

"But truthfully… even I wasn't expecting an explosion that big," Obi-Wan admitted, apologetically. "Merely… precise."

"Obi-Wan, what is going on?" Padmé demanded.
Obi-Wan didn't answer for a while, but Padmé continued to stare him down until he sighed and relented. And still he spoke with that perfect calmness, "This wasn't some whim I just had. I mean, it was, but – Destroying the crystal was always the plan."

Padmé stared at him with growing incredulity, stealing a glance at Anakin behind them, who was still sleeping like an apathetic citizen on election day. "How was it always the plan?"

Obi-Wan shifted in his seat, weighing his words for a while, then looking her gravely in the eye as she oscillated between his and the sky, "You and Anakin are not the only ones suspicious of Palpatine. The Jedi Council has long been wary of the emergency powers he has accumulated during the war - and continues to accumulate, I might add. Most recently, he has seized near-complete control of the Republic weaponry and military. I'm sure you're aware."

Padmé nodded slowly. She was aware to an extent – she even remembered being vaguely worried. She'd known that by staying on Utapau, she'd miss quite a few Senate sessions and weapons discussions (since that was all anyone wanted to discuss these days, anyway) …but the implication that Palpatine had acquired more power during her short absence? It couldn't be… had she somehow missed another voting?

She really needed to catch up on the news. Between doing her homework for yet another fake mission and worrying about her husband, she quite simply had not had the time nor energy. Didn’t power-hungry dark lords ever get tired?

"I admit that the Sith Lord part is new," Obi-Wan continued, "but not completely out of the blue. I already told you about Dooku's insinuations on Geonosis. As for the Jedi Order, Master Windu, in particular, has many times expressed his mistrust of the Chancellor… recently in an increasingly overt manner."

Padmé nodded slowly. She was really quite relieved to hear these news – they did have allies in the Jedi Order – but she was quite taken aback, too. Suspicious of Palpatine all along, more so in recent times? Why had Master Windu not talked to anyone in the Senate?

"We had a meeting while Windu was here on Utapau," Obi-Wan went on, "Long meeting short – we agreed that the crystal ought to be destroyed before this war turns from bad to worse. He also handed me a file of study results on the Vanqor 1 weapon. He was concerned that the Chancellor would soon claim total ownership of the gun, and wanted me to have a copy of the file while the Jedi still had access to the research."

"Naturally we were preparing for the worst, but I reminded him that we should also keep a healthy academic interest. The weapon, after all, holds inside some sort of mutation of kyberite – the power source of a lightsaber. Hyperite, as we nicknamed it."

"Very… clever."

"It’s a little silly. In any case, the file was a very short read, but the scientists concluded that the weapon is currently very unsteady, and possibly entirely flawed in design - but ideally, it is designed to launch ‘very powerful and very precise explosions that can be directed at a single target, thus minimizing collateral damage’, and that this attribute almost entirely stems from the ‘very unique and very refined properties of the core crystal.’ I’m sure by now you have figured out what it is I placed inside the ship's gun system."

Artoo made an enthusiastic sound, apparently very much recovered from their spontaneous trip toward the thermosphere.

"So that’s why you felt so comfortable firing."
“I never feel ‘comfortable firing’, my good Senator, but hyperite, much like its more famous sibling, has a presence in the Force. I was – “ Obi-Wan abruptly paused for a while, lifting his shoulders in an odd manner, almost as though he was suppressing a shiver. “I was following the Force’s guidance, and I took a calculated risk.”

Padmé nodded again, she didn't know how else to respond.

“Granted, this wasn't our original plan for the crystal's destruction – because I truly didn't think that little shard could do so much damage, but, you must understand, I had to take the shot. Master Yoda had a terrible feeling about the giant crystal from the beginning. Sith Lord in the Senate or not, a kyber crystal is the core of a Jedi Knight's sacred weapon, it doesn't belong inside guns and cannons.”

Padmé had stopped nodding, a deep frown crumpling her already weary face. So she and Anakin had not been the only ones keeping secrets.

“So… when you scolded Anakin about ‘the bigger picture’, this is what you actually meant.”

"Perhaps…” Obi-Wan shifted in discomfort before continuing, “You must have entered this mission knowing that the crystal would eventually wind up in the Republic's custody. It needed to be destroyed. And you agreed with me.”

"Why weren't Anakin and I let in on the plan?” Padmé asked.

"Well, first of all, as I said, this wasn't the original plan… But the Sugi were never going to hand us the – ”

"Is the Council suspicious of us, too? Because I'm a Senator, because you associate me with Palpatine? And because Anakin is –?”

Obi-Wan shook his head, "Of course not."

"But the way you persuaded me,” Padmé continued, trying to identify all the reasons why she was upset with Obi-Wan, "you made it sound as if you made the decision to fire based on my revelations only. She crossed her arms and turned his way. “You're quite the 'Negotiator' indeed. And you almost didn't tell me.”

"I only acted with such urgency because your revelations were of such urgent nature.”

"I think I see it now.”

"See what?”

"Why some people are opposed to you. Afraid of you.”

"Of me?”

"Of the Jedi. Criticizing your autonomy, denouncing you as a frightening cult... condemning your role as military generals. You only answer to the Council – you only communicate to the Council. You archive all your 'academic interests' in your own private library... You blow up weapons because your leader 'had a terrible feeling', you talk in hushed tones in the corner, follow ‘the Force's guidance’…”

"But Senator, as I said, it was you who convinced me – ”
“To take the shot now, I heard you. I’m talking about the public perception of the Jedi. You used to be these admired and mysterious heroes. But ever since the war began, the anti-Jedi sentiment has been on the rise again. Now and again I find myself defending your ways at work, and to be sure, in places like this, where the Order isn't trusted at all.”

"We have always had our critics, however, the Jedi code binds us to a certain set of rules –”

"I'm not talking about rules, I'm talking about accountability.” She sighed, suddenly exhausted, relieved and troubled all at the same time. “And the Jedi Council is an even more exclusive environment, by the sound of it. Why didn’t you hand Anakin the file, even though he took part in the research? You made an educated guess, he could have -”

“Anakin is not a member of – “

“That is my point, exactly.” She paused, but quickly opened her mouth before Obi-Wan had the chance, “But I understand your reasoning perfectly, and I still think you did the right thing. I wouldn't have agreed unless I thought it right. But what you just said only makes sense to me because, as Anakin’s wife, I’ve had a certain exposure to the Jedi culture, to your way of thinking, to the rules and hierarchy. And our marriage isn’t even technically allowed, is it?”

Obi-Wan made a vague 'well…' sort of gesture. In general, he didn't seem nearly as affected by this sudden flood of criticism as she would have thought (or perhaps, preferred).

“And you're sure that Anakin and I are not under suspicion?” she asked once more.

Obi-Wan smiled, "Quite positive."

-

Anakin had had the most extraordinary dream.

He'd dreamt of being a Sith. Feared by the entire Galaxy, his name spoken only in shrill cries and trembling whispers. More skilled than any Jedi, more powerful than anyone. Few dared dream of defeating him – and there was no one that could. No one that could hurt him, challenge him, undermine him, order him around nor hold him against his will. He certainly took no prisoners.

No one dared come near his wife. Nor his children.

Yes, Padmé had been there. And they'd had two children, a boy and a girl. The Sith had no rules against having a family. The Sith drew their powers from their passion. And he loved his family with a great passion. And it was with matching passion that he taught his children and guided them in the ways of the Force, passing on everything he'd learned and trained them as his successors. Trained them to protect themselves.

Trained them in the dark side.

The dream had felt real and not real at the same time. Like a vision - yet like a dream.

Had he seen his future? Was he destined to be a Sith? Was this an inevitable future? Could he still stop it from happening?

Did he want to?

He'd only ever known being a Jedi. (And a slave.) What did he really know about the Sith, about the dark side, besides Master Yoda's warnings and Obi-Wan's dutiful repeats? Perhaps… there was
a way the dark side could be harnessed to serve the good. Perhaps he could be a Sith and still do the right thing.

Padmé could still love him. She was so good.

No… no.

Anakin had not noticed when he had transitioned from deep slumber to oblivious wakefulness, but gradually he recognized the inside of his own ship. And Padmé… Padmé turned towards him from the pilot seat, then gasped and immediately stood up. Still fighting that limp, she hurried over with her arms spread, wrapped him in her warmth, and squeezed him tight.

She smelled so good, like home and flowers and hopefulness.

Obi-Wan was standing about awkwardly, apparently trying to locate an insect on the ceiling, muttering, "Alright, alright, there are… uh, chaperones present."

"How do you feel?" Padmé asked him, drawing back from the embrace. Anakin could do nothing but stare. She was just so beautiful, she didn't even look real. Yet she was his wife. Surely not even the angels of Iego could be quite so lovely. So good.

"I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to push you – “ the angel said.

Anakin frowned. Why was she being so fussy? He gently moved aside her arms and stood up from the bed, and both his companions yelped in unison, "You shouldn't – “ Anakin ignored them. He still remembered how standing worked.

"Do you remember what happened?" Obi-Wan asked as Padmé still endeavored to get Anakin to sit down.

Anakin frowned. He slowly turned to stare at his half-arm. "Well, he got me again," he muttered.

"I think you got him," Obi-Wan said. "Anakin, Dooku is… he's dead. In a ship crash. But you – you made it."

A fair while passed until the words took on any meaning in his head. And still they seemed distant, dreamlike. "In a ship crash?"

Obi-Wan was eyeing him cautiously. "But you… it was you, wasn't it?"

"I remember wanting to kill him."

"Anything else?"

Anakin shook his head. "I just wanted to get away."

The Force… The will of the Force. The power of the Force.

"Do you remember what he said to you?"

Unintelligent. Impressionable.

Weak.

"Not a whole lot.”
"Perhaps you ought to rest some more."

Anakin finally agreed, even if he did not want to. He was tired of being weak and sick and pitiable. He was tired of being at someone’s mercy or under someone’s care or constant watch. Dooku was dead, and yet he felt nothing. Everything felt distant and muddled and made-up.

You will inevitably side with him.

The last of the hypos’ effects disappeared within the remainder of the day, and, the next morning, like the physical wonder he was, Anakin assured his companions that he required no more rest. He was unfortunately missing a hand though, and so he had no choice but to instruct Artoo as to how the finish constructing the hyperdrive and then install it into the ship. Artoo kept complaining that his Master’s creation wasn’t anything like the standard model, but Anakin assured him this one would be better, with more juice. Obi-Wan had to inquire whether Anakin could also install a less creepy voice into the translation device, which only provoked him into making his droid beep the most blood-curdling things he could think of, and have the device repeat them at full volume.

Senator Amidala canceled their ride back to Coruscant, ordering the pilot to instead pick up some refugees from the other side of the planet and take them to Naboo, where Queen Neeyutnee herself would receive them. Obi-Wan wondered at which point of their hectic adventure she’d had the time to even become aware of the refugees in question.

Next, Obi-Wan and Padmé were faced with the task of informing Anakin of the latest developments. Now landed, they led him outside and sat him down on a rock that looked exactly like a Council member’s chair (to Obi-Wan’s combined unease and amusement). Anakin seemed oddly averse to the mere idea of sitting.

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan began gravely, ”I know. I… I know.”

Anakin stared at him for quite some time, but not in confusion – the Force filled in the gaps between the words. He then looked away from his Master, nodded once, then turned to Padmé, “You told him…?”

“She did,” Obi-Wan answered in her stead, ”and it was the right thing to do.”

Anakin was silent as he stared at both of them. Then he began, almost bashfully, “…And it doesn’t make you think…less of me?”

Obi-Wan made an incredulous sound. Padmé rushed over to embrace him again, and he leaned into her touch, still continuing to stare at his Master over her shoulder.

“Why would I think less of you? Dooku offered me the same position, remember?” Anakin narrowed his eyes. Obi-Wan slapped his forehead. He’d said that far too casually. Too busy navigating the latest unprecedented developments, he’d already forgotten the previous bumps in their relationship. Why was this so difficult? They were on the same side, surely Anakin knew that already. ”That’s right… you were there. I’m… sorry about what happened.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Anakin hurried to say. Padmé turned her head to smile at Obi-Wan. Anakin then asked again, even more earnestly than before, “…You really don’t think less of me? You’re not…”

“Worried? That you’ll turn Sith when I’m not looking? Not until you start shooting lightning out of
“Thank you, Master,” Anakin smiled.

“But I still think we need to let the Council know,” Obi-Wan stated firmly.

Anakin didn’t say anything. Obi-Wan drew a deep breath and stood up. He nodded at Padmé, and she moved aside so he could have his turn on the rock next to Anakin’s.

“Anakin, I am not as dull as you think. I know you have mixed feelings toward the Council. You might know that I can sense these things. You’ve told me as much on a few occasions. You might recall my Master, who also had a complicated relationship with the Council.”

Obi-Wan paused. Anakin was looking at him intently – expectantly, almost. Obi-Wan realized he’d have to open this particular lid just a little more if he wanted to keep the boy’s attention.

“I… I used to feel embarrassed for him sometimes. Think to myself, ‘come on, Master Qui-Gon. If you just do this, they will like you and they might even give you a seat someday.’ ‘Please do that more, and they’ll stop whispering behind your back’. More than a few times I had to cover for him, for the most inconsequential things, because I couldn’t watch him be criticized over and over. Then he found you… and died… and trust me, I’m not blind, I know they give you a hard time. By telling you over and over again to consult the Council and do what they say I’ve tried to make things easier for you. But I also think the Council is right in most matters and they most definitely mean well. And what you and Sen… your lovely wife have learned holds huge implications for the whole Galaxy. Surely you must realize that. You have to have faith in their goodness and sense of justice. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Anakin had been listening to him attentively, but at the last few words he seemed to recoil slightly. To Obi-Wan's surprise, Anakin proceeded to ask Padmé if he could talk to his Master alone. Padmé expressed some reluctance, but in the end couldn't argue against the idea of some real talk between Master and Padawan on the great complexities of the Jedi Order.

"I need to kill Sidious,” Anakin stated as soon as Padmé had closed the door behind her. "If you tell the Council of the Sith’s plans, they will never let me. They’ll think I’ve already fallen. Or they'll assign me 'protection.' I don't want protection, I want to protect.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “Sidious?”

“The Sith Master. Dooku asked me to kill him. He didn't think he could do it himself. I didn’t want to do it on his terms,” Anakin shook his head impatiently, “So I tried to kill him… wanted to kill him… and the ship succeeded.”

“Slow down,” Obi-Wan urged, feeling his space migraine returning. “Dooku asked you to – “ He paused as he identified another critical implication in the story. “So the Sith Master is… Chancellor Palpatine?”

Anakin ruffled his hair. “I don’t… He didn’t really say. Or maybe he did. He – he drugged me up pretty bad.”

Obi-Wan mused on the words. Anakin had woken up in a rather confused state. And judging by the sparsity of his recollections, perhaps there was no trusting his remaining memory, either. Why would Dooku have made such a request to his sworn enemy?

Clearly, they still needed to take things slow with Anakin.
“So we still cannot either confirm or deny anything.”

“I’m… I’m sorry.”

Obi-Wan hesitated. "Your dealings with Dooku and the Sith are obviously yours to disclose of your own will. Just… perhaps try and properly recollect your memory first. I recommend meditation."

There was a guarded edge in Anakin’s gaze. "You don't think I'm powerful enough to defeat the Sith Master."

"You are obviously very powerful. A far greater Jedi than I could ever hope to be – ” Obi-Wan stopped, wondering why he was humoring this silly question. "Anakin, we will discuss this later. You must understand that I have to at least inform them of Count Dooku’s death, and that you were with him at the time. And are you sure you don’t want the credit? In all likelihood, it was you who – “

"I don’t care about credit."

"I will also tell them to continue to be wary of Palpatine. And if you remember any new details at all – “

"I will let you know."

"And you won’t go killing any more overt or covert Sith Lords without – “

"Telling you, Master."

"Try again."

"Consulting you, Master."

"One more time?"

“…Asking you for help, Master?"

“Good call, my young Padawan.”
Anakin did not want Obi-Wan’s help, no matter how much he wanted to want it. They’d always been a team, and it hurt to admit, this time Anakin just did not want a team – he wanted his friends and a future with them. The more he pictured them all facing Sidious ‘together’, the more vivid the images loomed before his eyes of what could happen to them. He did not want to agree with Dooku, but it was easier now that he was gone – Anakin needed to do this on his own, on his own terms.

He was the Chosen One. There was just ‘one.’ For whatever he was chosen for, there was only himself.

Anakin did not resent Padmé for having told Obi-Wan, but the fact that he knew felt more and more irrelevant. He’d only told his Master about Dooku’s request in a desperate attempt to convince him that this was his cross to carry. But Obi-Wan had not even believed him, which actually suited Anakin perfectly.

At least he’d convinced Obi-Wan not to involve the Council. Less and less they registered to Anakin as individual faces and minds, and more and more as a mass and an institution that was always telling him what to do and where to go. But in a strange way, Anakin felt protective of them as well. In his heart he already knew that Palpatine was Sidious and Sidious was Palpatine. But if the Council were to gain that same certainty? They’d send Master Yoda, or Master Windu, and that would be the end of it. It was as though he could sense Sidious's power through the Force – it was like a massive, all-consuming, all-crushing fist – a fist that would sometimes open to reveal a large gleaming eye on the palm. And that eye was on him, Anakin Skywalker.

It was as though the thought of facing Palpatine was somehow easier than the thought of facing Obi-Wan - really facing him. It was not the gleaming eye he was afraid of. That gleaming eye had already seen through him long ago. His friend the Chancellor was a Sith, a Sith who sensed the darkness inside him, the darkness he'd willingly drenched himself in once, that continued to trickle down his veins into his fingers and then into his saber.

But Obi-Wan…

Obi-Wan had watched him swing that saber with fury and passion and bitterness, and yet the continued to deny it. He might criticize him, lecture him; gently remind him, on his better days. But he could never see Anakin falling, he'd said so himself. Or perhaps, he could never see him jumping. Because the only way he could reconcile with Padmé's revelations was to think of Anakin as the victim.

It was apparent in the way he spoke. Now Dooku had joined the Sith and betrayed the Jedi, willingly twisted his mind and soul and sullied Master Qui-Gon’s memory. But Anakin was their 'prey.' Watched by the Sith, carried off by the Sith, tortured by the Sith. That was what Obi-Wan saw. For him, the dark side was an either/or. Either Anakin was still his little Padawan who could do no wrong, or he was a lost cause.

He still did not quite get it. Anakin was his protégé no longer, nor some promise to be fulfilled to Qui-Gon. The Chosen One belonged to the entire Galaxy and Anakin to himself. He was his own person, capable of making his own decisions. He needed to face the dark side for himself, of his
own free will.

But he was not free to go, not yet. They only had one ship - and Anakin only had one hand. After Obi-Wan had done his obedient reporting to the Council, they'd received orders to go back to Vanqor. Apparently there had finally been another 'major weapons discovery', which the Council had done their best to keep from the Senate. Evidently the Jedi had now definitively chosen a side: the Chancellor was not to be trusted, whether or not he was a mere facade for a greater evil. And with Dooku defeated, they believed they could promptly end the war – provided they wouldn't soon find themselves facing a new threat.

All of this appeared to be code for 'we need you to destroy these weapons as well.'

Anakin felt very conflicted. More than anything he wanted to face Sidious before he could hurt anyone else. But he was familiar enough with politics to know that removing the Supreme Chancellor from office was no simple task – he had to believe he still had time. The 501st had now joined the 212th on Vanqor (apparently, the discovery really was major), and he knew his men had been struggling lately. What was the point of saving the Galaxy from the Sith if he could not even help his own battalion?

Besides… perhaps he needed the borrowed time. He was most likely very ill-equipped to face a Sith Master – he'd only barely defeated the apprentice, and in wildly dubious circumstances. How could he possibly fight the dark side if he didn't know the dark side?

Then an idea had hit him.

He still had access to Palpatine's private holo channel. But 'spying on him' would do him no good without a plan. And he realized that so far, he'd been far too distant, too cautious. He needed to get bolder.

He could feign interest in the dark side. If Palpatine was baiting him, he could just as easily bait him back. If he played his cards right, he could get Palpatine to reveal himself once and for all, trick him into exposing his weaknesses, maybe even his master plan.

By pretending to be falling into Sidious's traps, Anakin would trap him instead.

- 

Halfway through their hyperspace journey to Vanqor, Padmé seemed to be falling more and more distracted, which in and of itself was a testament to the excellence of their new hyperdrive. For something with 'more juice', it was extremely stable and reliable, and their voyage so far very comfortable. But while their best pilot remained one-handed, Obi-Wan took up on the duty of asking whether he could occupy the seat for a while.

Padmé seemed thankful at the suggestion, and immediately took out her holopad as she sat down next to him. Anakin was on the floor with Artoo, constructing what Obi-Wan could only assume to be a new arm, and occasionally wincing (without once touching his arm stub, which still needed to remain wrapped for at least a week).

“Um,” Padmé began after a minute, staring into her holopad with glazed eyes. “I was wondering if you two could give me some feedback. On a… speech. I don’t know how often the Jedi give speeches – “

“You know, Master, I always thought you would just make jokes at my funeral,” Anakin interjected from the floor. He appeared to be in a reassuringly good mood, but still Obi-Wan had to
object, “Jedi funeral conventions aside, what would I possibly have to joke about on such an occasion?”

“Oh, I don’t know… ‘Anakin died as he lived: losing his lightsaber; going, ‘oh no, Obi-Wan’s gonna kill me…’ And then I did.’”

“That’s… delightful, Anakin.”

Obi-Wan gave a private grin. Something about the exchange seemed to lighten the burden on his shoulders. He didn’t know where Anakin had ever gotten such a bizarre idea about his own funeral, or indeed his Master's character, but he was glad they were back to jesting about heavy subjects.

“Oh… gentlemen?” Padmé cut in, sternly. “Can we please focus? This speech actually is for a funeral. A memorial service, actually, as there will be two separate funerals. For Teckla and Typho.”

She recounted to Obi-Wan what had happened to her Head of Security and her handmaiden when she'd been captured by Dooku. Obi-Wan nodded silently, and Anakin apologized for having interrupted her.

“That’s alright. But I could really use some feedback,” she continued. “I still can’t believe they’re letting me speak. After I – ”

While Padmé gathered herself, Anakin stopped tinkering, got up from the floor, and walked quietly over, laying his single hand on her shoulder.

“Well… I can’t really read it aloud. It wouldn't feel right. But I'm trying to find a theme… something I want to say. I can say a thousand times that they died as heroes and it still won’t feel any less hollow. Teckla's kids are going to be there. She was their hero… not mine.”

Anakin stroked her cheek.

“Of course, their sacrifice should be remembered and honored. But… I thought about how Typho – well, I can't really give away all our security secrets, but he taught me how to protect myself in a thousand different scenarios. And it was Teckla and her family's story that inspired me to push for lower water rates on Naboo – twice. And at the service, I want to be able to say that they have finally been lowered to a fixed fee of… something a month…” She gave a warm sigh, and craned her neck back to reassure her husband, “I’ll make that happen, just watch me.”

“I believe you will.”

“So I think… what I want to say is… I believe it is our affection for our loved ones that motivates us, that inspires us to do good for the whole Galaxy, whether it is to ensure them a better future… or to cherish their memory. It was the love for her family that emboldened Teckla to speak up, and more than anything, I want to honor her legacy… and I want her kids to remember not only her heroic sacrifice… but the hero she was in life. And that they, too can be heroes… for her sake.”

She looked at Anakin again, and he was nodding with a warm smile. “I like that.”

“Obi-Wan?” she turned to the Jedi Master, and Obi-Wan froze for a moment. He was quite noted for his own verbal prowess, but he had simply not expected to be asked, and suddenly felt quite out of his element.

“Sounds great so far.”
“But?”

“No, I mean it, it's… great.”

“Anakin tells me you excel at constructive criticism.”

“I never said 'constructive,’” Anakin clarified.

Obi-Wan frowned at him until he admitted he was kidding, then turned back to Padmé, “You really want feedback from me?”

“Yes. If I want an ego boost, I go to this one,” she nodded at Anakin, who didn't object to this observation.

“Well, I understand that you do not wish to read it aloud,” Obi-Wan said, "but unless I see the paragraphs it will be very difficult to comment on such things as structure and – “

“Ah… now that I think of it,” Padmé interrupted him, her expression suddenly changing. “The Jedi have a different philosophy, isn't that correct? You believe that in order to devote yourselves to the greater good, you must remain detached in your personal relationships. In a way, it's the completely opposite idea.”

Obi-Wan sighed. It was apparently time for round two. Well, he was ready. Satine was the reigning world champion of unsolicited Jedi criticism, Master Qui-Gon a runner-up. “Senator, our philosophy has hardly any bearing on the merits of your speech.”

“I know,” she acknowledged, and was silent for a while. Then her tone softened again as she inquired, “Tell me, Obi-Wan – what is your favorite thing about the Galaxy? You want to save it, protect it. What is it you wish to preserve?”

Anakin shot his wife a questioning look, but Obi-Wan decided to humor the question.

“Well, the Galaxy is a diverse place… inhabited by beings of many different species, and backgrounds… there's the nature, which is just as diverse, just as fascinating. And the Force, which connects it all together.”

“And what is your favorite thing about your late Master? You spoke so fondly about him the other day. You don't have to tell me, just think of something. The first thing that pops into your head.”

“Padmé,” Anakin chuckled with something resembling either admiration or second-hand-embarrassment.

Obi-Wan stared at her for a long moment. Even Anakin rarely dared challenge him like this, and now he was apparently taking his side.

But something did immediately pop into his head. He wasn't sure it was his favorite, but he'd always admired Master Qui-Gon's wisdom… as well as his respect of nature, of every living thing.

Funny how he'd just given the same answer to a different question.

“And I bet you have a favorite thing about Anakin.”

"Padmé," Anakin gently protested again, but she simply repeated the question, and he threw his hand up in defeat.

“You don't have to tell me… but I bet you do have one.”
Again, it was very hard to determine a favorite… but when thinking of Anakin, Obi-Wan often thought of those moments when he'd thought he'd gotten the last word, with a witty retort or a stealth insult, and Anakin, when he least expected it, would throw an even better line, snicker to himself in triumph… and Obi-Wan would shake his head and pretend to be exasperated.

“Very good, Senator,” Obi-Wan finally responded. "You illustrated your point very effectively. And as I said, the Jedi code hardly has any place in your speech, which I'm sure will be very well received by the audience just the way it is. I wish you good luck.”

When they finally arrived on Vanqor, the night had already fallen on the crystalline wasteland, and only the battalion leaders were awake (and maybe Hondo somewhere, if he had not already soared off on rum fumes). They explained that the weapons were secure in the REP, and they'd agreed to share the night watch.

Obi-Wan was pleased to see that Cody had done his job admirably, but there was something about the way Anakin greeted his second-in-command – almost apologetically, regretfully. Rex stated that they had a lot to talk about in the morning, and that was when Obi-Wan remembered the odd symptoms that some members of the 501st had suffered on Felucia.

"Cody," Obi-Wan felt the need to say before they went on their ways, "I hope you and the boys have been doing well."

There was an odd smirk on the commander's face. "Some of them have expressed interest in joining a pirate gang."

"Oh, brother."

-

Sidious had thought about contacting Skywalker, but he'd known that sooner than later, Skywalker would come to him, and it was always worth waiting until they came to him. He just couldn't resist his true calling.

“My boy, so good to hear from you. Has your mission been a success?”

Skywalker's expression changed as he clearly prepared to recite a rehearsed line. “We never found the crystal. Merely a legend… and, we believe, a set-up by the Separatists. But Senator Amidala found a way to contact the prime minister and tell him to go back to the capital before he could be taken hostage by the arms dealers or used for some other underhanded purposes. And so the government is more friendly than ever toward the Republic.”

“I'm glad to hear it,” Sidious replied calmly. He didn't believe for a second that the crystal was 'merely a legend', but he had yet to hear back from his Separatist contacts, which frustrated him greatly.

Oh well, he would get his Death Star yet, one way or another.

"And you are now - "


“And did you have something you wanted to talk to me about?”

Skywalker shifted, and Sidious leaned back on his seat. Finally.
“On Utapau, you… you mentioned the dark side. Are you - are you very familiar with - "

“Perhaps more intimately than you would expect. But Anakin, you are a Jedi. Are you allowed to take such an interest in the dark side of the Force?”

“And you are the Chancellor. Are you allowed to… study it?”

“The dark side… represents freedom. It allows you to explore your true self, your personal passions and desires. So yes, the dark side is free for anyone to study… of course, with the exception of the - "

"The Jedi."

"Exactly." He paused for a while. "And the dark side is not a lonely place, as some mistakenly believe. It is known for its power - and only those with power can protect others. Provide them safety, ensure them a better future. This is what I strive to do - as the Chancellor."

“So you really think… the dark side is more powerful? Not just… a pathway to the 'unnatural'?"

“Well, Anakin, let me ask you a question. The Jedi promote harmony, but is harmony a source of power, or simply the desired end result? Harmony or passion, which one lends you strength? Which one comes to you, shall we say… more naturally? Harmony or passion, which one fuels you, when you face injustice, when your friends are in danger? Just imagine… if you weren't under constant pressure to suppress those feelings - 'release them into the Force', as the Jedi say. Imagine how much stronger you would be.”

“It can't possibly be that simple.”

“I understand… you are afraid.”

“I'm not afraid.”

“Then you are braver than most Jedi.”

Skywalker still hesitated, but there was also a new conviction in his manner - a straighter posture, an avidity in his eyes. He did appear to be missing an arm though, which was very interesting.

What was also interesting was that Sidious couldn't directly track his location, which meant that Skywalker was disrupting the signal - Jedi business or not, he didn't want him knowing his whereabouts. Nice try, if only it hadn't been so laughably easy to follow the trail to Vanqor, where 'a major weapons discovery' had recently been made. He had a lot of questions about Utapau, but if his intuition was correct, he was starting to see what kind of game the Jedi were playing.

Thankfully he'd invented the game, and their prized Knight would soon be captured off the board, only to re-emerge in his true colors. But Kenobi needed to go first. Preferably tonight. If he didn't end him soon, exploiting their nauseating mutual fondness would prove much harder. Not impossible… but harder.

At least he had one sure-fire option. It might be premature, and thus risky, but he'd dealt with premature before, and the risk was worth it.

Much like in chess. Now there was a respectable game.
Obi-Wan started awake to a feeling of danger. The travel bed squeaked beneath him. His hand was still searching for his lightsaber when he squinted in the dark to see the helmet-clad, blaster-toting figure better.

Next thing he knew, the barrel had landed on his forehead.

“Cody?”

Chapter End Notes

updates might be a little slower again for a while! saying this again, thank you so much for all the support so far! <3
For five utterly baffling seconds, Obi-Wan fully expected to die, without answers nor clever last words. But as the seconds ticked on and on, the cold barrel growing warmer from his body heat, the Jedi cautiously sat up on the mattress and spoke quietly to the orange and white helmet above him, "Is everything okay, Cody? Do you need something?"

The commander was silent. He tightened his grip on the blaster, the barrel sinking deeper into Obi-Wan's frown lines. One hand still fumbling for his lightsaber, he felt a strange counter-pull in the Force, and soon realized the weapon was pinned firmly to the ground by Cody's foot. How many times had his second-in-command picked up his lightsaber… Cody would know where to find it.

And he had to set up a private tent, too… well, he had really needed the space after Utapau.

Cody slightly shifted without moving his blaster. Why was he still hesitating? If he'd come this far in his surprise betrayal, why not just take the perfect opportunity?

No sooner had the barrel left Obi-Wan's forehead than Cody removed his helmet, dropped it on the ground, and placed the weapon on his temple instead.

"No, no, stop!" Obi-Wan cried and shot up from the bed. He heard his lightsaber rolling away on the uneven ground, but suddenly that was the least of his concerns. Thankfully Cody didn't panic, but instead hesitated again.

"Commander Cody!" Obi-Wan addressed him in his order-giving voice. "What is going on?"

He could now see the clone commander's features clearly in the dark. Gone was the man who had joked with him about pirates just mere hours before. He looked confused and disoriented – as though he'd sleepwalked into his General’s tent in search of his night slippers and found a blaster in his hand instead.

"…I don’t know," he finally spluttered, wiping sweat off his forehead. "I don’t know why I - Good soldiers -"

"Please lower your weapon, Commander."

Cody quietly obeyed as Obi-Wan stared at him, still recovering from shock. He almost wanted to ask whether the clone was in fact a sleepwalker, with rather more morbid tendencies than the average case. Instead he demanded, "Who sent you after me and why?"

"I… I don't know," Cody continued to echo, shaking his head.

"Yes, that seems to be the theme here."

Obi-Wan considered his loyal second-in command for a while as he awkwardly stood to attention, not knowing what else to do.

Finally the Jedi General said calmly, "Cody, it's the middle of the night. I’d rather not make any rash decisions right now. Why don't I join you and we can share the watch, and Captain Rex can get some well-deserved rest."

"I… I don't know what to say, sir. I can't explain what happened."
Padmé wasn’t sure whom she should expect back to their once-again private sleeping quarters – Anakin or the ghost. He’d been gone for two hours, and she’d noticed, the less trail he left behind after vanishing, the more likely the ghost would emerge in his stead. That strange creature with ashen cheeks, wandering eyes and something hurting inside.

But when he did finally come through the door, it looked to be an entirely different being – mostly reminiscent of the man that had appeared on her balcony that night on Coruscant, his face purple and entire body in pain, nevertheless smiling at the sight of her. Indeed, her regular-colored husband greeted her with such sudden blithe cheer that she almost didn’t want to play the part of the nagging wife. Almost.

“You better have a good excuse for making me worry.”

He chirpily skipped up to her and took her both hands in his single one.

“Come with me. I can show you.”

This time he obviously couldn’t just sweep her off her feet, which seemed to sadden him more than it did her, but he instead offered his broad shoulders to lean on, as he led her into the starlit Vanqorian night. The ground beneath them, harsh and crude and unforgiving by day, had somehow transformed entirely, into a dark canvas with crystalline sparkles sprinkled here and there, just sparsely enough to keep the eye ever searching. It was like a painter’s interpretation of the sky above.

They made their way across the austere wasteland, away from the excavation site and the ships and the sleeping tents. In the nocturnal silence, they crossed the threshold into that parallel universe where it was just the two of them, husband and wife: no Sith Lords, no weapons, no politics, no war - no one else.

He brought her to a mountainside, in front of a cave mouth that seemed to have been only recently opened, judging by the enormous pile of rocks at its sides – and, she suddenly noticed, the fresh dirt on her husband’s clothes.

“Anakin, how long did you – “ she tried to ask, but he simply smiled and adjusted her arm on his shoulders.

“Ready?” he asked, and she nodded, anticipation tugging at her stomach. No sign of the ghost tonight - but she’d know this Anakin anywhere. She had really missed ‘sappy flower bouquet Anakin.’

Still, no amount of gallant gestures and excitement-building could have prepared her for the sight waiting for them at the end of the cavern. If the starry sky had been the curtain, and the sparkling ground the red carpet, this was the stage, fit for lovers from legends and myths and famous plays alike.

Before them waited a small pond, or a spring, cradled by the rough cavern walls like a refreshing gulp of water in a working man’s hands. The water was clear like a cloudless sky after a good night’s sleep, illuminated by little spots of light flowing in from the cracked rock above. The pond was deep like the reverie in her husband’s eyes, and surrounding the rim were crystals – different sizes, shapes and colors; faint purples, pinks, and blues; some with sharp edges, others rounded; some fractured, others smooth in surface – and all gloriously beautiful, as though emitting a magical glow of their own.
“These are…” she whispered, two words away from completely speechless.

“Just regular crystals,” Anakin smiled.

Padmé grinned, leaning closer against his heartbeat. “But they are so gorgeous.”

“Yeah,” Anakin agreed. “That’s their only job, I guess. To be gorgeous… just kind of observe life in their small corner in the Galaxy.”

“Dream career,” Padmé chuckled. For another long while they just admired the sight, listening to the comforting silence, until Anakin pursed his lips and gave her a sheepish look.

“So… remember how… on our ‘vacation’ … in the end, we were too tired… in the lake?”

Padmé smirked at him, playfully. “And just when I thought, ‘someone knows how to set the tone’…”

“Oh, pardon me, milady. Should I recite some poetry?”

“Preferably,” she laughed, already working through his mucky tunics, Anakin all over her white nightgown.

“Still waiting for those rhymes,” she remarked mock impatiently as she grabbed his hand to lead him into the water, only for Anakin to gently draw her back toward him. In one heroic feat, he once again whisked her off her feet and into his arms. For a moment she panicked, wanting to know whether there was truly enough arm there to support her back, whether he had waterproofed the bandage properly, if his nerves were still in pain, but the questions stopped as soon as he planted a soft kiss on her forehead and reassured her it was fine.

The water was surprisingly warm, its velvety feel pleasant and inviting like a long embrace. The crystals sparkled all around them and the moonlight from the above cracks caught in their skin as Anakin finally humored his wife’s request, “In beauty, all equal; but only one of them most special; dearest, best loved, most sublime, for this is the one that’s mine; to keep, to cherish, and –”

No sooner had their lips met again and their bodies melded together than Anakin suddenly drew back with an odd expression. Then he heaved a deep breath and dived under the surface.

“…To pine? …To call divine?” she guessed in puzzlement, observing as her husband’s naked body descended deeper and deeper into the never-ending pit of velvet water. What a tease…

Before she had time to worry, Anakin’s lean form was already swimming up to the surface, quite nimbly for someone from a desert planet, and with one arm.

“…to find,” he completed the verse, shaking his wet curls.

“To find?”

“There’s one more verse after that,” Anakin explained. “But look.” He opened his fist.

Padmé gazed down on his palm – and was instantly hypnotized. On her husband’s lone flesh hand rested a small shard. There was something about it – the shard had a strange, magnetic quality to it; she couldn’t seem to tear her eyes off its dimly blue glow.

She cautiously reached out her hand. She didn't think she'd ever seen something quite so beautiful – save, of course, the japor snippet Anakin had carved for her when they'd first met.
And when she thought back on the little boy who had given her that gift – his twinkling eyes and his earnest spirit -

“Is that… but it couldn't be…”

“Hyperite, as they're apparently calling it. I saw another shard like this on Coruscant – inside that weapon we brought back from Vanqor 1.” Anakin tilted his head in consideration. “But it's strange… they look so completely different… but still the same. But yet, so -”

“Exactly,” Padmé whispered.

Hyperite. She had been curious, so she had asked Obi-Wan to show her the crystal he had used to destroy its gargantuan 'sibling.' She remembered her eyes glazing, she recalled acknowledging the crystal's great beauty - as well as its immense power. But at the same time – she had felt an odd sense of melancholy.

The shard had done them a great service – a greater one still to the Galaxy. And yet… looking at its translucent surface she'd seen a reflection of not herself, but something else. As though the crystal had suddenly resembled a tear.

In the end, she had only nodded, closed Obi-Wan's hand around the shard and thanked him.

“In a way,” Anakin said. “It's no different from these other crystals… except it holds this incredible power. That's what I'm told, anyway. The one I saw, I didn't think it was worth much anything.”

Padmé nodded silently. Anakin reached for her hand, opened it, and dropped the shard on her palm. “It's yours.” As he spoke, a single tear rolled down his cheek.

“What's wrong?” she asked, squeezing the shard in her hand.

“No, I…” he rubbed the corner of his eye with some embarrassment, “I have no idea where that came from.” Then his expression changed dramatically and his eyes shot to his bandaged arm. “… What…”

“What is it? Oh, Ani, I told you not to get it wet.”

“No,” he was now chuckling, “it's just… up until now, my arm - it was in such terrible pain. And I was certain a good half of my nerves had gone dead.”

“Oh, Anakin…”

“No, Padmé, it's…” He laughed, a genuine elation radiating off him. “It feels so much better. I - I can't believe it, this is amazing.”

She drew back her gaze in disbelief. “All of a sudden?”

“Yeah!”

“Wait…” She brought her injured ankle to the surface, covered in watertight wrappings just like Anakin's arm.

“Same… same here,” she said in amazement.

“What, seriously?”
She swam back into the shallow water, and stood on the rock beneath her. “I can almost step on it now.”

Anakin gave an incredulous laughter, his grin almost wider than his cheeks could accommodate. He splashed the water at her out of sheer joy. “What is this, magic water?”

“Ani…” she waded back to him, squeezing his hand in hers. “You’re the Jedi here. This is all you.”

Then they both had the same thought, and Padmé opened her hand. For a moment, they were both spellbound once more.

“You don’t think – “ Anakin began.

“You can’t tell?”

Anakin shook his head. “But I feel a… sort of a warm breeze in the Force.”

“Anakin…” her tone grew serious, “I don’t care which one of you is doing this.” She planted the crystal in his hand once more. “You should hold on to it… and take good care of it, like it was your greatest treasure. And promise me you’ll never, ever let anyone turn it into a weapon. Promise me.”

Anakin stared at her. A lone tear escaped his eye again. But instead of wiping it away, he closed his fingers around the shard.

“Okay, I promise.”

- 

It wasn't until the break of dawn that the husband and wife sneaked back to their ship (Padmé taking cautious steps with her own two feet), and slept what must have amounted to no more than a few minutes.

Anakin, still quite overwhelmed by everything that had happened in the cavern, woke up to a very peculiar feeling. If last night had begun with a warm breeze, before igniting into a summer night's heat; this was a sudden spark a fire. If last night had been a curtain of stars; this was a supernova, one billion times brighter than Tatooine's twin suns.

He couldn't stop smiling. He wanted to shake Padmé awake just so he could smile at her and hold her tight, but he waited patiently until she opened her eyes before wrapping her in an embrace.

The magic faded as quickly as it had come when Anakin's comlink beeped and it was a summons from Obi-Wan to come outside. The spouses got ready with haste and met Obi-Wan outside the REP, accompanied by Captain Rex and Commander Cody.

Anakin glared at the REP in disgust. His sunny spirits were gone. Dooku had held him in there, before discarding him like dirt and taking Padmé away. Just looking at the ugly monstrosity made him want to scoop up his wife and get away from there.

“So what I’ve learned from Cody so far,” Obi-Wan began with an oddly formal tone. Anakin forced himself to concentrate, and it struck him that Cody was looking oddly unfocused, shuffling his feet and almost cowering behind his General. “Is that the weapon situation is not actually urgent at all,” Obi-Wan continued, "more of a false alarm. Our excellent troopers have unearthed about two dozen guns from underground, which all appear to be the same model as – Crys – I believe it was called? However, none of them appear to have a crystal inside, and as such currently
Obi-Wan paused abruptly, and it took Anakin a moment to understand why. As far as the clones knew, they were all still loyal servants of the Republic, unaware of the Jedis' mistrust of the Chancellor and their conspiracy to have the crystal-powered weapons destroyed.

The Jedi Master turned to Anakin, “However, it seems we do have another urgent situation in our hands. It appears that – and I don’t want this information spreading – Cody had some sort of episode last night. I questioned him a little, and it appears - well, why don't you tell him, Cody.”

The clone commander nodded warily.

“It all started on Coruscant, at that health examination. We were all lining up to get cleared from the clone ward – usually not very busy. It was only supposed to take a few minutes, but the line just kept on getting longer and longer. So most of the boys went to the other line – Rex's line – but I had to find out what was going on. And when my turn finally came, there was no med-droid there, but instead this… machine. For 'level 5 scans', or something. I kind of got the feeling there had been some kind of misunderstanding - like we weren't supposed to be in that room. The med-center was a little short-staffed that day, and no one was really paying attention to us. But most of us had already been cleared, and everybody was doing just fine. Or that's what I thought.”

“Oh,” Anakin said. “I know where the med-droids went. While I was staying at the Halls a few weeks ago, I had an SH for company, only the poor thing was broken – some problem with the scanners, I think. And well, I know a thing or two about scanners, ever since I was a little boy – “

Anakin paused. He'd said that without thinking, without any intention of bringing his past on Tatooine into this.

But now he was recalling it anyway. How he'd been working long hours by day, under the scorching suns; then well into the night, in secret, trying to assemble with his mucky little hands an instrument of freedom.

“…But I was sick, and had Master Windu breathing down my neck. So I had him take the little guy to maintenance. But then in the end I just couldn’t help myself. I went to the maintenance guys - I believe they do the medcenter droids too. I told them they should just pull all the faulty droids, and gave them some tips as to how fix the scanners and do some updates.”

He would find those damned bombs and he would free all the slaves if it was the last thing he did.

"Oh, that would explain it."

How he hated to be reminded of Tatooine. Of all his friends in bondage, whom he'd failed…

"What did the scan say?"

Of those bombs, those cursed things; taking away his free will, his choice, his future…

“It said…'There is a bio-chip inside the patient's brain that connects directly to their genetic makeup, as well as to several regions of the brain that preside over decision-making.'"

Thank the Force his had been removed.

“'Removing the chip is not recommended without consulting a professional.'”

He still had a choice. A future. He could still free the slaves…
“And that… the chip appears to have been damaged by toxic chemicals.”
By almost all laws of logic, Obi-Wan had no reason to believe Cody's story. It was far-fetched and the supporting evidence circumstantial at best. Not to mention coming from a man who had tried to shoot him in his sleep.

What lent it some credibility was that it wasn't so much a 'story' as it was the hard-earned answer to a question he had chosen to ask. If only because he'd stubbornly refused to believe he'd been betrayed, or at least that betrayal was as simple a choice as years of loyal service followed by a surprise blaster to the head.

Perhaps he should have been above such naivete. Perhaps even now, he was somehow being duped. Perhaps he would yet regret this.

But there was just the slightest chance Cody wasn't lying and he wasn't naive, in which case the implications were rather world-shattering.

“Some of the boys had heard rumors of the chip,” Cody clarified. “Mostly Rex’s. Apparently they started spreading fast after what happened with… ARC trooper Fives.”

Obi-Wan remembered hearing about the unfortunate affair in question. They’d briefly discussed it with the Council – and Anakin, who’d been directly involved in the events, had of course taken it very personally. To Obi-Wan’s memory, it had all started with the inexplicable execution of General Tiplar at the hands of clone trooper Tup of the 501st, and shortly led to the deaths of both himself and his fellow trooper Fives.

In the Council’s eyes, the entire incident had appeared extremely messy and hard to make sense of – but Tup’s mysterious condition had eventually been brushed under the rug as some sort of ‘parasite’; while Fives, shortly before meeting his fate, had undergone a complete mental breakdown and even assaulted the Supreme Chancellor himself.

It was funny how anything involving the big man suddenly sounded at least suspicious to Obi-Wan’s ears.

“As for myself… I didn’t have a clue,” Cody went on, gaze dropping. “I don’t think any of us did – there must have been no more than thirty of us in that line. I… at first, well, I brushed it off. I assumed the chip was just part of our biology – no more or less natural than the rest of our artificially bred bodies. I’ve never had any illusions about the purpose for which we were created. To be obedient soldiers, to do our duty. I figured… well, it only makes sense that certain regions of our brain should be biologically altered.”

“We were already being hurried back to the field,” Rex recollected.

“We already gotten a few days off because General Kenobi had written us that admission note. We were not about to start demanding more treatments.” Cody paused for a moment. “But some of the lads… well, in hindsight, they were wiser than I.”
“I only got a regular scan, so for a long time I didn’t know what was going on,” Rex explained. “But when we got to Felucia, I started noticing some… odd behavior among the troopers. They would pester me about Fives, over and over, as if I hadn't already - as if it was some heroic legend… they would complain about headaches, lose focus in the middle of an attack… keep whispering about their ‘humanity’ and ‘free will’, and ‘those shady Kaminoans’…” The clone captain sighed. “I’m afraid that at the time, I thought it was my duty to discipline them rather than listen to them… so I did. I only said a few choice words, but… well, then we had those deserters. Snow, Slip, Burn… And still I couldn’t quite connect the dots, so I contacted General Skywalker and asked him to come back. I thought the boys were having a hard time because of new leadership… Suffice it to say we've had… some bad experiences on that front as well.”

“Wait,” Anakin cut in, “when were you going to tell us? Why now? What's going on?”

“Well,” Cody said quietly, “As I said… I never learned to what degree our chips were damaged…”

“What happened?”

Cody hesitated, but Obi-Wan gave the clone a reassuring nod, and he bowed his head and answered, “We don't exactly know. I have very little memory of last night. But we suspect someone gave me an order to kill General Kenobi and then myself. And I… I'm ashamed to say that I almost did.”

Anakin stared open-mouthed at the commander, then at Obi-Wan. “…What?”

Senator Amidala echoed the sentiment, “I’m sorry, what?”

“General Skywalker,” Rex spoke, “sir, do you… do you recall Fives's last words? In the warehouse… The evidence is in here. It's in all of us, every clone. Organic chips built into our genetic code to make us do whatever someone wants, even kill the Jedi. It's all in here.”

“And do you recall how General Tiplar died?” Obi-Wan backed him up. “How her murder was eventually dismissed as a… ‘parasite?’”

Anakin just stared, fists clenched, statue-like. “Are you saying that… the damage on the chip made you - or stopped you from -”

“Well, we… we don’t know, sir. Rex, General Kenobi and I spent all night speculating… and it still sounds just too unbelievable.”

“Yes, it does!”

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan went on, “You and I both know that the clone army's origins were shady from the very beginning. For all we know, there could be some kind of instant-kill button in there somewhere. Do I take these speculations as stone-cold evidence? No. Do I think them worth our time and consideration? Yes. Did I, by some miracle, survive a murder attempt last night? Yes. Has my would-be assassin been anything less than supremely cooperative ever since? No.”

“But,” Senator Amidala cut in, “this is… the implications of what you're saying are – Do you think other Jedi could be in danger?”

“Possibly,” Obi-Wan nodded gravely, “However – “

Here his train of reasoning came to an abrupt stop. He didn't have a clue how to bring this up with the Council. He wanted to believe his commander – who had thirty other witnesses to confirm parts of the story – but from an objective point of view, the whole theory still stood on very flimsy
footing.

Still – with a potential Sith Lord leading the Galactic Senate – it wouldn't be the craziest thing.

He just wasn't used to being the craziest person.

“Thank you for telling us,” Obi-Wan addressed the two clones, “Commander Cody, Captain Rex. I understand how you might have had your misgivings about relaying this information to even your immediate superiors. But I'm afraid I'll still have to put your lives in the Council's hands. I think we can all agree that the situation has escalated in ways none of us could have anticipated.”

“Yes,” Cody agreed. “Thank you, General. And we're – I'm deeply sorry.”

By force of habit, Obi-Wan began to leave the scene – even signaling Padmé to keep an eye on Anakin, because there was never any telling how he would react to a given piece of news, let alone his Master's attempted murder – before backpedaling and taking out his holoprojector right then and there. Really, what was the point of hiding?

Perhaps the Council had figured out the answer. Minutes trudged on and on as they stood in a circle around Obi-Wan's extended arm, but no blue figure appeared on his palm.

“Well, that is… unexpected,” the Jedi Master finally said, scratching his head. “In fact… I believe, quite without a precedent.”

“Leave it to the Council to fail us just when we need them most,” Anakin growled. “Can't you contact Master Plo, or Master Fisto? Or someone else in the field?”

“It would be irresponsible not to consult Master Yoda first.”

“Then there's Master Ti, on Kamino…” Anakin turned to Cody and Rex, who were shifting uncomfortably. “But you don't think the Kaminoans can be trusted.”

“We've heard only bad things since Tup. Up until now, we didn't really pay them mind, but…”

“Everyone's been on edge, trying to avoid Kamino like plague. It's an open secret.”

Obi-Wan tried to think. At worst, there could be some conspiracy at play, and he could have the power to prevent it – if he acted now. What if the other clones were in on it, and these fine men the sole exceptions?

To be sure, he'd been stretching the bounds of his command lately, but he was fairly certain he lacked the authority to either evacuate thousands of Jedi off the battlefield, or send millions of clones to get their heads checked.

But what if something had happened to Master Yoda and Master Windu?

“Anakin,” he addressed the younger Jedi, “send a request for status report to as many Jedi Generals as you can, and – tell them to… watch their backs. On my authority, of course. Have them spread the word. I'll give the Council two hours to get back to us and then we're going back to Coruscant.”

“…Understood, Master.”

In just one hour, Obi-Wan and Anakin were able to ascertain that no other Jedi had been targeted within the last twelve hours, which gave everyone a momentary relief.

Anakin, though, was suspecting the worst, and shortly retreated back into his ship to continue
working on his new arm extension – their return to Coruscant could prove perilous in many ways.

Senator Amidala, too, soon vanished, no doubt to contact her mysterious insiders and do some investigation of her own.

Obi-Wan gave a small smile. He had not invited Padmé to their secret meeting by accident - by what little he'd seen of her, he could tell Anakin's wife was truly a woman of contradictions - as shrewd and sneaky as she was trustworthy.

He wondered if that was some people's perception of him - it certainly sounded familiar enough.

Right now, he hardly felt worthy of such a reputation. Without the Council to fall back on, without immediate danger to anyone to whom he held a forbidden attachment - he soon found himself slumping down on the ramp of the lead freighter, waiting for the hour to pass and trying to think.

This endeavor was blissfully short-lived, though, as he soon sensed an all-too familiar presence approaching from afar - just in time, when least wanted, where least needed.

“Kenobi!”

The jovial man in front of him did not look like he had lived in a barren crystal wasteland for the past two weeks. He was cheerfully waving around his hat, once again revealing beneath its usual spot a diorama which Obi-Wan wasn't sure had more in common with a desert or a forest.

“Hello, Hondo. Tell you what, I will pay you to leave the planet immediately – but depending on your price range, I might just settle for my presence.”

“Rich words from a man who’s yet to make good on my last payday.”

“I hired you for a very specific purpose. Have you made good on my request?”

“You wanted shiny rocks.” He gestured around the landscape, faint sparkles flickering in Obi-Wan's peripheral vision as he lazily followed the movement. “Should I just charge you by millimeter?”

“Let me clarify: I hired you for a specific type of ‘shiny rock.’”

“Then you probably shouldn’t have run away with the prototype. I’m charging you for that.”

“You already did. I take it you haven’t found any.”

“Well,” he spread his arms mock apologetically, “my associates and I ran into a very specific problem: too much work. That, and – oh, and there weren’t any to be found.”

“Good,” Obi-Wan responded, half-privately. Less for them to destroy.

Cody sprinted to the scene in Ohnaka's wake. “I'm sorry, sir,” he cut in, “We can't seem to keep him off the planet, he’s just been going back and forth for two weeks – “

“Going back and forth – ”

Hondo grinned. Obi-Wan shook his head. Well, of course. It had been silly of him to assume he could turn the tables on Hondo Ohnaka and hold him hostage on a decidedly unexciting planet for two tanks of gas (or was it three) - much less make him into a servant of the Republic, or whatever it was they were serving these days.
Here was his just reward for ever having entertained such an outlandish idea.

“Anyway,” Hondo announced, “I have more lucrative gigs awaiting, just begging me to snatch them from incompetent hands. I just wanted to say hello, see if I could collect my reward after all, maybe swipe some advance off your troopers while waiting.”

“I told you, sir,” Cody whispered sharply, “he's made quite an impression on some of the boys – “

“But it’s truly been a thankless journey, this one,” Hondo lamented, shaking his head. “Imagine my disappointment when I found out that none of your Republic boys have any property to swipe at all! No credits to their name, no nothing! They don’t even own the helmets on their heads!”

Obi-Wan was silent.

He was not wrong.

“Alright, you want me to leave, I’m leaving.” The pirate captain held up his hands in surrender, then stopped for a moment, as though to – perhaps for the first time ever – consider his next words. “But let me ask you one question, Kenobi. These are some nice youths you have here, y’know, for military types - some of them talented, even – a little same-y in the face area, maybe, but we all have our – point is, say, if Crys and Jon and I were to grow a little bored of this crystal business, maybe take our decisive round of sabacc somewhere more… fun… we could, right? It’s a free galaxy… right? Your poster boys here might not have any property - but they're not -”

Obi-Wan didn't grace him with an answer, but forced himself to look Cody in the eye, and the clone commander saluted him.

“As a man who frequently makes his living off… challenging the freedom of others,” Hondo babbled on, placing a theatrical hand on his chest, "see, hostages, guests, whatever you call them; they're only temporary property. This war, on the other hand… well, it seems kinda never-ending, no?"  

With those words, Hondo shrugged his shoulders, then spun on his heels and set off toward an imaginary sunset – until Obi-Wan called after him and declared that he’d accept the Republic transmission radio as payment for the fuel he’d stolen.

The pirate captain accepted with a smirk – and even inquired whether that Skywalker was saved yet, if Dooku was dead yet.

Obi-Wan assured him that was the case.

Once the hour was up, the trio assembled outside the Twilight; Obi-Wan vaguely anxious, Anakin oddly quiet, and Padmé bearing an actual piece of news: most of the Senate was currently gathered at a peace conference on Alderaan, where Supreme Chancellor Palpatine had been scheduled to make an appearance - until canceling at the last minute.

Regardless of this ominous development, all three Republic servants agreed that Alderaan must wait for now - in the end, all clues led back to Coruscant - and that they needed to leave without delay. They bid uneasy goodbyes to Cody and Rex – Cody still making apologies, avoiding his General's gaze – and away they flew.

The first few hours of their hyperspace voyage passed in a monotonous, uncomfortable silence. Anakin was back on the floor, bolts and screws flying around, ignoring his wife's warnings about attaching the new arm prematurely.
“I hate to just abandon them,” Obi-Wan said, thinking back to the misty horizon where identical figures commuted between shifts and breaks. “But in case we’re wrong about all this, we have to keep up the appearance of normalcy. It probably won't be long until our troops are summoned back to the battlefield. Things have been awfully quiet since that droid incident on Vanqor 1.”

“It’s funny you should say that,” Padmé said quietly. “I heard someone say that being away from the battlefront has been like ‘a vacation.’ That there’s been… ‘way less blaster bolts.’ ‘Fewer… fallen brothers.’” She turned to her husband, who, Obi-Wan was fairly sure, had yet to speak a single word since this morning. “He was one of yours, Anakin. He had only just arrived there.”

In another few hours' time, Padmé’s words took on tragic overtones when the transmission radio beeped to relay a very quick and very troubled status report from Rex, informing them that the excavation site had been attacked by the Vanqor military. Several troopers had fallen - but the weapons remained secure.

Anakin slowly put down his tools. Persistently wordless, he looked as though he might rip off his newly attached arm on the spot and throw it at the nearest rage-worthy object.

“I know what this is,” Padmé sighed, burying her face in her hands. “Vanqor is just another of Palpatine's puppet governments. They'll do his bidding at a moment's notice. This is a last-minute attempt to stir panic and convince everyone of the weapons’ significance – and an excuse to 'save' yet another planet from the war-mongering Separatists.”

“At the worst possible time…”

“The clones are slaves.”

The seated passengers turned their heads at the sound of Anakin's voice.

“What?”

“There, I said it.” Anakin stared into their eyes, deep resentment dripping from his words. “They’re slaves. We all know it. We’ve just been too cowardly to say it. They’re slaves, and the Jedi are slavers.”

“Anakin – “

“Is this really the time, Anakin?” Obi-Wan responded, leaning over his seat. “I think we can all agree that the clones' situation is not ideal, and there are definitely discussions to be had –“

“Well I’m tired of discussing!” he screamed out, his voice hoarse, knocking over his toolbox and making his companions flinch. “I’m tired of it all! I should have believed Fives, I should have ripped those things from their heads long ago! No puppet soldiers, no war!”

“That is not even remotely true – “

“We’ve failed them!” He stood up to his full height, eyes ablaze. “The Jedi have failed them! Yeah, I can barely wait to discuss this with the Council! That's what they do best, isn't it? Sit on their butts, in their stupid red chairs, and discuss!”

“Ani, please…”

“Anakin…” Obi-Wan began calmly, vacating his seat to meet his student at eye-level. “I am done listening to you maligning the Council at every opportunity. I’ve said my piece, I know the past few weeks have been hard on you, and we all find ourselves in an unprecedented situation – “
“This is not about me,” Anakin yelled, “it never was! Did you even listen to what I said?!”

“Anakin, we need to take one thing at a time,” Padmé reasoned.

Obi-Wan stepped closer to him. Anakin scowled at him, his posture straight and guarded.

Obi-Wan was silent for a moment before speaking, all-too conscious of his own words before they left his lips, “Anakin, I just want to say… if you’re unhappy… if you - if you and Padmé want to have a family someday… If you want to leave… you’re free to do so. You’ve always been free. That - that is to say - you know what I mean.”

He heard Padmé shifting in her seat. Anakin just tilted his head.

“You want me to leave?”

“Alright, maybe you don’t know what I mean.”

“That is not what he said, Anakin.”

For a fair while, the Master and Padawan just stood there facing each other, heads bowed, as the air grew thicker and heavier in the cockpit. Then Anakin gave a small nod, sat back down on the floor, his movements tense and deliberate. He adjusted his new arm like a glove, muttering something about ill fit and lacking motor functions.

Obi-Wan and Padmé took turns on the pilot’s seat through the rest of the long journey home.

The crew were only minutes away from coming out of hyperspace when they, to their great relief, finally received a very short message from Masters Yoda and Windu. Conveniently enough, it was a summons to return to Coruscant immediately – for an ‘emergency meeting.’

“That can’t be good,” Obi-Wan stated the obvious. “At least we know they’re okay. They’re coming to meet us at the spaceport.”

“Oh, I’m so relieved,” Padmé sighed. She turned to Anakin and said softly, “Anakin, just give the Council one more chance. Whatever happens, we’re all in this together. Everything will soon be set right.”

Anakin gave her a curt smile.

As soon as Coruscant's brilliantly glittering form appeared before them, the adventurers all exchanged weary glances once more; signaling some manner of truce, bracing themselves for whatever emergency loomed down below.

At the spaceport, Masters Yoda and Windu were waiting, along with a handful of clone troopers – and, in an unusual sight, two temple guards.

“Senator Amidala,” Windu greeted the politician as the crew disembarked, “we're glad to see you back safe.”

“Yousever as well, Masters…”

Mace cast Obi-Wan a very peculiar look as he reached to shake his hand. Master Yoda was nodding at the youngest Council member in an acknowledging manner.

“Obi-Wan Kenobi, we commend you for your invaluable efforts on Utapau in taking down Count Dooku and General Grievous in one go.”
“I'm sorry, what was that?”

Windu disregarded his inquiry, “Anakin Skywalker…”

The Jedi guards marched up to the last addressee.

“You are under arrest for conspiring with the Sith against the Jedi and the Republic.”
Red-Handed

The clink from the handcuffs alone probably should have activated Anakin's fight-or-flight response. As should the firm grip on his arm, the uninvited hand on his shoulder, the gentle push on his back, the low voice ordering him forward.

And everyone knew the answer to that old dilemma. Anakin Skywalker never went down without a fight. He should have been kicking them. He should have resisted.

Instead he let the arrest take its course, observing it impassively from above – after all, it wasn't really happening to him, but to that sad creature down there; wrapped in filthy rags, gaunt in the face and unkind in the eye.

It wasn't him being cruelly betrayed by the Jedi, denounced as a traitor and taken away, in front of his Master and his wife -

Obi-Wan rushed to block the arrest party's advance.

"No, no, please wait," he objected, "this is all a misunderstanding. Anakin is not in league with the Sith, we can explain –"

"Obi-Wan – please, not now," Windu grumbled absently.

"Please, what?" Padmé joined in the protest, her voice resolute. "Not now, what? Not now, the truth? There's been a terrible mistake –"

"On your part, I'm afraid, Senator. Take him away."

Obi-Wan was jostled out of the way, Padmé moved carefully aside by the shoulders. Anakin let himself be taken.

"No –"

After all, he had predicted it. It had only been a matter of time.

"It's okay, Padmé – we have the truth on our side."

Because it was him being led away in those cuffs, a prisoner once more; but he was innocent, they'd made a mistake, he had not betrayed them, he could never -

"Your ally, the truth is? Allies, one would trust, yes. But know, does one ever truly?"

After oscillating so long between their grudging military duties and supposed peacekeeping, the Jedi had finally made a commitment, and it was to peace; established a stance, and it was anti-war, anti-destruction. Mace could feel it in the Force – the war was nearing its end, the rage of battle had dramatically abated within just the last few days, and all signs were pointing towards an imminent Republic victory.

But it was now that very victory that Mace had come to dread the most. Hiding beneath a veneer of peace could be another war waiting to happen – the risk was there so long as they still had the means and the machinery – excuses would come later, experience had taught him. From a strategical standpoint, they required no additional firepower, and by choosing not to hand any more
guns to an increasingly dubious man wielding near-unlimited power, the Jedi were finally honoring their truest ideals; making a statement in the face of inevitable opposition. They would happily face the consequences in due time, if it meant saving the Galaxy from its own never-ending bloodlust, the deceptively dormant menace of their own weaponry.

The bad news was that they might still be too late, and Mace’s worst, most absurd fears all but confirmed.

“Master Yoda,” Mace’s low voice echoed loudly off the walls of the near-empty Council chamber, as the Grand Master spun around pensively, “you must have felt what I have felt. The dark side of the Force surrounds the Chancellor. For so long we have denied that possibility, because it was too preposterous, too embarrassing even... but I can no longer turn a blind eye. If he is our Sith Lord –”

“Slow down, young one,” Yoda responded placidly. “Felt it, I have. A Sith Lord, our Chancellor may yet prove to be. But cautiously, we must proceed. Choosing to reveal himself, the Chancellor might be. Why now, we must ask ourselves.”

"I'm sorry, but I respectfully disagree, Master Yoda,” Mace countered, his tone betraying a little more panic than he would have liked. “We have to act now. The Chancellor is scheduled to leave for that peace conference in just a few hours. I strongly suspect it is a key step in his plan. With the Republic this close to victory, he could declare himself dictator and still make himself look like a war hero, and there would be nothing we could prove nor use against him. Master Yoda, we must confront him now, we must question him now. He will not deny us an audience.”

Mace caught his voice faltering towards the end, and promptly straightened his posture. He didn't fear the Sith, he never had. He feared loss – loss of what he could have preserved, decay of what could have been protected. He feared resignation, passivity in the face of threat.

Yoda cast a look at his fellow Master’s belt. "And to this audience, your lightsaber, you intend to bring?"

Mace looked away. If this war had taught him anything, it was how quickly ideals could be compromised and good intentions tainted. If there was one thing to which he was happily resigned, it was that there was perhaps no ideally clean way to remove a dark lord of the Sith from office, no means to 'confront' the two-faced Chancellor without so much as threatening him.

Yoda pressed his wrinkly hand to his chin and deliberated on Mace's words for a while. “Hm. A great deal of time, have I spent meditating of late. Fruit, it has born – but time, also cost, precious time, yes. And without a timely knife, eventually rot, even the best fruits will. Perhaps – right you are, young Master Windu.”

Mace softly touched the ‘knife’ attached to his belt, mostly just to adjust it, but Yoda shook his head.

“The sharpest blade, our words are.”

The vast Coruscant sky loomed deep blue above them, less than an hour away from the break of dawn. Skyspeeders and spaceships commuted above them, greeting the new day in the bustling city like any other. Only a select few could feel the shift from yesterday; only those helplessly sensitive to the Cosmic fabric of the Force – the smothering shadow of an otherworldly darkness, the insatiable mouth of emptiness devouring everything in its path, ripping apart all illusions of coming peace and harmony.
At the door of the Senate building both Jedi came to a simultaneous halt, needing to catch their breath – the darkness emanating from the inside was almost too much to bear, the invisible grip on their throats tighter and tighter.

The guards greeted the Jedi Masters with great politeness, but Mace wasn't going to take any risks, and responded with a wave of his hand, "These Jedi have urgent business with the Chancellor, and do not wish to be disturbed."

"These Jedi have urgent business with the Chancellor, and do not wish to be disturbed."

The two Masters silently made their way through the long hallways of the Senate, eerily empty at this hour and with a majority of its usual occupants on Alderaan. Nearing the Chancellor's office, the two Jedi fought harder and harder against the suffocating darkness – until they began to hear a voice from the inside, and stopped in their tracks.

"Alone, he is," Master Yoda stated in a low voice as the two Jedi craned toward the door to listen.

"So you really think... the dark side is more powerful? Not just... a pathway to the 'unnatural'?

Mace's heart sank at the sound of a familiar voice, distorted by the flickering hologram signal.

"Skywalker!" he gasped. "That's -"

“Well, Anakin, let me ask you a question. The Jedi promote harmony, but is harmony a source of power, or simply the desired end result? Harmony or passion, which one lends you strength? Which one comes to you, shall we say... more naturally?"

Master Yoda raised his gaze at him, and one look from his troubled eyes seemed to say more than Mace could have possibly put into words. Mace adjusted his focus to the pragmatic and the immediate: their target had most likely already sensed them; they'd come to a point of no return.

Mace called upon the Force and knocked down the door with a crash. The dimly lit, red-themed office opened before them, the Supreme Chancellor sitting at his desk in the very center – slowly whirling toward them, not looking remotely surprised nor intimidated. He calmly put down his communication device, an indistinct blue figure vanishing away beneath his hand.

"You are..." Mace stuttered. "You are the Sith Lord!"

"Blind, have we been," Yoda lamented.

Palpatine stood from his seat and walked toward them. His countenance was confident and his step steady and assertive. Without the shadows surrounding his presence, eating away at the very air around him, he would have looked like just another politician; a leader, a great man worthy of his great status.

But the shadows were there and Mace now saw, for the first time - there was nothing else in there at all. He was looking at a monster risen from a burning inferno, his features twisted and his every word echoing the shrieks of souls lost beyond time and understanding. And yet, at the same time, it was the same man; unchanged; the very sight that they all had, with blind eyes, been looking at all along; unaltered, unconcealed; right under their upturned noses.

"Why were you talking to Skywalker?" Mace demanded.

"Oh..." Palpatine uttered softly, crossing his gangling fingers. "You mean my apprentice."
“I don’t know what poison you’ve put into his head, but Skywalker is not your apprentice.”

Palpatine arched his eyebrows. “In your own words... you have been blind. Now you would choose to be deaf as well?”

The Jedi drew their sabers, still stopping short of igniting them, as the Sith Lord continued to close the distance between them.

“You have never wondered why we didn’t get rid of him long ago?”

“We?” Mace echoed, the saber-hilt burning against his fingers.

“My other apprentice and I,” Palpatine clarified, shooting Yoda a pointed look, "shame about his passing - indeed, if I’m not mistaken, he too, once belonged to the Jedi. But Skywalker… the Chosen One, the hero of the prophecy. Destined to bring balance to the Force. Is he not a great threat to our very species? Do you not think it very merciful of us to choose to train him rather than kill him?"

“Skywalker wouldn’t –” Mace protested, "That holo is a fake – "

“Already he’s been of great use to me in this war. And a very dedicated student. Skywalker’s Jedi masquerade has been perfectly endearing,” Palpatine sneered, as he, seemingly out of nowhere, summoned an ignited red blade, "...but the costume party is over."

Before so much as lifting his weapon, Palpatine reached toward Mace, with such astonishing swiftness that neither of the Jedi could sense his intentions before it was too late. Then he clenched his bony fingers together with a twisted grimace, as Mace heard something make an alarming scratch under the bulge in his tunic and delved underneath to find a crushed holoprojector.

Well, so much for that all-important recording.

And before they knew it the Sith had leaped at them in a single flash of red, like blood-stained wind, and different-colored sabers were whirling and fizzing in all directions.

Never before had Mace been so instantly caught off-guard by an opponent. The red blade of death shot across the room with such simultaneous chaotic energy and controlled, polished skill that it was all Mace could do to evade the first round of the offensive. The Jedi parried and struck and ducked and jumped, as the scent of darkness dominated the space around them, its bitter essence thickening with every swish of the scarlet saber.

And not only was Mace stunned by the elderly man's lightning-like maneuvers, he was distracted; losing focus with every hit he caught with his loyal purple blade, trading distressed glances with Master Yoda in between the swings: it couldn't be true, not the Chosen One, it couldn't be...

No, the Sith were liars and he was better than this.

Recovering his focus, Mace once again became one with his weapon and and an unstoppable two with Master Yoda, whose concentration was absolute and movements as careful as they were unpredictable. And soon enough the red-clad Sith Lord began to retreat farther into the room, towards the panorama window, his hand reaching toward his desk –

This time Mace was faster, and summoned the Chancellor's holoprojector into his hand, throwing it out the doorway into the corridor, away from his destructive reach. That was all the evidence they would need. The truth about Skywalker –
Suddenly the two Masters felt themselves being thrown back, hitting the floor with a thump, and before either of them could catch a breath Palpatine had lifted his desk and tossed it at them. Other pieces of furniture followed in quick succession, but Master Yoda was already back on his feet, cutting through the tables and chairs with ease, while Mace carefully observed the Chancellor's movements, now backpedaling towards the window as the kept the barrage coming –

With a sudden terrible shriek the window shattered into pieces and shards of glass rained on the Jedi's heads. The Chancellor had jumped – Mace was still covering his eyes but in the distance, he could hear an engine whirring, before the noise faded into the first rays of sunrise.

“Sprightly, for a man of his age, our Sith Lord is.”

- 

Anakin slouched deeper against the hard wall and into his darkened thoughts.

They'd kept Ahsoka in a cell just like this. Murky, but comfortable enough. Deceptively so. A gilded cage was still a cage, and a mild and humane prison no different.

In the end, the Jedi were no different.

Or perhaps Anakin had been too different.

They were always going to do this. He should have known better. They'd already decided he was guilty, just as they had done with Ahsoka. They didn't care about the truth, the truth could drown away with him for all they cared.

He'd never stood a chance. The Jedi had never wanted him. But they'd taken him anyway and decided he was this and that. And even now, they seemed to know exactly what. Better than he knew himself.

Soon enough Windu's stiff figure appeared in the doorway, waving the cell shut as he entered. Anakin forced himself to lift his gaze. The Jedi Master's severe features looked the same as always.

“Where are Padmé and Obi-Wan?”

Anakin didn't know why he was asking. He didn't expect to be allowed visitors. He didn't really expect anything anymore.

“Not here,” Windu replied curtly. "But very anxious to defend your case. Should they?"

“I don't know, should they? It's up to you, isn't it?”

“So… you admit your guilt?”

“Does it matter?”

“Very little. The evidence against you is rather staggering.”

Ridiculous. He had not betrayed the Jedi. Anakin could only guess at how much they knew, but they'd misunderstood, perhaps willfully misunderstood. How could he ever – he'd intended to kill Sidious, not join him, it had all been a front –

“I’d still be interested in hearing it.”

He'd only been faking; he could never join the Sith, he didn't need the dark side, it was all pretense
and none of it real –

“Right now, we do not have time. We need to know the whereabouts of Chancellor Palpatine, immediately. Just tell us, Skywalker, and we may yet find an understanding.”

Anakin stared at the Jedi Master. They really were convinced. What could he possibly say to defend himself? It would fall on deaf ears; all they cared about was Sidious.

“You’re going to interrogate me,” he said under his breath. "And I would guess, in very un-Jedi-like ways.”

“This… this is an emergency. He is deceiving you, Skywalker; using you. Just tell us where he is. This is for your own good. And for the greater good.”

“I don’t know!” Anakin yelled, slamming a fist against the wall. "You don't understand, he's dangerous - I - I have to be the one to do it!"

"Do what?"

Anakin brought a mechanical finger to his temple. His new cybernetic nerves still responded slowly to his commands. "Well why don't you look inside and find out."

- The Jedi Masters chased Palpatine through the city well into the morning, but the Sith Lord had vanished like a nightmare upon waking, and the trail of darkness he'd left in his wake was waning. Vehicles whirred across the sky, beings of all sizes and species filled the streets below. A demon had risen from the depths of hell and no one had noticed.

“Haste, we must not,” Master Yoda stated matter-of-factly as the two Jedi trudged back to the temple. "Hasty, were we, in facing him. Waste time, we should not. But waste opportunities, we cannot afford."

“Do you… do you believe what he said about Skywalker?”

Somehow, Mace had already accepted in his heart the Republic leader's true identity, its implications for the immediate future; even his deception of the Jedi and all the shame involved. He couldn't explain why he couldn't make peace about Skywalker. The two of them had never been close (neither was that the ideal, exactly); there had been traitors among the Jedi before and there would be again (said the cynic in him). And he'd known something was off with the boy. He shouldn't have been so shocked, it was unbecoming for a Jedi.

“Keep speculating, we could... if so afraid, are we, to look.”

Mace gave an obedient nod, took out the stolen holoprojector, and began examining it. He was no technological genius, but he could tell it was a model that could also record and save messages.

“He appears to have been in the process of deleting recordings,” Mace observed, concerned. Getting rid of the evidence... "Here's one that appears to be cut short..."

Mace looked over his shoulder - only seeing an empty courtyard - before opening the recording.

"I am glad that you have opened yourself to the dark side, Anakin. Most Jedi who tap into the dark don't even realize they've done it, and thus never gain control of their abilities... never reach their true potential. I trust you're someone who wants to reach their true potential, my dear boy?"
"Yes."

"In that case… I think we have a great deal to talk about once you get back to Coruscant.”
When they’d been preparing to arrest Skywalker, Mace's initial shock had subsided and a righteous disillusion taken its place. He’d carefully arranged his thoughts and started examining the external evidence. The pattern had begun to appear clearer and clearer – all along the Sith had been intentionally keeping Skywalker alive, preserving the life of their supposed enemy with remarkable dedication.

Recently Mace had been handed another file of research results fresh from the lab, this time on the previously unstudied toxins of Vanqor 1. The weapon supervision committee had commissioned the research shortly before Palpatine had snatched the crystal gun away. There were plenty of points of interest. First, the most dangerous toxins, while ultimately lethal without proper treatment, were actually extremely slow-acting; causing ostensibly conspicuous symptoms at first contact but sometimes taking as long as 20 years to kill an organic life form. However, the chemicals had a treacherously similar composition to certain types of battery acids (save their level of toxicity to humans), which rendered them far more harmful to the inorganic; particularly machinery that employed similar acids as electrolytes. But even long-term exposure to these chemicals would very rarely actually disable the device – it might, in fact, provide longevity – however, short-term exposure was enough to ‘confuse’ its primary programming and cause unpredictable malfunctions and general instability.

Known victims of these chemicals included the gun, nicknamed Crys; as well as two companies of B2 series battle droids – more specifically, a specialized series. Despite the malfunctions caused by the toxins, the scientists had been able to determine the basis of their original programming. The cybernetic soldiers were programmed to, in a way, ‘masquerade’ as a regular series in the field; with the same basic functions on a surface level, but not quite the same degree of competence. What they lacked in battle prowess they then made up in large numbers – which was also advantageous to their true primary function: apprehension of prisoners. The droids’ central processing unit held inside a high-performance scanner with a capacity to identify thousands of individuals by appearance and voice – but with only a select handful of desired apprehendees actually installed into the system.

And who was on that list of desired apprehendees? What was their one common denominator?

Dead Jedi Generals, and only dead Jedi Generals. All captured, tortured for information, then executed. With the exception of just one.

Skywalker.

Who was no stranger to narrow escapes and curious run-ins with the Separatists – or rather, the Sith. It was concrete, undeniable proof that he was special to the opposing side in some way. As was the fact that he was alive at all. Could it be possible that his frequent captures, were, in fact, just a camouflage for mutually agreed secret meetings… or, at worst, training sessions?

There was the one on Naboo; an incident whose horrific consequences they'd felt in their bones and observed in war statistics every single day since. On a closer look, plenty of things didn't hold water: was it not awfully convenient that Dooku should have managed to grab their prized Jedi Knight near-simultaneously with General Grievous’ capture; necessitating a prisoner exchange, on which neither the Jedi Council nor the Senate were consulted?

Then there was Vanqor. Skywalker had been gone for days. No demands, no nothing. Except – as Mace had later learned from Obi-Wan – Skywalker had apparently been used as bait in an attempt
to bring his Master to the dark side, which had raised some alarm in the Council. Obi-Wan had stated in his report that Anakin had been mercilessly tortured for this purpose – but then, he'd also detailed how the supposed torture victim had actually been freed by Dooku, and immediately afterward simply walked off the scene. And later, when Obi-Wan had investigated the electrified containment field, he'd found the electric current inoperative. Almost as though it had been nothing but smoke and mirrors all long.

Finally, there was Utapau, which certainly broke the pattern in a significant way, with Dooku's sudden and inexplicable death. Other than Skywalker, there were no witnesses as to what had happened on that ship; which, according to the team they'd sent to investigate, had been destroyed completely in a subsequent explosion. An accident seemed highly unlikely. No, Skywalker must have killed him. But what were the implications; had he betrayed co-conspirator, in accordance with the Sith ways? Or did the critically pivotal elimination of the Separatist leader call Mace's whole theory into question?

Naturally this was all pure conjecture, but when all they had in the way of concrete evidence was a corrupted holo, the circumstances inevitably called for some reading between the lines. (Mace also had to wonder how Senator Amidala, who had been present and/or directly involved in all of the three incidents, figured into all of this.)

And Mace would have been inclined to believe in Skywalker's innocence – but he'd seen him. He'd heard him. And even without the critical holo, was his guilt not palpable? Dear friend of the Chancellor, always seen skulking around him. It was not inconceivable that somewhere along the line -

They just couldn't afford to blind themselves any longer. They’d allowed a Sith Master to roam free and rule the Galaxy for long enough; and he, too, had had all the appearance of upright character and good intentions.

Skywalker's defense of himself was weak-spirited and highly contradictory. On one hand, he insisted he didn't want anything to do with the Sith – and on the other he'd confessed to having known of their plans for some time, and having kept it from the Council – but Obi-Wan had found out. But even he didn't know everything. When Mace had asked what 'everything' meant, Skywalker had fallen quiet for a while, then clarified that Obi-Wan didn't know about his conversations with 'Sidious.'

Mace was torn. Perhaps in some way, Skywalker was the victim here. Palpatine seemed to have abandoned him anyway. But the boy was still evidently highly unstable and volatile, and most importantly, untrustworthy.

They were doing the right thing. They might not yet know the whole truth, but they'd have time to investigate once Palpatine was captured (or preferably, dead) and they could breathe again. But for now, they just couldn't afford to risk it.

It shouldn't have hurt that much. Windu had gone easy on him, almost to a laughable degree; he’d confirmed what he'd needed to confirm, then immediately pulled out of his mind. And Anakin had cooperated – at least, a part of him had. But something had kept him from surrendering completely, resisted the probing; almost more out of spite than anything else - or if there was a more bitter flavor of spite.

The Jedi had always hated him. They'd wanted this to happen. They'd been waiting for him to make a mistake. They'd ambushed him, just like Dooku had; lain in wait to catch him at his
weakest –

Anakin jolted up from the floor as the pain came shooting back. He leaned against the wall and slid back down. While Windu had been inside his head – a mere flash of a moment – he’d seen something. Images - horrifying images. He’d seen Padmé – in agony, fighting against the pull of oblivion. A hand extended toward her – a torturer's hand. Himself, so near yet so far away; unable to reach her, still weak and useless and unworthy.

And in a distant horizon, two small faces – innocent and carefree, running towards him, joy bolstering their every step – then disappearing into nothingness when Padmé’s strength gave out and her head fell limply to the side.

Then Windu had stopped, withdrawn his hand – muttered an apology.

The door swished open again. Sensing his Master's signature before finding the strength to look at him, Anakin struggled to get to his feet. A vague anger churned in his chest, but it was though there was nothing beneath to support it, keep it from randomly swaying his body where it willed.

Obi-Wan’s presence felt tense in the Force, and he was very deliberately keeping his distance. Anakin's vision had grown oddly blurry since the last time he’d given actual thought to his physical health, but he could just about discern the weariness in his Master’s features. When he finally spoke, it was with a bizarre, feigned airiness, as though he was trying to open with a joke, “It seems I killed General Grievous when I blew up that kyber crystal on Utapau. Apparently he was the one in charge of the transaction. ”

“Well, congratulations, Master,” Anakin said mechanically. Utapau now seemed another life entirely. He supposed that in that other life, he would have found the story amusing.

“And they want me to take the credit for Dooku,” Obi-Wan went on, head bowed, “I refused, but… they'll think it might confuse the public – “Once Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker's capture and disgrace are announced and his good name forever tarnished. Sure, let Obi-Wan be the hero. Anakin had never fit the bill, not exactly. “– in the event that we have to defend ourselves in the media – “ Obi-Wan suddenly stopped, as though at a dead end, then blurted, “Anakin, I saw the holo. Of you… and Sidious.”

He'd spat out the words as though they might eat away his tongue - then inquired calmly as to whether or not the holos were fake.

“I tried to tell Windu,” Anakin snapped at him. “I was faking, I – I thought by getting close to him… I could - deceive him…”

Anakin heard himself trailing off, and Obi-Wan nodded in blank acknowledgement. His presence dilated in the Force, as though floating across the limited cell space in search of a response - any response. Finally he sighed, resigned, “Anakin… if you say that’s the case, I believe you. But… do you – do you really believe yourself?”

“What?”

“Anakin…. when you were arrested, why didn't you try to resist? Why didn't you say anything to defend yourself?”

Anakin narrowed his eyes questioningly. He had trouble even recalling the events.

“I'm not necessarily asking if you're guilty… but is there a part of you that feels that way?”
What was he saying now? That he'd surrendered due to pangs of conscience? That he deserved to be put away, and deep down, he knew it?

“I don't understand what you're asking, Master.”

“And I don't understand why you kept this from me in the first place!” Obi-Wan burst out, almost yelling, arms snapping up. “Did you want to keep a back door open to the dark side? Why play with fire? I don't understand – “

Anakin took a step back. Obi-Wan wouldn't understand. He never went anywhere near fire. He never risked anything, he always played safe –

“Q and A sessions about the dark side?” Obi-Wan stammered on. “With a Sith Lord? What did you think was really happening there - who was really in control?”

“I'm in control – “ Anakin tried, but Obi-Wan was shaking his head. Anakin made an incredulous sound. He'd tried to tell Obi-Wan, he'd tried to protect him -

“Anakin, you know I want to help you – ” Obi-Wan's voice grew pained as he threw his hands down in defeat, “Save you - you cannot fault me for lack of trying. But I – I cannot save you from yourself. I cannot make the right choice for you.”

'Choice', he'd said.

Anakin didn't have a choice. He was in jail, that was kind of the idea.

In the end, it really made no difference whether he was a slave of Watto, servant of the Republic, prisoner of the Sith or captive of the Jedi. His life was nothing but a cycle of demands, insults, glares, beatings, and punishments for non-compliance. He'd tried to carve his own path only to be shot down and locked away. Even Obi-Wan thought he was a danger to himself and others. His choice didn't matter, because his choice was inevitably wrong.

Obi-Wan started to leave - only to spin on his heel once more, sending an odd ripple into the Force as he did.

"Anakin… Padmé – ”

"What about Padmé?"

Padmé watched helplessly as her husband was pushed aboard a nearby freighter, which then disappeared into the hectic cityscape as quickly as they'd shoved her and Obi-Wan out of the way. Naively she'd thought that there was no force of nature that could separate her and Anakin, ever again, not anymore – but apparently all it took was another rough pair of hands and an ill-fated ankle.

And the Jedi Grand Master had the nerve to gloat.

"Are you implying I don't know my – Anakin?” she snapped at the crumpled green man without the slightest pretense of civility, flicking Obi-Wan's diplomatic hand away. “You want to know the truth?”

"Senator Amidala!” Master Windu huffed. “With all due respect, we strongly doubt you know more about this case than we do.”
"But I do know - "

"Please – you need to hear our side of the story," Obi-Wan cut in.

"And our side, Obi-Wan – you need to see," Master Yoda announced while leading the Jedi toward another ship, "Need to see – to believe." He momentarily turned to Padmé, stalking next to him with a barely noticeable limp, "Senator – injured, you are. Medcenter, we recommend."

"I'm fine, thank you!"

"We will hear you out in due time," Windu reassured her as a ramp unfolded onto the platform, "but right now, it is paramount we question Skywalker immediately."

Windu marched up the ramp but Yoda cast a long look at Padmé and Obi-Wan. "Master Windu, ahead, you go. Persistence, I sense in our friends."

Windu nodded obediently, the ramp folded back up and the ship zoomed off.

"Senator – treatment, you require."

"Master Yoda, I can vouch for Senator Amidala's trustworthiness," Obi-Wan insisted.

"Same would you say, of Skywalker. Clouded by attachment, your judgment is."

"Please, whatever it is you need to show me, she needs to see as well."

"Why?"

"Because 'she’ is Anakin's wife!"

Yoda stopped in his tracks, leaning against his walking stick.

Padmé felt herself tensing for a moment, her anger numbing away. Before the words had escaped her lips, she had already heard their echo; regretted their unforgiving nature. It wasn't the grand, world-shaking moment she had sometimes pictured; a far cry from that sweet breath of relief, that new dawn she'd long imagined. She didn't get to sign a formal letter of resignation and walk hand in hand with Anakin all the way to the Senate to turn it in, she didn't get to invade a boring Council meeting, rush into her handsome Knight's arms and kiss him so hard he'd arch backwards. No slammed doors, no enigmatic winks, no surprise elopement - no Anakin.

Just her last plea to the little green man who dictated his every step.

"…Then questions we have, Mrs. Skywalker."

- Final day of the peace conference on the breath-taking Alderaan.

As they said, one could take the Nabooian out of Naboo, but one couldn't take the Nabooian out of him. Sheev Palpatine was swelling with pride. He'd created art, poetry; rivaling the most exquisite creations of his home planet, and indeed whatever cheap copies the locals were subjected to. Once again he'd timed and choreographed everything perfectly, down to every minute detail.

Of course, as far as Skywalker was concerned, it was all about broad strokes. The Jedi, in his eyes, were now the new Dooku: robbing him of his freedom (the illusion of it anyway), using him for their own gains, then taking away his beloved. They were now the villain.
He hoped they'd hurt him. They didn't need lay a finger on his wife for him to think they did - all it took was the implication, and his trauma would do the rest. But Sidious probably had little to worry about - if there was anything he Jedi were good at, it was hypocrisy. They'd willingly become soldiers all the while singing chants about 'the greater good.'

He straightened his collar and gave a nod of confirmation to his aides. The curtains parted in front of him, and he strode proudly onto the stage to a round of applause. There was not a patch of floor in sight in the white auditorium. The crowd extended all the way outside, far into the horizon against a view of azure mountains.

Sidious leaned comfortably over the speaker’s stand and arranged his face into a grave expression. Thankfully there was very little need for opening jokes or trifling niceties.

“I want to thank you for your warm welcome – and I apologize for the initial confusion regarding my appearance at this vitally important conference. But I'm afraid it is with a heavy heart that I come before you today. First, let me reassure you that our shared dream of peace is not lost, and it is with utmost devotion that I, Sheev Palpatine, continue to work towards that end. But I fear that within the last few days, there have transpired several shocking developments at the very heart of the Republic, that have forever altered the course of the Clone Wars and changed its very nature.”

A stir shot through the crowd. Up on a private balcony, the Queen and the Viceroy exchanged glances.

“I regret to inform you that the Jedi Order, once our trusted allies and chivalrous Generals of our Grand Army, have now openly turned against the Republic and its leadership. What you are about to see is live feed from the Galactic Senate on Coruscant.”

A vast holo screen came down behind him, showing airborne footage of the Senate building, guarded on all sides by the Republic's prized protectors. Now and then the wide panorama windows would reveal a glimpse of someone skulking inside. "Shamelessly taking advantage of this historically important conference, of our gathering here in the spirit of peace, the Jedi have taken over the Senate building in what I can only assume is an attempted coup."

The audience stood frozen, stunned beyond words or expression, before breaking into a distressed uproar. Sidious pretended to gather himself as the camera soared toward the Supreme Chancellor's office, sunlight catching in the blood-splattered shards from the broken window. "I myself was a first-hand witness to the outbreak of these appalling events. Only hours before I departed for this conference, I was attacked in my own office by Jedi Masters Yoda and Windu of the Jedi High Council. I was saved at the last minute by my loyal chauffeur, who happened to hear the commotion. You can see the lightsaber cuts on the furniture - and the marks on my face."

Utter shock overwhelmed the listeners, as Sidious brought a tentative hand to his cheek to draw attention to his altered looks. Farther in the back, a wave of outright panic rippled through the audience - someone in the back had spotted a Jedi; several guards were being summoned to his direction. Sidious smirked in satisfaction. The only thing that could make this speech more of a success was if a Jedi attacked him live on stage. Or was simply lynched by the crowd.

“But I have not been without my allies in the Jedi Order, and certainly not in the Senate. It saddens me immeasurably to say that the Jedi are currently holding two of my dear friends captive - whose lives I already went to great personal lengths to save only weeks ago. General Anakin Skywalker, who bravely - and wisely - chose my friendship over blind loyalty to the Order. And Senator Padmé Amidala, my former Queen and close associate. If the insurgent Jedi on Coruscant are listening, I must implore you to set them free and surrender immediately. But for now I am forced to declare all Jedi – with the exception of my friend – enemies of the Republic.”
In the Moons and in the Stars

Padmé gazed wistfully to her desk as Obi-Wan took her aside after the ‘questioning.’ Against the daylight flowing from the window now stood a different vase holding a fresh bouquet of flowers. Passable, but not as beautiful as the one Anakin had given her – she suspected, as she had trouble recalling its exact appearance. Stop and smell the roses, as they said…

“Padmé, I need you to comply with the Council’s proposition,” the Jedi Master still tried to persuade her, lowering his voice as he added, “Their reasoning might differ from mine - but we now know how the Sith operate. I believe that Sidious will seek to use you against Anakin, just like Dooku did – almost did. You know the risks. You’ve lived the risks. Anakin would want you safe. And you will yet have your part to play, in your own arena, when this is all over.”

“Obi-Wan, I’m simply warning you,” she responded sternly, gesturing around their surroundings, “The Jedi had no right taking over the Galactic Senate, and make no mistake, there will be consequences to your actions. You said it yourself. This is not your arena – “

“And facing a Sith Lord in armed combat is not yours,” he shot back. “As I said, it's a temporary arrangement until we've arrested the Chancellor – “

“It's still unlawful and ill-adsvised,” she cried. “As is your arrest of Anakin. And of me.”

“We're not arresting you, we're assigning you protection.”

She stared into his insistent eyes for a while, then gazed down on her gown – overwhelmed by a sudden, distant sense of nostalgia. She felt her steely tone softening.

“Like in the old times.”

“Yes, like in the old times.” With a mock exasperated sigh, he added, “That's – that's how you met your husband, I believe.”

Padmé couldn’t fight a slight smirk as she remembered Anakin as he’d looked back then; the rebellious young man with that questionable hairstyle, awkward pick-up lines, and the widest, sunniest smile she’d ever seen…

“…Reunited with him, actually.”

“I knew that, silly me.”

She sighed, defeated. Unlawful arrest or not; in the end, she had little choice. She had just confessed to having lied to the Jedi for almost three years, having withheld crucial intelligence for several weeks now; all hand in glove with her forbidden Jedi husband who they now suspected of not being a Jedi at all. The High Council (save Obi-Wan) evidently didn’t trust her enough to just let her walk. And if they did, what would ‘walking’ entail, exactly?

Fleeing, and abandoning Anakin? Pulling a hidden knife on the Jedi and fighting them? She was just as powerless as she had been as Dooku’s prisoner – except she had to believe that this time, her self-righteous captors truly did mean well.

Padmé remembered how she’d made a vow to herself after Anakin had rescued her from Dooku’s clutches. A vow to accept his protection, to not brush him away when she needed him – to allow herself to be rescued once in a while. But to have to honor that vow in spirit only; by leaving him
behind, by accepting help from those she deemed powerful but hardly held dear –

“Let me tell him myself. And please – just promise me something.”

- 

“They’re taking you away?”

Anakin stared into his wife’s troubled gaze, suppressed tears glistening in the dim lighting.

“Anakin, I told you – I told them everything and they believe me,” she insisted, her voice firm, yet wavering, “But they also believe I’m in danger. Because of what Dooku did - Ani, I – I have to go – “

“Where?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

Anakin cocked his head to his side and regarded her closely – dubious. Even while confined in a Force-resistant prison, now and then his highly attuned midichlorians would pick up a suspicious tremor in the air.

“They’re not giving you a choice,” he deduced. “They’re kidnapping you, or else – or else you wouldn’t be leaving me – “ He heard his voice cracking and trailing off.

“Anakin, until the Chancellor is caught, it’s a lawless world out there! Kidnap me, protect me, it doesn’t matter!” She added whispering, “Obi-Wan promised me he won’t let anything bad happen to you. He believes you –”

“They’re taking you away. They’re not giving you a choice.”

“Anakin,” her whisper fell lower, “Obi-Wan is getting you out of here. It breaks my heart to go, but I have to. Have you forgotten so soon what Dooku did to me, what he did to you? Don’t you see? It was all a plot to make you turn! I’m not about to make myself an easy target again!”

Anakin could only stare, incredulous. He couldn’t process what she was saying. His head was spinning, his vision hazy –

“Anakin, I saw those holos,” she shook her head, “I know you’re being tempted. But I trust you – we made a promise to trust each other. Please trust me.”

And suddenly he understood.

“I get it,” he almost laughed. “They’re trying to protect you from me. And you – you agreed.”

Distantly aware of her persistent protests at the idea, he turned away from her, mouth open in disbelief. But he now saw it clearly. He’d expected to be cast out of the Jedi – to have to give up his identity – but he’d been awfully optimistic. The Jedi were never going to be content with that, they wanted everything; his freedom, and his wife –

After all, for the Jedi, he was as good as gone. A sinner like any other. Untrustworthy and volatile –

Jolting back to reality, Anakin slowly lifted up his flesh hand, wondering why it was clenched into a fist and throbbing with a sharp rush of pain, as opposed to the constant ache all over his body. Padmé was staring at the wall, eyes wide. The cells were made of solid, Force-resistant metals –
virtually immune to such primitive instruments as organic muscle – and yet he could have sworn there, on the monotonous gray, was now a fresh dent.

At that moment, Obi-Wan and Windu stormed in and pinned the prisoner’s hands behind his back. As Anakin trashed in their grip – regretting his actions, desperate for a goodbye – he saw only a last glimpse of his wife's pained eyes as a third Jedi escorted her out. And still she called out to him, her voice receding as she did,

“Anakin… remember the poem: ‘In beauty, all equal; but only one of them most special; dearest, best loved, most sublime, for ’tis the one that’s mine; to keep, to cherish, and to find –’”

Some time ago Obi-Wan had observed that there were perks to being himself, one of them being the ability to stay objective and to compartmentalize. Not too long after, he'd come to question whether he had, in fact, gained complete mastery of this gift – but he would still consider it one of his strengths.

And as shocked he was over Anakin’s arrest and the surrounding circumstances – he had his detached nature to thank for not forgetting.

The Vanqor incident. The clones.

At the mere remembrance of the events, Obi-Wan felt an ominous shiver in the Force, which rippled all the way across the Council chamber to Master Yoda – and he turned around.

“Still troubled you are, young one.”

“Master Yoda,” Obi-Wan, encouraged, walked up to the Grand Master, “we have strong reason to suspect that there is a bigger conspiracy at play – or should I say, more widespread.”

Praying he still had just a smidgen of credibility left – after openly defending Anakin and his secret wife to the Council – Obi-Wan refreshed the Grand Master's memory on the details of General Tiplar’s death, which was thankfully still relatively recent. The old man listened in silence as he then recounted what had happened on Vanqor with Cody, and calmly explained why he had made the conscious decision to trust his second-in-command and the other witnesses.

The last part proved painful to get through. Just this morning, he had received a report from Vanqor listing the casualties in the recent attack.

“Cody had no reason to let me live, then lie to me, then – then die protecting – “ Useless weapons. “The Republic.”

“Hm,” Master Yoda acknowledged the reasoning.

“Confirming their story would be easy enough, all it takes is sending a single clone to a level 5 scan,” Obi-Wan stated, “however – I think that might be a waste of time. Master Yoda – “

“Hm,” Yoda uttered, closing his eyes. “Sense it, I have. A plot to destroy the Jedi. Details… until today, escaped me, they have.”

“This is it, Master,” Obi-Wan declared, thankful to receive much-needed backing from the Force, “And now that we've learned that opposing leaders of this war are, in fact, Sith Master and apprentice, I'd go as far as to surmise that this whole conflict has been nothing but a ruse. Nothing but a means to our demise.”
Well, that was oversimplifying things – he had good reason to believe that a good majority of the Separatist Senate actually believed in their cause, and had been deceived just as despicably as they had – but Obi-Wan was starting to see the unfortunate truth. They were out of time, and there were simply no ideal solutions left. No room for diplomacy, peace talks, carefully measured decisions – they needed to act if they wanted to preserve what was left of the Republic - and its Grand Army.

Obi-Wan hesitated. Master Yoda was looking at him expectantly, while Obi-Wan wished the Grand Master would just put into words what they both were thinking. Evacuating thousands of Jedi Generals off the perilous Outer Rim and out of the range of their unwitting would-be slayers would also mean abandoning millions of blameless clones to the enduring torment of the gradually waning battle. It would not reflect well on the Republic, it would be cruel and unfair to the abandoned, and without the accustomed leadership managing the troops, thousands of clone lives as well as innocents could be lost in the ensuing chaos.

To Obi-Wan’s relief – if one could call it that – Master Yoda gave the order to evacuate all field-active Generals and have them appoint their second-in-commands as temporary vice Generals to lead the battle. He also laid out a new battle strategy for them to follow that would place strong focus on defense and the protection of civilians – hoping, as he’d added with a sad smile, that the clones would be able to save a maximum number of innocents before - well, the inevitable.

Once the live broadcast from Alderaan aired – declaring the Jedi enemies of the Republic – the first few hours were chaos; but they were a distant, controlled sort of chaos. The chips were activated instantaneously. By this point, hundreds, if not thousands of Jedi had been successfully evacuated from the line of fire to various distant locations; however, others had heroically chosen to remain with their men, with full knowledge of their impending death at their hands, willing to sacrifice their lives for the protection of innocents, for what good they could still do in the meantime. And for their brave troopers’ good company, of which they had grown so very fond during the otherwise horrible conflict.

In his heart, Obi-Wan felt empty. Granted, they’d discovered the whole conspiracy just a little too late, and by nothing but dumb luck – and still he felt they could have done more. They could have done better. They could have been better. Somewhere far away in the scattered wastelands of the Outer Rim, hundreds of Jedi were giving up their lives, millions of clones were fulfilling their long-concealed, sickening purpose; and all of them had names, a life, an identity, a future… all given up for something greater, whether for a final sacrifice or for continuing forced servitude under a new command.

He could have done more. But maybe, just maybe, there was still a whole future of ‘more’ to look forward to. If they somehow survived this ordeal, Obi-Wan solemnly swore to himself, he’d personally make sure no clone would be left to suffer at the hands of a master they had not chosen; whose will overrode their own, whose hand indicated their target and aimed their blaster. (And that included the Jedi.)

Instantly outnumbered by the brainwashed clones, the Jedi at the Senate were forced to evacuate as well - or, in most cases, meet their end. The survivors took shelter at the Temple, where the Jedi present (only a couple hundred, and a majority of them younglings, healers and non-soldiers) were faced with an arduous task – protecting their sanctuary from the eventual attack. Their current plan, Obi-Wan thought, was flimsy at best – while their strongest Force users combined their efforts to form a Force-field around the temple, a task team – for which Obi-Wan had been nominated – would attempt to escape the temple unscathed and deliver their single piece of evidence against the Chancellor to a trustworthy member of the Senate (Bail Organa’s name had come up a lot). The contents of the holo, while not exactly incriminating, would hopefully at least warrant a full
investigation on the deceitful Sheev Palpatine.

At the same time, three separate teams (mostly escaped field Generals) were tasked with locating the Chancellor and securing his swift arrest/death.

Obi-Wan knew that in their rapidly worsening situation, there was little room for hesitation. And yet, as he watched his fellow Jedi prepare for the attack, trainers herding their wobbly-legged younglings from room to room, and the strongest of their kind lifting their hands into the air in unison, calling upon their omnipresent protector - he felt that something was missing. Someone was missing.

And it was then that he was hit by a sudden realization.

“Master Yoda, we need to free Anakin,” Obi-Wan pleaded. "Please allow him to join me on my mission. Or at least defend the temple with the others.”

Mace stared at him incredulously, half-focused on aiding in the Force-field effort.

“Skywalker is staying in, Obi-Wan,” he answered in the Grand Master's stead. "And we're doubling the guard on the detention center.”

“Master Windu, Master Yoda – with all due respect," Obi-Wan had rehearsed this speech only once in his head, "Anakin may have made a mistake – he may have made many – but I believe his fate is not yet set in stone. I truly do believe he has the capacity for great good - but I also believe he has – “ It was all Obi-Wan could do not to swallow his next words - an admission of his own failure. “ – I believe he has it in him to turn against us, too. If we continue to treat him as our enemy – then that's what he will become. A self-fulfilling prophecy – as well as a self-unfulfilling one, as it were.”

“Obi-Wan,” Mace's tone was harsh, “I would have expected you to be more concerned with the bigger picture in these circumstances. You have made your partiality to your former Padawan abundantly clear, if that was intention. I, however, am a pragmatist. Have you forgotten? Our only piece of evidence against Palpatine involves Skywalker as well.”

“Doomed himself, your student has.”

- 

The Jedi Temple detention center was supposedly Force-proof, and Anakin found himself wishing it were so. Following his forced separation from Padmé, he'd even been moved to a more secure cell, and chained by the wrists to the wall – deemed too dangerous and unstable for the standard accommodations – and yet, he suspected, had either of those counter-measures actually worked, it might have been a blessing. Now and again, without warning, he would find himself gasping, hyperventilating; feel shivers running down his spine, nausea in his stomach. Horrid images would flash past his vision, indistinct noises fill his ears.

Something was happening, but he didn't know what – no one would tell him what.

They'd taken Padmé and confined him here, powerless…

Powerless?

Anakin started and turned his head back and forth. Now he was hearing voices.

I think if you truly wanted to, you could break those chains and escape.
Anakin desperately squinted into the surrounding darkness, the cuffs clinking above his head as he did. The walls were still gray, he was still alone.

*Release young anger. They took your wife from you and confined you here.*

Anakin deduced the voice must be his own.

*Embrace your hatred. You hate them. You hate them all.*

He felt something heaving up within him, almost of its own accord. Anakin tried to fight it, his features creasing under the building pressure.

*The Jedi ruined your life. You were ever so close to claiming your freedom, finding your true purpose, and they took it away.*

Anakin's head hurt. The fight proved futile, he couldn't stop himself, he felt his veins flaring up with an inescapable fiery surge, his fists clenching tighter above his head, pulling against their bonds –

*They took everything from you.*

He felt the fire rising up to his chest, into his throat, he wanted to scream but he was still fighting –

*But you can still be free. Release your true power. The power of the –*

A silent eruption enveloped him. For what seemed like minutes – hours – lifetimes – he couldn't hear or sense anything.

Then – panting, exhausted, disoriented – Anakin snapped back to the present, reality building itself anew around him – yet so drastically transformed that for a moment, Anakin hardly recognized his surroundings at all.

His hands were free, the chains broken at his feet, and he was standing.

The walls were gone, crumbled and collapsed onto the hard gray floor – and the door was open.

Anakin hesitantly crept into the hallway – only to almost trip on two motionless bodies sprawled out only steps from the doorway. In his haze - and subsequent shock - he could just identify them as temple guards – now just a clutter of masks and cream white, orphaned lightsaber pikes fallen to their sides.

Anakin raised his eyes and gazed down the hallway – and at every door there lay another lifeless heap of white. He slowly brought his hand to his mouth, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Did I… did I do this?”

“My boy – you have done well.”

-“*In beauty, all equal; but only one of them most special; dearest, best loved, most sublime, for ‘tis the one that’s mine; to keep, to cherish, and to find; in the night, in the shadows, in the pitch black; in the moons and in the stars; until you, my dearest, come back.*”
Obi-Wan tentatively reached out into the city-lit night and was immediately halted by an invisible barrier. He’d only had a few hours to practice the technique that would allow him to pass through the Force-field – which was easier to maintain than it was to re-create – but he’d always been a quick learner. According to Master Yoda, both the field and the passthrough gate were abilities only available to the light side of the force, which for some reason gave the Jedi heart. The myth about the dark side being more powerful than the light was nothing but Sith propaganda.

Preparing to perform the trick, Obi-Wan peered into the nocturnal cityscape, reached into the Force as far as he could from the glaring obstacle before him. He couldn’t help that old nagging feeling – it was too quiet. The invisible wall, he’d been told, would render those on the inside near-indiscernible as well - but truthfully he’d only chosen the most obvious exit because if anything, there was more going on in his immediate field of view on this side of the temple. Even through the field, he could sense clone patrols prowling through the city, a distinct sense of danger lurking at every corner. But no matter where he looked, there were still no signs of any incoming attack at all, air or ground; and he was too much of a realist to believe that to be an oversight on the enemy’s part. Other than the lack of guards in the temple grounds, there was nothing suggesting that the newly outlawed residents weren't home. Did they just plan to starve them out?

Extending his both hands, Obi-Wan concentrated on the barrier and gradually felt it grow thinner under his touch - but over and over, the field would repel him back, and he just couldn't seem to tear an opening. Obi-Wan sighed.

Mace and Yoda’s harsh words about Anakin had not helped him gain any sense of clarity or closure on the matter. He simply could not stop thinking about his stupid, naive, young and impressionable student; alone in that cell, abandoned and miserable. He dreaded what his future would hold. His expulsion from the Order was little more than a matter of formality, that much was for certain.

So much for that promise to Qui-Gon, not that it meant anything to anyone but himself. So much for the prophecy – not that it had ever brought anything but the faintest of comforts and a world of pressure on the callow shoulders of its Chosen hero. Never once had those ancient words saved him from suffering, never once given him protection.

Once upon a time he’d had Ahsoka, and - Obi-Wan could only hope - he still had Padmé. But within the Order, his own ‘true family’, Obi-Wan had been his student’s sole protector, his only defender – and now he had failed. There was little point in denying their attachment now. Well, he’d fooled everybody long enough with that perfect Jedi act. In the end, he supposed his trickster reputation was far better deserved – he’d actually managed to trick himself for a while. But now Master Yoda knew, Windu knew, he had no doubt everybody knew. And he knew. His love for his student ran deeper than any learned façade. Deeper than the Code, the rules, his identity as a Jedi or his devotion to the Republic. Deeper even than any romanticized memory of someone long gone.

He could only wish Anakin knew – but he doubted he did.

Had it all been for nothing, he wondered. All those times they'd saved each other, time and time again, against the most unimaginable of odds? All those times he'd zoomed to the opposite end of the Galaxy for him? In the end, did Anakin still think he'd only done so out of a sense of duty, because the Council said so, because he wanted to mock him for his failures or win a childish bet?
Would he ever know?

Would they execute him?

Obi-Wan opened his eyes as he finally felt a fissure in the wall, and threw himself through. But barely had he sprinted ten steps into the cold night, gone over the escape route in his head, when he stopped – for a moment he didn't have – and spun on his heel.

He couldn’t leave Anakin. He just couldn’t.

He had a bad feeling.

He was going to set him free.

He didn't know how, but –

That was as far as he got in formulating a plan before he abruptly felt himself being yanked back by the neck by a disembodied grip, his head hitting hard stone as he landed on his back. Hand instinctively groping for his lightsaber, he heard it clattering to the ground as the invisible hand jerked him to his feet – and two corporeal ones seized him from behind. A crimson blade was placed above his collarbones.

"I believe we're headed the same way."

Obi-Wan tried to crane his neck back, even though he had no desire to look at the foul creature to whom the croaky voice belonged; only seeing a vague glimpse of pallid skin cloaked in inky black attire. His breath hitched momentarily as he caught the rotten smell of the dark side exuding off his assailant, no longer hiding behind a mask of manipulations and mass approval.

"I'm not moving," the Jedi declared. "You're just going to have to kill me now."

"I would most certainly like to," answered the vile voice, as its owner shoved him forward, quite literally Forcing him to eat his defiant words. "You've proved quite the survivor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and indeed, it is out of respect for your resilience that I’m letting you breathe still."

"You're making me blush, but I’ll die before I let you into our sacred temple."

"Worry not, for I will be sure to honor your death wish after you’ve taken me to my prize."

Sidious had now marched him right back to the edges of the Force field. Before Obi-Wan had time to even respond, he’d lifted his saberless hand above the Jedi’s head and –

Obi-Wan fell to his knees, his captor and saber prison following. The bastard was in his head, probing through his thoughts, his memories – no. This was something else. Obi-Wan had been subjected to mind-probing before but he’d never felt anything like this; it was like a million poisonous daggers shooting through his head, and instead of scouring, they’d come to thieve, to rob, take away something that they had no claim on –

His entire body screamed as he was thrust through the Force field once again, penetrating the unbroken barrier in a pitiful imitation of the intricate trick he’d just performed. Panting in sudden exhaustion, he heard Sidious following behind, then forcing his prisoner back up with his saber's assistance.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Master Kenobi. Now – I should like some guidance to the detention center. Do not try to trick me – it's a battle you'll lose.”
"I won't let you take him," Obi-Wan snarled.

"You will not lead me into the very nest of my greatest enemies? To my own potential destruction? You wish to hasten your own?"

Obi-Wan gazed at the imposing form of the grand temple, his vision tinted by the burning crimson beneath his chin.

"Play a game with me, Obi-Wan Kenobi," Sidious whispered to him, "Help me overcome our common obstacle – and I’ll give you a fair fight for your student. Light versus dark. If you’re victorious, he’s yours. If I’m victorious – well. Imagine it now, for you won’t be around to observe."

Obi-Wan quickly went through his options. There was no guarantee that this deceitful bastard would honor such a bargain, but then, the alternative would be his ‘hastened destruction.’ He had to think of something…

Sidious was already walking him up the long steps, not bothering to wait for an answer.

"Very well then. I’ll play your game… Sheev."

They ascended the steps in silence, the dark side of the Force stifling Obi-Wan’s senses, Sidious cackling quietly at his occasional gasps of breath. More than once, as they advanced across the courtyard, Obi-Wan regretted his deal with the devil and desperately tried to reach someone – anyone – inside the temple; to warn them, ruin his own plan, sacrifice himself – but it was as though the mere presence of Sidious rendered his attempts dead on departure, smothered every signal he tried to send.

Finally, at the entrance of the detention center – which, as Sidious had suspected, was an isolated, inconspicuous detail on the southwestern side of the temple – Obi-Wan stopped, crimson saber burning at his throat without having so much as grazed it. He sensed two temple guards directly behind the door.

"Now, Master Kenobi – I hear you specialize in mind tricks."

Obi-Wan wanted to gape at him, but he was still being forced into facing forward.

"…No."

"I can release you of our contract now, if you so wish."

Obi-Wan felt sick to his stomach. He had to wonder whether Sidious just wanted to humiliate him – if he truly required this much help in infiltrating the cell block. He tried to call for help again through the Force – only to have Sidious resort to old-fashioned ways and wring his arm behind his back. Obi-Wan yelped.

"I’ll know my way in, and I’ll take your castoff Padawan if you don’t want him."

Obi-Wan was ready to die of shame alone, but he tapped into the Force, closing his eyes, bumping into the well-protected minds of the entrance guards. It was time to see whether he’d ever perfected this technique, honed it enough to use against his equals. Something he’d never particularly wanted to find out.

"My associate and I are authorized to be here."
He sensed, rather than heard, the response, “He and his associate are authorized to be here.”

The door creaked open, the guards moving out of the way, and they’d only walked a few steps into the first hallway when Sidious demonstrated a trick of his own. With but a flicker of his hand, the two guards flopped down to the floor, unmoving.

The same pattern repeated several times as the Sith and the Jedi navigated through the prison – Obi-Wan would refuse to cooperate, Sidious would make him, or do the dirty work himself. Obi-Wan did have to suppose that at this point, he truly was just honoring the bargain. But the deal was just getting worse and worse - when they finally reached Anakin’s level, the max-security section, the Jedi felt his sensation of the Force disappearing near-entirely. He couldn’t sense Anakin, whether he was close or far or even present.

But Sidious simply strutted forward with perfect composure, yet wild aggression; still restraining his prisoner with one arm while taking down four more guards with a crackling bolt of lightning. While the remaining two still put up a fight, thunder flashing against their saber pikes, Sidious very purposefully shoved Obi-Wan to the floor, freeing his both hands and striking the guards down.

Obi-Wan tried to avert his eyes from the still-smoking bodies as he claimed a masterless pike from the floor. He scarcely dared to ask, “I don’t understand. This is a Force-proof prison. How – how can you possibly – “

“Oh, I’m sure your little tin barn here here can hold many a learner,” Sidious commented smugly, already twirling his saber. “But I am a Master. Know your enemy, as they say.”

With those words, he charged, right into Obi-Wan’s first, clumsy sort of parry. And it was the first and last clumsiness he was allowed. Sidious; swift, polished and precise, rained strikes on his opponent with an aggression well beyond his age. The analytical master duelist could hardly make any sense of his form; except that it was a combination of many, showing seemingly no consistency, let alone predictability; and certainly no mercy. Clearly Sidious had not toyed with his life only to let it slip between his fingers, he had come to collect, and was utterly confident, and perhaps rightly so, in the success of this endeavor. It didn’t take many narrow escapes for Obi-Wan to realize he was in over his head, all his famed defensive prowess pushed to the limit, the offensive virtually reduced to naught. It didn’t help that he was wielding a borrowed weapon - dual-wielding he could manage but double blades were something else –

Sidious now seemed to be taking note of his adversary's defense-based form, realizing that if the Jedi held out long enough, the chances increased that the cavalry would eventually arrive. He charged at him with a new boldness. Desperately escaping the red saber strike by strike, Obi-Wan did some swift calculations. So he was all but Forceless and badly outmatched. What did he have left?

His cunning. He needed to think outside the box.

Or perhaps… outside the building.

Staggering farther back into the hallway, toward the back wall – the other side of an exterior wall – Obi-Wan feigned exhaustion, allowed Sidious to push him farther and farther back. Sidious Force-shoved him against the wall, and Obi-Wan just barely escaped the fatal slash – which plunged deep into the supposedly lightsaber-resistant metals and hard stone, as though they were nothing but bantha butter.

“Impossible,” Obi-Wan marveled aloud, although in reality he was no longer surprised. What he’d witnessed had been no accident, but a manifestation of the corrupted kyber inside his red saber, that
same darkness that their pathetic man-built prison couldn’t contain. Sidious smirked, as though reading his thoughts.

But Obi-Wan was still a believer. He believed in the Force, in its universal magnificence, in the balance. Sidious had packed a neat bag of tricks but Obi-Wan had risked everything to come here, and he still intended to live. His skill might not be equal, but his will was more than a match.

He’d risked everything for Anakin, because he’d believed in his light. And he had to believe that even without him, the light would still be there.

He had to let him go.

Once more he let himself be pushed against the back wall. Sidious took the bait – relishing his overwhelming power, he slid his saber along the wall, letting its incomprehensible destructive power penetrate the structure. Obi-Wan could already feel the draft from outside. He evaded one strike after another, all the while keeping his back against the wall, letting Sidious glide his saber down his both sides, above his head, and finally below his feet, all the while feigning obliviousness. Then he pretended to notice, pretended it was too late to escape. Snickering under his breath, Sidious took a moment to admire the perfect rectangle he’d drawn on the wall, before Force-pushing it back and off the supporting structure and into the cold night, letting the winds take his framed masterpiece –

Obi-Wan fell and he fell and he fell, the wind rotating him as it willed, tunics fluttering as he plummeted toward an ungainly demise. But his grip remained tight on his stolen weapon, and as he temple wall flashed past his vision, Obi-Wan focused, calculated -

Mere meters from the unforgiving ground, Obi-Wan straightened his back, aiming with instinct – and thrust the ignited yellow blade into the exterior wall, picturing a bright light piercing his heart.

The energy blade caught in the structure, breaking the most fatal edge off his fall, and Obi-Wan held onto the hilt for dear life, revolving in the air and slowing down the momentum. Then his hands slipped and he was flung upward - greeting darkness as he hit the ground.

-

Anakin lifted his gaze from the bodies toward the approaching figure, swathed in black, sallow face distantly familiar –

“W-what…” he managed to utter from his utter incomprehension. His voice was shaking. “Why are you here, how did you –“

“Anakin – we must hurry.”

“Don’t! Don’t you take another step!” Anakin shouted, standing up, as Sidious looked at him questioningly. Anakin squeezed his eyes shut. Sidious had triggered something in him. He couldn't think clearly, he couldn't remember clearly, but he knew – “You. You put all those thoughts into my head. I know – somewhat – I know you’re behind all of this –” He motioned toward the bodies, “You made me do this –“

He tried to remember; facts, arguments, anything; but he only saw flashes, heard snippets –"

"He will make it so that you cannot refuse. You may scoff at me now, but he has bent you to his will before, and he will do so again."

“Your own apprentice betrayed you, you know,” Anakin blurted, grabbing at the first thread of
thought he could reach, “Dooku – he told me – you planned it all –“

Sidious nodded in acknowledgment, turning his back toward him. He then spoke calmly, “Well, you said it yourself, Anakin – Tyranus betrayed me. And truthfully, it came as no surprise when he did. You see, Tyranus and I – we never quite saw eye to eye. He never respected you as I do. You are, after all, my dear friend, Anakin, whom I've come all this way to rescue.“

Anakin scowled at him. He couldn't make much sense of the words. He didn't know what to believe anymore. And he only cared about –

“Padmé –“

“Yes. Why don't you come with me, Anakin, so we can go see her?”

“What did you do to her?!” Anakin screamed in momentary panic.

“I did nothing. Come now, Anakin, I simply wish to help you. The Jedi took her, remember?“

Anakin hesitated, eyes wandering to the bodies at his feet.

“Or you could stay here. It's your choice. They'll discover you eventually.“ Sidious dropped his gaze. “Along with your former Master.“

“…Obi-Wan?”

“Indeed. It seems, in your anger, you killed him.”
"What?"

Anakin’s mind went numb. He understood the words, but he couldn’t accept them. His knees wobbled beneath him. He desperately reached for his Master in the Force, tried to access their Force bond – but there was nothing there. He felt his head sway from side to side, turn into unbalanced lead. His eyes lost focus, shot from the crumbled walls to the lifeless guards and back to Sidious.

"Do you wish to see the body?" Sidious asked calmly.

"No!" Anakin screamed. He fell to his knees.

"It appears he was on his way to see you – and was caught in the line of fire.” The Sith Master gestured vaguely towards the end of the damaged hallway. A row of white-clad bodies led the way to the exterior wall, which, like his cell, was missing an enormous, shapeless chunk of stone and metal.

Stone and metal that he’d ripped apart…

"Sensing your anger – I followed the trail here."

"You – you killed him," Anakin sobbed, curling into a ball on the floor. Tears pricked his eyes as he cradled his head in his hands.

"Now, Anakin. I don't think you really believe your own delusions. A man of my age, against your youthful master?"

"Obi-Wan – I couldn't have –" He jolted to his feet, voice cracking, “It was you – ”

"And are you absolutely certain about that?"

Anakin stared at him, letting his eyes dry themselves on his cheeks. Flashbacks raced through his thoughts. Of anger, violence… suffering.

"… No."

"I can teach you how to harness your anger, Anakin, how to channel it. It is your greatest asset. Come with me. Allow me to teach you."

Anakin wiped his cheeks, “Why would I want to embrace such a power?”

Sidious slowly walked closer, “Because you already have, Anakin. I sense your contemplations and I understand you perfectly. Do you still not see? You are already on the dark side.”

Anakin averted his eyes. A pained gasp escaped his mouth.

Yeah, he supposed that made sense.

Anakin didn’t resist when Sidious pressed a waxen hand on his back, and led him to the end of the hallway, to the opening on the wall. Sidious slightly inclined him forward, and without wanting to, he looked. And there, down below – he would have recognized those tunics from klicks away.
"All that remains… is learning control."

He let himself be led outside and across the courtyard, down the steps and through some invisible wall, which hurt to pass through. It all passed by in a haze. Sidious’ hand was still on his back. Anakin could barely comprehend what he was saying.

Jedi. Enemies. Republic. Empire. So you see, Anakin, you have no Jedi Order to go back to. No friends left among those villains. Your Master may be lost but we can still save your wife –

He hated them. He hated them all.

- 

Not for the first or last time, Padmé Amidala found herself wondering if she’d done the right thing. If she’d truly done right by Anakin by leaving, if the journey ahead was the right step for the Galaxy. Ever determined not to look back, she just couldn’t banish away those lost blue eyes – where, no matter how she looked, she just couldn’t see her own reflection.

The computer already blared warnings about the impending exit from hyperspace – still minutes away. Her Jedi companions entered the cockpit through the blast door. Their faces seemed to indicate that a heavy conversation had just taken place.

"Senator Amidala, if I may,” Master Aayla Secura addressed her, sitting down next to Padmé on the passenger seat. Master Kit Fisto stood at the door, folding his arms and giving her a small smile.

“You may."

Padmé had met both of her protectors before, on a few occasions, always on official Republic business. She had heard nothing but praise about Master Secura’s respectable character and fierce battle prowess. Kit Fisto, most recently, she remembered from the mission to Mon Cala. Wistfully, she thought back on his jovial disposition and seemingly relaxed dynamic with Anakin.

“We’re under certain orders,” she finally spoke, “and we’ve been given a sufficient explanation of the nature of this assignment. However –“ she looked up at Fisto, “we still find ourselves a little confused. We were wondering if you could explain the situation in your own words.”

Padmé hesitated. To care about her perspective at all did them credit, but she didn’t really feel up to going into detail right now.

“You’re married to… Anakin,” Fisto helped her along, sounding almost cheerful.

“That is correct.”

Aayla traded glances with Fisto before smiling at her hesitantly, “We would offer our congratulations, but – “

“The Jedi Code.”

“No, we –“ Fisto began.

“We were told that your husband has turned to the dark side,” Secura stated.

Padmé froze for a moment. A sudden regret clutched at her heart.

She shouldn’t have left.
Clearing her throat, she masked her alarm like a professional, responding coldly, “And did they say the same thing about me?”

The two Jedi wordlessly consulted each other again.

“We are trying to determine that for ourselves,” Fisto replied. “Determine just what kind of protection you require.”

Padmé sighed, gazing out the window, where the blue strands of light swooshed past. The alarm sounded again. “…What you were told is what we're all trying to prevent from happening. I made a vow to love my husband through thick and thin. Your superiors couldn’t decide whether I am a co-conspirator or a poor little wife. I’m not sure I can help you further.”

“I find it difficult to believe that you are a traitor, Senator,” Fisto commented, with genuine warmth in his voice.

Padmé twisted around on her seat to look at him. “So I am not a captive? Simply an assignment?”

She locked eyes with Secura, who remained silent, sliding closer to the pilot’s seat as the final warning sounded.

“You’d better make up your minds soon,” Padmé announced, ignoring Secura’s attempts to claim the seat. “Because in a few minutes, we’ll land on Raxus – and I’m already a little late.”

“Raxus?” Fisto echoed.

“I changed our destination before we left,” Padmé declared triumphantly, grabbing the yoke in both her hands. “That’s the thing about hyperspace, looks awfully similar no matter where you’re going, doesn’t it?”


“A meeting with the Separatist Senate.”

“I don’t follow.”

“It’s time to open the peace negotiations.”

Not exactly pleased about this turn of events, but unable to stop the iron-willed Senator, the two Jedi Masters had no choice but to let her land the ship on a small, inconspicuous space port on the capital planet of the Confederacy. After much arguing, protests and bargaining (but very little explanation), she managed to convince the Jedi that her objectives were honorable, that she was here as a representative of the Republic – and promised that if either of them caught her doing anything that resembled treason, they had permission to kill her on the spot. To which Fisto responded with a nervous laughter – and reassured her that that was not the Jedi way.

Finally they agreed that Fisto stay behind and guard the ship, while Secura would pose as Amidala’s aide. Secura shook her head, but didn’t object when Padmé handed her a spare travel attire to wear. Two unarmed women would look much less threatening to the opposing side than a high-profile politician with two Jedi protectors. (That much she had learned on Utapau.)

At the landing platform, the Senator and her ‘aide’ were welcomed (a little coolly) by Separatist Senator Amita Fonti and her two aides. The party led them across the spaceport to their ship and they stepped aboard, all the while maintaining awkward small talk about the quality of their trip and the beauty of the surrounding nature. Once or twice, Secura remarked upon the extremely risky
Lush green landscape passed by the window as the ship flew to a remote location in the outskirts of the capital. Padmé felt a cautious sense of optimism. She’d had to pull some strings to bring about this meeting, given its unlawful nature and the short notice – but as it turned out, she still had some friends-of-friends on the opposing side, mostly through her late mentor Mina Bonteri. The five Senate members that she had contacted had, to her understanding, all voted yes to the last failed peace treaty.

Finally they arrived at a lovely little neighborhood on top of a grand green hill, overlooking a vast, idyllic valley – and the visitors were led to a nice-looking cream-colored house, evidently someone’s personal residence.

Inside awaited a cozy dining room, where all the summoned Senators were already seated, along with their aides. Some tea and cookies were served.

“Senator Amidala – welcome,” Senator Kushi said warily as he showed her to her seat. Secura, a little awkwardly, opted not to sit down. “I must say, we were quite surprised to receive this invitation from you.”

"Surely this is a part of the peace conference on Alderaan?” Senator Chopel guessed.

"Where, I might add, the Confederacy has little to no representation,” Senator Bluss scoffed. “Have you come to gloat, Senator Amidala? We’re days away from surrender, everybody knows that.”

“What do you want, Senator?”

Padmé made sure to acknowledge everyone at the table and take a polite sip from her cup before speaking.

“I have come to tell you the truth about this war.”

Padmé Amidala wasn’t a liar, far from it, but as politician she was used to masking her words behind a layer of decorum and discretion. Now, she held nothing back. With equal passion and composure, she told her fellow politicians everything she knew, from the very beginning; about her once-mentor Sheev Palpatine, how the balance of power had been drastically overturned during the Clone Wars, how only the faintest semblance of democracy remained. She offered insincere condolences for the passing of Count Dooku, the Separatist leader, outlined a very generalized view of his political ideals and the origins of the Separatist cause from the Republic’s point of view. In response she received wary nods and dull sounds indicating both agreement and disagreement.

Barely had she made it through her main thesis – the Clone Wars was a con and its respective opposing leaders its orchestrators – when the room suddenly erupted into accusations and heated protests.

“Senator Amidala, what you’re saying is utterly absurd!”

"We don't have to listen to this!"

“This is some new ploy!”

Padmé calmly waited for the yellers to be done until continuing.

“And what do I stand to gain from slandering our beloved head-of-state to my enemies, in this
quaint little house on a remote planet?"

The Separatist Senators exchanged glances, then fell silent, eyeing her warily.

“When was the last time any of you felt you had a say in this war?” Padmé inquired.

The Senators looked at one another again, until Senator Poeq spoke, “The Separatist cause is inherently more of a movement than a political system.”

“Yet it has a centralized government, which, if my memory serves, still held a measure of power at the beginning of the war. Do you remember when we tried to open peace negotiations during the first year of the conflict?”

The stark reminder of the disastrous results of said endeavor almost led to another shouting match, but Padmé’s soft and composed voice rang the loudest as she recounted the events. How she had collaborated with her old friend Mina Bonteri to introduce the peace negotiation bill. How it had passed by a far majority in the Separatist Senate. How Count Dooku had publicly endorsed the proposal – only for everything to fall through at the last minute, in the wake of Bonteri’s mysterious assassination and near-simultaneous attack on the Republic capital of Coruscant.

“Let me ask you this. Which one of you authorized that attack? How does a bill receive majority support from a governing body and then get withdrawn the next day, in the wake of two simultaneous unprovoked attacks? When both sides desired peace and were taking active steps toward that end?”

To her surprise, the Senators all took a pause for reflection, before Senator Fonti responded, “Well, we suppose you’re suggesting that someone would stand to gain from prolonging the war.”

"From the very beginning, this war has been a ploy by Chancellor Palpatine to amass power,” Padmé maintained. "And who do you suppose has been calling the shots on your side of the conflict?"

“War profiteers,” Senator Poeq answered immediately, yielding mildly shocked stares, to which he could only shrug. “It’s an open secret. Arms dealers, bounty hunters, criminals, traitors. We all know what sort of folk skulk around the Senate these days.”

“I have been wondering about the state of our finances,” Senator Fonti said. “Ever since the Republic got the banks… we don’t know where our money comes from.”

“And we don’t know where ours goes,” Padmé responded, “we only think we do.”

Bluss opened his mouth, but when Padmé gave him an expectant look, he withdrew back into his thoughts.

“The only reason we’re still fighting is because Palpatine has been holding all the strings. That peace conference is nothing but a charade, and I don’t even need to be present to tell you that the end goal is not peace. Far from it.”

Silence reigned over the table as the Separatist Senators considered Amidala's claims. Padmé and Secura exchanged looks. The Twi'lek Jedi seemed cautiously impressed.

“And what proof do you have of this?” Senator Bluss finally asked.

Padmé almost smiled. She had expected this question.
“I don’t. You do.”

“What?”

“Count Dooku, your leader, only passed away last week. Palpatine will not have had time to dispose of all the evidence yet. I suggest you hire a skilled individual to search all Dooku’s known bases and his personal residence. Trust me, I would do it myself, but whatever evidence I present to you will look suspect, and due to your connections, you’re in a far better position to conduct this investigation.”

“Skilled individual? You mean a bounty hunter.”

“Sure. Let them profit from the pursuit of peace for a change. Believe me, I have tried to end this war through lawful means. Even then, I had to start by breaking the law. Make no mistake, if we try to act through legal channels, we’ll all end up like Bonteri. I simply came to inform you of the truth. If you don’t act, I’ll hire someone myself. One way or another, I will have proof, and when I do, I hope you remember what I’ve told you when we open peace negotiations proper.”

Padmé opted not to linger on Raxus, even though she knew she had dropped quite a weighty bomb on her hopefully-allies, and there would have been a thousand more discussions to be had and apologies to trade. She knew that these wishes were still premature, and she simply could not risk rumors spreading about her continued stay on the capital planet of the Confederacy.

Nevertheless, she had meant what she had said. She had taken a chance on Bonteri’s past allies, but if they should fail to act with reasonable immediacy, she would take matters into her own hands. She already had a list of people to contact once they landed on the neutral planet of Caluula, their original destination. Starting with Obi-Wan, who would have news about Anakin, hopefully only good ones. Still, she would have to tread carefully. Not for her own sake, not even Anakin’s – but for the sake of her newly outlawed friends.

A great heaviness hung over the cockpit as the three passengers listened to the transmission radio, alternating between additional news reports from Alderaan, additional news reports from Coruscant, and fragmented distress signals and status reports from the field. Amid all this channel-jumping, the core substance remained much the same: dead Jedi Generals, escaped Jedi Generals, wanted Jedi Generals. Fabricated accusations, anti-Separatist propaganda, hollow promises of coming peace.

While her Jedi protectors mourned their fallen comrades, Padmé deliberated how this sudden turn of events appeared in the enemy’s eyes. And what kind of game was Palpatine playing, by declaring her a victim of the Jedi and his ‘dear friend’? Clearly he had something in store for her still, and she feared it was in the form of martyrdom. Still, he had miscalculated: her Jedi captors had given her a long leash, and she intended to make full use of it.

“I’m sorry,” she commiserated as Master Plo Koon’s death was announced, and the two Jedi closed their eyes and squeezed each other’s hands. General Koon had stayed behind with his troops on Felucia, liberating entire villages from what remained of Grievous’ armies, before graciously accepting his fate at the hands of his unwilling assassins.

“Senator, we’re sorry,” Secura responded, glancing at Fisto, who only nodded, “We knew this was coming, but we – we thought we still had time. But now we’re targets too, to both sides, no less. This will entirely change how we approach this assignment.”

“This is not how I wanted to introduce you to Naboo fashion, Master Fisto,” Padmé jested with a sad smile, gesturing at the disguise that Secura had kept on. “All joking aside, we’ll figure out a
plan once we’ve landed. But I do fear that the two of you may be in greater danger than I am.”

As it turned out, Palpatine was not the only one with miscalculations. As they jumped out of hyperspace, the first sight greeting the crew was not the faintly hazel orb known as Caluula, but an entire squadron of large warships floating in perfect formation.

“What?” they all gasped in unison. “How –“

Secura, on the pilot's seat, wasted no time in employing evasive maneuvers, while Fisto sat behind the gun and fired at their ambushers. But Padmé studied the warships closely as they put up their shields and began moving toward them. She had seen this exact formation before. Only now did she recall clearly.

Vanqor. Teckla. Typho.

Dooku.

They were here for her.

Her suspicion was all but confirmed when the enemy ships opted for light, easily avoidable fire; seemingly guiding them towards an escape – only to then drastically change directions and surround them. Padmé tried to shout warnings and aggressive suggestions. She had witnessed all of this before, and it was frustrating to see it unfolding and working yet again.

But their escape route was already blocked, and their ambushers, instead of continuing on the offensive, projected a tractor beam toward them from the largest ship. The small freighter was caught in the snare immediately.

They intended to let their captives live – for now.

At least one of them.

Padmé racked her brain as Secura continued to try to struggle them free. Her memories of her first capture were still hazy. But Typho had come up with an idea – and they'd almost broken free. Only – it had been too late then –

Padmé cast a panicked glance toward the window as they were drawn closer and closer, minutes away from the warship devouring them whole. And then she remembered.

“Senator!” Secura called after Padmé when she abruptly sprung from her seat. “Where are you going?”

“I’m taking the escape pod,” she announced, darting through the blast door to the back of the ship.

“No, Master Fisto, it's surrender,” Padmé clarified, opening the pod and checking her equipment before getting in. “If Palpatine wants to play games with me, then so be it. The impact from the release will yank you free, and the pod will distract the ships long enough for you to make the jump. Promise me you'll save yourselves.”

The Jedi protested vehemently, now leaping from their seats in a final attempt to stop her.

“If we get pulled any closer, it won’t work,” Padmé explained, almost apologetically, before the door whipped shut behind her. “May the Force be with you.”
With that, she activated the pod and zoomed off.
The scorching twin suns had set hours ago, and would rise again all-too soon. If only the chilly night could have offered even a moment’s comfort, but it really was just a different kind of menace. The piercing northern wind blew in from the glassless window, carrying along grains of sand and dust and other itchy things into the darkened hovel.

Anakin rubbed his eyes with his little fists, then suddenly stopped and shot a significant look at his mother, who was wrapping a sparse blanket around him. He looked her squarely in the eye through the midnight dimness – these weren’t tears that he was wiping, just some muck, eniki? Shmi returned a knowing look, arching her brows, but Anakin wanted to make sure, and studied her weary features a while longer. He felt bad about having woken her up, taking away from what little sleep she could get, but then, she always had a knack for sensing these things. Somehow, she always seemed to know his troubles even before he did.

“What is it, Ani? Bad dream again?”

Anakin shook his head, but he figured it was better to just tell her. It wasn’t really that big of a deal, because he was a big boy now. But then, his mother always knew the right thing to say, she was always so wise. One time, she had even explained the difference between ‘wise’ and ‘intelligent’. Then she had asked Anakin if he’d rather be wise or intelligent when he grew up. It seemed like she really wanted him to say ‘wise’, but then, she’d said that one had to be intelligent to be able to build droids and podracers and spaceships. So he’d answered ‘both’. She’d really liked that answer.

“No, it's just,” the boy began almost airily. “Today, right? I was supposed to finish that engine today… actually, Watto said he needed it 'yesterday.’” That didn’t make a whole lot of sense, Anakin thought.

“Oh?” Shmi gently rubbed his shoulder under the blanket. The blanket felt scratchy against his skin. It was a very old blanket, but it still smelled alright. “You've been working so hard, though. And when it's finished, I just know, no competing engine will be able to match its speed.”

“Well,” Anakin shrugged, “that's not what Watto said, Mom.”

“What did he say, then?”

“He called me lazy and stupid.” His eyes glazed over and stared at the crumbling wall when he added, “And he said, if I don't work harder… he will separate us, Mom.”

“Oh, Ani…” She stroked the side of his arm. The blanket might be itchy, but it still felt good when she did that.

“I used to ignore him when he said that,” Anakin went on bravely. “But he's kinda been saying that a lot, lately.”

“Well…” Through the darkness, he could see her giving that 'between us' look, warning him not to blab to anyone, even the other kids. But he was a big boy, he knew that. And he was smart, too. “It's cruel of him to say something like that. But I don't think he means it. He knows we – he knows we make a good team.”

Anakin nodded, because of course, he knew that, too. He felt a little silly now. Maybe he should have just ignored it after all. But –
“But if he – if he did separate us – it's not like we could do anything to stop it,” he reasoned.
“Because – “

His mother was silent for a while, gazing up at the ceiling in deep thought. Then she twisted around and sat cross-legged on the small bed, patting the thin covers to urge Anakin to sit opposite her the same way. So he did.

“Ani – do you remember the poem? The one I used to sing to you when you were…” She grinned warmly. “…little? I made up my own melody and everything.”

“Yeah, I remember it,” Anakin nodded.

“Why did you tell me to stop singing it? Is it because you're a big boy now?”

“I am a big boy now,” Anakin argued, a little offended. He’d thought they were agreed on that.

“Of course you are,” she laughed. “Oh, I know. Is it because it's about love? You know, around here, plenty of things are advertised as love that have nothing to do with love.”

Anakin’s nose scrunched up. He had an idea what she meant, maybe. He thought, sometimes, love could be a little embarrassing – like when his mom would kiss him on the forehead before he went off to work and those older boys saw – but it really wasn't the worst kind of love, far from it. Embarrassing love was still good, he thought. Not like ugly love, or forced love. She probably meant those kinds.

“In the poem, you see – two people who love each other are separated. Maybe mother and son – or – well, it can be about any kind of love. Of course, the good kind.”

“Oh-huh.” He supposed it wouldn’t be the worst thing if she started singing it again. He wouldn't really mind hearing it now. It was actually quite nice, even if it was a little sad. Sometimes he even hummed it to himself when he was working.

“But even while separated, they still love each other and cherish each other. Remember each other – and believe that someday, they will be reunited again. And until then – ”

“They look at the stars,” Anakin recalled.

“That's right.” She gazed out the window up at the deep blue sky. “Isn't that what you always do, little dreamer?”

“Yeah, because I want to fly up there,” Anakin whooped with sudden enthusiasm.

“That's right.”

“And, and, Mom, you're coming, too, of course. And oh, oh, and don't worry, because I will build just the best and the fastest starship. With the fastest engine.”

Shmi smiled at the idea. Then she sighed softly, was silent for a while again, before asking, “And… do you remember the first verse?”

Anakin nodded. It was about ‘beauty’, though, so he didn’t really want to say it out loud. Beauty could also be quite nasty and bad, especially in places where there was nasty and bad love. (Although, like his mother said, it was probably not love at all.) Apparently there were many kinds of beauty, too. She saw beauty in his heart, she often said. Beauty in what he built.
He still didn’t quite understand, but it sounded nice when she said that. He thought, maybe his mother was the only one who really knew what words meant. Even in Huttese, which didn’t have a whole lot of nice words.

“Well,” she said, “I think it might be slightly untrue. ‘In beauty, all equal.’ Especially if we’re talking about the beauty of one’s heart. But I think it’s a lovely thought. And I think if you, Ani, can make this world a little more equal – if share your heart’s beauty with everyone. The poem may be about a special loved one, but only so many people can be special to us. Our compassion belongs to all.”

“Even Watto?” Anakin questioned, and Shmi tilted her head and pursed her lips.

“I'll put it like this. What would you do, if you were in his place, and he was your slave?”

“Yuck!” Anakin cried in disgust. “I would ditch him and go do my own thing.” He then thought about it again and added, “And then, I would come back, and free the other slaves.”

She gave him that knowing look again. These words were not to leave this hovel.

“You know what, Anakin? I really think you will someday.”

Sidious’ lip curled up with satisfaction – but his forehead crumpled into a frown. Skywalker was his, but he still needed to exercise caution if he wanted to keep him. True, the boy had willingly followed him out of his Jedi prison, but the pledge remained implied, unspoken and unsettled. And there still remained a few variables, unforeseen complications – the worst and most dangerous kind.

Tyranus' 'betrayal' was not one. It was charming, to be sure, but ultimately of little consequence. He did not care what lies or truths Tyranus had fed into Skywalker's head, he'd already mastered that art long ago. He had years, decades of Mastership to look forward to, plenty of new ideas to replace the old. And in killing Tyranus, Skywalker had already made his choice.

Still, Sidious did not much appreciate the material destruction of his property. He'd given highly specific orders for a reason – he needed Skywalker believing himself weak, desiring the dark side to complete him; all the while growing stronger and more worthy.

And he didn't know what sort of fixation Tyranus had developed with Skywalker's right arm, but the removal of the cybernetic limb and the hasty insertion of a makeshift one had left his new apprentice clumsy and haphazard in his movements – weak in ways that were not beneficial to the current stage of his plan. At this time, Sidious feared, he was in no condition to duel Jedi Masters, much less stage an invasion into the temple. Sidious would have preferred to bathe him in bloodlust, seal his fate with a crimson handprint. Instead, he would have to settle for something a little less theatrical – but no less effective.

(As for their future partnership, however – it was something to consider. The boy was bursting with potential, a son of the Force itself, almost too powerful for his own good, and most certainly for whomever held his leash. He’d have to find a way to rein him in, constrain him on his own terms, create a pair of shackles he couldn’t escape.)

Then there was the small matter of Padmé Amidala. Now this called for a gentle touch, before the fatal blow could be struck. Sidious knew he'd taken a gamble in framing Skywalker for Kenobi's death, and he believed that ultimately, the rewards would outlive the risks. But at present, the
wound was still fresh, festering, and it was possible that deep down, Skywalker knew the truth. Sidious was under no illusions, he might be holding the leash, but he knew what was tied to the end of it. If Amidala were to perish now, there was no set-up convincing enough to shift the blame. Skywalker would turn on him – and Sidious would have to strike him down. And what a waste that would be.

Thankfully, once again, he already had a trump card ready. He had not made empty boasts to Obi-Wan Kenobi. He was a Master of the Dark Side. He had studied the dark arts far past graduation. Only when he’d exhausted his late Master’s knowledge had he finally let him sleep. He’d learned and perfected every ability he’d read about, been taught, invented, imagined. And he’d known, someday, he would reap the rewards.

Rather than slay her, he would save her.

He could see it unfolding before his eyes, clear as Naboo’s waters.

"So it’s true!"

"This is just another ploy of his. He’s trying to back you into a corner – “

He could hear their glass hearts shattering, see their entwined fingers torn apart. He could see a hand lifting and clenching into a grip.

"But I’ve already – ”

"Anakin, you're going down a path I can't follow. Please, just come with me now."

He could see her rejecting her own salvation.

"Don’t you see, I can use him! Just like I planned. Eventually my powers will surpass his. Then we won’t need him anymore."

“You really trust this man. You really trust him, Ani? This is the side you’ve chosen?"

Her death by his hand.

- 

Padmé Amidala had been awake for some time, studying the shapes of the lights on the ceiling.

They were too bright. She closed her eyes. Her head hurt, and it hurt to think, but she did remember the collision.

She’d actually had a decent chance with the pod. She’d had good momentum, the move had been unexpected by the enemy, and Caluula had been close. She could have made it to the ground. She had been so close.

Then… the world had gone black.

She should have been frustrated, berating herself. But she’d expected this. And whatever she knew to expect, whatever the Jedi could only vaguely suspect; Sidious had probably foreseen long ago, then arranged to happen. She thought about that mediocre bouquet of flowers in her office, where she had been questioned; their bountiful blossoms and long stems. That is where the bug had been, she now realized. Oh, they were amateurs.

Her thoughts fluttered about hazily in her head. Was she dying? She couldn’t quite tell. It was as
though she'd already been knocking on death's door, but no one was home to open.

Anakin could still come through, she thought, even without her. She had to believe he would. He had so much still to give; such a tender, loving heart. It would have been wasteful to spend all that love on her; Anakin still loved the Galaxy, he would rise to the occasion as its champion.

He would see through Sidious’ lies. He had nothing to give Anakin that he could want.

- 

Anakin jolted awake, heaving deep, raspy breaths. This time he knew without a shadow of a doubt. What he'd seen was the truth. Padmé was in pain. Her angelic features contorted in agony.

He took in his blurry surroundings, sweaty curls whisking from side to side. He’d fallen asleep. How could he have betrayed himself so? Chancellor Palpatine’s murky office slowly took shape around him. A plush red sofa squeaked under his weight. A restless wind howled through the shattered, half-covered window. An awful stench wafted into his nostrils: the cushions reeked of – of vomit.

Force senses still drowsy, he nearly fell off the sofa when the Chancellor sauntered into the office in a leisurely manner. Muscle memory kicking in, Anakin instinctively summoned his newly stolen weapon from the floor. He ignited one yellow blade with a hiss, marched over to Sidious and pointed it at his sallow neck.

“Where’s Padmé? You told me you know where she is.”

Anakin glared at him as he edged the blade closer. Only then did he notice something odd about Sidious’ behavior: quite indifferent to his threats, his eyes were closed, as though in concentration, one hand held up, fingers clenched taut as though gripping something.

“What is this?” Anakin demanded.

“Anakin,” Sidious addressed him, yellowish eyelids still half-drooping, “I must say, I am disappointed. Is this my thanks for helping you, for offering to teach you? For welcoming into my Empire as my trusted apprentice? Is this how you repay me?”

"You told me you knew how to find -"

“Padmé, yes. I understand. When will you finally believe that I am on your side? I have been patient, Anakin. When will you start showing respect?”

Anakin scowled at him silently. At length he said weakly, withdrawing the golden blade ever so slightly, “I’ve seen her, she’s… she’s suffering, she’s – she’s dying – “

“Mm,” Sidious mumbled, with an odd satisfaction in his voice. “You want to save her, protect her. Keep her yours forever.”

“Yes!” Anakin cried in desperation.

“Hm,” he murmured again, closing his eyes for a excruciatingly long moment before speaking again. His upheld hand appeared to shake a little, before freezing in place again. “My boy, I have seen her too. And the good news is, she is on her way here – to you – as we speak.”

“What’s the bad news?” Anakin panicked.
“Her incompetent Jedi protectors allowed her to fall victim to a grave accident.” He licked his lips as Anakin stared at him, stock still and horrified. “She was on the brink of death – descending into the depths of the Netherworld – when I took it upon myself to interfere with fate.”

“What?”

“Come closer, dear boy.”

Anakin reluctantly put down the saber and obeyed. Sidious lowered his claw-like hand, gestured for Anakin to touch it.

Anakin’s jaw dropped with awe and fright.

“Padmé!” he gasped, withdrawing his hand, only to immediately reach back toward the invisible grip. “What - what is this – “

“Just a little something I learned from my own late Master,” Sidious explained calmly. “A life for a life. An inferior, insignificant life… for a beloved one. Is that not a fair trade?”

Anakin looked away. A part of him was repulsed. Padmé's very life, her beautiful and precious soul rested on Sidious' palm; was trapped in his disgusting, foul hand -

And still he remained in awe, was lost in a trance as he raised his widened eyes again.

"Well? Am I not doing you a great kindness? Are you not impressed? Will you not allow me to teach you… as your Master?"

Anakin's knees dropped of their own accord, hitting the floor with a hollow thud.

"Please… just let me see her with my own eyes - in front of me, alive. Then - then I will do anything you ask. I swear to you. Just please - please, don't let her die.”
Anakin kept his eyes to the floor as silence reigned and his own words echoed in his ears and throbbed in his head. At the back of his throat, a fresh mouthful of nausea was churning.

"Is that a pledge I hear… my young apprentice?" Sidious queried.

"Yes… my Master."

It took the last of Anakin’s self-mastery to form out the words individually. They hung in the air like suspended blaster fire; surreal, abstract and harmless, until his shields dropped, the Force relented, and they pierced his skull and sunk into his consciousness. So this was it. Everything up until now had been leading to this moment, the stars above aligned for a common purpose, a final inevitability. A moment of resignation and submission.

Dooku had been right. Anakin had known. Padmé had known.

They had all known, and yet, in the end, here he was. And he was tired of fighting. All was lost. The Jedi Order was no more, with or without his help, no matter on which side he stood. This man had designed his whole future for him, and in the end, it was the only future that was left. His only future was with Padmé, and this man held power over his wife's life and death.

At the same time, underneath Anakin's submissive exterior, a strange jealousy was burning.

He should have been the one holding her life in his hand. He should have been the Master.

"Good, good…” Sidious whispered, arm still outstretched and hovering about in the air, which Anakin only saw in a glance as he lowered his gaze again. “I was worried you were going to make things hard for yourself.” Studying the pattern of the carpet, Anakin realized his palms were pressed against the fabric as well as his knees. “In fact… before we begin, let us correct some misconceptions that you still seem to harbor, young one.”

In his peripheral vision, Anakin saw a yellowish hand summon the stolen lightsaber pike from the floor, a billowing black sleeve sweeping past. Then he felt his chin being gently lifted up by the touch of cold metal, as the Sith Master held the long hilt to his new pupil’s throat, slowly craning his neck uncomfortably far back.

"Look at me,” the Sith Master demanded, though Anakin barely could. "You really think you can dictate conditions to me? I reunite you with your wife, then you do as I say?”

His wild, gleaming yellow eyes shone expectantly. Head forced still, Anakin's irises shifted to his outstretched hand.

”…No, Master.”

Sidious mumbled in acknowledgement, letting the hilt glide across the air, Anakin's chin and gaze following obediently in its wake. Then he released him with a casual whack across the cheek, and brought the weapon to his cybernetic arm instead.

“Your new arm appears to be poorly constructed.”
Anakin’s half-flesh arm gave a sudden spasm. Given the disproportionate amount of time he’d spent in shackles directly following its attachment, Anakin had given very little thought to his new cybernetic extension, but ‘little’ was still enough to have convinced him that the premature installation had been extremely ill-advised, and had possibly just hindered the healing process of the limb. There was a constant burning sensation settled around the joint of metal and flesh, with sudden, sharp stabs of pain cutting through the limb at the slightest shift of position. To say nothing of the abrupt cramps, involuntary movements and at other times, sudden numbness.

"With respect, my Master…” Anakin stopped as he realized the words no longer posed a struggle, but skidded off his tongue like pain-induced curses. Though it might only be a force of habit – somewhere in the back of his mind, his former Master and friend still loomed large. Anakin pushed him farther back as his lips went through the motions. “Nothing I make is ever poorly constructed. But I think… I think I might have neural damage… from my last encounter with your former apprentice.”

"Indeed,” Sidious mused, again with that strange note of satisfaction in his voice. “Well, that will not do. Perhaps we should see about having that entire arm replaced. And if we find serious damage… perhaps also have a look at your spinal cord… and your brain. After all, we need to find a way for your bodily vessel to… channel your powers. So as to prevent any more unfortunate accidents.”

Cold shivers crawled across Anakin's skin, but he knew there was only one acceptable response.

”…Yes, Master.”

"There is nothing to fear,” Sidious reassured his student. “A powerful Sith you will yet become… Lord Vader.”

Anakin nodded in submission, as though in response to a simple greeting. The name didn't particularly mean anything to him, all these formalities signified very little.

“Thank you, Master.”

“Come, your first task awaits you. To the Imperial dungeons.”

A cold numbness settled over Anakin as he let himself be led out the room and through the ornate hallways of the Senate. At each passing door a pair of clones stood guard, and they saluted the Master and apprentice as they stalked past. Anakin looked away, wishing he were wearing a robe, or a hood - or a different face.

He waited until they were outside before asking anything.

“‘Imperial’?” he echoed.

A little smirk rose on Sidious' chalky face. “Tomorrow,” he chortled. “Tomorrow, the Republic will be reborn as the First Galactic Empire.” He led Anakin across the courtyard and to his private transport, where his chauffeur was waiting. As they embarked, Sidious turned to Anakin again, his voice darkened, “I was hoping you would have been paying more attention, Lord Vader. I have shown you great favor, but you must understand that my visions for the future extend far beyond your training, and I hope you will treat your duties as my chosen apprentice and an Imperial officer with the appropriate commitment and integrity.”

“Of course, Master.”

The pair took their seats and the ship shot to the night sky. Anakin studied Sidious intently as the
Sith Master's eyelids sagged once more, his upheld hand slightly rocking from side to side.

Perhaps Sidious was right. Perhaps Anakin still wasn't thinking big enough. The inception of the Empire would signify the end of the war, bring a new order to the Galaxy. Perhaps, serving at his side, he could change things. Padmé would still serve as a Senator. Perhaps there was a way to make this right.

Maybe the dark side was the answer. Maybe that was what he’d been missing all along. He'd never belonged with the Jedi, that much was clear. Long before declaring him a Sith with ceremony, they’d been accusing him of that very crime from day one. Anger leads to hate, and so on. Perhaps they'd feared the unknown. Or perhaps they'd just wanted to keep him on a leash, tie him down with invisible bindings that would ultimately crystallize into shackles. Was anger not just another source of power, untapped by those who would flaunt their moral superiority, and now stood defeated by their lessers?

A dark blur of thoughts hung over Anakin as they arrived at one of Coruscant's many detention facilities. Sidious favored him with a horrid smile as he led him into the bleak building. Helmet-clad clones once again saluted them at every corner. Anakin continued to avert his gaze as an accusing shriek tore through his head.

Finally, they came to a halt before a cell door in the very back of a long, heavily-guarded corridor. Sidious handed his apprentice a holopad, which Anakin accepted with some dread.

“These traitors were caught trying to smuggle forged evidence to treason-minded members of the Senate,” Sidious explained, indicating the cell. “They were also participants in the Jedi uprising and attempted coup of the Senate. I want you to interrogate them, Lord Vader. Here you will find a full list of war crimes of which they and the Jedi Order are guilty. I will need a full confession. Once you've acquired it… you know what to do.”

Before Anakin could react, the cell door had flung open, hitting the supporting wall with a bang, and he found himself staring into the eyes of a dozen or so Jedi, shackled to the back wall in a neat row.

“Or perhaps you still require explicit instructions?”

Padmé had fallen asleep to naive, too-optimistic thoughts, but she had not expected to wake up again. She had hoped, but not expected. She was wiser than that now.

Had she only been wiser, she might have succumbed to oblivion's call after all. But a new sun had risen from the shadows and she was a woman born anew. The fog around her head had dispersed, and a new determination had lit ablaze in her chest. A distant, non-descript pain continued to rack her body, but she resolutely pushed it aside. Sitting up on the bed in one heedless motion, she looked around her surroundings for the first time. It looked to be a standardized medbay – or it would have, had the clinical white room not been almost completely stripped of any actual medical equipment. To her right, a single gray door broke the pristine white of the wall, and next to it glowed a blue holo screen.

She scrambled up from the bed and very deliberately set her full weight to her right foot, and winced only a little. Declaring the ankle fully healed, she made to the door and assessed the screen. Predictably enough, the exit was code-locked. But interestingly, the screen gave no indication of what kind of code was required for entry. The screen was slightly old-dated technology, the letters on the screen of very simplistic design.
Pamé considered her odds. She could spend a lifetime guessing, with each passing hour bringing her closer to her eventual discovery. Or she could risk it all and never look back. From one of her covert missions, she remembered an 'emergency override' that only worked at some older medical facilities and certain other emergency-prone areas, where the need for aid sometimes took precedence over formal clearance. She took a deep breath as she drew a clenched fist back and braced herself.

The fist landed with a smash, shattering the transparisteel to a million useless shards. She winced as prickles of electricity licked at her fingers and rivulets of blood oozed from the fresh wounds. But the door had made a promising 'whizz' sound. She tore a piece off her sleeve-hem and wrapped it around her injured hand.

But on the other side of the door awaited not freedom, but an identical white, near-empty room.

And on a white bed in the center lay a being identical not to her - but to literal millions of others. Failing to notice the newcomer, he was twisting and turning across the mattress in evident agony. Pamé's had no time to lament her misfortune as she rushed to the clone's bedside. "Oh my gosh, are you okay?"

The clone gasped in surprise as he twisted to face her. "Senator Amidala!" He managed a shaky salute and an apologetic grimace, almost as though he wanted to stop suffering out of sheer reverence for her company. "Apologies, ma'am... I had no idea you were on board, ma'am..."

Pamé waved off his fussing, and as the patient tried to get up, she gently eased him back down. "What happened? Is there anything I can do?"

"Senator, thank you," the clone panted dismissively. "It's going to be okay, ma'am. I'm just... resting..."

"You can call me Pamé. What's your name?"

"Senator, I couldn't --"

"No, I insist."

"I'm... I'm Pluck," the clone answered with a pained smile.

"Pluck, it's nice to meet you."

Pamé extended her hand and the clone squeezed it firmly.

"Good to meet you too, Pamé."

That night, the Separatists made their last stand and launched a final strike against the Republic. Targeting the capital city of Coruscant; the sparkling, safe haven of statesmen and their soundly sleeping subjects, far removed from the seething battlefield; the shock was immediate and counter-efforts lacking at best. Anakin observed absently out the window as the horizon was painted red, fire and smoke melding with the first rays of morning.

The ship came to a halt above the Jedi temple, the Force-shielded sanctuary still standing tall amid the raging chaos. Sidious glided silently into the cockpit and laid a weighty hand on Anakin's
shoulder. Anakin did not recoil, but as the structure slid into full view, he promptly turned away.

“If the Jedi were true heroes, they would come out of their shelter and defend the city. But in the end, they do naught but desperately cling to their broken, meaningless legacy… of which there will soon be nothing left.”

Anakin was silent, which Sidious took as encouragement to continue.

“The crystal that we acquired some time ago has now been installed into the ship's gun system. However, judging by the test results…” Sidious' voice grew into a snarl. “It appears that the crystal, while truly mighty in its prime, only holds a… finite amount of power, the last of which I now fear has gone wasted on tests and trials. Our prized acquisition is at the end of its lifespan. According to my calculations, the remaining energy should still be enough to shatter the protective field around the temple… but the shard will likely self-destroy in the process. But we have to start somewhere, hm?”

Anakin heaved a sharp gasp. His mind shields were coming down with a crash.

This did not escape his master's notice. He slowly turned his leathery neck and stared until Anakin was forced to look into those analytical, alarming yellow orbs. “Your thoughts betray you, my apprentice. You hesitate? Why?”

It was a rhetorical question, for which Sidious evidently did not so much want an answer as he did a remedy. But he'd come to the wrong person. Had Anakin held the answers, to say nothing of remedies, he would have not stood here at all, staring into a hope-devoid sunrise. What he did have was time – not much, but just enough for a flicker of gnawing doubt and regret. A moment's silence was enough to invite unwanted thoughts and disrupting whispers in the Force.

“Anakin. I promise, I will not abandon you.”

“Obi-Wan…” Anakin uttered in a barely audible voice. But the Force carried his hushed tones to Sidious, while Anakin was still struggling to rebuild his barriers.

“Your former Master is dead, Lord Vader.”

“He… he cared about me.”

With some horror, Anakin realized his lips weren't moving, but his private pains and fears were leaking out to Sidious through the two-faced traitor known as the Force. For a moment, he almost panicked. There was no room for wavering now, no path left to turn back.

“That is a bold assertion to make of a Jedi.”

Anakin had rejected him then. Arms pinioned to his back, he'd kept screaming Padmé's name while Obi-Wan and Windu tightened their grips and struggled to bring him under control. In the hallway, Padmé had been singing the poem, only to be cut short when the door had slammed shut between them, and his sole comfort had been cruelly snatched away.

He did not care what Obi-Wan had to say. He did not care when he softly leaned toward his ear while he was still screaming and Windu was distracted. Anakin had scarcely even heard him.

“Anakin. I promise, I will not abandon you. Whatever happens – know that I care about you.”

And now he knew. Now he heard the words with perfect clarity, and he could not escape their tormenting gentleness.
“At times…” Anakin whispered. A naive, enduring hope had sparked in his heart, and he desperately wished it were gone. It would have made everything so much simpler. He had made his choice, he’d passed the point of no return. “I swear I can still feel him. I should have gone to him. I should have made sure!”

“Yes… you should have.”

Sidious’ voice was laced with disappointment, and he promptly gestured to the front of the ship, where two gunners were stationed and ready.

A sudden impact rocked the transport, knocking back both of the standing observers. Just barely keeping his balance, Anakin darted to the front window and peered down at the miniature city. The temple was still standing, he was still standing – until a sudden, forceful wave tore through the air, sending him staggering back once more.

“The way is clear,” Sidious announced simply, leaning awkwardly against an extra seat in the back. “And the Jedi exhausted by their futile effort.” He then locked gazes with Anakin, shaking his head in disapproval. The deathly pale palm where Padmé's life rested was now hanging lower at his side, and alarm flashed in Anakin's eyes. The Sith Lord answered his unspoken question with a stiff, grudging gesture.

“My patience is running short, Lord Vader. It would appear you still harbor a… shall we say, attachment… to the Jedi Order.”

Anakin shook his head in denial. “I had a moment of weakness, is all. I don't care what happens to the Jedi.”

“Perhaps you ought to start caring,” Sidious retorted. “Is your lack of caring the reason why you've failed to inform me that there is another crystal?”

Anakin started. His shields fell back in place, but the damage was already done. Tucked under three layers of clothing, Anakin felt the hyperite crystal burn against his skin. After the Jedi had failed to confiscate the shard from him, truthfully, he’d forgotten about it for some time. Even now, he had not so much remembered as been hit with a sudden, quasi-conscious feeling. But judging by Sidious' piercing stare, he might as well have announced its existence in a loot report on his knees.

Suddenly he was back in the cavern, lost in a parallel universe, plunging deep into the moon-lit velvet abyss.

He had made a promise to Padmé that night. He recalled her blazing eyes, the earnest note in her voice. And now, for the first time, he was beginning to understand what she had really meant.

"Promise me you’ll never, ever let anyone turn it into a weapon. Promise me."

But what she had really meant was not something he could give.

“Do elaborate, my apprentice,” Sidious hissed.

“Obi-Wan… Obi-Wan found another shard,” Anakin answered honestly - although it still hurt to say his name.

"He did indeed?"

“Yes. Most likely, he brought it with him into the temple.”
Sidious eyed him suspiciously, but gave a perfunctory nod. “Well… I suppose it would have been a shame to demolish such a grand building… of such great sentimental value. This looks like a job for our ever-obliging clone troopers.”

“I will – “

“You will give the order, Lord Vader, and stay behind and wait for your wife. Does that sound like something you can accomplish?”

“…It does, Master.”

“Mm,” Sidious mumbled. "I am confident that this long-awaited reunion will help you… find resolve. See with clarity the path that's been laid out before you.”

Chapter End Notes

not many chapters left now. I would say 3. maybe 4 if I get really wordy. most likely 3.

thanks for sticking with this story, each kudo/bookmark/subscription really is a huuuuge deal to me and each one of your comments just makes my entire week, period. so, um. thank you! <3
Receiving the order, Anakin felt the need to retreat back into the cabin to fulfill it, as though privacy could have made it easier, or running away given him more options. As he swept past the windows, past the blazing sunrise, after-images of flowers danced across his retinas.

He thought back on the younglings who had given him a bouquet of flowers while their trainer had glared.

Anakin spun around in the center of the cabin to find Sidious stalking in his wake. So much for privacy, then. Sidious made it no secret that Vader had yet to gain his trust (whatever trust amounted to between Sith Master and apprentice) and apparently that meant constant supervision.

“Master?” Anakin queried.

“I might have failed to mention that the 501st are back on Coruscant as of last night,” Sidious informed him. “We might properly discuss the bounds of your command at a later time.”

Anakin stared at him – with some puzzlement, which he now made sure to conceal behind barriers. Since his incarceration at the Jedi temple, he had not heard any news of his battalion. He knew that the control chips had been activated since then – but he’d thought that the ones inhabiting the once-unsuspecting heads of the 501st and the 212th had suffered critical damage by chemicals and had ceased to operate.

Had they? Back on Vanqor, they had all openly discussed a possible plot for the Jedi’s destruction, which he might have found cruelly ironic (or maybe just ironic), had his thoughts not been so heavily occupied by confusion.

And deep down – though he still tried to deny it – anger.

It seemed as though Sidious remained unaware of these recent (and perhaps inconsequential) developments – and Anakin was not really sure that he wanted to report them. In fact, he found himself quite unable to say anything at all. Sidious regarded him with suspicion and impatience as Anakin produced a newly provided holoprojector from his tunics.

Anakin continued to entertain the possibility that his men were free and could refuse the order if they so wished. Would it not be only fair to address the order to someone who was no longer a mind slave, who could at least make their own call? If the good captain had no desire to attack the temple, surely he’d communicate as much.

Anakin swallowed. He knew that Padmé’s life was on the line, and he should not have been playing any of these games. But he found a strange sort of comfort in thinking that someone else might still have a choice.

Soon a blue diminutive Captain Rex appeared on his palm.

“General Skywalker!” The clone captain sounded genuinely surprised to hear from him.

“Captain Rex,” Anakin addressed him formally, ignoring the reaction. He locked gazes with Sidious as he recited the pre-agreed code, “The curse has been lifted. Execute Order 66.”

It was an unwritten rule of the military to react to orders immediately, but Rex was silent for a while - no longer than half a second. Then he gave a small nod and a salute, “Understood, sir.”
“I swear – you’re the first one to believe this part – but I swear. Here was this – famed Separatist warlord – and he just stood there – in nothing but a nighrobe and – well. He might have been armed from head to toe, we - we didn’t stay to find out. He’d – he’d already commed for reinforcements, and – ”

Pluck paused for a moment to catch his breath. His voice was quavering, his cheeks had grown paler – but he was determined to finish this story, which he had prefaced as ‘the best day of his life’, insisting that talking would help him keep up his spirits and fight off whatever was tormenting his rapidly deteriorating body.

The clone's foolhardy antics reminded Padmé of someone else who had never heard of 'resting' or 'saving one's strength'.

“And what happened then?” Padmé queried, although she was seconds away from making another heartfelt plea for him to rest.

“Well, we heard a couple of warning shots – or actual shots, who knows with that poor aim - “

Pluck winced and threw an armored hand to his head. Padmé gasped in alarm and took his free hand in both of her own.

“Please, you need to rest,” she insisted, surveying the room and finding it empty, locked and devoid of hope for the millionth time. She stiffly tried to inject some cheer into her voice, “You can finish the story later. I'll look forward to seeing that cliffhanger resolved.”

She squeezed his hand, and the clone smiled up at her. “Thank you, Padmé – but we both know – “

“Shh,” she whispered, bringing one finger to her lips. “No pressure. At least I know this one has a happy ending.”

“Y-yeah.”

She tilted her head, “What if I told you a story of my own?”

“Yeah,” Pluck agreed immediately. His eyes shifted to the side as thought about the suggestion for a while and added, with that enduring mischievous glint in his eyes, “Can you – maybe make it about an exceptionally boring day at the Senate, or something? I think I might – might want to get some sleep after all. Wouldn't want to miss out on anything – interesting – “

Padmé laughed heartily, masking a crestfallen smile. “I can tell you about the time we accidentally passed the same bill twice within the same year, and the ensuing bureaucratic mess took two years to sort out.”

“Perfect.”

- Sidious' vision of the future was no longer clear as crystal. The gist of the events remained the same – constant and ineluctable – Vader would, without a sliver of a doubt, cause the death of his own wife. Sidious' could hear his cries of despair, his hoarse demands of why, why why?! as he held her limp body in his arms. But the details of her impending demise continued to elude the Sith Master, and he was compelled to re-evaluate his plans as they stood now. -
“Well done, Lord Vader,” Sidious congratulated his apprentice as he put down the holoprojector in a sloppy, apathetic motion. The ship was now steadily gliding away from the temple – Sidious would have preferred to make Vader watch the coming destruction – but alas, they had a busy schedule today.

Vader nodded stiffly, his head hanging low in what he apparently tried to mask as a submissive bow. He had the look of a man about to be hanged refusing to speak any last words.

Sidious' lip curled downward as he sauntered closer to him.

A final test, perhaps.

“I have been receiving reports of… a significant number of Jedi having escaped annihilation – a far greater number than we anticipated,” Sidious informed his student, refusing to specify the actual amount, which did not please him in the slightest. “You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, my apprentice?”

Vader reacted to the news with only mild surprise - near-indifference. He seemed to mull over his response for quite a while before speaking. “It is possible they found out about your plans ahead of time.”

Sidious was less than pleased with the answer. “And how, pray tell?”

Vader was silent. His eyes shifted to the side, and again, he seemed to be putting far too much thought into his reply. “I… I found out. About your plans for me. To train me as a Sith.” A flicker of something dangerously close to defiance passed over the boy's immature features. “Your secret communication channels might not be as secret as you think.”

Sidious gave an impassive nod, processing the information - which he mostly found uninteresting and irrelevant. "It was never my intention to hide from you, Lord Vader."

Vader responded with a mechanical nod of his own. There was a heavy silence between them, before the apprentice raised his gaze and ventured to inquire, with thinly veiled impatience, “Is the process almost complete, Master?” He motioned slightly toward Sidious’ outstretched hand.

Sidious read the suspicion in his voice and sneered privately. The boy was already spoiled by his Master’s greatness. Sidious would have liked to see him try – take just a single breath of the Living Force and convey it from one vessel into another, halt the advance of death itself, all the way from the other end of the Galaxy. Sidious wondered if behind the seemingly anxiety-motivated question there was also a budding curiosity toward the mechanics of it all. The 'process' – as Vader so flippantly had dubbed it – was excruciatingly difficult, laborious and intricate, and from anyone but a true Master, would have required undivided attention and concentration.

Vader would never be a true Master, Sidious decided on the spot.

In all fairness, his suspicion was not misplaced. The process was no simple snap of a finger, but it did not take hours to complete.

But Sidious had needed the leverage.

The Sith Master had to confront the hard truth: his success with the former Jedi's conversion had been underwhelming at best.

Vader should have been ready by now. He should have been Vader by now. Intoxicated by the power of the dark side, reveling in the destruction of his enemies. Sidious had not put forth all this
effort to be rewarded with an evasive, half-hearted part-timer.

He would have to prepare for the possibility that Amidala's death would still not be enough. Despair was meaningless if he couldn't dress it in chains. There was still a chance that Vader would slip away or turn on him (foolishly), and after today, he could no longer afford to dedicate any more time or resources to this slippery urchin. He would have his hands full establishing the Empire and bringing entire planets and governments under his control.

And with all those Jedi at large, he needed a killing machine, not a brat who required constant monitoring or emotional blackmail. He didn't want to have to anticipate betrayal at this stage of their Sith partnership. He wanted an independent servant who would do his bidding without question.

It was official. Vader had failed his trial period.

It was time to hurry things along.

He would give Vader an hour with his wife, and he would make sure that he finished the job. Then he would have him sedated and delivered to an operating table on Kamino with very specific instructions.

He wanted a servant who would do his bidding without question.

After all – good soldiers follow orders.

- 

The hatch slid open, and Padmé's eyes widened at the sight awaiting on the other end of the ramp. She had not expected to see the broad, open veranda of her own apartment, basking in sunlight, nor the silken curtains dancing in the light afternoon breeze.

And she had not expected to see her husband - fixed in an anxious forward-leaning stance, eyes burning with anticipation, then lighting up with joy at the sight of her.

“Anakin!” she gushed in relief as she broke away from the clones holding her, and rushed down the ramp to his arms. He caught her in a warm bundle of weary muscle and coarse sleeves, enveloping her in a time-stopping embrace. The world around them melted away as they held each other. The circumstances ceased to matter. For one blessed moment, they were victims no longer, failures no more, their hearts mended once again; husband and wife reunited against the most daunting of odds and destined for eternal shared happiness.

At length, she drew back to look up at him. Anakin reluctantly adapted, caressing her arms with his hands in sweeping, desperate motions. Padmé’s hazel brown eyes narrowed in inspection of his azure ones, which were shining with - she couldn't quite tell. Was this rapture, or anxiety? The swarming city around them suddenly grew quiet, and Padmé’s ears hyperfocused on the sound of his breathing.

“You’re really here…” he whispered. Seeing her frown, he broke into a wide, exuberant smile that dissolved into a small, breathy laughter.

Padmé studied his features as she stroked the ends of his sand-colored curls licking at the collar of his tunic. Her initial elation waned as she couldn't quite return his strange grin. She glanced involuntarily behind her back. The shuttle had now disappeared into the skies.

“Anakin,” she began warily, “what happened? How did you get away from the – from the temple?”
His eyes darted downward. His smile vanished as he clamped his lips together. “Palpatine,” he answered simply.

“What?” Padmé cried in shock, pulling farther back. Alarmed at her reaction, Anakin hurried to close the distance between them. “No!” he protested. “Padmé… he saved you. Palpatine – Sidious saved you.”

Padmé gaped at him. She drew back again – then brought her arm to his waist and rested it on his back, guiding him towards the privacy of the apartment.

“What are you talking about?”

Now Anakin was the one to pull away, almost stumbling in his steps as he did. Fists clenched at his sides, he fixed her into place with those adamant, piercing blue eyes, “Sidious saved you.” He hesitated, but kept his insistent tone as he continued, “He – he took someone else's life and used it to bring you back. I'm not saying it was necessarily right.”

“And your servitude?”

“I'm saying I owe him. Padmé, he's more powerful than I could have ever imagined!” The words were bursting out of his chest like a series of explosions, and he was speaking with an odd drawl, almost a slur.

Padmé opted for silence again. It was as though their perfect shared universe had abruptly been torn apart and split into two, separated by a black hole that was threatening to swallow both halves whole.

“So it’s true!” Anakin deduced. “You – you felt it, too. He brought you back. You were dead, and he brought you back. I owe him my life – my whole life!”

Padmé arched her brows at him. “And your servitude?”

Anakin said nothing. His chin shot upward, in an almost defiant gesture.

”Anakin – listen to me,” she began calmly, “I don't know what happened, I don't know what Palpatine has made you believe – but this is just another ploy of his. He’s playing mind games with you. Trying to back you into a corner.”

“You don't believe me, do you?”

Padmé reached to take both his hands again, “It doesn't matter what I believe! You owe him nothing, Anakin. Please – ”

Anakin's fringe whisked wildly about as he shook his head. “But I do!” he cried. His eyes wandered toward the ceiling, and squeezed shut as he tried to gather up his thoughts, or composure. Padmé tried to pull him closer to her, when he shook his head again and declared in an anguished voice, "I've already – I've already sworn loyalty to him. I've killed for him. Killed for you!" His face distorted uncomfortably as he cried out the last words. Padmé recoiled ever so slightly.

“Padmé,” he continued to beg. ”We – we have to adapt.”

Padmé frowned. “Adapt?”

“Don’t you see? With the Jedi gone – my bounds are gone. I can learn from the Master of life and
death itself! I can finally be the husband that you need, the protector that you need. No one will
dare come between us anymore. And you’re his former Queen! Padmé, he could make you an
adviser, or something! This is our chance to better the Galaxy. To make things the way we want
them to be. No more ineffectual politics. No more corrupt Senate. Just… us.”

Padmé’s voice beginning to quaver, “Anakin, I can’t – I don’t understand what’s happened to you.
You’re – you’re going down a path I can’t follow. Please, just - just come with me now. We’ll think
of something. Where’s Obi-Wan?”

"Don’t you see, I can use Palpatine!" Anakin cried, throwing down his arms in insistence. His lips
twisted into that bizarre smile again. “J-just like I planned, from the beginning. Eventually my
powers will surpass his. Then we won’t need him anymore. Padmé, I’m – I’m so close.”

Padmé gazed intently into her husband's eyes – surveying, evaluating, thinking. His eyes might
have looked surreal had they not been so eerily familiar. His voice would have sounded alien had
she not heard it many times before. She would have thought the creature before her unrecognizable
had they not crossed paths in the past.

Anakin tracked her every movement as she turned away to pace around the room. A gentle blanket
of sunlight rested on the veranda even as the wind picked up and ruffled the curtains. Far in the
horizon, billows of smoke were pouring into the sky.

A tense silence reigned in the air, until finally, Padmé spun around to face her husband again. “You
really trust this man,” she stated. “You – you really trust him, Ani? This is the side you’ve
chosen?”

Anakin didn’t answer, but his shoulders climbed up, as though to protect him from her accusations.
He was glaring into the empty air, biting his lip and clenching his fists probably hard enough to
puncture his gloves.

“Alright…” she whispered. Her head was turned away, but she heard a rustle of fabric as Anakin’s
whole body seemed to relax at her softened tone. “I understand.”

“Y-you do?” he stuttered. She nodded several times.

“I,” she ran a hand through her hair. “Anakin, I just need to talk to him. Preferably immediately, if
it’s at all possible.”

Anakin flinched at the suggestion. “I’m – I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Why is that?” Padmé questioned. “You told me Palpatine saved me. You would be putting our
future, our lives in his hands. What are you so afraid of?”

Anakin's eyes shifted wildly between his wife and the curtains flailing furiously in the wind.

“Try to understand,” Padmé pleaded. “A week ago you wanted nothing more than to get away
from him - or to end him. This is all very confusing to me.”

At long last, wordlessly, Anakin brought a comm to lips and spoke into it. “Master- Padmé
Amidala requests an audience.”

First, there was only silence on the other end.

“…Granted.”
Sheev Palpatine was to announce the establishment of the Empire in less than an hour, and yet the Senate building remained eerily empty and quiet. A strange stillness seemed to have spread over the entire city, but the hallways of the heart of the Republic had grown downright ghostlike. Their footsteps echoed loudly off the floor. Even the clones had vanished from the premises.

Steps away from Palpatine's office, Anakin flicked his hand away from Padmé's shoulder, and before she could ask, he reassured her, “It's all going to be okay. It's going to be alright.”

She responded with a tight-lipped smile.

Sidious – or rather Palpatine – received them with open arms and guided them into the red-themed room. Anakin's eyes fixated on Sidious' sickly yellow hand. It was now dangling freely at his side.

Well, there it was. The debt that he could never repay – but _would_, and with interest.

Sidious did not look even remotely exhausted by the effort. The Sith Master appeared to inhabit another sphere entirely – reside above the Force itself.

“Senator – you must excuse my rush – “ Sidious was saying to Padmé. He shot what looked like a significant glance to Anakin, but Anakin could not decipher the meaning behind it.

“Anakin told me… you saved my life,” Padmé stated. Anakin twitched. He did not like how close to Sidious she was standing. But at the same time, there was something about her – her posture was perfectly straight, her visage clear and fearless.

Sidious' forehead folds quirked up. He opened his mouth, but before her could answer, Padmé had already interrupted, “Now I’m saving his.”

For one extraordinary moment, time appeared to slow down. And yet, it all happened in a flash. A flash of an elaborate sleeve streaking across the air, a standard blaster flung forward. An inky black sleeve coming to meet it, a deathly pale hand gripping a slender arm and twisting it upward. A single blaster shot piercing the ceiling. Specks of dust and dirt and paint and concrete raining down.

Finally, another, brighter flash; as red as blood and as black as death.

Anakin did not stop to think. He had no time to think. And had he had the time to think, he would not have wanted to. Pure instinct taking over, he called upon the Force and reached out.

“Get away from her!”

Sidious' lightsaber landed in Anakin's hand with a satisfying _thwack_. The crimson blade came alive. And with a single, precise thrust, faster than lightspeed and fiercer than a wild beast, it plunged through Sidious' chest with a lingering hiss.

Impassively, the Sith Lord gazed down on the crackling ray of energy, before his head snapped to face his assassin. Dust from the ceiling was still catching in the folds of his black cloak. Slowly, his wrinkly fingers loosened around Padmé's arm. He stared at Anakin with empty, horrible eyes. Then he collapsed onto his knees, then headfirst onto the carpet.

Anakin's fingers trembled around the saber-hilt. His eyes did not linger on the body. Locking gazes with Padmé, he witnessed with horror as her knees gave way underneath her. Saber slipping to the floor, Anakin rushed to her aid with a cry and caught her limp body in his arms.
“Why?” Anakin demanded as the truth; the whole truth, the horrifying truth, began to dawn on him. “Why would you do that?!”

“Because – “ Padmé grimaced as she held a hand to her forehead. Drops of cold sweat glistened on her perfect skin. Then she let out a chuckle and reached to caress her husband's face. "Because, Anakin, my love – you're – you're impulsive. You're so… you're so impulsive."

“What?”

“I didn’t expect to hit him,” she smiled. “I – I tricked you. I'm sorry.”
The Force burst into life. Colors grew bright and a stifling fog cleared away, the air became fresh and clean once more. Eyes could see, ears could hear, hearts settled into a steady, harmonious beat. The city was busy and buzzing again, and only distant ghosts of the chaos remained.

And in the center of it all, Anakin Skywalker's heart was being torn into pieces.

"I did this to you!" he gasped, voice trembling from the strangling lump in his throat. Perfect brown curls cascaded over his arm as he cradled his wife's head in his lap. The color was drained from her silken cheeks.

"No, Ani – no," Padmé whispered as she continued to caress her husband's face with her tender touch. Anakin pressed his palm against the back of her hand. “Palpatine did.”

"I killed you," he sobbed, tears streaming freely down his face and catching in the gaps between their fingers.


Two pairs of eyes shifted ever so slightly to the motionless mound of black sprawled across from them, then immediately turned away.

"Anakin – it was all just lies. Everything he ever did, or said, all lies. Even when he told the truth, he was lying. You – you see it now, don't you?"

One half of Anakin could scarcely hear her words from his grief. The other wanted nothing more than to memorize them in perfect detail, study the sound of her voice, breathe in her scent, burn her eyes into his vision and carve her name in his heart.

A quiet understanding settled over his mind. He had seen it all along – but he had not wanted to look.

"And I… I fell for it.”

"We all fell for it!” Padmé cried, cupping his damp and distraught face in both her hands. “‘Humble and wise Chancellor Palpatine’ – “ She stopped and closed her eyes as her voice trailed off. “I don't want to waste another word on that monster.”

"Please, don't go. I can't live without you, Padmé. I don't know what I will –”

He spoke the truth. He didn't know. Even as the world came alive all around him, he was drowning in darkness, and he only saw darkness ahead.

"Anakin, I love you,” Padmé said calmly, her fingers lost in his hair. “I love you so much –”

"Please don't say that,” he begged.

"Then – please don't say that you can't live without me,” she replied. “It breaks my heart, and that's not how I want to go. I want to see your live your best life. Remember Anakin – I wasn't always there.” Her eyes shifted to the side in remembrance. “Do you remember, Ani? Do you remember the little boy from Tatooine?”

Anakin sobbed silently. Padmé's hands were getting wet with his tears, but he could not let go of
her for one moment to wipe his cheeks.

"He believed in angels. Do you know why?"

Anakin shook his head.

"Because he himself was one. And is one."

Anakin's attempted smile crumbled away as she gazed at him with those gentle hazel eyes. He ever so preferred Padmé's lies to Palpatine's. And he loved her ever so much more than he loved himself.

One arm still gently holding her head, he brought the other to her back and pulled her close, until her head was resting on his shoulder.

Then he came to an abrupt realization.

This was all wrong. It was wrong that even in her final moments, Padmé should be the one comforting him. Padmé Amidala was not his possession, nor his personal beacon of light or sole source of solace. She was her own person, a human being with her own thoughts and dreams and desires. She was Padmé Naberrie, a brilliant and luminous young woman from Naboo. She was a person beyond her political achievements and titles, and she was more than her love for him, or his love for her.

And she deserved better than this. The Galaxy might not deserve her, but it needed her desperately. Not because of what she could do, but because of who she was.

"I haven't been there for you, Padmé," he stuttered, holding her tight. "I would do anything – if I could just give my life for you – so you could live yours – “

"I don't like trading lives," Padmé whispered into his ear. "Every life is precious."

Anakin gently rocked her body in his arms. "I love you, Padmé. I love you. And I promise I – I won't fail you again. Never again."

He meant it. He meant what he said, and he had never meant anything more than he meant it.

And he meant it so much, it became his whole world. It was as though the Force itself disappeared from around him, because even the Force mattered to him less, its awesome power mattered naught and its fickle will very little. In silence he held her and their bodies melded together in a perfect, peaceful moment.

At long last, he let go and let her head rest against his arm once more.

His eyes widened in surprise.

“Padmé…” he whispered.

A smiling, open face looked back at him. Salty droplets dimmed his vision as he blinked in disbelief. A healthy color was climbing back on her cheeks, and he could feel her heart beating in harmony with his.

"Strange," she spoke. “I feel… better."

Anakin pulled his head back. “…What?”
She nodded and smiled enthusiastically.

“Don’t – don’t say things like that,” Anakin pleaded. The last thing he wanted was false hope. Despite himself, he let out a nervous laughter.

Her silly grin widened, and she squeezed Anakin's hand tighter, and – to Anakin's shock – pulled herself into a sitting position. Then she took his face in her hands and kissed him.

Dizzied from her touch, Anakin leaned into the kiss for a moment, deliriously happy and terribly confused, then pulled away and tilted his head in inspection.

“I felt you drifting away – “

“Maybe I just blacked out for a moment,” Padmé chuckled, her voice laced with playful mischief. “Maybe… maybe we just overreacted, Ani.”

Anakin's laughter came out in broken, disbelieving huffs. He could not believe his eyes, ears, or even the Force. Here she was, his perfect angel, the most beautiful woman in the Galaxy, alive and happy and laughing. His tears had now dried on his cheeks, but fresh ones threatened to trickle out. Here she was, smiling up at him, the center of a vibrant canvas of fresh paint and new life.

“Or perhaps – “ her face suddenly changed, and she looked up at him with a new intensity in her eyes. “Ani – you heaved me.”

Still completely engrossed in her healthy appearance, Anakin had to take a minute to grasp what she'd said. “What?”

“I – I felt something, too,” she said. “You healed me. Like you did on that night, on Vanqor. In the cave.”

Anakin allowed himself a wary grin as he shook his head, “Come on, Padmé. That wasn't me. It was the – “ He instinctively brought his hand to the front of his tunic, patted it some, then pulled something out.

He would have been in danger of once again getting lost in the crystal's beauty, had he not been in the radiant, revitalized presence of Padmé Amidala.

Padmé gazed dreamily at his palm, then closed it around the crystal with her fingers and smiled at him.

“Nice try,” she said. “I told you, Anakin. It's all you.”

Suddenly reality set back in with a terrible jolt of remembrance, and Anakin pulled out holoprojector from his belt with lightning speed. ”Rex? Captain Rex?” he called into it as Padmé observed, startled.

”General?” Rex's voice sounded wary, but hopeful.

”Abort, please abort immediately – “ Anakin ordered, technically - it came across as more of a desperate plea.

”General, you're – you're all okay now, sir?” Rex inquired.

”What?”

”You're safe,” he clarified. “Is the Chancellor dead, sir?”
Anakin stared at the flickering holoimage. "Yes," he replied mechanically, "You – you didn't –"

"Of course we didn't, General. We're at the temple now, guarding it from any incoming attack. How would you have us proceed?"

Anakin tried to process what he'd just heard and what immense relief it gave him. He felt as though his heart was about to burst. He didn't deserve this reality. He'd done everything in his power, and under someone else's greater power, to destroy it, and yet he'd been saved.

At least, a part of him had. With every life destroyed by his hand, a part of him had died. And with every life miraculously spared, a piece of him was spared, too.

"Say," he began finally, "you guys can blend in pretty well around here. Fancy picking up a body?"

The odd exchange between Anakin and Rex inevitably led to questions from Padmé, and eventually answers from Anakin, about just what had happened during his short-lived servitude of Darth Sidious. Anakin provided a concise but honest recount – feeling the darkness and the madness seeping back to him in rivulets as he did, but thwarting them with a sturdy mind-dam – and Padmé listened - understanding, but at parts understandably shocked.

At the end of the recount, Anakin realized that he'd left something out. He'd blocked something out.

And it was again that terrible lure of false hope.

Or maybe, just maybe - the regular kind of hope.

"Padmé," he said, "I have to go back to the Jedi Temple."

"What?" she gasped. "Why?"

Anakin couldn't immediately put together an answer, and Padmé suddenly appeared very alarmed.

"Anakin… they'll arrest you again," Padmé reminded him. "Or worse!" A flash of panic swept across her features. She took both his hands and held them up. "Come away with me," she pleaded earnestly. "Let's just go, Ani. Leave everything behind while we still can."

"Padmé – "

"Please, Anakin. The war is almost over. I've already sowed the seeds of peace. Palpatine will be exposed one way or another. But you – you were manipulated into this. The aftermath will just be too messy, and I'm not sure I will be able to take it."

"Padmé – "

The corners of her eyes were glistening now. "I tried so hard to be a diplomat. It's what I do! I tried so hard not to hate the Jedi, because – we were all deceived by Palpatine – but – I can't lose you again, I've lost you a thousand times during this war, I almost lost you just now –"

Anakin studied her distressed features, mostly to distract himself from his tortuous thoughts. He reached to wipe a single tear from her cheek. Did he hate the Jedi? He remembered being in a trance, blindly wanting to wipe his past away – wanting to wipe them all away, and not wanting to even look. He remembered being convinced that yes, he hated them.

But if not looking was going to cost him the one Jedi that he decidedly did not hate, then what was
the point of having eyes?

"It's okay," he said, holding her hands and gracefully lifting her to her feet as he stood up himself. "I told you – it's going to be alright."

This time, the journey from the Senate to the Jedi Temple was no simple undertaking. No longer mysteriously empty, several floors were already seething with politicians and reporters making themselves at home and waiting for a special announcement from the Chancellor that would never come. Padmé, a master of improvised disguise, could blend in without problem, but Anakin did attract some attention from the crowd even as they made use of staff-only hallways and a swift pace.

Finally out of the woods, sat in an air taxi, the husband and wife exchanged knowing glances. They'd done an adequate job of hiding the body away for Rex to find, but there was a general atmosphere of curiosity and speculation buzzing around the Senate.

Maybe Padmé's proposition was not so ludicrous. Maybe this was a disaster waiting to happen.

At the temple, a handful of clones from the 501st greeted the pair. The troopers appeared to have the temple surrounded from all sides, and for once, the intent of such a formation was anything but malicious. Rex and his team had already left for their secret mission.

Anakin was quietly praying for their success under his breath, when he suddenly flashed back to those dead, horrid eyes, sunken in that waxen, inhuman mask of a face. He felt the coarse texture of the carpet tingling his palms, his knees rubbing against the textile.

A light touch on his shoulder banished the images. Padmé was smiling at him. Rich late afternoon sunlight was playing in her eyes and in her hair.

"Thank you," he said.

The Force still insisted that Obi-Wan was gone. No matter how far Anakin reached, how desperately he tried to see, he couldn't. And yet, somehow, he knew. This time, he just knew.

Anakin's instinct-dictated steps led him across the courtyard and back to the southwestern end of the Temple, where, against the hard stone surface, lay a white-clad Jedi, eyes open, studying the clear blue sky above.

"...Obi-Wan?" Anakin addressed the Jedi uncertainly. Padmé covered a gasp with her hand.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan greeted him as the pair crouched down at his feet. "Padmé," he added, his voice now betraying some strain.

"I thought you were dead," Anakin stammered. "I couldn't access our bond –"

"Oh. My bad," Obi-Wan smiled, "I closed myself off from the Force a moment before I," he gestured toward the ground and made a theatrical thumping noise, "it seemed like a logical idea at the time." He shook his head blearily, and rose to his elbow with a wince. "I only came to moments ago. Did I miss something?"

Even as Obi-Wan slowly slid back into the comforting warmth of the Force, thousands of words were unspokenly exchanged between the two men as they looked at one another. A long, winding string of emotions ran across Obi-Wan's face – joy, relief, fear, regret, acceptance. The lies clouding Anakin's mind had dissolved away, and he heard and saw with clarity once again.
"You came back for me," Anakin said quietly.

Obi-Wan smiled, then tried to lift up his other elbow, and winced again. "I – I broke my back for you."

Padmé stood up, and gestured at Anakin. "Anakin, can you heal him?"

Anakin almost flinched at the words. "N-no, I –"

"I'll go get help," she announced, and darted off.

“What's this about healing?” Obi-Wan asked, almost playfully, as they watched her dash away.

"I don't - I don't have any healing abilities,” Anakin insisted, before producing the mystical crystal from his pocket. “I just have this.”

The crystal's beauty was as undeniable as ever, but Obi-Wan simply gave it a quick glance and grinned at Anakin. "Are you going to throw it at me, or…?"

"Okay, fine, come here."

With the utmost care, recalling the lessons on human anatomy and first aid from his Padawan days, and some practical ones he'd learned in the field, Anakin gingerly lifted Obi-Wan from the ground to his knees, soliciting instructions from him until they found a good position, making sure he didn't hurt – then he cautiously wrapped his arms around the Jedi Master and lightly pressed his body against his.

“If you start feeling better, I promise it's not me.”

Anakin had already half-predicted Obi-Wan's response, 'And if I start feeling worse?', but instead he asked, “Why would you say that?"

Anakin didn't answer. After a while of silence, Obi-Wan lifted both his arms and hugged Anakin back.


“It's alright,” he reassured the younger man. They stayed like that for a while, both still reluctant to give words to their manifold thoughts and feelings.

“Can you help me walk?” Obi-Wan asked finally.

It wasn't until that the two men had already limped their way to the main entrance that they ran into Padmé – as well as Jedi Masters Yoda and Windu.

Anakin took one look at the pair – no medical capsules, no stretchers, nothing remotely helpful – merely a look of disbelief and – the longer their eyes stayed on the former Jedi and prisoner of the Order – of disgust.

And Anakin knew why.

It was an instantaneous vicious cycle.

He could feel the darkness slithering back into his veins once more.

A friendly nudge on his shoulder brought him back to reality and encouraged him to keep walking.
“Save it, Windu,” Obi-Wan muttered as they hobbled past the Masters. “Not now, Master Yoda.”
Anakin had no desire to defend his actions to the Jedi, and very little energy to even explain. Padmé could tell he still had a hard time telling apart Sidious’ manipulations and lies from his personal, long-dormant grudges towards the Order. He was teetering between intense shame, misplaced anger, and understandable anger.

Anakin would have never asked, but Padmé rose to the occasion and to her husband’s defense one more time, to justify his continued stay at the Halls of Healing watching over Obi-Wan’s recovery. The Jedi had more or less relinquished their custody of him, for reasons more practical than merciful. But Padmé Amidala was still, at heart, a firm believer in diplomacy and forgiveness, and after she’d already gone behind enemy lines to build bridges over the most daunting of abysses, she simply couldn’t leave this one to burn away.

"Messy, is this. Messy, indeed."

The diminutive Grand Master of the Jedi Order paced around the Council Chamber, stroking his wrinkly chin lightly with his sharp claws. Padmé took a deep breath to calm herself. She had nothing to be afraid of. Once again, the truth was their ally, as messy as it might be, even if it had become infinitely messier still since the last time she had confronted two Jedi Masters about matters relating to her husband. One could not just turn back time and wish it all gone, but she was hopeful. The last time she had been listened to, and just barely believed. This time – maybe, just maybe – she had been heard, and understood.

“We commend you, Senator Amidala, for giving a truthful account of what happened – and your husband, for agreeing to it,” Mace Windu commented after a while of consideration. “As far as merits go, killing a Dark Lord of the Sith is something we cannot ignore, and it would have been easy for you to make Skywalker look like a hero, but we respect you for telling us the truth.”

Padmé gave a small, wary smile, and after a while Windu added, “We have to believe that both of you were telling the truth all along. We failed to listen. We bear a measure of responsibility for… what happened.”

“Thank you,” she responded quietly.

Padmé didn't pretend she could read minds, and she didn't really know either of these men at all, but she regarded Windu curiously as he cast a significant look to the floor, as though avoiding his superior's gaze. She wondered if Windu had the authority to make such an admission. From their motions and their faces, she could tell that Master Yoda had the hardest time of all coming to terms with the 'messy' – Anakin's brief flirtation with the dark, short-lived pledge to the ways of the Sith, and troubled return to the light were all things quite unheard of in the history of the Order. Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny, as they taught.

Yoda rubbed his chin again, shaking his green little head. “A victim, young Skywalker may be. But innocent, he is not.”

“He was being coerced and blackmailed by an older authority figure and sitting leader of the Republic, who had just essentially legalized the persecution of the Jedi,” Padmé argued back. “I am not trying to belittle the lives of the Jedi that died at his hands, but they were unarmed prisoners
presented to him on a plate just so that he would dip his hands in Jedi blood that he otherwise would not have spilled.”

“Above coercion, is Jedi. Above personal desires and needs,” Yoda shot back with a dismissive wave of his cane.

“He allowed his attachment to you to be exploited by a Sith Lord, and pledged himself to his service, rather than thinking of the greater good,” Windu said.

“And the greater good, or rather the means of achieving it, would have been to kill the Sith Lord?” Padmé queried. “That is, before he chose to do so for reasons less than heroic by Jedi standards?”

“Well, yes.”

“So you would have him slay emotionlessly, unquestioningly, and without hesitation? So that he could then be glorified and promoted for this accomplishment, like Obi-Wan was? With all due respect, Masters, I find that this war has done much to confuse the Jedis' relationship with killing. And with following orders.”

Anakin had shown her a holopad given to him by Palpatine, which contained documents that detailed war crimes and acts of treason committed by the Jedi. To her shock, she’d found that some of them had been confirmed to be true, or at least attracted unwanted attention and speculation from the Senate.

The Masters were quiet. Padmé walked across the room toward them with her queen-like grace and composure, until the two Jedi turned to look at her.

“From his early childhood throughout his Jedi years, my husband been taught never to question authority. For him, it's just been one Master after another. His choice has never mattered before. And all the while, Sheev Palpatine has been warping his mind and whispering poison into his ear. Sidious was relentless. Had Anakin refused him yesterday, he would have forced his hand today, or tomorrow. And still, even in his weakest hour, my husband spoke of overthrowing him, because he saw this man for the monster that he was, and knew that his rule would still be infinitely more preferable to that of Darth Sidious. Has anyone ever asked him what he wants to do with his life?”

She made a significant pause here. “Sidious did not. Anakin has always wanted to go back to his birthplace of Tatooine and free all the slaves there. His old friends, and their children. You may look down upon his attachments and his passions, and I’m not denying that there is an evil in this world that would use them against him. But those are also the things that make Anakin the good man that he is. One who is no longer content following orders – one who wants to go above and beyond.”

The Jedi Masters were sparing in their gestures, but as silence reigned, Padmé saw that certain warmth of sympathy travel across their faces.

“Hm. Wise, are you, Padmé Amidala,” Yoda finally said. “Understand your husband well, you do.” He paused for a moment. “Perhaps, indeed, enough for the Chosen One… we Jedi were not.”

In the shared recovery room in the Halls of Healing, Obi-Wan could feel Anakin’s discomfort from the eyes trained on his back as the boy leaned on his injured brother’s bedside. Whether they were looks of admiration, or confusion, or mistrust, it was impossible to tell, for even the onlookers didn’t really seem to know. For every whisper about Anakin’s dark deeds, there was a gasp of awe at his defeat of Darth Sidious and fulfillment of the prophecy.
When asked – and few had dared – Anakin would look them patiently in the eye and tell the truth. He hoped that the truth would eventually catch on, and Padmé Amidala would one day be hailed among the Jedi, and among all, as the Galaxy’s guardian angel and a heroine of her own story.

“She told me to wait until I was ready,” Anakin said quietly, sighing. “You know. To talk things out. I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve her.”

“I don’t think it’s about deserving,” Obi-Wan commented. “I think people just kind of get stuck with one another.”

Anakin gave an absent-minded smile. “That reminds me of something Snips said to me once.” He paused for a moment. ”I really miss her, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan gazed at the ceiling, adjusting the pillow beneath his head. “You know – I never told you this, but a while ago – I did this – spontaneous philosophical experiment.”


“Oh, this should score me a lot of ‘cool’ points with you, former Padawan mine.”

“Okay, now I’m curious.”

Obi-Wan rolled his head to face him, “You say that now, but to avoid boring you and your short attention span – “

“Hey!”

The two men shared a moment of laughter before Obi-Wan's features grew serious, and he faced away again. “Basically – I was questioning the Jedi code. Or perhaps, rather, whether I am the perfect observer.”

Anakin nodded silently, but his expression betrayed some surprise. “And where did you end up with that… experimental philosophy?”

Obi-Wan’s grin widened and he turned back to Anakin.

“I suppose,” he said, “that perhaps we’re happier with a little imperfection in our lives.”

A gradual smile lit over Anakin’s mouth, and he dropped his gaze and nodded.

“… I think Master Qui-Gon would be quite proud of me, actually,” Obi-Wan suspected. “I suppose I couldn’t escape his influence after all. ‘Someday you will understand’, he used to say to me often. And I didn’t even know what it was I was supposed to understand.”

“But you understand now?”

“I think I do.” Obi-Wan smiled again, with a hint of mischief at the corners of his mouth. “You know what else he used to say, though? ‘In your hurry to be wise take care not to trip over.’”

Anakin gave a light chuckle, but something darker seemed to pass over his face, as well. “Yeah.”

On the open veranda of Padmé Amidala’s apartment, sunken into the cushions of the curved couch, two lovers seemed to have melted together in the sunlight. It was probably a sunny day, there might have been a light breeze, but the two were so engrossed in each other that they had not
noticed. Hours might have passed, or days, or lifetimes, it didn't really matter how much time, so long as they'd spent it together.

At length Anakin leaned away and gazed dreamily into his wife’s eyes.

“Thank you,” he said, “for everything. I spoke with the Council today. I – “ he paused for a moment. “I would have hated to leave things the way they were, even if I'm not – even if I – even if it was – ” He paused again, unable to get past the stuttering, a hint of a shadow on his face.

“It’s a process, Anakin,” Padmé said softly. “Give it time.”

Anakin nodded, as a dancing ray of light landed on his cheeks and swept the shadow away. Time. What a rare luxury indeed. For the first time in ages, he truly felt in no hurry to go anywhere. He could savor this moment, work through all the complicated feelings haunting his heart, he could lay his head to rest and wake up to a new hopeful dawn.

“I don’t know how you do it,” he said then, leaning back on the couch, eyes never parting from his lovely wife. “With that plethora of new motions of the Senate, after everything that’s happened… are you not exhausted?”

Padmé gave a mysterious smile, then shrugged. “I am.”

“What?” Anakin suddenly bolted upright, alarmed at her confession. Padmé's smile just broadened.

“I wanted to make it a surprise, but…” She paused for effect. “I took a few months’ leave, effective immediately.”

Anakin’s face lit up in delight – but his tone was that of utter disbelief, “But I thought you were swamped – “

“Bail, Mon and Jar Jar were more than happy to take over from me,” Padmé explained. She lowered her eyes for a moment. “And more than supportive of me taking a break. I was – I was quite moved, actually.”

Anakin reached to cup her face in his hands and pressed a celebratory smooch on her lips. “That's wonderful.”

Padmé nodded her agreement and nuzzled her nose against his.

“So… Varykino?”
The aftermath of the Clone Wars proved a troubled and confusing time for the Galaxy. The Republic had technically won, but their beloved leader had passed away under mysterious circumstances, and their legendary heroes in the Jedi Order had been declared traitors and war criminals. The peace negotiations were put on hold for weeks as the Senate formed a temporary leadership board intent on learning the truth behind these unforeseen developments. This turned out to be an easier task than anticipated – Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala wasted no time in coming forward, anxious for the truth, the whole truth, to be revealed to the public. After a long, grueling investigation, with help from the most unlikely of places, the Separatists; Chancellor Palpatine was found to be guilty of an elaborate, far-reaching deception scheme and a multitude of other crimes against the Galaxy as well as human and alienkind itself.

It was ruled that in their assassination of the corrupt tyrant, the Jedi and the Senator had acted in self-defense, and in the best interest of the Galaxy. For his brief involvement in the Jedis' planned destruction, Anakin got off lightly due to legal technicalities and extenuating circumstances – a verdict that he, for a long time, found hard to accept. Sometimes it was easier to just suffer a punishment than to carry a hidden, insatiable guilt in one's heart for a lifetime.

Palpatine’s exposition soon led to other shocking discoveries in a domino effect: his conspiring with Count Dooku, the deals he’d struck with corrupt governments, bounty hunters, criminals and war profiteers. Perhaps the most shocking at all, the truth behind the creation of the clone army and the true purpose of the clones came to light. This, at last, seemed to open the politicians' eyes to the completely unethical circumstances of the clones and the extremely bleak future they were facing after the war. Various campaigns and motions were soon established to promote their freedom and welfare: removing the control chips, giving them basic civil rights, providing them temporary shelter, building them permanent housing, finding them (paid) jobs and other future opportunities… A team of scientists (led by one young prodigy named Jenna) even began to look into the possibility of slowing down their accelerated aging and giving them the long, happy retirement that they all more than deserved. Many former Jedi Generals, who wouldn’t normally have gotten involved in politics, were happy to provide help behind the scenes, and, once the dust had settled on their own troubles, advocated openly for these movements.

Many clones, such as Captain Rex, clone trooper Pluck and Commander Cody (posthumously), received medals of valor and attained legend status.

The peace negotiations with the Separatists began awkwardly as both sides were still reeling from the recent revelations, and trying to determine who they could trust even among their own: who was complicit, who was loyal to credits only. After several power shake-ups on both sides (mostly non-violent), the two opposing sides were eventually united by their common enemy, finding a new sympathy for the other's perspective, as well a better understanding of their political goals and visions – and how they had been utterly destroyed and distorted to suit the agenda of one Sheev Palpatine.

Determined never to let history repeat itself, the two sides began to envision and construct an entirely new system; the (im)perfect marriage of unifying democracy and a healthy measure of autonomy for each planetary system. It was an ambitious undertaking, as it soon became evident that some systems needed more help getting started than others – it was difficult to encourage democracy where laws were suggestions at best, or foster a healthy independence where crime ran rampant and poverty and hunger ravaged the land. For centuries before the Clone Wars, greedy hands and greedier minds had ruled the Galaxy, and to transform their playground into a balanced welfare state would require nothing short of gargantuan efforts, starting with a complete redistribution of resources and a new focus on the reinforcement of humanitarian laws.

Restoring the Jedis' reputation proved trickier than expected. Even as the public gradually came to
terms with Palpatine's true colors, misinformation and rumors – and some inconvenient truths mixed in – continued to plague the media and the public consciousness. The Jedi were Palpatine’s co-conspirators all along. Palpatine might have been a rotten egg, but the Jedi were no better. The Jedi steal our children and send them to war. Look what became of Count Dooku! There appeared to be a great deal of fear and hostility attached to the name of the Jedi, and finally the Jedi were compelled to look inward and ask themselves why. When had they ceased to be the famed heroes of old and earned the reputation of a child-snatching cult and common warmongers? Why had it been so very easy for the public to accept their fall from grace and abandon them? Had they abandoned the people first?

Or had they abandoned themselves first?

The short-lived fall of Anakin Skywalker, besides being an extraordinary case in many ways, was also a symptom of a larger epidemic. The Clone Wars and the years leading up to it had seen an unprecedented number of Jedi leave, fall, resort to desperate means. Count Dooku, Barriss Offee. Disillusioned by the ways of the Jedi, driven to resentment and violence. While there was no excusing their actions – the Jedi began to wonder. Gradually they came to open their hearts to the truth that they had been unwilling to face for so long. The Order had lost itself in the entanglements of power and politics, in the black-and-white philosophy of us versus them, and had come to forget its true heart.

They had sent troubled young men and actual children to fight in the front lines, their only shield a blade of plasma and an army of slaves.

They had encouraged detachment, but grown detached from their own ideals and driving motivations.

They had been preaching compassion, but forgotten to look after their own.

Master Yoda, ever-loyal to the will of the Force, soon found that an old dog could perhaps learn a new trick or two, but teaching them was another story, and shortly stepped down as the Grand Master. The remaining members of the Council made the difficult but practically necessary decision to give up their political powers and reform the Order completely. However, they eventually ended up postponing the reformation, as the far majority of the surviving Jedi were more interested in taking part in the disaster relief effort and joining the already-existing aid programs.

Naturally, in the aftermath of the war, there was great need for various kinds of aid; and the surviving Jedi were encouraged to ask questions they never had before, to find what they wanted to do, how they wanted to help – what they were passionate about.

There were many of those - particularly younglings and fledgling Jedi - who needed help themselves, and gradually, it became less taboo to ask.

Padmé Amidala had had her fill of politics for a while. In a way, she could relate to the disillusion of the Jedi. Her parents had taught her to care for the fellow man, but she'd become a politician to make a difference in the Galaxy. Now she had seen the best and the worst of that world, how the greater good could mask a great evil, how good intentions could be corrupted and good people wielded as pawns. Her last act as a Senator of the Republic was attending the funeral of Teckla Minnau on the same day that the Amended Naboo Water Distribution Program commenced officially.

Now she had had her rest and decided that it was time to take action again. And this time, she wanted to roll up her ornately embroidered sleeves and go to where the people were.
Anakin Skywalker desired nothing more than to go with her. He had found his small corner in the universe, a family and a home to call his own, and he didn't think that he particularly deserved such an abundance of good fortune. If he could give back even just a little - and in his heart he knew he was meant for much, much more - he could imagine no greater happiness nor a better life.

On the day of the departure, at the spaceport, there was the slightest hint of concern on Obi-Wan Kenobi’s face – or perhaps just a deep, melancholy fondness. As the other people around them chatted about lightly, he looked his brother up and down, a little thrown off by his much healthier appearance and clothes that weren't his murky Jedi robes.

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan addressed him hesitantly. “What you're about to see out there… will you be okay?”

Anakin gave a confident nod. “I really think I'm ready. ”

“You do look a lot better.”

“Thanks.” The young man narrowed his eyes and reached out an inspecting finger. “Hey, is that – yep, a couple of gray hairs right there.”

Obi-Wan playfully swatted his hand away. “Right, because I'm getting old. Never heard that one before.”

Anakin belted out a boisterous laughter, so hard his head fell back, and he needed a moment to recover. Obi-Wan shook his head, but waited patiently until he was done.

“You'll always have a home here.”

Anakin's beamed from ear to ear. The words needed no elaboration.

"I'll be back before you -"

His smile shrunk into a rounded shape and his eyes widened as he suddenly picked up something in the Force. A presence he'd not felt since… He gasped and whisked his head from side to side.

“Oh! Almost forgot,” Obi-Wan said mysteriously as he laid a hand on former student's back and turned him around toward the crowd. “There's someone here to see you.”

Anakin spun around.

There might as well not have been a crowd at all - if there was, he could not see it. If there was noise, then he had gone deaf.

His heart recognized the newcomer before his eyes did. She was taller - much taller. Every limb of her was taller, more muscular; her posture had grown upright and self-assured. She had a new maturity about her, her Force signature radiated a new-found freedom. At the same time, there was a just hint of something deeper and darker, a new solemnity etched into her brow.

Only her eyes were the same. Big, blue and full of mischief - like a reflection of his own.

“Ahsoka!” Anakin exclaimed, disbelief warring with delight.

Her face lit up in a huge grin. She spread her impossibly long arms and dashed toward him - and he dashed toward her - and he really should have known better.

“Hey, whoa!” Anakin gasped as he felt his feet leaving the ground and his arms pressed to his
sides. Her hold was tight and inescapable as she spun him around and he watched the cityscape flash by his eyes and blur together in a mishmash of gray and blue. “Seriously, Snips?”

Ahsoka was just laughing. Everyone was laughing. “Padmé, stop filming,” Anakin protested as he twirled about in the air. “Put the holocam away, Rex. Obi-Wan – never mind.”

When she finally put him down, Anakin's head was spinning and he wasn't entirely convinced that he hadn't imagined the last twenty seconds, public humiliation and all.

“This is not fair,” he huffed, still trying to wrap his head around her mere existence - to say nothing of her height, strength, or surprise homecoming. “We're minutes away from leaving, and now my prodigal little sister decides to come back?”

“Yeah, I was hoping to catch a ride with you guys, actually,” Ahsoka confessed with a sheepish shrug. “Long story, I'll tell you on the way.”

Anakin just gave a light chuckle, still incredulous; unable to express how much he loved the idea. Padmé emerged from the crowd and kissed him on the cheek.

“Come on, stunned husband, prodigal sister-in-law.”

Goodbyes were said, a few tears shed, laughter never ceased but smiles grew wistful.

Obi-Wan Kenobi gazed silently after the receding figures. He had a theory. Perhaps bringing balance to the Force was never about a single blaze of glory or one grand heroic act. Perhaps it was always little by little, step by step; by and by rebuilding the Galaxy and finding a balance in one's own heart.

He bobbed his head to the side. "What do you think, Master Qui-Gon?”

Chapter End Notes

now to break your immersion with this huge wall of text…

first things first, I can’t thank everybody enough for reading. each and every kudo/bookmark/follow I’ve received truly means the world to me, I find it difficult to express just how much. all I’ve ever wanted to do is write and have somebody willingly subject themselves to the results, so allow me to get Real for a moment and say thank you, you’re only helping me fulfill my life-long dream.

and of course special big thank you to those who commented, your lovely compliments helped me keep going all the way through and all your observations were truly invaluable and helped me to get a better overall picture of my own story. is there an expression stronger than thank you? THANK YOU!!!!!

I initially planned on having some commentary here (like I did for Give Me a Signal) but I’ve kinda already commented plenty in my replies (and I'm absolutely willing to do more) so I thought instead!

here are my next few fic ideas: -anticlimactic fanfare-

1. sith!Padmé AU. in which I will probably try to avoid the 'manipulative seductress'
trope, despite the fact that yes, she's on the dark side, and yes, she fancies Anakin. have something a little different in mind. (but maybe just a little. idk!)

2. time-travel RoTS fix-it loosely based off the movie Edge Of Tomorrow (or the manga All You Need is Kill, if you will) with some added inconvenient amnesia. presupposes Anakin dies on Mustafar in the original timeline. so whenever he's killed, he's transported to a different point in the timeline, and can't remember any past timelines, except vague out-of-context flashes.

(^these two might be a little too similar to this fic thematically, so… ???? do you people want more of the same with a new spin or something completely different???? I'm ambivalent send help srsly)

3. Princess and the Pauper AU no one asked for, based off the eponymous Barbie movie. (yes, you read that right, not the classic Mark Twain novel. it’s my favorite movie, too.) anidala all the way, Padmé & Sabé lend themselves well to the concept, Obi-Wan and Satine will be there in some form.

4. have a few other ideas too, very vague as of now, but fair warning that stuff might drop unexpectedly maybe at some point

5. YOU TELL ME. I'd be willing to take prompts/suggestions/story ideas with the huge caveats that

1) it might take a while

2) you'd have to let me write it on my own terms… although you can be as specific/vague in your suggestion as you'd like!

3) if it's not really my thing, I'll let you know as nicely as possible! please don't let that discourage you from asking.

^ I'll probably write all of these eventually but if you see something in there you’d like me to prioritize feel free to… vote, I guess? suggest?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!