Second Chances

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Second Chances

by Driverpicksthemooseic (Ratkinzluver33)

Summary

Leia wasn't convinced inviting evil incarnate to join them in fighting the Empire was exactly one of Obi-Wan's brightest ideas.
(The De-Aged!Fic, because someone had to.)

Notes

SO, UM. YEAH. The Deaged/Force Soulbond fic.

Dude, full disclosure, this is crack that's wearing reading glasses and pretending it's intellectual. Every hint of seriousness I get in here will at some point be totally overshadowed by Anakin's bouncy hair and Obi-Wan's desert-dry humour. I'm saying this in case there aren't enough ways I can creatively tag "Crack!fic incoming!!!!!!" and nobody notices.

Also, what is angst? Baby, don't hurt me.
Leia had no idea how they'd gotten to this point.

Vader and Obi-Wan were doubled over on the floor, their fight completely forgotten. Luke, the idiot martyr, had rushed over past tens of trigger-happy Stormtroopers to save them as soon as it happened, but no dice. It seemed to be a Force issue, not that she knew much about it. There was a vague sense of distress permeating the docking bay, but she was too disconnected to tell more.


She looked down at the famed General Kenobi, who was silently encased in some kind of golden energy. He had stopped writhing in agony and seemed to be in some kind of peaceful trance. Vader wasn't much different.

"This is absurd," she said, horrified.

"Tell me about it!" Luke reached out a hand to touch Obi-Wan, but quickly wrenched it away. "Ouch, that's hot. Why is it hot?"

Luke stood for a moment, mouth drawn into a tight line. He looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words.

"What the hell?" It was Han now, from behind her. He'd had no trouble crossing from the Millennium Falcon, which was unsurprising, as she supposed the Troopers were too terrified at seeing their superior discarded on the floor like some sort of limp rag to fire.

"I'd like to know, too," she agreed. "He's not in pain anymore, at least."

"Is there anything we can do?" Luke asked, voice filled with desperation. He made another aborted attempt to reach out.

"I don't think so." Leia held a hand over the energy casing, feeling its warmth, which was slowly lessening. "It's wearing off, whatever it is."

"Will they be okay?" It was rhetorical. They could barely see through the thick, shimmering beam. Luke twisted his hands nervously, peeking through every so often and measuring the subtle change. The heat and light was fading faster now.

"I think I can see him!" Luke announced, after a minute or two. "He looks- he looks different. Something's wrong."

Sure enough, the energy dissipated, leaving behind someone who, though less weathered, was still very much Obi-Wan Kenobi. He looked at least twenty years younger, as impossible as that seemed.

"The Force," Luke was quick to decide. "It must be the will of the Force."

Leia honestly had no idea why the Force would want an unpolished, more inexperienced version of the General to face up against the galaxy's greatest threat. Unless, of course...
She inclined her head to look at the now-risen, clearly shaken Vader, who was scrabbling to get off his helmet. It fell to the floor, echoing loudly in the now very, very silent room. There, inside the monstrous armour, was someone who looked so disturbingly like Luke, she had to look twice.

"This is absurd," Vader said, in an uncanny parallel to her earlier words, yet sounding at once like a petulant child without his imposing air to guide him. She almost laughed at the contrast.

Obi-Wan, who had shaken off his daze, chuckled in agreement. "A second chance, old friend," he offered, holding out a hand, which, to Leia, was in equal parts a dangerous and unsound decision to make when faced with the man that was only five minutes ago trying to murder you.

Vader snarled in response, brushing himself off. "You're a fool if you think a little youthful vitality is all it takes for me to ally myself with you once more, old man."

"I don't suppose you know what you'll do with yourself now, then," Obi-Wan said, casual. "Can you truly face the Emperor like that?"

"Underestimating my power again, Kenobi? I thought you'd learned from your mistakes."

"Come with us," Obi-Wan suggested, ignoring Vader's thinly-veiled warning completely. "Think of the Force, the Prophecy. Why else would we have been gifted this opportunity?"

"Do not speak to me of the Prophecy," Vader hissed. Leia had the sudden impression that she was woefully under-prepared. Even with the Alliance's knowledge, not many had a firm understanding of the Republic's fall, nor the reasons behind it. Clearly, there was something incredibly important they were missing, something that Obi-Wan and Vader knew.

"Of course you must have a better explanation." Obi-Wan looked distinctly unimpressed.

Vader said nothing. He clenched his fists, tight leather scrunching audibly. Then, finally, "The Prophecy has long since given up on me. There's something else behind this 'second chance.'"

"Then help us find it."

Leia wasn't convinced inviting evil incarnate to join them in fighting the Empire was exactly one of Obi-Wan's brightest ideas. She glanced briefly at Luke, who looked similarly doubtful, though more willing. His devotion to Obi-Wan was a little blind, perhaps.

"Still, as they say, the enemy of my enemy, she thought. Objectively, Vader could be a powerful ally. Personally, she would find it hard to look past his... flaws. Obi-Wan was taking a risk -- one that he couldn't let his affection cloud over. She was almost positive this was a terrible idea.

Vader's eyes danced around the room, taking in the petrified Stormtroopers, the blaster-marked walls, coldly calculating. He looked somewhat disappointed, and the fight left him, replaced with wary cooperation. "Very well. I will help you discover the cause of this event, but that is all. Don't mistake this for friendship, Kenobi."

"I wouldn't dare."

Luke and Leia sat quietly, listening to the hum of the Falcon as she flew through hyperspace. The past hours were catching up to them, finally sinking in, and Leia was, at this point, far beyond confusion.

"Ben," Luke began. "Uh, what are we doing?"
"Saving an old friend." Obi-Wan shook his head sadly. "I haven't told you the whole truth about your father, young Luke. Or yours, Leia."

She blinked at the non sequitur. Was this the missing piece she had been looking for? If only he'd stop speaking in riddles and tell them the straight truth.

"Anakin Skywalker was once a great Jedi, before he was seduced by the Dark Side. When he fell, it became my job to protect his children, to hide them from him. To separate them."

Leia knew, somehow, precisely where this was going, and that it wasn't the much-needed clarity she'd wished for. She could sense Luke's fear through the Force. "You can't be saying that he's--"

Obi-Wan's gaze wasn't pitying, but it was close enough. "He was a good man," he assured. It did little to help.

"That monster cannot be my father -- our father."

"But we're helping him, right?" Luke cut in, voice shaking. "He's not all bad."

"No, he's not." The General smiled, small and hopeful. "And I think he knows it, as well. This, the will of the Force, was just the push he needed."

Leia shut her eyes. Luke was her brother, and together, they were Vader's children. It sounded like nonsense, but The Force told her it was true, no matter how much she wanted it not to. The thought made her blood feel like poison. If the Alliance knew, they'd look at her like she was a ticking time bomb, and would they be wrong?

"There's still a chance, Leia," Luke pleaded, "that we can save him."

She had been staring at nothing for far too long, trying to ignore Vader's presence on the ship. With so much Force power, she knew he'd have sensed their shared blood about as soon as she acknowledged its existence. Luke was with him, she could tell, probably already making amends, but she couldn't bring herself to move. She had nothing to say to him. As far as she was concerned, Bail Organa was her real father. Not in blood, no, but certainly in spirit.

She sighed and stood up to make her way to Vader's quarters. She couldn't leave Luke to face him alone.

She couldn't hear anything but muffled voices when she arrived at the door. She probed the Force to check, but felt only peaceful emotion. Hopefully Luke's warm demeanour would act as a mediator and save them from being choked to death.

"Come in," she heard, through the door. So, Vader could sense her after all.

She entered slowly and with a feeling of surreal detachment. Luke was there, smiling as wide as ever, waving in greeting. Vader stood next to him, wearing simple robes, which she could only presume Obi-Wan must have lent him. The family resemblance was striking, now they were lined up side-by-side.

"Welcome to our family reunion," Luke laughed. "I'm really glad you made it."

"You must have questions," Vader said, and Leia knew the guilt she might have seen in his eyes was only her imagination.
No, of course not. Why would I have those? she thought in reply, but resisted the urge to voice it aloud. Instead, she only narrowed her eyes at him in acknowledgement.

"Please, sit down." The gracious hospitality did nothing to ease her suspicions. "I'm sure we'll be here a while."

She sat on the only available surface, the small bunk in the corner, and rubbed a hand over her face. Where could she start? Half of her wanted to deck him in the face, but that would get her an angry Sith Lord and no answers. The other half wanted to shake him, hard, and demand an explanation, even though she knew none that he could give would lessen her disgust. She was part of the movement sent to destroy him, for Forcesake. Talk about family dysfunction!

"Family dysfunction is one word for it," Vader said, and Leia's hackles rose. She shot Luke a cautious glance, but he only shook his head. "Your shielding," Vader clarified. "You have very loud thoughts, much like I did at your age."

She winced at the comparison.

"I can help you with that later, if you want," Luke cut in, reassuring. He must have understood her need for psychic privacy.

She smiled tightly and hoped he caught her gratitude.

"I'd have liked to teach you about the Force, had things been different," Vader offered. "I sense great power within you both."

"Oh, spare me," she snapped. "You're not here to be a father, we know. Save the formalities for someone who needs them."

For a moment, she saw surprise colour his gaze, soon to be replaced by almost fond amusement. "You have your mother's eyes, but the attitude is all mine."

Was that supposed to be a compliment? She had no idea who her father once was, but it wasn't much of a leap to assume her stubborn determination was inherited. The idea put her on edge.

"Relax, I'm not making a statement." Vader sighed, an unexpected reminder of how quiet and unassuming his breathing had become. He looked young, tired. "I'm trying to get to know my children."

Leia didn't know what to say to that.

"Okay," Luke said. "This is a pretty extraordinary situation, so I think we can put aside our differences, right, Leia? It'll be a second chance, like Ben said."

She knew it would be pointless to keep up this tense atmosphere, that they'd drive themselves mad before long. She wasn't trusting, but she could compromise. "Alright. A second chance."

"Great!" Luke smiled, and the Force radiated like the sun. "So, how about lunch?"

Chapter End Notes

The Force just does whatever. It's so chill, man. It's like the next honey badger.
(I have more written, but not the entire story. My update schedule basically doesn't exist, I'm sorry.)

(Vader does lighten up in later chapters. Both in a figurative sense and Force-wise. And, one day, I swear I'll switch out of Leia's POV.)
Leia hoped Obi-Wan had agreed to pay their laserbrained pilot enough for this. The entire situation was surreal. Here they were, travelling to the Alliance base on Yavin 4 with Darth Vader himself, allies, at least temporarily. She could hardly believe it.

Vader wasn't what she expected, either. He'd been strangely subdued in the past days, temper less easily sparked, though Leia wasn't going to risk testing it. He'd spent most of the time staring at, and analysing, Obi-Wan when he thought the other man wasn't looking. Leia was privately thankful at the lack of subtlety. Vader hadn't needed subtlety behind a mask, and he'd obviously forgotten to relearn.

Whatever he was up to, Leia would find out.

Obi-Wan wasn't doing much more than simple planning, going over and over Artoo's most basic files out of some innate meticulousness, but Vader looked completely engrossed in the frankly mind-numbing activity. Was it out of dedication to the Empire, to breaking into the Alliance's important plans? Leia knew the droid's defences were too strong, and Obi-Wan would give his life long before any vital information. This was something Vader had to be aware of, so why would he bother? To be contrary, even though it would get him nothing? That was too needless, even for him.

It made frustratingly little sense.

Vader's eyes settled on her, and he raised an eyebrow at the stormy expression he must have seen on her face.

"Why do you keep watching him?" Leia asked, when Vader made no move to open his mouth.

His eyes widened briefly, barely noticeable, before he sunk back into his usual carefully-schooled blankness. But Leia had seen it, the same sort of surprise she'd often seen on Luke, when he was faced with something particularly baffling. It was as if he hadn't been fully conscious of his own actions, which almost seemed impossible for someone as calculated and controlling as Darth Vader. Maybe he was softening in his old age, even though his face no longer showed it.

"I haven't seen him like this for a long time," he mused, and Leia almost saw the corners of his mouth twitch up.

"Like this?" she repeated, more to herself than to anyone, and turned to look at Obi-Wan.

She couldn't quite describe the difference, but there was some kind of renewed spirit in him, even in planning, which not even someone as cautious and tightly-wound as Threepio could appreciate. He seemed lighter.

Obi-Wan, realising their scrutiny, nodded towards them. Artoo beeped a happy greeting at Leia, then pointedly swiveled his head away from Vader.

"Hello again, Artoo," Vader said, but there was no reply. "He never did let go of a grudge."

Leia couldn't blame the droid. If Anakin Skywalker was ever as close to Artoo as his son, then the
betrayal would have been a sharp blow. Leia didn't even want to imagine Luke turning his back on their good friend. For Artoo, it would have been like heartbreak, and the thought made her own heart clench in sympathy.

"I'm not surprised," she said. She didn't add, "After what you did," but it was openly implied.

"Neither am I." It was simple resignation, and a ready acceptance she hadn't expected, so she had no reply. She couldn't tell if his unpredictability was just part of his personality, or an attempt to throw her off, but it must have worked well in his favour during his time both in the Clone Wars and in the Empire. It was obvious why the man was such a legend, even if she couldn't respect what he'd used his power for.

She sighed and shook her head, waving him off. She had plans to go over herself, and if Vader was content to stare at Obi-Wan all day, then it was fine by her. She didn't trust him enough to go over Alliance files anyway.

Luke came to her later, when she was just getting bored of considering strategy after strategy. He settled next to her, gave one slightly disapproving look to the plans, and said, "Father isn't really how I thought he'd be."

She laughed. "No, you don't say."

"Do you think he's gonna stay with us on Yavin 4?" Luke sounded hopeful.

Leia was hopeful for different reasons, primarily being that Vader was less of a risk under the watchful eyes of the Alliance and its only Jedi Master. It was also helpful that being surrounded by his family and the people he'd once called friends had mellowed him, and Leia didn't want the Empire sinking its dirty claws any further into her father's warped psyche.

"I would think so," Leia said, carefully. "But I wouldn't be surprised if he went crawling back to Imperial space."

Luke flinched, offended on Vader's behalf. "I don't think he'll do that, after all this. He may not admit it, but I think he views this as a second chance, just like Ben does."

"Just don't get your hopes up," Leia warned. "He may have Anakin Skywalker's face, but his mind is all Vader's."

"I don't think so. I'm not sure the line between the two is so defined." Luke's presence in the Force was filled with determination. "Just because you fall, it doesn't mean you're lost forever."

That was a Jedi's optimism speaking.

"I hope you're right, Luke. I hope you're right."

As their arrival to Yavin 4 grew closer, Leia felt antsy, and the more she grew to believe this had all been a horrible mistake. The only way to find out was to wait and watch, and the sense of powerlessness was frustrating, to say the least. And Vader's curiosity wasn't helping matters.

She could hear their conversation now, safely hidden from sight. The voices were muffled, but Obi-Wan sounded tense for a Jedi peacekeeper.

"Where are we going? I never asked." Vader's tone wasn't hostile, but it was noticeably demanding.
Obi-Wan didn't rise to the bait. "Perhaps it would be better if you didn't know."

"Perhaps it would be better if I did." There was a sigh. "I only want to know if there'll be a Medical Droid on hand, old man. I don't know about you, but I'd like to know what that thing did to us."

"Yes, I'm sure you'll have access to a MediDroid, Anakin. They're hardly scarce, even on the most underdeveloped planets."

Leia went rigid in anticipation, but Vader had no audible reaction to the use of his old name, or to Obi-Wan's dry humour.

"It never hurts to be prepared, Obi-Wan."

"If it's your brand of overpreparation, then I beg to differ."

There was a chuckle. "My overpreparation has saved your skin on countless occasions, if you recall."

"I seem to remember that you were usually the reason we were in those dangerous situations in the first place, Anakin," Obi-Wan quipped. "But you do have a point. There could be any number of unseen side effects to this, and it's certainly better to know about them than not."

"There we go, Master. Was it so hard, admitting I'm right, as per usual?"

There was a palpable silence then, and she had to fight from making some kind of strangled and slightly hysterical noise. To see her father like this, slipping back so easily into his former life, it only validated Luke's point. Han dismissed the Jedi teachings as spiritual nonsense, but Leia could see their merit, especially now.

But Vader would fight it, wouldn't he? Here, in front of the only people in the galaxy willing to offer him any single sliver of forgiveness, he would still put up a fight. Leia cursed the Emperor, suddenly, for corrupting Anakin's mind, and depriving him of the life he could have had.

Her anger must have been seeping into the Force, because she heard a soft noise, and then, "We have a visitor, Obi-Wan."

She stepped into the lounge, taking in Obi-Wan and Vader -- or was it Anakin? -- sitting at the hologame table, where they'd clearly been talking over a game of dejarik. It was domestic enough to have been taken out of a low-production romantic comedy holoprogram.

"Hello, Father, Obi-Wan." She nodded to them both in greeting, as if she hadn't just overheard.

Vader looked uncomfortable to be caught in what he must have perceived as a moment of weakness, but Obi-Wan's eyes were warm and kind. Leia doubted he'd had a proper conversation with his old friend, and from what she could guess, likely apprentice, in years.

"Anakin and I were just discussing our journey," Obi-Wan said, though his face was painted with a knowing smile. He knew she'd been listening in and was probably pleased she'd been able to catch a glimpse of an era long past. "We'll be arriving soon, I think."

"I'll be glad to get my feet on the ground," Vader admitted.

"I thought you liked flying." Obi-Wan was teasing him, Leia realised.

"Only when I'm the pilot," Vader shot back. "And since I don't know where I'm going, I doubt I
could get you anywhere."

Obi-Wan laughed at that, and Leia couldn't remember if she'd ever seen him laugh out of anything but situation-appropriate politeness before. The two were taking the easy banter in stride, practiced from the many years they'd spent their lives together. It was a nice change from the bleakness of Alliance fighting, which seemed unchanging and never-ending after a while. Luke had said this was the will of the Force, and Leia was now very tempted to believe him.

Fighting down the instinct to call the two a married couple, she instead offered what little reassurance she could. "It was a necessary precaution, Father. There's a lot at stake, and I'm sorry, but the Alliance can't take the risk." She frowned. Truthfully, she probably wouldn't have told him even if she could have, but now things were changing.

"Believe me, I have enough experience with wartime negotiations to understand." Vader made a face, which Obi-Wan smirked at.

"That was more my area, really."

"I don't know how you could stand it. I nearly fell asleep half the time."

"It's all in the meditation," Obi-Wan said seriously. "Something you refused to even try."

"I did try," Vader corrected, "just never hard enough."

"And that was why I, thankfully, did the negotiating."

Leia felt herself somehow gratified to see the two like this. Obi-Wan's faint aura of sadness was slightly less prominent, and his recovery was proof that they could still overcome suffering -- even Darth Vader himself, apparently.

"I'll leave you two to your game," she said, unable to keep the small glow from her voice, and left swiftly.

She could hear their laughter echoing behind her, even as she reached the farthest end of the hallway.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not saying Anakin is checking Obi-Wan out, but Anakin is definitely checking Obi-Wan out.

(I swear I'm going somewhere with this. I don't know where, but it's definitely a place.)
Arriving on base was a relief. She needed the space, the fresh air, and the chance to sink back into her work. Unfortunately, most of her relief was overpowered by her fear of discovery. She knew the more veteran members of the Alliance would recognise her father's face, and his Force presence, within seconds. The results would be disastrous, and her skills in negotiation would be more than tested in explaining her way out of this reckless decision. Like a dagger hanging above her head, she was certain they would find out eventually, and even the best of their disguises couldn't hide Vader forever.

How could she convince the Alliance that Anakin Skywalker wasn't a lost cause? If only they could have seen out of her eyes, they would have easily understood the new hope she'd found in the fallen Jedi. If they tried, they could bring him back from the Dark Side, together. It would take time and effort and a lot of Force power, but it wasn't impossible.

When the time came, after she was sure of Anakin's return and loyalty, she would tell Mon Mothma. For now, though, she had to wait.

"They'll know," Vader said. The long robes managed to shadow his face almost entirely. To Leia, he seemed unrecognisable, but paranoia was a hard habit to break. "At best, they'll mistake me for my son, but that can only last so long before they realise they're seeing double. Luke may be strong with the Force, but even he can't be in two places at once."

"The idea that you're back from the dead, metaphorically speaking, would be entirely too implausible for them to even consider, Anakin. As long as your face is at least reasonably hidden, you'll get along fine." Obi-Wan readjusted the hood one last time before nodding in approval.

Vader eyed him, looking unconvinced. "My death will be on your hands," he warned.

"Stop being so melodramatic, Anakin, honestly."

"You'd at least get a fair trial before being executed," Leia offered, which earned her an unhappy glance.

"The reassurance is appreciated."

"Except for the people in this room, anyone who's ever known you is convinced you're dead, Father," Leia assured, in the way she knew best: with fact. "And, according to Alliance intel, Obi-Wan is in hiding, and about twenty years older. It's going to take a hell of a lot before they suspect otherwise." It was the tone she used in the Senate, at her most diplomatic, and it usually placated even the most skittish. Of course, in the Senate there was slightly less swearing, but the point stood.

Her father relaxed, posture less hard set, and crossed his arms, mouth half downturned in a frown. "I-thank you. This is still a foolish idea, but thank you."

Obi-Wan gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Have our ideas ever been anything but?"

"Forgive me for the lack of positivity, Master, but I value my own life."
There it was again, Leia thought. Vader had called Obi-Wan Master, fallen back into Anakin's persona with ease. Through the Force, she could feel something. Obi-Wan's projected aura of forgiveness and caring was almost enveloping Vader, changing him. The harder she examined the two, the more she could sense their shared connection. It was as if a cut thread was retying itself.

She stared at them, wide-eyed. The Force had given them the opportunity to repair the damage they'd done to each other, but why? Was this part of the Prophecy Obi-Wan had referred to? Perhaps looking to the Force itself would provide answers.

"Is something wrong, Leia?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No, nothing's wrong," she said, but she couldn't wipe the curious look from her face. She studied the Force-thread incredulously. It was yet another thing to add to the ever-increasing list of now-possible impossibilities.

"Well, if you say so," Obi-Wan conceded, after a pause.

Anakin's -- and they were Anakin's, this time, unquestionably -- eyes were narrowed in concern. "Are you sure you're alright, Leia?"

"Yes, Father." She smiled. "I'm more than alright."

She sent her gratitude to the Force for second chances.

Luke was pacing when she met up with him in his newly-assigned quarters, his brow furrowed in sadness and frustration, grease from the X-Wing stained in his hair, ignored or overlooked.

"Han's not staying." He turned to Leia, defeated. "I think this is way too much for him to handle all at once, which I understand," he admitted. "It doesn't hurt any less, though."

"Han's a loner and a freelancer. I don't think the Alliance is enough to tie him down, even with all its promises of danger and thrill-seeking."

There was a small silence as Luke considered this. Finally, he rubbed a hand through his hair, and shot her a quick smile.

"Is Father staying?" he asked.

"Yes, Luke. He's staying."

"I'm glad," Luke said, and sat down. "Do you think he'll want this back?" He held up his lightsaber, gently cradled in his hands like something precious.

"He has his own. I'm sure he'll want you to keep this one."

Luke's eyes were warm when he looked at her. "I want to be a Jedi Knight, like he was- is. Like he is."

"You will be," Leia asserted, with firm conviction. "Maybe you can teach me a few tricks along the way."

"A whole family of Jedi." Luke laughed. "We're one of a kind."

"We're something," Leia said, dryly.
The next time Leia visited Anakin and Obi-Wan, hidden away in the empty and forgotten quarters they were now sharing, it was evening, when everyone was too busy sharing dinner to notice her absence. Obi-Wan answered promptly, looking a bit ruffled.

"Did you get a chance to find a MediDroid?" she asked.

"What, no greeting?" Anakin's voice came from somewhere behind Obi-Wan's back, thick with sleep.

"Hello, Father."

"We did get a chance, yes," Obi-Wan confirmed, allowing her to hurriedly slip into the darkness of the room. "Medically, we seem to be in perfect condition."

"There's no explanation for it," Anakin sighed. "Physically speaking, it's as if the past two decades haven't happened."

"Except they have," Leia pointed out. Force hope this didn't send Anakin spiralling deep into denial.

"I'm aware of that," he replied, dismissive. "It just feels..."

"Like turning over a new leaf?" Obi-Wan finished for him.

"What he said."

"The Force is forgiving," Obi-Wan said, thoughtful. "Perhaps this is a way for its forgiveness to wear off more materially."

"Over-spirituality aside, Obi-Wan has a point," Anakin acknowledged.

The room was deathly quiet for a moment, as the three were lost in their own minds.

"Qui-Gon's ghost!" Obi-Wan clasped his hands together, sudden, displacing the pensive atmosphere. Leia almost startled. "I didn't think to ask him."

"Would he know?" Anakin asked. Leia wasn't trained in the Force, but from the look of it, posthumous conversations were business as usual. "And more importantly, would he spout anything but his usual cryptic nonsense?"

"It's certainly worth trying. I'll talk to him when I meditate tonight."

Despite not knowing what a ghost could do to help but rattle its own chains, she nodded.

"In the mean time, since you can't eat in the mess hall, why don't you come to dinner with Luke and I?"

"After two decades without a proper meal, I have more than enough lost time to account for."

Anakin smirked. "I'm going with or without you, old man."

"Well, I'm hardly going to sit here alone and eat, am I?" Obi-Wan shook his head fondly. "Come on, then."

______________________________

It was as if Anakin was resurfacing and beating down Vader in the process, Leia reflected. The more the Force connection between him and Obi-Wan had a chance to develop and strengthen, the more the Light Side of his personality began to emerge. Surrounded by the people who were closest to
him, he sometimes seemed like an entirely different man altogether.

It was unpredictable, like riding on a half-broken ship, rising and twisting and spinning, leaving Leia to try and analyse what the hell was going on. Luke had noticed, too, but he seemed to be more than happy about it.

She knew nothing about the ghost of the old Jedi, Qui-Gon, but if he could give them some information, Leia would be thankful for it.

Chapter End Notes

From that shocking lack of protest, one would think he wants to be called Anakin.

Behold, Dad Vader in all his glory. The Obikin Force Bond is purifying his soul with the power of love, Ani just can't tell yet. He wants to know what love is, and Obi-Wan can show him.

(Oh, and just a heads up: essays are attacking me in the night, so if I don't update, I'm probably staring at a blank Word document somewhere, making constipated noises and switching between the Word window, my AO3 bookmarks page, and thesaurus.com. I think I'm gonna run out of caffeinated beverages by the end of this month. This is also the reason my chapters are so short, I'm sorry ;a;!)
Qui-Gon Ships It

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Obi-Wan breathed his emotions into the Force's warm embrace. He'd forgotten how much he loved meditating, even if it had been a few days since he had last had the chance. These few days felt like a lifetime. He'd been a dying old man, and now he was looking into a face he'd thought he'd never see again, young once more. After decades of believing Anakin Skywalker was dead, seeing him again was a miracle he'd barely thought possible.

Qui-Gon was right to have faith in the young boy they'd met so many years ago. He was always right.

"I'm glad you think so, young padawan."

Obi-Wan shook his head, laughing. "I'm hardly young anymore, Master."

"Your appearance says otherwise." Qui-Gon's ghost smiled.

"About that," Obi-Wan began. "I don't suppose you have any explanation to offer us."

"I only know that it's of great importance to the Prophecy," Qui-Gon said, faintly regretful. "Though, your own guesswork isn't far off, it seems."

"My guesswork?" Obi-Wan questioned. "So, you agree this is about forgiveness?"

"A chance to heal what has been broken, yes."

The mysticism was a deserving taste of his own medicine, he figured. "And what has been broken, Master?" Aside from everything.

"The bond you share," Qui-Gon told him. There was a sly glint to his eyes. "Without it, there tends to be some miscommunication."

He snorted in agreement. "I'd say." His eyes rose to watch his master's glimmering figure, pleading silently, and then not-so-silently. "Is there hope? Can I fix this?"

"The task doesn't fall solely in your hands, Obi-Wan. You have always been so quick to bear the weight of the world on your shoulders, and yet, each time, you forget you have so many who are willing -- more than willing -- to support you."

He blinked back what unexpected tears he felt coming. "Master, thank you- I-"

"I know, Obi-Wan."

He looked down at his hands, they were softer and less calloused compared to the ones he was more familiar with seeing. When he looked back up, Qui-Gon was gone.

He'd walked, to calm himself. When he arrived back at their quarters, Anakin was awake and waiting for him.

"Have a nice nap?"
'I have bed head,' Anakin said, quizzical. He shook himself off with a disbelieving sigh. "How was your chat with Qui-Gon?"

"Surprisingly informative."

"Oh?" Anakin yawned and stretched, fully awake now. Obi-Wan could feel his former padawan's attentiveness through the bond he was only now aware he had. "And what did he have to say?"

"Apparently, I was right. This is about forgiveness and," he hedged, "the Prophecy."

"I see." Anakin didn't sound upset, but then again, he never sounded much of anything anymore. His animated personality only showed when he allowed it to. Though, from the lack of rattling and destruction, Obi-Wan felt he could safely assume Anakin wasn't too angry.

When it seemed clear Anakin wasn't about to add anything else, Obi-Wan gave him a pat on the shoulder and went to prepare himself a cup of tea.

When Leia knocked at the door to his shared quarters, Obi-Wan was swirling the dregs of his second cup of tea absently. He'd managed to get in a little sleep, more than he ever could during the War, and his tea helped him the rest of the way. Anakin was still snoring, so he opened the door gently. The light peaked in, but not enough to illuminate their bunk.

"Good morning," Leia said. "Did you hear from the ghost?"

"I did." Leia lit up at the news, and the sharpness in her eyes was all her mother's.

It took him a while to explain the Prophecy and the meaning of Qui-Gon's message, enough time for Anakin to wake up and throw a pillow over his ears.

"Couldn't you take this conversation elsewhere?"

"So, the Chosen One finally gets up," Leia remarked wryly.

Anakin raised the pillow long enough to give him a questioning glance. "You've told her, then?"

"I have."

"Okay," Anakin said. He looked uncomfortable. "Did you save me any of that?" he asked, eyes trained on Obi-Wan's empty mug.

Leia narrowed her eyes at the pointed change of subject, but Obi-Wan shook his head, gesturing to keep quiet. They couldn't risk cornering Anakin, not when he was so dangerous. Mentioning the Prophecy was chancy enough as it was.

"I have a limited supply," Obi-Wan warned, handing Anakin a new cup.

He settled back against the bunk, and Obi-Wan noted how strange serenity looked on him. "I'll try to curb my appetite, Master."

"I have to get back to work," Leia said. "Try to be careful when you leave." She grinned, before adding, "Oh, and there's tea in the cafeteria, if you need it."

She gave them a firm look before slipping out the door.
Weaving through the crowded corridors with Anakin at his side was like a trip home. He hadn't let himself miss it, but the sense of loss had crept up on him on more than one occasion. It felt like he'd regained a part of himself that was gone.

Anakin kept his head down, but even Obi-Wan could detect the beginnings of a smile. "I'd forgotten this feeling," he mused from beneath his hood.

"I'd forgotten your inability to understand personal boundaries," Obi-Wan admonished, long-suffering, as Anakin bumped into him for the fifth time.

"Most people get out of my way."

"You're not as hard to miss in this disguise, Anakin."

Anakin groaned at the thought of another of Obi-Wan's infamous lectures, broadcasting his displeasure through the Force. "I'll be careful."

Obi-Wan sidestepped another one of Anakin's misplaced feet. "I'm sure."

They rounded the corner into the cafeteria, and Obi-Wan hoped they'd go by unnoticed. They were dangerously low on supplies, and without his tea, he'd have trouble meditating. At a time when tranquility was necessary to establish his connection to Qui-Gon, his only source of answers, this was all too important.

"They're all so young," Anakin commented, pointing with at least some subtlety to the groups of X-Wing pilots huddled around the many cafeteria tables.

"Technically, we are, as well. Besides, they're no younger than we were when we fought in the War."

"I felt older at the time. Less like an unqualified youngling." He punctuated this with a quick glance towards the youngest group, and towards Luke himself.

"I admit I worried about you constantly, but your self-assurance was never something I doubted."

Anakin's mouth twitched upwards. "I don't suppose it was, no."

"Luke will be fine," Obi-Wan comforted. "When it comes to his skills as a pilot, he takes after his father."

"My flying couldn't exactly be characterised as safe."

"You've lasted this long, haven't you?"

"I should go with him," Anakin said resolutely. "He needs someone reliable at his side."

"You don't have faith in the other pilots?"

"Not as much faith as I have in myself."

"Your humility astounds me," Obi-Wan deadpanned, raising his eyes skyward, looking to the Force for patience.

"But it's the truth." Obi-Wan could see Anakin fighting a pout. He wondered if Vader had ever gotten away with it underneath the mask.
"I'm not sure sneaking on board an X-Wing is a good idea, Anakin, even if it is to protect your son."

"Surely Mon Mothma could have no objection. The Alliance needs all the support it can get."
Anakin narrowed his eyes, his voice low and threatening. "Rejecting me out of stubborn pride would be ill-advised."

Obi-Wan couldn't help but be relieved that of all the ways Anakin's darker side could manifest, it was in protection of his own flesh and blood.

"Why don't we cross that bridge when we come to it, Ani," he soothed. "For now, Mon Mothma cannot be allowed to know--"

"Of our continued existence?" Anakin scowled. "Yes, I'm sure she'll be very disappointed to know I'm no longer as close to death."

"You care about him," Obi-Wan thought aloud. The great Darth Vader, doting on his own son. He had always been fiercely protective.

"Unlike the Jedi, I'm allowed to form attachments."

*From my point of view, the Jedi are evil!*

No, Obi-Wan was no stranger to Anakin's resentment.

"Yes, you are," Obi-Wan conceded. Better he attach himself to his family than to the Emperor.

Anakin's eyes widened in surprise. "After all the years you spent teaching me to uphold the Code, Master, one would think you'd be less accepting of my blatant disregard for it."

"What would be the point?" Obi-Wan questioned, but he didn't expect Anakin to reply.

Anakin blinked, then smiled dimly. Had he wanted an argument? They'd been arguing for decades, and Obi-Wan was growing far too old for this.

"The tea," Anakin said abruptly, pulling Obi-Wan along. "Let's go get the tea."

Perhaps he, too, had grown tired of their fighting.

"Did Jedi-in-training ever have two masters?" Luke asked.

He'd stopped off at their quarters earlier from what must have been his flight practice, by the looks of his uniform, and had looked like he'd wanted to ask them something for the past twenty minutes.

"It wasn't unheard of, though not exactly commonplace."

"I had two masters, in a way," Anakin told him.

Luke fiddled with the hem of his sleeve, the grease there rubbing off onto his fingers. "I was thinking," he said hesitantly, "what if you both trained me?"

"You'd want me to?" Anakin asked, then looked away, like he hadn't intended the outburst.

"Yeah, of course."

"I haven't had a padawan in a long time." Obi-Wan felt Anakin's overwhelming wistfulness through
their bond. He hadn't seen Ahsoka in years. She'd be well into her adulthood by now, though Obi-Wan couldn't picture her, with her never-draining energy, old and tired like they'd become.

"I'm not worried about your teaching, Father," Luke said. "I'm sure you'll be fine."

Anakin smiled. "Okay," he said. "First rule, only use the Force irresponsibly when Obi-Wan isn't around."

"But Obi-Wan uses the Force irresponsibly all the time." Luke's brow was furrowed in confusion. "He used it to get us into that cantina in Mos Eisley."

Anakin raised an eyebrow in Obi-Wan's direction. "Do as I say, not as I do," Obi-Wan said solemnly.

"Ah, yes, the age-old excuse." Anakin chuckled. "Snips never appreciated my attempts at using it."

Luke looked to them both. "What was it like, back then? There must have been so many Jedi. I bet it was amazing."

"It was, for a time." Sometimes, he missed it so much he couldn't breathe, but it was not without its faults. He'd spent so much of his life hidden away in the sand and never once thought of getting up and trying again, fixing what had lead Anakin and so many others down the wrong path. Luke deserved a second Jedi Order, and a way to avoid the mistakes of his predecessors.

"Because it fell?"

"The Old Jedi Order wasn't perfect. The Council was often short-sighted, and the Code..." He paused, noticing the astonishment on Anakin's face. "The Code had its own shortcomings."

"Master, the Code was everything to you," Anakin said.

"I've had twenty years to reassess my judgement, Anakin." He hid a smile at his former padawan’s reaction. "And believe it or not, I'm not always right."

"So, it's a second chance for the Jedi Order, too," Luke said. "But aren't all the Jedi, you know-" He winced. "-dead?"

"I destroyed the Jedi, but not the Force-sensitive." Anakin twitched. "You could say I had other things on my mind at the time."

"Palpatine got sloppy," Obi-Wan said. "He was far too blinded by his own arrogance to be thorough."

"As was I," Anakin admitted.

"But Master Yoda survived." And the potential for a new Order lay scattered through the rest of the galaxy.

"So, there's hope for us." Luke stood up, excited. "I'm not the last of the Jedi?"

"Not the last of the Jedi, no. Rather, the first of the new."

Chapter End Notes
TEA IS LOVE. TEA IS LIFE.

On an actual writing process-related note:

So, Anakin speaks like he swallowed a dictionary (and an AP English course) whenever he gets angry. That's how I've always secretly explained the discrepancies between Prequel Anakin's and Original Trilogy Anakin's use of vocabulary, other than their differences in life experience, which is the second most obvious change. And the most likely factor, I mean, unless the Dark Side makes you suddenly forget colloquialisms, which is very possible, if you also get free cookies :D.

Hey, Anakin, doth mother know you weareth her drapes?

(And I'm sorry for being super-duper late. Life, man. I don't even have one and it still gets in the way.)
Ben and his father were sparring, a quick flurry of hits and jabs and whirls, so perfectly in sync, Luke could only stare. The Force sung with every matched attack. He wanted that level of understanding, that perfect balance.

Father was laughing, jumping and flipping in ways that could only have taken ages to master. "I haven't felt like this in years!"

"Stop showing off and fight me," Ben joked.

"Yes, Master." Father countered, aggressive yet somehow graceful. Ben met him in turn.

They danced.

"I didn't know Ben and Father were so close," Luke said, contemplative. "I mean, I figured they knew each other, but this- this is something else."

Leia nodded. "Apparently, they have some sort of bond, using the Force."

"That makes sense. You should have seen them training together, Leia! It was like they could read each other's minds."

"And they talk to ghosts," Leia said, amused. "The Force just gets stranger and stranger."

"But it's kind of beautiful, in a way, don't you think?" It was his goal, he decided, to be able to move like that, like something otherworldly.

Leia stared off into the distance and laced her hands together. She was suddenly very quiet, and she moved to brush over Luke with the Force, and Luke knew she was reassuring herself that he wasn't a ghost, some kind of haunted relic from the past, because Luke often needed the reassurance himself.

Eventually, she spoke, regretful. "There's so much we don't know about our past. Hell, we barely know anything about our own parents."

"So, I'm not the only one who feels like we're missing out," Luke laughed, but it came out sounding more bitter than he'd intended.

"It's part of the reason why I joined the Alliance." Leia's mouth twisted angrily. "The Emperor destroyed so many lives, so many thousands of years worth of culture and civilisation. In a way, I wanted him to get a taste of his own medicine."

His fingers dug into the material of his robes, a sudden surge of determination coursing through him, nails reaching just close enough to hurt. "If we find can find a weakness in those blueprints, I want to help. I want to fly on the front lines."

"I know the feeling. There's a reason I've dedicated my life to helping restore the Republic, after all. And Force knows I don't want it to be for nothing."
"It's going to work," Luke said. "It's got to."

They had too much to lose, and Force hope Father could see it, too. If he went back to the Emperor's side, the Alliance wouldn't be the only thing to be so damaged, Luke knew. Everything within Palpatine's reach was shrouded in Darkness, and if someone as strong as Father couldn't shake it, how could anyone else? 

Father had agreed to pass on his training to Leia, as well, which was a relief he'd definitely needed. If they were going to fight a war, they might as well fight it without their hands tied. Unfortunately, Ben insisted they first learn how to meditate, which sounded much easier on paper.

Leia was twitching with impatience. "I have too much on my mind," she grumbled, eyes still closed. "When you're in my position, you don't usually get a chance to relax, trust me."

"I figured the Jedi were about inner peace," Luke said, "but isn't there a limit? I've already gone numb."

"Well, you're certainly Skywalkers," Ben said, aiming a fondly exasperated look in Father's direction.

"You could've started with something less boring, you know." Father rolled his eyes. "We're not really making the best first impression."

"Meditation is an essential part of the Jedi Order," Ben chided. "Without it-"

Father muttered something that sounded like, "Not another lecture," then waved Ben off.

"Now, where was I?" Ben continued, but his disapproving expression didn't fade. "Clear your mind. The less you try to think about nothing, the easier it will become."

"Don't force it," Father added. "If I say 'Don't think about pink tauntauns,' what do you think about?"

"Pink tauntauns." Leia snorted. "There's an image."

"Now I'm going to think about weirdly-coloured tauntauns every time I meditate," Luke complained. "Thanks, Father."

"If it helps, then go for it," Father said, mock serious. "Whatever works for you, of course."

"By the Force, it feels like I'm back at the academy." Ben rubbed at his temples, but Luke could see he was trying not to smile.

Father shrugged, unapologetic. "What can I say? It's how I learned."

"This is a terrible meditating environment, by the way," Leia informed them.

Training took hours, and Vader returned to their quarters exhausted, Obi-Wan close at heel, closing the doors behind them.

"Really, Anakin?" Obi-Wan was laughing, though not cruelly.

Hurt rose inside him anyway.
"It's the least I can do. Master, my own children are afraid of me," he said, and Obi-Wan's eyes widened at the turn in mood. "What else would you have me do?"

"I wouldn't quite say-"

Vader cut him off, "You hid them from me, half the kriffing galaxy away, and you'd 'not quite say' they were afraid of me? Don't be obtuse, Obi-Wan."

"Then, this training is, what, your way of extending your hand in friendship?" Obi-Wan sighed, and Vader could sense his old guilt returning. "Force, this is one failure after another, like it has been for years."

"I won't deny it, but I'm hoping this isn't unfixable," he said. "They seemed happy today. Leia's stopped flinching every time she sees me, and Luke asked me to take him as a padawan. That must count for something."

He'd felt enough of Leia's anger and betrayal through the Force in recent days to know what his children thought of him. He had no idea how to be a parent. Force, the last children he'd had any interaction with...

He looked away quickly, swallowing down revulsion. To feel again, with all its fast-fading novelty, was a pain that came in waves, and only when he least expected. The Dark's unique brand of hurt could blend into the background with time, leave him comfortably numb, but the Light's wasn't so escapable. Like a loose tooth, he couldn't stop pulling at it.

"They love you, Anakin. I love you. Even a non-Force-sensitive could see that."

He choked. "They know- you know that- that I feel the same, don't you?" In his own way, however broken.

"Of course," Obi-Wan replied, but it was too fast, too hastily reassuring, and Vader thought maybe his Master hadn't known at all.

Chapter End Notes

One moment, I'm writing a serious fic, the next minute there are fluffy family feels, and then it's back to serious angst once more. And they say Anakin's the mercurial one.

On another actually writing process-related note, Anakin's not quite there yet in this whole saccharine redemption arc business, and that is totally the reason why he still refers to himself by his usual moniker in his own head, even though Obi-Wan is literally already calling him "Ani", and he's literally calling Obi-Wan "Master". I have no reasoning. FICTIONAL CHARACTERS' SELF-HATRED IS FOOD FOR MY SOUL. OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT. I enjoy tearing my heart to pieces and writing painful angst, so, y'know. Gotta pile that h/c on like chocolate sauce on an ice cream sundae.

I'm sorry my updates are so incredibly slowwwwww. I have schoolwork practically heaped up to my ears right now, which is making my productivity disappear. It sucks, and I suck. I'm sorryyyyy~.
Han was getting underpaid. At least, he certainly wasn't getting paid enough to sit and drink his morning caf next to Darth Vader. He'd known this wasn't his idea of an average drop-off mission from the start, but hells, he hadn't signed up for this.

He wasn't going to be the next third wheel at Tall, Dark, and Genocidal's family reunion, so, he'd decided on leaving. It was by all means the smartest choice to make, but Chewie didn't seem to agree. In fact, the damned fuzzball was giving him the silent treatment. And Luke kept staring at him with his big, shining eyes, practically begging him to stick around.

He groaned, ran a hand over the comforting presence of his blaster, and went to tell Chewie there'd been a change of plans.

Luke's over-excitability was going to be the death of him.

"So, you're staying?"

"Yeah, kid, that's what I said."

"Thanks, Han." Luke drew forward to hug him. "It means a lot."

"Sure, any time," he said, and awkwardly reached to pat Luke on the back. He wouldn't exactly characterise himself as the huggy type, but Luke looked like he needed it.

"I'll go tell Leia the good news." Luke gave him one last squeeze before hurrying away.

Damn, did he need something to drink.

Han was entirely surrounded by the Falcon's parts, part of her regularly-scheduled check up, when Vader himself came strolling through like he owned the place.

He grit his teeth and thankfully extricated himself from the mess he'd made without slamming his head against the Falcon's hull, finding himself face-to-face with someone who was, to his endless frustration, offering unsolicited advice on the caretaking of his own damn ship. He tried to give Vader a pained, sour expression, but the man's disturbingly familiar excited grin stopped him dead.

"So, I mean, the point is... I could help fix it for you." Vader scratched the back of his neck and shrugged. "It's the least I could do for the trouble, and honestly, I've been waiting to get my hands dirty since I got here. You have no idea how kriffing boring TIE Fighters get after awhile. They don't even have proper shielding!"

He blinked. This was the first time he'd heard the new and improved Darth Vader open his mouth since the incident in the Death Star, and the change was like a slap to the face. No wonder the Twins had looked so lost and confused.

"Of course, you don't have to. I wouldn't want a Sith Lord anywhere near my ship's engines either." Vader gave a polite smile. "Just think of it as a token of my gratitude."
He narrowed his eyes. He knew the Jedi had been peacekeepers and negotiators -- possibly even manipulators, if Kenobi really was the poster boy of all the Jedi ideals -- but the charm wasn't something he'd expected. After all, who was more charming than Han Solo? He'd never met anyone able to keep up, and if he were to have picked anyone, the overlyreserved Force-worshipers would never had made his list.

*It just goes to show nobody's intuition is always dead-on,* he thought, eyeing his now awkward-looking guest.

"I'd appreciate it," he said, finally, when he'd had enough of watching Vader squirm. "If you're any good."

"She'll run better than ever when I'm finished with her, I swear." Vader gave a smug grin. "I'm one of the best."

"Yeah? You shoulda become a mechanic, pal," Han finished, and gave him a pat on the back, a little too forceful. "Real shame you didn't."

Vader cocked his head in curiosity, eyes dimming slightly when he caught Han's meaning.

"I mean, 'cause of all that wasted potential, of course," he clarified.

"No, you're right." Vader nodded, smiling blandly. "The galaxy would've been a better place for it, but unless your ship can warp through time, well, then I'm stuck here, where Anakin Skywalker has spent the last twenty years dead." He sighed, defeated. "Listen, Solo, your ship's the only thing left I can fix, so I'm fixing it."

Han stared at him.

"I guess you're alright for a dead kid," he offered eventually.

"Kid?" Vader repeated, nose crinkling at the idea. He looked a bit like Luke, then, which made Han clamp down on a smile. "I'm certainly not a kid."

"Well, you look like one," he said, simple. "You act like one, too." If Kenobi's anything to go by. Their personal vendetta is half the reason Luke and Leia's true family aren't by blood.

"I can't say I haven't heard that one before."

"There's a shocker." Han handed him a wrench. "Have fun up to your elbows in grease, kid. And welcome back to the land of the living."

Vader hadn't been lying, and when he gave her a test run, the Falcon flew smoother than she should after only a few hours of maintenance. Using the Force for engineering was probably cheating, but he wasn't about to complain if it saved him the time and effort.

Han stood in awkward silence, Leia staring bemusedly on as Luke mooned over Vader's handiwork. The Twins had stopped by to update him on the Rebel's progress, but Luke had gotten quickly sidetracked.

"I wouldn't have thought I'd end up here," Leia said, eyes still trained on her brother. "I never thought about finding my biological family. Never had reason to."

"I don't know all that much about mine, either," Han admitted, though he had no idea why.
"I'm sorry."

"Family's overrated, anyway," he dismissed, and Leia snorted.

"Somehow, I'm glad I found mine."

"I guess I've found mine, too," Han said, and turned to the nearest panel interface before he could embarrass himself further.

Luke continued excitedly pawing at the Falcon's internals until Vader returned, and Han realised he was in for an awkward Father-Son Bonding Moment. At the sight of Luke's sunny smile, he immediately regretted agreeing to any of this sappy emotional stuff, just for the sheer second-hand embarrassment.

"Father, this is amazing. I would never have thought to arrange it this way!"

"Well, I mean, I spent my whole childhood practicing." Was Vader embarrassed? "It's nothing, really."

Kenobi sidled up from behind him, smiling slyly. "Have you finally found modesty hidden somewhere deep in that ego of yours?"

"But, Master, it's not egomania if I'm only telling the truth!" Vader's protests sounded well-rehearsed, an argument he'd had many times before, and Han was almost surprised he'd been willing to face the unpleasant reminder of his past.

Han was no stranger to the unhinged, he'd seen more than enough of them during his days as a "scoundrel" -- not that those days had ever ended, he told himself -- and it was clear Vader was the perfect picture of someone with some seriously deep-seated issues. Family ties aside, the man was dangerous. But from the looks of things, the willingness to play into their old roles, Kenobi was thinking what Han was thinking. Vader could be useful. And if they could utilise his power while reawakening his long dead Jedi half, the rebels would be thousands of times stronger. Though, somehow, Han doubted Vader's family had taken tactical advantage into their consideration. They only wanted to chase the ghost of Anakin Skywalker.

But that was a dangerous game. Han had played many -- and if Han's intuition was right, Kenobi wasn't inexperienced himself -- but the odds, as much as he hated to acknowledge them, weren't exactly in their favour. If Vader fell back into the hands of Imperial forces, and then into the Emperor's, things would not work out well, and Han had spent enough time under Imperial jurisdiction already.

But he couldn't tell them this. He couldn't tell them what they didn't want to hear, even though he knew they'd listen. They'd dug themselves too deep. Who tried to reform a killer? Hell, he didn't even know why he'd agreed. No money was worth this.

Damn. What had he gotten himself into?

Chapter End Notes

Anakin Skywalker pretending to be Darth Vader pretending to be Anakin Skywalker.
WE NEED TO GO DEEPER.
I swear the characterisation makes sense in my head, somehow. Anakin thinks he needs to be Vader ("IT IS TOO LATE FOR ME, SON." //ANGSTANGSTANGST), for some crazy reason, but he knows the Junior Skywalkers need Anakin Skywalker as a father instead of Darth Vader, so... We get Anakin who thinks he's Vader trying to pretend to be himself so that his kids can feel better. LOGIC, MAN. LOGIC.

Meanwhile, Han trusts literally nobody ever except his baes, Lady Angry Space Buns and Adorable Puppy Eyes Guy. Han Solo for Biggest Dork of the Year.

I DEEPLY APOLOGISE FOR THE LACK OF UPDATING. I've been busy with my usual comics!fandom stuff, and after Arkham Knight and Comic-Con, all I could think about was writing more DC fic. It's been an intense writing period for me, man. Super intense. I think maybe this chapter's ended up a little unpolished as a result, I'm really sorry. But I thought maybe it would be better if I at least got out an update before you guys thought I'd died? Haha.
He tapped his fingers impatiently against the metal of his bunk. He was quickly growing tired of sitting around uselessly, waiting for something to happen, some opportunity to fight and get his hands back on the familiar weight of a ship's controls. Obi-Wan was frustratingly cautious, never venturing outside the safety of their cramped quarters for anything but the necessities. It made him itch for the battlefield.

"I should be out there," he announced angrily, startling Obi-Wan. "I should be flying alongside them."

"I see your patience is running dry," Obi-Wan said wryly, resettling himself. "It's too much of a risk, you know. Leaving at this time of day, when we could be easily recognised."

"That will never change," Vader snapped. "At least now I have the advantage of being unnoticeable."

"And how are you enjoying your new-found stealth?"

"It has its perks," he admitted. "My peripheral vision has improved."

"You don't miss the mask?" Obi-Wan seemed almost pleased by this.

"It wasn't exactly comfortable," he said.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow.

"No, I don't miss it. Is that what you wanted to hear, you sentimental old fool?" He laughed, unsurprised. "You've enjoyed every second of this, haven't you?"

"I've missed you, old friend. My dear Anakin." Obi-Wan smiled warmly.

He sighed, let himself relax. "It's not like I ever left, Master."

"Didn't you?"

"You could have found me if you wanted to," he accused. "The Star Destroyer Fleet isn't actually hard to miss."

"I could say the same to you."

"I won't willingly set foot on that dustheap of a planet." He crossed his arms. "And don't tell me you didn't know that when you first hid yourself there twenty years ago."

"I didn't hide there," Obi-Wan corrected.

He allowed himself to smirk, slow and satisfied. "Didn't you?"

Obi-Wan shook his head, rubbed at his temples. "You twist words as well as Master Yoda."

"There's a reason they call me the Negotiator," he said.
"A title I had first, I believe."

"Before you stopped negotiating."

Obi-Wan waved an exasperated hand. "You've made your point. Next time there's a flight practice, you'll hopefully be able to slip into the cockpit unnoticed."

"I won't get caught," he assured. "You've seen me charm my way out of too many risky situations to doubt that."

"Risky situations you could have easily avoided with a little caution, Anakin." Obi-Wan pinched the bridge of his nose, looking very much like the younger, disapproving Master he remembered. "Caution you still won't exercise."

"Some things never change."

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Vader breathed a sigh of relief. Luke had managed to spare one of his unused uniforms, and the next flight practice was full of pilots eager and distracted enough to allow him to slide in next to his son without so much as a second glance.

"Hello, Father," Luke whispered. "I can find you an X-Wing, but we don't have another astromech, unless you want Artoo back."

Artoo chirped unhappily.

"I'll be fine without one."

Luke's eyes widened, but he didn't protest. "If you say so."

It would be a valuable opportunity to learn Luke's flying style. If he truly was going to stay and fight with the Rebels, as ridiculous as that sounded, then he'd need to work seamlessly with the squadron, especially his own family. He couldn't allow Obi-Wan's caution to get in the way of his practice. And it wasn't as if Mon Mothma herself would come strolling through the hangar, personally introducing herself to the rookies.

Of course, he would have to get by Luke's Rebel friends, he thought, watching the group waving them over.

"Hey, Skywalker. Who's the new guy?"

Luke twitched. "This is, uh, Cousin Ani. We were just leaving for flight practice. Always gotta be first to fly out, you know? It's kind of a family thing."

The group gave knowing nods. "See you after practice, Skywalkers. Don't get yourselves killed or anything."

Luke hurried them along, and as soon as they were out of earshot, Vader couldn't stop himself from laughing. "Cousin Ani?"

"Sorry, Father."

"They'll believe it. It's not far from the truth anyway."

Artoo was shaking with amusement, and Vader gave him a friendly glare. "Enjoying yourself?"
Luke led them over to the X-Wings, running a fond hand down his ship's hull. "Here we are." He gestured to its neighbour. "This one hasn't been used in ages. I'm sure no-one will miss it if you take it out for practice today."

"Thank you," he said, putting a hand on Luke's shoulder. "You have no idea how much I've missed flying."

"No, I get it. Ship's like a part of your soul, can't go without it for too long." Luke smiled. "I'm glad I could help."

He felt immensely comforted as soon as his hands rested on the controls. He flew often, and considering the Empire was as accommodating as he needed them to be, he was only ever given the best. Still, a traitorous part of him missed the old designs, and the X-Wing's form was similar enough. It was easy to blend in with the other squadrons, and if anyone noticed his unique flying style, he couldn't sense it. Luke flanked him as often as he could, and Vader felt somewhat wistful to see Artoo settled neatly in a fighter's hull once more. If he tried hard enough, he could pretend nothing had changed.

He didn't.

"Back so soon?" Obi-Wan greeted him.

"Yeah," he replied, untying a bootlace. "Too long, and I'd raise suspicion."

"And how was it?" Obi-Wan's eyes shifted from the holo he'd been watching to Vader's face. "To your satisfaction, I suppose, judging from that look."

"What look?"

"You look pleased." His master seemed to be fighting down a small smile. "Happy."

"Feels good to get back in a starfighter, for once." He stretched until his back cracked pleasantly. "It's therapeutic."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"You never did appreciate my talent for flying," Vader remarked dryly. "It's the reason we're still alive now, you know."


Vader found himself laughing. He had laughed more in these past few days than he had in decades. Force, he hadn't realised how much he missed the unfamiliar feeling. The wistfulness he'd managed to contain came rushing back. "I miss it," he admitted quietly. Obi-Wan did not need to ask what he was referring to.

"As do I," Obi-Wan agreed. "But the past is the past, and their future holds more promise than ours ever did."

"You are very wise, my master," Vader said, though he didn't know where teasing ended and truth began.

"The natural consequence of two decades spent alone in the desert."
"Hidden alone in the desert," he corrected.

"As you say." Obi-Wan's smile went sly. "Though, if I am so very wise, my solitude cannot have proven too terrible. Perhaps everyone should try it. I'm sure you could avoid many things this way."

"I know I wouldn't." Vader shuddered. "Ten seconds on that planet is ten seconds too long."

"Really? You certainly seem like the brooding type. Are you sure you wouldn't like to give it a try?"

"Very funny, old man." Obi-Wan's jokes were as dry as the Tatooine sand itself, and Vader was not surprised that he had fit in well there.

"I am glad you think so, my friend."

Obi-Wan's friendship was as unflagging as his sense of humour. It left him endlessly bewildered, how brazen this man was with his affection. When they were younger, as young as their bodies were now, Obi-Wan's commitment to the Jedi Order had rendered him distant and unfeeling in Vader's eyes. But perhaps he had been wilfully misunderstanding his master.

He always had been stubborn.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not even sure myself whether Ani really believes that he's not pretending things haven't changed. Leia certainly wants him to acknowledge what he's done, but maybe others would want the subject dropped. After all, who wants to acknowledge that Literal Actual Killer Darth Vader was once a slightly, kind of peaceful (totally adorable) Jedi? The remaining Jedi are stuck in the past (except maybe Obi-Wan, but that man is all over the place), but the Prophecy (wooooo, 2spooky, 2deep) is too important for that "le wrong generation" shit.

This fic is an emotional rollercoaster. I'm sorry. IT'S JUST SO FUN.

(I know it's short. I'm sorry, I swear, I'll try lengthening further chapters soon. I'm a college student, and new semesters totally stress me out! I promise I'll try to get working a bit speedier.)
Vader awoke to a very insistent pounding on the door to their quarters. He turned to Obi-Wan, expecting him to answer, but his master simply groaned and buried his face into his pillow.

"You're not too old to answer the door yet, my master," Vader said wryly, and Obi-Wan made a hurt noise.

"Don't let my looks deceive you. I am indeed a tired old man," he replied and waved a hand desperately in the door's direction. "Now, please, it's far too early for this."

Shaking his head, Vader stood and gently peeked outside, squinting against the harsh light that slipped through like sand. Solo was standing dangerously close to the doorway, looking furious, flanked by his Wookie companion and Vader's own children. He blinked sleepily. Surely he hadn't overslept? Was it time for lunch already? "Can I help you?"

"Did you do it?" Solo grit out.


"Did I do what?"

"Put a tracking beacon on my damn ship, that's what," Solo said, voice cracking in a choked whisper, his best attempt to keep from waking any of the Rebels nearby. An outlaw like Solo could never be too cautious.

"The Empire would never be so careless as to let its prey escape its clutches," Vader informed him. Honestly, they should have been expecting it. In fact, for all the Empire's legendary incompetence (and terrible marksmanship), Vader was a little proud the device had escaped their notice for so long. He'd missed it himself when fixing the Falcon.

He watched as a vein twitched in Leia's forehead. "Father, now is not the time."

"No, I didn't plant the device," Vader said with a sigh. "But its presence is not surprising."

"This could compromise the Alliance," Leia snapped. "Reveal our location. Aren't you concerned? Or perhaps pleased?"

"Leia," Luke cried, outrage seeping into his tone. "He's one of us now! Of course he isn't pleased."

"We've been too trusting," Leia said.

"Like I told you, I'm not responsible for this," Vader protested. "I'm just not particularly surprised. There is a difference."

There was a chuckle from behind him. Obi-Wan had finally dragged himself out of bed and was slipping into place at Vader's side. "You're very defensive," he said, quiet enough that Solo had to strain to hear him. "Dare I say you've come to consider yourself one of us?"

"Obviously," Vader replied without hesitation, just to see the shock dawn in their faces.
Obi-Wan gave a warm smile. "As you can see, Young Han, Anakin is not your culprit."

Solo grumbled something under his breath and pointed an accusing finger. "You may have melted Luke's heart, but I'm not so easily touched, pal. Don't think I trust you farther than I can throw you."

"I don't," Vader said dryly. Then, he turned to Leia. "I promise I'm not the one who did this."

She narrowed her eyes at him. Once again, he was struck by her resemblance to her mother, but the anger there was all his. "You'd give up the Empire so easily, Father?"

"The Emperor no longer deserves my loyalty," Vader said. Not that his loyalty was worth much anymore.

Leia shook her head. "Has he ever?"

"No," Vader admitted.

"You still have a place among the Jedi, Anakin," Obi-Wan offered gently.

"Well, there are only a handful of us," Luke added. Vader wondered if he knew the impact of his own words. "It's not like there's anyone to say no."

Yes, that was what his loyalty had earned him. A place in a council of ghosts, felled by his hand.

"You'd be welcome all the same," Obi-Wan said. He was lying through his teeth, but a small part of Vader, the part that was still Anakin Skywalker, appreciated the sentiment, though he didn't need it. He knew the Council would have been less than happy to see him rejoin their ranks, were they still alive.

"Thank you, Master."

Luke jostled Leia happily. "We're still a family of Jedi. I'm kinda proud. It's never been done before!"

"Not for a very long time," Obi-Wan said. "Well, we never have been especially normal, have we?"

"You're the only one that ever tried to be, Master," Vader replied.

Obi-Wan gave a sad smile. "So I was, so I was."

Solo emerged from the Falcon, covered in grit and dust and looking very pleased with himself. "The tracker got damaged on the way over," he said, wiping sweat off his forehead. "Whatever the Empire got, it's a jumbled mess. No chance in hell they'd be able to get anything from it."

"We got very lucky," Leia said pensively. "But we can't afford to make a mistake like this again."

"No, we cannot," Obi-Wan agreed. "Forgive me, but am I wrong in saying the Alliance is not truly prepared to take on the Empire and its forces?"

"We will be," said Leia. "Though, yes, we need more time."

"We've bought ourselves enough," Vader said. "I can't imagine the Emperor is pleased I'm missing, but I doubt he'd look for me here."

Luke gave him a puzzled sort of look. "Were you and the Emperor good friends?"
Anakin had once thought so. Of course, that hadn't lasted very long. It was true, he'd clung to tattered hopes that Sheev Palpatine held some sort of respect for him, but it had become increasingly obvious in recent years that he was only Palpatine's weapon. Vader had been fine with that, in the way that one becomes complacent with immovable, unchanging circumstances. Now that he had a taste of freedom, though, he was not so fond of being a tool in the Emperor's hands, under his thumb and trigger-finger.

He felt, rather than saw, the scowl that formed on his features. From the slightly wary look Obi-Wan gave him, he imagined his eyes had also taken darker turns. But even now, he couldn't fight the yellow likely seeping into them. He felt like he was burning. "He only searches for me because he doesn't want his prized and most useful weapon in another's hands," he spat.

Luke, with his mother's concern and his father's indignant righteousness, looked horrified by this. "That's awful!" His stare was filled with confusion, and for a moment Luke seemed almost angry. "Why would you subject yourself to that?"

Anakin Skywalker wondered about that frequently. Darth Vader refused to admit it was anything less than satisfactory. It was weakness to be displeased with his position as the Emperor's right hand. But Luke wouldn't accept any non-answers. "Until only recently, I had no choice."

"Well, aren't you stronger than him? Couldn't you just leave?"

Luke was too young to know anything of strategy. No doubt, his caretakers would have preferred it stay that way, but Vader knew he would soon lose that naiveté.

"And risk aiming every Imperial weapon my way? Not even Darth Vader can defeat the Galactic Empire in its entirety. Not when he has only himself to give."

"Would he really send the whole Empire just to get you back?" Luke raised his eyebrows, disbelieving.

"I am his greatest weapon. He would not suffer the loss gladly."

"Well, you don't have only yourself now," Luke declared, with an air of finality. He crossed his arms, as if daring Vader to disagree. The Skywalker spirit in him was clear to see. Vader wondered how he hadn't noticed it sooner. "The Emperor won't know what hit him."

He rested a hand on his son's shoulder. "Thank you, Luke."

"Of course, Father." Luke grinned, gave him a thumbs up. "Any time!"

Vader made a conscious effort to be in cheerier spirits the next time Luke and Leia visited their quarters. The less they saw the darkness behind Anakin Skywalker's joking, approachable features, the better. If he truly was about to fight for a second chance, then he would need the trust of his own children. Luke seemed willing to forgive, but Leia was not the type to trust easily.

Not that he had given her reason when he imprisoned her on the Death Star and had her tortured for information. Information that she never gave. A loyalty that had cost her the planet she held most dear.

Guilt. Well, that was a new feeling, he mused. Anakin had felt guilt in his time, but he was supposed to be dead, long erased by decades of Sith training.

Or so he had thought.
"Hello, Father, Ben," Luke said. "There was extra training this afternoon. I think the Alliance knows we're getting close to the fight that might finally turn the tides."

"It's about time," Vader said, easy. Easy like the past hours hadn't happened. Denial was a particular strongsuit of his.

"I'm somewhat excited," Obi-Wan quipped. "The longer we have to study those blueprints, the more chance we have at finding a weak spot. As young Luke said, the Empire won't know what's hit them."

"We've made great gains," said Leia, with pride. "We're closer to finding a fatal flaw in the Death Star's design each day."

"Assuming there is one," Vader pointed out, as gently as he could. The Death Star was both his prison and his investment, and he didn't know how to feel about its coming destruction.

"Nothing is perfect," Leia said. "Not even your Death Star, Father. We will find its weakness."

The Death Star was not his, not in any way he could think of, but he didn't correct her. "If it exists, then I'm sure you will."

This did not placate his daughter in the slightest. "It does exist."

"Very well," Vader said.

"A bit out of your depth, are you?" Obi-Wan teased. "Is this your first time meeting someone as stubborn as you are? I imagine it must be difficult for you."

"Yes, thank you, Obi-Wan," Vader said quickly. "You think yourself very funny, we know."

"It's never too late to remind you," Obi-Wan replied, with a pleasant smile and twinkling eyes. The attitude made him want to shake Obi-Wan by his shoulders like an ill-tempered child, but at least his master's eyes had life in them.

"It's always too late to remind me," Vader grumbled. "As I won't ever have forgotten in the first place."

"As it should stay, my friend."

He was, in fact, not in cheerier spirits by the end of the next practice flight.

"Has no-one noticed?" Obi-Wan asked. He meant it to come out lightly, Vader knew, but his underlying concern was obvious, especially through their reformed Force bond.

"My flights?" Vader shook his head. "Nobody who would recognise me. Luke told his friends I was his cousin."

Obi-Wan snorted. "The best kind of lie is one that's half-true."

"As close to truth as possible," Vader agreed. "Eventually, the higher-ups will notice, Obi-Wan."

"Yes," he said, slow.

"What will I tell them?" Vader lightened his voice, mimicking decades past. "Well, sorry, Mon Mothma, ma'am, I happened to be in cryostasis all this time, actually. Damn, I can't believe I missed
all the action! I mean, wow, this new Darth Vader guy sure seems like a big deal. He doesn't remind you of me, does he? Personally, I think we're total opposites. It'll be great to fight him, don't you think?"

Obi-Wan blinked. "You weren't that... bubbly."

"I was," Vader said, derisive. "I was a whiny child. And when I wasn't throwing temper tantrums, I joked my way through my training, and through the war."

"That's not quite how I'd put it."

"And now I have to pretend." Vader spat. "I lost my sense of humour in that lava pit, Obi-Wan. Eventually, my children will be able to tell. I know you already have."

"You can be both Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader," Obi-Wan offered. "Attempting to be one or the other at this point would... not work out in anyone's favour, least of all yours."

"I haven't been Anakin Skywalker in twenty years. I can barely find what's left of him." Vader felt himself snarl. "Other than my physical appearance, I suspect he's no longer there."

"Do you mean to tell me everything since 'the Incident' has been a façade?" Obi-Wan waved him off. "I have felt it, Anakin. It's more likely you are lying to yourself than to your children, or to me."

"Why should I want to?" Vader growled. "Anakin Skywalker may be a better father, but he is weak and untrained. I could barely restrain myself then, and I rarely tried."

"Which is why I said you should combine elements of both," Obi-Wan told him. "And before you say it, no, that is not impossible."

Vader looked at him. "That is far easier said than done, my master. It is not difficult to forget who I am inside with this face, but the fact still remains."

"You've succeeded at things more trying than this," Obi-Wan dismissed.

"And in the mean time? Do you suggest I continue to play my part?"

"For Luke and Leia's sake, yes. Still, I think you'll find it's not as much of an act as you think."

Vader stared, incredulous. "Old man, I admire your faith."

Chapter End Notes

So! Anakin reveals his Inception-style persona-switching to Obi-Wan! But Obi-Wan ain't havin' that shit! FOOL HIM ONCE! FOOL HIM TWICE! (How many references have I made in the Author's Notes section again?)

And more plot makes a brief appearance! And then just sidles off once more! It will make a comeback next chapter, I promise!

HONESTLY, WHAT AM I DOING? I'm sorry? (Literally, in my notes, planning for this chapter was called, and I quote, "WHAT THE FUCK AM I EVEN DOING AT THIS POINT: A STORY". Yes.)
Oh, and just a quick note before we assemble the Anakin Skywalker Defence Squad and totally come at me, bro. Vader's feelings on his time as young Anakin definitely do not reflect my own! But Vader hates himself (and everything and everyone), so it's natural he'd look back on his life as a series of mistakes, one after the other. Right?

(What even...? My Author's Notes contain more crack than the actual story at this point...)
They sat, huddled in the cafeteria, trying desperately not to call attention to themselves while eating. Vader had gone months without food many times before, but Luke and Leia had insisted he eat more than the few scraps he had managed to steal away when no-one was looking.

To go unnoticed was a tall order. The uniform's bright orange made him feel like a walking target, and Rebel officials could choose any moment to sweep through their ranks. He had cut his hair slightly shorter, like the rest of the soldiers in their regulation homogeneity, but he'd worked closely with so many of the now-Rebels. He'd fought with them, bled with them, and his wasn't a face to forget. His every scar was a reminder, could be read like a book. It was only a matter of time before he'd find them catching on.

He would be killed when they realised. He knew this, and had made his peace with it. He would not escape. Part of him never wanted to see Palpatine's disfigured, sneering face again. The other wanted only to disfigure it further.

No, he would not go back to the Emperor's greedy hands and allow himself to once more be tainted by that filth.

"What are we gonna do about the Empire?" Solo asked.

Luke blinked up at him. "What?"

"Listen, they're gonna go after their own, you know. Sure, this is the last place they'd look, but they'd still look. The Emperor won't stop until he's found Vader, you can be sure of that. And then what're we gonna do? Hide him? Go on the run for the rest of our lives? Confront the Empire completely unprepared? Kid, we'll die either way."

Luke looked furious. "We're not just gonna give him up, Han! He's my father!"


"The Alliance does not leave anyone behind," Leia spat.

"Solo's right," Vader cut in. He tried to sound as light-hearted as possible. "I'm a target, Luke, you've got to come to terms with that. With me here, we're like sitting ducks. Maybe it'd be better if I le-"

"Don't you finish that sentence," Leia snapped. "You are my father, and I have allowed enough of my family to be killed already."

"That wasn't your fault." The blame for that lay solely on him. He was not cowardly enough to deny that.

"I won't let you go out there, reckless like Luke-"


"Reckless like Luke," Leia continued, "and stupidly throw yourself back into Imperial clutches."
"Then what am I supposed to do?" Vader asked. "I won't get you killed for my mistakes."

"You'll say we kidnapped you," Obi-Wan announced.

Vader choked slightly. "I'll what?"

"A sacrifice of pride, yes, but it will throw Palpatine off our tracks a little longer." Obi-Wan sighed. "Make your way back to the Emperor, explain that we brought you to an Alliance base to interrogate you, that it failed, and that you convinced the Alliance you had defected. Then convince him to let you return and work as an Imperial spy. Simply feed him false information, and he will leave you be, and buy us much-needed time."


"Damn," Solo said, chuckling. "Old man, I didn't think you had it in you."

"I did fight a war, you know," Obi-Wan replied dryly.

"That could work." Vader tapped the cafeteria table thoughtfully. He would return briefly to the Empire if it meant protecting his family. "But Palpatine's not an idiot. It's possible he'll see through it. Actually, it's kind of guaranteed. I'll have to modify the suit slightly, and my movements will be different."

"Do you do a lot of rigorous exercise with the Emperor?" Obi-Wan asked.

Vader gave him an exasperated look. "If he gets the mask off, he'll know. And the Stormtroopers will probably have talked by now, Master. I'm their favourite subject." Solo snorted. "I know, it's a gift."

"You could explain it away," Obi-Wan proposed. "An advancement in the Imperial science department, perhaps? Age reversal?"

Vader laughed, mocking. "They're definitely not that competent. I have firsthand experience with Imperial tech. None of it works." At Luke's doubtful look, he said, "The suit malfunctioned most of the time. Honestly, it's a miracle I'm still alive."

"So, it's a plan, then," Luke said, still looking like he was reeling from that previous statement. "Will you be okay in the suit, Father?"

"I was okay in it for twenty years, Luke," Vader said, trying to smile. "I'll manage."

His hands were clenched in tight fists as he knelt below Palpatine's throne. It disgusted him to submit now, when he was so much more powerful, when he could so easily throw off the shackles of the Empire with just a touch more time.

"Where have you been?" Palpatine said. Straight to business, then.

"The Rebel traitors had me captured," he grit out. Palpatine's rage crackled in the Force.

"You would be so foolish as to allow this to come to pass?" Vader grimaced beneath the mask, grinding his teeth. How he had borne the brunt of Palpatine's anger for so long was beyond him. Truly, he had been in a haze of unfeeling. "I thought you better than that, Lord Vader."

"I worked it to my advantage," he said, trying to keep the note of defensiveness out of his voice. His former master had no faith in his abilities. Then again, he should not be surprised Palpatine believed
"Have you now?" Palpatine steepled his hands. There was a moment's pause as he thought. "Very well, you will continue this deception. See to it that you learn something useful in this endeavour, Lord Vader. I will not tolerate any further failure."

"As you wish, my master." It pained him to bestow the title on someone so undeserving, but he would do this for his family, and somehow, for the Rebel Alliance.

"Take your leave," said Palpatine, with a dismissive wave of his hand. As if Vader were no more than dirt to be swept away. As if his former master hadn't been searching desperately these past weeks. What weakness his pride brought out in him. "Only come back if you have something worthwhile to deliver."

He turned and left. There was no more to be done here.

"How did it go?" asked Luke.

"I managed to convince him," Vader said, smirking slightly. It had become his signature expression in years past, and now it was reforming. "Not that it was very hard."

"Does he trust you that much?" Luke seemed sceptical.

"Hah, as if." Not at all. Not ever. "But he knows me. It seems like something I would do."


"Be careful, Anakin," Obi-Wan warned. "This is not going to be easy. Any wrong move, and you could-"

"Die, I know, Master. I won't get cocky."

"Please don't. To either of those." Obi-Wan rubbed a hand over his forehead, rankled. He really was the weary, erudite old man, even in this false skin.

"Don't worry about me, Obi-Wan. You know I'm resourceful." He winked.

"But quick to anger, to rush in blind, rash, and reckless. Palpatine is... no easy man to face down. He deceived the Council for years, all while barely lifting a finger."

"I've become more calculated in my old age," Vader said. "I won't let him trick me again, or corner me, or best me in a fight. I've studied him for years, Obi-Wan. Even before I took on my new name."

"You confided in him, yes, but did you truly know him?"

"Perhaps more than I wanted to admit," Vader said. "But I believed it was the only way. You know this already, old man. I've only told you about a thousand times."

"Yes, you have." Obi-Wan sighed. "We can't afford to let this fail. The aftermath would crush the Alliance."

"Don't underestimate us," Leia said. "We, too, can be resourceful, you know. If Father's plan fails, I'll make sure we have backups."
"Contingency plans," Solo added. "They're kind of a specialty of mine."

"We can only hope this works," Obi-Wan said, solemn. "It's our best shot at getting a leg up on the Empire. Perhaps even in winning the war."

"I know," Vader said.

"A lot rests on your shoulders, but don't let history repeat itself, Anakin. I am always here for you. We all are. You are not alone in this."

Vader blinked. "Of course, Master. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet." Obi-Wan laughed, but he sounded frazzled. He ran a hand through his hair, leaving it mussed and sticking out in places. Something in Vader wanted to fix it for him. "We have a lot of work to do."

"So, nothing new, then," Vader said, nudging his master gently.

"Ha! No, nothing new." Obi-Wan smiled. "Nothing we haven't done before, eh?"

No, nothing they hadn't done before. Vader had lied for so long he barely knew how to tell the truth. He could keep Palpatine off their trail. He had to.

Chapter End Notes

THIS IS SOME HEIST-Y, SPY-Y, MISSION IMPOSSIBLE SHIT. I mean. Oh god. I know, I'm going somewhere with this plot. It's forming, somehow. What a miracle.

There are things to come! I've done a little planning! I'm surprised at myself, honestly. Since when do I have any idea what I'm doing ;)?

College is hectic af rn, so if I don't update, I haven't abandoned! I'm just sleep deprived and slurping caffeine like it's lifeblood!
"They have a mission for us," said Leia.

"Us?" Vader asked.

"Well, me." Leia smiled. "And ostensibly you. Someone in my position is allowed to bring others along."

"Finally!" Luke jumped up like an excitable Loth-cat. "I think I'm getting cabin fever like this."

Vader considered this. It would be good to leave, of course, escape the soon-to-be-watchful eyes of the Rebel Alliance for a little longer. But he still ran the risk of recognition, even outside the Yavin 4 base.

"There's a small, partially uninhabited planet here in the Outer Rim. The Alliance thinks there's an abandoned Imperial base there, where we might gather useful information." She frowned slightly, perhaps in shame. "And equipment, which we sorely need."

"You're underequipped?" Vader asked, concerned. The Rebels were struggling, he knew. How could they not, against Imperial forces? But he hadn't thought them desperate enough to scavenge like starving Nexus. This was news. Perhaps he could "borrow" a little something from the Star Destroyer Fleet.

"Not very," Leia said cautiously. "But enough, yes. Enough to make this trip, at least."

"Alright," he said. "Are you sure the base is abandoned? The last thing we need right now is to get ambushed."

"We haven't exactly gotten up close and personal." Leia gave him an amused look. "But all signs point to it being so."

"So, what's the plan?"

"We'll meet up with the other Alliance fighter assigned to this mission once we arrive, and make our way around. There are only non-sentient lifeforms to worry about, thank goodness. A few predators here and there, but nothing to worry about." She paused a moment. "Unless I'm speaking too soon. We won't know until we get there."

"Understood." Vader smiled. "So we're going in completely blind. I've done worse, I guess."

Leia rolled her eyes. "We have maps of the planet, a few scans of its lifeforms, and half-finished blueprints of the base. Admittedly not much, but neither is it nothing."

"Like I said, I have done worse." Vader shrugged. "And I've worked with less."

"Well, this certainly looks promising," Obi-Wan said dryly.

"Hopefully, it will be," Leia said. "With any luck."

"If it gets bad, we can make our own," Luke offered. "Contingency plans, right? And if the base isn't
so abandoned after all, Father can go in alone, or with us as his 'prisoners'.” He grinned. "Worked last time!"

"Kid, you're learning," said Solo.


Vader tapped the ship's controls lightly. "I know where I'm going, Master." He smiled sweetly. "No need to worry."

"When our resident smuggler wakes up and finds you piloting his ship, he will not be happy," Obi-Wan continued.

"He gave me permission."

That got his master's rant to unravel. "He what?"

"Uh, he did," Luke said. "He said he didn't want to be in Father's debt after the repairs. He, well, um, he also threatened Father with 'evisceration' if he crashed the ship. I wouldn't fly that thing in a million years, but I guess some recklessness has no limits. At all." Luke gave him an unhappy look.

"I won't crash it," Vader said cheerily. "I would never. Wouldn't even dream of it."

"Yes, you needn't go on," Obi-Wan interrupted, and then sighed, exhausted. "Just get us to our thrice-damned destination without any evisceration, please."

"Of course, Master. Anything you say, Master."

"Believe it or not," his master told his son, "this is one of his good moods."

"Wow," Luke said, understanding dawning on his face, so like Vader's own, and yet so unlike it. Untouched by years of pain and fighting and regret. "Huh."

"Ship's still not gonna crash." Vader hummed.

"Do you remember anything of what I said about restraining your ego? Not getting cocky? Anything at all?"

"Every word." His sugar-sweet smile got sweeter. "As if I could ever forget anything you say, Master. I hang on to every word, truly."

"One of these days, Anakin, you're going to be the death of me." Obi-Wan sighed. "My complete undoing."

"Don't sell yourself short," Vader said, a little more seriously. "You've managed thus far, right?"

"A feat to be commended," Obi-Wan replied shortly.

The ship flew on. And didn't crash. Not that it ever would have, of course.

When Vader stepped out of the ship, he realised the planet was beautiful. Too beautiful for the Empire to ever have deserved to touch.

Luke rushed outside to the fresh air like the Mon Calamari to water. Artoo and Threepio rushed after
him, others joining until only Vader stood on the Falcon's boarding ramp, looking out over the
tropical treetops and to the horizon beyond.

"Care to join us?" Obi-Wan asked, standing at the base of the ramp.

Vader looked down at him. "I haven't breathed such unfiltered air in years."

Obi-Wan's eyes went sad, but not pitying. They would never, not for him, and Vader didn't need his
pity regardless. "Come, take in the sights with us, then. Young Luke seems to be enjoying himself."

Vader turned his attention to his son, who was staring in fascination at a large, fruit-baring tree. "Do
you think these are edible?" he asked. Leia and Solo winced. "Not that I was going to try! Honestly,
I do have some sense."

"Oh, I'm sure," Leia teased, and plucked a fruit gently down from the tree. "Worth investigating.
There are enough of these to feed the whole Alliance."

"And then some," Solo added. He handed one to the Wookie, who sniffed it curiously, and then
nodded. "Chewie thinks they're good. Wanna try?"

"Am I the only one with any caution here?" Leia laughed. "Give it to me, I'll take a sample back to
the base. Please, nobody eat it. I don't want to bring bodies back, as well."

"Alright, Princess." Solo handed her the fruit, which she slipped into the large bag she'd slung over
her shoulders.

"Okay." She eyed the bag, and Vader watched with surprise as she readjusted it to a more
comfortable position with the Force. "Let's get going. My contact won't get impatient, I hope, but I
do want to get there by sundown, at least."

Vader descended the ramp and came to stand next to his daughter. "Sounds like we have a long way
to go. Any reason we're not flying there?"

Leia smiled and gave a frustrated shake of her head. "There's nowhere else to land. According to my
informants, the Empire only settled here for a few months before realising it was, well, very
inhospitable, and neither worth their time nor their effort. The canopy here is so thick, this is the
only available 'parking space' in kilometres. It's the closest we've found. Any others are practically on
the other side of the planet."

Vader wrinkled his nose. "It doesn't sound like it's worth our time or effort, either."

"My contact says there's some very valuable equipment lying around. Apparently, in their hurry to
leave, the Imperial forces entirely gave up on packing." Leia shrugged. "All the more for us."

"Who is this mysterious contact?" Obi-Wan questioned. His face was smeered with dirt and dripped
with sweat. There was a small cut on the bridge of his nose, where a particularly sharp plant had
slashed him. Still, he looked better than Vader, who had leaves in his hair, could taste mud in his
mouth, and felt positively eaten alive by insects. He was wearing the suit, but had taken the helmet
off to breathe air that tasted like moisture and not empty filtration. Perhaps he should've kept it on.
"I'd love to meet them and," Obi-Wan coughed, "compliment them on their resilience."

Leia blinked. "Perhaps someone you would know," she said. "They say she was once a Jedi. I
haven't met her personally, but she's somewhat of a legend here in the Alliance. Goes by the
codename Fulcrum."
That sounded awfully familiar. Vader said as much.

"Perhaps you do know her, then." Leia's hair was beginning to fall into her eyes, and she used the Force to retie her buns. Vader raised an eyebrow. "I know," she said, laughing. "Don't use the Force irresponsibly. This is survival, you know."


"I'm not saying anything," Vader said. "It's Obi-Wan who gets mad about this."

"I'm not mad," Obi-Wan said fervently. "Not in conditions like these. Force, I do believe this heat is lethal."

"You lived on Tatooine for twenty years, and you're not used to a little heat?" Vader teased. "Master, have you lost your touch?"

"Quiet, you." His master chuckled. "It wasn't as humid on Tatooine. Plus, I did have a house, with a 'fresher."

"What luxury," said Vader.

"See?" Leia said to Solo, waving her hands as much as she could without getting them tangled in vines. Luke perked up at this, grinning slyly. "Like a married couple," they chorused.

Solo nodded. "Yeah, I get what you mean."

"I heard that," Vader grumbled.

They walked on, until Vader's boots were soaked in mud and detritus, and until they had to carry Threepio, who complained so loudly, Vader briefly wondered what his childhood mind had been thinking in building him. And restoring his memories.

"Goodness," he said, and if he'd had the nose to do it, he'd have sniffed haughtily. "I cannot believe I'm being subjected to this. You should have left me in the ship. Let Artoo go along! He has jets. His joints won't get locked up by dirt!"

"Sorry, Threepio," Luke offered. "But we really need you. You're an important part of this mission, you know. You and Artoo can interface with the tech in ways we can't."

"Oh," said Threepio, quieting. "Well, then."

Vader made a point of broadcasting his pride and appreciation through the Force. Luke winked at him mischievously.

"We're almost there," Leia assured. "We're reaching landmarks my contact's told me about. See those marks?" She pointed to a large arrow burnt into a tree by what looked like a lightsaber. So the rumours were true. This Fulcrum had been a Jedi. "Means we're about half a kilometre away."

"Thank the Maker!" Threepio announced. "I've half the mind to celebrate."

Vader and Leia rolled their eyes in unison. He wondered if she'd noticed it.

As they approached the meeting point, Vader put on the helmet and stuck to the shadows. If Leia's contact truly was a Jedi, then she would recognise him on sight. At least as Vader he could explain away his presence at an Imperial site. He tried to reign in the distinct aura he knew disturbed most
Force-sensitives, and hoped Leia's contact wouldn't notice him snooping like the Imperial spy Palpatine thought he was.

Leia tapped her communicator. "Come in, come in, Fulcrum. We're at the rendezvous."

"I can definitely see that," came a wry voice, as his former padawan stepped out from the brush. Vader's eyes widened, but he tried desperately to clamp down on any other reaction. If Ahsoka knew he was here, things would... not be pretty.

"As you can also see, I brought some friends." Leia turned to introduce Luke, Solo, the droids, and the older Jedi, but found only the former and not the latter. From behind him, Vader felt Obi-Wan creep up.

"She lives," Obi-Wan whispered.

"She does," Vader confirmed, hiding the guilt in his tone with likely little success.

"And you didn't tell me."

"I didn't tell you, no," said Vader. "Before the Incident, I never would have. Afterwards, I assumed you knew anyway."

"You're telling the truth." Obi-Wan gave him an incredulous look. "How would I have known?"

"Old friends tend to reconnect."

"I have not seen Ahsoka in over twenty years." Obi-Wan sighed. "She's grown."

"Very much so," said Vader. "She is a fine fighter, and a talented Rebel. You wouldn't believe how many plans she's sabotaged."

"Oh, I would." Obi-Wan looked to her fondly. "We can't reveal ourselves, can we?"

"Certainly, you could." Vader sighed. "But not I."

"She will ask questions," Obi-Wan said, regret lacing his tone and his presence in the Force. "Too many questions."

"Then perhaps we should answer them," Vader suggested. He had a sudden need to talk to her, Snips, his padawan, his friend. Not that he'd been so kind to her in recent years.

"Should we?" Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "I don't mean to be brash, but if she sees you here, she will..." Obi-Wan's mouth twitched a little. "Ani, my friend, in no uncertain terms, she'll kick your arse."

"Oh, I know," he agreed. "I should let her."

Obi-Wan gripped his shoulder tightly, and Vader stayed his hand. "Please, let us at least watch how things unfold. I'm not sure she'll be particularly receptive."

"Very well," said Vader, and waited.

Leia had adapted fast and made no sign of being surprised by her diminished party. "Yes, I have a brother," she was saying. "It's a long story."

"Seems like it," said Ahsoka. "Well, any friend of the Alliance is a friend of mine. Welcome to the
mission, Luke, Han." She laughed a little and gestured to the broken down Imperial base entrance
before them. "Let's do this thing, huh?"

"Artoo, want to get it open?" Leia asked.

Artoo beeped happily and swiveled forward. A claw brushed away the grime from the access port,
and the small droid went to work.

Vader breathed a sigh of relief. They didn't need someone with great training in the Force to open the
door, after all.

Ahsoka went rigid. "Did you hear that?" she asked. The mask, Vader had forgotten the mask. Blast
it all, he was growing careless, acclimatising too fast, finding himself so easily addicted to his
newfound youth.

Solo shrugged. "Hear what?"

Leia turned to her. No lies showed in her eyes -- she had caught on -- but her smile was slightly
strained. "Could it be one of the lifeforms inhabiting this planet? They won't have taken well to our
intrusion, will they?"

Ahsoka had her master's relentless curiosity. "Let me check," she said, and Vader felt the powerful
rush of her Force presence, the tendrils working to piece him together from the shadows.

"Was I right?" Leia's hand went to her blaster.

"Cold," said Ahsoka. "So cold. And beside it... the smell of cinnamon? I know this."

"Now would be the time, I think," said Obi-Wan. "If we are in fact to answer her questions."

Vader grimaced. "Yes, now would be the time."

The two took steps out into the small clearing, Obi-Wan wearing a nervous smile that was rendered
useless by the hood hiding his face, and Vader wishing somehow he could make the mask look less
unfeeling.

"You," Ahsoka said, broken and angry. "Have you come back to protect your base? Well, news for
you, Sith Lord, there's nothing here to protect! Or can't you stand the Alliance getting their hands on
your toys? You can't, can you?" She growled. "It's not like you and your giant fleet of Star
Destroyers can't take the loss."

Vader blinked.

"I'm completely wasting my time," Ahsoka told herself furiously. "Nothing gets through to you, does
it?" Her hands gripped her lightsabers like a lifeline. "Not anymore."

It would be hard to diffuse this. He knew what he'd done. But if he could shock her into calm
again... "Hey, Snips, maybe put down the lightsabers?" he asked. "I'm not sure about Obi-Wan, but I
definitely want to keep my head." He nudged Obi-Wan. "You up for keeping your head, Master?"

"Well, it'd be a shame to lose it," he replied, flipping up the hood. "I put a lot of effort into
maintaining this beard, you know."

Ahsoka stopped dead. The resulting silence was so sharp it could cut. Eventually, she sheathed the
'sabers, and held her hands tightly at her sides. Her stance was still deadly, her eyes still suspicious.
"Okay, what's going on here?" She turned to Leia. "I know you know about this, Princess. I can sense it."

"The Force works in mysterious ways," said Vader, joking his way through life-or-death situations like Anakin would. His past wasn't just returning full force, it was strangling him with all its might.

"Master?" Ahsoka's face filled with hope. "Master, is that you?"

Vader took off the mask. "Master, it is you!"

"Not quite," he said, choked.

"A lot has happened these past weeks," Obi-Wan said. "We've found ourselves de-aged, so to speak, thanks to the Force. And the Prophecy."

The hope died. "So it isn't you." Ahsoka clenched her fists. "Darth Vader, you are one good actor."

"It's not all an act." He was mirroring Obi-Wan's words, even if he didn't quite believe them, because he had to. It was a hope he could offer. Not as great as the one he'd seen on Snips' face moments ago, but better than the dim, quiet disappointment he saw now. "I'm no longer with the Empire." He smiled slightly. "Me and Obi-Wan were assigned to this mission, same as you."

"Pfft." Ahsoka snorted. "I'm not a giant kriffing idiot. You've taken all these innocent people hostage, haven't you? Forced them to play along?"

"Well, that's definitely what I'd've done if I was still on the Emperor's side, I'll give you that." He grinned, pained. "Snips, you know me too well, huh?"

"Stop doing that," she cried. "You sound just like him!"

"I am him," Vader said. That was, not to Snips' knowledge, the first time he'd admitted that in so many countless years. He was Anakin Skywalker. Kriffing hell, he was Anakin Skywalker. The Hero with No Fear turned traitor and murderer. Not that many knew. Most thought he was just dead. Anakin Skywalker, abhorrent killer, hiding behind his mask because it was easier than explaining to the ghosts of everyone he'd killed. Despair filled him. What had he done?

"Ani's dead," Ahsoka snapped. "You killed him, and just because you're wearing his face, it doesn't mean he's back."

"I'm trying," he said, his voice cracking. It was still so light. He'd grown into the suit's voice modulator over the years. Even in the Meditation Chambers, when he could speak without its help, the voice Palpatine had made him use would not leave him, even half-broken and whispered. Because it was his, it had been all along. Only artificially lowered, until it no longer needed to be.

"Why?" she asked. "After all this time, why?"

"I've been given a second chance," he said. "By the Force. Not that I know why."

"You don't deserve it," she said, anguished. He could sense she was lying. He wanted to reach out and comfort her, guide her like he used to. He couldn't.

"No, I don't," he agreed. "But I can't just throw it away, Snips."

"Why would you do it?" He knew she wasn't talking about his changed face anymore. "Master, after everything, how could you?"
He'd hated everyone and everything, himself included. He'd thought himself betrayed. The Jedi had left him, not that they'd ever been there for him in the first place. His master had never loved him, his wife was scared of him. He'd killed her without meaning to. His children were dead. Everyone he loved was dead, or hated him. Palpatine wanted to mould him into a perfect weapon, and there was nothing good left in his life or in himself to stop him. Why not be the Empire's servant, her attack dog? Who was left to care? What choice did he have? He'd wanted more power, hadn't he? He'd already made all the sacrifices for it, so why not reap the benefits?

There were no benefits. But he'd not realised that at the time.

"I was blind," he said, after a while. "I was a foolish child, and I was blind, and Palpatine had me as his puppet, and there was nothing left in me that could muster enough energy to cut the strings."

Everyone was silent.

"I was in over my head," he continued. "So I let myself drown. That's why, Snips." Obi-Wan laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

This seemed to hurt Ahsoka even more.

"A few weeks of contrition is not enough," Leia reminded him. "Especially if it's all been for nothing."

It had, hadn't it? That was the worst part. He'd ruined the Republic and the Jedi not because they needed ruining, but because Sheev Palpatine had wanted him to. And that was why he was here. To rebuild what he'd torn down.

"Then I'll do more than that," he said. "Whatever it takes."

Ahsoka stared at him. Vader -- or, rather, Anakin -- stared back.

Finally, she offered a small, sad shrug. "Then, let's get on with this mission, okay? I guess everyone's gotta start somewhere, right?"

"Right," Anakin said. "Lead on, Snips."

Chapter End Notes

INB4 DAVE FILONI JOSSES ME. STAR WARS: REBELS SEASON TWO ISN'T OUT YET. *PLUGS FINGERS IN EARS* YOU CAN'T CORRECT ME ON ANYTHING, LA LA LA.

Spoiler alert for the actual chapter above, and for SW: Rebels. Like, a lot of it. And super long A/N coming. TL;DR: there's no CANON BACKSTORY I HAD TO MAKE IT UP.

I'm assuming in the season to come, Vader's gonna do some Bad Shit, and Ahsoka's not exactly going to be having much fun (someone in the Youtube Comments Section -- which gets capitals all on its own -- said Vader would, and I quote, "core her like an apple". So, damn, there's that). Basically, I'm piling on more angst than is probably going to happen in S2. Uh, or maybe not? The shows have been freaking brutal so far, honestly. Like, wow, damn, you guys, I thought this was for kids, jeezeze.
ANYWAY. Ahsoka's had years of Anakin's betrayal to sink in by now, so she's furiously angry and hurt when confronted with him. Also, Vader's been a huge dick to everyone and treated everyone like shit for decades now, especially Snips, so yeah. She's p mad, dude. I'm explaining this because Disney said, "FUCK THE EU!!! lol" and backstory and ...forwardstory all rely on the current established canon. AND SW: REBELS IS ONGOING AHHHHh *tears hair out*. So I'm making it up. Essentially. Yep.

And so arrives the moment Vader realises he's actually kind of Anakin tho. WE'VE ONLY BEEN WAITING FOREVER.

SO, HOLY FUCK, THE PLOT MAKES AN APPEARANCE AGAIN, KIND OF. I KNOW, I'M SHOCKED, TOO.

Extra Note: LISTEN WHAT THE FUCK EVEN WITH VADER'S VOICE? There is so much fuckery with it, and I researched and researched, but in the end I used my own headcanon like a dumbass. I know, I'm sorry. I've run with the idea that Vader's modulator voice is just his real voice lowered (because synthetic voicebox sorcery)... until he grows up enough that it's actually his real voice? Listen, it's better than the actual, "Palpatine made up a voice for me lmao", right? Cooler or something? Oh jfc what am I even... Just, it's not like there wasn't a lot of fuckery going on outside of canon. Like, ten different people helped play Vader in the Original Trilogy. Prowse, Jones, Shaw, I could totally go on. Help. Why is Ani so fucking complicated?!?!
Past Mistakes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

...
"Rarely," Anakin said disdainfully. "He didn't like me having much freedom."

"And building was freedom to you?" Solo's eyes had gone narrow. The man was smart, Anakin noticed. He liked to get a firm grasp on people, put them together like puzzles. Anakin was a very difficult puzzle to solve.

"Yeah," he said. "It was freedom. It's always been freedom to me, even when I was a kid. Especially when I was a kid."

"Especially when you were a kid?"

"Tatooine slavery," Anakin said simply. "I wouldn't recommend it."

Solo winced in sympathy. "Rough deal."

"I got out," he said. "Mom didn't."

"Real rough deal."

"It's life," Anakin said, and got to work on taking apart what the Empire had built.

"Aww, yeah," Ahsoka cheered. "Sensor arrays!" She added it carefully to the giant pile they'd amassed. "Really advanced ones, too. I think they could get through jammers."

Anakin tilted his head. "Advanced? How long has this base been abandoned?"

"A few months, at most."

"What a waste," he said. "This is some good tech."

"Your Empire's not so efficient, is it?" Leia smiled, a little self-satisfied.

"Not my Empire," Anakin said, and turned his face away, feigning interest in the nearest interface panel. Of course, she still didn't believe. Anakin didn't blame her. Still, he didn't want to see as well as feel the sense of one-upmanship both his daughter and his former padawan were practically radiating.

"Our boys in Equipment would never let stuff go to waste, would they?" Ahsoka smirked.

"Not like this," said Leia.

"It's not mine," he repeated. It came out petulant, boyish. He winced. This was why Anakin was weak. He took everything to heart. Vader didn't concern himself with what other people thought. He didn't know why he was trusting Obi-Wan on this decision. Was it truly so wise? Was he not more unstable when he could still feel?

"We know," Ahsoka said. "We're just celebrating a little. It's not often the Alliance beats out the Empire, is it, Princess?"

"Sadly, no." Leia laughed. "Hopefully, this will be happening more often."

"Don't underestimate the power of the Empire," Anakin warned. "They're inefficient, but they're oversupplied. They can afford to waste resources. And I'm getting the feeling the Alliance can't."

"You're getting the right feeling," Leia said.
"We're not underestimating them." Ahsoka's face went dark. "I've had too much experience with them for that."

Most of it my doing, and she knows it.

Everyone turned to look at Anakin. Even Obi-Wan.

"I was... just saying." Anakin shrugged. "Wouldn't want this to blow up in our faces, is all."

"Because you've had so much experience with that," Ahsoka snapped. "What, with ordering it and all."

Suddenly, the room was too small, his skin too tight. His eyes flashed to the nearest exit, overridden by vines and blooming flowers. A few months, Snips had said. Things on this planet grew fast.

"Oh, dear," Threepio said faintly. "I really should have stayed home."

Artoo chirped his agreement. Anakin wished he could chirp his.

"Snips," he started.

"Vader," she shot back.

Anakin stared at Obi-Wan helplessly. Was he still to put on a front? Clearly, it was unsettling her. Obi-Wan was all calmness in the Force, staring patiently back. Make your own decisions, Anakin.

Yes, because those were always so successful.

He lowered his voice slightly, quelling all traces of humour. "Ahsoka, what would you have me say?"

"Stop pretending," she said, eyes blazing. "It's a stain on his image! A betrayal to what he was. Could have been."

"As you request," he said, and let yellow bleed into his eyes. "Would you truly prefer me like this, my apprentice?"

Threepio shrank away. Luke looked pained, while Leia just stood, defiant, never breaking eye contact. But from Ahsoka, he felt validation.

"At least you wouldn't be lying."

"Wouldn't I be?" Anakin asked. "Both are lies. I am neither Anakin Skywalker nor Darth Vader, and yet I am both." He had yet to find the balance between the two, but nobody except Obi-Wan was to know of that. He looked away and blinked back to clear blue. "We're not separate people. Never have been. It's me, Snips."

"This is all rather odd, isn't it?" Threepio asked.

"My friend," Obi-Wan said, "that is quite the understatement."

They continued through the base and towards the exit, where Ahsoka had hoped to find some parked speeders, or maybe an AT-ST hidden away. There would be no ships, she had said with disappointment, as the Troopers had taken them all as they left, but a speeder would make up for it at least a little.
"I was almost hoping for a stray TIE," Anakin mused. "They're about as durable as flimsiplast, but they're quick and maneouvre smooth like butter. A speeder wouldn't be too bad, though, I guess." He grinned. "But not as fun. Too many trees to hit."

Ahsoka shook her head in incredulity, lekku swinging. "It really is you, isn't it?"

"Who else would it be?" Anakin said, casual.

"I have montrals, and I'm not afraid to use them."

"What, those little things?"

"If they cloned you, they did a real damn good job of it," Ahsoka groaned.

Truthfully, it was strange to appear the same age as his former padawan. She had grown so much since she'd left all those years ago. Anakin had no doubt he could be seriously injured by her montrals at this point, even if that wasn't exactly their intended purpose. She was no longer the little deadly, snippy padawan, but very much a Knight -- in spirit, at least. Still deadly, still snippy, but not so little.

They walked on, and Anakin hoped, in time, they could recover the friendship they'd lost. She'd meant a lot to him, before he'd let Palpatine destroy him. He'd become a killer, borne of mistruth and manipulation, and suddenly she was nothing more than a past mistake that needed to be rectified. He'd forgotten how much he cared for her, along with everything and everyone else, and for that, he would see Sheev Palpatine dead.

"You're looking very pensive," Obi-Wan noted.

"I'm just thinking about past mistakes."

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Ahsoka was glowing. "Is that an AT-AT?" Her voice sang with pleasant surprise. "What in the hell is that doing here?"

"Well, that's better than a speeder." Anakin raised his eyebrows and looked up at the metal beast. Really, the Empire was getting careless.

"How are we gonna transport that?" Luke asked. "I don't think the Falcon can carry it. No offence, Han."

"There are some things even she can't do," Solo said. "Hard as that is to believe."

"I'll get an Alliance freighter to pick it up," Leia offered.

"What a catch," Ahsoka said gleefully. She rubbed her hands together, and Anakin thought she looked almost predatory. His love of mechanics really had passed on. "Oh, I can't wait to get inside it and take it apart." Leia eyed her. "And put it back together again, but better. The Empire really can't build."

"This is even better than I expected," Anakin said. "Save some room for me in there, Snips."

"Oh, there's plenty."

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They arrived back at Yavin 4 with boxes and boxes full of stolen Imperial equipment, soon to be sent off and repurposed for Rebel use.
The higher-ups were so pleased, Mon Mothma was to be sent to greet and thank them personally. Anakin didn't often feel fear, probably couldn't anymore, but a frisson of what was almost trepidation shot down his spine at the news.

"Now is time for you to have found that balance," Obi-Wan said. "She will most likely notice, Anakin."

"I know," he replied. "Leia assured me I'd at least get a fair trial before being executed." He smiled, hollow and barely visible. "I look forward to having my many... atrocities presented before me in the Alliance Court."

"You could hide away. Return once she's left."

"She knows the personnel count for this mission, Master. There's no running."

"I won't let you be killed," Obi-Wan said forcefully. He shook his head, and Anakin felt surprising anger through their bond. Not directed at him, for once. Intertwined within it, breaking through Obi-Wan's emotional shielding, was a fierce protectiveness that had Anakin staggered.

"Master?"

Obi-Wan surged forward and kissed him.

Chapter End Notes

I FUCKING DID IT. LMAO. YOU WERE WAITING FOR THE SLASH FOR SO LONG, AND I'M SORRY, BUT I'M PROUD TO PRESENT YOU WITH...
FINALLY SOME ACTUAL OBIKIN. OR IS IT VADERWAN AT THIS POINT? IT'S HAPPENING, THOUGH.

Also, Ahsoka as a mechanic is... a thing I did. I know she's good at it, but sINCE REBELS S2 STILL ISN'T OUT, I made her better at it with time. I'm sorry for these long Author's Notes explaining every little choice, but I'm nitpicky, and everybody else is nitpicky, and... yes.

I promise I'll keep closer to the canon. It's all very hard to balance now! I can pull from the EU or the current canon, with all their movies, shows, comics, novelisations. I'm trying not to bite off more than I can chew, so forgive any mistakes. I research a lot before writing, and I've been familiar with the universe for ages, but people keep changing things. Disney, give me a break, oh my god.

Small Extra Edit: A lot of people have been asking about Padmé and why the Twins aren't asking about her. They know she exists! I mean, I'm not pulling out the "Padmé wasn't even real lmao" card here. I just try to keep my chapters planned out tightly, and it's never had the chance to fit in with where I was going. UNTIL NOW. In a couple chapters, they'll bring it up, especially now Obi-Wan and Anakin are together.
Anakin was so surprised, he was surprised he was surprised.

That was the first reaction he could manage. The second was to wonder if he should have seen this coming.

The third, with the vicious part of him that was still Vader, was to consider if Obi-Wan knew of Anakin's feelings for him and was using them to his advantage. Obi-Wan was in fact capable of that level of manipulation, but Anakin hoped what he could sense in their Force bond was disproof enough.

Anakin had loved Obi-Wan for as long as he could remember. It had become a sick, twisting guilt that he'd buried as deep as he could, silently pleading for Obi-Wan never to catch it in the storm of feelings Anakin often couldn't keep from their bond, and for Padmé never to see it in his eyes. When he'd Fallen, that guilt had become an agonising hatred, a longing he pretended he couldn't feel, confusing and infuriating. Love was no longer powerful, but weak. And Obi-Wan, if he had ever really loved him, had avowed the death of such feelings while Anakin lay burning at his feet. Vader had wanted to wring the life out of him, choke him until he truly regretted dicing his closest friend like fruit.

But now Padmé was dead, and his agonising hatred had become simple agony. He had only confusion and longing left to give.

"Obi-Wan...?" It came out soft, questioning.

Obi-Wan flinched away. "I'm sorry, Anakin. That was a terrible idea. Forgive me."

Anakin's mind was whirling, and no words formed in his scarcely parted mouth.

"Force, I've ruined this all, haven't I?" Obi-Wan laughed, a gloomy thing, and ran a hand through his neat hair.

This time, Anakin didn't resist the urge to settle it back. "Master, you ought to take better care of yourself," he said. "Relax. You look a wreck."

"Anakin, it is a lot to ask of you, I know, but if we could forget this ever-"

"Master," Anakin said. "Please. Please don't finish that sentence."

"I know, you can't forget." Obi-Wan looked ill. "I've taken advantage. I apologise."

"No, you haven't. I liked it," Anakin blurted, unthinking. He couldn't see that look on his master's face anymore. He'd caused it more than one time too often. A flush rose unbidden to his face. This was about as smooth as he'd been with Padmé. But she'd taken it fine. Anakin thought perhaps she'd found it endearing. Force, he missed her. Just as he had missed Obi-Wan. And Ahsoka. Everyone.

Obi-Wan's shock filled their bond. "You...?"

Anakin didn't know how to express himself. As Vader, romance had been out of the question. He
was out of practice. He hadn't even thought this was possible. So, he joked, because he always had when he was out of his depth. "If that was you taking advantage, then you're welcome to any time." He winked lasciviously.

Obi-Wan choked slightly. His eyes went a little darker, hungrier. "I've wanted to- ever since- with your body finally out of that suit-"

Their bond resonated then with something else entirely. Anakin licked his lips, and watched as Obi-Wan's gaze shot down to trace the movement of his tongue. He leaned in, closer, slowly, before Obi-Wan met him in turn, and pressed a line of kisses up his neck.

"Master," Anakin said, turning over and wiping the cooling sweat from his forehead. "Maybe we should have done some talking first."

Obi-Wan looked horrified, and Anakin quickly cut in, "No, no, not like that." He laughed. "It's just, this is pretty sudden." Obi-Wan eyed him. "Well, yes and no. Master, just checking, but you haven't forgotten who I am, have you?"

"I may be old," Obi-Wan said loftily, "but I most certainly am not senile."

Anakin rolled his eyes. "That's not what I meant and you know it." He sighed. "Just- how? After all I've done, how?"

Obi-Wan shook his head, sad. "Anakin, I forgave you long ago."

"Why?"

It was a valid question, but Obi-Wan seemed disturbed by it nonetheless. "Anakin, nothing you have ever done or ever will do will stop me from... caring so deeply about you." He swallowed. "From loving you."

"See?" Anakin muttered. "It was hard for you to say that. Because I don't deserve it, and I'm not the only one who realises."

"No," Obi-Wan said resolutely. "I'm just... not accustomed to it, Anakin. It was not the Jedi way to embrace passion, to indulge oneself in such things."

"And it's not anymore?"

"If we're ressurrecting the Jedi Order, we're doing it right this time," Obi-Wan said, with just a hint of a smile.

"But this isn't just about your reservations." Anakin tried not to grimace. "You know who I am, what I've done."

"I do." Obi-Wan gave a small shrug. "A while ago, you'd have called it weakness, but I do love you, Anakin. You could kill me and I still would."

Anakin recoiled from that sentence like it would reach out and kill him, vitiate him. Like he'd wanted to kill Obi-Wan, stand over his lifeless body and for the first time, gain the high ground. He would have done it. He knew he would have. It was seared into his mind like the burns that had adorned his skin. The savage need to destroy, because he had been destroyed. His fingers had gripped his 'saber's hilt like a vice, his very being had sung with the need to plunge its blade through Obi-Wan's chest.
He would have gone through with it, and Obi-Wan would still have loved him. Could Anakin say the same? Obi-Wan hadn't killed him in body during their battle on Mustafar, but rather in spirit, and with only that, Vader's love had become a simmering, all-consuming hatred. He had not forgiven. It had taken him two decades, in fact, and yet Obi-Wan had managed in more than half that time.

He was undeserving. He wasn't good enough. He had never been.

"Master," he said weakly. "I should have died instead of Satine, or Qui-Gon. They should be the ones here right now. You should have killed me on Mustafar. And even then, you should have let me die long before that." He laughed, half-choked. "Hell, not like there weren't plenty of opportunities. I flew a Starship into a warzone when I was nine."

"I'm not a battle droid, Anakin," Obi-Wan snapped. The admonishment made Anakin quiet. "I have my own free will."

"If neither Satine nor Qui-Gon had died, you wouldn't be here right now."

Obi-Wan bristled. "No, we'd all be dead."

"Because of me," Anakin continued. "You see? This only proves my point."

"But their sacrifices have driven us this far." His master reached out to grip his right hand, flesh touching metal, making him startle. "You wouldn't be here right now if it weren't for them," he went on. "Can you truly deny that?"

"No, of course not," Anakin said, tracing electrostatic fingertips over Obi-Wan's own. "Are you saying you wouldn't change things?"

"There are many things I wish I could have done differently, my love," Obi-Wan said, staring absently at the wall, lost in his memories. He hadn't realised he'd said it, Anakin noted, between attempts at tempering the heat rushing to his face. "But I'm afraid things would only go much worse if we altered the flow of time," he teased. "We have a chance to fix things now. Had things been different, this opportunity would've been lost, Anakin."

"That's true," Anakin conceded. "But don't you ever wonder?"

"Of course. Always."

They lined up like soldiers under inspection as Mon Mothma walked through the doorway to their little Rebel meeting room. Anakin hoped she could not see the bead of sweat dripping down his temple, the stressed, rigid stance with which he held himself.

She was laughing lightly, almost regally, as she discussed something with the Rebel official guarding her side. To her, this was an average day, business as usual. To Anakin, this was about as surreal as it could get.

"I'm afraid I have no medals for you," she began, head still tilted in the guard's direction. "But I have come to congratulate you on your excellent work and thank you on behalf of the Alliance." She turned to face them, a kind smile on her face, and Anakin watched as the recognition formed in her eyes, sharp and almost as tangible as stone.

Her eyebrows rose practically to her hairline. "Well, this certainly isn't the team I'd been expecting."

"Mon Mothma, ma'am, I can explain," Leia started, eyes darting around desperately, as if searching
for the explanation she'd promised, hoping to find it conveniently dropped on the floor, or perhaps hidden in a corner by the ceiling.

"I'm sure you can," she replied calmly, "but I'd rather hear an explanation from our two travellers in time, if you wouldn't mind, Leia."

Leia shut her mouth, jaw locked tightly. Her assurances of a fair trial, whether they rang true or not, would do nothing to help them now.

"Maybe our bodies have travelled in time, but our minds have not," said Obi-Wan, damning them both. Anakin looked to him, pleading. He would not be the only one sent for execution. Obi-Wan, as an 'accomplice', would be convicted by association, and Anakin would not allow that. If it meant he'd be destined once more to fall to the lowest depths of the Dark Side, then so be it. Let history repeat itself, as long as Obi-Wan did not die.

Mon Mothma's gaze trained in on Anakin. She must have known. How, he had no idea. "Leia, why have you allowed him here? Have I not explained to you enough what it is that he has done?" Leia's dishonesty hit her, darkened and coloured her like paint. "Please, explain to me why you would do this."

"Defected-" Anakin got out, before his daughter was doomed alongside him. "I've defected."

Mon Mothma's Force presence made it very clear she did not believe this, but she motioned for him to continue. "And your... youth?"


"Well, that would explain it." Mon Mothma shielded her eyes with the back of one hand, and held up the other. "Leia, everyone in the Alliance knows your trust is hard to win." She sighed, brows furrowing. "Tell me, has he won it?"

"He has." Leia bowed her head. Her respect for Mon Mothma must be very great indeed, Anakin thought. His feelings had taken on a kind of odd, fragmented detachment. An outsider, a ghost, watching in on a life that wasn't his own. After all, how could this be real?

"Very well." She paused a short moment, collecting herself. "My trust is harder to win, but you have earnt it a thousand times over, Princess of Alderaan. Keep an eye on him for me."

Leia gave a short nod. "Of course, Mon."

"Oh, and I must say, you've put in commendable effort out there. The Alliance is ever closer to victory, thanks to your help. We owe you a great deal."

"The pleasure has been ours," Obi-Wan said. "But not the debt. Anything for you, Mon."

"It is truly wonderful to see you again, old friends," she said, and with a genuine smile, swept out of the room.

Anakin breathed relief.

"That went well." Obi-Wan laughed. "We'll not see our throats slit by Alliance blade yet, I expect."

Anakin winced. "Yet."
I die of embarrassment every time I try to write anything explicit, so this is as much as I could write without dying and descending to the afterlife of complete Vaderwan/Obikin trash.

I'm so sorry if you were expecting something more! I'm no E.L. James, not that she's much of a comparison. But at least some slash has happened, right? //promptly dies of embarrassment

My angst is doused in sap and fluff. This always happens. I'm sorry? This is the "talk it out" chapter, so.

**Little Edit:** This A/N was written for the AO3 version of the fic, before all the FFN craziness started. If you're on AO3, awesome! If you're on FFN, this A/N will likely make less sense to you. Total disclaimer over here!
Playing with Fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Obi-Wan had always taken his life in stride. It had never been average, he knew. He'd first known it as a padawan, in fact. But he'd made up for the lack of control in his life by tightly managing his personal affairs. He'd never been rash.

Until now, of course. Now, he had no idea what he was doing, what he'd gotten himself into. Anakin was balancing on the precipice between Light and Dark, and Obi-Wan had known upsetting that balance by adding more emotional concerns wasn't going to help matters any. And yet he'd gone and done it.

He'd always felt deeply for Anakin. As a Jedi, knowing your own emotions was paramount. Denial would get you nowhere and hinder your connection to the Force. He'd never lied to himself about his unreasonable attachment to his former padawan. And when Anakin grew older and more beautiful, Obi-Wan staunchly refused to leave that unacknowledged, either. But acknowledgement was not action. He'd promised himself he'd never allow Anakin to know, especially not after Padmé.

And now he'd broken that promise.

Vader was a livewire, and Obi-Wan should've allowed him to go at his own pace. The man wasn't hesitant about demanding what he wanted, after all. He'd returned to calling Obi-Wan his master as soon as he'd managed an escape from Sheev Palpatine's iron grip. He wasn't shy.

Obi-Wan rested his face in his hands and sighed, drained. He should try and meditate, but his own mind was no longer so tightly managed. If his life were a river, he'd lost his footing on the stepping stones and fallen in. How could he unwind now, when he'd been so reckless, so stupid and impulsive he could almost have outmatched Anakin himself?

Stupid, impulsive Anakin, who'd crawled his way out of the Dark Side, out of the Empire, only to be sent back by the one person who loved him most.

Palpatine was not a stupid man, and Anakin, as fine a liar as he'd become, was no master of stealth. He kept his presence in the Force firmly reigned in, but if Palpatine suspected even the smallest thing, he would hack away at Anakin's mind until he broke. And if not his mind, his body. The suit was not so strong as to stand against all of the tools at Palpatine's disposal.

The Alliance needed strength, and it needed it fast, or their execution chambers would not be the only ones readied for Anakin's swift death.

Obi-Wan eyed Han's bottle of Corellian Brandy. Surely he wouldn't miss a shot glass' worth?

Pleasantly buzzed, Obi-Wan finally attempted to meditate in peace. It took him only a few minutes longer than usual, and he blamed that on the alcohol, not his own disorganised mind.

Eventually, he felt the slight but welcome chill of Qui-Gon's spirit as it manifested beside him.

"Hello, Master."

"My, my," Qui-Gon teased. "I see you're right back in the playing field, Obi-Wan."
Obi-Wan snorted. "You could call it that. Yet I find minefield is a more fitting description, if I'm perfectly honest."

"Do tell." Qui-Gon's eyes crinkled, deepening the laugh lines Obi-Wan had never seen him without. Not even in his spirit form.

"As if you don't already know, Master."

"Yes, but I'd like to hear your perspective." Qui-Gon laughed in fond rememberance. "You always were good at explaining your way out of things."

"I won't explain my way out of this," Obi-Wan said, with great emphasis, "as I have no explanation to give. I have no idea what I'm doing, Qui-Gon."

"Well, we never really do, do we?" Qui-Gon hummed. "You love the boy."


"Not in body, nor in spirit. But in mind, yes. Is this the first reckless decision you've made in a while?"

"I don't know, is it?"

"No, my dear padawan." Qui-Gon floated closer and sat beside him, even if he had no mass with which to sit. "I was never a particularly conventional Jedi. I always believed following your heart would lead you to higher paths, rather than following the Code to the strictest letter. Not that it was entirely valueless, however."

"Dare I say I have your approval?"

"It's not approval, as I lack the foresight to bestow it. This could prove to be a wise decision, or a foolish one in equal measure."

"Then, I ask only if you are angry."

"Never with you, my padawan. If you love him, do not hold yourself back. That will only cause undue pain, dear one." Qui-Gon looked as if he were speaking from experience. Obi-Wan had his suspicions. Maybe when they had all joined the Force themselves. Love ran freely in the afterlife, he'd heard.

If Anakin died -- and left Obi-Wan bereaved -- he'd at least have that, for once in his life. It was the only thing he'd ever looked for, unconditional love. Obi-Wan had never made it clear enough to him that he already had it, and not just from his master. Everyone around him had loved him deeply. Padmé, Ahsoka, the 501st, Obi-Wan himself. But he'd never seen it. His own hurt had blinded him.

Oh, if only Obi-Wan had broken his promise long ago. Could he be arrogant enough, presumptuous enough, to think that would have prevented this altogether?

"Do not get lost in your own mind too long, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said, honing Obi-Wan's attention to a sharper point. "You never like what you find there, misguided as that is."

"Why are you always right?" Obi-Wan laughed.

"Not always," Qui-Gon replied, eyes dimming. "I asked you to train the boy, did I not?"

"I wouldn't regret that for a second."
"It was a burden you shouldn't have borne so young, Padawan." Qui-Gon shook his head. "But you made use of what little experience you had expertly, if I may say so."

"Thank you, Master." Obi-Wan smiled at him. "But it was no burden. I fear I failed Anakin, it's true, but that stems from my own shortcomings, not his. I should have recognised the signs, realised what he needed. The Code was not it."

Qui-Gon thought on this.

"Or, at least, part of the Code," Obi-Wan continued. "As you said, it wasn't exactly an unsalvageable mess."

"Very true," Qui-Gon agreed. "But the past is behind us, now. We have only the future."

"I won't repeat past mistakes, Master," Obi-Wan promised. "I have learnt a great deal in my travels, and I intend to put those teachings to good use. On Anakin especially."

Qui-Gon chuckled softly. "Yes, he is a special case, isn't he? Always so brash as a child, and no less as an adult."

"I can handle him, Qui-Gon. I've known him for so long, it's practically second nature."

"Be careful, Obi-Wan, when playing with fire." Qui-Gon stared him down. "You know how easily it can burn."

When Obi-Wan left his quarters to find something to eat in the cafeteria, he found his path blocked by none other than his former padawan, and his former padawan's former padawan. It was an awkward dynamic.

They hadn't yet noticed him, so he stood, making no move to startle them, and listened.

"You can't take him alone," Ahsoka was saying.

"I've spent the past twenty years with him alone," Anakin shot back.

"That's child's play compared to this!" Ahsoka raised her arms in exasperation. Anakin tended to bring that out in people. "He's gonna know, because he's not as unobservant as he seems, and he doesn't even seem all that unobservant. If you've spent the past twenty years with him, he's spent the past twenty years with you. Studying you."

Anakin blinked. Ahsoka took a deep breath.

"Listen," she said, once more the wised up Alliance official. "The Alliance can't lose you, you're too important for that. Palpatine doesn't much care where you've been and where you will be as long as he thinks you're still loyal, right?"

"Inasmuch as someone like him can, yes," Anakin hedged.

"There you have it. Return to Imperial bases -- not abandoned, this time. Make your presence known, carry out official duties. Then come straight back, and make sure you're not followed. Do you see where this is going?"

"Carrying out official duties will set back the Rebels lightyears." Anakin tilted his head. "You know what Palpatine liked me doing."
"Rounding up dissenters like Bantha for slaughter, yes." Ahsoka grimaced. "But that's not all you did, is it?"

"No," Anakin confirmed. "There were recruitments, too. Scouting missions for particularly promising-looking planets -- their people, their resources."

"Scout for us instead," Ahsoka said sharply.

Anakin raised his hands. "I hadn't said otherwise."

"Yes, but..." Ahsoka trailed off. "I'm worried for you, Skyguy. Things are gonna get bad, playing the Emperor. You know this as well as I do."

"I'll make that sacrifice." Anakin crossed his arms. "I'm buying time."

"Time we can't afford to lose." Ahsoka pressed her hands to the bridge of her nose. "The Alliance takes risks all the time, but none like this. We're playing with fire, here."

"And we can't let it burn," Anakin finished. "I get it. I know the risks."

"We were both impulsive," Ahsoka said, careful. "I've grown out of it. Well, most of the time. You, on the other hand. There's no telling with you."

"I'll take extra care."

"You better," Ahsoka warned. "I can't see him fry you, or have you rounded up like all the 'nonconformists'."

Anakin winced at that. "I don't exactly want to get fried."

"Hell, this is so stupid. Stupider than what we've done before."

"Is it really, though?" Anakin smiled a little. "We've done some pretty stupid stuff, Snips."

"Not as stupid as this, Skyguy. Not as stupid as this."

Obi-Wan cleared his throat. Anakin and Ahsoka whipped around lightning fast, and he unshielded his mental barriers in turn, so no weapons were pulled in his direction before they could recognise his Force signature. "If Anakin can smuggle me in, I'll volunteer to watch his back on these 'Imperial missions'. It was my idea, after all, if I might add. I should at least take some part in it, as is my responsibility."

Ahsoka frowned harder. "I can't let myself be held accountable for your deaths. If Obi-Wan's going, I'm going. We have plenty of Stormtrooper gear after that raid on the abandoned base, so. I think we have ourselves covered."

"I know the kids won't want to be left behind, either."

Ahsoka chewed her lip. "I'll appeal to Mon Mothma. If she approves the mission, we'll go through with it. If she doesn't-" She looked at them, considering. "If she doesn't, we're just going anyway, aren't we?"

"Yep," Anakin said, drawing out the syllable long enough for Ahsoka to groan and roll her eyes. "We'll be sure to let them know we're going. Give the twins long enough to prepare, and for Threepio to get that mud out of his joints. He's still complaining, you know."
Ahsoka smirked. "How could I miss it? His vocal processors haven't degraded with age, have they?"

"Not one bit."

Chapter End Notes

This fic has basically become the "reminiscing on the past 24/7" fic. I'm sorry. Action happens occasionally, at least!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Leia tapped the edges of the holoprojector in thought. She'd gone over these blueprints about a thousand times, had marked down every possible weakness, every entrypoint. She thought she knew them like the back of her hand, but she'd come to expect the unexpected over these past weeks. If only she could look harder, use the Force somehow, and see what she hadn't seen before.

She was about to try it, when Threepio came bumbling in. Leia felt terrible for the Droid's poor knee joints, overworked like that. He waddled like a duck.

"Princess," he called, finally stumbling to a halt by her workdesk. His golden fingers scraped against the cheap plastic and grated on Leia's ears. "News, we have news." He looked like he was panting for breath. It was an astoundingly human gesture, but perhaps that had been her father's intention in building him.

"And what news might that be?" she hummed, and turned off the 'projector in preparation.

"From Master Anakin," Threepio said. "There's a new plan, apparently. I wouldn't know the details. No-one consults me on these things, you see."

Leia instinctively checked her inner Force radar, as she liked to think of it, and sure enough, she could feel her Father approaching at a steady pace. There was something off about him, though. Not in a particularly bad way, she thought. Just off. Some of that icy chill he emitted had diminished. It must be very good news, then.

Anakin rushed through the doors, Obi-Wan and Fulcrum at either side, and gave her and Threepio a little wave.

"Hello," she said. "You're in a rush."

"We came up with a plan!" her father said excitedly. "For once!"

"It's not our style," said Fulcrum -- no, Ahsoka. "I think you'll like it, though. Very sneaky."

"I do like sneaking around." Leia smiled. "We're infiltrating Imperial bases, aren't we?"

"How did you guess?" Anakin grinned.

"When?" Luke would have to know, and she'd have to gather their gear... Perhaps there'd be more blueprints hidden away, though. This would be worth it, with any luck.

"When Mon Mothma approves," Ahsoka said. "If she approves."

"If she doesn't approve, we're going anyway." Leia rolled her eyes. "Sounds like you, Father."

"Not just me!" he protested. "But, yes, me. It's vital the Empire sees me back as Palpatine's errand boy."

"Fun," said Leia.

"It could be." Ahsoka's eyes went to her holoprojector. "Blueprints, right?"
"Of the Death Star," she clarified.

"If we stole blueprints from any of the bases..."

Oh, Leia **liked** her. "I was just thinking that."

"Great minds think alike," Ahsoka said. "But let's hope our minds are great enough."

She was trying for the second time to retrace her steps on the blueprints, when there was a polite knock at her door. It wasn't uncommon for Leia to have visitors, but this knock she recognised. And her Force radar confirmed it.

She took a moment to collect herself, and then made her way to the door, placing the most diplomatic smile she could muster on her face. With a small whoosh, the door slid gently open to reveal Mon Mothma, whom Leia was entirely unprepared to defend herself to.

"You needn't give me that look," said Mon. "I'm only here to confirm what you said earlier."

"About my f- my newest charge?" That was a slip she could not afford to make. Mon Mothma knew her only as Bail Organa's daughter, Princess of Alderaan. She knew nothing of Leia's heritage from either Tatooine or Naboo. Yet Mon Mothma's knowledge of Leia's true parentage could still rival Leia or Luke's own. She knew next to nothing about her mother, and her father was stranger every day.

Once the monster beneath Darth Vader's shell had slipped out into the open wearing a face so similar in kindness and innocence to Luke's own, Leia had been sent reeling, and still, she had not found her footing or regained the understanding she thought she once had. Anakin Skywalker was an enigma, truly. Like a flipped switch, he could channel Light or Dark, snap from Anakin to Vader in a second, and vice versa. The smartness behind Leia's decision to allow him some half-baked trust was still unproven. She had no guarantees, no signed waivers that Vader would continue to cooperate. On her worst nights, she still dreamt of his phantom grip around her throat. And when she woke, she half-expected to see him there, masked like nightfall, towering in that menacing armour, breathing sickly rasps.

That visage held both good and evil within, and she shared its blood. He was her father, and part of her knew she could love him. That was the worst part. Anakin Skywalker was a honeypot to all, and Force save them should he ever truly realise it. He was approachable, respectable, a leader in countless battles, yet he'd terrorised so many. From the tales she'd heard over the years, he'd fought alongside his troops, making home to the front lines, yet he'd splattered that home with the viscera of his enemies. He was ruthless but compassionate. Kind but cruel. He wore two faces and could answer no questions. Leia wanted to delve deep into his fractured mind and wring the truth out of him once and for all.

But something told her his mind held no more information than her own.

"Yes, your newest charge," Mon said, startling Leia out of her reverie.

"Do you want the truth?" Leia said. "Or should I tell you what you want to hear?"

"Preferably both." Mon smiled. "But if they are not one and the same, I'll take the former over the latter."

"I have no idea." Leia winced. "No, that's not true. I have somewhat of an idea. Assuming the worst, my trust is misplaced. But even if that's true, I know he won't break from the Alliance. We're offering..."
"something he's wanted for years."

"And what might that be?"

"Freedom."

Mon's eyes narrowed. "I see."

"If I may ask, how did you learn his true identity? It's not exactly easy to find."

"From the agent you've come to know as Fulcrum. As you might've guessed, she studied under him for a number of years. Enough to recognise him anywhere, no matter what appearance he took on."

"And she told you this?"

"Me, and a select few. We wanted to... keep this quiet."

"For morale?" Leia questioned.

The look on Mon Mothma's face told her everything. Those who knew displayed odd reactions, Leia had noted. Obi-Wan displayed a saint-like quiet forgiveness, Ahsoka burned with fury, and Mon Mothma was stiff and disapproving and deeply disappointed. If she'd told everyone who once knew Anakin, there was no telling what could have happened.

"Yes," said Mon. "For morale, among other things."

She wondered what her mother would have thought of this. Would she be sad or angry or both? How had she died? Had Vader killed her? Leia had only faint memories of her, a scant few minutes. The distinct image of her face, smiling at her with pride but tinged by a kind of strange hollowness that, upon further reflection, disturbed Leia immensely.

She had so many questions, but she hadn't a clue what reaction she would stir out of her father's stilted warmth if she dared ask them. She was not a stupid woman, she knew Anakin could snap, let that misleading demeanour slip like the snowcaps on Alderaan's highest mountains. An avalanche of unbridled emotion lying just beneath the surface.

But she wanted. As a Rebel, information was her trade. An Alliance underequipped could not also be underprepared. She needed to know.

"Are you never going to reveal the truth?" Leia asked. She kept her tone neutral. She was high in the Alliance, but she wouldn't argue with Mon over this. She was in her mother's womb when Anakin fell; her insight wasn't comparable to Mon's. If she decided it was best hidden away like all the other skeletons in ex-Republic Officials' closets, then Leia would follow along. For a time. In the far future, she would see the information leaked. Time could not heal this wound, but when it was not as fresh, the people deserved to know.

"Perhaps not yet." Mon Mothma was a wise woman. "One day, but not this one."

"Of course."

The door to her father's quarters suddenly seemed like an insurmountable wall. She could hear laughter coming from within, the usual pleased banter, but that was not what stopped her. The Force was always filled with affection when Obi-Wan and Anakin interacted -- were even so much as in each other's presence -- but this was unlike any other emotion she'd felt before. It was powerful. It
made the air seem tangible. If she reached out to touch it, she'd feel it tremble. The small thread that bonded them was no longer so small. It was now durasteel rope. She could not untangle it if she tried.

She didn't try. This was good, this was a safety precaution. It killed two birds with one stone. But it made her hunger for more answers, and prying into her father's personal life wasn't high on her list of bright ideas. Why now? Why was it so strong now? If she fixed all her focus on the overwhelming scream of feeling, it felt almost like love. What the kriffing hell had they done?

Without her conscious consent, her hand reached out and knocked.

"Come in, come in," came Obi-Wan's voice.

She stepped in, and the wave of power hit her again like a typhoon.

"Leia?" She turned her gaze to her father, whose face was filled with genuine concern. Genuine like the bond that tied him to his oldest friend. How could it be genuine? This was Darth Vader. He'd locked her in the Death Star, tried to wring secrets out of her like wet cloth. Why had he changed so much?

"Yes?"

"Leia, are you alright?"

"I could ask the same of you," she hedged. "Something's changed here. You can't expect me not to notice."

Something in Anakin's expression went guilty. Hairs raised on the back of her neck. "What have you done?" She turned to Obi-Wan quickly. "Has he-"

"He's done nothing of consequence," Obi-Wan assured.

"I'm right here," Anakin said, upset. "You can ask me. Obi-Wan is not my keeper."

Obi-Wan quirked a smile. "Well, not anymore."

"Father, you've done something, inconsequential or not." Less desperate and more stern, she said, "Tell me, please. It's my duty as an Alliance member to-"

"Okay, okay." Anakin raised his hands. "I thought I was supposed to be the parent here." Leia didn't reply to this, so he merely shrugged. "Nothing's happened, Leia. I don't know why you think something's wrong."

"That Bond," she said. "Can't you feel it?"

"What? My bond with Obi-Wan? Of course I can feel it, that's how it works." He raised an eyebrow, amused. "You're strong with the Force, you know this."

She blinked at him.

"We also have a bond, you know. Familial. It's not common, since Jedi don't usually have any contact with their families, but here we are."

"This is different," she said. "You've done something to it, since it first formed."

"It wasn't ever gone in the first place."
"It's stronger," Leia pressed.

Anakin was terrible at hiding emotion without that mask. She could read the guilt in every movement.

"Yeah?" Anakin's eyes darted to Obi-Wan and back. "I'm no longer trying to kill him, so that makes sense."

"You haven't been trying to kill him since the beginning of all this," Leia said calmly. "But now it's stronger. Why is that?"

"I haven't killed for it," Anakin said defensively. "I didn't sacrifice people in the name of the Sith in order to strengthen my bond with Obi-Wan. Or something. Hells, what did you think I'd done?"

"How should I know?" Leia asked. "Look at what you've done before. Anything could happen."

"I'm not- I won't-" Anakin made a frustrated gesture. "I don't expect you to look at me and not see that mask, I know. I don't expect trust, nor do I deserve it, but Leia, I haven't killed anyone."

"Then why do you look so guilty?"

Anakin winced as if struck. "Nothing that you'd particularly care to know."

"But I still should know it, right?"

"Yes," he agreed. "Yes, of course, you should."

"Would you like me to tell her?" Obi-Wan cut in cleanly. He rested a hand on Anakin's shoulder, and Leia watched carefully as he leaned in to the touch. The emotion surged in the Force once more. Affection, love, caring. Nothing like the simmering rage she'd felt when Vader had tried to strangle the truth out of her.

Her intuition was a sharp point, fine like a razor, pristine like the blade of a lightsaber. It was a tool she used, whether it brought her knowledge with pain or without it. To her, ignorance was not bliss, and it quelled her endless curiosity to realise just why that Bond had changed. But with that relief came even more questions.

Her father and Obi-Wan? What about her mother? Who truly was her mother, for that matter? Leia had presumed her dead, but if she wasn't, this was another of Vader's many betrayals.

"You and Obi-Wan?" she asked. "I should have known."

Anakin looked like he didn't know what to say to that. It was a fair judgement, as Leia had let no emotion shine through. She was still reeling, as was becoming a usual thing now.

It would be good for him. She didn't need words to know Anakin's horror at what he'd done, especially to her. When he thought she wasn't looking (and she was always looking), he'd look at her with such anguish and fear. A sick guilt that Leia wanted to shower off like grime. She didn't need his pity or remorse. They were on opposite ends of a war. She was not so fragile as to break under Imperial torture, even if it was Vader's deranged brand. Part of her was disgusted at him, but she knew he had been broken as she had not. Palpatine had kept him like treasure for decades. But even before that, Anakin Skywalker was a damaged man. If Obi-Wan could fix him, she had no objection.

"Congratulations," she offered.
A little colour returned to Anakin's cheeks. "Thank you?"

"Does this make you my step-mother?" she asked Obi-Wan, who spluttered in shock.

Her father laughed at this.

"Does it?" Obi-Wan asked.

The tone had lightened, but she wasn't done. "What about my mother? How would she feel about having her place... usurped?"

"I'll tell you about her," Anakin promised. "But Luke should be here."

"I'm holding you to that."

She'd gathered Luke and brought him to their father's room, even though Luke was bleary-eyed from training. He'd shaken himself awake when she'd had the chance to explain, though, and was now looking in bright expectation towards Anakin, as if he were about to be read a bedtime story.

"Your mother's name was Padmé Amidala," Anakin began. "Queen of Naboo, its greatest senator, and about the best, most determined person in the galaxy." He looked away. "And I never deserved her."

"Why did we never know her?" Leia asked.

"What happened to her?" Luke's intuition was growing as good as her own. "Something terrible, I'm thinking."

There was silence.

"I'm not wrong, am I?" Luke went on.

"No, you're not wrong. She died in childbirth, but nobody knows why. It was after my Fall. I hurt her, before. Maybe it was that. Maybe it was shock." Anakin's voice grew choked. "It was my fault, of course. Don't blame yourselves. She loved you, I know that. She could sense your potential, we all could." He cleared his throat a little. "I could always sense yours, Leia. Princess."

"Is that why they brought you out in the Death Star? Did they know I wasn't just any Rebel? Bring out the big guns for the ones who won't cooperate?" It was harsh, so harsh. It was cruel, even, but she resented never knowing Padmé, her very own mother, so greatly in this moment, she wanted to make him feel it.

Luke gripped her hand.

"I... requested to see you, yes," Anakin said. It took him a lot of effort to spit out the words. "I wanted to recruit you. You had great spirit, and I sought to mould that into loyalty."

"But not without a little torture first?"

"You had information. Uncooperative Imperial prisoners were always sent to me for interrogation."

"Interrogation isn't the word I'd use."

"Your mother never would have approved," Anakin said. "She had that same spirit. Always fighting for what was right. Injustice made her so dedicated. She'd have joined the Alliance, I'm sure of it.
She wanted equality in an unequal universe."

"Much like me?"

"Yes, much like you."

Luke looked between them. "Why are you telling us this now?"


Luke srunched up his nose in concentration. It took a moment before shock hit him fully. "What?"

Leia sighed. "Exactly."

"How long has this been going on?"

"It's been a long time coming?" Anakin said, but he didn't sound so sure himself. "For as long as I've known Obi-Wan, I've loved him."

"Well, if that's what makes you two happy, then it's fine by me," Luke said, resolute. "You are okay with this, aren't you, Ben?"

"I really do have my own free will. Why does everyone always think otherwise?"

Anakin preened. "I'm irresistible, obviously."

Luke made a disgusted face.

Chapter End Notes

WHAT AM I DOING: A FANFIC. Action is coming soon, I promise!
Ahsoka gripped the controls tightly. Piloting them into Imperial space was no new job, but there were risks. There were always risks. She couldn't see Obi-Wan hurt and imprisoned for her carelessness. Vader had excuses, and the little Skywalkers were under his protection, but Obi-Wan had nobody. His Jedi family were dead. Even her, even Kanan and Ezra, the other Force-sensitive Rebels. They had all died, in a way, after Order 66.

And she'd left them long before that.

A stuffy voice filtered through the transceiver and interrupted her thoughts. "Imperial Shuttle, identify yourself."

Ahsoka eyed Vader as he stepped to receive the call. "Your routine inspection is due, officer. Prepare for my arrival."

"Of course, Darth Vader, My Lord. We'll have the landing pad prepped immediately."

As she flew them through the cloud cover, the small base came into view. It was underwhelming, as Vader had said. The Emperor had ordered him to inspect it as some sort of punishment. If the boredom wasn't painful enough, the blow to Vader's pride was. The Empire's greatest asset, inspecting a base in the middle of nowhere, finding nothing and gaining nothing.

Vader looked like he itched to strangle someone. Honestly, Ahsoka couldn't blame him.

"That was easy enough," she said lightly. "Not that I want to jinx it."

"We'll see," Vader said. Nervousness filtered in through the modulator. He stood in the way of the children, as if to protect them from the Imperial airspace, even when there were no threats she could see. It was so strange to see him like this again. Caring. How long had it been since he'd cared about anyone or anything? "You're staying in the ship, right?"

"We're dressed to the nines in Stormtrooper armour. I think we can step outside the door."

"Snips, I don't usually bring Stormtroopers with me."

"No, you pick them off like bugs if they even so much as speak a single word out of turn." Ahsoka set them down gently. The ship hadn't done anything to her, even if it was one of Vader's own. It didn't deserve punishment meant for its owner, and a broken ship would fly them nowhere when this inevitably went south.

"Just- don't say anything, okay?" He turned to her. Anakin's face would look pleading under the mask. Puppy eyes and pouts, charming his way through any disagreement. But she could only see empty blackness where those puppy eyes should be, and sharp grates couldn't pout. Still, it was so kriffing weird, it had its intended effect anyway.

"I won't," she promised. "I'm not going to be the one to jeopardise the mission."

"None of us are," Obi-Wan said firmly.
Ahsoka wanted to believe him. "Then, here goes nothing."

They stepped outside the ship, playing the cowed and quivering Stormies, afraid of the monster under their bed, who'd close off their airways if they used them improperly. Vader looked imposing and indifferent to their suffering, strolling across the landing pad like he owned the place. Of course, in a way, he did, and the Imperial officials knew it. They were stumbling over themselves, breaking their backs to bend over backwards and follow his every whim with honeyed words of agreement.

It was almost disgusting how they melted in fear under just his gaze.

Vader continued walking, his subordinates trailing him like ducklings, and turned his head slightly towards the ugliest duckling of them all, the one in charge. "Has there been any technical trouble?" he asked.

"The droids, My Lord, they're a little less durable than we thought, but that's all."

"And how have you been treating them?"

"E-excuse me, My Lord?"

"The droids. How have you been treating them?"

"We have them working at all hours, of course."

Vader looked at him as if he were the scum found at the bottom of Naboo's greatest lakes. "Then that is your problem."

"You suggest we work them less?"

"I suggest you do not overtax what little help has been given to you."

The official cringed. "We were only trying for max productivity-"

"And how will your productivity fare when your carelessness renders your droids useless?"

His mouth shut, and he nodded wordlessly at Vader until the Sith Lord turned his attentions elsewhere and once again walked on.

So protective of droids, as usual. Of all the things that could have stayed the same.

Vader maintained his steady pace until the officials began to tumble over themselves in effort to keep up. Vader stopped abruptly, startling his ducklings, and turned on one heel to face them. "Do you have anything more of value to add?"

The higher-up shook his head.

"Then I suggest you return to your duties, officer. I am in no need of your company."

The ducklings scurried away in haste and relief. Their necks hadn't been broken today.

But there was always tomorrow.

Vader motioned for them to follow, and they took off into the nearest corridor, where Ahsoka could finally remove the stuffy helmet for a small moment and free her aching head. She would hold Vader responsible for any broken montrals.
"Ow," she said pointedly. Her lekku fell over her shoulders once more, and she prodded one tentatively, noting the bruises forming. Blast, she'd be feeling that for a while.

Vader's shoulders slumped. "I hate this," he said.

Ahsoka took note of their surroundings while Vader pouted some more. The base was clearly on its last legs, run-down and cheaply made. Repairs here were probably done by whatever no good mechanics they could scrounge up. It was barely worth inspecting, but every base, no matter how broken, had up-to-date Imperial information. Even the barest basics included subspace transceivers with *at least* a 20 lightyear range, surely. The Empire was so rich.

"Where next?" Ahsoka asked. If they deviated from any norms, the Imperials would get suspicious, and they couldn't have that. Palpatine had eyes and ears everywhere. Except perhaps this hallway, thank the Force for what little it could give her.

Vader looked from one end of the corridor to the other. "I'm not checking the barracks," he said with distaste.

"Don't want to wake the Stormies?"

"It would explain the lack of them." Vader looked down one end once more. "They're all sleeping on the job, I bet you twenty credits."

Ahsoka snorted. "As if. I'm not losing twenty credits, thanks!"

Vader chuckled. "Alright. Communications centre?"

Ahsoka shrugged. "Good as any."

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It was cold and empty and Ahsoka thought she could feel the dampness from the rain outside seeping in. This place was a dump, but anything was better than nothing.

Or so she kept telling herself.

Leia headed to the control mainframe and went searching. Ahsoka pretended to do the same, but she was watching Vader more than she was watching the screen. Someone needed to keep an eye on him.

He was settled next to Obi-Wan, working in tandem, and when Obi-Wan moved on, Vader followed like a magnet. Trailing him. They worked in sync like a well-oiled machine. Occasionally, he'd glance over to Luke and Leia, and then Ahsoka herself, but his attention would go back to his ex-master soon after. He was distracted, loose. No longer so coiled and mechanical, overflowing with rage. In the Force, he was warmer.

It wasn't what she'd expected.

And Obi-Wan took it in stride, too. He worked as fluidly with Vader as Vader did with him. Like nothing had changed. Like Vader hadn't been plotting to murder them all without second thought what felt like just a few minutes before.

She could blink and see them all twenty years before. If she hadn't lived it, felt every death, watched as the Jedi faded into dust, she wouldn't believe anything had happened. She wouldn't believe her own master had killed everyone she ever knew.
"I've found something," said Leia, and Ahsoka refocused her gaze on the screens below. "It's a list of names."

"An important list?" Ahsoka asked.

"Names of spies, spies in the Alliance." Leia looked grim. "I'll have to copy the file and give it to Mon Mothma. She'll need to know. The Alliance will have this dealt with, I swear it."

Ahsoka sighed. Nobody was safe from Palpatine's ever-reaching grasp. "I'm sorry."

"So am I," Leia said.

They continued to inspect the base, taking what blueprints and information logs they could hide. Vader took the lead, Obi-Wan, even in the armour, right at his side, like a partner, an equal. Obi-Wan didn't look or sound like one of the 501st. They were going to get noticed. Surely Vader knew this? Why was he at Obi-Wan's side and not leading like a Sith Lord was supposed to?

Everyone who passed them gave them sideways glances, eyes following them with curiosity. Curiosity would soon turn into suspicion.

"You should stay in front, Skyguy," she whispered. "Obi-Wan's one of the 'Troopers, remember?"

Vader's mask tilted in her direction, but his breathing was even, not wheezy and rapid with anger. He'd taken the suggestion lightly, she hoped. She wouldn't want to pull out her lightsabers here, in the middle of Imperial territory, where the power-hungry Bucketheads would mark them for termination like the Jedi scum they were.

"Right," Vader said, slow. He seemed somehow upset with the idea. As if he couldn't manage to walk without Obi-Wan at his side for more than a few minutes. Blast, he'd done it for twenty years. Or maybe that was exactly why he couldn't let go now, after he'd been without for so long. Clinging to anyone who would show forgiveness for the unforgivable.

Only someone as nuts as Obi-Wan could do that. Or maybe Skyguy Junior, he seemed like the type.

Vader walked on, and Obi-Wan stayed a step behind. As they got further and further away from the barracks, Vader kept looking back at them, and finally slowed again to walk at their side. It was the Clone Wars all over again. Fearless Anakin and his fearless apprentice and his fearless master, running blind into the battle's front lines with all the Republic's forces struggling to keep up.

But Anakin was half-dead, and Vader couldn't be seen fraternising with his subordinates.

"We're not that far away from the Eggheadquarters, you know," she said casually.

A loud exhale. "There's nobody around. Relax, Snips."

There was always somebody around. She'd spent enough time in the Alliance to know that.

"We can't know for sure," she said.

Vader gave her one last look before speeding up again, but not without trailing one hand across Obi-Wan's armour-plated shoulder in a brief -- a brief goodbye?

She couldn't tell.

During the Clone Wars, Obi-Wan and Anakin were always in close contact, that everybody knew,
but Vader was never the tactile type. Plus, Ahsoka had heard Vader had his eye out for Obi-Wan, to wrap up loose ends. Finish what they'd started.

This was a stark contrast.

If only she knew why.

Vader continued surveying the Imperials, who quaked in their boots at the attention. Sometimes, he would stop and look over their shoulders, pretending as if he truly cared about the menial tasks the Bucketheads were sent to carry out. In fact, he seemed like he was enjoying it.

Ahsoka used this opportunity to examine his presence in the Force.

It was so warm. Warm with amusement and fondness and a slight familiar reluctance. It felt like Anakin's, through and through.

Obi-Wan's was at peace, content. Slightly hesitant, as always, but so much less empty.

Something had changed.

She knew about the Prophecy, of course, every Jedi who knew Anakin knew his status, but she'd thought that lost in the battle on Mustafar. Now, maybe, they'd found it again. Not that she knew what repercussions that would bring. If Anakin was still the Chosen One, how would he manage? Darth Vader, saviour of the Force? It was completely insane.

But how she hoped it would work. She'd put her heart and soul into the Rebellion. Now Anakin had regained some of his, would he, too?

Chapter End Notes

THERE'S ACTION! IT ALSO CONTINUES INTO THE NEXT CHAPTER!
MIRACLES DO HAPPEN! Sorry, this is a short one. The following will be longer, no worries! :)
On the return trip, Vader was quick to change into simple Jedi robes once again. Ahsoka could barely stand being in stuffy armour for more than a few hours, let alone twenty years. A small part of her pitied him for that.

They'd dropped off their refurbished little Imperial Shuttle in the shadowy docking bay of a hiding Rebel cargo ship. For optimal flying, they'd been allowed to rest in what scant few rooms were available. It was now, as Ahsoka looked through the scratched transparisteel and out into the emptiness of space, that she wondered how the Rebel Alliance was ever going to win. Her quarters were so small, so beaten up, and Vader had looked horrified by the ship's state of disrepair. She was sure the Star Destroyer fleet was filled with lavish furnishings, that the Stormies rolled out red carpets artfully decorated with flower petals for Vader to set His Lordship's royal kriffing feet on.

She wondered how the Alliance workers got on here. Were they half-starved by malfunctioning food processors? At least the Stormies were well-treated by Imperial engineering. Even Imperial rations would taste like sweet fruit in comparison to the Alliance's meagre stock. They could do so much better, and yet they chose to devote themselves to their work, to put their life on the line for a cause which could promise them nothing whatsoever. Victory was hard-won, and resources even more so. She was so proud of them, and so sorry they'd been put here. The Republic hadn't been perfect, but it had been a hell of a lot better than this.

Why had Vader chosen this path? He'd seen all the fleeing Jedi hunted down, and those who remained left broken and afraid. If she hadn't left the Order, could she have prevented this?

He could have let them run, not hollowed them into husks, like Luminara and countless others. He could have let them run.

And she could have stopped him.

She woke to sounds of calm chatter from next door. It was true that senses were heightened naturally in her species, but the fact that she could hear so clearly even through the durasteel was slightly depressing. This ship was old, Republic-era, long before it was nearing its fall, but even old ships could be kept running smoothly.

She blinked herself awake, rubbed at bleary eyes, and went to see how her leftover tea had fared overnight, when she was hit by powerful emotion. It was Anakin's, obviously. Nobody else had quite his whirlwind of feeling, but she was used to cold, bitter hatred, not this... whatever this was.

There was an underlying warmth to it, a sense of comfort, coming from both Anakin and Obi-Wan. They had been close in the War, but this was something else entirely. It made her curious, so she set nimble feet to the ground and walked close enough to rest her montrals against the wall, leaning, restful, to listen in.

"How're you holding up?" she heard Vader say.

"How am I holding up?" Obi-Wan asked. There was a bemused chuckle. "I should be the one asking that question, my love."
Ahsoka felt herself pulling away in shock, and then shame. This was a private conversation, and Obi-Wan’s endearments were no longer so platonic. That certainly wasn’t the “my friend” she was used to hearing.

Was that the feeling she sensed? Love? It would certainly explain a lot. A whole lot.

If Obi-Wan had forgiven Vader for his... transgressions, then what did that mean for the future of the Alliance? Could they also forgive, accept someone like him into their ranks? Would Vader devote himself fully, as the workers on this cargo ship had?

She didn’t allow herself to hope, but she wanted to. The Alliance needed someone with Vader’s power and talent, and not another Imperial spy. Mon Mothma wouldn’t be pleased to receive the Empire’s list, but having Vader truly on their side might make up for it. After all, wasn’t he worth ten Alliance fighter pilots? And working with them, a team he’d fought a war with, alongside his own children... he’d be stronger than ever, and the Alliance all the better for it.

But there was also the matter of the ex-Chancellor, now Emperor. Sheev. Disgusting monster of a man, whose face finally reflected the ugliness within. He would put up one hell of a fight if he realised Vader’s loyalty had been lost. They couldn’t allow him to know. And how could they keep it quiet if it was announced to the whole Alliance? There were spies in their ranks who hadn’t been included on that list, of course.

Damn. This was one hard secret to keep.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and put strategy aside. She wanted to go back to sleep -- always a rare occasion in this line of work -- and if Obi-Wan and Vader -- or Skyguy, or whoever he had become -- were happy, then she could at least rest easy. Force knows, Obi-Wan deserved it. Maybe even what was left of Anakin, after so long.

The next time she woke up, it was to the blaring sound of red alert sirens. On a cargo ship? Honestly, could she get a break around here?

Next door, there was a yelp, swiftly followed by the sounds of tumbling, a whispered "By the Force!" from Obi-Wan, and Vader's painful hiss of "E chu ta!" that signalled somebody had fallen.

"Are you okay?" she called.

"Oh, no, I'm fine," Vader replied, sarcasm almost worse than her own. "I just fell and knocked the whole room over, but it's all fine over here."

There was a small pause.

"Obi-Wan, you're squishing me."

"Sorry, blast, this room really is small, isn't it?"

They converged in the corridor, Vader rubbing his head and Obi-Wan looking ruffled, where Ahsoka waited for the telltale sign of boots hitting durasteel flooring to catch up to them and reveal Skyguy and Skygal Jr., along with Chewie and Han Solo. None of them looked happy to be woken up.

Join the club.

"I suppose we're heading to the bridge?" Obi-Wan asked.
"It's possible this is a false alarm," Ahsoka said. At everyone save Leia's puzzled looks, she went on, "There's no such thing as 'too careful' in the Alliance."

"Let's hope it is," Luke offered.

Han looked actually surprised. "To have that kind of optimism again." He shook his head.

Luke gave him an upset glance, and Ahsoka motioned them towards the turbolift. The sooner they reached the bridge, the better. She couldn't risk standing by, not when this had the potential to be disastrous.

Ahsoka listened to the lift's small whir, and took a moment to just breathe before stepping out into the chaos unique to a ship's bridge on red alert. But the moment was over sooner than she'd wished, and the chaos was worse than she could have imagined. Alliance officers were rushing back and forth, the ship's captain looking not terrified like the others, but rather resigned, a quiet sort of sadness that had Ahsoka immediately checking the transparisteel viewport. Not even the bustling crowd of underprepared workers could conceal the monster sailing the stars ahead.

An Imperial Star Destroyer, larger than any she'd seen in her life.

Vader's intake of breath had her staring him down in suspicion. His eyes never left the viewport, though, and a wounded sort of growl left his chest, vicious and reminding her who truly wore that face.

"The Executor," he spat. "Where's the strategy in this? I did not have her assigned to me for the purpose of hunting mere insects."

"That's yours?" Ahsoka managed.

Vader turned to her, his eyes burning yellow. "It was supposed to be. Palpatine has no doubt left useless scum at her helm."

"She's patrolling," Obi-Wan said quickly. Vader looked at him. "Anything not to Imperial regulation, she destroys, I'd imagine. Even if we are only a small vessel. Simply another bug on her windshield, so to speak."

"If you could open a direct channel with them, they'd stand down," Ahsoka said. "But I'm not sure how you could do that without revealing your identity. This ship is too run-down for private channels."

Vader winced. "This is clearly a Rebel ship. How in the Sith Hells would I explain that away?"

This was why she was a Rebel. They could talk their way out of this, save so many lives. She just needed a little strategy. "You're repurposing it. The original crew is dead, long replaced by an undercover Imperial force."

"Can they act?" he asked.

"They can, I'm sure of it," she said. The glint in Vader's eye told her he had a plan, even if it was self-sacrificing, but it was too late to raise any concerns.

"Alright, listen up!" Vader shouted, turning the whole crew's attention his way. "I'm about to do something really stupid, but I think it may get us out of this alive. We still have a few minutes before they blast us out of the sky, so follow every word to the letter, okay?"
Reassured by Leia and Ahsoka's presence at a stranger's side, the crew nodded.

"From now until we burn this sky until we see lines, this is officially an undercover Imperial ship, understand? What you're going to see in a few minutes will make no sense, but I promise you, we'll make it through this."

There were murmurs of confusion, but everyone seemed in agreement. "Alright," Vader said. "Give me a sec." And then he rushed off the bridge.

The crew looked in terror to Leia and Ahsoka, Rebel officials they understood in this mess of misunderstanding, and Ahsoka cleared her throat. "Nobody panic," she said. "Stay calm. We've all watched the Impies long enough to know how they act, right?"

There were a few chuckles at that.

"We're running headfirst into the nexu's den, but if we play convincing enough, we may just come out without a scratch." Ahsoka looked, imploring, to the crowd before her. "Got it?"

A chorus of cheers.

Then, Vader returned to the bridge, in full armour, and the chorus melted into horrified gasps.

"I know you don't understand," he said, modulator booming in the sudden quiet. "It would ask too much of you to trust me, but I keep my promises."

Then he stepped forward and opened a communication channel with the deadliest ship in the galaxy. The holoprojector flickered to life, revealing a very surprised looking Imperial commander.

"I see my ship has departed without me," Vader said, humour not quite so welcoming. "I trust you're treating her well."

"Darth Vader?" The commander blinked a few times, then saluted almost compulsively. "The Emperor had me assigned to this vessel in your absence, My Lord."

"So I see."

"This is a Rebel ship, My Lord. We had orders to destroy any Rebel vessels we came across."

"This ship no longer belongs to the Rebels," Vader said simply. "I have repurposed it for my use."

"You're undercover?"

Vader managed to express how little he thought of the commander's intelligence in only a look. "As you see before you."

The Alliance workers were all posed stiffly at their stations, looking sufficiently browbeaten by their "leader."

"But my orders..."

"Are null and void, in this particular circumstance. I don't imagine the Emperor would be pleased if you shot us down."

"Yes, sir, of course not, sir."

"Resume your patrol, officer. And see to it that you pilot that ship with care."
"As you command, sir."

The channel closed, and the holoprojector sputtered out, leaving the bridge in tense, petrified silence.

Ahsoka watched closely as the Star Destroyer prepared to warp, and followed its every edge and plane until it shot off into hyperspace like a blaster bolt. The cargo ship was once more completely alone in empty stars.

Vader waited a moment, staring at lifeless space as if to make sure there were no cloaked ships trailing behind, and then removed the helmet, holding it under one arm and wiping sweat away with the other. "I keep my word," he said, firm and almost to himself.

"Princess?" the captain spoke up, and Leia gave him a wan smile.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Is there anything to explain, or are you as lost as we are?"

"I'm sure you all know Darth Vader," she said, sly. There was a sudden uproar of voices, and amongst the chatter, Ahsoka caught only a few sentences. "Was he just some kid this whole time?"

"What the kriffing hell is this?"

"Did Darth Vader just save our lives?"

"Experimental science in the Empire doesn't always go their way," Leia announced, a white lie. Best not bring the Force into this. "No, Darth Vader is not a child, you can all still go home with your pride intact."

"Age reversal?" The captain gave Vader a very careful look. "I'm a very old man, and I've fought countless times, but that is not a face I would forget."

Leia's mouth set in a grim line. She knew what corner they'd backed themselves into. Mon Mothma would be unbelievably angry, she was positive. "You aren't wrong, Captain. That is Anakin Skywalker. He is also Darth Vader, and my biological father."

Vader looked at her with wide eyes. "I am an Alliance official, and it is my duty to be honest at all times. This is a small ship, but I don't expect you to keep this news solely within its walls."

The captain assessed them both, and then shook his head. "Only in the Alliance," he said. "Tell me, has he reformed?"

"If his actions today haven't proved that, then I don't know what will."

"The crew will keep this quiet. We've been away on resource collection missions so long, we can barely remember the last time we saw an Alliance base, Princess. There is nobody to tell either way."

"I am forever in your debt, Captain." Leia bowed, formal, so filled with Alderaan's customs, Ahsoka wanted to flinch away. She was one of only a few now.

"Nonsense. Your work has set our rebellion lightyears ahead, Princess. If anything, the debt is ours."
He smiled, then, and faced his crew. "Back to work, all of you! We can't afford to get behind in our
duties, now can we?"

And just like that, life returned to the bridge. Her shoulders were not the only ones to slump in relief.

What was left of Anakin Skywalker walked up to them, and stared at nothing. "I don't deserve this," he finally said, small.

"We work with good people," Ahsoka said.

Leia nodded. "I wouldn't trade them for the world."

For Ahsoka, the journey back to Yavin 4 was a mix of her relief and the slow-dawning horror of what they'd just done.

Setting foot on the landing pad was about as pleasant as facing down the Executor, but Ahsoka would take responsibility. It had originally been her idea, of course, and so it was her burden. Leia had already taken enough risks introducing Vader into the Alliance to begin with, and Ahsoka had always taken the fall in the past. But they had saved lives, so many lives, and she would put her personal attachment to the Alliance aside and let duty take the forefront. This would not and could not be a decision she regretted.

She breathed in the warm, humid air, touched a hand to the weathered temple, counted a few whisper birds in flight overhead, and then stepped forward.

Leia would no doubt be reporting directly to Mon, which meant she should follow close behind. After Vader's rash actions, he'd likely need to testify as well, so Ahsoka motioned him over.

"Snips?"

"You think we can get away with not reporting this to Mon?" she asked, lightly teasing.

"Maybe? Probably not." He sighed, looking exhausted. "It's bad enough that I have to sneak in my armour, sneaking away from Mon would be nearly impossible."

"Exactly," Ahsoka bemoaned. "We're gonna get creamed."

Vader cringed. "I get the feeling Mon Mothma hadn't wanted my identity leaked under any circumstance. Possibly including my death."

"I guess you could describe her feelings as... adamant," Ahsoka offered.

Leia, who had noticed her tails, looked over her shoulder sourly. "Adamant is more than an understatement. Fervent, commanding, insistent... I could continue, but I won't bore you." As she went on, sourness was replaced by despair. "Oh, she will not be happy about this."

"I'm sorry?" Vader said. "I couldn't let those men die."

Leia assessed him much like the captain had. "Why? Why couldn't you?"

Vader looked appalled by the thought. "Those were innocent lives! The Executor is my ship, those were once my people, I couldn't just let her-"

Leia smiled, satisfied. "That's all I needed to know."
Vader blinked. "You! I don't know whether to be proud or terrified."

"Be both." Leia winked, and Ahsoka burst out laughing. She truly was Skyguy's daughter.

Mon's quarters were as lovely and well-organised as usual, but nobody could appreciate the aesthetic value with the weight of what they'd done settling on their shoulders.

Mon looked up from her work, giving them each a quizzical glance. "You're looking very grim."

Ahsoka began, "Do you want the bad news or the--"

"Worse news?" Vader finished.

"What's the bad news?" Mon asked.

"We found a list of Alliance traitors at the Imperial base," Leia said. "If it's not too much trouble, I'd also like to cross-reference them with the crewmembers currently serving on board the Rebel transport I have listed here."

Mon surveyed the flimsi Leia held out with great care, and then raised an eyebrow. "A standard GR-75? What's its significance?"

"That's the worse news," Vader said carefully.

Mon handed the flimsi back to Leia. "Go on."

"It was supposed to be a standard pit stop to refuel and rest a bit, but we, uh, ran into a little trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The worst kind," Ahsoka grumbled.

"The Executor, the Imperial flagship, we- well, we ran into it on its patrol."

Regret filled Mon's face. "Casualty level?"

"Zero."

"I'm sorry, there were no casualties?" Mon looked to the three of them, incredulous. "How is this the worst of the two reports?"

"I had to pretend the Rebel transport was a repurposed Imperial spy ship to keep them off our scent," Vader said.

"And in order to do that, you had to-"

"Put on the armour, yes. And subsequently reveal my identity to the entire Bridge Crew, including those who worked with me in the Clone Wars."

Mon pinched the bridge of her nose, and shook her head. "I was hoping to postpone this news a little longer."

"The crew agreed to keep it quiet," Leia added. "I trust them to stay true to their word, ma'am, unless--"

"-there were Imperial spies on board at the time." Mon nodded in understanding. "Cross-referencing
will take no time at all. Please, sit. I'll have your results in a moment."

They sat, fiddling with anything available, until Mon looked up from her research.

"There was a single spy on board at the time. I believe he was the one to lead the Imperial ship to the Rebel transport, and that this was not mere happenstance. The GR-75's signal was being traced long before you arrived, from what this data shows."

"The news will have reached Palpatine by now," Vader said. "Would they have had time to tag the *Falcon* with a tracker?"

"No," Leia said. "Han's too paranoid, especially after our close call last time."

"Because that's such a relief," Ahsoka said. "Palpatine has the entire Empire at his beck and call. Do you really think it'll take long before he figures out where we're stationed? Mon Mothma, ma'am, it is my professional opinion that we evacuate this base as soon as possible."

"I agree."

"There will be a lot of questions," Ahsoka hedged.

"Then we'll answer truthfully. As truthfully as you did on that Rebel transport."

Vader raised an eyebrow. "You want me to go public?"

"Is there any possibility you can still convince Palpatine of your loyalty?" Mon asked.

"It's not likely."

"Then we should be as transparent as possible."

"Understood," said Vader.

"If we can get our hands on any holorecordings of the events on the GR-75, we may be able to convince the Alliance board Anakin's on our side," Leia added.

"I'll see that it's done," Mon promised.

"It's official," Ahsoka said. "Darth Vader has defected to the Rebel Alliance." She laughed. "They'll be making holovids out of this in the future, just you wait."

"I'll be looking forward to it," Vader deadpanned.

Chapter End Notes

NOW WE'RE REALLY GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS, HUH? Or something like that, anyway.

**AO3 Edit (I have a lot of these, huh? Sorry!):** I apologise if any chapters from now on are out late. College is very time-consuming (omg math teachers do i rly have to do 100 problems??? math teachers pls). There's a whole craaaazy whirlwind of stuff I keep having to do for university D:! Also, um, I kind of have to moderate the Anon Hate on the FFN version of this fic, which is actually way more difficult than I thought, haha.
Sorry for any delays! All of you are super wonderful, and I'm so glad you've been sticking with this cracky fic for so long! :D

As always, hope you enjoyed! c:
They had days, at most, Leia figured. It was more likely they had hours, which was why she needed to find the weakness in the Death Star's blueprints now. Palpatine's fury would be inescapable, so they needed to get out before he had the chance to crush them. They could dodge the Star Destroyers, outmanoeuvre the Executor, but Yavin 4 itself would fall prey to the Death Star's beam before they could even so much as touch the X-Wing controls, should she not find this.

Palpatine was inching ever closer. If he'd spent two decades with her father, he could find him anywhere in the galaxy. Palpatine was a sick, sick man, and he was a talented one. No matter how hard Anakin tried to conceal his Force signature, Palpatine would find it.

She breathed in. The realisation that not only had they wandered into the nexu's den, but right into its mouth, had her too tense to concentrate with everything she had, and everything she needed to find the needle in this haystack. What was it Anakin had said about meditation? Don't think about pink tauntauns? Don't think about thinking about pink tauntauns? Or, in this case, the rapidly closing jaws of the Empire, ready the chew up the Rebels and never spit them out.

She breathed out, and reached for the Force like a lifeline. Please, she thought, let this work.

Like the slow trickling of water from a creek, calm seeped slowly into her. The Force surrounded her, and she let herself fall back into it, drown herself in it. Her focus went sharper and comforting warmth began to wash in like the tide. She breathed in once more, and set back to work.

It had taken her ten minutes, she couldn't believe it, it had taken her ten minutes. She'd found it. Kriiffing hell, she'd found it.

She shot up from her desk, rushed out of her quarters and straight into Mon's. Flimsiplast in one hand, waving frantically, she finally got out, "I did it. I found the Death Star's weakness."

Mon set down her caf very gently. "Brilliant. Tell me what you've found."

"If we managed to aim proton torpedoes down its exhaust port, we could critically damage its reactor core. I doubt it'd last more than five seconds after that."

Mon hummed. "That's a very small target, isn't it?"

Leia lowered the flimsi, excitement leaving her. "That's the problem. It would take a hell of a lot of precision to aim those torpedoes."

"We'll have to call in Red Squadron."

"Luke and Anakin's team?"

Mon eyed her very carefully. "I know, Leia."

"Know what?"

"That Anakin Skywalker is your birth father." Mon looked away, took a sip of her caf. "I'm sorry I have to send your only remaining family out on one of the Alliance's most dangerous missions."
Of course Mon knew. It was her job. "I understand. They have the skills necessary to win us this battle."

"No one else could ever fly quite like your father, and it seems Luke takes after him in that respect." A little humour returned to her features. "Have you ever flown?"

"Of course, all the time. But I've rarely tried what they've tried. I like to think I have a little more sense than that."

"Perhaps you could take their brand of lunacy up a little more often," Mon offered. Sadness resettled in her eyes. "I know this will be difficult."

"War often is, ma'am. I understand the risks."

"We need you, too, Leia."

"Out on the front-lines? I know."

Force hope her and her family could fly like they'd never flown before, because damn, would they need it.

"The Alliance owes you so much, Leia," said Mon. "After this, we will owe you more than we can ever repay."

"As Obi-Wan has said, the pleasure is mine, but not the debt." Leia smiled. "Mon, it's alright. I'm starting to think I was born ready for this, actually."

Mon laughed, light. "Let's hope luck is on our side, along with your family's considerable talent."

Yes, let's.

She paced her quarters, likely wearing away trails into the ancient flooring. Many Force-sensitives had lived here before, she could tell. But she was not Obi-Wan, and she couldn't summon their ghosts at random to beg for advice.

Her father was going public. The entire Rebel Alliance, including any spies that hadn't been weeded out, was about to witness Darth Vader's defection announcement. Palpatine's anger would be wild, quick to strike, and lethal if they weren't prepared. It was her job to prepare them, go over the Death Star's plans again and again until the Rebels went to bed and woke up with the great machine's image burnt into their eyes.

But how did Anakin feel about this? Leia knew he'd gone to great lengths to protect his people during the Clone Wars, and his actions on the Rebel transport were likely reflex, built-in and reawakened on his path to return to the Light Side of the Force. In a way, he had no choice, and in doing so, he'd doomed himself to the scrutinising eyes of every single Rebel in the galaxy. News like this would travel at warp speed, spread like fire -- without the added benefit of being extinguishable. More than just the Empire would be after Anakin now. Furious Rebels, whose families had died under Vader's hand, would likely carry out assassination attempts. Leia hoped they all failed to end her father's life, but it was more than likely Anakin would get seriously hurt, even if she assigned every guard she had in her reach to his side.

But Palpatine already knew. And if they didn't reveal Darth Vader's newfound Rebel Alliance membership, the Empire would gladly do the job for them. They were so eager to pounce on the opportunity, she could taste it. In fact, Leia suspected they'd likely beaten Mon and the Alliance to it
already. Hell, perhaps half the Empire had heard the news, accounting for the time she'd wasted here, stowed away in her quarters like some useless nerf-herder.

A knock on the door startled her out of her reverie. "Come in," she said, recognising her father's distinct Force footprint.

"I only have my anonymity for a few more hours," he said casually. "I've been strolling the base, seeing the sights, talking to my fellow Rebels, you know. Just while I still can. I figure, after it's out, nobody will talk to Darth Vader, unless it's to tell him he's about to get mobbed." He smiled. "Fun stuff."

It was teasing, but Leia saw truth in it.

"I'm sorry," she said. "This won't be easy."

"I'm glad the transport crew is still alive," he said. "What's my life taken in place of theirs, really? I'm not worth much, compared to them. How many were there, a hundred?"

"Easily," she said. "But your life isn't over. Don't mistake this for a death sentence, Anakin. They'll have to end my own life before they get close to taking yours."

Anakin looked at her, and suddenly she saw Vader in those eyes, calculating. Not malicious, just considering. It was odd to see the monster tamed. "We share blood, but you have no obligation to me, Leia." He frowned. "I can't let you sacrifice yourself for me."

"Hopefully it won't come to that." Leia sighed. "I'm not doing this out of obligation, Darth Vader," she said. "I know who you are, but I also know who you were, and who you can still be." She shrugged, mouth twitching. "Provided we don't entirely screw this up."

"It'll be hard not to," he said. "I'm sure you're aware of the risks."

"Exceedingly."

"I'm not much of a father, and I had no part in raising you, thank the Force, but there's no daughter I'd rather have." He laughed, the joker once more. "Just putting that out there, in case I don't get another chance."

"Stop acting like you're going to die," Leia said, unyielding. "If you're so proud of me, then you should know I won't let that happen."

Anakin's eyes softened. "I admire you, Leia." He shook his head. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry about what happened on the Death Star."

"You didn't know."

"I should have," he said. "Only Skywalkers have that kind of determination."

Leia examined his Force presence once more, finding kindness, a sense of pride, guilt, sadness. A whirlwind, as usual, but without the biting cold. A few months ago, if someone had told her Darth Vader could experience emotion beyond the range of anger and cruelty, she would have laughed in their face. Now she could see it for herself, and part of her wanted to laugh still at the sheer absurdity.

"I forgive you," she said. "Just don't torture me again, if it's all the same to you. It wasn't the best experience."
"Never," he promised.

"Then it's settled." She held out a hand. "Welcome to the Alliance, Darth Vader. Enjoy your stay."

Anakin reached out and shook it. "Oh, I'm sure I will."

They were waiting, all of them, for Mon to lead them to the Alliance meeting room. The announcement was only minutes away.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Anakin," she heard her father tell himself angrily. "What would Yoda say? 'Get you nowhere, this will. Kriffing idiot, you are.'"

"None of us can blame you," said Han. What a master of tact, really. She elbowed him, but he looked at her innocently. Luke, on his other side, nudged him a little more gently.


"What? It's true. We're all gonna die." He slung arms around their shoulders. "But, hey, at least we're going out in a blaze of glory!" A sort of hysterical panic laced his tone. "It's what I always wanted, anyway. Isn't that right, Chewie?"

Leia's Shyriiwook wasn't fantastic, but she was almost positive that was an insult. Roughly, "Bite me."

"You're a real charmer," Han grit out. Chewbacca just huffed, disapproving.

"Relax," said Ahsoka. "Nobody's about to die, Solo."

"Really?" he asked. "I wouldn't be so sure. I know the Empire, and they don't give up easy."

"The Alliance is more resilient than you think," Ahsoka snapped. "Don't make the mistake of underestimating us."

"They're the Empire," Han protested, as if that was an explanation in itself.

"And we're the Alliance," Ahsoka replied.

Mon walked in, then, interrupting the stubborn staredown between Ahsoka and Han. Everyone snapped to attention, and Han thankfully shut his smart mouth. Mon looked exhausted, though, and waved for them to return to their usual relaxed posture. She sat in a chair in the corner and breathed an extensive, long-suffering sigh.

"I take it you called in the entire base for a public announcement?" Obi-Wan asked. "What a task."

"Indeed," said Mon, rubbing her face with tired hands. "I don't expect they'll take the news well, An-"

She paused. "It is Anakin, isn't it?"

Her father blinked. "Would that help the Rebels accept me? If they saw you calling me by my birth name instead of my adopted title?"

Well-put. Mon seemed taken aback by that response. "Do you have a preference?"

Anakin shrugged. "At this point, does it actually matter? I'm both and neither. Call me whatever you want, ma'am." He smiled, pleasant and accommodating. "This is your Alliance, and therefore your call."
"Your charm has returned," she said, eyebrows raised. She seemed amused, rather than insulted. A diplomatic pitfall avoided, for once in Leia's life.

"You flatter me," Anakin replied. Obi-Wan shook his head, laughing.

Ahsoka rolled her eyes. "How are you even real? We're about to announce the most crazed and unconvincing news in the galaxy, and you're charming your way through the entire base." She sighed. "Unbelievable."

"I aim to please."

Ahsoka snorted, luckily with mirth rather than disgust. "Go ahead and kiss her hand, why don't you, Skyguy? Could you lay it on any more thick?"

"We have five minutes before the announcement," Mon said, calling them back to the topic at hand. "Do you have anything you want to add?"

"Nothing I can say will make up for it."

"It might lessen the blow."

"Alright," he agreed. "I'll say whatever's needed."

Leia was used to making announcements. She frequently spoke at Alliance meetings, and there was always news of victories and losses to deliver to crewmembers' eager ears. On Alderaan, she gave more speeches than she could count. It had become routine, and she had never feared it. But Alderaan was gone now, and this was both a win and a loss for the Alliance. Anakin was a powerhouse, but he was a killer. She doubted the Alliance would accept him, no matter how delicately they worded this.

She rested her hands serenely on the podium. The news of the Death Star and evacuation was hers to give, but Vader's defection -- and her heritage -- was all Mon's. She trusted Mon's decades of experience in the Senate to save her from Alliance disfavour, at least in part, but she was still tainted by Vader's blood and they would still know it.

"We have great news," she said, slipping into royalty like well-tailored clothing. She was the last Princess of Alderaan, here, before she would soon become the daughter of the last of the Sith Lords. She still had their trust, even if she did not deserve it. "I've found a fatal flaw in the Death Star's design. It will allow us a swift victory, if pulled off." She presented the blueprints, complete with the marked point of weakness. "Red Squadron, your job is to aim torpedoes down the Death Star's exhaust port, located here, and damage the reactor core. It's not an easy target, but I have faith in your abilities."

One of Red Squadron spoke up, amongst the crowd. "Why now?"

"Imperial spies have been made aware of our location, and it's likely the Emperor will be sending the entire fleet after us. We'll need to evacuate as soon as we can manage."

Murmurs of disgust shifted through the crowd in waves. Nobody liked a traitor. They'd like Vader even less.

"Luckily, we can offset this damage with our newfound ally." She gestured to Mon, who took the podium quickly.
"Newfound ally?" the Red Squadron members repeated.

"Are they gonna help us this mission? Give the Death Star a good beatdown, eh?" They grinned to themselves, excited. One looked particularly pleased, rubbing her gloved hands together and radiating smooth welcome. A perceived new ally, and not a former enemy. Leia knew they'd be sorely disappointed. "I'm ready to see whoever can keep up with our flying, that's for sure." At this, the others nodded alongside her. "Show us what you got, Princess!" she called, waving one hand.

Part of Leia winced, and she let it show. "Mon?" It was late; Anakin was supposed to be making his appearance. They were running out of time. And nobody knew the full extent of it as much as she and the others did. What insane fury was chasing them down at this very moment.

"What I am about to show you will shock you, but know that I have tested his loyalty to my fullest ability, and that he is as much on our side as you are." And with that, Mon motioned for Darth Vader to enter the room.

The entire base heard his breathing before they saw his armoured face, and a deathly sort of silence overtook the entire room. Anakin showed no signs of being disturbed by this, and continued until he stood next to Leia at the podium.

"I am sure you have questions," he began, and an onslaught of yells and chaos met them in reply. Anakin stood, tapping the podium's edge, until the noise died down, and then repeated himself. "And I will answer them. But first, some elaboration is necessary."

With this, Anakin slowly took off the helmet, and set it on the podium with one elegant motion. The crowd erupted again, the elder members no doubt recognising the face Vader wore. It was not so long ago that they'd fought together.

"I was once Anakin Skywalker, and due to some... inexplicable circumstance, his body has been returned to me." Anakin paused a moment. "Whether this youth is artificial or organic is irrelevant to me; it has served its purpose either way -- to remind me where my true loyalties lie, with my flesh and blood, and with what is left of the Republic, here." He looked to Luke and Leia. "My children, Luke and Leia Skywalker, you already know. They are half the reason I came to join you. The other half--" Obi-Wan stepped up to the podium, then, "-the other half, you see here."

More deafening noise from the crowd, the emotion outpouring like torrential rain, drowning Leia in horror, anger, betrayal, hurt, confusion. It made a sickening mix, and she tried to shield her mind as best as she could with what little she'd had time to learn.

"What the hell is this?" one of Red Squadron shouted, louder than the others by some incredible miracle. How that was even possible at this point, she had no idea. "As if this monster could ever fight on our side, his face be damned!"

In the Alliance's fury, the sea of orange uniforms rose and fell like crests of water, crashing hard against the now very small figures standing by the podium. Leia had been expecting worse, honestly. There was no blasterfire, and so this was a win in her book. Still, nothing would calm them now, would it? Vader had ripped his way through the Rebels like they were fabric to be torn apart at the seams. That hurt was still new, and here Vader was, pronouncing himself their new saviour, their best hope. A lot would rather die than accept his aid, and she didn't need the Force to tell her that.

"Order!" Mon yelled, and the sea settled momentarily to listen. "I understand what you must be going through right now--" Snorts of disbelief from the crowd, and Mon's eyes narrowed. "This won't be easy, but the Alliance cannot afford to turn away whomever comes to its aid."
"Anyone but him!" someone cried out, and there were cheers of agreement so loud it was a physical force.

"I know you want proof, and I have it. He saved hundreds of lives on a Rebel Transport only days ago," Leia said. "I have records of the event, if any of you would like to see them."

She received doubt-filled murmurs and nods, and presented the small, crackling recording they could find of Anakin practically throwing his life into Imperial hands. The moment looked different from an outsider's perspective, with the terror not so palpable. Anakin still looked like a reckless, laserbrained, lumbering idiot, though. It would get the point across.

The base watched in slow, rising shock as Anakin saved the lives of hundreds in one of the most stupid, brash decisions of his career. The murmuring rose like a choir until the chatter had become outright shouting again, this time in both denial and acceptance.

"How can that be him?" one of Red Squadron asked limply. Shoulders hunched, eyes dim. Their worst enemy was offering out his hand, and they were about to be forced to take it. Leia couldn't blame their reaction for a second.

"I'm not about to apologise for saving their lives," Anakin protested.

Mon shook her head. "Nobody's asking you to."

"Or, at least, nobody should." Luke smiled weakly.

"You did that?" A man in the front of the crowd appeared, parting his teammates to get a better look at Vader's unnaturally tall form. He was old and scarred, eyes wrinkled and hair greying. Leia saw a veteran in him before he even opened his mouth. "I knew of you, in the war. Never got to fight with you personally, but I only ever heard good things. You had a reputation, as a boy." He hummed, a small smirk forming as he thought. "Do you have the balls to do it again?"

"It was what I was born to do," Anakin said. "Sir."

"Then, I will accept his help, if no-one else will."

"Some of us will." Red Squadron stepped up, as one. "Do we have a choice?"

"Always," said Mon.

"We accept," said the woman from earlier. "If he makes one mistake, we're booting him on his ass, get it? We don't care about his kids, as long as they don't commit genocide, too, but if he starts anything, he's gone. Assuming he will be on our team at all, that is."

"I had that in mind."

"Then, do you get us, ma'am? We're not working with a loose cannon, not on a team like this."

"Of course," Anakin said, in Mon's place. "I wouldn't expect anything else from Red Squadron."

"Cousin Ani," she acknowledged, sneering. "Keep up that good flying, and we'll see."

Chapter End Notes
SO, THAT HAPPENED.

(Exams are killing me. Sorry if I missed any typos ;a;;)
They trailed out of the meeting hall, and Luke turned to Father immediately. "Are you okay?"

"Went better than I expected," Father replied, with a shrug.

Luke shook his head. "I don't know how you can say that."

"It was their every right."

It was. He knew the Alliance wasn't perfect, but weren't you supposed to take the higher path? They weren't Jedi, of course, and they weren't as idealistic as Luke knew himself to be, but that reaction had surprised him a little in its intensity. Or perhaps that was only how it had felt, being overpowered by the hall's roiling emotions. For Father, it must have been a harsher blow. Reforming and being turned away at every step.

"That's not an excuse," Luke said. "It was out of order."

"Luke, I know you love our father, but you know what he's done to the Alliance over the years," Leia cut in. "That wasn't out of order, considering. It could have gone a lot worse."

Han jostled him lightly. "Nobody's dead, kid. Count your blessings, right?"

"That definitely wasn't a blessing," Luke said, dry. "At least Father still has his life, though."

"That's the spirit," said Han, and Chewie growled out something Luke wished he could understand. It sounded comforting.

Father nodded. "I'm just glad they didn't carry me out of here on a stretcher. I mean, I seriously thought for a few moments they might actually kill me back there."

Ben's face darkened at that. It was odd, seeing him protective of the man he'd only a few months ago faced down in a battle to the death. Their history went beyond Luke's understanding. "None of us here would ever let that come to pass, Anakin," Ben promised.

Father looked at him warmly. "I don't deserve it, but thank you."

Someone had to have his back, and Luke was glad that they, even faced with the entire Alliance's anger, were set to stay there.

The hangar bay was chaos.

People piled into ships like they had minutes to live. Maybe they did. But not every ship in the hangar bay was usable. Repairs took a lot of hard work and time, and some ships had lain unused for Force only knew how long. Luke caught quite a few Rebels scrabbling to wipe dust from their X-Wing's windshield, clambering onto the things wildly and covering themselves in dirt and stardust.

Tow vehicles were hauling in fuel like it was liquid gold, shipping it in and out of the bay faster than Luke had ever seen. It was evidently too fast, as some were discarded in corners, engines smoking and leaving the place smelling like fire, dust, and oil. Luke was choking on it -- eyes watering and
lungs burning -- about as soon as he'd walked in.

Pilots were running back and forth, ship-scouting, half-blinded by smoke and slamming against Luke's shoulders more times than he could count. Luke's own X-Wing was thankfully tucked away, right next to Father's, in a snug room to the side. Artoo rushed to it like a bodyguard, and made angry beeping noises at whoever ran past. Clearly he'd grown attached to the thing.

"Here we are," Luke announced, turning back to Father.

Ash-streaked face pulled back in a blinding grin, he hopped onto the X-Wing's nose and concealed the cockpit from view. "I've missed this."


"The rush of battle. Nothing quite like it, y'know? Can't ever get enough, once you've tried it." He breathed in, hands splaying on brilliant red streaks as he lay back, wiping clean marks into the dirt-faded paint. He moved one to briefly rest on Artoo's head, leaving behind a dusty handprint the droid wasted no time in complaining about. "How about it, Artoo? Wanna fly again?"

Artoo chirped angrily.

"Promise I won't get any dust on you."

Another chirp.

"Okay, any more dust," Father corrected.

Artoo seemed to consider this for a moment, and then jet-lifted himself snugly into the tail-end of Luke's ship.

"You wanna fly, but not with me, huh?"

Artoo swiveled his head away from Father pointedly.

"Okay, Force, I'll clean it later." Father shook his head. "You sure know how to hold a grudge, don't you?"

There was a pause as Artoo made himself comfortable, a small silence settling amongst the panic, before Ben emerged, coughing and choking, from within the smoke.

"Master?"

"Not just me," Ben got out, and Leia appeared from behind him.

"What're you doing here?" Luke asked. "It's kind of a warzone in here right now. Don't know if you've noticed."

"We've noticed," Ben and Leia chorused.

Father eyed Ben nervously. "You're not needed elsewhere?"

"Relax, Anakin. I'm not shirking my duties. In fact, we're just about to carry them out."

"We've been assigned to fly with you," Leia clarified.

Father and Luke said nothing for what felt like years, until they were interrupted by Artoo's chirping
"Obi-Wan, you despise flying," Father said. "Literal burning hatred."

"I can hardly use that as an excuse in front of Mon Mothma, now can I? Anyhow, I've been told I'm not so bad at it."

"You're a brilliant pilot," Father said firmly. "But why would you accept?"

"I must help you, Anakin." Ben looked as old and tired as his mind probably was, then. "This will not be easy."

"Mon knows I have considerable skill as a pilot, as well," Leia added. "It's inherited, clearly."

"You've been flight-trained?" Luke asked. "But you're a Rebel Leader..."

"The Alliance can't afford to hide away its leaders like fragile flowers," Leia said, tone light but meaning clear. "And my training with the Force has been going smoothly. Mon believes that's sufficient."

"And they want you, along with Red Squadron?"

"Mon wants to limit the casualties as much as she can, Luke. We're a diversion, but we're also the firepower. All the other pilots will be flying the escape ships."

"And it's not overkill?" Luke asked, just to be safe.

"This is the Death Star we're talking about here, Luke." Leia laughed. "You know just how much destructive force that thing has, and what Palpatine is capable of. He'll destroy whole planets; he has enough of them to last him a lifetime and back."

"And you both can fly?"

"We've both flown extensively, young Luke," Ben said. "Worry about yourself, not us."

"I can't lose you now," Luke said. "I've finally found you, and-"


"We have no plans for self-sacrifice," Ben said gently. "Don't let our presence on the field distract you. You must focus if we're to pull this off."

Luke knew that all too well, and that was what worried him. Ben and his father had trained in the Force for more years than they could probably remember, but Luke knew next to nothing. He'd been Force-sensitive all his life, but he'd never used it for anything more than making a few long distance jumps. And this wasn't a long distance jump.

"Yeah, 'if'," Luke said.

"Don't bother thinking like that," said Leia. "Trust me when I say it gets you nowhere. Just focus on the mission, and pretend nothing else exists for a while."

Luke laughed nervously. "Because that's so easy."

"I know," Leia agreed, resting a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "But we can do this. You can do this."
He hoped so.

Daylight couldn't hide it when it came. If their scanners hadn't told them beforehand, there was no way they could have missed it now. Yavin 4's new moon, the Death Star, slipping into their orbit with ease and grace.

Mon Mothma's voice filtered over the comm, "Red Squadron, you have permission to prepare for takeoff."

The hangar bay was emptying at a steady rate, escaping ships flooding out on all sides of the planet, no one target for the Death Star to aim its raybeam at with any success. Like bugs, they swarmed everywhere, jumping into hyperspace as soon as they could. Luke and the others were there to make sure it stayed that way.

His team were settling themselves into the cockpits of their X-Wings. They looked cocky, but their Force presence didn't confirm it -- tinged by rising horror, intensifying in sick bursts as the Death Star grew larger and larger in Yavin 4's calm blue sky.

"You guys alright?" he asked.

Wedge gave him a thumbs up, and Luke was impressed at how steady he kept his hands. The others only smiled, brilliantly false, and nodded absently at him. It wasn't convincing, obvious even to someone who had no connection to the Force. "We're great, Red Five," said Garven. He had on a strong face, determined and unshakable. The others tried desperately to mimic it.

"Good to hear," Luke replied, pretending he couldn't see through them about as clearly as a starship viewport.

He hopped up onto his ship, giving Red Squadron a few second glances, before locking the entrance hood into place. Inside a small world, comforting if a little claustrophobic. Artoo immediately began complaining about their lack of speed, the dust on his exterior, how boring it was not to already be flying. Luke snorted and turned on the comms. "Artoo's mad," he said.

"Of course he is," Father replied, fond.

"Hang on tight, Artoo," Leia said. "It's only going to get worse from here."

"Keep it positive, Princess," Garven said. "Ready for takeoff?"

The sound of a dozen engines roaring to life joined the hangar bay's chorus of low hums. Luke could almost feel the room vibrate and rumble around him, like a pride of purring nexu. He hoped they'd be as fierce, as sleek hunters. They'd need to be, to make it anywhere near that exhaust port.

They were soaring through the sky in seconds, parting the clouds like water. Internal sensors showed an entire fleet ahead, surrounding the Death Star like an asteroid belt. Star Destroyers hung low in the atmosphere, giants waiting to obliterate what little they could target. Dust and debris rained from below them, and Luke realised, in horror, they were the remains of unlucky Rebel ships.

"Don't let them catch you, Reds," Garven called. He flew in smooth arcs, over and under the fleet, spinning and zig-zagging wildly. No shot the Empire aimed came close to scratching his hull, and the others soon mirrored. "Wings down! Prepare to orbit the Death Star, we're about to breach the atmosphere."

They shot out into space, and came to a halt just under the great station's base, safely away from its
"Understood," Luke said. A few well-placed cannon shots, and he was no longer flanked. "We need to get into the trench on its upper half," he continued. "We're gonna have to fly up and around the back, avoid the superlaser."

"Roger that, Red Five," Wedge acknowledged.

"Red Thirteen, cover Red Five's starboard side," Garven cut in. "Red Fourteen, port, Red Fifteen, stern. You know the layout best, we can't lose any of you."

"Gotcha," said Father, slipping into place at Luke's starboard side. Ben soon made his way to Luke's left, surrounding him in close-quarters, tight formation. Leia kept a careful eye on his tail, leaving only the nose of his fighter uncovered. He could manage that weakness with his own weapons.

They spun upwards, like a flock of Yavin's own whisper birds, curving over the battle station's cannon-covered, smooth-plated surface. They were fast, and the Empire's notoriously awful aim worked in their favour. Shots bounced off Star Destroyers, likely to the Imperials' great frustration. Luke and his father wore the same smirk in seeing this. "Stop hitting yourself," Luke said, choking down laughter which was probably not appropriate for their life-threatening situation. Still, it was kriffing hilarious to watch the Empire struggle to land any hits on anyone but their own people.

"This is fantastic," his father said. "Force, I can't believe it."

"Don't get cocky, yet," Ben said. "We still have a long way to go before we hit that exhaust port."

"Follow Obi-Wan's advice, you two," Leia cut in. "They may be off to a slow start, but they have at least twenty times the firepower."

"Yeah, and it's being wasted on their own ships," Luke said, grinning. "But I won't get cocky."

"Nor will I," Father promised, solemn. Through the viewport, Luke could see his eyes were still alight with humour.

More TIEs came flying in, trying desperately to slow Red Squadron's assault. "Careful," Father said. "They're in attack formation. I trained them myself, they'll be hard to hit."

Sure enough, the ships nipped close at their heels, forcing Leia to drop out and under Luke to avoid cannonfire. "Damn," Luke said. "Leia, you okay?"

"Perfectly fine," she grit out. "Father, I'll take Luke's right. Get rid of the TIEs tailing me, and I'll get rid of yours."

Father slowed slightly, allowing Leia room to rise and settle snugly at Luke's side. He shot left and quickly circled round to face their tails, shooting them each one by one. The explosion of smoke and sparks hid him just long enough to make his way back around to the empty space Leia had cleared for him.

"Nice shots."

"Thank you, I practice," Leia said, sounding just a little self-satisfied.

They continued on ahead, dodging fire where they could. Some of his team's wings had been singed, but nothing had caught. The only damage on his fighter was from the sweat dripping down his forehead, his iron grip on the controls. He was still smiling, though. Maybe it was shock, but he
could feel the thrill of it now. They were about to deal the Imperial fleet its finishing blow, here and now. If they were lucky.

It was beautiful. Space around them shone with the glittering dust of cluttered and destroyed Imperial ship parts. The vessels around them, so powerful compared to their own, were left burnt and smoking. The Death Star itself was unable to reach out and grasp what lay just under its nose. As they got closer and closer to the trench, Luke felt the Force surge around him, envelop him. His family were beside him, energy shimmering, tied to each other by the battlefield. They could do this if they tried hard enough, he knew it.

The Force was with them, always. Even against this threat, murderer of millions, they could make it out alive. They were Jedi. They could make their own luck.

They were making quick descent towards the trench now, and Luke could sense the tension grow and grow from the rest of Red Squadron. More and more Imperial fighters were tailing them now, their cannonfire growing frantic as Luke got closer and closer to the Death Star's weakpoint. The squadron had to work incredibly hard to keep the TIEs from breaking the Skywalkers' formation, and Luke knew it would take its toll.

"Ease off if you can, guys," Luke said. "Don't worry about me, alright?"

"That's easy for you to say!" Wedge cut in. "We can't have you dying on us now."

"I can actually take care of myself." Luke laughed. "Red Two, don't take fire meant for me, okay?"

"Can't make any promises."

As Luke made the drop into the hollow canyon below, his team fanned out slightly, leaving Luke with a slightly heavier load of TIEs to deal with. Wedge flew above, leaving Biggs to follow closely behind Leia. TIEs, in tight-knit pairs, chased them down soon after, setting them on shaky-footing. Dodging was hard here, and the narrow walls seemed to close in on them the farther they flew. Biggs' wing almost brushed the trench's edge a few times, in avoiding dangerously close enemy fire.

"Back off," Luke said. "We're too close, someone's gonna get cornered into a collision course if we're not careful."

"If any of us are gonna make this shot, we need to stay in the trench!" Biggs protested.

"They're hot on our tail," Father said. "Let me take care of it."

"What're you-?" Leia's voice caught as their father broke formation and dove beneath them.

Ben's ship flew on smoothly, but Luke could feel shock and concern pouring into the Force. "Anakin-"

Luke looked down, trusting Artoo to correct his course while he took his eyes off-target, and watched as his father slowed to a crawl beneath them. The TIEs passed him without a second glance, keeping their shots aimed solely on Luke and Leia. This was, apparently, the opportunity Father had been looking for, as he swiftly pulled up once more and positioned himself scant metres away from the backs of the Imperial fighters. Luke's eyes widened. "Keep flying, and fast," Father said quickly. "This is gonna hurt."

Luke sped up, leaving the TIEs reeling behind him, and winced as he heard the distinct sound of Father charging up his ship's lasercannon. He didn't look back to see the explosion, the trail of fire licking at his ship's rear boosters.
"Well, that was certainly reckless," said Ben, as Father joined their flock of fighters once again.

"Should scare them off for a while," he shot back, voice tinged with excitement. "Buy us some extra time. Don't act like we didn't need it."

"We won't," said Luke, breathing a sigh of relief. It was looking more and more like he was going to be the one making the shot. Biggs was lagging behind, wings cracked and sparking. His family were crowded around him like a security escort, as he raced far beyond the rest of Red Squadron and closer to the exhaust port. Nobody else had such a clear line of fire.

He swallowed, and hoped the Force would work with his inexperience. His ship was old enough to have a faulty targeting computer, and he wanted to be the backup plan, as opposed to pure failure. They couldn't lose this now, not after all the sacrifices the Rebel Alliance had made to get the Death Star's blueprints, to work behind the Empire's back long enough to allow Luke to be flying here right at this very moment.

He swooped forward, watching as the exhaust port got larger and larger in his field of vision, and begged silently as he heard cannonfire ripping through titanium. Part of Red Squadron was going down. He couldn't let their deaths be in vain. If he didn't do this now, he could never be a true Jedi.

"Status report!" came Garven's unsteady voice.

"Red Ten is down," Biggs replied. "I'm flying on half a wing here, we can't keep this up much longer."

Theron. Shit. Damn it, damn it. Luke looked back, laserfire dizzyingly bright through the small viewport. "You guys?"

"Reds Thirteen through Fifteen are still flanking you, Red Five," Garven said. "Make us proud."

He was so close, flying so fast he could taste it, but the TIEs were catching up just as quickly. Red Squadron was overworking itself, and the Empire was a lot bigger than they were. The lasers were coming close enough to burn dark streaks into the hulls of adjacent fighters, and Luke imagined they'd be tearing them apart soon enough. Maybe too soon.

"I- I don't think I can make it," Luke said, breaths coming short and catching with sharp jolts. The TIEs were coming in too close.

"Yes, you can!" Leia shouted. She, Father, and Ben were hammering out shots as fast as their fighters could charge them. "We've got you covered."

"You'll die!" Luke cried.

"So be it!" Leia's ship shuddered in the effort to dodge more searing hits. "So be it," she repeated, practically spitting. "This is what we've devoted our lives to, Luke. We made this choice."

Artoo made a mournful cry from his position on the ship's back, and Luke prepared to watch everything he'd fought for die along with the mechanical death trap around him. The TIEs rammed down Bren's ship behind him, sending Red Eight plummeting to the bottom of the trench in a shower of knife-sharp debris. The horrific wailing filled his commlink as the TIEs shot their way through Red Squadron's outer defences, and Luke thought then he'd never heard a more terrible sound in his entire life.

Luke was about to scream, to do something, anything at all, when a sharp light ripped through space around them, and the wail became an ear-piercing screech, then a sharp whine, and then nothing.
Complete silence.

Then Luke saw the *Falcon's* shining hull speeding overhead, and heard a loud whoop through the comms.

"You're all clear, kid!" Han said. Luke owed him everything, in that moment. "Now, let's blow this thing and go home!"

The exhaust port was *right there*. Luke summoned all the strength he could possibly manage in the Force, and fired.

"It's a hit!" Father yelled, pride an overflow in their familial connection. "The Force is strong with this one," he said to Ben, whose laughter rang through the comms happier than Luke had ever heard it.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Leia said. "I think we've angered the Empire enough for one day."

They pulled up in a sickening lurch, leaving the Death Star to collapse in on itself, explosion lighting up the dark of the galaxy for a much-awaited second.

"We made it," Luke said.

"The Force has been with us today," Ben replied.

"One step closer to the Empire's defeat," Leia added. "We've done it, Luke. We've finally given as good as we've got."

He breathed out, and reached towards the Force as it sung around him. Victory was theirs. The Empire would be feeling this for a long while yet.

Chapter End Notes

I'm SORRY I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M DOING???? I wrote ANH's iconic scene, with a few little added extras. I think I'm dead; that was a lot of pressure.

Happy Halloween, yo! And I hope I didn't butcher this. I've had, like, six hours sleep, and I think my mind is a smoothie right now.
Leia winced as the *Falcon* dropped out of hyperspace and her docked X-Wing rocked painfully. It was in bad shape. Even the *Falcon* was in bad shape. Would Han regret the decision to stay with the Alliance now that his ship was almost in shambles? She had no idea what the Alliance was to do now -- after so many casualties, and yet such an incredible victory -- so it was likely Han would be a necessary asset. Hopefully he would choose to remain.

Hopefully *everyone* would choose to remain. Their orders were to make their way to Hoth once the Death Star had fallen, *if* it had fallen. She assumed they were still in place, that the Alliance itself was still in place. From what she had seen, the evacuation had cost the Alliance greatly. And now they were changing their scenery from Yavin 4's tropical heat to Hoth's bitter cold. Who would have hope now? They had won, but they had lost just as much.

Morale would be at an all-time low, and Vader's presence would only worsen their situation. Force, the Alliance was in deep now. There would be no coming back from this.

She swallowed, and pushed herself up and out of the fighter and into the *Falcon's* main corridor. There was chatter coming from the direction of the main cockpit, Force skyrocketing with uncharacteristic fear, so Leia rushed as fast as she could right into the heart of it all.

Luke was waving his hands around, pointing at Anakin desperately, and Han was shaking his head firmly, turning away with a dismissive wave. Chewbacca growled something Leia could barely make out, but it sounded dangerously close to, "It's hopeless." That was not what she wanted to hear right now.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Ship's busted," Han said, sounding crushed. He was strangely attached to this hunk of junk, fast as she was. "Think we flew it too fast."

Chewbacca growled again, longer and even more upset.

"Chewie says we blew out the hyperdrive trying to outrun the Star Destroyers," Han shrugged. "Can't say it was my best idea."

"I thought Father could fix it," Luke told Leia, which certainly explained the odd hand movements.

"I would, but from what I can sense, it'll take hours." Anakin frowned. "We don't actually have hours. Palpatine will have the Empire search anywhere up to one hundred or one hundred thousand lightyears away from Yavin. As far as we could have possibly flown, probably farther."

"He'll find us as soon as he can, and he won't be happy when he does," Leia said. Anakin nodded his agreement, which swiftly and unfortunately confirmed her predictions. She sighed, rubbing a hand over her face. This was one of the only times, of which she could count on one hand, where she'd ever *wanted* to be wrong about what her instincts told her. "Great," she said. Just when she'd thought they had managed to escape the nexu's den. "Can we cloak?"

"Not on this ship," Han said. "She's fast, but that's because we put all her power into it. Not enough left to put into stealth, and frankly, we don't ever need it."
"Until now," Leia said.

"Until now," Han repeated, frustration radiating off him in waves. "You sure we can't fix her? Combine our efforts?"

Anakin hummed. "That'd definitely reduce the time, but I've got a bad feeling Palpatine's only just around the corner."

Leia had that same feeling.

"It was certainly nice working with you," said Obi-Wan, tone disturbingly light.

"You didn't expect to survive this, did you?" she asked. It came out accusing, but she knew he wasn't wrong to have thought so. This was more reckless than anything any of them had ever done, despite their considerable experience in war.

"Not exactly, no," Obi-Wan confirmed, and gave a sheepish shrug. "Perhaps it is wrong of me to say so, but I still don't expect to."

"Hey, as long as you're being honest, right?" Anakin joked.

Leia stared at them. "When you're done being martyrs, let me know. We can resume attempting to get out of this mess."

Luke snorted. "Oh, ouch. I think that one actually physically hurt."

Han joined in, snickering, but soon sobered up. "She's got a point, y'know. If we wanna get out of this alive, we've gotta put everything we have into this. And I mean everything."

"You think any Alliance ships are still flying this route?" Luke asked. Han shot him a puzzled glance, and Luke replied with a sly smile. He was learning from them, Force help him. "You know, in case we don't have everything."

Han laughed brightly. "Well, kid, we better hope so. With that attitude, we're not getting anywhere."

"I'll aim to be more positive," Luke promised, solemn, but his eyes were sparkling. They were all glad to still be alive, she figured. If they didn't laugh, they would cry, and that would further their progress even less.

Even if crying was a more realistic reaction to this situation. No matter how far you've fallen, always get up. She'd always lived by that, and she would die by it, too.

"On that note," Obi-Wan said. "Why don't we get to work? I'm sure Anakin will be glad to help."

"Nobody understands me more than a ship's engine," Anakin said dramatically.

Anakin sighed loudly, touching a careful hand to the Falcon's internals. "I don't think this one understands me," he groaned.

Leia raised an eyebrow, and Han clambered up next to them, dusting himself off. "No luck," he said.

"Nothing?"

Han motioned inside. She inspected the intertangled wires and circuits carefully, and found everything out of order. Smoke rose from the grates around them, and with the Force winding
around her much like it must have with her father, she could sense just how overworked the thing was. Suddenly she understood why Anakin connected with ships like they were people. The Falcon, if she didn't know better, could easily be perceived as a sentient being. She was so ingrained with their journeys and feelings, it was as if she had life, emotion.

And right now she was feeling grumpy and uncooperative, by the looks of it.

"Oh," Leia said. "Damn." She searched farther. "We won't be able to fix that in time."

"You don't say," said Han, waving a blowtorch around with too little care. Leia eyed it suspiciously until Han set it down. "Listen, we're sitting ducks, and not for the first time."

"But this time it's worse, right?" Anakin said, running hands through his hair. It always curled up at the edges, but now it seemed to have been magnetised by the Falcon herself. Leia hoped dearly that was a common occurrence within starship cores.

"Maybe not worse than I've ever seen it," Han replied. His face was filled with concern. "Definitely up there, though."

"We need hyperspace warp capability soon, or Palpatine will find us dead in the water," Leia said, tensing. Bracing for the battle which she knew would inevitably come. "And then..."

"And then we get blown out of that water." Anakin shrugged with false cheer. "We had a good run, guys."

Han narrowed his eyes. "No, I'm with the Princess here. We don't give up."

"I'm not," Anakin assured. "I just honestly cannot see a way out of this, unless the Falcon chooses to magically fix herself." He patted her side warmly. "That'd be nice, by the way."

"She needs a repair station," Han said. "I was thinking the one on Hoth. How far are we from that hunk of ice, by the way?"

"We made it relatively far." Leia charted the starsystem in her head. She'd studied their galaxy enough times, taken enough astrology classes in her time being trained up for Alderaanian royalty, to know every planet's location off by heart. "We're less than a parsec away, if that's what you're worried about."

"Would Palpatine come this close?" Han asked. "Seems a bit like overkill to me."

"He would," Anakin added. "That's my fault. He wants Little Pet Lord Vader to come back to his heels."

"You really shoulda' been a Rebel earlier."

"Everyone in the Empire hates the Emperor."

Han stared at him. "Yeah, and that says something, doesn't it?"

Anakin blinked. "Well, yeah... I guess you have a point there." He frowned. "Force, I was blind. That place is Chaos personified."

Reference to a shared Corellian mythos hit Han hard and fast, and he grimaced. "It really was that bad, huh? Don't know why any of us didn't leave sooner."

"Fear," Leia said. "It's hard not to let it trap you once you're there. That's the point. Up until recently,
that was his point.” She glanced to her father pointedly.

"Not so scary once you get to know me, right?" Anakin laughed. It sounded fake.

"No," Leia said. "If you ran back to Palpatine's side with the knowledge you have now, you'd define fear."

She could see the glimmers of Vader behind those eyes, something dark and hurt like a wild animal. "I don't intend to do that."

"Currently, you're hope for the Alliance. Fear, as well, I won't deny it, but closer to hope. Don't turn that around, Father."

"I'm not about to," he said, inflection taking on Vader's strange formality, less Tatooine farmboy like Luke. Imperial-cultivated, tinged with superiority. His voice was his commanding presence without the armour, but Leia only stared him down, as she had on the Death Star, even as air had left her, as the pain of suffocation had begun to dim her vision.

"I'm sorry," she said finally. "I trust you won't turn back to him."

"And do you trust me with anything else?"

"My own life," she said. "I know you won't end it now."

"I wouldn't have ever."

Leia snorted at that. "Don't lie to me, Father. I don't need to be coddled like a child."

"I'm not lying," he said. In the corner of her vision, she noticed Han twitching uncomfortably. Well, he was close enough to family now, she thought. He'd saved them all, and here he was to see what it was he'd truly put such effort into dragging out of Palpatine's hands. "I was fond of you," Anakin continued.

"You had a strange way of showing it," Leia snapped.

"Your fighting spirit... amused me. None of the other Rebels could so reliably bite with as much force as their bark." He sighed. "I wouldn't have killed you, you were too intriguing. Palpatine would have been angry for it, but I knew he needed me enough to allow me some leeway. Your life could have been spared, and likely would have been, had Obi-Wan and Luke not come for you."

Leia considered this. Vader was as brutal with her as he was with any other "traitor", but she had always felt he was oddly regaled by her stubborn resistance. The others only annoyed him, but she had caught his interest. She knew that, she'd seen that. But to spare her life? That was something else entirely, especially coming from Vader, whose vicious tactics left her fellow Rebels trembling and crying for their mothers.

Perhaps to have someone shaking with anger rather than with fear at his presence was welcome relief from boredom in that hell. How would she know? Her father had a knife for a tongue. He could have wished and begged for her extermination before now, and she would be none the wiser.

"You don't believe me."

"Forgive me if I find it rather hard to believe."

"I did not kill everyone," he protested.
"Only most of them."

Strange desperation filled the Force. "Your beliefs about the past are unchangeable, but in the present, do you understand? You are my daughter, my flesh and blood." Every word was clearly pronounced, sharp. Vader's words in Anakin's mouth were strange, but ultimately truthful. She at least appreciated he could drop the front some of the time. "Had I known- I would never- There was no way-"  

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself?" Leia asked.  

"I do not need convincing," he hissed. The Force shook with Vader's emotion, and Leia was surprised to find it wasn't anger, but hollow despair. "You are my child!"

She hadn't known she would upset him this badly. Raising her hands in placation, then gently laying one on Anakin's shoulder, she said, "Alright. It's alright, Father. I believe you."

Han reeled back from them. "He's not gonna go all magical strangulation on us, is he?"

Anakin deflated. "Force, I'm sorry. I usually have a handle on it. Kriffing hell, I didn't mean to scare-"

Han raised a hand. "It takes a lot to scare me, pal. Relax."

Anakin sunk to the floor, slowly, breathing in deep, choking gasps.

"It's not like we don't know who you are," Han continued. "I expected more unexplained fits of rage by now, if I'm honest. You've done pretty great for a genocidal maniac, Skywalker, if you care to know at all."

"That's not a comfort-" Leia began, but Anakin's laughter cut her off.

"I appreciate someone who's honest with me, Solo."

"We trust you here," Han said. "I let you fix my ship. Hell, I let you fly my ship. That says enough."

Leia saw both Vader and Anakin now, an odd balance that shouldn't have worked. But it was, by their hand or by his own, and Leia was more than thankful. "I hope, someday, to deserve that trust, Han."

"Day's now, Anakin." Han grinned. "Nobody's dead, so I think we're good." He looked to Leia. "Wouldn't you say, Princess?"

"We're good." She laughed. "The ship isn't, though. Let's get back to work. We're not exactly on schedule."

They floated in empty space, buoyant on the nothingness, but moving absolutely nowhere. Leia's head ached. She'd been staring at the same wire for what felt like hours.

"Honestly," Anakin said, throwing his wrench down carelessly. "I'm pretty sure we're going nowhere. This ship isn't gonna move anytime soon, so unless we throw ourselves out of the airlock -- which I don't recommend -- I don't see any other options."

"Wait," Leia offered. "Luke might be right. A Rebel ship may be able to pick us up, if we're very lucky."
"That's all we've got?" Han asked. "Doesn't seem like much."

"It isn't." Leia sighed. "But what choice do we have, Han? This ship isn't going to move an inch farther unless we get out and push it."

"I'm not sure any of us could do that," Anakin said. "Even if I put the suit on, I doubt I could push her all the way to Hoth."

"No-one's asking you to do that," Leia assured. "That would be pushing it a little."

Anakin snickered.

Leia rolled her eyes and turned to Han. "As you can see, my father is a twelve-year-old child at heart. Any ideas?"

"On maturing your dad or fixing the ship?"

"Either, at this point." Leia waved a hand. "None of us have slept for hours, and if we were to wait this out, someone would have to keep watch. Obviously we need a better plan."

"And you don't have one?"

"I definitely didn't expect this trash heap to fail in its only strength, if that's what you're asking."

"Hey!" Han protested. "Even her speed has limits."

"Limits we need to surpass, if we're going to get out of this alive." She rubbed at her temples. "She got us close enough, closer than any other starships around. If that's any comfort."

"What a real compliment," Han said dryly.

"Sorry," Leia said quickly. Han thought of the ship as an extension of his own person. "I'm just itching to get out of here."

"Same goes for all of us." Anakin patted her shoulder. "Hey, there are four Skywalkers on board. We'll think of something."

"Four?"

"Obi-Wan's a Skywalker by association now. Honorary, in fact, after all we've put him through."

"Your gift to Obi-Wan for his endless patience is the family title?" Leia asked. "The family title which is actually synonymous with insane, life-endangering recklessness."

Anakin shrugged. "He has to be insane, to stay here. And reckless." He raised an eyebrow. "He shares quarters with Darth Vader. He's earned it."

"Good point."

Anakin lay on the booth, feet propped up above him, and idly tossed a blast shield helmet back and forth with the Force. He groaned and repositioned himself every so often, but his phantom grip on the helmet never lessened. Leia had watched him juggle it like a toy for far too long to be healthy at this point, but there was nothing to do other than sit. Dejarik was out of the question, since she didn't want her arms ripped off by an angry Wookiee. And she'd not woken up Han or Luke, both of whom had fallen asleep sitting side-by-side at the console.
Obi-Wan was staring at the board, on the booth beside Anakin, but folded up to consume far less space. Anakin's head came to rest on his thigh when he wasn't focusing so much on fiddling with whatever he could find, and Obi-Wan didn't seem to mind. He'd run a hand through Anakin's hair occasionally, which made Leia feel like she was intruding. Yet, Anakin smiled at her and tossed her the helmet every time she felt she was no longer needed.

"Come on," he said. "Throw it back to me with the Force."

"Doesn't Obi-Wan have something to say about our blatant misuse?"

"As long as Anakin isn't bored." Obi-Wan smiled. "Force save us all should that happen."

"Hey, that's not-" Leia took this opportunity to toss the helmet back at him with the Force, which he caught just a hair's breadth away from his face. "You don't play by the rules, do you, Princess?"

"I think that's inherited," she said smartly.

Anakin smirked. "I think we could work with this." He nudged Obi-Wan. "Hey, Master, how hard can you throw?"

"You want to train her?" Obi-Wan asked. "Now?"

"When else?"

"I'm not sure I want to be hit in the face with a helmet," Leia hedged.

"You won't. You'll be catching it."

That was a lot of faith in her ability. She'd had decades less training, less training even than Luke. Working in the Alliance had taken up plenty of her time, and the training she had managed felt underwhelming.

"You can do it." Anakin smiled. "What's something Yoda would say? 'Unlock your potential, only you can.'"

"Who is this Yoda?"

"A great Jedi Master," Obi-Wan clarified. "He spoke Basic as well as any of us, but rather backwards. Everything he said was more memorable that way, I suppose. No quirk of his was ever without meaning."

"Is he still alive?" Leia laughed. "I'm sure meeting him would be just as memorable."

"He is," Obi-Wan said. "Perhaps we owe him a visit, sometime soon."

Leia was wondering just where a Jedi Master could hide himself in this galaxy, when the helmet came flying towards her. Shocked, she held her hands out to shield her, only to find the thing suspended in midair. It took her a while to realise she was the one keeping it that way.

"See?" Anakin looked a bit smug. "Told you."

She tilted her head, and gently rotated the helmet. Then, she reached out and plucked it out of its resting place on empty molecules. "Odd." She felt herself begin to beam. "I didn't expect to manage it so quickly."

"You've got good genes." Anakin's arrogance never stopped being completely ridiculous, but she
appreciated it just this once. If she could match Luke's potential, they might have a fighting chance against Palpatine. She would finally match the Empire blow-for-blow, as she'd always wanted, and drain them of the seemingly endless power they loved to hold over their subjects.

"Again," she said. "And throw it harder, this time."

Leia was woken up by a loud, ever-repeating ping coming from the ship's cockpit. She blinked sleep out of her eyes and dragged herself over to look. Han was waking, too, seeming unsurprised to have fallen asleep in the pilot's seat. It must have been a regular occurrence.

"What's that noise?"

"It's the radar." Han stopped. "Wait a second, the radar only pings when there are incoming-" He paused, looking through the viewport. A small vessel floated beside them. "-ships."

"It's got no Imperial markings," Leia offered. She peered closer. "That's the Alliance insignia."

"We're saved," Han said.

"Let's see what they want," Leia said. "Open communication channels."

Han blinked, then raised an eyebrow. "Yes, ma'am."

At the helm of the neighbouring ship sat a woman, alone, looking bemused. Her golden hair was pinned neatly atop her head, but some strands had fallen loose, and there were dark circles around her eyes. Leia saw grief in them.

"Princess?" the woman said.

"We've gotten ourselves in a... predicament, as you can see." Leia smiled. "Our ship's engines seem to have failed us. Would it trouble you to give us a ride?"

"Not at all, Your Highness. Evaan Verlaine, of Alderaan." She looked away. "What little is left of it."

Icy, they called her. Cold, because she wouldn't break down into hysterics at the loss of her people. But she understood better than any what it felt to lose hope. "Some remains, still, Miss Verlaine."

"Some," she said. "Please, dock your ship. I would be happy to tow it."

"We are in your debt." Leia nodded formally, and the comm shut down.

The Empire wouldn't find them yet.

Chapter End Notes

It got a little cracky again. I'm sorry? Last chapter was pretty serious, so have a little light-heartedness for once C:! Before I go back to angst again... >;(
Frost-Blooded

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Verlaine welcomed them to her ship in stilted greeting, bowing formally but rigidly. She looked at Leia with a sort of confusion in her eyes, a confusion which turned soon into a sharp glint. Leia could sense anger from her.

Leia represented the last of the Alderaanian people. She was the figurehead of a disintegrated pile of dust now, and those left would look to her. If the people saw her as an unfit representative, then what did that say for Alderaan's image? Should she step down? The Ice Queen of Alderaan, she could accept, but Ice Queen, Daughter of Darth Vader, she could not.

What problem did Verlaine find with her? Did her people also share these sentiments?

"The quarters are small," Verlaine said. "I apologise, I wasn't expecting... guests."

"We're the ones who should be apologising," said Leia. "I'm sorry to have to inconvenience you like this."

"It's perfectly fine, ma'am. As long as you don't mind the tight space."

That was not what she was worried about.

The ship was, as promised, small. Small, but homely. And more importantly, still running.

She stood, looking out into the stars, next to the pilot's chair, where Verlaine was staring at anything but her. "How long until we arrive at Hoth?" she asked.

"ETA in two hours, ma'am."

Two hours to figure out what was wrong. Two hours to bridge the distance between her people.

"Speak your mind," Leia said. "I know there's something you want to say."

Verlaine hesitated a moment. "Is it true you're Vader's daughter?"

"Yes."

"And is it true that Vader's joined with the Alliance?"

"Yes," she repeated.

"I see." Verlaine laced her hands together and put them to rest against the ship's controls.

"Is that what you take issue with?"

"No, my queen. Sharing his blood was not your choice."

She stared out into the stars again. "You are angry."

"There is nothing left of our planet, ma'am." Verlaine looked away. "We were powerless to stop it."
"You're mad I couldn't do more for my people?"

"No, ma'am." Verlaine made no move to continue speaking, even though Leia looked at her expectantly.

"Then, what?"

"Do you have no grief for your adoptive father?"

Leia blinked. Verlaine blinked back, and covered her mouth with her hands, which had been so carefully resting at the controls, so precariously balanced, that in the sudden movement she'd knocked them and tilted the ship sharply. Leia stumbled into the bulkhead behind her, and Verlaine's horror grew.

"Forgive me, My Queen," she said quickly. "I was out of line."

"No," Leia assured. "No, you were not." She smiled sadly. "You may have a point. To others I appear cold, but inside I am not. My parents' deaths were far too soon, and without the peace they deserved. I regret I couldn't do more to save them, that I didn't do more."

"There was nothing we could have done," Verlaine said bitterly. "The Empire wants what it wants. Even now, the Alliance has heard they plan on hunting down the Alderaanian people like dogs."

Disgust filled her. "We cannot allow that to happen." The Force rumbled. "We cannot. As the last children of Alderaan, it's our duty to preserve what's left."

"I agree, ma'am." She paused. "Let me come with you, help you save our people."

"You understand the risks?"

"Always."

The biting cold of Hoth greeted them as kindly as the Empire had. The thick snowfall -- mixed with sleet, hail, and dust from the thousands of fighters docking -- tore at their faces and chaffed their skin painful, frostbitten red. Leia kept her muffler on as tightly as she could, shielded her streaming eyes from the glaring white, and cursed the Alliance's taste in bases a thousand times over. Why here, of all places?

"Well, that's just great," said Han. "This place is a cesspit."

"Tell me about it," Luke grumbled, choking on the snow flying into his mouth. The winds here rarely let up, whipping the snow into an icy storm, cold enough to freeze anyone unprepared.

They were only a few metres from the base's entrance, yet it felt like a whole parsec. Like the planet wanted to eat them alive.

"Couldn't you have landed inside?" Han said. His hood blew back, then, cutting off his complaint with a gust and a face full of wet snow. "Damn it."

"Echo Base is full," Verlaine said. "They'll have to tow my ship in later."

"Seriously?" Luke's sigh was lost in the wind. "This is ridiculous."

They trudged through the snow, dragging ice-laden boots towards the base entrance step by exhausted step. The rest of the Alliance were in similar states of disrepair, shivering as they worked
on clearing a proper runway into the new, cavernous hangar bay. These weren't the worst conditions Leia had ever faced, but they must have been new and unpleasant for the rookies. That the Empire should drive them here, to shake in the cold like wet dogs...

The hangar bay's floor was sopping, and people slid like clumsy newborns as they tried desperately to do something productive. Anakin wrung out the sleeves of his Jedi robes, unprotected even by the thick, fur-lined coat he'd bundled himself into.

"Shouldn't you stop adding to the problem?"

"Is there a point?" Anakin asked. "This floor will be wet for the rest of our stay here."

It would be. They would all be cold and soaked through to the bone here, and she expected the Alliance would be begging for wounds, just so they could soak themselves in bacta tanks and free themselves from the freezing temperatures for a small moment. This was a step down from Yavin 4, and that moon itself was falling apart at its seams.

"Don't make it worse," Leia said.

Anakin rolled up his sleeves, revealing his gloved hands, one bound tighter than the other, in an effort to hide the machinery they all knew was there. He tucked himself tighter into his coat and chewed cracked lips. "I'm not used to this," he admitted.

"The cold?" Leia raised an eyebrow.

"The suit was its own separate system. I could regulate the internal temperature at will." His eyes lowered. "Though it always felt cold regardless."

"But never this cold," Luke added. "Tatooine is a big change from this. I think I almost miss it."

"You take that back," Han said, teasing. "Place is the worst in history, worse than this by lightyears."

"Maybe. I liked Yavin better, though."

"We all did," said Leia. That much was obvious.

They walked farther and farther into the hangar, until they found the rest of Red Squadron huddled away in the back. Luke breathed a sigh of relief when he saw most of them unharmed. Still, there were a few empty places at the squadron's side, where the lost had once stayed. "Hey," Luke called. "You guys okay?"

"As okay as we can be," Antilles said. "You holding up alright? That was some good flying out there."

"You, too," Luke said. "I'm alright. I keep waiting to wake up, but I haven't been hurt so far."

"I know. It doesn't feel real, does it?" He nodded towards Anakin. "That especially. Not your cousin, huh?"


"I bet." Antilles waved him off. "It's no problem. As long as he keeps up that good flying, right?"

Rattling came from behind a battle-damaged X-Wing, where Darklighter dropped down lightly onto the floor and pulled off his helmet to greet them. "You saved our asses out there. I still can't believe any of this isn't a dream, but thanks."
"Thanks for covering me," Anakin said. "We couldn't have done it without you guys."

"Glad to be of help," Dreis said, from Antilles' side. He held out a hand. "Listen, Skywalker. I figure, we flew together before, we can do it again. Shake on it?"

Anakin held out his left hand awkwardly, and Dreis gave him a puzzled stare. "Other one's a bit cold," he clarified.

Dreis shrugged and took it, giving it a few firm shakes, before clapping Anakin on the shoulder. "Welcome to Red Squadron. Now it's official."

Leia was thankful to find Mon in her newly-assigned quarters, already filling out forms and studying plans like nothing had happened.

"You survived," Leia said.

"So I did," said Mon fondly. "And so did you, it seems."

"I don't know how, but I made it through."

"The odds were against us, and we prevailed," Mon said, the Alliance founder once again. "Though the cost was great, so were the gains."

"The casualties were far less than expected, ma'am."

"But there were casualties." Mon's brow furrowed. Leia could tell she was deeply troubled by the Alliance's recent deaths, but that the responsibility was one she intended to bear alone. "Their lives were in my hands."

"They were in everyone's hands, including their own," she offered. "They volunteered their lives in our service, and they were aware of the risks. I know that won't lessen the tragedy, ma'am, but it will spare you the fault."

"Leia, you needn't comfort me. I am to blame for ordering them to attack the Death Star, and the casualties fall on me and me alone."

"We had no other choice," Leia insisted.

"No, we didn't," Mon said. "They gave their lives willingly, for a cause that wishes to free the galaxy from the Imperial dictatorship. And yet I wish no lives had to be given."

She sighed. "I feel the same."

The Alliance boardroom was a mess. Mon sat silently in a raging storm of Rebel upset, rubbing her temples and studying documents. Leia noticed Ahsoka by Mon's side, pointing things out from time to time. She was gratified to see her father's apprentice still alive.

"What's wrong?" Leia asked her, once she'd stepped to the side.

"Skyguy's in the Alliance," Ahsoka said. It explained the chaos, certainly, but not the blueprints strewn about across the boardroom table.

"There's more to it than that."
"The Empire is rounding up the rest of your people, Skygal." She frowned. "I'm so sorry. I wish I'd realised this earlier."

"You found out about this?"

"The documents we stole from the Imperial base. They had lists of Imperial ships transporting Alderaanian prisoners, and the locations of Alderaanian outposts on other planets."

"Why the hell...?"

"Palpatine likes to make things personal. He wants to crush the Alliance in spirit and in strength, and he knows exactly how to do it. To get people where it hurts the most."

"And this-"

"Is only the beginning." Ahsoka flinched at this, confirming the worst. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"Yes. It's only gonna get worse from here, Princess."

She braced herself. "We have to do something."

"They want you guarded at all times, now you're even more important to the Alliance's success. They're going to get really protective, Skygal."

"I won't let them stop me."

"I know." She laughed. "If I know Skywalker determination, and I do, there's no way they'll get to you. But I'm coming with you, okay? This is my job, too, now."

"Thank you, for everything. And now for helping save my people."

"Of course, Princess. I can't just stand by while the Empire abuses its power, I never could."

Touching the walls of her quarters felt like touching her hand to a corpse. She was eager to leave, to get to the Alderaanians the Empire had snatched from their homes. But Ahsoka had preparations, ships to repair, and the Falcon herself was top priority. Every part of her screamed to get out and fix this, but any and all actions she took would now be scrutinised. She no longer held the respect borne from royalty; she was tainted blood. Her father, in overseeing the construction of the Death Star, had played a part in destroying the very planet she'd pledged herself to, that she'd dedicated her life to protecting and bettering. And now it had all been lost, and her people would look to her for accusation. Verlaine had proven that enough.

She clenched a fist, and the cup holding her freshly brewed tea shattered like glass. She stared in horror at the ceramic shards, the liquid seeping over her table. Verlaine was right. She was her father's daughter.

No, that was wrong. She had the power to overcome her impulsive nature, unlike her father. She would not become a monster as he did. She would never let herself fall prey to the sugar-sweet words of a power-hungry maniac like Sheev Palpatine. She had trained for this, had exercised control over her every movement, practiced winning fights before they'd even begun. If the Force was something that could be trained, then so she would train it.

She breathed slowly, shut her eyes, and focused on the sharp pieces scattered over her desk. Gently, she felt the energy around her coalesce, like a tool to be used, and carefully, delicately she reshaped
the cup like clay, knitting the broken together like bone, like a puzzle that took form only in her mind.

She opened one eye, and found the cup pristine, untouched on her desk, sitting in a puddle of rapidly cooling tea.

She could still be their princess. She could still honour their people. She wouldn't give up until she'd saved them.

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Her father's presence surprised her, so late. She expected he'd be in his shared room, talking the night away with Obi-Wan.

"Come in," she called, and Anakin stepped in carefully, looking around until his eyes finally rested on the cup she had in one hand.

"You've been using the Force," Anakin said. "I sensed you fix that."

"I did."

"How would you like to train a little more?" Anakin shrugged. "We're not even close to beating the Empire, and there's no way it'll stay this easy. We should be prepared, right?"

"Right," she said. "And how's Luke's training going?"

"Obi-Wan spends a lot of time with him. I figured I owed you the same."

"You think I have his potential?" She gave him a disbelieving snort. "Luke's powers are beyond my understanding. He took to it so fast, there's no chance in hell I could do the same."

"You're his twin," Anakin said firmly. "His powers are your own, Princess." He pointed to the cup, lifting it like a feather out of her hand and into his own. "It's like new. That takes a lot of skill, y'know."

She laughed. "Anyone can fix a cup."

"Fix it, sure, but this is different. It's as if it never broke in the first place. Now that not everyone can do."

"As if it never broke?" She looked closer. It was true, she could find no cracks, but it was a cup, and Luke had laserfire precision-pointed down exhaust ports. "It's only a cup," she said dryly.

Anakin grinned. "You're not limited to just one cup, Leia. Let me teach you more often. We can have you fixing whole starships in no time."

"Okay," she said. "But don't think I'm not still sceptical."

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Chapter End Notes

It's not that long, but sometimes writer's block is a huge dick and totally interferes with my (admittedly lacking) creative process.
Leia leaned against the console, watching the stars being mapped on the screen below her. Verlaine was carefully noting everything down, humming at odd intervals as she worked. Leia recognised it as an old Alderaanian melody, perhaps a lullaby. It was soft, and settled over their workstations like a blanket from home.

"I'm charting their movements now," Verlaine said. "Telemetry indicates they've gone..." She paused, then traced a line upward with her finger. "From Alderaanian space up into Dathomir."

"Dathomir?"

"They've transported loads of prisoners there," Ahsoka cut in. "I've been on too many rescue missions to count, and pretty much half of them were headed to Dathomir."

"Why there? It's not ideal, obviously, but there are so many other planets in the Outer Rim they could have chosen."

Ahsoka shrugged. "The Nightsisters live there. I've had run ins with them before, mainly Asajj Ventress, and from what I know, they'd probably hunt them down. Especially Force-sensitives. Not pretty."

"A penal colony?" Verlaine asked. "That's- I shouldn't be surprised."

"It's the Empire," Ahsoka spat. "Business as usual, for them."

Leia sighed. "We'll have to get ready, and quickly. Dathomir's environment is about as pleasant as this planet's. Only, replace 'wampa' with 'rancor'. I'm not sure which one's worse."

"What about the native Dathomiri?" Verlaine asked. "Will they pose a threat?"

Ahsoka hummed. "Scattered, but a thousand times better than the Nightsisters, or the Zabrak. It's possible they could've taken some prisoners in, sheltered them."

"So there's some hope for our people," Leia said. "It's better than nothing."

Ahsoka smiled sadly. "Better to look on the bright side, right?"

Leia picked at her rations, feeling her appetite turn to nothing. Her people were being herded like nerfs, sent off to the nearest hellhole to die in the cold.

"Snips told me the news," Anakin said, sliding into the chair opposite her. His tray was noticeably full, as it always was. Twenty years being fed through a tube would do that to somebody.

"Hopefully we can get my people safely onto Hoth, and then onto one of the other Alliance-occupied planets in the Outer Rim. If I get my way, it'll be one that makes for a better vacation spot than this igloo."

Anakin huffed a surprised laugh. "Sounds like a plan. You are inviting me and Obi-Wan, right?"
"We'll need as many people as we can get."

"Mothma isn't gonna be happy, is she?"

"Not in the slightest, but I have to do this. I must save what's left of my people."

"I understand." He stuffed a forkful of food into his mouth, chewed, and made a face. "What happened to the fruit we collected? This tastes like dirt."

There was a sudden surge of anger in the Force, and Leia inclined her head to look at a group of Rebels heading back from the serving line, trays clenched tightly in hand. "Complaining already, are you, Vader? Not to your Imperial liking, is it?"

Anakin blinked. "Well, you gotta admit..." The Force surged once more, and her heart sunk. Her father wouldn't want any conflict so early into his stay on Hoth, if only because she would throw him to the brig for it, but he was still Darth Vader, and his volcanic temper likely had disappeared into the fray in much the same way as his Imperial-accented, imposing Basic. It hadn't. Not truly.

"We take what we can get, here." The Rebel's face twisted to a vicious sneer, and he slammed his tray down onto the table in clear disgust, rattling it and the others dining in the canteen. Everyone's eyes drifted to theirs, raising the hairs on the back of Leia's neck.

"Now, you listen here," Leia cut in. "You had orders, officer, to remain civil with other Alliance members."

"He's not an Alliance member."

"Hey!" Anakin said, smile friendly still. How long would it remain that way? "I resent that implication."

"Do you? You know it's true."

"Since when were you the authority on Alliance membership, officer? I don't seem to recall making you head of Recruiting."

The tray, wafer thin and half-broken already, began to shake. "No, ma'am. Of course not. I apologise for speaking out of turn."

"As you were, officers." If looks could kill, Leia would be facing charges. She had expected this, naturally. There was a certain amount of validity in their dissent, as she often felt like throwing a tray at Anakin herself, but there was a chain of command here. They didn't have the distinct pleasure of being as rigidly-structured as the Empire, but they needed order and cohesion if they planned on winning any more of this war.

"That was a close one, huh?" Anakin was still smiling, but his eyes were flecked with gold, and his teeth clamped together behind a bitten-back growl.

"We don't need any more trouble," Leia said plainly. "If you can't stay calm-

"I'm fine," Anakin spat. His fork clattered into his leftovers, bent and disfigured by the imprints of his fist. Much like the cup Leia had shattered.

"We're not your maids. Have that fork fixed," she said. "We're low enough on supplies already."

"I'm not the one starting confrontations in the cafeteria!" Anakin protested.
"They were out of line, but the Jedi are above that sort of thing, aren't they?"

"They're supposed to be, but I never was much of a Jedi." He smoothed out the fork, and twirled it in his rations absently. "I guess I should have expected it, right?"

"You know better than I do what you've done." She sighed. "I have to ask, but would you recognise your victims if you saw them again? I can guarantee a lot of them are right here with you."

"Maybe not," Anakin admitted. "I killed and tortured hundreds. Their faces blurred after a while. I'd probably feel it in the Force, though."

"Did the Force have anything to say just then?"

"No. I think they were just mad, Leia. It does happen sometimes."

"I'm more than familiar with it." She shook her head. "At least I know where I get my temper from."

He put a hand over hers. "I'm trying. Hey, I fixed your fork, right?"

Leia stared at him, at the gold-speckled eyes, sharp behind that smile. "You don't need to keep acting, Father. I can take it."

Anakin threw his hands up. "Why does everyone always think that?"

"You're saying it's not true?"

"I'm supposed to be finding a balance, here."

"How's that working out for you?"

"One is always more present than the other," he said, slow. "Wouldn't you prefer Anakin to Vader, Leia?"

"Not like this."

"I should tell Mon," was the first thing to come out of her mouth. "Don't look at me like that," was the second.

Ahsoka held out incredulous hands, pleading. "Are you actually crazy?" she asked. "Mon will never let us go!"

"And she'll search the whole damn galaxy for us if we go missing!"

Ahsoka turned and paced, shaking her head to herself, lekku caught over her shoulders. Her boots scraped against the ice, and her fast breaths came in visible puffs, warm against the harsh air.

"You'll wear a trail through your quarters like that," Leia said.

"Might actually make it look better, you never know." She touched a hand to her headdress, adjusting it lightly, and kicked at the chipped slush she'd worn into the floor. Leia stepped aside to avoid the wet spray.

"It's better if we tell her," Leia said.

Ahsoka paused, coming to rest in the middle of her lap around the room, feet making one last crunch
in the snow. "She'll try everything to get you to stay, Skygal."

"I wouldn't be so sure." Leia hated to call in her favours like this, but her people needed her. Mon had given them all leeway, promoted her and her family to high rank, but would she let them leave? Leia wasn't above begging. "We did a lot for her, out there. I flew like a Skywalker for once in my life."

"Well, that's something," Ahsoka said. She patted Leia's shoulder. "Not see-through. You sure you're not a ghost?"

She smiled, teasing. "Quite sure."

"You think she's gonna let you leave because she almost got you killed?" Ahsoka hummed. "And what, she's guilty about it?"

"I wouldn't use her like that," Leia said. "I just think she might be willing to let us do what we want now, since it's gotten us this far already."

"Hah! Has it?" Ahsoka gestured widely. "I wouldn't call this 'very far'. It's a step down from Yavin 4."

"The Death Star is no longer any concern of ours." Leia crossed her arms. "I'd like to think our plans have been working out so far."

"Well, I wouldn't call them plans." Ahsoka grinned. "Okay, give it a try, Skygal, but don't be surprised if she gets her robes in a twist."

"That'd be a sight."

The corridor buzzed with energy, and Leia had to carefully twist and manoeuvre to squeeze by the Rebels bustling past. All of them were a little blue in the face, noses chapped red, snuggled in thick coats and goggles. With all the extra padding, Echo Base's hallways felt about as bouncy as a mattress.

It was a winding path to Mon's quarters, walls like the sky surrounding her on every side. She rushed faster and faster, footsteps echoing around her like a phantom chorus. She was incredibly unsettled all of a sudden, like someone close had just been snatched away. The Force seemed to echo alongside her, a second-hand terror seeping through from above, oozing like a Hutt. She'd have to make her visit with Mon quick. Something was very wrong.

She rapped on the door, unable to keep still, and shifted from foot to foot until Mon opened.

"What's happened? You look awful."

"Thank you for the compliment, ma'am. I'll make this quick." She glanced down either side of the corridor, as if she expected some great beast to come crashing through and swallow them whole. Of course, there was only silence. The base was perfectly fine. "I'd like to request permission to leave briefly. There's an Imperial transport full of Alderaanian prisoners headed straight to Dathomir."

"I was aware." Mon's eyes narrowed. "You wish to save these people?"

"My people."

"Very well. Take a full security detail, whomever you wish. Do not go in alone, Princess. You're
invaluable to the Alliance, now more than ever. Is that clear?"

"As crystal, ma'am."

"Well, then, I'll let you go. Please don't suddenly inherit your father's recklessness, Leia."

She snorted. "Not a chance."

The terror only heightened as she continued through the base. Finally, when the stranger's panic was so gripping, Leia forced herself into the hangar bay, looking for a snowspeeder, a tauntaun, anything. This person was in terrible danger, and Leia felt somehow like she knew them. The fear flooded everywhere, and Leia couldn't hear or think above the high whine in her ears, but she was sure it felt familiar. She hurried forward, and slammed into something thick-coated and grumpy.

"Hey, Your Highness, you wanna watch where you're going?"

"Han, you're just the person I need." She grabbed him by the lapels and pulled him along to a side corridor. He stared at her with wide eyes, stumbling after her likely out of shock rather than a wish to cooperate. "Have you seen Luke?"

"Luke?" Han bit his lip, thinking. "Last I saw him, we were patrolling together. I'd hoped he got in alright." Worry, on top of the fear she already had pounding her skull, began to wash in from Han. "You saying you haven't seen him at all?"

"No. There's something wrong, I can feel it. He's terrified. At least, I think it's him." She ground her teeth. "I'm sure it's him. There's no-one else on this base I can sense as well."

"Damn, I can't let anything happen to the kid." Han smiled, humourless. "He's the only one who'll put up with me around here."

"All the more reason to hurry up," Leia said. "We have to get out there."

"I'm not saying no, but shouldn't we come up with a plan first? I thought we might give one a try, y'know. A trial run."

"I'll take a snowspeeder, so the cold doesn't kill us first. If we can haul a tauntaun along-"

"Use one to get into tight spaces, right? Search everywhere?"

"If we leave the speeder, we'll freeze to death." The Force sounded like it was howling. Leia wished she knew how to lessen the effect. How was any Jedi expected to think like this? Hell, this was probably the reason they shunned attachments. "No, nevermind that. It doesn't matter now. Whatever it is that's got him, it's getting worse."

"Take it easy, Princess." Han frowned. "We'll get him back."

"I'll get supplies, you get the tauntaun. If you're here first, leave without me. I'll catch up to you later." She turned on one heel, then looked back at Han. "And pack warm, laserbrain! The temperature drops at night."

"It can get colder around here?" Han muttered.

Then, she was off, racing through the base to the storage room in long strides, stalking along like her father. She'd need food first, then extra coats, then the portable medkits, if they were going to survive the night outside. They wouldn't be getting back inside until dawn, not once the blast doors had
closed. Force hope the snowspeeder had enough space for them all.

Chapter End Notes

HELP ME, STAR WARS EXPANDED UNIVERSE, YOU'RE MY ONLY HOPE. FOR ANOTHER MONTH OR SO, AT LEAST. THEN THE FORCE AWAKENS WILL JOSS ALL OF THIS. (The chapters are still a bit short, though, I'm sorry! Sometimes I get these dreaded moments of "Oh god, what the hell have I done? Is this my life now?" and can't type out words. Then I have to go stress eat and pretend I'm not as lame as I really am for a while.)

Edit: Um, I caught a small little error of mine, and I'm pointing it out in the interest of honesty. Leia mentions wampas by name, but I'm totally aware that none of them have any clue wtf that crazy shit is in canon. I mean, who the fuck stays on Hoth long enough to name its native monsters? UH, SO, LET'S PRETEND SHE HAS A VESTED INTEREST IN THOROUGHLY RESEARCHING THE HORRIBLE PLANETS THE REBELS HAVE TO CONSTRUCT BASES ON? //Is embarrassed
The first thing Han realised was that it was damn cold. Leia had said, of course, but she had a tendency for the dramatic, like her father, and Han hadn't thought it'd be this bad.

A snowstorm had kicked up, raging around him and the growling tauntaun, battering his face wherever it was uncovered. His muffler was dangerously close to blowing off, and his goggles had to be re-fastened every few minutes, leaving his eyes streaming in the wind. This planet was a hellhole, if he ever saw one.

To top it off, he had no idea where he was going. Nobody, not even a Jedi, could see in this madness, and his radar, of course, told him nothing that would help. He could barely hold it up without his hands shaking, anyway. If only the tauntaun had tracking abilities, but its brain was probably too pathetically small for that. Plus, nobody could track anything in this storm. Footprints would've long been blown over, and scent... Han couldn't even smell the damn creature he was mounted on. No way would Luke's scent have survived.

He was stuck. The Force might help, if he thought he had the capability for that spiritual drivel. Maybe he could magically track Luke down then, by sensing his great emotion, or whatever the hell it was. But he was out of luck, there, and unless Kenobi appeared from nowhere and brought him to Luke's location, he'd have to wing this by himself.

He urged his tauntaun forward, wiping at his face, and searched with half-closed eyes for Luke's form lying along the rolling wasteland. Any noise from his radar, should it choose to make any at all, would be lost in the wind, so he periodically checked at the frosted screen, looking for any dot of light to indicate where he'd find his friend, or his friend's body. He hoped to the gods that were or weren't out there that it wouldn't be the latter. He couldn't lose Luke, not like everyone else around him, slowly slipping away in his dangerous profession -- the one that he'd traded for one even more dangerous, even more unforgiving.

Please let him live.

"Dammit, kid." He licked at his bloodied lip, tasting metal. "Where the hell are you?"

It was getting darker by the second, the sun's rays lowering over the horizon, shining through the fog like a beacon. One he couldn't follow.

The cold stung his lungs, and his breaths came shallowly, choked. His tauntaun's feet had begun to sink into the snow, and even it looked miserable. He'd felt it buckle and stumble under him more than a few times now, and he was beginning to suspect he wouldn't be able to get more than a few metres out of the thing.

Clambering off, he gave it a pat on the side, and made his way through the snow, leading it along with him. His eyes were wet and aching, and the radar's screen looked as if it were underwater, but he could still make out a faint map. It was enough to go on, for now.

He dragged himself through the blizzard, shielding his face with an arm, and scanned the endless line of white for something even remotely human-shaped. After an eternity, he made out a figure, lying face-down in the snow, one arm outstretched, frozen like a tree branch. Han let go of the tauntaun's
reins and ran.

"Luke?" Blond hair, snow-tipped, a scraped, bleeding face. He'd do anything to see that there was still life in it. "Luke! Don't do this to me, Luke. Come on, kid. Give me a sign here."

He could barely make out a sound over the wind, so he bent down, hands resting on Luke's chest, waiting to feel the air reach his lungs rather than hear it. He thought he saw movement, but the beast he'd left alone let out one last screech and slumped to the floor before he could check further. Great. One more problem to deal with.

With all the strength he had, he hooked arms under Luke's shoulders and dragged him towards the only source of heat around. The inside of a tauntaun. He felt sick just thinking about it.

Fumbling, shaking hands grasped for the weapon always at Luke's side. He was a quick study, and a lightsaber was far less complicated than starship engineering. With a hurried incision, he tore into the tauntaun's side, and hoped Luke would live until he could build them shelter.

Luke grasped at his arm, unseeing eyes opening, panic and desperation etched onto his face. "I saw him!" His nails dug into Han's coat, hard enough to hurt. "I saw him."

"Saw who, kid?" Han wiped sleet off his face. "Saw who?"

"Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan's master." Luke spat blood onto the ground, staining the snow, mixing in with the blood of the animal Han had just dissected. "Dagobah. He wanted- Dagobah. To see Yoda- Gotta get to-" He gasped. "Dagobah system. We hafta-"

Luke could say nothing more, and so Han arranged him neatly against the tauntaun's side. He swallowed down, railing against his gag reflex. "And I thought they smelt bad from the outside."

It was going to be a long night. Leia had better be as good at the helm of a snowspeeder as she was at an X-Wing, or they were done for. Whatever had come after Luke would be coming after them next.

"I have a bad feeling about this," he said, to nobody in particular.

He woke to the sound of a roaring engine settling to hover nearby, sending shockwaves through the snow beneath him. Boots crunched against the ground, until one kicked at the tent. Han blinked. If that wasn't Leia, he'd be very surprised.

"You in there, flyboy? Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Your Highness!"

Leia peered in. "It's still dark. Lucky for you, I came prepared. There are more supplies in the snowspeeder." She stared at Luke, curled in a foetal position, shaking and bleeding from the scratches littered throughout his face and neck. "Is he alright?"

"He keeps talking nonsense. I can't get a coherent sentence out of him."

"What's he been saying?"

"Something about the Dagobah system? And somebody called 'Yoda'. He says Qui-Gon's ghost told him."

"Obi-Wan was telling me about a Jedi Master named Yoda the other day," Leia said. "I'm almost
certain they're the same. Why would Qui-Gon want us to go and see him?"

"Training, I'll bet. If Skywalker Senior and Kenobi studied under him, he's got to be something."

"We'll have to stop at Dathomir first." Leia narrowed her eyes. "I'm sure Yoda will wait for us in the Dagobah system. It's the last place the Empire will search, at any rate."

"Dathomir? That's on the other side of the galaxy. What do we need so bad that we have to travel thousands of parsecs for?"

"My people," Leia said dryly. "Imperial soldiers are rounding up Alderaanians and taking them to a prison camp on Dathomir."

Han sighed. "Okay, Yoda can wait. Chewie won't be happy. Fuzzball is too attached to the Falcon to overwork her."

"We can take a faster ship, if you want."

"Faster ship?" Han snorted. "I'd like to see you find one, Princess."

"Alright, then. We'll go as soon as she's in working order, and no later."

"Yes, ma'am." He yawned, stretched, and stepped outside. The snowspeeder was parked neatly beside them, the only light coming from inside its cockpit.

"I brought bacta," Leia said. "It should keep him alive long enough to get to the tank in the morning."

"Will we fit?" Han asked.

" Barely." Leia smiled wryly.

They hauled Luke into the snowspeeder, where it was warm, and safer than what Han had managed to build for themselves. Leia immediately set to unpacking the medkit, but not before tuning her commlink. "Just in case," she said. It was out of context, but Han didn't ask. He didn't want to know what they were preparing for. He still didn't know what had gotten to Luke.

"It'll work through the storm?" Han gave it a disbelieving look.

"It'll manage," Leia replied. She checked it again, fiddling until it crackled faintly. "See? It works fine."

"Sure."

The bacta seemed to be returning life to Luke's face, draining the cold out of him. He still twitched faintly, mumbling to himself about long-dead Jedi and the Dagobah system. Poor kid, he was so desperate. Leia looked ill to be around him. Han didn't envy her skill in the Force. At least, not now.

"He alright?"

"No," Leia said. "No, he really isn't."

She touched a finger to his pulse, and sighed. Relief, and pain. "He saw something out there. The Wampa. We don't know much about them. Nobody with any sense tries to actively engage with something that could tear them limb-from-limb."
"This is bad news," he hedged.

"Not if we get ourselves out of here soon enough."

Han looked out the viewport, at the whirling snow, covering the corpse of his mount like dew. When would it clear up?

Leia turned back to the controls, tapping absently. There was silence, and then a muffled voice from the comms.

"Give it to me, you fool!" Han and Leia whipped around, towards the source of the noise. "Obi-Wan, remove them, immediately." A loud crash. "Let me through, now! I must see them. Where are they? Where are my children?"

Oh, hells. They'd forgotten to inform Vader of their whereabouts. They could do with thinking things through a little more, especially now.

"Father?" Leia asked.

"Leia!" There was scuffling.

Obi-Wan's voice filtered through. "Anakin, calm yourself!"

"Calm myself? My children are missing! And on this pit. You cannot understand, I have to-"

"Father!" Leia yelled. There was instant silence. "We're safe. Everyone's perfectly alright."

"Breathe, pal," Han said. To Darth Vader. He hoped the Force wouldn't extend through the commlink, but with their luck, he wasn't about to start taking bets.

"You're alright?"

"We're in the middle of a snowstorm, far outside Alliance territory, but we're protected, for now. I brought a snowspeeder, no thanks to Han. He came equipped with the truly astounding sum total of a dead tauntaun and a single pair of goggles. Unbelievable." Leia pinched the bridge of her nose. "He didn't even think to bring the Walking Carpet along with him."

There was breathless, hysterical laughter from the other end. Han could hear the Rebels in the background, the wail of Red Alert sirens. They'd slipped up, bad.

"And Luke?"

"Bruised, but alive. There was a wampa after him, but I assume he took care of it."

"A real case of 'Wait until you see the other guy!'" Han offered. "Pretty sure the other guy's been sliced, by a lightsaber. Not survivable." He winced. "It was probably... very impressive?"

"Is that a question, Solo?" Vader asked, with amusement.

"I didn't see any of it. Storm kinda got in the way." Han chewed his lip. "He keeps mumbling about his visions. You got anything to say on that?"

"Visions?" The Imperial still hadn't left Vader's voice. Evidence suggested catching him by surprise, or pissing him off, would ruin his perfect balance. Han figured they'd done both. "Tell me of these 'visions.'"
"Something about Qui-Gon telling him to go to Dagobah? And a Jedi Master who goes by Yoda? You know him?"

"Do I know him?" Vader snorted. "Everyone knows that little green-"

Obi-Wan's voice cut through again. "Anakin!"

"Yes, I know this 'Yoda'. He is the greatest of the Jedi, despite is diminutive size." A small pause. "Perhaps Luke and Leia could benefit from his... unconventional tutelage."

"Yours isn't?" Han said, and then wished for a way to turn back time. Joking with Anakin when he was so... off-colour was a terrible idea, and would get them all killed.

"It is." Another noise, something like laughter. "But I pride myself on making mine comprehensible."

"Another cryptic bastard to deal with?" Leia slapped his shoulder, gentle. She could probably have thrown him through the windshield, if her power rivaled her father's. Luckily, Her Highness had a little more control.

"In essence." Vader hummed. "Qui-Gon no doubt prefers it that way."

There was silence from the other line, likely as Vader considered their options. Han used the opening to lean in towards Leia and whisper, "Is he going to snap out of it?"

Leia held out her hands, as if to say, How should I know?

"Is he dangerous?" Han asked.

"We're over twenty kilometres away from Echo Base, and you're worrying about him?"

"He could do anything!"

"My ears still work, y'know," came a voice. "I'm alright. Give me a sec."

Han's smile was broken on his face. "We spooked you a little, didn't we?"

"I may have wrecked a few communication consoles," Anakin hedged. "I have the credits to pay!"

"Anyone strangled?"

"Force, no." There was an awkward laugh. "Y'know that balance? I may have tipped the scales a little."

"A little?" Leia grumbled. Sweat dripped from her forehead, even in the cold. They were slowly unfurling, where they'd been held rigid, blasters in hand, with no conceivable target to fire at. What good that would've done them.

"You were gone!" He sounded distraught. "I thought you'd-"

"Father, we're alright."

"Hear that, Obi-Wan? The kids are alright-

"Father, look around you. We haven't forgotten who you are. The more you try to force us to, the more frequent this will become."
"I know." He sighed. "I'm only trying to make it easier for you, Leia."

"Nothing about this is easy, Darth Vader."

"No, I suppose not."

Luke shot up, breathing too quick to feed his lungs. He looked around wildly, hair whipping to the side and staining itself in fresh blood from reopened wounds. "I thought I heard Vader."

"You did," said Leia, gathering fresh bacta from the first aid kit on her lap.

Luke looked at her, begging her to elaborate, but she was already ripping gauze with her teeth.

"Your dad wasn't too happy we disappeared without a trace," Han said.

He absorbed this silently, finally letting out a long sigh. "This is a real mess." He passed a hand over his lightsaber, its hilt as covered in blood as the rest of him. "I had to kill it, whatever it was. And Qui-Gon came to me. And now Father's worried. Force."

Han patted his shoulder, pulling his hand back wet from melted snow. "You don't look too bad, kid."

"I'm blue, aren't I?"

"You were," Han said. "But, hey, look who came to the rescue!"

"Thanks for saving me back there, Han. I may have killed that thing, but the cold was..."

"Even worse. Yeah, I know."

"There might be more of them." Luke tore a bandage from his arm and used it to clean his lightsaber. Perhaps he was preparing, like Han would dismantle and remake his blaster before a fight. Leia, though, shot him a glare.

"Bandages aren't much, but they're all we have."

"Saber's all I have, too, Leia."

Leia sighed. "I'm short on supplies."

"I'll be fine."

"And if more come?"

"Two Jedi and a Corellian smuggler," Luke said, "versus a few of those things?" He shook his head, laughing. "And this is a snowspeeder, too, isn't it?"

"Never underestimate the enemy." Leia pointed an accusing finger at Luke, between organising the supplies. A small smile threatened to break her serious front, so Luke took his chances, and began to scrub the drying blood off his weapon once again. Leia didn't comment.

"How long'll we be out here, you think?" Han asked.

"If we're not at the blast door in the morning, they'll send a rescue party for us." Leia shrugged. "But Anakin could be on his way right now, for all I know. We're flying blind in this weather."

"You think you could fly us out of here? Either of you?" Luke asked. "I'm a little out of commission
right now."

"In this weather, kid?" Han snorted.

Leia's eyes narrowed. Instead of immediately writing the idea off as impossible, as any sane person would, she seemed to consider it for a moment. "I'd have to use the Force. Nothing in this tin can will be working properly, not with all the interference."

"Then do it!" Luke said, with excitement. "The faster we get back, the less trouble we'll cause for the Alliance."

"Think of all the trouble we'll cause if we die," Leia quipped.

"And you think you're gonna kill us? I won't believe that for a second, Leia."

"Alright." She spun in her seat and put her hands to the controls. The targeting computer beeped angrily in her face, and she pushed it away with zeal. "Won't be needing this. Are you ready to get going, flyboys?"

"I think the flyboy here is you now, Leia," Luke said.

"Ready as I'll ever be." Han crossed his arms and prepared for the worst. "Don't crash, Princess."

She took one hand off the steering, and held it out, as if beckoning something forward. Then, there was a gasp, and her eyes flew open. "I can feel them. They're about thirty kilometres ahead."

They shot through the air, snow howling and beating against the hull around them, and Han screwed his eyes tightly shut as gravity pulled him back, slamming his head against the gunner's chair. He adjusted quickly, even as Leia threw them through twists and turns. "What are you dodging? I can't see a thing out there."

"Debris," said Leia. "Believe me, a bumpy ride is better than the alternative."

Han rubbed the back of his aching head. "Lemme guess, certain death."

"Isn't it always?"

The roar of the engine joined in with the pounding headache, intensifying as Leia picked up speed. He felt about as bad as Luke now. Perhaps worse, counting this flight was far rougher than the stomach of whatever had hunted Luke down. At least alien monsters ran at a steady pace.

"We'll be there soon, Han," Leia said. "Hold on tight. And you, too, Luke. If you rip off another bandage, I don't know what I'll-"


Chapter End Notes

I REALLY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THIS STORY HAS BECOME. OH GOD. Enjoy?
Anakin stood firm in front of the blast door, boots planted in the snow like he was going to grow there. He knew Obi-Wan was nearby, concern emanating from every pore, but he ignored it. He didn't want to look at his master's face, in case he saw regret. Obi-Wan had promised him forgiveness then, but now what Anakin had been trying desperately to both show and hide was out in the open. His balance was shaky, teetering on a cliff's edge. He could do nothing about it now, though he itched to.

He held his hands behind his back, looking down into nothing. He wasn't using his eyes to see, to search out his children. If something happened to them, he would snap and crack like the ice that surrounded him. And so they had to live, or the scales would tip.

He didn't trust himself to do anything but stand. As if movement would make him Fall again, leaving him to sweep through the base in silence, save for hollow breaths and the sound of his own 'saber. Nobody would scream; they wouldn't have time to.

"Why won't they let me out?" he hissed.

Obi-Wan sighed. "For your own safety, I suppose."

The fingers on his mechno-arm twitched. "My safety? Do they forget who they share a base with?"

"Better them than the children, perhaps."

"It is more likely they are not thinking at all."

"Anakin-"

"That's not my-" Anakin stopped. His finger twitched again. "Force, I need to get out of here."

"They won't open those doors, my friend, not even for you."

"I'm losing it in here. Going stir crazy." He clenched his fists and tried to breathe slowly, lightly. It didn't help. "You've seen me slip once already. Twice is two times too many."

"And if you slip? Do you truly think I wouldn't help you get back on your feet, Anakin?"

"And if I couldn't?"

"You would still be here with us, helping your children win their freedom."

Anakin threw up his hands. "My children don't want Darth Vader for a father, they want Anakin Skywalker."

"Yet they have the convenience of both," Obi-Wan said, and strolled to his side, completely unaffected. He stretched, yawning and cracking his joints, and let contentment slowly fill his expression. "I could do with some caf, I think."

"You're not afraid of me, are you, Master?"
Obi-Wan looked at him, eyes warm. "Only when you get bored. You know how insufferable you are, then, Anakin."

"If I fell, I don't know if I would-" He shook his head. "I don't know what I'd do."

"Go and rest, hopefully," Obi-Wan said. "I'm sure you're exhausted. Unless you fancy sharing my caf? The cantina isn't too far."

"Master, I was empty. I had nothing else left to give. If that happened again, I don't think I'd want to go and have a nice nap."

"Did they not have proper beds on the Death Star?"

Anakin stared openly. "Does your Jedi tolerance have no limits, old man?"

"My feelings for you extend far past tolerance, An." Obi-Wan paused, and seemed to rethink. "Darth," he said, for the first time since their duel.

"Both sides of me? Light and Dark?"

"Always."

Anakin gripped his shoulder tightly. "Thank you."

There was one lone Rebel in the cafeteria, scarred from the head to toe, and holding himself with a kind of weariness that Anakin knew well. Dark circles rested under his eyes, and his skin had gone sallow as war had whittled him down to skin and bones. But there was a strange familiarity in him that set Anakin on edge, more than his haggard appearance.

"Master, maybe we should get caf somewhere else," he hedged, gently tugging Obi-Wan's robes.

"I could use the energy," Obi-Wan replied. "Especially if I'm about to keep a night-long vigil."

"Master-"

"One lone, broken man," Obi-Wan said sharply. "I was little more than that only months ago."

"There's something off about him."

"A spy?"

"No, I don't think so." He bit down on his lip and with all his strength, tore through the very worst of his memories -- ones he'd hoped never to bring up again. As the bile rose and burned his throat, he scanned through most of his half-lived life like a holoreel, losing count of the deaths he'd seen and caused far too quickly. They overwhelmed him, their faces, their thoughts, their last moments etched into his mind, their eyes widened in terror, brimming with tears and mixing with blood. Was this man among them? Could he even stomach the search long enough to tell? "I'm not sure who he is."

"Don't you remember me?" the man asked. He didn't raise his voice, as if he knew he'd be heard from the other end of the room. His eyes remained firmly locked on his half-eaten food. "Darth Vader."

He didn't seem bitter, or angry, just lonely and tired. Not a threat to either of them, then. "Do I-"

"Know me? Yes." He took another bite of his food. "Your Empire ripped my family apart. Perhaps
they're dead. I've been here, with the Rebels, recovering for too long to remember. I was hoping to find them again."

"And you think I can do that?"

"Would they have blurred with time?" Anakin blinked at the non-sequitur. "Their faces."

"Not if I try. Would you like me to find them for you?"

"Would you?"

"You may not like what you find."

He shook his head, laughing. "Over the years, I've learnt ignorance is not bliss."

"You were the Empire's prisoner for how long?"

"I've lost track."

"And your name?"

"Ephraim. Ephraim Bridger."

*The father of the padawan with the unbreakable spirit.* How did he get here? Why hadn't the Alliance seen them reunited, as he himself had been? "You! I know your son well."

"Is he alive?"

More than that. He was hope for the Order before Luke, before Vader's return to the Light. "And fighting your war alongside you."

"A Rebel?"

"One of the most unshakable. A Jedi, by now, I'm sure."

"A *Jedi?*"

Bridger looked up from his plate, and after a silence, began to shake. One trembling hand set down his fork, and the other wiped at the tears welling in his eyes. His fingers came back wet, and as he shook, more streamed down his face and dripped onto the cafeteria table. Those, he didn't try to wipe away.

"Are you alright?"

"All these years, I'd hoped- I'd hoped he would make it. And now he has, I think that's the question I should be asking him."

"He's part of a Rebel Cell, now. They care for him."

Bridger cradled his head in his hands. "My *son,*" he said, with great, heaving sobs, and Anakin understood.

He hadn't drank the caf. He felt sick, trapped, and helpless here, in this cage. Bridger's Force presence was all wrong and twisted and broken, deprived of familial care. Vader had done that to him. What would become of him if he did it to himself?
The Force told him his children were alive. They'd told him themselves. But if they hadn't been? Here, surrounded by these people, whose lives he had torn apart, he had never been more aware of the destruction he caused, people ruined by his touch. The balance he'd found was transient. He was a liability.

He stared at his own hands and realised they were not his. The prosthetics on his right arm were twenty years out of date, long been replaced by one of Palpatine's own design, and his left was still soft with youth, unscarred and dusted by light hair. He had been Bridger, months ago, a singularity of nothingness, with a half-functioning body more machine than man.

"Obi-Wan."

"Hmm?"

"Has this all been a terrible mistake?"

"Is this not a little late for a mid-life crisis? Or perhaps, too early?"

Anakin said nothing.

"Your children are alive. We are alive. Finally, we have a chance to undo Palpatine's damage, as a unified force. Surely that shouldn't be called a terrible mistake?"

"But what am I doing here?" he asked, and wished the Force would answer. It couldn't.

"This isn't your fault, Anakin."

"That was." He motioned in the cafeteria's direction. "It is too late for me, old man. This came too late."

"It came exactly as it was meant to," Obi-Wan said. "Could we have fixed this any earlier?"

"I was reckless. I knew nothing of the Force."

"Then that is your answer." He held out a hand, to pull Anakin up from his resting place on a shipping crate. "Take the miracle that has been given to you, Anakin, and help fix what we've made of this galaxy."

Artoo's sad whistles continued through the night, echoing through the hallways like birdsong. Anakin pretended not to hear him as he spat out panicked insult after panicked insult. Threepio shushed him insistently, but nothing would give Artoo peace of mind.

Anakin had nestled himself into the crook of a fighter's wing to wait out the darkness, staining his palms in oil and dust. Obi-Wan lay across the adjacent wing, and had begun to snore slightly as the time wore on. Sleep did not come to Anakin so easily, not over the noise or the knots in his stomach.

He trailed a hand across Artoo's head. "They'll make it, buddy. Wait and see."

Artoo whined and shuddered forward, bumping into Threepio's knee. "I don't want to lose them, too."

"I know."

He stared up at the ceiling and traced patterns into the ice. He imagined he could see the stars, that they were back on Naboo, away from this hell.
He still couldn't sleep.

In the morning, they opened the blast doors, and let the ships trail in and out. The chill woke him slowly, the engine noise a pleasant lull. A gentle hand rested on his arm.

"You don't even have a blanket. Aren't you gonna freeze out here?" Luke's voice, drifting in from a sleepy haze.

He opened his eyes to the faces of his family. Luke was bruised and scratched, but the others seemed fine. "You're worrying about me? You should be in a bacta tank! Where the hell is the medical team?"

"I'm fine, I swear! Leia and Han came prepared."

For a moment, he just stared, and then let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. He slipped down from the fighter's wing and pulled them into a brief hug, which had Han raising both eyebrows. He'd been with them long enough, and he'd risked hypothermia to save Anakin's son. A hug was the least of his troubles.

"We all thought-"

"Hey!" Luke said. "We're not that fragile. I think we can survive a few snowstorms, right, guys?"

Leia sighed. "Not something I'd care to repeat."

"You can say that again." Han gave Luke's shoulder a firm pat. "Glad you made it, kid."

Obi-Wan slipped in beside them. "You're not the only one, it seems."

They gathered in his quarters, Luke folding his hands out before him and tapping the frame of the bunk in thought. Anakin had heard about Luke's intense visions, an unfortunate shared trait in their family, but he hadn't heard just how frantic this made the boy.

"I know Dathomir is our priority right now," he said, "but Qui-Gon seemed to think seeing Master Yoda was important, too. I think there might be something wrong with him."

"With Yoda?" Anakin asked. "He's lived longer than any of us than count. It could be catching up to him."

"That's a possibility," Obi-Wan agreed, resting his chin in his hands. The hood of his robe shadowed his eyes, but Anakin could sense the sadness in him. Yoda was the last living remnant of the Order he had destroyed. To lose him would be to lose culture preserved now only in holocrons.

"I think we should go see him as soon as we get Leia's people out of the prison camp," Luke said, decisive, crossing arms over his chest. "If he's sick, we should do everything we can to help."

"Qui-Gon said he was on Dagobah?"

"Yeah. I'm getting the sense that's in the middle of nowhere."

"That's an understatement."

"It's hardly safe there," Obi-Wan added. "Perhaps Master Yoda was injured by the planet's native life."
"Like the lifeforms here on Hoth?" Luke gave a dry smirk. "Yeah, I can imagine. Question is, why is he there in the first place? There are more welcoming places to hide, here."

"None I wouldn't know of," Anakin said. "Yoda's smart. Dagobah is the last place I'd have thought to look. It's crawling with dragonsakes, and worse. Honestly, you'd probably get eaten alive out there if you slipped up so much as once, and even then." He grimaced. "It's a miserable cesspit, much like this one."

"Sounds lovely," Leia deadpanned. "When do we leave?"

Luke snorted. "I'm not exactly looking forward to it either, but if Master Yoda is hurt, it's our duty as Jedi to go and rescue him. I've always wanted to see a dragonsnake up close, anyway."

"Stay positive, kid," Han groaned. "I hadn't planned on meeting any. In fact, I'd like to stay as far away from those slimy earworms as long as possible."

"Luckily, we're supposed to arrive on Dathomir in a matter of days, Han. You can say hello to the rancor and tell me if you like them better."

"Damp down your power core, Princess. I'm not gonna leave you guys for dead out there. Just don't like snakes."

"Han Solo's afraid of something?" Luke asked. "Somebody pinch me, 'cause I think I'm dreaming."

"I didn't say anything about 'afraid', farmboy!"

Obi-Wan sighed and opened a holo-map of the Outer Rim. "Dathomir is a long way from Dagobah. We'll need fuel, supplies, and a ship that's actually functional."

"The *Falcon*'s almost fully repaired. Chewie's been working on it constantly since we landed. Only time the damned fuzzball gives it a rest is when he sleeps."

"Let's keep it that way, shall we?" Obi-Wan rubbed at his temples. "We can't afford a repeat of last time, not in Imperial space. We'll be blaster fodder within seconds."

"Agreed," Anakin said. "I'd like to keep breathing a little longer, thanks, and getting marooned on Imperial patrol routes isn't about to help with that."

"Then we'll leave as soon as the *Falcon* is ready," Leia said.

Luke took the map from Obi-Wan's hands and looked it over. "It's a deal. I'll get the supplies. I'm sure I can get someone to let me into the storage room."

"I'll take care of the ship and the fuel. That leaves luck. Anyone have any?"

Leia shook her head. "If I could buy it with credits..."

Luke shrugged. "I'm glad we can't. We need all we can get, and I don't have nearly enough credits for that."

The MediDroid attended to Luke with care, but Ahsoka looked on with disapproval. Anakin recognised that particular brand of exasperation, so often aimed his way. It seemed Luke had not fallen far from the family tree.

"How did this come about?" she said, even as Luke winced and hissed as his wounds were cleaned.
"A wampa?" Luke said.

"Unbelievable." Ahsoka waved a hand. "You better get into that bacta tank, Skyguy Jr., or so help me-"

Luke saluted. "Yes, ma'am."

The MediDroid, if he had the capability, would have raised an eyebrow. He turned towards Ahsoka, briefly, and titled his head. "Commander Skywalker will not be ready for immersion in the bacta tank until 1400 hours."

"Listen, Too-Onebee-"

The droid turned his back to her, and resumed his duty mending Luke. "I'm the most efficient medical droid you have on hand, Commander Tano. Please stop interrupting my work, or find a droid you believe better qualified, and more silent, if you so please."

Ahsoka blinked. "I'll leave you be, but make it quick, Too-Onebee. We have no time to lose."

"I'm always quick."

She focused her attention back on Luke. "How are you feeling?" she asked, more gently.

Luke seemed to calm at that, shoulders loosening and posture slouching as Ahsoka's scrutiny dulled. "I'm fine, honestly. If it weren't for Leia and Han, I'd be a lot worse. I got lucky."

"Let's not use up our luck already," Ahsoka said. "I'd recommend staying on guard at all times, but I think that'll happen naturally now, won't it?"

"I'm feeling it now, actually," Luke quipped.

"Muscle tension will not help the procedure," Too-Onebee cut in.

Anakin trusted the droid wouldn't ruin Luke completely, but he couldn't help but share in Ahsoka's concern. Was this truly the best place to set up camp? Surely, the Alliance could afford to move elsewhere, where the bacta tanks were not so frequently used as to amass a waiting list, and the cold not so harsh as to ruin their comm reception, or their skin.

"Why are we even here?" he groused.

"In the medical bay?" Luke smiled. "Blame that wampa, Father. Or, you know, you could, if I hadn't killed it."

"On Hoth."

"What choice do we have?" Ahsoka shrugged. "Before now, the Alliance only built bases away from the Core Worlds, and your watchful eye, Vader. The Core is still too dangerous, even after this. Whatever this turns out to be."

"Yavin 4 was closer to the Core than Hoth," he started. Ahsoka just snorted in distaste.

"And look where that got us."

"We're losing men."
"They're stronger than you think."

"Luke won't be treated for hours. There's a line."

"We have nowhere else to go, Vader. You've chased and bit at our heels for so long that we'll settle for living hell, as long as its out of your reach."

"This isn't out of my reach."

"It's beyond your convenience."

"Need I repeat myself?" Too-Onebee pointed a bloodied claw in their direction. "I know my words haven't fallen on deaf ears; I've assessed you personally. Quiet yourselves, or risk scarring Luke, and not just mentally."

"Someone's sour today," Han said.

"And your patience hasn't been tried, Commander Solo?"

"Never said it wasn't. But you don't see me making a fuss."

"Your health isn't in danger."

"So it isn't," Han said slowly. "Don't get those hydraulics in a twist, pal. Leia and I can get them under control, if worst comes to worst."

A sharp burst of static came from Too-Onebee's vocal grates, which Anakin realised was his version of a frustrated huff. He let out a laugh.

"Sorry for ruining your work environment, Too-Onebee."

"No need to apologise. Rather, I might thank you. You've provided me with consistent employment over the years, Darth Vader. Your endless supply of gravely injured Rebels is how I make my living. Truth be told, I'd probably be off collecting dust somewhere if it weren't for your continued existence."

At this, Anakin clamped his jaw firmly shut, and hoped to remind himself never to anger Alliance droids in the future. Even Ahsoka had paled in shock.

"Isn't there a chain of command, here?" Han grumbled.

"Of which he is the lowest rank," Two-Onebee said. "Lower even than myself."

"I'm not sure that's true," Ahsoka added, with care.

"Then I apologise. Now that's out of the way, if you don't mind?" He waved a dismissive claw.

Anakin left the room in quick strides, skin itching with unshed guilt. He hoped they made their way towards Dathomir quickly, so he might absorb himself in rescuing the people whose vaporisation he'd allowed.

Chapter End Notes
Um? Uh? *Comes to terms with having inserted Darth Vader into a slash pairing*

fUCK IT LET'S GO. What is my life anymore?

vADERWAN OTP ILL FITE U ON IT u WANNA gO?? *Pre-Serum Steve Rogers voice* I could do this all day!

//somebody hit me

//probably also take angst out of my hands and hit me with that, too. I'm not sure if I'm using it properly. Woobie!Vader is likely not a thing, and yet here we are. I've created a monster.

Note: so this is total canon divergence and characters who are dead aren't and i don't even know what i'm ddddddioiiing. Yes. Ephraim is alive. Who the fuck knows when Rebels will Joss this? We have seasons to go.

Too-Onebee is basically the EMH from Star Trek: Voyager, not even gonna lie.
Slight Warning: equally as slight gore. It was Halloween, okay? I was going full Addams Family.

Han set the *Falcon* down gently, as if she were his own child. Immediately, Anakin felt the fog swirl and consume them, concealing her hull from watchful eyes in every direction.

It hadn't changed much. The sky still burned blood-red, the mist still chilled him, and the trees still held ancient Nightsisters hostage. It was as miserable as ever, and part of him wished for Hoth again. There were less unpleasant memories there, less in the history of his old life. Dathomir warmed him like Hoth could not, but it had still given birth to the woman who left a permanent mark on his face, so he might forever remember his own mistakes.

Han moved to secure the landing brakes, while Chewbacca flipped switches and listened as the engine's roar faded to eerie silence. Luke and Leia checked over the droids, and Ahsoka stood with her back to their faces and her eyes on the viewport.

"I haven't seen this for a while," she said.

"I'd imagine not," said Obi-Wan. He pulled his robes tighter around him, feeling the night's cold before it had the chance to slink in and condense on the *Falcon's* internals.

Verlaine grimaced. "This is an awful place to hold prisoners, but I suppose that would be intentional."

"Don't spread out," Leia announced, as she tuned Artoo's holoprojector. "We don't want to get picked off."

"Wise decision." Anakin followed Ahsoka's gaze, and saw the small green glow dripping from the leaves clawing at their ship. After Grievous, there weren't many left, but they weren't gone. They were never gone.

Apparently, this bothered the Empire about as much as anything else. A mere annoyance, a bug on the windshield, easily wiped out, resistance quashed before it was allowed to begin. The Nightsisters posed no threat, and if they interrupted the smoothly-run prison facilities, Anakin imagined they'd be erased from the face of the planet. Not quite as swiftly as he could have done, but newly-found inefficiency wasn't the only price the Empire would pay now that he'd left them.

Perhaps this knife hanging over their heads might drive them to take in whatever help they could get. Talzin's progeny were scattered and dying without her continuous guidance, leaving the Zabrak and the human inhabitants as the only species left properly standing. Alderaanians were leverage, and it was likely the Nightsisters' frustrating illusions had gained them more than a few prisoners.

Good. That meant less risk for them. A band of broken witches was far easier to overpower than the fortified walls of Imperial encampments.
"Wherever shall we begin?" Obi-Wan said dryly. Every branch, every reed, every puddle looked identical. Finding shelter suitable for Alderaanian civilians here would be an undertaking.

"Follow the green trail." Ahsoka shrugged. "It could be a decoy, but what other leads do we have at this point?"

Leia sighed. "None at all."

The trail led them deep into the forest, much farther from the *Falcon* than he would have liked. Without an immediate escape route, they'd have to fight their way back. Should it come to that. The Sisters were unpredictable, and so were their allegiances.

He didn't like it. This was smart, for the Empire's impossibly low standards. It was so well-crafted, Anakin suspected it hadn't come from Tarkin or Tagge, before their final moments on the Death Star, or from any of the Imperial officials he'd had the displeasure of working with. No, this *reeked* of Sheev Palpatine, hiding and conniving, secreting prisoners away on a planet whose sun coloured it deep, blinding crimson, and whose inhabitants barely allowed themselves to be seen regardless.

His expression soured as he trekked on, feet dragging in thick mud. The suit protected him from damage, especially from the sharp claws of the saurians flying overhead, but it was heavy and easily weighed down. He had considered removing his mask, but the ever-present reptilian screeching made him decide firmly against it. It was a prison of his own, but it would keep him safe.

He couldn't say the same for his own children. Their robes would tear like bread under a saurian flier's iron grip, and the cloaks they wrapped around themselves like bandages would shred just as easily. Ahsoka's armour would hold up for longer, but not in the jaws of a rancor, or a ssurrian. And the survivors, experienced or not, could not fight off a band of them alone.

Palpatine had built Vader's own casing to withstand all thrown its way. Only the Emperor himself held the key to its destruction: its weakness to Force lightning, and the control panel like a beacon on his chest. Still, it would suffice against the Dathomiri, living primitive lives in caves and trees.

"Stay close," Anakin said. "If the saurians dive, let me take the hit."

"How is *that* a good idea?" Han snapped. "We don't blow up the tank before the battle starts, Skywalker. You fought a war, didn't you?"

"I did," he allowed. "And I won it."

Han grumbled something unintelligible at that, waving him off. Soon his attention was drawn elsewhere, onto frantically slapping at his exposed neck in horror, where their fresh scent had begun to attract sparkflies. "I didn't sign up for this."

Anakin unsheathed his lightsaber, clearing their way through the brush and warning off the hungry parasites circling them like carrion. "Those can be lethal," he admonished, and Han paled even further.

"I really didn't sign up for this."

He turned to Luke for sympathy, but his gaze was blank and aimless, his face a little sick. "What's wrong with this place?" he asked, after a few paces. "It smells like- like death."

"The Nightsisters use their dead for reinforcements. Aside from that, General Grievous massacred most of them during the Clone Wars. The population has scattered since then."
"It never reformed?" Leia touched a hand to the burns etched into the treebark beside her. "They haven't repaired any of the damage here."

"No. Their leader, Talzin, has managed to consistently evade the Empire since that night. Without her guidance, they are nothing."

"Do you think there's any chance they took in some of Leia's people?" Luke asked, then winced apologetically. "And Evaan's."

"A possibility. Among many."

"Oh, that's just great." Han groaned. Chewbacca gripped his shoulder tightly and growled into his ear. He quieted, leaving only the background noise of Dathomiri life for conversation. The chirping of insects, screams of ssurrians and saurians alike, howls of rancor, and branches that swayed and creaked under the weight of the wind, or the nimble feet of a witch.

They pushed farther. Sweat dripped down their faces in rivulets, evidence to suggest how hard wariness and exhaustion had begun to bear down, and Luke started to straggle behind, cuts from leaves branding his face, salt-stung and muddy. Their formation wavered, leaving them open, exhaustion and heat baring their necks and bringing the sweet smell of fresh blood closer to Dathomir's predators, who approached with steadily growing confidence. Every so often, glowing eyes shone from spots in the trees and revealed the snouts of Kodashi vipers, their tongues licking the air like fire.

Ahsoka scrunched her nose, raised gloved hands to her face, and shook her head in disgust. "This planet reeks of the Dark Side of the Force. It's everywhere."

"As usual," Anakin said.

"As usual." She coughed. "Always as usual."

As they walked, the forest parted around a small grotto, and Anakin saw the first signs of sentient life in the orange glow flickering against the shadows. Firelight. What was left of the Sisters.

They were not silent in their arrival. Anakin's own breathing was impossible to quiet within the protective confines of his suit, and attempting stealth near Nightsisters was about as plausible. After Grievous, no Sister ever left an encampment unguarded. They slept at odd hours, rotated watch, paranoia driving them to lash out like frightened animals at any disturbance. A leaf out of place, and they'd scatter into the dark.

As they would attempt to now.

A panicked hiss from one of the Sisters, and the firelight dimmed to nothingness. "There's someone coming!"

"Who at this hour?"

"Does it matter? Run!"

He spoke with Vader's voice, blending into the sudden darkness, belonging there. "An exercise in futility. You won't escape."

The Sister's terror turned rabid at the sound, a distinct rumble every sentient creature in the galaxy begged never to hear, and a single arrow's light pierced the shadows from a newly-drawn bow. It
didn't shake; the Sisters would never allow the indignity. "That won't get you very far."

The Sister didn't care, probably didn't have the capacity to, and let loose a flurry, which grazed over Luke's shoulders, searing flesh. He yelped at the sudden pain, and ducked, holding his one useful arm above his head for protection. The other hung limply, as blood trailed and dripped its way down to his fingertips.

Anakin held out hands, soon clenching into shaking fists, and kept the Dathomiri in place with the Force until they grasped at their necks, fingers scrabbling at an invisible chokehold. "Were you attempting to prove me wrong?"

His grip lessened enough for words to form in their throats. "Please! What do you want?"

"Information."

"Specificity," one spat, and he barked out a laugh at the Sisters' daring.

"All right. Where are the Alderaanian prisoners?"

"Everywhere. Some in caves, some still in their prison. We take in the women who show promise in our magicks, the others make their own way."

As scattered as the Sisters themselves! Searching could take hours, days. They were too elusive to be rescued in full, and keep the low bodycount they needed to prevent the Alderaanian culture's extinction. Leia must have realised this, as she slumped against the nearest tree, and pinched the bridge of her nose. In the Force, she hurt more even than Luke. Tatooine still blazed bright and whole in the cosmos. Alderaan was little but rocks hurtling through fields of empty space.

Millions of voices silenced, monuments demolished, years upon years of tradition destroyed. Only its memory was left, in the minds of people slowly withering away in Imperial cells, under Palpatine's unforgiving hand. They would die out like the firelight if their small team didn't act immediately. And even then, as the seconds passed, casualties were piling, one after the other, until the numbers reached unbearable heights.

"I'm sorry," he told Leia, whose agony was as unheard as her people. She shook her head, standing still as time wouldn't, and looked upwards, away from the camp where Vader levitated their only sources, legs dangling like ragdolls, and into the stars.

Verlaine was by her side, bitterness blazing in the Force. She didn't speak.

Leia's gaze fell back to the earth. "We need to find the Empire's main base of operations here on Dathomir. Most of our people will be concentrated there. The remaining escapees we'll have to search out, before they're eaten by rancor. The witches' sheltered refugees are in slightly less danger, and fixed positions, but I don't imagine there are many."

"So, we're heading for the prisoners first?" Luke asked, through teeth gritted in pain. The wound wasn't bleeding heavily, but the arrow had cut deep, and Luke was overworked and enervated already.

Han held Luke's shoulder steady, to better inspect the damage. He didn't look pleased with what he saw. "You're lucky we brought bacta, kid."

"I thought we were just about out of luck." Luke's gaze was solely on his sister as he said this, but Anakin's fell to the horror dawning on Han's face as he realised they weren't talking about the wound anymore.
"We still have a chance," Obi-Wan said. "But I'm afraid we'll have to spread out, at least in pairs, to manage."

"Pairs only," Leia said. "Any less and we'll all be dead, and that will get our people nowhere. Especially not out of here."

"Obi-Wan and I can take the prison. The Bond allows us to share strength, which will be necessary to infiltrate it. Snips can head with Leia and Verlaine to get to the Nightsisters' cave network. They're a matriarchy, so you'll have more leeway. Han, Luke, Chewbacca, you search the wasteland, and take the droids with you. As a smuggler, you're pretty good at tracking, aren't you, Solo?"

"What smuggler isn't?"

"Then you shouldn't have trouble keeping up with Luke's Force ability, right?" He shot a quick smile at Han's dark look.

"I'll lend a hand, sure. I don't have his range, but my vision isn't so bad, either. I've had a lotta time to practice."

"Is that good with you, Verlaine, Princess?"

"It's a plan, maybe even a good one. It's better than nothing, at any rate."

Verlaine sighed. "We have no choice, do we?"


Anakin dropped the Sisters, and pointed to Leia, Ahsoka, and Verlaine. "Lead these three to the caves where you hold your 'new recruits'."

Then, with Obi-Wan at his side, he turned and headed towards the Empire's signature brand of Dark hatred. They still had not mastered the art of subtlety. It did not surprise him. Their incompetence no longer could. Before, even as it became dull expectation, the depths of their inability had lost him countless men, but now it was a weakness he could exploit -- and one he thoroughly intended to.

Sometimes, it seemed like the only constant in the galaxy. Like nothing else was left.

"Sharing in your strength will be... fun." Obi-Wan wrung the sleeves of his robes, coloured with a measure of apprehension.

He didn't want to share Anakin's fate, and Anakin didn't expect him to. Power in trade for Light was less than ideal. Especially a power so great, so easily utilised in everything the Jedi turned from, with passion and hatred and revenge. Obi-Wan's life had not been fair, and with a head held so high, the Dark in Anakin threatened his control, and his cultivated, half-desperate Jedi serenity.

Yet another failure. The Light in his master gave him peace, and yet he had only chaos to give in return.

"I'm sorry it's come to this, Master. You know how heavily the Empire guards its secrets. There's no other way."

Obi-Wan winced. "Unless we fancied being blown to pieces, no. No other way."

The fog seemed to grow colder as they walked on. There was a sickly sort of aura that hung low and oppressive in the air, and Anakin felt Obi-Wan's apprehension grow further. "Something's wrong
"here," he said. "Very wrong."

"I don't know much about what happened with Grievous, but I don't think it was good. There's a kind of damage here, and it's not about to leave any time soon."

"I can't imagine he slaughtered them all, and yet it feels..."

"Like that's exactly what he did. I know. The Sisters were Dark to begin with. Who knows how their magic has reacted to the loss?"

His boot stepped on something that made a disturbing crunch, then, and all thoughts retreated as he shot back and, reflexively, looked down. Reaching out of the ground, like a plant, was rotting, mangled flesh on dirt-covered bone. He'd seen massacres in his time, half of them by his own hand, but the shock overwhelmed his immunity to disgust. "They didn't bury them?"

Obi-Wan looked a bit ill. "At least, not properly."

Setting foot on a makeshift graveyard felt like walking on glass. "There... might not have been anyone left to try."

"This is worse than we thought."

The Empire had chosen the best planet in the system. One with a built-in defence mechanism. Corpses upon corpses, piled like leaves, half-smothered in dirt and left to rot. Parts of droids hung from the cannon-marked trees, discarded by Grievous. Had he still been alive, Anakin doubted he would have ever bothered to come and retrieve them, remove all evidence of his presence here. Perhaps he had been too proud.

He pushed on, looking ahead and never below, and tried not to listen to the horrible noise his boots made when they hit something that was once alive.

There were no guards in front of the prison's entrance. There was a small security panel, sparking a little, obviously installed incorrectly, but it seemed nobody had bothered to fix it. It was stupidly easy, that only this small, unprotected door separated them from the Alderaanians. His eyes weren't playing tricks on him, not that they ever tended to, considering even his Force visions had come to pass, and Obi-Wan looked similarly baffled. If it wasn't an illusion, then it was a trap.

"You know how you said there was something very wrong here?" Anakin examined the panel, and found nothing. "I'm definitely starting to agree."

"Where are the guards?" Obi-Wan asked. He crept towards the building's edge, to peek around the corner, and Anakin let his power pass into the Bond, in case there was something waiting on the other side.

There wasn't. Obi-Wan returned to the door, giving it a puzzled glance, and finally shrugged. "Shall we go in?"

"You don't think this is a trap?"

"As odd as it sounds, no. Something's happened, something the Empire didn't expect."

"The Nightsisters?"

"Perhaps." He smiled wanly. "There's only one way to find out."
"The panel's broken. I can probably get in without Artoo's help."

It was easy to rearrange the wires, smash through the underwhelming defences, and pry the door open with an ear-splitting screech. The hallway was dark, but the moons lit it softly. It was enough to make out the scene before them, the glint of clinical white armour, blasters still clenched in stiff hands, gnarled fingers.

"They've been dead for a few days, at most," Anakin said. He toed at one body, flipped the limp form on its back, and checked beneath the helmet. Cold skin, relatively untouched. Lesions around the neck and face, like burns. "It looks like the Sisters' magic."

Obi-Wan stepped ahead. "They didn't seem to know anything when we asked."

"It's pretty clear we weren't asking the right questions," he said. "They told us about the prisoners, not the prison."

Obi-Wan eyed the body. "Are they really this... brutal?" He shook his head quickly. "No, forget I said that. Of course they are."

"You've had more run-ins with the Dathomiri than I have, Master."

Obi-Wan just stood and stared, a haunted look in his eyes that unsettled Anakin further.

He tugged him along, like they were children again. "Come on, let's go."

The inside of the prison only worsened as they got deeper and closer to its heart. The Alderaanians were physically fine, but the same could not be said for their mental health. Some of them shook and cried, and others made incoherent noises, sobbing and wailing nonsense, huddled together in small corners. Civilians in warfare. Anakin let down each cell's forcefield, took care that no single one was left unopened, but only half the prisoners chose to leave their cells. The rest clung to the walls, as if their cages were safer than the freedom of the outside world.

The bodies of Stormtroopers were strewn everywhere, like decorations, the walls covered in scratches and burns. It could have been an uprising from the Sisters. They never did like to be ruled. Leaving the prisoners unharmed, though, disturbed as they were, was an act of uncharacteristic mercy. Or of distraction.

The corridors, dimly lit red by his lightsaber, soon opened to the cafeteria, chairs and tables knocked to the floor, trays broken in half, food gone brown, but not quite spoilt. The fight must have broken out barely days ago. They kicked away rations and discarded utensils, clearing themselves a path through to the next corridor, marked by a flickering, cracked sign labeling it the nearest entrance to the prison's control centre.

If anyone was still here, they'd have gone to the single most important room, the one which held the switches to every door, sign, forcefield, machine, to every ventilation system, to all the life support, to anything of any significance at all. If they took the controls from the Imperials, they'd have full reign of the entire base in seconds. The outpost's crown jewel. And a Queen did not often leave her throne unguarded.

"They're probably still here," Anakin said. "And they're probably watching us right now, actually."

Obi-Wan laughed. "Did you want to catch them by surprise?"

"I'll have to pass on that one."
"Is she still around, do you think?"

Anakin didn't need to ask whom Obi-Wan meant. "Oh, I'm sure Talzin's still here. No-one else can rally the Sisters like she can."

"They're rather a mess without her, it's true. Living camp-by-camp, running from the enemy? That's hardly their style."

"After Grievous, I don't think they had time to stick to tradition, Master."

"No, I suppose not."

They rounded corner after corner, for half an eternity, passing door by door marked by blasters and arrows, pushing past Stormtroopers slumped against the blood-stained walls. Clearer and clearer signs of the Nightsisters' revolt.

It wasn't his problem. He needed only to convince Talzin to allow the prisoners their release, not to give up her hold on a base of useless, lifeless bodies, even if the entire settlement had been sanctioned by the Emperor himself. Let her get her people killed once more, as long as Anakin and his team were long gone by the time Imperial reinforcements arrived.

Soon, the control centre's doorway came into view, vibrant green seeping out from the cracks the Stormtroopers had managed to pry into.

"That's definitely her."

"Shall we give her a proper entrance?" Obi-Wan smiled.

They split left and right, and plunged their lightsabers to the hilt in layers of durasteel. Molten, liquid metal seeped to the floor and brightened the hallway for a brief moment, before cooling in puddles at their feet.

Anakin sidestepped the door as it fell, and clambered through the neatly-cut circle, ducking his head, and raising it to the sight of the Nightsisters gathered around their Mother. Talzin sat in the middle chair, of a line of many, and stared firmly at the controls, robes floating behind her in a phantom breeze. Her fingertips, lain along the central panel, were more smoke than flesh, but she looked as young as the day Anakin had first set eyes on her. The benefits of being non-corporeal, it seemed.

She didn't look up to greet them, but Anakin knew she didn't need to. She would have seen them long before they'd broken into this hell, probably about as soon as they'd landed on her planet.

"You want the prisoners, yes?"

Obi-Wan bowed. "Mother Talzin, you are as perceptive as ever."

She spun around, face contorted in a scowl, brows warping the markings that adorned her face. "Do not flatter me, Jedi. That will not win you their freedom."

"Then what will?"

She steepled her fingers, which seemed to mingle into each other and weave together, lacking in substance entirely. Her face was young, but her eyes did not tell the same story, filled with an old woman's wisdom, and jaded anger. "I want to know what it is that you have done to yourselves."

Anakin looked to Obi-Wan, whose face was as puzzled as his own. Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow,
and he shrugged. "Beats me. Maybe she's finally succumbed to her old age, Master."

Her mouth pulled back into a snarl, eyes flashing. There was a viciousness to her, now, that had finally overcome the part of her that was so cunning -- the part that was once her whole being. Now she was as lost as the rest of them. "Your youth! You would be fools not to know the value -- the power -- in eternal life. Now tell me, what did you do?"

"We don't know," said Obi-Wan. He knew she could read between the lines of honesty and deceit.

Fingernails, like claws, dug into the chair, but left behind no marks. "How can that be true?"

"Nothing in this world is ever clear. Jedi must trust in the Force to gain true insight."

"Spare me your creed, your empty words, Jedi. You must surely know."

Obi-Wan blinked. "I can assure you I do not."

She roared, and sent them flying back into the wall, breath leaving them in a painful heave. "Have your prisoners! They are of no use to me. Their feeble minds are not worth the effort to repair." She pointed an accusing claw their way. "Take them, go!"

And so they left, feeling her furious gaze, glinting with all-too-recognisable hatred, burning white-hot as the master realised she was as much a slave as any of them.

It was not an unfamiliar fate.

Chapter End Notes

Darth Vader goes Dad Vader. Again. What is this, the thousandth time? Seriously. What am I doing with my life? What is life? What is its meaning, or does it not hold any at all? What is the Universe? Look at my life, look at my choices. Why am I writing a gay romance novel set in the Star Wars universe? Why am I writing a gay romance novel about Darth Vader? Why am I writing a gay romance novel about Darth Vader and Obi-Wan Kenobi?

Oh, right. Once you get on this ship, you don't get off. It's Mr. Bones' Wild Ride 2: Electric Boogaloo. Enjoy your stay. //Thros self into rubbish bin, where all the other trash belongs.

I have no regrets.

**Edit:** This probably should have been the Halloween chapter. I pre-write these, and it's Halloween as I write this, but it will be well into December or something by the time this is out. :a: WHY, ME? WHY? I could've been totally atmospheric, dammit!

TFW WRITING WITH FLU, AS WELL. Sorry if this makes no sense. I'm probably delirious.

**Edit 2:** OKAY, THIS I WRITE AS I LITERALLY PUBLISH IT. Uh, so, y'know how I said, "Who the fuck knows when Rebels will Joss this?" a chapter ago? In regards to Ephraim's life? Uh, yeah. I jinxed it. It's been Jossed. But I'M NOT GIVING UP. You'll see this plotline addressed soon, despite it being non-canon c:
They reconvened, prisoners in droves by their side. There were too many to crowd into the small clearing, and so some curled up under trees, shuddering in darkness. Verlaine looked nauseated.

"I've called in a fleet of Rebel transports," Leia said, while tending to the wounded with what little first aid they had left. "They should arrive soon. In the meantime, we'll have to make do."

"I can see that," said Han. A mass of the cold, sick, and starved, survivors of a race on the edge of extinction, chased down by a force intent on eradicating them. Bacta was useless in comparison.

"What about the Sisters?" Anakin asked.

Ahsoka shrugged. "They were weirdly receptive. I think Talzin might be giving them orders."

"Speaking of, we ran into the very woman herself on our way through the prison. She asked about this." Obi-Wan gestured to himself, and then to Anakin. "Of course, we had no answers to give, which... did not make her happy."

Ahsoka tensed. "Are we in any danger?"

"I'd think not," Obi-Wan said. "She's a little mad."

Her eyes narrowed. "Mad angry or mad insane?"

"The latter."

"Well, then. Guess that's what happens when you spend over two decades without a physical form."

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It took three transports to deliver the prisoners safely to the many Rebel bases scattered throughout the Outer Rim. Cargo bays stuffed to the brim with people of all species, all ages, all walks of life. The pilots had given them shaky, overwhelmed salutes, and driven themselves into the stars.

Ahsoka tapped at her communicator impatiently. "We need to get to the *Falcon* and monitor the Alliance frequencies as soon as we can. I don't want those refugees to have a run-in with the Empire, especially not after this."

"Gotcha," said Han. "She's not far from here. Hopefully the witches haven't stolen her."

"They'd have stolen the Empire's ships if they needed any," Leia assured. "I have a feeling they're far too caught up in their own age-old, unsolved problems to start new conflicts with the Alliance."

"You're probably right," Anakin agreed. "Still, best to be safe, right?"

Han twitched. "If they've taken my damn ship..."

Anakin gave him a pat on the shoulder, startling him and sending him stumbling forward a few steps. "Relax, she'll be fine."

Han brushed himself off. "Maybe I should be more worried about me instead."
Ahsoka led them forward, stopping on occasion to listen for signs of danger. It was quiet, now, as the Sisters had retreated back into their renegade base, and the predators had fled as Alderaanians filed through their hunting ground, trampling with feet heavy and laden from their own exhaustion. Their footprints intermingled now, predator upon prey, the Alderaanian's bare and bandaged, the Dathomiri clawed and heavy-set. It was a wonder they'd left easy pickings to move on. Strength was not in Alderaanian numbers.

They found the *Falcon* as they'd left her, save for a few scratches along her hull. Anakin couldn't say who or what had used the starship as a footpath, but Han was quick to blame the entire planet, spitting and cursing as if he'd been struck as well.

"She's fine."

"You call that fine?" Han gestured widely. "That's fine to you?"

"Yep." Anakin popped the 'P'. "She'll still fly, Solo. Now let's get off this dump of a planet and head back to one... that's not much different, actually."

Han snorted. "The Alliance better pay me for the repairs."

The ship was quiet as the weight of the Alderaanian's suffering began to fully hit the crew. Leia paced back and forth, hands at her aching temples and face pulled down into a grimace. Verlaine sat and stared at the wall, and every so often dropped her head into her palms. Luke was still shaken from the force of the prisoners' emotions, and Han stood by him, joking and jeering in a low whisper, waving hands and telling wild stories until he got the corners of Luke's mouth to twitch up just a little.

He and Obi-Wan sat in the booth, staring absentmindedly at an unfinished game of Dejarik, and at Obi-Wan's tea, untouched and long since cooled. Ahsoka raised an eyebrow at it as she walked by. "Can I have that?"

Obi-Wan held out a hand. "By all means. I'm not sure I can stomach anything right now."

She plucked it out of his hands and gulped it down as if her life depended on it. Then, she crashed into the booth next to them, and ran a hand over her face, fingers brushing over her headdress.

"Tea is non-alcoholic," Obi-Wan pointed out.

Ahsoka scoffed. "Last thing I need right now is a drinking problem. I'm just tired."

"I think we all are."

She heaved a sigh, and leant down, head cradled in her hands, elbows digging into her knees. "What are we going to do? There are so many of them. We won't be able to keep them all safe."

The part of him that was Vader seethed at that, that he wasn't powerful enough to fight off the Empire, pry away their greedy hands and stay them from squeezing the life out of what empty husks were left in the Alderaanian people. He tried to focus on the part of him that was still Anakin Skywalker, but he, too, was furious that their fate was left at the Empire's mercy -- of which it had none.

"We're going to have to try," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan smiled. "What was it Master Yoda always said? Do or do not, there is no try?"
Anakin shrugged. "Extenuating circumstances. We're gonna have to make an exception."

At this, Ahsoka almost spat out her tea. "I thought there were no exceptions to Master Yoda's rules."

"Sometimes, there have to be. The Code was... rigid, and it didn't often account for 'extenuating circumstances'." Obi-Wan shook his head. "In the end, that was its ruin."

"I guess, in this case, it's true. We'll either fail or succeed in saving the Alderaanians. There's no halfway when it comes to people's lives."

Obi-Wan rested a hand on his shoulder. "If we save even one life, then we won't have failed entirely, Anakin."

"Sometimes it doesn't feel that way, Master." He looked away, to where Leia and Verlaine sat. "I wish I could do more."

Ahsoka gave a slight nod. "So do I."

Anakin sat in almost the exact same spot, save for a few visits to the 'fresher, for the entire journey home. The empty checkered pattern on the hologame board had about burned itself into his eyes, but his mind was running too fast to find sleep or relief. The images of the weak, sick, shaking prisoners echoed over and over in his mind like a broken holovid, and not even the mind-numbing monotony of a starship flying without him at its helm could quiet his thoughts.

He'd stood and watched as Alderaan met its end. Leia had kicked at his knees, bloodied fingernails trying to scratch through the armour, practically spat in his face to free herself of his restraint. The rage and betrayal in her eyes had meant nothing to him at the time; he'd seen it far too many times before, in a thousand eyes in a thousand star systems. But now it meant something, now Alderaan meant something, as no planet had before. A symbol of what he'd allowed, and of what he'd instigated.

Palpatine and his cause were an escape -- an excuse -- to pretend he'd had a higher purpose, that there was a reason other than simple cruelty behind the Empire's actions. The path one inevitably followed to learn of the Darkness in the Force. But he'd been Palpatine's pet project, a puppet on strings, ever since he'd knelt and pledged loyalty, damned useless Anakin to nothingness where he belonged, and birthed Vader, instrument of a necessary creed, to rid the galaxy of Jedi poison.

It hadn't been necessary. None of this had been necessary.

Obi-Wan peered over at him, concern written in the furrow of his brow. "Are you alright, Anakin?"

"I can't stop thinking about Alderaan. They must have families, you know?" He ran a hand through his hair, still damp from sweat. "That kid, Bridger, I read up on him. Before the Alliance, he was nothing more than a common smuggler, orphaned and left to fend for himself. His father was with us the whole time.

"If Owen hadn't been there for Luke, and Bail for Leia..." He shook his head. "She might still have been on Alderaan, another Princess in her place, the Death Star still on the Rebel's trail... Point is, she got lucky, we got lucky. Everyone else didn't."

"You can't change the past, no matter how much you want to. Trust me, I've tried."

He slammed a hand down onto the gameboard, shaking it a little, startling no-one. "Why didn't the Force send us back? Why return us to this? Where we can fix nothing!"
Obi-Wan winced as he opened his mouth, as if he wished he didn't have to speak the words. "Perhaps the Force wished to teach us a lesson."

"What use is a lesson when everything is already lost?"

"Not all of it."

"Not all of it? What are our lives now? What are anyone's lives now?" The gameboard started to rattle, but Obi-Wan seemed as serene as ever, lowering a cautious hand to steady it, set it back into place as if it were a stray hair.

"Better than they were before, you can be certain. I'd lack one entirely, and Luke and Leia would be alone amongst the Jedi. Master Yoda is dying, as you well know. Only they would be left to resurrect the Order, and likely against your will. We have a long path ahead of us, Anakin, but it is far clearer than it could have been."

"We are four people, against planets' upon planets' worth. Their conditions remain the same."

"And when the Empire falls?"

"Will their families not still have been torn? Will their freedom bring back their dead?" Anakin sneered. "You know as well as I do how irreversible and fragile our mortality is, especially in the hands of the Empire. Life is not freely given, but it is freely taken away." He laughed. "I suppose the Force intended to remind me what part I played in that."

"I doubt that was the sole intention."

"Do you, old man? And what else could it have gotten from this?"

"Not it, you. The Force is no singular being, Anakin. You are left to make of this what you will. And there is more to this than repenting for past mistakes. It is not too late to take action."

"I suppose I should be glad. Any singular entity could not be this cruel." Save from myself, perhaps.

"A singular entity can make mistakes," Obi-Wan told him. "There is still hope, my love."

"'Have faith.'" Anakin waved a hand. "As I always have. I'll see if it pays off, when we stare down the eyes of the Emperor."

As Hoth came into the viewport's sights, Ahsoka stood him aside, arms crossed and eyes narrowed with suspicion. "I heard something about Ezra's father, back there."

"Yeah," Anakin said. "I was going to tell you about that. We found him on Hoth. Looked like the walking dead, if you ask me."

"But still alive?"

"Still alive."

"I'll need to let him know." Ahsoka walked a few paces forward, with fingers pinching the bridge of her nose and eyes clenched shut, then returned. "All this time, and he was right under our noses."

"It's not like you could've known, Snips."

"If I'd just looked harder!" She growled. "Ezra could have been reunited with his family years ago."
"I'm not sure Ephraim was... all there a couple years ago. The Empire took him. I think you know what that means."

"Did you know about that?"

"Not until he told me."

She leant against the wall, frustration driving her fingers into her palms. "It won't be easy. To break it to him, I mean."

"I guess I shouldn't be there?"

"Maybe not. I don't know." She sighed. "You could brief him on his father's progress, but I'm not sure he'd want to see you."

"Ask. If not, I can just send Ephraim in to meet him. I'm sure Mon Mothma will be fine with that."

"Alright. I'll ask."

He hung back in the shadows, feeling oddly guilty, as Ahsoka hailed Bridger's division on the holoprojector. He hoped the dark of his hood would hide what lines of his face the holo lit. Bridger wouldn't recognise him, but the other one, Jarrus. He would.

Ahsoka waited patiently, and then not so patiently. "I hope they're not caught up in a firefight right now." She straightened her posture, stretched, tapped rhythms onto the table, and finally hopped up to rest on it, looking sorely like she was in need of some caf. After a solid minute of nothing, the holo flickered to life, revealing Bridger, covered in dirt and smeared with blood, lightsaber in one hand, grenade in the other. Jarrus was behind him, guarding the archway they'd found cover in, while Syndulla swiftly disassembled and unjammed her blaster. He couldn't see the other two, Wren and Orrelios, but he assumed they were somewhere off screen. "You look like you've seen Hell," Ahsoka said.

"I could say the same for you," Bridger replied, with a laugh. "Phoenix Squadron is in the middle of 'borrowing' supplies from the Empire. They've put up the fiftieth blockade this year. It's getting kinda old."

"Believe me, I know." She frowned. "The Alliance has come across some intel you'd definitely be interested in. But I'm not sure now is the best time."

Bridger snorted. "You can't just drop that on me and not follow through. C'mon, what is it?"

"We have a lead on your father."

Bridger paled, and there were audible gasps from behind him. Jarrus shot forward, leaving his post half-abandoned, and Syndulla set her blaster cleanly down, eyebrows raised. "My dad? Where is he? Is he okay?"

Ahsoka turned to face Anakin briefly, motioning for him to speak.

He stepped forward, angling his face away from the holoprojector, and said in a low whisper, "In the south wing, by the cantina."

"Here on Echo Base," Ahsoka began, but Bridger leant forward, eyes narrowing.

"Who was that?"
"My source." Ahsoka crossed her arms. "As I was saying, we have your father, or at least someone who claims to be him, safe on Hoth for the time being. You know how fast our locations are compromised."

"I'll get there as soon as I can and confirm it." Bridger tilted his head. "Who's your source?"

"A Rebel," Ahsoka said.

"Why are you being so evasive?"

"I'm not being evasive."

"Is it classified? Commander, this is my dad we're talking about here. I want to know your source is reliable. It's been over a decade since my family disappeared, and still we have no breakthrough, and just now, suddenly, out of nowhere, you're saying-"

"Alright!" Ahsoka held up her hands. "He has knowledge of the Empire. Apparently, they had your father in custody -- probably holding him for information -- and the Alliance got him out. He's been recovering ever since."

Bridger gave her a hurt look. "That still doesn't tell me who your source is." He paused. "Commander, I can't believe I'm even asking this, but is it one of the Inquisitors? I've heard rumours about a 'defector', whoever that's supposed to be. Apparently they're some kinda big deal back at base."

"He's a little more than an Inquisitor."

"You're being shifty because your source was an Imperial?" Bridger gave a disbelieving huff. "Like we haven't forgiven and forgotten before. We're Jedi, remember?"

At this, Ahsoka only tensed further, looking distinctly ashamed, as if his presence there could somehow irreparably taint the Jedi Order. He wasn't really surprised. He took a hesitant step forward. "Maybe I should-"

Ahsoka shoved him back, with a powerful force he really should've come to expect, and shook her head violently. "Listen, Vader-" She cut herself short, then, as she realised the holoprojector was still on, and whipped around to face it.

Bridger had on an astonished look, which soon transformed itself to bitterness. "Your source is the Sith Lord, and you're actually trusting him? Commander, what the hell are you doing?"

"The rumours are true," she said. "Vader has defected, and by chance, he managed to find your father. In a way, we should be glad he likes to explore the base."

"Vader doesn't like anything!" Bridger turned to Jarrus, horrified. "Is she being, y'know, mind controlled? I can't tell over the holo, but I think-"

"I'm not under the influence of Jedi mind tricks," Ahsoka snapped, derisive, and with all the presence of a high-ranking official. Bridger cowered. "Trusting Vader would be beyond stupid." Anakin hid his wince in the thick robes, but Ahsoka wouldn't have noticed regardless. She was staring intently at Bridger, almost demanding he trust her. "But I can tell when someone's lying. He wasn't."

"Vader found my dad?" Bridger slid down the wall, holofeed following him, likely mounted on their small, angry little droid. The C1 series, Chopper, if his memory was accurate. It usually was. "Vader found my dad. I can't believe this is real."
"This is the last thing any of us expected, kid," Jarrus said, patting his shoulder lightly. "I'm sorry. On the bright side, at least we finally have a lead on your family."

"This has literally nothing to do with brightness. He's practically the epitome of the Dark, if you hadn't noticed," Bridger spat. "I hoped- What if he's lying and I come all this way- and it's- it's all for nothing?"

Anakin walked into the holo's range, pushing his hood out of his eyes, blinking at the harsh light. "It's not for nothing. I saw what I saw."

Jarrus reeled. "Skywalker?"

Bridger looked at Ashoka like she'd gone entirely mad. "Who the kriffing hell is that? Commander, you said Vader, not... this kid, whoever he is."

"I am Vader, boy," Anakin snapped. Kid! As if a reckless adolescent like Ezra Bridger could lecture him on maturity.

"You definitely weren't my age, last time I checked. And look, you're shorter."

"Excuse me-"

Ahsoka sighed, exhausted. "Look, what Vader means to say is, the Force returned him to his twenties, for whatever unfathomable, idiotic reason that was, and now he's here. With us. And also, his children. It's a very long story, Ezra, can we please just focus on what's important? Phoenix Squadron needs to rendezvous back at Echo Base as soon as possible."

"Vader being a kid isn't important? Vader having kids isn't important?"

"Not now," Ahsoka said, firmly. "Settle down. I'll explain when we're not on a channel vulnerable to Imperial interception."

"What can explain this?" Bridger said.

Syndulla looked betrayed. "Anakin Skywalker is Darth Vader? How could this have-"

"Later."

"Roger that, Fulcrum," Syndulla said. "Phoenix Squadron will rendezvous at twenty-one hundred hours. Tell Echo Base to expect our arrival."

"Understood, Captain Syndulla. Fulcrum out."

As the holofeed terminated, Ahsoka shielded her eyes with one arm, and sat in the nearest chair. She said nothing, opting instead to breathe slowly and attempt to focus herself in the Force. Breaking the silence was not a task he planned on taking up by himself, so he simply remained in place next to her and kept his mind firmly blank -- doing nothing, seeing nothing, hearing nothing.

He blinked back his oncoming headache. This would not be easy.

Chapter End Notes
Welp. That was a thing. That I did. I couldn't just leave the plotline unfinished! That would be, like, even more evil than Sheev Palpatine himself.

Um. But still. As I said last chapter, this kind of makes it a little AU!Everybody Lives, Nobody Dies? Sorry ;a;.

I haven't seen TFA (yet). I will soon. I'll just get Jossed more, I'm sure, but please don't tell me. I love to go in the theatre surprised ^o^.
Ahsoka left the room soon after, presumably to inform Mothma of their upcoming situation with Phoenix Squadron, and Anakin found himself alone in the dark, slumped over, half-asleep on the desk, knowing Ahsoka didn't trust him. This didn't come as a shock, considering their reactions had been entirely anticipated, save for the unwavering optimism in both his children and Obi-Wan. It was safer for them to doubt. He knew the risks, of being here, of renouncing his apprenticeship to Palpatine, of returning to the Light. He could still Fall, and the aftermath would be... beyond disastrous.

The hall echoed with someone's footsteps, and Anakin opened one eye. The walls were a dark, empty colour at this time of night, but Anakin could see light slowly approaching, spinning the arc of the doorway into a rhythmic pattern of mottled whites and blues. The footsteps quickened, intertwined with the slow hum of a lightsaber. Obi-Wan. Nobody else walked quite like he did.

"Are you alright? I heard about the situation with the Bridgers." Obi-Wan gave the room an unimpressed once-over. "What are you doing here, all by yourself in this dark, cold... entirely empty room."

Anakin pointed to the holoprojector. "It's a meeting room. I think. I hope. It's whatever the Alliance could scrounge up."

"And so you're in a meeting room, meeting with absolutely no-one." Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "This is where Ahsoka made the call."

"And you haven't left? It's been hours."

"I was thinking."

Obi-Wan's Force presence coloured with even more concern, but outwardly, he seemed calm, if a little amused. He wore masks better than Anakin himself could. "More like brooding, I'd say. And brooding is never a good idea for a Sith."

"Former Sith," Anakin corrected.

"Are you now? Is it official then?"

"I'm at least half-way there." He smiled, a little half-hearted. "I've never worried about risks before, y'know, but now it's basically all I ever worry about. Joining the Light, the Alliance? Neither of them want me back, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan sighed, and sat in the chair next to him, where Ahsoka had once been. If he was lucky, it might still be warm. "You really ought to ask for a second opinion more often, Anakin. Plenty of Alliance members are glad to have your allegiance. 'Better you're on our side than the Empire's.'" He hummed. "At least, I believe that's what they've been saying."

"You'd think otherwise if you'd been around to witness Bridger's reaction earlier."

"His ties to you are more personal," Obi-Wan said. "You've come to blows before. He has reason to
distrust your intel, even though what you've said has been entirely truthful."

"He thinks I'm giving him false hope."

"And yet he will find himself mistaken. If this Ephraim Bridger is who he says he is, that is."

Anakin scowled. "For his sake, he better hope so."

The night rolled on, the base lit only by flickering, failing electronics, and the three moons that hung above them. Obi-Wan sat with him in their quarters, waiting for Ahsoka to signal Phoenix Squadron's arrival. The waiting curled beneath his skin, setting him on edge and churning his stomach like the raging ocean far below him. He felt about as wet and cold.

It was unpleasant, but far worse conditions had found him before. Bridger was his primary concern. The boy was wild. He would lash out -- perhaps even Fall -- if he suspected Anakin of lying. And if this Ephraim was not his blood, he would set the blame on Anakin's shoulders, not on Ephraim's -- or whoever truly lay behind the man's empty eyes, behind the face scarred beyond recognition.

Perhaps the family resemblance would manifest more clearly in person, side-by-side. Anakin had no guesses. Ephraim's presence was too dulled to piece together.

Ezra's was far brighter. Noticeably brighter. The boy might not like what he found.

Anakin would know if he did. He'd seen the same look in his own children's eyes.

The ships rumbled into their touchdown at precisely twenty-one hundred hours, as Captain Syndulla had promised. They were pinpricks of light in the dark sky, until they grew larger and larger in Anakin's field of vision, flying in neat, pristine formation. He watched for errors -- small deviations in their flight path, a single misplaced turn -- and found none. They flew like soldiers and walked like soldiers and breathed like soldiers. It reminded him too much of the past.

Ahsoka watched their descent, eyes sharp, walking alongside the docking ships as they skidded into Echo Base's hangar bay. She had a small smile on her face -- a warmth Anakin hadn't seen directed at anyone but him, or the long-dead Plo Koon, in a long time. And now she wore it for the Rebel cell that had plagued him for five long years.

He frowned, looked at the tracks scraped into the snow by the bellies of starships, and then turned and followed them into the ice.

Syndulla guarded Bridger like a son, even though he'd long grown into his own skin. She set comforting hands on his shoulders, and whispered something to him Anakin didn't let himself hear. Jarrus gave him a firm pat on the back, and they were off, led by Ahsoka's rapidly-disappearing silhouette, headed to the South Wing.

Anakin didn't know if his presence would smooth things along, and he wasn't in the mood to test. Bridger's reaction to him could endanger the base, and his would-be father -- and if nothing, Mothma would hide him away, hurry him into the Alliance's dressed up form of solitary confinement, so they might spare the Rebels from the monster under their bed, who spoke in lies and cracked even the hermetic, unwavering control of the Jedi.

So he hung back in the shadows, tailed them until they reached the bunks Ephraim had made home to, and stood beside the door, staring at the wall and searching with the Force for any signs of trouble.
There were murmurs, frantic and bitten out fast and broken, then half-choking, wrenched out sobs. It seemed the son had finally found the father. The parallels turned his stomach, and he found himself rushing the path towards his quarters, trusting Ahsoka could handle the fallout. He didn't need to be here; he needed to be anywhere but here. He was already intruding on something he had no right to witness, any longer and he'd be breaching trust.

Obi-Wan was meditating when he returned, food left untouched, nightclothes folded beside him. Anakin slipped into his bunk, and tried not to break the silence. Everything was still, save for the rhythm of their breaths, and the gentle trickle of water, dripping and melting from the heat of lantern-light. He didn't dare disturb it. He couldn't imagine Obi-Wan had much time to find peace in the Force, not now he was parted from the endless emptiness of Tatooine sand. Perhaps not even then.

And his youth had been taken up by the needy, small slave boy he'd rescued from that hell of a planet. Darkened with the death of his master, burdened by a padawan who had all of the Force at his fingertips, and still wanted more.

No, Anakin didn't imagine Obi-Wan had found much peace at all.

Despite the cold, Anakin felt sweat slide down the arc of his neck, over his Adam's apple. He closed his eyes but couldn't sleep. He wanted to toss and turn, pace, spar, tire himself until he couldn't hold his eyelids open, but Obi-Wan would wake if he tried. The scratched metal underside of the bunk above him soon grew boring, burning itself into his eyes. He rose, took step after cautious step, and seated himself next to Obi-Wan.

Hoth held none of the same calm as the meditation chambers he'd built for himself in the Empire, but its distinct serenity, no matter how often it refused to come to him, would reach out and take him eventually. If he managed patience.

Footsteps roused him from his trance. Two pairs, close together, light and interspersed with whispers. His children. And yet he still held his eyes closed, trying to grasp the ends of rapidly retreating tranquility. It didn't work.

He opened one eye, trained on Obi-Wan, who was still entirely unaffected, even with the bright glow of the lantern dancing over his eyelids. His children stopped outside the door, talking to themselves, hushed but strained. They were arguing.

"Listen, Leia, I'm serious! Father really felt like he needed someone to talk to."

"I'm aware. I'm saying we shouldn't disturb Darth Vader when he's in a bad mood. Or do you want to lose your oxygen supply? Let Obi-Wan handle it."

"Are you kidding me? Ben's sleeping, or meditating. Even if he wasn't, you'd wanna leave him there alone, Leia? You can tell what they're both feeling, I know you can. You're telling me we shouldn't go in and help?"

"That's not what I said at all. Just not now. Didn't you see Phoenix Squadron land?"

A snort. "How could I miss that? They practically woke up the whole base. But it takes more than a couple of Rebels to get Father this upset."

"You don't know he has history with them?"

Luke paused. Feet scuffed against the floor. "Damn. No, I had no idea. He's run into Phoenix
Squadron before? When? And what happened?"

"They're led by his former padawan, Luke, of course he's run into them before. Captain Syndulla has
known Ahsoka for years."

"Well, maybe you could have told me that at the start of this whole thing." Luke sighed.

"I assumed you knew!"

"It does make a lot more sense. Did he-?"

"Try to kill them? Yes. And they attempted to return the favour. From what I've heard, Ezra had
barely any training when he first ran into our father. I think you can imagine how that turned out."

"And so now the guy that's been trying to kill him for years suddenly turns around and tells him
where his missing family's been his whole life. And joins their side, out of nowhere." Luke groaned.
"No wonder this is such a mess."

"Do you see why I told you to exercise at least some caution? You can't just run into everything

"My own father's not going to kill me!"

"He could have!"

He heard fabric shifting, as Luke crossed his arms. His Force presence went thoughtlessly
determined. "I'm still going to help him."

Anakin rubbed a hand over his face, catching on the scar that curved across his brow, aching from
unknown hurt. "You may come in."

Silence, then Luke and Leia stepped sheepishly into the room. Leia's expression was blank, but
Luke's was painted with a guilty smile. "Sorry, Father. Guess I forget how great your hearing is
sometimes."

"Thank you for your concern, Luke, but I'm fine." He thought so, at least. He could say with
certainty he had hold on the very edge of sanity, and that itself was miracle enough. Of course, none
of his internal struggle needed to be heaped upon his children's shoulders, and so he would say
nothing more. They shouldn't have to listen to him droning on about his problems night after night.
That was what meditation was for, after all. And likely why Obi-Wan was always trying it.

"Father," Leia cut in. "Luke may appear sweet, but he's sharp like the rest of us. You can't just lie to
his face and expect him to smile and nod along."

"'Appear sweet!'" Luke looked offended. "It's not just appearance. But Leia's right. I may be an
idealistic, but I'm not an idiot. I know when people are okay, and you definitely aren't."

Anakin blinked. "You're not my therapists, you really don't need to-"

Luke shrugged. "If you don't wanna talk about it, you can come with us to the repair station and lend
a hand instead. It might help take your mind off things. And help the Rebels, too. They don't all have
the Force to work with them."

He'd underestimated them once more. It was becoming a habit, but not one he planned on keeping.

He peeked at Obi-Wan, who was as composed as usual. Not a hair out of place. Breaths slow and
steady. He seemed perfectly content, even after spending countless hours folded into the same exact position.

"Alright," Anakin said. "Lead the way."

He thought he felt oil on his face, but it didn't matter. The state of the ship did. One of the lucky ones in the escape from Yavin, they'd said. It didn't look particularly lucky.

*Nobody in this dump looks particularly lucky.*

The Rebels were clearly struggling to keep their hands from shaking. Occasionally, they'd slip, scratch a fresh mark into the hull of their fighter, and begin again. They looked sick and overworked. Cracked lips bled as they pulled back in a uniform wince, sensation lost in the mayhem of the repair bays. They were miserable, and yet he hadn't heard a single complaint. It was an admirable effort.

He was shaken out of his thoughts by Ahsoka emerging from the bay's entrance, Phoenix Squadron at her side. Bridger's eyes were red and puffy, but there was hope etched onto every line of his face. Jarrus and Syndulla doted on him like a child, but he held out placating hands, shaking his head. He seemed happy.

And then he walked in Anakin's direction, and Anakin started, tensing and dropping the wrench in his hand to the floor with a loud clatter. He stared at it as if it had personally betrayed him, and then tried to put on a smile as Bridger got steadily nearer and nearer. He imagined it looked fake.

Bridger peeked down beneath the ship and eyed him sharply. "So I guess you're Darth Vader."

He nodded and managed a small noise of affirmation around his smile.

"You can quit that," Bridger said, with a pointed snort. "I could tell that smile was fake from across the room."

He flinched. "I'm not the smiling type."

Bridger looked at him. "Wow, you don't say." Then, he shrugged, shaking it off as if it were nothing. "I figured I should be thanking you, y'know, for finding my dad. I don't understand you at all, but it means everything to have found him again, so. Thanks. For that. And for giving up on trying to kill the Ghost Crew."

"You and your crew have impressive... tenacity," he settled on, finally.

Jarrus let out an exaggerated sigh at this, looking somehow exasperated and pleased simultaneously. Bridger elbowed him. "That's one way to put it."

"What my master is trying to say is, he's grateful we're not all dying from strangulation right now, and we were just leaving."

"I'm glad I could find your father for you," he said, as they made their retreat. Syndulla turned and gave him a surprised look, her hand still on Bridger's shoulder. But Bridger nodded solemnly and continued on with his crew, tugging at Syndulla's jumpsuit, patting the head of their loudmouthed droid, who rumbled like a contented feline. Only Jarrus trailed behind, wearing the distinct lingering, haunted stare of someone who'd known him before the Dark.

He supposed it wasn't every day you saw ghosts. Especially not one from a past the galaxy had spent decades trying desperately to erase.
Chapter End Notes

There are times when I have no idea what I've just written. This incoherent nonsense just flows out of me sometimes.

As always, enjoy. <3 And Happy Christmas (or, the day after)!
Luke was growing more and more tired of his nightly patrol by the second. The blizzard was harsh tonight, not harsh enough to send them flying back to the relative warmth of Echo Base, but still a pain, biting at his skin and making his eyes water. Wind-blown tears were streaming down his face, and part of him thought they might freeze in place on his cheeks.

They didn't, thank the Force. That would have been humiliating. Especially when Han was taking the patrol in stride, chatting aimlessly about some of the more interesting things he'd seen on base the past few days. His mouth was almost blue from the cold, but he kept on talking. It was kind of comforting, when Luke felt like a complete wreck, trying not to let his nose begin to stream like his eyes.

He'd thought he'd hated Tatooine's dry heat more than anything. But this cold was perhaps even worse.

They were headed out to the Rock Field tonight. Han had named it that, in a burst of true creativity, when they'd first began patrolling Hoth, what felt like years ago. It was likely the only landmark for kilometres upon kilometres, aside from a few stray craggy patches of stone, a shrub here and there. It marked the only point of reference they had on this heap of a planet, other than radar guidance. Should the equipment fail, the Rock Field, the only narrow strip of land bare of snow, was their only chance at survival.

"I wonder if the blizzard's maybe a little calmer at the Rock Field," Han said lightly. He didn't seem to believe his own words.

"Are you gonna mark that on an official Alliance map?"

"What? The Rock Field?" Han snorted. "No way. Nothing ever happens there, anyway. It's just something to think about in this plane of... nothing."

Luke hummed his agreement. Though they left every night hoping patrol would be uneventful, the emptiness of it all sometimes caught up to them. With only a tenuous hold on the Force, Luke felt very alone in Hoth's wasteland. There were none of the buzzing, excited bursts of energy from the Rebels back at base here in the snow. Only Han, their mounts, himself, and the stray wampa every so often. It was so deathly quiet sometimes, Luke would whistle out a tune into the unhearing storm, just to keep himself from going crazy.

They were close to the field now, tauntauns growling as their feet hit solid ground, and Luke let out a sigh of relief. "Maybe we should camp out here for a little? Dunno about you, but I'm starved."

"Sure, kid." Han eyed Luke's satchel. "You bring anything good?"

Luke didn't answer. On the horizon, where the rocks began and the ice blanket ended, there was a cloud of smoke, rising and mixing into the blizzard around them. Glimpses of light blinked in and out from his field of vision. Electronic and sparking, rather than natural flame.

"You see that?"

Han squinted ahead. "Meteorite?"
"I don't think so."

He approached with apprehension, inching slowly closer, tugging on his tauntaun's reins, so that it might trot as carefully as it could. They were easily spooked, and Luke couldn't afford to fall off the saddle and lose track of himself in the snow -- not when this could be more than a meteorite.

It was looking more and more like something artificial by the second. After all, meteorites didn't make noise, or spark, or move.

"That's a droid," Luke said, more to himself than to Han. He stared into the smoke, reflexes gone numb with shock, and rode no farther. Han pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head, muttering about bad luck and the sheer nerve of the Empire.

This wasn't supposed to be happening. From the dark of space, Echo Base was virtually indistinguishable from the white of Hoth's natural snow-cover. Sending a droid to search here was a waste of time and resources, and oozed desperation. It was clear Palpatine wanted his father back -- needed him back, and urgently. From what he'd seen of the Empire already, a replacement apprentice of similar skill would be virtually impossible to find -- and if he didn't have to, the Emperor wouldn't settle for second best.

It was pure luck that the scouting droid had landed near Rebel civilisation. And yet it had.

"Why now?"

"I dunno, kid." Han gave an exhausted shrug. "Let's shoot the thing down and report back to base. Her Highness is gonna need to prepare the troops for an attack. Hell, she'll be sent out, too, with the sorry state we're in."

"You think the droid had a chance to send word back to the Empire? It's badly damaged, from what I can see. Hit the Rock Field hard, I guess."

"They're practically made for crash landings. It may be half-dead, but its comm systems are always the last to go. They'll hang on for hours if you let them." He waved his blaster, then aimed it in the droid's direction. "Trick is, we won't let them."

"If it's too late, shouldn't we keep it? Use it for information?"

Han snorted. "Information? Only things they send out with scouting droids are maps, and coordinates home. It's not the Empire that's trying to hide its location, farmboy."

Luke continued to stare.

"Oh, don't tell me you're feeling sorry for it."

"No, no." Luke looked away. "Go ahead, shoot it. Then we'll head back to base."

Ahsoka didn't move for a full minute, just standing and looking increasingly more furious. Her hands were clenched into fists by her sides, teeth grinding. But unlike Father, her anger was a rallying call in the Force. It shook him, true, but it didn't have the cold, dead, sickly-sweet taste of Vader's rage. It was rigidly controlled, perhaps purposefully.

"We'll have to inform the base," she said, after a while. Her voice rasped, darkened where it had always been so light. "I refuse to let this outpost fall to the Empire like Yavin did. We will not slink away with our tails between our legs, cowering and trembling every time the Imps get close. No."
She looked to Luke. "Get your family. We're going to put up a front."

Luke saluted her, dragged a stunned Han behind him, and exited quickly to the hallway outside.

"That's it? We're just gonna fight?" Han asked. "Isn't it better to run? The Empire's not gonna make the mistake of underestimating us twice."

"Then we'll be evenly matched," Luke said.

They stood for a scant few seconds, processing their surroundings, until the ear-piercing, wall-shaking klaxon of Red Alert sirens began to stir the base. Luke shook himself. "We need to hurry."

His sister's voice filtered over the intercom, and he paused, briefly. If she was in the control centre, would Father follow? "Attention! The Empire has our location. ETA in one hour. Evacuation will not be necessary. Prepare our arsenal, and expect full resistance. Do not, under any circumstance, let the Empire reach the Power Generator. Protect it at all costs." A burst of static, as the intercom link terminated, and Luke was rushing towards the North Wing, to General Command.

"There's no way we can defend ourselves against the Empire," Han said, running along Luke's left side. He kept up the pace, matching stride-for-stride, with practiced balance. Luke imagined smugglers found themselves running for their lives almost all the time.

"We have lasercannons, gunships, a stolen AT-AT, and Darth Vader on our side. Odds are, we'll win."

Han scoffed. "Don't talk to me about odds, kid. The Empire churns out weapons faster than you and I can count. We're outmatched."

"They'll get nowhere without Father to lead them. All their other generals were killed at the Battle of Yavin, Han. They have no idea what they're doing."

"Even an uncontrolled army can manage a few hits, Luke. Enough random blasterfire, and they'll fire into something living eventually."

Luke glared at him. "So we don't let them get that close. Are you just gonna run away, Han? You didn't last time."

"No. I'm not running away. I'm just saying, don't make their mistakes for them. Underestimating the Empire has gotten people killed for decades. Trust me, I've seen it."

Luke sprinted forward, bounding through the corridors and weaving through the panicked crowd. Han crashed through the gaps left behind him until they were side-by-side once more. "I'm not underestimating them," Luke said. "I just think we can do it, Han."

"Whatever you say, kid."

General Command was a wreck, even when the base wasn't on Red Alert. On Hoth, you could never be particularly organised, or prepared, with water dripping into every piece of tech around, but General Command was something else altogether. It was like a winding snake of people and papers, slithering through every passageway, and somehow managing enough cohesion to think and act as one.

Leia was at the centre console, hair falling into her face, sweating in spite of the sub-zero temperatures. Her eyes flew and darted across the screen as she read the incoming data, soon to be
translated into commands for the Rebels flocking to her in droves.

"Luke," she said, eyes never leaving the screen. "Our father's over there." She motioned behind her, and Luke spared a quick second to glance over in Father's direction. He was wearing the armour, towering above the Rebels and sending them flitting by, skittish. Ben stood at his side, looking truly like the general he was fabled to be. While the masses shied away from Vader, they looked openly to Ben, who led them as he'd led many a soldier before. "I'll be out on the field in a moment," Leia said. "I'm checking our stocks in the weapons hold."

Luke nodded, and then pushed through the crowd as gently as he could, until he reached his father. "Aren't you gonna give orders, too?"

Vader's steady breathing transformed into a loud scoff. "They'd either wet themselves in terror, or tell me just how little my authority means to them here in Alliance space."

Han eyed him. "And how d'you feel about that?"

Father returned the stare, and though Luke could sense both concern and amusement from him, he was entirely still. "They will listen to me if it is necessary."

Han looked as if he didn't know what to say to that, and then shrugged. "Well, I guess it's true. If there's anyone who can scare people into blind submission, it's probably him."

Ben let out a surprised laugh at this. "Well, that was certainly heartening."

There was a sort of rumbling chuckle from Vader, almost pleased. Well, Luke did get the sense Father liked it when people played into his façade of an ego. He couldn't say he was shocked. "I don't intend on scaring them into submission. I only give orders when they need to be given."

Suddenly, there was a loud snort, and Luke blinked as Ahsoka slipped out of the nearest corridor. "Well, that's quite the change from last I knew."

"I didn't order you," Father said, unruffled. "I simply made suggestions."

"Some of which were entirely ridiculous."

Father looked to Ben, and then to Luke himself. "Believe none of this. Commander Tano is entirely mistaken."

"So, you never told me to shave off Master Obi-Wan's beard while he was sleeping?"

Vader twitched. "Pure hearsay." Ben raised an eyebrow. "And nothing more. These are baseless accusations."

Ahsoka choked down hysterics, and failed. "In the suit, hearing that, I can't even comprehend-"

"Balance, they said." Vader sighed. "It's perfectly achievable, they said." He removed the helmet, revealing Anakin's warm smile, clear eyes, free of that sickly yellow. The other Rebels perked up at this, and some began to head to Father for orders, instead of bombarding Ben with lines upon lines that trailed down the farthest ends of the hallway.

Luke caught whispers. "He's not as intimidating when he's not choking you, or glaring at you."

Privately, he agreed.
The cheery mood dissipated when Luke was sent to the docking bay for boarding. The snowspeeders were small and underwhelming in the face of the Imperial fleet, and their lasercannons looked as menacing as a children’s toy. The Rebels would have to utilise every bit of what little Jedi support they had.

Ahsoka rested a warm hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, Luke. I think you'll find we still have a few tricks up our sleeves."

Luke didn't know what to think. Targeting Imperial troops required precision. Snowspeeders excelled at smooth manoeuvres and fast dives, but it would take a few shots from their cannons to properly destroy an AT-ST. And the AT-AT... They had one, to the Empire's hundreds. Was there really shame in admitting when you were outmatched?

"I know that look," Ahsoka said. "Have faith, little Skywalker. We'll get by."

He nodded, and headed towards the nearest speeder. His aim hadn't failed him in the past, and he trusted his family would have his back. It was scratched, beaten up, but a quick check with the Force confirmed it was in working order. That was about as good as it could get in conditions like these, if what he'd seen was any example.

He was making further checks when his father's breathing slipped into hearing range. Ben and his sister were there, too, he could sense. He was making progress in his Force identification abilities, moulding into second nature, so integral he had no idea how he'd ever lived without it.

Leia gave his arm a brief pat, and breezed past, towards the AT-AT. She stood at its feet for a while, looking intrigued, and then propelled herself up onto the head of the great metal beast. There, she knelt, and Luke watched in surprise as she lifted the hatch and set one tentative foot inside.

"What are you doing?"

Leia tilted her head in his direction. "Driving, apparently." She smiled, barely noticeable. "You look small from down here, you know. I see why Ahsoka calls you Junior."

Luke snorted. "Thanks. Any reason you're driving? Do you even know how to drive?"

"I'm driving because nobody has a lightsaber to spare around here. I was hoping Master Yoda could help me with that, but I suppose that will have to wait now." She sighed. "The Empire's getting in my way. Luckily, our father has extensive knowledge of the AT-AT's systems. He's a surprisingly good teacher for someone so..."

Ben winked, and even from so many metres above, Leia didn't miss it. A smirk curled the corner of her mouth, wry. "Many words come to mind when attempting to describe Anakin, as you can see."

Father shrugged -- a gesture that didn't look quite right on someone of his... intimidating stature -- and said, "What can I say? I'm not a one word kinda person."

Ahsoka shook her head. "I doubt I'll ever get used to that."

"Back to business, boys," Leia called, and disappeared into the depths of the AT-AT's hull.

It was clear when the Imperials arrived that they meant business. Luke had known Palpatine wouldn't make the same mistake twice, but some minimal yet idealistic part of him had hoped a small hope: that the Emperor might underestimate them still. Of course, that was optimism at its worst. The Emperor had gone overboard instead, dropships unloading piles upon piles of AT-ST's, knocking
into each other with clumsy chicken legs in their bustling attempt to head towards the Power Generator.

Father wouldn't allow that to happen. As Luke sped through the snow, sleet spattering his windshield, Father had nestled himself like an astromech on Luke's speeder, boots just overhead. As they passed Imperial troops, Father sent the blade of his lightsaber spinning through, cutting cleanly across stray AT-ST's legs, leaving their crew to crawl out, shivering, into the snow.

Ahsoka and Ben were to his right, plunging sabers into the entry hatches of AT-AT's, attempting to smuggle Rebel pilots into their holds and hijack the controls. Give them a chance to even the playing field, for once. Success was half-bought. The AT-AT's they'd captured were sent lumbering into the heart of Imperial battalions, crushing troops underfoot. Those they hadn't made every attempt to shake them off like flies, until Ahsoka hung from their flank, one hand on the saber she'd slid to the hilt inside, the other trying to cushion her fall.

The husks of burnt-out snowspeeders speckled Luke's path, sending him into a winding tailspin, desperate not to meet the same fate. The Force was his only guide, but even it couldn't prevent death. If he missed one turn, he'd go down in a flaming wreck, and take his father with him.

It was a miracle he'd managed to hang on thus far. But that was what decades of Force training got you, he supposed.

His vision was all white, but something in him screamed danger on all sides. Vader, a swirl of Light and Dark, stormy above him, acting as his gunner, even from outside the ship. The Troopers he'd hit, despite all effort to do otherwise, rolling behind them, and coming to rest, so still they were almost indistinguishable from the snow beneath. The only tell was the sickly crimson bleeding into the ground around them.

"And to think that," Vader said, "they ever doubted the Force. A shame they don't have the breath to learn the lesson in this."

Sweat dripped into his eyes. He blinked water back, screwed stinging eyes tightly shut, yet his eyelids wouldn't shade him from the corpses tossed in every direction, Rebels and Imperials alike. He had other ways to see, now.

It was war, but sharp, roiling guilt twisted and scratched at his stomach like a vice. But he had to fight, or the Stormtroopers wouldn't be the only ones finding themselves cut and broken on the floor.

"How's it looking?" Luke asked. "Can't see much right now."

"Your sister has cleared us quite the path." The comm crackled as Father strained to sense further. "Ahsoka and Obi-Wan are alright. We're gaining on them, getting closer to victory as we speak."

Were they? Were they really?

"That's kinda hard to believe," Luke said, tentatively. "We're outnumbered, by far."

Father leant down, mask aligning with the side viewport in an absurd parody of a greeting. "Your lack of faith disturbs me."

Luke frowned. "Something tells me you've said that before."

"And I was right then, as I am now." A hint of Anakin, sudden in the barren, expressionless mask. "I usually am, y'know."
He skidded to a halt, circling back to oversee the battlefield again. Red in the snow, smoke rising, obscuring everything but blasterbolts, shining and piercing in the clouded sky. Cut tow cables trailing like leashes on the feet of half-fallen AT-AT's. "You think we'll win this?"

More hints of the kindness Vader had failed to extinguish. "Lemme count. Two Padawans, one Jedi Knight, one Jedi Master, and one Sith Lord. Dunno about you, but I think we've got this covered."

Luke wasn't stupid. He got the feeling people viewed him as a sheltered idealist, which was half-true, but Tatooine wasn't all warm sun and sweet fruit. It had been, and would be, far from paradise. Luke had seen things, there, learnt at a young age what it meant to live in this galaxy, where some were dealt a better hand than others. He also knew exactly what his father was attempting to do. On the nights when Luke was young and the Sand People eager to raid houses alone in the desert, Beru would read to him, distract him, weave stories of magic and unbowed, unbroken Jedi. His father was trying as best he could to offer comfort in a life without. For the most part.

Caring, in any form, meant Darth Vader wasn't the empty husk he'd first met on the Death Star, and that was progress beyond what anyone could've hoped. That itself was comfort enough. That the Force didn't abandon the Chosen, even when he'd abandoned himself.

But instead, Luke said, "If you say so, Father. I just hope you can still aim at high speed, 'cause now we're pushing it."

Luke hadn't kept count of the hours.

Imperial forces came in wave after wave, until exhaustion had blurred his vision and dulled his mind. And, when it became clear the Rebels would fight tooth and nail until they had none, then, and only then, they stopped. Stragglers dragged themselves inch-by-inch into emptied dropships and simply left. Packed up and flew away.

Echo Base was free, and bleeding.

There was life in the snow, now. Some Imperial, some Rebel, all hurt and choking and wet and cold. The Force around him was filled with the pain of hundreds of troops. Soldiers staggering through harsh wind, and others lying down and giving up. A cacophony of anger and sickness.

The Rebels beside him looked at Vader as if he were a singularity, drawing their attention, and consequent horror, like a black hole's inescapable gravity. One, spitting teeth onto the ground, had the soundness of mind to speak up.

Coughing, he said, "I've never seen him fight like that before. Well, I have, but that wasn't on our side, and frankly I was lucky to live through it." He stared at the blood on Vader's suit -- Imperial blood. "I don't know what to think."

In battle, there wasn't much of Anakin left, Luke had noticed. He was never gone, but he faded, replaced by a strange, single-minded hatred that made his ears ring. Vader always controlled the fight, as if he didn't trust the Jedi in him to manage it. "Anger is a weapon," he told the Rebels beneath him. "Use it."

Then he turned to Luke, and the battle was won, and Anakin had no need for Vader anymore. Sometimes it scared him how easily Father could switch from Light to Dark. "Looks like we won. You did good out there, Luke. You definitely take after me. When it comes to flying, that is." He patted Luke's shoulder. "Maybe not so much the other stuff, huh?"

ON OCCASION, CRACK LIKES TO WEASEL ITS WAY BACK INTO THIS STORY. I AM TRULY SORRY FOR THIS MONSTER I HAVE CREATED. Enjoy the Battle on Hoth tho. Hopefully. ;a;

I know it's quite the change from canon, but I'm pretty attached to Echo Base after all this, and I don't really want to let it go quite yet (but soon). Besides, Vader's still looking imposing and striding through its hallways like he belongs there, right? Just in different circumstances ;).

Regarding, like, the entire fight though... Um. TFW when Battlefront. That is all.

(I pre-write these, and it came out like a week ago as I type this, so. It's kind of influencing my vision of the Hoth battle. It's totally canon, right? *flails*)

As you can see, I still have no idea what I'm doing. And on a more recent note (because post pre-writing), I saw TFA! No words. Literally amazing. Won't spoil anything, because I'm not so cruel as that D:! Spoilers are like stepping on lego, but a thousand times more painful. All I can say is, I had a tonne of fun, but I can't say much for the originality of the plot. Still, so worth it.
Ezra had never seen a base so awful. Well, that wasn't true, exactly. He'd seen a lot over the years. After Lothal, at the age of fifteen, he'd thought he knew the worst the galaxy could offer. Of course, he'd been wrong. He couldn't have known, not even guessed, the extent of what he'd come to see. And yet, Echo Base had been run-down from the start, and now half of its occupants were dead.

It was chaos, the Rebels' unique brand, but chaos still, and if intel was correct, there were Alderaanian refugees here that needed... actual, legitimate refuge. Not whatever this had become.

Commander Tano was overseeing the repair operations, but it was quickly becoming clear how long this would take, and how unnecessary an effort it was. The Empire knew where they were, and they never left an Alliance station untouched. It was clinging to hope, to stay here.

And yet they were.

The Alderaanians were... a mess. Ezra was reminded of Lothal often, but never more than now. Masses, huddled, shaking and cold, cowed by the Empire's scare tactics. It was disgusting, and this was as safe as they'd find in this war-torn cluster of stars. They'd been herded into strongholds, small, stuffy rooms, with walls stronger than durasteel, reinforced a thousand times over. They had meagre rations, whatever the Alliance could spare, and their clothes, Imperial prisoners' jumpsuits. He knew just how little protection those offered.

This is what the Empire had made of them. Scared, broken, and cold, hiding away in steel cages like animals. He wished they could do better, but Imperial reach was endless, and the Rebel corners of the galaxy were abandoned, inhospitable, chewed up and spit out. The Empire's sloppy seconds.

"Commander Tano," he spat out, between chattering teeth. "We can't just leave them here."
"We're not," she said. She looked away, seething. "We won, and yet we'll have to leave."
"You know what happens when the Empire finds-"
"Yes. Yes, I know."
"And you know that leaving is our only-"
"Yes," she repeated. Ezra doubted the cold was making her fists shake. "I'm perfectly aware, Ezra."
He tilted his head. "You really hate the Empire, don't you?"
"More than anything."
"Then why are you so calm around... him."

Ahsoka looked at him, and said nothing, so Ezra made his hands into a triangle and raised them to his mouth. Then, he breathed with such obnoxiousness that Ahsoka did a double take. "Yes, Ezra, I knew exactly who you meant. You don't need to-" She waved at him, and he lowered his hands, but not his smirk. "Very good impression."
He hummed. "You still haven't answered my question."

"What's there to answer? We're Alliance officials. I have a professional reputation to maintain."

"I think they'd allow you to lose your temper with Darth Vader, Commander Tano."

Ahsoka shook her head. "He's different. See for yourself." She made a sweeping gesture, and Ezra realised she was no less confused than he was. "Around his kids, it's almost like..."

"He's a Jedi again?"

She stared at him, eyes wide, as if Darth Vader and Jedi weren't allowed in the same sentence. "You don't know much about what happened, do you?"

"Nobody's really explained anything about any of this to me since I arrived here." Ezra gave a casual shrug. "I have no idea what's going on half the time."

"He was a great man, once. A very long time ago. And almost a great Jedi, if it weren't-" She sighed. "Well. I'm sure you know, as all of us do. Still, he taught me more about the Force than I could ever imagine, and yet I always felt..." She gave a pinched, angry smile. "I felt like I had a better grasp on sanity than my very own master."

"Then why is he here? Why is he cooperating? And maybe even more importantly, why are you cooperating? He's left a string of people who are all- I don't know. Wrong? Wrong in the Force? Everyone who knew him before, they're all-"

"About as sane as he is?" She laughed, cold and bitter. "He does that."

"I mean, this sounds bad, but sometimes I feel like I'm the only one around Vader who's balanced, or at least unbiased, or something. Everyone I know seems to have some connection with him, even in a small way, and they're all- Not the same as they were, I guess. Not like I would know."

"You're right," she said. "They're not the same. None of us are. But it's better he stays here than-" "Loose in the galaxy, free for the Empire to capture? Yeah, I figured." Ezra held out his hands. "I mean, someone needs to keep an eye on him. If it's not me, it's you, right? I don't think the others could do it, and Kanan... He can't even look at Vader right. It's like we're not seeing the same person."

"Trust me when I say you're not." Ahsoka's eyes were clouded and wistful, as she stared at empty space. "It's probably better you never knew him. You don't have to know what we all- what we all lost, when he Fell."

"I'm guessing it was a lot."

Ahsoka snorted. "More than," she spat. "The Jedi lost the only family they'd ever known to his hand, and our Hero with No Fear died to let Vader take his place. I should have seen it coming."

"There were signs?"

Ahsoka laughed humourlessly. "There were many. Perhaps Anakin was Vader all along. I don't think I'll ever know, and I don't think Vader himself does either. She held her hands behind her back, and turned her gaze to the floor, pensive. "If he has the capacity to change so much now, maybe I'm right. Maybe my master and Darth Vader are the same person. And what does that say about any of us? About the Order?"
"Well, we're a new generation, right? Me, his kids, the other Force-sensitives? We have a chance to do it again, and watch for the signs. You can learn from your mistakes, this time. I know it sounds pretty cold, it was better in my head, I swear, but. You still can, can't you?"

"Yeah. We can. And I plan to."

Ezra was full of stupid ideas, but he found that at least half of them seemed to work in his favour. Still, even he was unsure of this, strolling up to Darth Vader's quarters and inviting himself in for, what, a cup of tea?

But he wanted answers. Phoenix Squadron, his family, blood and otherwise, they'd all fought long and hard, and lost about as much, to make a dent in the Empire's endless reign. Vader had terrorised them for half a decade, and now he was setting it all down, giving it all up? How did that make any sense? So, the Force made him share his age with his own son, and even Ezra himself. And? Vader was more than arrogant enough to brush that off like dust.

What had changed?

Vader's quarters were simple, from the outside. There was a small plaque, next to the door, reading "QUARTERS OF: DARTH VADER & OBI-WAN KENOBI. PLEASE KNOCK." Then, scribbled in messy handwriting below, "PLEASE NO LYNCH MOBS. -ANAKIN." Ezra stood and stared at it for longer than was probably healthy.

He held out a hand to knock, and then thought otherwise. If he interrupted a fight, there would be a blazing, sizzling lightsaber at his throat within seconds. So, instead, he listened.

There was warm laughter from within, and the sarcastic binary of a very familiar Rebel droid. Vader was talking to Artoo?

He tapped at the door. There was shuffling, then, "That's not Obi-Wan, is it, Artoo?"

Vader opened, looking suspicious, and then dropped his gaze down to Ezra. He was as tall out of the suit as he was in, Ezra noticed. It was stupidly intimidating, and Ezra felt fifteen again, scared padawan, hiding from the Sith he'd unintentionally set on his tail. Vader's eyes, an odd, calm blue, narrowed. "You?"

"Uh, yes, me." Artoo pushed aside one of Vader's legs and let himself out of the room. He chirped out a friendly greeting, which was reassuring familiarity in unfamiliar territory. "Hello, Artoo."

Vader eyed him. "Are you looking for General Kenobi?" He waved a hand. "You will not find him here. Try my son's quarters. They should be training at this time of day."

"Err, no, I was looking for you, actually."

At first, Vader let out an incredulous laugh, which soon died away as he realised Ezra was deadly serious. Emphasis on the deadly. He was beginning to reconsider his entire life, when finally Vader stepped aside, and motioned for him to enter. He set foot after cautious foot inside, until he came to rest in a small little chair in the corner. Vader didn't sit, and instead opted to stand above him, both eyebrows raised, sceptical. "You were looking for me?" he repeated.

"Yeah," Ezra started. "I want to know where we stand."

"In a room on Hoth, boy. Are you in need of a visit to the medbay?"
Was that— Was Vader joking with him? Ezra snorted, and then covered his mouth. What if he wasn't? Oh, Force, he had no idea what he was doing. "No, I think I'm good. I just— Nobody's really explained anything. At all. And I figured, who better to ask then, well, you?"

"And you're not worried that I might lie to you?"

"I think I could tell. Y'know, with the Force. Probably."

"Perhaps." Vader sat, then, at the edge of his bed, facing Ezra directly. His expression transitioned from suspicious to inquisitive. "What did you want to know?"

"Did you really train Ahsoka?" Ezra asked. Force knew why that was the first thing he wanted to know, but it was better to start somewhere than to risk trying Vader's patience.

"She was my padawan in the Clone Wars," Vader told him. "But I think you'll find she's more than capable of telling you that herself."

"Nobody likes to talk about it. Except your son. And General Kenobi." Ezra fidgeted. "My master doesn't say much about the Jedi Order, before the Empire. And Commander Tano is... well, she doesn't like talking about it, either."

"Understandable," Vader said, and didn't clarify.

"So, you were a Jedi, like us?"

"I was. The Order took me in when I was nine."

"And your name wasn't always Vader?" That was a dumb question, but some part of Ezra just wanted to hear him say it. Confirm what nobody else could.

"No. Palpatine gave me the title when I joined the Sith."

"So your name, before, it really was Anakin Skywalker?"

Vader was being remarkably patient with him, for someone who so often liked to print bruises on his neck. "I think that much is obvious," he said, with light amusement.

"I just— Kanan showed me the holos," he said, and Vader tilted his head. "Of the Clone Wars. You're not much alike."

"People change," Vader said. He raised a hand, and tapped two fingers to his head. "Anakin is still here."

"Commander Tano said you're... still like him, sometimes." Ezra swallowed. "That doesn't really make sense. You can just, I dunno, switch? Whenever you feel like it?"

Vader's posture relaxed, then, and a small smile curled at the corners of his mouth. His eyes warmed, much like General Kenobi's, or Kanan's. Like a Jedi Master's. "Well, not when I'm mad," he said, with a voice much higher than the one Ezra had heard come from his mouth only seconds ago. Ezra blinked at him. "It gets kinda hard to control when I'm mad. But Snips probably told you that, too, huh?" He raised an eyebrow, teasing. "Or maybe she didn't."

Ezra felt like he'd been turned upside down and flipped upright again in an instant. "What- How-?"

Vader pushed Anakin back, and the warmth lessened, slightly. But it didn't disappear, not completely. "People change, but they do not forget."
"I can see that," Ezra said. "Okay, so I think now I get what she was talking about. Really- I- Wow." He paused. "So, you're really with us now?"

"Yep," Vader said, suddenly friendly. "Y'know, if you ever need answers, I promise I won't pull the intimidation routine again. Trust me, I know what Jedi mysticism is like. Feel free to stop by whenever." He looked toward the door. "There's only one rule: no lynch mobs. If you tried not to bring any around during your visit, that'd be great."

"You'll just... tell me?"

"Of course. I'm uniquely qualified to talk about the Jedi Purge, after all." He frowned. "Unless you'd like to talk to someone else? I understand my... tendency to be capricious disturbs people."

"No. I think I get it now."

It made about as little sense as anything else in his world, especially since the Force had become such a great part of it. Maybe Vader's return to the Light was a sign. He'd heard Kanan call him "the Chosen". Maybe he was supposed to prove that nobody was irredeemable. That the Light and the Dark Sides of the Force could find a middleground.

Somehow, that made him feel a lot better.

"Thank you," he said, slow.

Vader blinked. "For what?"

"I dunno. For being honest and open, where nobody else has? I never thought I'd be saying that to you, of all people, but... I appreciate it."

A smile. "Any time."

Ahsoka pulled him aside, snapping him out of his reverie, and bombarding him with concern and disapproval. "What were you thinking back there?"

"I know. It was stupid. But it cleared a lot up, a lot that I needed to know. Nobody else has been particularly, y'know, forthcoming about any of this. You hid it from me, too, that he was your master."

Ahsoka sighed. "You're right, I did hide it from you. The less people involved in Vader's problems, the better."

"He's clearly been through a lot. I'm not saying that excuses what he did, 'cause I'm about the last person to forgive and forget after all he's put us through, but it does make sense. His Fall makes sense." Ezra looked at her pointedly. "Don't tell me you didn't think the Order had problems, or did you make your choice to leave for no actual reason?"

Ahsoka pinched the bridge of her nose. "It's true. The Order was falling to pieces when Vader Fell. They played a part in driving him to the Dark Side, undeniably. But he's dangerous, Ezra. If you want answers, you should ask General Kenobi instead."

"I'm not a mindless buckethead," Ezra snapped. "I'm not the only one who's noticed what's going on between General Kenobi and Darth Vader. You're telling me he's the neutral ground here?"

"And Vader's neutral ground? Kenobi won't kill you, Vader will."
"Vader's guilty. I could tell. He has his pride, sure, but he's still noticeably... off. Less cold. Maybe having people who liked him, for some reason, made him able to admit the Empire was using him. He's willing to talk about what happened, unlike the rest of the surviving Jedi."

"I know what it feels like," Ahsoka said, apropos of nothing. "To question the Jedi, wonder what they're really about. It's been twenty years, but Vader's Fall is still fresh to us. The Sith promised the greatest threat the Order had ever faced, from the very beginning, and now still. Someone the Force had Chosen to restore balance failing at that entirely made us lose faith and hope for the fate of the galaxy."

"His son seems to think he can still do it. Restore balance, I mean. And Luke's not an idiot. He has a lot to say about the Order and its problems with attachment, and yet he's one of the most promising Jedi around. He hasn't lost hope like the rest of us seem to."

"You believe him? That Vader can be redeemed?"

"Maybe. I don't know. But it would be worse not to try."

A dozen Stormtroopers kicked and prayed at the forcefield holding them inside what few Rebel prison cells existed on this hellhole. It was a racket, and a whirlwind of chaos the Alliance didn't need right now. And they were a drain on resources, a liability. There were a million reasons this was a bad idea.

"Why are you holding them?" Ezra asked.

Ahsoka smiled wryly. "They have useful information on the Empire. Why wouldn't we hold them?"

"You think they're just gonna give up their secrets?"

"No," Ahsoka said, slow. "Vader will do that for them."

"You- you want to torture them?"

"Absolutely not." Ahsoka crossed her arms. "Interrogate them. We're interrogating them."

"Oh, and that's so much better."

"It makes all the difference."

Ezra turned away, to watch one of the more persistent 'Troopers bang her fists against the forcefield.

"You can't just keep us here like this!" she spat.

"It's gotta be against some kinda law? Right? They won't just... leave us here. The Empire won't let them, right? Right? It's against the law!"

"The Rebels have no laws!"

Ezra sighed. More of the usual. Still, he didn't turn back to Ahsoka. "You see?"

"We'll get something out of them eventually. They're only a little rattled right now."

"Wow, what a comfort." It didn't come out as harsh as he intended. The Alliance was changing, and fast. Force knew why he should rail against that. The Imps had information. The Alliance needed that information. It was, by all means, a fair trade for their freedom. Still, any Imp was a risk, no
matter how mindless. It probably rattled him more than them.

Maybe that was the worst part. Any blow to the Imps felt hollow, and yet every hit they dealt the Alliance was crushing. The endless double standard that had become his entire life.

"Let Vader intimidate them," he said, finally. "Least they can do is give us intel. But please, you can't- please just don't kill them." He glared at Ahsoka with all his might, though she was the deadliest -- one of the deadliest -- Jedi, and outranked him by far. "Then we're on their level."

"I know," she said. "Sometimes their level is the only path to follow, but not now."

"You mean with Vader, don't you?"

"If he Falls again, yes. Anakin was -- and is -- part of all of us, but Vader is too dangerous to live without the Light. You know that, Ezra. You've seen that."

"Yeah. I have." He shrugged. "I don't know if Skywalker's still in there, or if Vader's just very good at playing hero. Does it matter? He'll help us save thousands of innocent lives, Commander Tano."

"It matters if he decides to go rogue."

He hummed. "Y'know, I don't think he will. The Bond he shares with the remaining Jedi... it's powerful. Really powerful. And if anything, Vader likes power -- well, more like loves it. Or needs it, or something. He won't let it go without a fight, never has."

Ahsoka stared, calm and analytical, as if she were piecing him together. He wondered how he'd missed it, before. The clear signs she'd been trained by Vader. He only ever made good students. "Force hope you're right, Ezra. Only time will tell."

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Vader stormed in, a whirlwind of black, and came to rest dead in the centre of the cell's entrance archway. His mask was only milimetres away from the bright hum of the forcefield. "These are the prisoners?"

A 'Trooper perked up. "Is he- is he gonna get us out? Is he negotiating with the Rebel Alliance?"

From one of the other 'Troopers, a swift, but relatively gentle swat on the helmet. "I thought the Empire recruited better than these karking morons. No, he's alligned himself with the Rebels. I'm sure you've heard."

"What? No way. There's no way. Shit, what are we-"

"Exactly."

Vader rotated his head in Ahsoka's direction, attention peeked. "You think they have information?"

"I do."

"Very well." Vader focused on the Stormies once more. "Tell me, which of you had the chance to serve with me in the Empire?"

A few peeped up.

To Ahsoka, he said, "These will have the greater intel."

Ahsoka's eyes narrowed. "How?"
"If they served on the same vessel as I did, then they rank above the lowest blasterfodder, if only a little."

Ahsoka's eyes narrowed further.

"A very little," Vader said, sounding sickly pleased. One of the 'Troopers shrank back, but the crowd pushed him to the front again.

"No deserters. You serve, you stay."

"No torture," Ahsoka said.

Vader shot her a look, unreadable, and then a brush with the Force that felt almost petulant.

"No torture," she repeated.

"Very well. As you ask," he pointed at her, just a touch shy of accusing. "Only for you, Ahsoka. You're lucky I like you."


Vader held out a single gloved palm. "You will tell me all you know of the Empire's plans... in regards to the Alliance, and otherwise."

"I'll tell you all I know of the Empire's plans," the forefront 'Trooper echoed, dumbly. "Word has it the Emperor's mad. He's trying to find a replacement for you, but he's not having much luck. We're ordered to try as much as we can to get you back. He wants another Death Star, but that'll take years none of us have. That's all I know."

"A second Death Star?" Ezra yelled. "Doesn't he have limits?"

"A replacement apprentice?" Ahsoka said. "Who in the Empire could step out of Vader's shadow? They're smart, but they're not as," she paused. "As fearless."

Vader twitched.

What had Ahsoka called him? The Hero with No Fear?

"Not many. Overconfidence breeds fearlessness, and overconfidence is... strongly discouraged in the Empire. Though not many listen."

Ahsoka barked out a laugh. "You didn't."

"I could afford not to."

"And that's the whole point, isn't it?" Ahsoka held up her hands. "No Sith outmatch you, and that's not feeding your ego."

"It's fact," Vader said simply.

"He's just gonna have to settle with second best." Ezra shrugged. "Still, second best isn't a breeze. They're still exponentially more powerful than these bucketheads."

"Two new problems to be dealt with," Ahsoka said. Vader radiated approval, which made her tense for a brief moment, before she let it roll off her like water on feathers.
"An attitude to be commended," Vader said, more to the Stormies than to them. A lecture? A lesson?

"Nothing better than a little determination," Ahsoka grit out.

After the interrogation was finished, Alliance personnel rushed in to transfer the Stormies to another wing, leaving Ezra alone with two incredibly dangerous Force-sensitives who just happened to be at odds. What were the chances? That his luck could possibly be this awful? Part of him wanted to turn to dust and blow straight out of the room.

"What was that back there?" Ahsoka asked, plain. One hand rested on her hip, the other on the hilt of a 'saber. "Encouraging torture?"

"They're little more than-"


"You dare use my son-" A sudden quiet. "Snips, low blow."

"Your temper is under your control, not mine."

"I don't intend to torture your prisoners, Commander Tano." He waved a hand. "They're none of my concern. But a threat will thread words better than any trick of the mind, if you know how to use one." He tilted his head. "See for yourself if they suddenly find themselves more pliant."

Ezra sighed. What had he done to deserve this?

Chapter End Notes

A lot of dialogue this chapter, and the next one as well. I'm sorry. Sometimes I just can't stop writing my ridiculous bullshit, and then this happens.

On a positive note, Ezra! He is the cutest. I could not resist his POV. And Anakin being like an emotional strobe light. He is all over the place, man. All over the place.

Enjoy <3!
Ahsoka rubbed a single tired hand over her face, and tapped a rhythm into the interrogation room table with her other. She waved the next in. The next in a line of many. But this one held promise.

An Alliance official shoved this one in with force, and he spat curse after curse in their faces, until he was finally cuffed to the table. He jerked against the restraints, snarling and snapping like a rabid animal.

"You don't appreciate captivity much, do you?"

He bared his teeth.

"You're the one the 'Troopers gave up?' she asked coolly. "I hope you hadn't expected loyalty from them. Still, this is the first time an Inquisitor has found their way into Hoth's internment system. Let's see how you fare, shall we?"

"Lonely Jedi, I will tell you nothing."

"Oh, I think you will. All of you, always so willing to defile the name of a traitor. Will you cooperate? This could be so much nicer for you, Sith of Many."

"The name of a traitor?"

She leaned closer. "Tell me of Darth Vader, and I'll see you're given an easy time."

"Darth Vader, the defector? You have him. You can ask him."

"Oh, can I? Could you?"

He growled. "Of course I couldn't."

"Exactly. For all our differences, neither of us can get him to talk. But you have observed, where I have not."

"What do you think he did?"

She shrugged, smooth, calm. "How should I know? I'm only a Lonely Jedi, who hasn't seen her master in many years. I'm also a Curious Jedi, so tell me sooner rather than later. Or are you Inquisitors not particularly inquisitive?"

"Your master? Vader trained you?"

"He did."

Eyes narrowed. "I will tell you, but I expect payment."

"You will get it."

A cruel smile, forming cruel words. "Then, shall I start at the beginning? Or should I start at the end? Are they not both? Tell me what it is you are so eager to know, Jedi. Would you like to know how
far your master has fallen?"

"Is it a fall, from your point of view?"

"It is. His rise to glory means nothing to us now. Betrayal is the way of the Sith, but respect comes and goes. Betraying the Dark for the Light is the ultimate humiliation."

"I imagine it's not a feat many have performed."

"No, indeed, your master is one of the first in years. But he always was weak, in that way. Far too much like the apprentices he chose to train, or perhaps they, him."

"Apprentices? Plural?"

"Did you think you were special, Lonely, Curious Jedi? You are not the only apprentice of his, and certainly not the first to defy him. How do you think the Rebel Alliance got its crest, Jedi? Did you believe they chose at random? That they picked the prettiest picture first?"

"No, the crest is of the House of Marek. Any official knows this."

"And did you also know Galen Marek was once Vader's little prodigy, before he crawled his way back to the Light?"

"They never told me. How is he now?"

"Dead. But there lie many more, curled in little tanks for the Emperor to pick and choose. Clones. Fully disposable."

Ahsoka blinked, then slammed a fist against the table. "The replacement."

"Oh, Little Jedi, are you so unique now? Is your master the one and only, the Chosen? Everyone can be replaced, as they can be discarded, like droids for scrapyards."

"I am no little Jedi. Uniqueness does not preclude talent, Sith. We will win this war, and you will watch every second through the blur of a high security forcefield. Enjoy being replaced."

She waved a hand again. "Next, please!"

"Please, I can be helpful. I know things. About the Empire. Secrets. I can help, please. Don't kill me."

She raised an eyebrow. For all his fancy words, the Inquisitor had given her nothing on Vader himself. The Apprentice, she would have to consider. Marek's clones posed a great threat to the Alliance, but they were not the greatest. Vader had the pleasure of claiming that title. If he Fell, the Alliance would fall with him. And so she needed to gauge his state of being, from more than just her own experience, so easily limited by Vader's shielding. "Go on," she said, and folded her hands neatly atop the table.

"I worked with the Inquisitors," the 'Trooper said, and then tapped his chestplate, holding two fingers against his heart. "I... have, it. You know. Whatever it is they use. They never told me anything about it, only that I had it, and that I was useful. I have really good aim, which is kinda rare in our ranks, if you get my meaning. So they used it."

"You were their marksman?"
The 'Trooper swallowed, and looked away. "Yeah. I've seen things. You'd probably believe them, since you're a Jedi. But the Inquisitors, they were -- are -- ruthless. They did stuff I couldn't even imagine, before I got recruited. I had time to learn just how bad it got."

"Who oversaw the Inquisitors? Who supervised them, kept them under control?"

"If not the Emperor himself, Darth Vader. I mean, in a way. Vader didn't like to spend time with them, but he passed messages through the higher-ups. Messages and training, and other stuff. He taught them about their powers. Didn't teach me about mine, though. Guess only the really important ones got personal tips. He was always watching, though. If any one of us acted out of line, somehow he'd know about it."

Good. This was good. This was what she'd needed. A drop of curiosity trickled through her mind, and as best as she could word something so absurd, she asked, "What was he like?"

"What, like, his personality?" The 'Trooper gave her a confused stare. "Don't you know? I mean, he works with you guys now. Doesn't he ever talk to you?"

"He knows us personally. He has more to hide with us than with you."

He blinked. "Oh, well. I guess. I dunno, it was odd. He was cold, and with my power, I could tell there wasn't ever a moment where he wasn't feeling anger or hatred. But sometimes, whenever he felt like it, I guess, he'd show these hints of a sense of humour. It was terrifying, actually. There were times where you couldn't tell if what he said was serious or sarcastic. And, you gotta remember, this is in a place where one wrong move, one misunderstood order, and you're out. And I don't mean out like kicked out. I mean out like having your life pinched out. That kind of out."

"And he'd have these moments often?"

"I guess, yeah. When something pissed him off, he'd shut down completely, go brutal and homicidal on any nearby Stormtroopers. Luckily never me. I think he knew I had It, y'know? I knew that he had It, and he knew I did, and I guess he knew he had It, too. With us -- the ones with powers, I mean -- he'd always be... curious, I think. But in a prying sort of way. Like he was sorting us by our potential, our strength with these powers."

"He was seeking out Force-sensitives?"

"That's what it's called? Then, yeah. A lot of them got recruited to the Inquisition, but I think you know that. I can tell, 'cause you don't seem surprised. Or maybe you're doing that on purpose." The 'Trooper sighed. "I talk a lot when I'm nervous. Point is, he wanted to use the ones with powers, but it always felt like he was looking for something or someone that wasn't there. None of us were ever good enough for him." He frowned. "That's all I ever saw, though. He was a very closed-off person. The, uh, Force never let me sense much from him other than the anger I talked about."

"Thank you. This has been... informative, and you've been a great help."

The 'Trooper tapped his foot quickly, sweat rolling down his neck. After a while, he asked, "You're not gonna kill me?"

"No. I'm sure the Alliance will see you released soon. After that, you can choose your own path. Rejoin the Empire, or go elsewhere."

"Are there other, um, Force-sensitives? Other than you, the Inquisitors, and Vader, I mean."

"A lot. Many who don't know what they possess."
"Maybe I could help them? To understand?"

"You would be doing them an immeasurable favour," Ahsoka said. "If you chose to do so." She smiled, small. "Then, I wish you good luck, and may the Force be with you."

At this, the 'Trooper nodded, muttered a quick, "And you, too," and, with a flick of her wrist, was escorted swiftly out the room.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, and breathed in, fighting an oncoming headache. She needed to meditate before she continued with interrogations. There was much to think on.

Her knees were wet as she knelt, but that was nothing when meditating -- the physical body meant nothing. After all, sitting for hours upon hours without moving did make necessary a little... mental wandering. A lot of mental wandering, if she was honest with herself. And she had to be. Too much of the Code had bled into her for that, for denial.

The air was clean and crisp, the cold a comfortable numb, and the tumultuous emotions of the Alliance crew a melted pool of background noise. To her, it was as perfect as it could be, in this war.

So, naturally, she had to darken her mind with thoughts of Vader, his actions in the Empire, the repercussions of his defection. It was her job to consider these things, now, to plan ahead for every endless possibility. In the Clone Wars, she'd followed in Anakin's footsteps, gone in blind and made things up as she went along. But the Clone Wars were a puppet show of Palpatine's making, and every move the Separatists made had been stupidly predictable by consequence. Here, in the stark contrast of life outside the Emperor's control, she had to find some measure of her own.

Vader had single-handedly taken apart the Order, and now he wanted to rebuild what he'd knocked down, out of some measure of regret and sorrow. That was simple enough to grasp, if you tried not to think too long on it, but upon further reflection, it became considerably more disturbing -- more risky -- by the second. She wouldn't pretend evil had left Vader, but now he was an asset. His evil was contained within their walls, for their use. But how could he reconcile his own evil with the wishes of the Rebels? They, in his mind, wanted to restore everything he'd tried desperately to destroy. One did not let go of that easily. Of course, to her, she could find nuance -- the New Republic would learn from its predecessor's mistakes, and the New Order would follow the same route. But to Vader, would any of that matter, in the face of his own actions? Would he allow them to remove meaning from all of his work? To officially render all his efforts in vain, his Fall for nothing?

She couldn't possibly understand how he should manage that. It was more likely he wouldn't.

But there was one factor she hadn't considered in full. The other ally, the truest of the Jedi, but also the most broken. Obi-Wan Kenobi. His judgement had always been sound, but decades in an empty, dry wasteland could have blown his sharp wit away with the sand. Did he realise what he was doing? What impact he had on Vader? His hands were at the reigns of the most dangerous animal in the galaxy. If he didn't stay its hand, the tatters of the Order, and his remaining family would be left to take control. And Force knew they'd had no luck in past endeavours to do so.

She had to talk to him. Them. The keeper of the beast, and the beast itself.

Wonderful.

She found Obi-Wan nestled atop the highest bunk, in a deep state of meditation. Vader lay on the
bottom bunk, idly tracing his fingers over names carved on the bedposts. He looked bored, one eye half-closed, hair falling into the other, which he'd occasionally attempt to blow away. The draft undid every attempt, but he kept at it anyway.

She cleared her throat, and Vader turned to her, raising one scarred eyebrow. "Hey, Snips. You need something?"

"I wanted to talk to you two."

One of Obi-Wan's eyes opened, and he gave a slight wave. "Evening, Ahsoka. I trust you're doing well."

"As well as I can do, considering the circumstances." She sighed. "I need to ask about your relationship."

Vader coughed awkwardly. "You've, uh, known for ages, Snips. What's there to ask?"

"A lot. Can you put aside personal feelings for the mission, for one?"

Obi-Wan blinked. "I certainly can. Anakin, on the other hand, has rather the history of being... passionate, in regards to people he cares about."

"My personal feelings and the mission can get along," Vader said dryly. "I don't need to get rid of them to make the right decisions."

"Things are only going to get worse from here," Ahsoka warned. She aimed an unwavering stare in Vader's direction, but confusion only grew and grew on his face. "You do know what you're doing, don't you?"

"I'm gonna admit, I think I know what you're getting at here." Vader hummed. "You don't know why I'm doing this, do you?"

"Force only knows why. Do you even know, Vader?"

"Maybe I don't." He shrugged. "But ever since the Force returned my, uh -- let's see, legs, skin, ability to breathe, charm, and good looks, minus one right arm, I've, um. Well, that explains it in itself, doesn't it? I've felt clearer, in mind and in body. I know this is the right path." He winked. "Plus, I was getting sick of the Emperor anyway. Do you know how boring that guy is? He's all doom and gloom, no fun whatsoever."

"You understand the implications? The consequences? This will render what you've done-"

"In the interest of honesty, there's a small, Dark part of me that doesn't want to see this was all for nothing. But I also know that it never will be. Nothing, I mean. The dead don't return, and trust me when I say I've tried to find about a million ways around that. None of them work. I've kind of permanently stained history." He sighed. "But whatever can be undone, that's a good thing. Everything I've destroyed gets a chance to piece itself back together, right? The Order included."

"And you're alright with this?"

"Okay, so my judgement hasn't always been the greatest. I get it. But I'm not so deep in denial I've become delusional, Ahsoka. I know what I've done, but I have... a small hope for the future. Force knows how I'd ever match all the bad I've done with good, but at least, when I die, I can say I've tried. It might count for something, even in the galaxy I've ruined." Something in his eyes dulled. "Okay, not much. But I am trying."
Ahsoka blinked.

"I know. Doesn't sound right coming from Darth Vader's mouth, does it? I've had a lot of time to think, Snips. And I can't just, I dunno, give up my second chance. In a way, that would've almost been worse than continuing down the path to the Dark Side."

"Reconciling this with," she motioned to the armour, neatly stacked in a corner and almost hidden from sight, "that... It's hard to come to terms with."

"I don't expect, nor deserve, forgiveness, and I'm not asking it." He gave her a pleading look. "But don't think this is all an elaborate ruse, or a mask, or anything other than what it is." He began to laugh nervously. "Which is... me. Trying to find a balance, and not always succeeding. Helping the Alliance in whatever way I can. Y'know, going through the motions, as one does."

"Alright," she said. "The Light Side and good don't always align, just as the Dark Side and evil aren't, by default, the same. I recognise that. All I ask is that you don't equate the two. If you Fall, you can still help us win this war. You don't have to let the Dark consume you and turn you into something unrecognisable."

"Of course."

She shook her head. "Somehow, some way, you've managed to be both Anakin and Vader. Just don't let one win over the other."

"I'm beginning to see that."

Later, when Vader had gone to help Solo prepare the Falcon for evacuation, she slipped into their quarters, where Obi-Wan had settled, alone, with a cup of tea, steam rising and condensing on the melting ice around them.

"That's not all you wanted to talk about, is it?" he asked, blowing gently over the tea's surface, sending gentle waves crashing into the side of his mug, like a small, self-contained ocean. He took a sip, and then looked at her meaningfully.

"I couldn't ask with Vader around. There's no telling what he'd do."

"I won't lie to you and say you're wrong. He is predictably unpredictable." He set the mug down on the bedcovers, and yet somehow it still managed to stay upright. She stared at it rather than him for a while, until he broke the silence and said, "What is it you wanted to ask, Ahsoka?"

"Do you know what you're doing?"

Obi-Wan gave her a very puzzled laugh. "I'm in full possession of my senses."

"Let me rephrase that. Do you know what you've gotten yourself into?"

"Well, hopefully this bed. It's about the only warm thing in this base, if I may say so."

She inhaled, held her breath for a good few seconds, and then exhaled. "Obi-Wan. Let me ask again. Do you know who you're dealing with? Who and what you've gotten yourself into?"

"Why, Commander Tano, are you insinuating that Anakin and I use this bed for anything but-""General Kenobi," she snapped. "Now is not the time for jokes."
"They might help lighten the atmosphere," he offered. "Ahsoka, I know what I'm doing. We're on the same side here. We may differ in our beliefs about Vader's redemption, but that doesn't mean I've gone mad." He took another sip of his tea, and let his eyes close. "You know, I used to be in precisely the same place as you are now. In the earliest part of my stay on Tatooine, I was absolutely convinced there was no saving him. In my mind, Anakin Skywalker had died at my feet. But then I talked to his son, whose bright ideals still remain rare in this galaxy, and I noticed something. If anyone could convince Anakin to help our cause, it would be him. And so it has been." He held out a hand, and traced a line with his fingers. "The Order believed Light and Dark were two opposing sides of the Force, that there could be no coming back from either." Slowly, the line curved into a circle. "But as my master had hinted all along, things are not so black and white in this universe. The Light and Dark Sides of the Force are but one interconnected circle, perhaps even cycle. Not two points on opposite ends of a line."

She considered this. "Is that what the Prophecy meant by 'balance'?

"Who knows? Anakin may often joke that the Force works in mysterious ways, but there is some truth to that. Perhaps we'll never know what the Prophecy truly meant. Clearly, it is not as it once seemed." He stirred a finger through his tea, and thought for a moment. "But it does mean that there's still room to hope."

"I've learnt not to allow myself to. Not in the Alliance, not outside the Order. And, until recently, every star in this sky was outside the Order. Even stars in the Core. You've got to understand the damage his Fall did to every single belief the Jedi had."

"Believe me, I do. Nobody knows better than I do. Circumstances, and the people in them, may have failed Anakin, but he can still come back. He can always come back."

"Why do you believe that?"

"I've seen it." He raised an eyebrow. "Watch and see for yourself, Ahsoka. If you're looking for it, you can still find the good in him."

Chapter End Notes

Ahsoka's like, "LOOK AT YOUR LIFE, LOOK AT YOUR CHOICES." And everyone else is like, "Oh, shit, yeah. We fucked that up majorly, didn't we?"

There is a lot of talking in this chapter. The dialogue to internal monologue ratio is pretty overbalanced here. But they were totally conversations that needed to happen! That is, uhm, all. The Defence rests.

(Honestly, the Prosecution wins this case.)
The dark of space did nothing to hide the slow trickle of departing Rebel vessels. Like a line of marching soldiers, each ship was filed out, one-by-one, with metaphorical tails between their legs. It was humiliating, to be forced to evacuate not one, but two Rebel bases within less than a year. But more than that, it was dispiriting. Leia had her pride, but she could put that aside for the Alliance's best interests. But she couldn't put aside hope. Once lit, hope's flame burned until there was no more oxygen to feed it. And if oxygen came in the form of victory, then every loss was a step closer to suffocation.

She traced her fingertips over the arc of the hologame board, staring blankly at the tiles. Takeoff was in thirty minutes, and then they would be leaving Hoth to fall into the Empire's long line of stolen planets.

It felt somehow like a betrayal, though she wondered if perhaps the wampas might find themselves better suited to Imperial company. They were both as vicious, and equally as intelligent.

But now the Rebels had nowhere to turn to, nowhere to hide but between the stars. Wandering like a circus in their portable space station promised manoevrablity, but not safety. They could run, but the Empire would find them time and time again. Living out life like an unwanted parasite was not exactly on her to-do list.

"So," Luke said, bringing her out of her mind and into the present. "Dagobah. That'll be fun."

"We should arrive within the day," she replied absently. "I'm hoping Master Yoda will agree to train us, even on such short notice."

"Maybe not outright. I mean, he's probably not all that pleased with our father, so maybe he'll be hesitant to take us on. I sure hope not, but it's possible."

"It's possible," she acknowledged. "Let's hope not."

Time flew on, along with their ship, but her mind was stuck in the past. Echo Base had never been much of an achievement, yet losing it made her feel... unbalanced, and strangely frustrated. They lost to the Empire regularly, and yet now more than ever, it felt like hacking off a limb.

Well, perhaps not quite that bad. If she considered it, she could see that leaving Echo Base for a more transportable headquarters was a wiser decision than choosing to stay, yet having to do it, not in their own time, but in the Empire's, made her skin crawl. Her life, and the lives of others, were not to be dictated by nameless, faceless uniforms. That was what she fought for, but here it stayed, being forced down her throat by particularly determined hands.

Sometimes, she wished for more power, to use the Force to end this. But she knew the way that path wound, and the Darkness that lay at its end. If the Light would allow her goals some leeway, she could work Red Squadron into a driving force against the Empire. If Master Yoda trained her with wisdom borne from hundreds of years of experience, perhaps she could help those without a connection to the Force, without the power to stand up, in their stead.

"Great," Han yelled, and she looked up to see him and Chewbacca glaring at the console as if it had
betrayed them. "How did I miss this on the map?"

Chewbacca growled out something she might loosely translate to, "Because you were too busy with the Corellian spiced ale," and turned on one heel, headed towards the direction of the forwardmost guns.

"What's the problem?"

"A damn-near star system of asteroids."

"An asteroid field?" She left her place at the booth, and walked over to the viewport, staring out into what could only be described as an abyss, decorated by stray hunks of icy rock. Some still held fraying wingtips from downed ships. "No way around them?"

"No," Han said, "and it doesn't look like anyone's had much luck getting through it, either." He sighed. "I knew there was a catch to this shortcut."

Leia raised a single eyebrow to convey her displeasure. "You deviated off course?"

"Listen, it was a sound route, up until now. Guess I just didn't notice the asteroid field straight in the middle of it."

"It's not exactly easy to miss, Han."

"There was Corellian spiced ale involved. I may or may not have been sharing a glass or two with Chewie. Depends on who you ask."

"I'm sure you're the only one who'll be denying it."

Han gave a swift bow. "Until the day I die, Your Worship."


"Navigate our way through it," Leia said simply.

"You'll what now?" Han raised his hands in a gesture of defeat. "Nobody's getting a scratch on my ship! And there's no way we'll make it through that field without one."

"Can so," Luke cut in lightly. "Don't you remember when the wampa almost ate me? Leia got us back to base without any scratches, dents, bumps, or bruises. And if I help, too, and maybe Ben and my father could join in from there... well, then we're practically untouchable."

"That was a snowspeeder! This is my ship!"

At this, Anakin moved his head out of the corridor's view and into theirs, and said, "We'll do you proud, Solo."

Han stared. "You're in on it."

"I assure you, I was just passing by. Gotta stretch your legs sometimes, y'know? Don't want to go numb from the waist down."

He pointed an accusing finger. "You're still in on it."

"I swear, your ship will come out of this field like she's brand new all over again. You can trust us Skywalkers when it comes to flying, if nothing else."
"If nothing else," Leia repeated dryly.

Anakin shrugged. "If nothing else."

"I think Ben could've made a better argument," Luke groused. "But Father does have a point, Han. Doubling back now will just waste time we don't have to spare."

"Fine, but I'm not going to be held accountable for what I'll do if any of you get so much as a single nick on my prized possession. I'm not proud of much, but the Falcon is my own damn home."

"You've got it," Anakin said.

"A little to the right," Obi-Wan called. "No more than a metre, or we'll all be at Han's mercy."

"D'you hear that?" Luke said, a hydrospanner between his teeth, sweat dripping down his forehead. "Only a little to the right, Father."

He waved a single hand. "Yep, loud and clear!"

She scooted backward, accidentally knocking into the toolkit, and cursed. "This is the most fun I've had in ages."

Something was off. She'd first noticed it when they'd slid the Falcon past the first few asteroid pairs, and it had only grown more worrisome since. Initially, she thought there might be another malfunction in the ship's hyperdrive, but a thorough check had revealed nothing, except for Han's smug face when she emerged in pristine condition, without a single problem to report.

Now, the feeling was so powerful, it had begun to overtax her senses, every sound and sight seeming somehow magnified in intensity a thousand times over. Some part of her was calling out to her surroundings, as if she'd left some piece of her soul marooned on one of the asteroids. And suddenly, distance threatened losing a part of herself.

"There's something wrong," she said.

Luke dropped the hydrospanner. "The ship? We're being careful. Force, Han's gonna have us for dinner-"

"No, no, not with the ship. With something outside. There's something there, I can feel it."

"There?" Luke echoed blankly. He closed his eyes, and Leia felt his attention shift to rove over the field before them. "Yeah, you're right. I feel something, but it's faint. Really faint. That's weird. If you hadn't have pointed it out, I wouldn't have noticed at all."

"That's not at all what it feels like to me." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "It's overwhelming. Like I need to find it."

"It could be a trap," Luke started, but Anakin rested a hand on his shoulder, and he quieted.

"Tell me more about it, Leia? If that's what I think it is..."

"It's... as if it were part of me, somehow, and moving forward will tear it out of me. But that's not possible. The Force travels with me, I can't leave it behind."

"Obi-Wan!" Anakin yelled, startling all of them. "I think there's something you need to see."
"What's all the fuss?" Obi-Wan asked. There was a smear of oil on one of his cheeks, which Anakin attempted to wipe away. Instead, it only smudged further, and Obi-Wan batted eager hands away with a huff of amusement. "Did you call me over to clean me, Anakin?"

"That wasn't my original intention," he said, with a smile. "I think Leia's found something."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "Something?"

"There's something out there," she said, in Anakin's stead. Obi-Wan furrowed his brow. "Something connected to the Force, and to me."

Obi-Wan tilted his head in Anakin's direction. "And you think you know what it is that's calling to Leia?"

"I'd say I was seventy percent sure. It's an odd location, but when has that ever stopped the Force?" Anakin shrugged. "I think it's a crystal."

Obi-Wan blinked. "A lightsaber crystal?"

"No, Master, a decorative one. Yeah, a lightsaber crystal."

Obi-Wan snorted, and held up two hands. "Very well. Do you intend to retrieve it?"

Anakin stared at him blankly. The answer was clear in that alone.

It shone, that was the first thing she noticed. It was almost blinding, so much that it had looked more like a small star as they'd beamed it up.

It still shone now, in her hands, but it seemed calmer, less urgent now she had taken hold of it. She had been right, this crystal belonged to her, so much so, she swore it felt like an extension of her own being, an added limb.

"Is it yours?" Anakin asked. "You'll know if it isn't."

"It is. I'm certain."

Her father beamed, teeth flashing with much the same light as the crystal. "Yeah, I know that feeling."

"I imagine I'll have to assemble my 'saber. Though I'm not sure what material to use."

"To be honest," Anakin said, a little slyly, "lightsabers are flexible. As long as the crystal is imbued with the Force and the handprint it's given you, it'll work. Any crystal, generally, and any material, they'll all work, too, so long as you truly feel and accept it as part of your being. And, you do have to stabilise the matrix. But anyone with the Force can do it. That's kind of the point."

"I can use anything?"

Anakin hummed, as if he were really considering it. "Maybe not flimsiplast."

She laughed. "I did expect some limitations. Too bad, though. That'd be very unique."

"Most Jedi use Kyber crystals, but their heart is in Ilum, which has lain unused for years now."

"And mine isn't?"
"It could be," Anakin offered. "Only the crystal's owner -- or as close to it, in Luke's case -- can know it as a whole. Usually, Jedi have years and years of training and knowledge to rely on when they search for their crystals, but since you haven't had the chance, I'd say, just go with your gut feeling. If you feel it will work for you, then it will probably work for you. The Force doesn't typically hand out misinformation."

She turned it over in her palms. "I believe it'll work."

"Hey, you never know. It really could be a Kyber crystal. They do tend to hang around in the Outer Rim territories, after all. Even in Wild Space."

"It's possible," Obi-Wan acknowledged. "For now, I'd like to see what design Leia feels is right."

"Practical, but effective," she began. "More reliable than a blaster, with more durability."

Obi-Wan smiled. "You've thought about this awhile, haven't you?"

"Preparation is essential in the Alliance, you know."

Han came into her quarters with a box in both hands. It towered high enough to cover his face and made him recognisable by Force signature alone. He looked like he was having trouble carrying it, whatever it was, so she gently floated it out of his hands and set it on the table.

"I heard you were making a lightsaber," Han said.

Leia raised an eyebrow. "I am."

"I've got some spare parts, here. Won't be needing them now, not after Chewie's repairs."

"These are for me?"

"Yeah. Dunno if they'll work, but feel free to give them a try."

She squeezed his shoulder. "Thank you."

"Any time," he said, and walked awkwardly out the room.

She peered into the container and skimmed through with her hands. Sturdy and practical, surely enough to house the immense power of a lightsaber's unstoppable blade. They'd work, and likely she wouldn't find anything else in the near future, unless rocks and space debris were part of the flexible design. That, she sincerely doubted.

She could see these moulding themselves into a hilt that would stand the test of time, and that was enough. Besides, her father was proof enough that lightsabers could frequently be replaced, even if it required putting aside all sentimental value. If she lost this, she'd have to search long and hard for another, but that was a challenge she would face -- and conquer -- if made necessary, and not before.

She weighed the box, for reference, and set her crystal at its side. Anakin had mentioned the need to imbue the crystal with the Force, and her Force signature. If her instincts were right, this was both incredibly crucial to the process, and its beginning step. It also meant meditation. Rather a lot of it.

The first phase, and already she was letting time pass quicker than it needed to. She sighed.

"You better work," she told the mess of promising -- but currently useless -- parts, and wished they would hear her.
Anakin had given her a basic sketch to work with, but that could only take her so far, even with sprawling, extensive notes. She got the sense that a Jedi's 'saber was a very personal -- and uniquely individual -- thing, which meant, for the most part, she was entirely on her own.

In a way, that was better. This weapon would soon be her life, and it was only fitting that it represent her in every way imaginable.

But here, as it lay in the palm of her hand like a small, particularly cold pet, it still stood her hairs on end. This small thing was one of the most dangerous weapons the galaxy. One slip, and it would slice through her own hand like butter. If anything required training in their haphazard, thrown-together life, it was this.

And yet they trusted her unequivocally to use it. She hoped with everything she had that she deserved that trust.

"So, did you make it?" Anakin was smiling with such excitement, she couldn't help but picture an eager child unwrapping a present. "How is it? Does it work?"

"I haven't tested it," Leia said. "I wouldn't want something to go wrong and cause irreparable damage to the ship."

"That's not likely." Anakin said this with undue confidence, and she shot him a worried look. "Technical skills run in our family," he amended. "It'll work."

"Can you turn it on?" Luke asked, with precisely the same excitement as their father. "Please? I wanna see."

Slowly, carefully, she let the blade ignite, watching as it shone brilliant yellow.

"That's... unexpected," she began.

Obi-Wan hummed. "A strong will, a wish to patrol, to guard like a sentinel. It fits you, don't you think?"

She smiled. "Doesn't it have to?"

"Maybe," Anakin said. "Clearly 'sabers can be passed down through bloodlines." He gestured to the weapon at Luke's hip. "Still, it seems like you."

"It's like it's a part of me." She spun the blade in one hand, careful not to touch Han's ship, but fast enough to experiment, to test its speed, its power. "And it fits my specifications perfectly."

"It should."

Luke grinned. "We should spar."

She sheathed the blade, and eyed Han, who frowned nervously. "If you fracture the hull, we'll all get sucked out into space," he said. "That's not on my bucket list."

"Faith, Han," Anakin quipped, "have faith. She is my daughter, after all."

"Your head is about large enough to fracture the Falcon's hull all by yourself, Skywalker."

"We promise not to break your ship," Luke said, and held out a hand for Han to shake. Han hesitated
a moment, and then reached out to take it.

"You're lucky I trust you, kid," he warned. "Don't go breaking my ship."

Luke's smile was all teeth, but his eyes were warm. "I thought you said you trusted me?"

"Even Jedi make mistakes, don't they? What if you drop it?"

"I won't drop it, Han. Look." Luke twirled the hilt of his lightsaber and sent it flying into the air, and for a small eternity, all they could do was watch. Then, even as it shot down like a blaster bolt, Luke simply plucked it out of its tailspin, as if he were sliding a book out of its shelf, and holstered it once again. "See?"

"Those were the most terrifying three seconds of my life," Han said dryly.

"But I didn't drop it."

The only room Han could spare was an unfortunate extension of the cargo bay, piled on either side with box after box. It reminded her of the garbage chute on the Death Star, but she said nothing. Any insult to the Falcon was an insult to Han, in his eyes. Regardless, the boxes could offer training. She'd likely face obstacles in the field, and it was better she learned to dodge them now, rather than in the heat of battle. Here, she could prepare for what lay ahead, and save some small amount of time and effort for an old Jedi Master, living in a swamp in the outer reaches of nowhere and likely very, very tired.

She'd had extensive combat training, of course, which she could easily fall back on if worst came to worst, but the weight of a lightsaber, as non-intrusive as it was, still affected her centre of gravity. Artificial gravity, but gravity still. Master Yoda would no doubt be an expert at balance, if he was as small as Anakin made him out to be. And it was possible he knew more of the forms of combat the surviving Jedi had managed to teach her, in what little time they'd had.


"The best defence is a good offence," she replied, and swung the blade until it met -- loud and sparking -- the beginning of Luke's parry.

Luke laughed. "Both at the same time is better, don't you think?"

They fought on, meeting blow-for-blow, until their muscles ached and their lungs burned. And even then, they continued. Every arc, she dodged, and every slash she attempted clashed against the immovable, burning light of Luke's lightsaber. They kicked, leapt, and swept every hit away, until Leia couldn't hold in her laughter.

"This is getting us nowhere," she said, and Luke sheathed the blade, opening his mouth to speak. But no words came out, and then, swiftly, she kicked the hilt right out of his hand, just at the moment his grip was lax enough to let it slip. Luke stared at the fallen blade in numb shock, and after a pause, began to laugh with her.

"I can't believe you just-" He snorted. "You kicked it? Where'd you even learn to do that?"

"House Organa placed a high emphasis on self-defence. Usually with words, but in this galaxy, even they have limits. So, they taught me how to fight."

"Your adoptive parents?"
"Alright, I'll admit they hired a trainer. Most senators don't come equipped with combat training. My parents knew some, but not enough, and they were rare. I suppose the Rebellion set them on guard."

"I'd think so," Luke said. "I can't imagine. The paranoia might have gotten to me, after a while."

"Somehow, we learnt to get used to it. The Rebellion is and always has been my life. Paranoia was a fair trade if it meant I could guarantee the freedom of others."

"That's amazing, Leia." Luke smiled. "Hopefully, now, we can really send the Empire running. Tails between their legs for a change, y'know? I'd like to see that."

She quirked a smile at the image. "So would I."

Chapter End Notes

I was so torn between a blue or a yellow blade, you have no idea. I spent, like, two hours staring at the screen and thinking. Eventually I settled on yellow, because I can see Leia as a seasoned Jedi Sentinel, patrolling the galaxy, fierce-spirited and unbreakable. And stuff.

So, uh, um. Sorry if you wanted blue?
As Dagobah came into view, Obi-Wan felt rising laughter. Of course Master Yoda would have chosen such a place. So misleading from the outside, so dangerous within. A subtle parallel.

The children seemed excited, despite the unappealing view, chattering amongst themselves about first impressions and the small but deadly size of the greatest Jedi Master alive. Anakin, on the other hand, looked sick and jittery. He alternated between peering through the viewport, and hastily turning away, as if he didn't quite know what to make of it all. Obi-Wan didn't blame him.

"Feeling nervous?"

"Master Yoda isn't gonna be happy to see me," Anakin warned. "He might try and kill me. You never know."

"That doesn't seem like him," Obi-Wan assured. "I imagine he'll show a measure of disapproval -- perhaps even a great deal -- but he will certainly not resort to physical violence. That's not the Jedi way."

Anakin's eyes narrowed.

"Generally, it's not the Jedi way," Obi-Wan corrected. "Still, do you truly think Master Yoda means you harm?"

"Maybe with his mind," Anakin said. "He wouldn't attack unless I provoked him, but I don't intend to do that." He fiddled with the hem of his robes. "I'm gonna have to wear the suit, in case we disturb the dragonsnakes, but hopefully he'll sense the change in me without needing to see my face." He frowned. "That is, if he hasn't lost it after all these years."

Obi-Wan smiled wryly. "I very much doubt that."

"I'm not landing on that swamp," Han said, decisively. "The Falcon would get eaten, for one, and absorbed, for another thing. And then we'd be stuck here. Indefinitely." He stared at them all as if an extended stay on this planet was akin to torture, and Obi-Wan couldn't help but smile.

"There's nothing to worry about," he said. "There's plenty of dry land for you to touch down on."

"Yeah, sure, say I believe you. We land, okay, but then what? We all take a stroll to Yoda's house? And leave my ship unattended? What if we get stuck here? Indefinitely."

"You may be able to land within... strolling distance of Master Yoda's house, away from the other native inhabitants," Leia said. "We'll just have to try."

Han aimed the Falcon's nose slowly closer to the treetops, desperately searching for any ship-wide space in the canopy. He found himself sorely disappointed. "That's it?" He sighed, and pointed towards a small gap in the trees. "Tell me, is that close enough to Yoda's place, Luke?"

"Should be."

"Alright. Wish me luck."
He made his descent on a smooth, controlled glide, until he was near enough to slip through the trees like raindrops. All the while, even as the ship flew on without a scratch, his expression grew only more pale.

"You really love this ship, huh?" Luke asked, staring down at the swampland below. He didn't seem daunted or intimidated, despite the ripples in the water, or the occasional fin.

"More than my life," Han replied, like a promise.

Luke gave Han a pat on the back and a warm smile. "Don't worry. We won't let anything happen to her, okay?"

"As I've said, you're lucky I trust you kid." He managed a smile of his own. "Let's just hope we don't run into anything with scales."

"We're six against one, eight if we count Threepio and Artoo, which we do."

Threepio shuddered. "I'd rather not fight off any large, dangerous creatures here on this planet. I do get the feeling I wouldn't hold up very well."

"In a team, we would," Luke assured.

"We'll see," Han said, ominously.

It was cold, and he could barely see through the thick fog, but he could sense Master Yoda's presence immediately. He hadn't succumbed to the harsh environment. At least, not yet. But Obi-Wan didn't intend to allow that to happen.

Luke left the ship cautiously, feet squelching in mud, checking the stability of the ground before him with every step. He winced at the wet noises his footsteps made. Han mirrored Luke's every expression, while Leia strode ahead, eyes on the horizon, and not on the marshland below her.

"You might sink!" Luke called, but Leia just waved dismissively.

That blasé attitude reminded him of someone, quite poignantly. Leia had a great deal more good sense than her father, but there were times when her fierce spirit had him seeing doubles. Skywalker Determination. It was either a great asset, or one's deadliest enemy.

Anakin caught up to them shortly, boots sticking to the wet sludge on the ground. He made a great show of being disgusted without Obi-Wan needing to see his face; his sharp, frustrated breathing was enough of a tell. "Having trouble?"

"Too much of it. This suit weighs a tonne," he replied. "I got used to it before, but I also had the strength of my prosthetics to fall back on." He held up his right arm. "This doesn't help much, unless I planned to walk on my hands."

Obi-Wan laughed. "If you arrived at Master Yoda's on your hands, he'd likely think you'd gone entirely mad."

"Me? Wouldn't he think he'd finally lost it?"

"Many people have accused Master Yoda of insanity over the years, and he's never once believed them."

"Hah! That's true." Anakin shook his head. "It's going to be good to see him again. He's one of a
kind. Really, we don't even know anything about him, or where he came from, and it's only been nine hundred years."

Obi-Wan smiled wryly. "I think he prefers it that way."

"This guy Yoda sounds like a character," Han said. "How did he ever come to lead the Jedi Council if he was so nuts?"

Anakin threw up his hands. "Who knows? Maybe he appointed himself."

That brought a chuckle out of him. "Well, I certainly wouldn't be surprised."

There was a great swamp ahead, all rolling water, rippling like muscle as the dragonsnakes patrolled their territory. It seemed, somehow, more important than the small puddles they'd already passed by, and it rang with the touch of the Force. Obi-Wan knew without a doubt that Yoda had settled somewhere nearby. There was no-one else who had such a lasting impact on the life that surrounded him.

"Hey, look," Anakin called, beckoning with one gloved hand. His voice seemed to echo through the forest, and Obi-Wan knew anyone else would have been terrified. "Footprints. Small ones. Guess who?"

"Yoda was here, and recently," Obi-Wan confirmed. "We must be getting close."

Luke stared. "He really lives in the middle of nowhere." He gave a full-body shudder. "And it's so cold, and awful. If he wanted to hide, he could've just gone to Tatooine."

"Too many Jedi in one place, and Anakin would've noticed."

Anakin tilted his head in acknowledgement, but seemed preoccupied by the tracks pressed into the mud. "Probably would've. Hey, how far do you think he could've gone? This looks fresh."

"He's close," Obi-Wan said. "I'd recognise his presence anywhere."

"I dunno. It might be a trap," Anakin hedged.

"You just don't want to see him," Luke announced, suddenly. His eyes were round with surprise. Then, they went sly. "You don't wanna get lectured by one of the greatest Jedi Masters around, do you?"

Anakin huffed. "Well, would you?"


Luke crossed his arms defensively. "If it meant I was learning, then of course."

"Wow," Han drawled, slow, teasing. "Someone's a real teacher's pet."

Luke snorted. "That doesn't matter if it means I'll get the chance to become a Jedi Knight."

That was the determination that would achieve his goals, and Obi-Wan made a point of telling him so. He may have failed training his last padawan, but let him succeed with this one. Luke and Leia were symbols, now, of a new hope for the galaxy. He couldn't repeat past mistakes.

"I have no doubt of it."

There was nothing for Luke to worry about, considering he already had.

"Are we just gonna wait here?" Luke toed the ground before him. "How do you know it'll work?"

"Master Yoda will come to us," Obi-Wan promised.

But that didn't appease everyone's misery. The rain had begun to beat down, even with the canopy to protect them, and Luke was shivering and shaking as much as the leaves. Even the robes they'd bound themselves in did little to keep away the chill, and Anakin, even in his suit, was still suffering.

"I can't see," he said, petulant and frustrated. A drop of rain trailed down the helmet and into the filtration grates, which culminated in him angrily and hastily removing it, and trying and failing to clean it off with his cape, which was similarly as ruined. "The mud keeps splashing up into my mask."

"How was that practical?" Leia asked. "Doesn't it function as a spacesuit?"

Anakin snorted and wiped murky water off his nose, blinking back against the wet hair plastered to his face. "Only if I set it to be. Clearly, manual air filtration mode isn't feeling it today."

Gently, Obi-Wan added, "You now have the luxury of being able to remove it, at least."

He managed a small thumbs up. "Free from it physically. Probably not ever mentally." A sad, brokenly-teasing smile. "I mean, look at this thing. I'm a walking bucket. Nobody in their right mind would design something like this."

Obi-Wan sat next to him in the mud, even as it seeped unpleasantly into the fabric of his tunic. "The suit was my fault, Anakin, and I apologise."

Still the same broken smile. Like a holoframe frozen in time. "Cutting off my legs and watching me burn is about a fraction of what I deserve. I'd say you haven't even started, old man."

"Even then?"

"I massacred a group of younglings," Anakin said plainly, and the smile died as weak as it had come. "Cremation was more than I deserved."


"Penance."

"And, even in your remorse, you continued to slaughter innocents," Leia growled.

"I should have stopped, and let Palpatine have me executed for disobedience, but I wasn't there anymore, after that." He raised a finger in Obi-Wan's direction. "Tell them about me. They'll get it."

"I already understand," Leia said. "I was subject to your interrogation."

"My Jedi-borne ability to manipulate was still there, at least," Anakin said casually. "Even though my mind wasn't. I was more loyal animal than human." Suddenly, he burst into laughter that shook the forest around them. "I became the very thing I hated. Ironic, isn't it?"

"Isn't everything in our lives ironic at this point?" said Han. "We never do anything as expected. I
can't even count the number on my fingers. Hell, who'd envisioned we'd arrive in this dump? With Darth Vader, just to add a little needed extra to it."

Leia dragged her feet through the mud, and then perked up. "We should get going," she said. "I sense someone. Someone who's probably better at self-awareness and introspection than we are. Someone who might actually have something to offer, if what you've said still applies."

Yoda's mind had been lost from the beginning. Honestly, it would be more surprising if he'd found it again.

Luke rifled around in his bag of rations, looking steadily more exhausted. "This place makes me hungry," he said. "I think it's the cold."

He held up a protein bar and grinned at it, before holding it out and offering it to the rest of them. Anakin took a bite, chewed, and then scrunched up his nose. "These tasted better in the Clone Wars," he said. "Have they lost the recipe? Maybe I should start cooking for them."

Leia's expression turned bitter. "The Rebels don't have the energy or resources to run a proper kitchen, Father."

"Hey! I'm energy efficient." He tapped the chestplate of his suit. "I'm practically my own energy source, if you think about it." He offered the food back to Luke, who considered it carefully. "It tastes bad, but it's fine," Anakin assured, and then it was missing from his hand entirely.

"What the hell?" Han shot up. "Did you just see that disappear? Please tell me there aren't any hallucinogens on this planet."

"Hallucinating, you are not," came a voice, from within the mist, and Obi-Wan couldn't help but smile. "Hungry, I am, yes, but a ghost, I can't be. Take rations, ghosts cannot. Eat, neither can they."

"Master Yoda," he said, bowing his head. "It is good to see you again, after all this time."

"Likewise, do I feel." The mist parted around them, revealing Master Yoda, protein bar in one hand, cane in the other. His presence was still of the perpetually-amused onlooker, and his wit seemed sharper than ever. Dagobah hadn't dulled his mind. He twitched an ear. "Brought a few Skywalkers, have you?"

Leia held out a hand, which Yoda took. "It's nice to meet you at last."

"Told me much about you, the Force has. On its course, the Prophecy is." At this, Yoda stared pointedly in Anakin's direction. "Risen from the Darkness, have you, Anakin Skywalker. Energy and determination, that takes. Far more, it does, than ever thought possible. Remarkable, this is." He rested his weight on his cane, looking thoughtful. "However, disapprove, I still do. Still the wrong path, you chose, even after the advice we gave to you. Many life forces, you have extinguished, in your time."

"I know," Anakin said, simply. "Nobody knows better than I do what I've done."

"In your head, it is," Yoda confirmed. "But understand it, do you? In this galaxy, much hope has been lost. Given up, most of the Jedi have. Not usually in their nature, that is. Much suffering, it must take, for the Jedi to fade, after so many years. A great loss, this has been, and grasp this, you must."

"I do."
Yoda frowned. "Do you? So immense, this is, hard to understand, it has become."

The line of Anakin's mouth wavered slightly. "And you're telling me you didn't see it coming? That you couldn't have done something to prevent it?"

"Saw it, I did, but belong to you, your actions do. Take responsibility, you will, or the Light you will not have reached."

Anakin was silent. Then, "But you did see it."

"The Force goes on. Only you can change your destiny. Do it for you, I cannot."

"It's not just my destiny," Anakin said.

"No, not just your own. But there is training I must get to," Yoda dismissed. "That is why you brought them here, is it not?"

Luke stirred Yoda's soup-like, brown cooking around in its bowl, looking entirely unappetised. Every time he took a bite, he tried with all his might to contain his grimace. Obi-Wan gave him a pat on the shoulder.

"It's alright, Young Luke. Master Yoda knows his cooking is terrible."

"When hide away on an inhospitable planet, you do, find your cooking is tolerable, you won't."

"Your cooking was terrible before," Anakin pointed out.

Yoda narrowed his eyes. "Jedi did not train to cook. Necessary to our training, it wasn't."

Anakin snorted, and bumped his head on the small, stifling walls of Yoda's hut. "You probably set that rule, didn't you?"

An ear twitched, almost a wink. "Figure that out for yourself, you can."

"What is part of Jedi training?" Luke asked, and Leia nodded her agreement.

"Learn to commune with the Force, you must. Think of it not as an obstacle, but an ally. Rarely will you find its limits, if you understand its nature."

"Can you help us? I don't think we have any idea where to start."

"Begun, have you, already? Trained by your masters, you have been."

Obi-Wan bowed his head. "Our training could not be as comprehensive as yours, Master Yoda."

"And my training, you need, to defeat the Emperor, yes? Very well, I will train you. But listen carefully, you must. Unlearn all you have learned, you will." Yoda pointed a finger. "Raised from a young age, the Jedi were. Taught the meaning of the Force properly, they had to be."

"You're saying we have misconceptions?" Leia hummed. "That would make sense."

"Sense, I always make. But choose to listen to it, no-one does."

"We'll listen," Luke promised. "What do we begin with?"

"Learn to use the Living Force around you. Aid you, it will, but only if you allow it. Try not, but
"do, that is the key."

"Sounds like a plan," Anakin said, and broke into a smile.

"You haven't seen this for a while, have you?"

His eyes were wistful. "Not in twenty years."

Luke was the one who stood on his hands, now, sweat pouring down his forehead, mouth twisted grimly in concentration. Leia was performing similarly, though she seemed to understand what control and discipline Master Yoda intended to teach them in this exercise. She'd had formal combat training. Luke's had been entirely informal.

"There's mud on my hands," Luke said, laughing. "I feel like I could slip at any second."

Yoda raised his head, staring up at them from the rock he'd chosen to centre himself on. "Use the Force, and you will not."

"That's the point of this, huh?"

"To accept that it will help you survive for many hours in dangerous circumstances, you will need. Learn this now, it is better to, before unprepared and in trouble, you find yourself."

Luke nodded, and held himself rigid, even as his arms began to shake. Leia mirrored his stance, and closed her eyes, breathing her pain into the Force, mingling with Luke's own. But they were learning, and that was what mattered.

They would need to maintain this position for hours. That was the true test of a Jedi's strength. Courage and determination in the face of great challenge. Luckily, Anakin's children had that in spades. Nobody who shared his blood had ever given up.

Yoda waved his cane. "Waver, you must not. Remain straight, can you? Like snakes, you look."

Clearly Obi-Wan wasn't the first to come to that conclusion. He smiled at Luke's exasperated groan. "I'm trying."

"Try not!" Yoda gave him a firm stare, meaningful even from Luke's skewed line of vision. "Do, or do not. There is no try."

Anakin side-eyed them, a small smirk threatening the corners of his mouth. "Told you he'd say it."

Chapter End Notes

Yoda is such a wiseass, it's amazing.

So, this was new. Yoda himself is such an elusive character, and Lucas has consistently maintained the "he has no backstory what do you even mean backstory lol" stance for the past forty years, so. That's a bit of a challenge for characterisation. Not saying I'm breaking down into sobs "because nobody's ever made a character with their own flair and touch before!!!@!1!!one!!!" (Okay, I might be.) Just a bit terrified. Like, a lot. Iffy
characterisation and my perfectionism blend into a smoothie of general horror.
The mud and bark had grazed Luke's hands, scratched stripes over his knuckles, until he felt like they'd become chewtoys for the wide-open mouth of a nexu.

"Continue," Master Yoda said, and he was, he was, but it hurt so much, and he'd lost count of the hours entirely.

To his right, Leia was lost, deep in meditation, even though her arms were as ruined as his. Luke didn't want to know why it was so easy for her to block out the pain, but his instinct told him in spite of it. Practice. It was clearly borne from practice, and lots of it. Years' worth.

Alderaanian princesses didn't live a life of comfort, he figured. But neither had he, and his muscles were still screaming, even with the soothing touch of the Force.

"Relax," Ben said, unfolding and folding his hands, where they lay at his cross-legged knees. "It will be harder to focus on the Force if your attention lies with the exhaustion."


The Force came to him, he knew it. But it was half-whispered, vague, faded, and Luke sometimes felt he couldn't piece it together for the life of him. It was a great essence of being, the life force of the entire universe, and learning to understand that was beyond daunting. It was horrifying, but he was determined.

His spirit was what fueled his ability. He only needed to learn to set it at peace. Not an easy task for him, and certainly not for Leia.

Bloodied knuckles cracked and splattered the ground cover, but he held on. He would always hold on.

Days turned into weeks. Weeks turned into months. Every day, Master Yoda worked them until they couldn't breathe. Every day, he told them something new about the Force. Every day, they'd have to use every piece of that knowledge.

Luke looked aside. He balanced on one finger, rigid in the air like the trees around him, but he could barely feel it now. The Force was a pillar that held him, kept him from falling. "You've trained a lot of us, haven't you?"

Master Yoda's eyes blinked open, disturbed from meditation, and surveyed him sharply. For all the joking, for all the bad cooking, he was clearly the greatest Jedi of their time. "For nine hundred years, have I lived. A thousand generations, I've seen, grow and learn the Force. So will you, in time."

"How much time?"

"Patience," Master Yoda said, and closed his eyes again.

bad."

"There's likely a bounty on our heads," Ben offered. "Pay it no mind. This place is unreachable."

"There's more than our safety at stake here. They could, I dunno, kidnap someone, or, or-"

"Alright, alright. I'll see what we can do."

"Communications?" Anakin asked, and received a nod in return. "I'll get to that."

Luke returned to his practice, but found he could only fall. Master Yoda gave him a considering look, and made the walk back to his hut. Luke was alone in the fog, tired, cold, and feeling like someone was dying.

His surroundings looked hungry, jagged rocks, sprawling mud, gnarled trees like old, dead hands. He felt sick. Everything looked wrong, and he thought he could hear his father's ragged, wheezy breathing in the sounds of birdsong.

"It must be Palpatine," Anakin declared, with complete and unwavering certainty that was entirely unnecessary. They knew. They all knew.

"He's sending them after us," Luke said. Nobody asked him to elaborate. They knew that, too.

"We have to leave." Leia stared them all down. "Master Yoda's presence in the Force is unmistakable. But we can hide."

Luke reeled, pulled back like a twig and snapped. "And leave him here? We can't do that! That would- that would-"

"Protected myself for years, have I, and with great success." He waved a hand. Luke blinked the sweat and dirt from his eyes. "A threat, death does not pose. Luminous beings, are we. Not this crude matter."

"That doesn't mean anything," Luke said, in his rising panic, "when the Emperor has weapons that can blow up entire planets within seconds. Leia's right, we can't stay in one spot. You should come with us, Master Yoda. I know you're great, but Palpatine won't ever stop, he won't ever-"

"Perhaps my time for rejoining the Force has come," he replied. " Destiny this is, I believe."

"No," Anakin growled, and suddenly the phantom spirit of Vader wasn't so intangible. "No, I'm finished with destiny. It could disappear entirely, for all I care, and we'd all be better for it, anyway." His voice shook, and Luke could tell he was trying desperately not to let it drop a register, but the walls around them were a sacrifice for his control.

"Many things, this way, you'll find, in life. Mistakes belong to us, and with us. Pay for them, we do, and pay for them, I must."

"You're saying you haven't paid already?" Anakin pointed to the cracks in the walls, the ones he'd caused. "You did nothing. This is on me."

"Nothing," Yoda confirmed. "The point, that is."

"What? You're gonna let yourself die because you feel guilty the Order wasn't perfect?" Cracks shot down farther, until dirt began to fall from them, and the rain outside began to make itself at home on their cloaks. "You think it had a chance to recover, after the Wars? If I hadn't Fallen, someone else..."
would've. And you know it."

"Less damage, someone else would have done. An Order to repair itself, there would still be. Here, all are with the Force. In our hearts, are they, but not in our eyes. Disappear, they did, as you so wished them to."

"So, because I Fell, and not someone less of a monster, you want to martyr yourself?" The beast in his eyes returned. "See where that gets you! You will have changed nothing, Grandmaster. Your precious Jedi will remain dead, and any attempt at dragging yourself back to their side will only end in further suffering. If you truly wish redemption for the Order, you would spare no thought to abandoning it at its greatest time of need. You would understand that dying will not lend you the title of martyr, as you intend; no, it will earn you the title of a coward. And a deserter."

Mud and rain stung Luke's eyes, but he couldn't seem to close them. "Father, Father maybe you should-"

"Many things, I have been called, but a coward and a deserter is new, I find." Master Yoda hummed. "Think this to be right, you do? Though my nine centuries I have already spent? Find me, death will, and blind it is to my location at the time."

"And you'd prefer that death meet you when you lie bleeding on the floor of an Imperial holding cell? You'd choose torture over starflight?"

"If that is my fate."

"Fate, fate, you dare to talk of fate after the Prophecy? What do any of us know about the future of this forsaken, broken galaxy?"

A hint of anger flashed across Master Yoda's face. "Who broke it, hmm?"

"It was broken before I got here."

"Cracked, it was, yes, but fixable. Smashed it into a thousand shards of glass, did you, and hard those are to put together."

"You will come with us. If you die, the last remnants of the Order will dissolve. I cannot fix a glass that no longer exists, you self-righteous old fool!"

Instead of the fight Luke felt probably deserved to break out, Master Yoda simply began to laugh. Darth Vader wasn't infuriating him, not intimidating him, not changing his mind, no; he was entertaining him. Entertaining him. "So devoted, you are, to resurrecting the Council?"

Vader was spitting. "I am, but can I say the same for you? Any of you who survived? Or have you given up entirely? Let my failure stop you? Don't tell me your mind has finally left you. Or is it your conviction? Your courage? Your faith?"

"Enough!" Ben snapped, with a kind of fury Luke had never seen grace his features, in all his twenty years of life. "Is this what's become of the Jedi? A band of squabbling, petty, ill-tempered children? We are better than this. If this is our true reflection, then the Order died long before Darth Vader took it apart. There is no hope for a Jedi no longer at peace with the Force."

Everyone was silent. The rain refused to take the cue, battering Master Yoda's collapsing little treehouse until they were all soaked through and shaking in a suspended moment of painful nothingness. Finally, Father exhaled, measured, and looked away. "You're right. Of course, you're right."
"This isn't the End," Ben said, with firmness, until they all nodded, even Master Yoda himself. "We can still find peace."

"We must leave." Master Yoda folded his small hands in his lap, deep in thought. "Go, I will, with you, but you know I am dying, yes?"

"You made that very clear," Father replied, emotionless and cold.

"Complete your training, you will, on Han Solo's ship, with my guidance. The majority of your strength is internal, you must understand this. Carry you the whole way, I cannot, and will not."

"We understand," said Leia. "Your help has been invaluable."

"It is my job."

The ship felt cold, but that was probably just Luke's imagination. Dagobah had chilled him to the bones, in more ways than one, and months of exhausting lessons in the Force had worn him down with time. He felt like torn cloth, fraying at the seams. But it had been worth it, he knew. Now, he felt the universe working at his side, the Force flowing with him like water, and everything came with instinct. He'd changed. They'd all changed. There was renewed confidence, finally, and Leia's devotion to the Alliance had fueled her throughout all of the grueling tasks, hurdles, leaps, and goals Master Yoda had pushed them through in their time at his side.

They had more of a chance now than ever. But Palpatine wasn't blind enough to miss it. Luke sensed his hatred in the Force, even from his place on a small ship lightyears away from civilisation. He sensed the desperate need to smother them, to extinguish the threat they posed to Imperial rule. Palpatine hadn't the arrogance to pretend the Alliance had never been more than a small uprising of determined maniacs, but now the threat was tangible. Or, about as tangible as the Force allowed itself to be.

He knew they had to find him, and stop him. Sooner rather than later.

"You're the navigator around here," Han began, and Leia looked up from the holomap she was studying. "Where's this Imperial convoy he's sent?"

"They've set up headquarters on a planet fairly near here, I can tell." There was a minute of careful silence as her eyes went unseeing. "Somewhere around Anoat, or Bespin. No, definitely Bespin. A city. Lots of people who don't know what they're getting into." She blinked. "It's obviously a trap."

Father shrugged. "Then we'll have to go in careful."

"You don't want to stop to consider the fallout?" Leia asked, with pointed scepticism.

"The whole point of the Alliance is to free innocent people from the Empire, right?" Father crossed his arms. "It's not a trap if we know a workaround."

"Then we'll go," she confirmed. "But not without a plan."

"Oh, c'mon! Plans are so boring and unoriginal."

"Going in blind may not be boring, but it is unoriginal. It's been done before. Many times. And they end mostly the same way: in death. Don't be reckless, not with the Emperor."
A flicker of a ghost, then. "I've learnt not to be."

"Then, we come up with a strategy." Leia smiled, wry. "Who wants to volunteer, or do I have to go first?"

"You suggested it!"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the shortness! As I said, I pre-write these, and it was Christmas at the time, and a whole other year ago, if you can believe it. 2016 is here, wow. ANYWAY. Didn't have much time to write with the holidays all up in my face, tempting me with delicious food and hiding presents that look like they've been wrapped by a toddler. Sorry. Hopefully I'll make up for it. <3

Writing in the present, though, college is legitimately the opposite of going to Jedi Academy, and a novel-length SW fanfic won't please my English teacher when she asks for essays. Still, since I'm an insane person who can continue to write about gay romance when her teacher is demanding results, I've still got chapters incoming. Don't worry, I've got my precious caffeine for backup. I'm trying my best not to let my workload water down my writing. Every chapter I write I want to be one you guys actually find adds to the story! ;a;
"Learn to share your strength, you must, if to Bespin, you intend to go."

Luke blinked. "Who with?"

"Your sister, hmm? Combine your powers, you can, and make yourselves two halves of one whole."

"Because we're family?"

"No, no. Because you accept yourselves to be. A powerful connection, you must have, to share the Living Force within you."

Leia looked up at this, intrigued. The prospect of joining their strength to become an even greater threat was tempting, but she wasn't naïve enough to think it wouldn't come with its drawbacks.

"What's the catch?" she asked, and Yoda looked at her with something like approval.

"Your pain, you will share, as well as your strengths. Go down one, go down the other. If luck finds your side, you could continue, cut off the connection, but equally as painful, that is. Endurance, it requires, and determination."

"Do we have what it takes?"

Luke stared at her. "Do we have a choice? Emperor Palpatine is hunting us down like- like animals, and he'll go after the rest of the galaxy next. We have to stop him, no matter what. Even if it means our lives, you said so yourself."

"I did." Her eyes fixed on a point of nothingness, and stayed there. "I should have expected you would, too, Luke."

"It's what we've gotta do. We have this power, right? Our father is stronger than the Emperor himself, so we have to come close. If we have it, if we really do, then not using it would be... a disgrace to the name of the Jedi." Luke gave them steely looks, daring challenge. Nobody volunteered. "It's our duty."

"It is," Leia agreed, careful. "But, if we're very lucky, we may just be able to live. With strategy, and the backing of the Alliance."

"Backing," Anakin said. "I've had enough soldiers die for me."

"They chose what they chose. The Alliance doesn't punish deserters, besides. We understand the risks. Only those who accept them move forward into the ranks, past the beginning draft, and the mountains of datafiling."

"You're just going to let them-"

"No. They'll come if we need them to, but they won't follow us around like they're lost children. This is a disciplined, military order. They understand nuance, and when orders are orders, and why. If a commander lost their mind, here, their command has full rights to disobey poorly-planned, suicidal attacks."
"But we should still use them?"

"To hopefully prevent our own deaths, yes, but not if it means trading our lives for theirs. I place value on what we give to the Alliance. Without us, the rebellion would continue, but they'd no longer have the intimidation factor we can offer. We're a genuine threat, and the Empire knows it. They're not interested in killing Rebels anymore, they're interested in killing us. If a 'Trooper had one broken blaster at their side, and one shot left, either at a Rebel or one of us, Imperial training dictates that they choose us."

Luke swallowed. "But I can't let them die for us. I can't."

"I know. If we play our cards right, they won't. And even if we fail, I'll make sure the Alliance doesn't suffer for our actions. I'm fighting a war, but I don't want a massacre, Luke." She smiled at him. "I'm saying we have help."

"It seems... I dunno, less lively," Han said, his gaze wandering over the clouds. Empty clouds, and Leia hadn't noticed a ship flying past in ages. Nobody was leaving the planet, or entering it.

"Something really isn't right."

"Agreed," said Han. "My instincts are telling me this is a terrible idea."

"There might be people trapped down there," Luke protested, looking frantic. "We have to help them."

"Might be?" Han shook his head. "Of course we're gonna help. I'm just figuring, better to be cautious about it. Not that I really enjoy sneaking around. But this is the Emperor, and it'd be great if we all kept our lives, kid."

"Han's right," Anakin added. "Stealth and I don't get along, but chances are, there's something bad down there. And I'm talking really bad." He frowned. "I'm Palpatine's pet project. He's going to try everything to get me to follow him again. After all, he put a lot of time, effort, and credits into making me. He just wants his investment to pay off."

"That's," Han paused, "incredibly disturbing."

"Believe me, I know." He shrugged. ",S my fault for playing into it, I guess. I should've seen it coming. He destroys for the sake of it, and he always has."

"So it's certainly a trap," Obi-Wan offered. "Well, that does require a little more caution. Perhaps we should try not to throw it to the wind this time."

Han turned, briefly, away from the flight controls to give Obi-Wan a disbelieving look. "Good luck avoiding the wind here."

Leia sighed. "Han's right. We need backup plans."

"Call in the Rebel forces?" Anakin grinned, painfully false. "I hate to say it, but we don't have a lot of options. We go in and risk it, or we leave them here to die. That's it."

"And since the latter isn't going to happen," Obi-Wan began, "I suggest we risk it. But not without a little careful foresight, for once. You'd think by now we'd have learnt from our mistakes."
They landed on the underside of an industrial complex, far away from a docking bay. The smoke and grime would cover their tracks, for now, but it was better they left none at all.

That was half-impossible.

"I could sneak in," Anakin began, but paused to adjust the mask’s fitting, where it had dug into his neckline. "If they see me, they'll probably be too threatened to do anything. I mean, what are the chances that the people of Bespin know I'm not on the Empire's side? Low, I bet."

Leia eyed him. "That suit doesn't by any chance have a stealth mode, does it?"

Anakin held up a finger. "I could breathe less."

"Next plan."

"I was only joking!" Anakin held up his hands. "I'm not stuck in it forever. If I carried it along with me, used it to fight, but not to hide..."

"And just how do you plan on dragging Sith battle armour through the halls of Cloud City without arousing suspicion, Father? Please, tell me."

"The shipping industry is booming here. We could pretend we're delivering cargo?"

"It might work," Luke started. "Y'know, if we're careful."

"We don't know who's there waiting for us. Even the suit won't hold up against a barrage of missiles."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow, considering. "You expect a threat of that size here?"

Yoda tapped his cane against the floor, the judge with the gavel. Leia leveled him with an amused stare. "Feel it, I can. Something dark, there is, waiting here. Something terrible."

Looking suspicious in Cloud City wasn't a rarity, and that was their only saviour. They walked with their eyes on the floor, their hoods drooping down and obsuring their faces, and their skittish caution palpable.

Most of the surviving Jedi had experience with some level of stealth, but Leia and Luke were a new breed, and Luke was a farmboy, carefree, before he joined them. She wondered if he could keep his secrets close, like they'd been taught, or if he would spill like bathwater.

Anakin hadn't dragged the suit along with him, because Leia had insisted it was impractical, and because the guise of Vader couldn't help them here. If these truly were Palpatine's agents, they'd be more than aware of Vader's allegiances, and the armour would only slow him down when they ran. As they would. Cloud City had a population to worry about, and they would not be the only casualties if they put up too great a fight. No, she would wait for that moment. And savour it, when it came -- and it would come. It would.

The halls were quiet, and the people pale and sick. Anakin brushed a few shoulders, taller than the ceiling and unable to compensate, ducking and blindly pushing his way through. Every shoulder jumped, their necks going taut, eyes wide like animals, small and scared. She'd seen that look on every face subject to the Empire's regime of nightmares and cowards.

"What's wrong with them?" Luke asked himself. "Who did this to them? The Empire?"
"Torture. Fear tactics. Things like that," Leia said. "They do it to keep them in line."

"I wonder who they're using," Obi-Wan hummed. "Any number of people could qualify. Perhaps all of them."

"What d'you mean, who they're using?" Anakin's eyes narrowed. "Who they're using for what?"

"A new hire, to fill in your old position, Anakin. Torture, fear tactics, and things like that -- they all were relegated to you, weren't they? And now you're gone."

Anakin's posture crumpled farther. "You're right. Of course you're right. There must be someone else now, but I don't know. I don't know who he'd pick. Someone who doesn't want to think or see, or someone who likes it too much. That's his- his method of choice. When he chooses the torturers. I hand-picked half of them myself."

"You're a very credible source," Leia said, and failed to keep the bite out of her words. "Luckily, we can work that to our advantage, now. Who are the most likely candidates, do you think?"

"I- I. Bounty hunters, maybe. Not reliable, but effective. Someone I trained, possibly. Even a droid could get the job done. Especially one that's been treated badly. There are a lot of options."

The hallway was long, and to her tired feet, endless. "Well, at least you've narrowed them down," she said, dryly.

He hadn't narrowed them down. "It's also possible they've chosen someone at random," he offered, for the fifth time. "There are a lot of killers in this galaxy."

"So," Han said, and Leia had never seen him more exhausted in her life, "what you're saying is, it could be anyone, anywhere, any time, and we're just gonna have to wait and see."

Anakin nodded. "That's right."

"How's that a good idea?"

At this, Anakin snorted and alerted the entire city. Leia gripped his shoulder tightly until he gritted his teeth and lowered his voice enough to ease suspicion. "When has anything we've ever done been a good idea?"

"You say that like you're proud," Han said, with approval, and then stopped without warning, until they all crashed into him and knocked their teeth back into their jaws. "Did you hear that?"

"I'm sorry," Leia said. "I couldn't hear anything over the sound of my bones breaking. What's the hold up? If anyone so much as begins to suspect-"

"I know. But did you hear that?"

Leia listened and heard the base. And footsteps, as people side-stepped them and passed swiftly by. Then, below that, a hum. "Yes. What is it?"

"Beats me."

"It's probably a trap," Luke announced. "So we just find another way in, right? One they don't expect?"

Han slapped him on the back. "Normally that'd work, kid, but this time's different. Something tells
me they've got all their bases covered."

"Something tells me the same," said Obi-Wan, carefully. "We might as well prepare, if it is indeed
unavoidable."

They followed the hum to a dark room filled with nothing but machinery, and lights dim and
sparking. Leia lit the way with her own 'saber, but the shadows were stubborn.


Han gestured around. "It's just a room filled with junk, Luke."

"I'm not sure about that," Anakin said, and Leia at once sensed dawning realisation from him. She
tensed.

"What? What is it?"

But Anakin was no longer talking to them. "It is you, my apprentice." He laced his fingers together.
"At last, it seems we meet again."

"You!" The voice was ragged, scratchy. It was harsh and grating and the inflection was just a
centimeter away from natural, as if its owner wasn't comfortable in his own skin.

The man the voice belonged to looked even worse. He was scarred, deep and long and agonising,
and his eyes were empty and glazed over. Leia didn't need the Force to tell her something was
deeply wrong with him. Every move he made sung hurt and broken.

"What's wrong with him?" Luke whispered, backing away as if cornered, though they were six-to-
one.

"Don't act like I can't hear you," he replied, and reached for the hilts of his lightsabers with stiff
fingers, grasp so practiced it passed into the point of abnormality.

"I'm with Luke here," Han said, cautiously. "What's going on?"

Anakin sighed. "He was my apprentice, once. And then I killed him."

"So that's not the original guy," Han continued, encouraged by the pleased look in Anakin's eye.

"The last one."

"Someone tried to- to clone your dead apprentice?" But Luke wasn't asking. Leia knew he wasn't
blind to what their father had done, in his time, or what he had helped the Empire to do, but to see
the mangled -- and, for all purposes, rotten -- corpse of the past standing in front of them, that was a
fresh wound.

"And you would be Emperor Palpatine's assassin, I suppose." Obi-Wan bowed low to the ground.
"Any chance we could skip all this and have a civilised conversation?"

Not even a moment's hesitation. He had about as much free will as a doll. "You have to die."

"Marek," Vader said, his presence in the Force dark and cold. Like a familiar greeting. "Have you
chosen to finish what you started?"
"I- what did I start? You're the traitor. The deserter. The coward."

Vader considered him. "And you don't remember me?"

"Remember you? How'd I even...?" A pause, to collect himself. "No. We've never met before, Rebel scum."

Vader opened his mouth to reply, but was quickly silenced by the blade of Marek's forwardmost lightsaber. "Ah." A dry, unamused laugh. "I see you're not one for conversation, are you?"

Her father was confident in his abilities, she knew, and he didn't precisely seem to feign even remote concern about the half-dead hitman meeting him strike-for-strike, but there was a kind of strange, detached curiosity in the way he fought. He was more interested in studying his opponent than beating him, and so Leia stepped in before they were all eviscerated.

Marek's hands were caught in fending off their two blades, and sweat began to bead at his temples, teeth clenched as he stood and tried not to let himself fall back into the livewire surrounding them like vines. Luke took this as an opportunity, with a sudden burst of his father's daring, and slashed a crimson line into Marek's back.

And then all was forgotten, and Marek was turning, like a rabid dog, throwing all his strength into an attempt at impaling Luke on both blades. Luke met him evenly, fought until Marek was panting, and Leia felt the anger become a thick miasma, pouring down their throats. With added fury, Marek aimed a sharp kick to Luke's stomach, sending him reeling into the machine behind him, smashing his wrist into its innards and trapping him there. He held his free hand out to guard, but Marek was winning. Vader came at him with a roar, switching his focus long enough to spare Luke, but everything was wrong.

There was no humanity in this one's eyes. Leia had met a thousand clones, all living and whole and different. But this one was cultivated and sick and there was nothing left. Palpatine had wanted the perfect weapon, and perhaps he'd found it in this empty husk of a man, but his leash wasn't tight enough. Marek was vicious like an animal, and his 'saber, held blazing by a shaking hand, came down with a sick crunch, slicing through the wrist that had kept his prey in the web.

Luke screamed and fell to the floor, and Vader's fury grew so potent, her vision had gone dim, and her ears rang like alarm bells. He had them all crumpling to the ground, fists balled at his sides, face pulled back into a ruthless snarl. Leia saw, in this moment, that her father was going to kill him. Marek was going to die.

And then silver blocked their way. "You've done far too much of that, now, Vader. Can't go breaking that record, now can we? Not when we all thought you'd gone sober." Ahsoka, holding them apart, warding away Obi-Wan, master to master and apprentice to apprentice. "This is my job. He's trying to steal it, after all."

Marek spat in her face, but she ducked faster than Leia could see, and came up with the same snapping, biting rage as her master. "There's only room for two of us, here. Me, and the real Galen. You don't even come close, and frankly, I think it's time the Empire let themselves see things to the end. Don't you?" She held the blade to Marek's throat. "If you move, you'll find this flowing right through you. I don't want to kill you, whatever the hell you've become, but I will. Force help me I will. You've taken enough from innocent lives already."

All the courage in the world couldn't keep Luke from sobbing in agony, but his eyes were dry, and his mouth hidden in his sleeve. Yoda had taught him to channel his pain, but Leia could still feel it, crawling like fire up her arms.
"You need a medbay," Ahsoka said, in Luke's direction, where he lay curled on the floor, backing away from any touch. "We can get that fixed. Trust me when I say it's happened before." She turned back to Marek. "As for you, well. We can use you. I'm sure there's something left of the old Galen in there. And if there's not, better our hands than his." She turned, surveyed the room. "I'd say we're done here, wouldn't you?"

Vader slumped to the ground, and let Luke rest by his side, whose blood was seeping into the many layers of cloth folding like waves in Vader's robes. Vader ran his metal hand through Luke's damp hair, a reminder. Another likeness to share.

Leia held her 'saber to Marek's back, then to his arm, just close enough to his elbow to singe the hairs. "Move anywhere I don't tell you, and you'll meet my brother's fate."

Chapter End Notes

So, uh. More characters. Yes. But it's not like the Emperor would just sit around and do nothing!

Okay, real talk. It is a character party up in here, and it will, knowing me, inevitably continue to be. For, like, the whole story. I'm sorry. It makes me sound weird af, but I just love writing character interaction. Dialogue is, by far, my life. Introspection sustains me. I try to make up for this with Things Actually Happening in the Plot, but somehow it always comes back 'round to Characters Have Intense Conversations That Only Continue to Intensify Exponentially. Forever. Please forgive me.
Ahsoka dragged Marek's body through the hallways, but the people of Cloud City didn't even blink. They knew exactly who'd seized the reigns of their government. They'd seen countless horrors already, she imagined. They'd given over their fate like a gift, presented, perfect, for the Empire to take, to slowly drain the life from.

She'd seen it in more places than one.

Leia's face was her father's, all of a sudden, twisted and broken, and so angry Ahsoka watched as her chest heaved ragged breaths. The floor beneath her shook very lightly, but Ahsoka could see her trying to reign in her fury, sweat pooling at her temples, fists shaking harder and harder at every agonised noise her brother made. Luke refused assistance, had insisted he carry himself back to the ship, but he was cold and pale and swaying. His feet knocked into each other as he stepped.

They could fix his hand, but they couldn't fix the parts of his mind that had been frayed alongside it. Leia clearly saw this, as well as Ahsoka herself, and from the looks of it, Vader. Even without the suit, he looked as he had five years ago, when he'd chased down the newly birthed Phoenix Squadron with unrelenting claws. The only difference made apparent was the direction of his hatred; it wasn't aimed firmly their way, for the first time in two decades.

He, too, breathed without satisfaction, heavy and laden with rage. The line of his throat was tight, and his voice so rough, she could barely distinguish it from the modulator that had supported his burnt vocal cords these past years. The inflection, the cold contempt, the, on occasion, deliberately slow enunciation, as if he considered himself in the company of idiots.

But she saw something else, too, behind the wall of ice. Fierce devotion, the desire to protect. A Jedi's motivation, more than a Sith's. Not by definition, of course -- Ahsoka knew better than anyone the blurred lines between the Dark and the Light -- but at least by association. He cared, somehow, some way. He didn't view his children as pawns in a game between the Empire and the Alliance, as she had expected. He saw them as people.

Vader stared at Marek's limp body with something like pity, and Ahsoka wondered if he saw himself in the boy. He wasn't one to make judgements about the paths others had chosen, but he could understand it like no-one else in this galaxy. "You had so much potential, youngling," Vader told him, and he moaned out something none of them could understand. "What has he done to you?"

"What," Marek spat, "are you on about, old man? I've always been like this."

"You are a dead man walking," Ahsoka said. "You should be grateful heroism is in your DNA, or half this planet would throw you to the dogs."

Luke reached out to touch his shoulder, and then snatched his hand away, to rethink. "He doesn't remember, does he? His old life?"

Ahsoka shook her head. "Technically, it's not his."

"What're any of you saying-? I don't- I don't understand."

"Palpatine has taken away your mind, little one, and cloned your body." Vader looked away. "A part
of him has altered your soul. Pray he does not alter it further, or you'll find yourself missing one altogether."

"I- What?"

Vader slid the glove off his hand in one smooth movement, and flexed mechanical fingers, dancing in front of Marek's wide eyes. "I know what it means to lose part of yourself in the war," he said. "It was a fate I wished to spare my son, but it seems that is... no longer possible. You stole that from him, and if I were still as untamed as I was when I was your age, I would have stolen it from you in return." A pause. "As of now, you can keep your arm, child. But if you lay your hand on my blood again, that is not all you will be losing."

Obi-Wan eyed Vader, at this, calculating, and then settled. Ahsoka could sense anger from him, as much as he tried to smother it, and she knew, then, that Luke and Leia were as much his children as they were Vader's own. Even with his picture perfect Jedi ideals, Obi-Wan would be struggling not to kill Marek himself, now. Blood, so precious, its consistency always thicker than water, an instinct not even the Force could purge from the highest in its ranks.

They were a balance, and like any measurement, they would tip and rise with time. Let them only keep it level where it mattered most.

"You face a choice," Vader said, to Luke's floating form, bacta healing the connections his joints had made to his artificial arm. "Continue to use this, or create one for yourself."

Luke opened his eyes, seeing through liquid, to the half-broken lightsaber in his father's grip. He made a wounded noise, and reached out to grab it, hands slamming against the sides of the tank.

"It's still salvageable," Vader assured. "But you may want to consider making your own. I think you will find it helps."


"I'm not entirely sure he'll be alright," Too-Onebee cut in, and Ahsoka gave him a horrified stare. He held up a claw. "Physically, this can be solved with ease. But mentally, well. When you have relatively swift access to the chemical composition of one entire army's brain, you tend to notice things. He's been taught a very hard lesson, one that all the Alliance learns eventually." Something like a sigh left his vocal grates. "War doesn't exactly forgive, not even the slightest mistake."

"He's had his pride injured more than his arm, is that what you're saying?" Ahsoka crossed her arms.

"Oh, it's more than pride, as you're well aware, Commander Tano. When one finds themselves getting too cocky..."

She looked away. "Yes, I understand."

Vader sat, chewing his lip, wiping sweat from his brow. Contemplating, and every so often, casting pained glances in Luke's direction, knife-sharp with carefully honed strategic intuition. He'd lost his own arm, fighting a war. And so the Son was still the Father's unending parallel line, and Ahsoka knew that, for all their world had to offer, this scared him most. That his flesh and blood might have to suffer his own fate.

Obi-Wan was at his side, a hand resting on his shoulder, but he, too, looked disturbed. This was no
new news to Ahsoka; in war, she'd seen everything. But to them, this was fresh. To Obi-Wan, the first battle casualty in twenty years. To Vader, the first he hadn't delighted in causing, the first he felt any form of sorrow for. It ate away at him, old eyes in such a young face. Fury in the same framing as the kindness shown to her when she was barely more than a youngling. Hatred and rage on the face of the Republic's beloved hero.

She wanted to laugh. How the tides liked to change, and wash them all up, half-drowned, like wet, shaking, pitiful things.

Luke blinked the bacta from his eyes, rivulets trailing down his forehead, like he'd stood for an hour in the rain. "You've seen a lot, haven't you?" he asked, quietly.

"I have."

"This isn't the first time you've seen someone, I dunno. Get defeated. Lose something. Does it feel any less like a failure, in the future?"

"You didn't fail, Luke. Things happen in war." She hummed. "You have great respect for your father's combat ability, don't you, Little Skyguy?" He tilted his head in confusion, and she went on, "Even he lost his arm. And then, even if we can't see it anymore, his legs, and a whole lot more. He lost himself. And now, look, he's finding it again." She shrugged. "I'm not about to promise you time heals everything that's wrong with this place and these people, but you come to see things... differently."

"Living longer gives you a better picture to work with," Luke said. "More frame of reference. But I didn't trip up and accidentally burn out some power converters, this time. You can fix that. What if I couldn't save my father? My sister? One slip, and he took my whole arm off."

"Your family can take care of themselves, and more importantly, so can you." She held out her arms, scarred and scorched by countless blasterbolts, countless 'sabers. "If you fight and win, you come out having paid for it. And then you can move on."


Ahsoka smiled down at him. "Your father went through far too many before he settled on the one he has now. And he lost more than his arm. Now look at what he's doing, Luke. You're taking apart a regime that's ruled for too long. Bringing life back to a body that oversaw democracy's departure 'with thundrous applause.'" She laughed. "That line, I took from your mother. She understood."

"I'm getting the feeling."

They'd brought Master Yoda to their portable base, where he'd settled in a small room on the farthest ends of the ship. Ahsoka watched as Luke and Leia trailed in and out, day after day. Leia wouldn't speak with Marek, but the database logs showed she'd been searching his records. With her clearance, she'd clearly found what she was looking for.

Luke hid with Master Yoda, radiating shame. But each day, he came back with a steadily more complete 'saber, and Ahsoka wondered what the old man had brought along with him to his new home. If he'd been expecting this.

Force knew if anyone could, it was him.

The others spent long hours meditating, attempting to rest their minds, but Ahsoka felt their worry in
"How's your son?" she asked, and Vader looked up from his holo.

"As well as can be expected," he replied, and looked back down again.

Ahsoka crossed her arms. "How are you?"

"As well as can be expected."

"Very forthcoming, thank you." She set a hand on his shoulder. "How are you really?"

"Not well." His eyes brimmed yellow, but they were a dulled blade, and his face was pale, his hair damp with sweat. "Destruction is no job of his. Not anymore, not after I- after I killed him. He was on the side of the Light, and that was where he intended to stay. If he had doubts, I wouldn't have... finished what I started. But he had none."

"And now Palpatine's dragged him back."

"He has no memory of it. Perhaps a meaningful few seconds, but otherwise, he is... a clean slate."

"Not so clean at all."

"Tainted upon birth. Growth. Creation." A small frown. "He wouldn't know his parents if they were alive, here, to talk to him." He waved a hand. "Empty. All of him."

"What're we gonna do with him?"

"Nothing. The wretch has nothing to give, and precious few years of life left. Unless the Emperor has outdone his previous efforts, in which case, he will spend the rest of his long stay in this galaxy alone."

"You intend to abandon him?"

"If that's what he chooses. We can offer him a place among us, but he would never find himself so low as to take it."

"You did."

He held two fingers to his temple. "I'm- wrong. I think on my feet. I let my feelings cloud my judgement."

"He doesn't?"

"Not if the Emperor has learnt anything from his past mistakes. He'd leave Marek no room for a mind of his own, no chance at independent thought."

"You're saying he'll blindly follow whatever Palpatine orders, forever."

"I won't seek to tell you what I see in his future. My predictions have been wrong before."

They hadn't, but she didn't comment. Vader would appreciate it enough to thank her with an iron grip on her pharynx, and she didn't much plan to receive that gift twice.

"What should we do with him?" she asked, instead.
"Let him choose his own path, should he be capable of it."

"Leave him?"

"Free him," Vader corrected.

"What makes you so sure he won't try to kill again?"

The yellow in his gaze was a little brighter. "Rest assured, I think you'll find that he's unwilling to follow this path, after all."

"I have to stay," said Marek. "I'm missing something, and I want-no, I need to find out what. I have to."

Vader eyed him, cold and distant, no hint of emotion shown. For all he complained about the burdens of his feelings, he still had a measure of control over their visibility. A very small measure. "Very well. You understand the conditions?"

"Yeah, I can't do anything for banthashi-"

"Then we are agreed. You will stay, and learn, and in return, you will refrain from... indulging your more violent impulses."

Marek snorted aloud, a harsh, bitter thing. "Old man, I heard the terms."

Vader tilted his head. "So you remember I was old?"

And Marek blinked, and there was satisfaction in Vader's eyes then. The distance momentarily eclipsed, the coldness overtaken by a frustrating smugness Ahsoka had known throughout her formative years. The face Anakin Skywalker once wore when he knew he'd won.

"I- No- Wait-"

"Continue. I have faith it will come to you, in time."

Marek twisted his face like a child, fingers tightening their hold against the table's edge.

"So Palpatine does make mistakes," Ahsoka said. "I'd never've guessed."

Vader's smile was a sharp-toothed nexu's, his stare glinting, unsettling the prisoner before him. "The Light is a stain it seems none of us are able to scrub out."

"Not even Palpatine," she finished.

"No, indeed. Not even he has the pleasure of finding permanence in the Dark."

"But it can be found." A warning, which Vader ignored.

"If you like." He turned the grin on her, now. "Don't you see? The Force is ours. We can choose to do with it what we wish. Create, or destroy. Live, or die."

"Is this what you want to teach me, old man? Spiritual dri-"

"You will come to know the Force, in time. Just as you did before, you can again. For now, you can learn to control your anger, padawan."
A sneer, half-broken, half-meant. "Speak when spoken to?"

"Speak whenever you wish. Do not expect to be heard."

Vader could, in fact, still hold a grudge. She sighed, and stepped out the door, to breathe the sterilised air of the corridors ahead. Her head was beginning to ache, impatience and exasperation searing the edges of her thoughts. She wanted, more than anything, a mug of tea, and to meditate. Or sleep, Force allow it.

"He was emulating you, you know," she said.

He didn't even blink. "I've seen enough of myself to know."

"Palpatine doesn't want to clone Galen Marek, he wants to clone you."

"I'm exceedingly aware," Vader spat. "He will not get the chance, I'll see to that."

"Not just you. We're all in this now, like it or not. If we go down, we go down together."

"That isn't a wise idea." Vader sighed. "I have a target painted on my back."

"And we don't?"

"Not one important enough to drive the Emperor to... this." A hint of Anakin then, and a sneer. "Whatever the hell this is."

She sat down, stealing some of the untouched rations at Vader's side. It was odd, considering he had quite the consistent appetite, but she figured seeing your son lose an arm was as good a reason as any to lose your taste. This had affected him like nothing else, since his Fall. When their paths joined once more, those five years ago, Vader had been void of all things. But here, now, he felt as much as he had lost. All at once, twenty years of cold, unthinking murder, draining the life from him with the ferocity and determination of open space.

"Do you regret training him?"

Vader's eyes narrowed. "He was a good man, in the end. But he would have been better suited to life as an orphan on Kashyyyk."

"So you do."

"He was worthy of my training." Vader smiled, humourless. "Too worthy. He needed the guidance of the Jedi Masters I destroyed."

"Not your own?"

"No. Never. Palpatine hollowed me out from the inside, and I, myself, finished what he left untouched. The only guidance I had to give led to enlightenment in the Force, yes, but it required sacrifice. The boy would've handed me the strings to his life, and by consequence, the Emperor. And the Emperor never leaves his puppets to collect dust, as we can see."

"The Jedi required sacrifice as well, if I remember," she said, dryly.

"Of a different kind." Vader's stare was unwavering. "One could leave the Jedi Order, if they wished."
"One can leave the Sith, too."

"They would be lucky to escape unharmed."

"You did."

"Did I?" Vader asked, and left it at that.

Chapter End Notes

I got deep again. Shit.
Luke showed his face for the first time in the ship's cafeteria, gripping his fork with unsteady, mechanical fingers. His father sat across from him, projecting comfort.

"Hey, at least yours looks real." He waved, flicked his wrist. "Mine even jams up sometimes. Always when it's the least convenient, actually."

"Are you alright?" Leia peered over from her tray. "Adjusting?"

"As much as I can." Luke laughed. "Really, not much."

"You get used to it," Father said. "Sometimes I forget my legs are still flesh and blood." His feet tapped a rhythm into the floor. "A lot. I let them go numb on accident all the time now."

"Are you saying you prefer prosthetics?"

"Either way is fine. As long as I can use a 'saber, I'm good."

"Maybe a mission will take it off your mind," came a voice, and Luke turned his head to see Ahsoka towering above them.

"A mission?"

"Not just any mission. It involves a certain Pirate," she said, and Ezra, from a table over, slammed his head down onto his empty plate.

Luke startled. "They're that bad, whoever they are?"

"I wouldn't say bad." Ahsoka hummed. "In it to win it?" She shrugged. "He looks out for himself, and that takes priority. But he won't leave you for dead if you have something to offer, and trust me, you always have something to offer."

"Why are we negotiating with Hondo?" Ben asked, one eyebrow raised, half-disapproving, half-amused in equal parts.

"He has intel about the Second Death Star."

Anakin blinked. "Already? It took two decades for Palpatine to salvage up enough scrap to fully complete that heap of-"

"Yes," Ahsoka said. "But we've made him very, very desperate."

"Well, that's good," Luke announced, and all gave him a confused glance, save Leia, and Han. Han, who looked distinctly pleased at this line of thought. "That means it's going to be put together even worse than before, right? It'll be a threat, but not so impenetrable."

"They might buff up their shields, change the design to hide the exhaust port," Leia began.

"And that's why we, with reluctance, are going to negotiate a deal with Hondo," Ahsoka finished. "He'll tell us what we need to know, if we're diplomatic, and if we have something he wants."
"Sounds like fun," Han said, and meant it.

Luke rolled his eyes, but seeing them happy again was a comfort too great to be overwritten with exasperation.

Half-way into their flight, a trailing group of puzzle-pieced-together, mashed up ships arrived at their side. Luke stared out the viewport and contemplated how they weren't all suffocating from multiple hull breaches, and then practically choked when Han informed him this was, apparently, their escort.

"We don't need an escort," Luke said. "The Falcon is basically overflowing with Jedi right now."

He made a sweeping gesture, from his own body, to Ben's, to Father's, to Leia's, to Ahsoka's, and then, finally, to a sheepish Kanan and Ezra in the corner.

"That's Hondo," Ahsoka said, and Ezra let out another pained sigh.

"This isn't gonna be pretty," he warned, and Han held up his hands.

"I'll let them escort us. Don't wanna get into any unnecessary trouble."

"Fair point," Luke said, and let his eyes follow the blazing path of the engines' trail in the stars.

They looked old, the ships. Practically ancient, to a mechanic. He figured the Empire hadn't made it easy for them, over the years. That they'd lost business, good people, even if they were pirates who only had eyes set on themselves. It wasn't hard, in this galaxy, to end up with solely your own interests at heart.

He just didn't know how he was going to negotiate with them, backed into a corner, fighting so desperately for leverage they'd steal plans from a fleet whose shadow could swallow a thousand of their own. They'd drain the Alliance's blood until it had no more to offer, if they could, if it meant credits, or intel, or the hundred million things that could wedge a thorn in the Empire's side. Anything to slip away unnoticed, instead of being hunted down in ships made like patchwork quilts.

Luke swallowed. "Are we sure this is a good idea?"

Ahsoka raised her gaze from the durasteel plating on the Falcon's hull to the sweat beading at his temples, the way he held himself, edgy and on guard. "No," she replied. "In fact, it's a terrible one. But we have no choice. If the Empire manages to build the Second Death Star, they'll put an end to life beyond these starsystems. They'll go farther than just here." She held out her arms, lekku folding over her shoulders. "They have an entire universe to break, and they will break it."

"And so the pirates are the lesser evil?" Leia asked.

Ahsoka gave a half-shrug, and Han sighed, and said, "In a place like this, evil comes in degrees ranging from very to barely. There aren't any people willing to snatch the Empire's plans who are anything close to upstanding, because upstanding citizens in this shithole are supposed to stay inside and keep their heads down." Luke got the feeling this was personal, an integral part of what drove Han. "The pirates are practically the least of our problems, kid, and they got a better deal to offer than the Imps, lemme assure you. You'd be surprised to see what kinda things people are really willing to do in order to get by."


"Greetings, and welcome to my humble abode." His face was hidden in the shadows, but Luke
knew immediately he was a liar.

For all the pirates were suffering, their headquarters, by all means, were not. Every possible surface was draped in riches, trophies, credits, *everything*, though the crew themselves wore little more than rags. *What a life.*

Ahsoka kicked empty cups of something alcoholic away from the path she was carving. Her nose wrinkled, her face disgusted and amused, and Luke thought at once this was a terrible, terrible plan. "You usually keep your house this clean?" she asked.

"Forgive the, ah, *mess,*" Hondo -- and he had to be, from the way the other pirates bowed to him -- told them. He had a pleasant sort of smile on his face that wasn't really pleasant at all. "We tend to get carried away, these days. The life of a pirate! You know how these things go."

Father scoffed, an odd noise from beneath his suit. "You intend to wager a deal, Ohnaka?"

"Darth Vader, what a pleasure. And to find you on our side, I may add. What a pleasure indeed."

"Our side is not yours," Father grit out. "You and your ilk have no allegiances."

Hondo smiled at Ahsoka, whose gaze was sweeping the room, likely for threats. "He is charming, as ever, is he not?"

"Oh, plenty." She waved a hand. "You said you had intel on the Second Death Star, Hondo. Tell me, do you still have it, or have you sold it to the highest bidder?"

"My Jedi friend, you *are* the highest bidder." He grinned, teeth glinting.

She remained impassive. "So you have it."

"I do. For a price."

"What else is new?" she murmured, to herself more than to the pirates, who overheard nonetheless, a sneer finding its way onto each of their faces. "What price?"

"A favour. Or two. Or perhaps three, hmm?"

Father bristled. "The Alliance will not *indebt* itself to untrustworthy little-" He cut himself off, the outrage overpowering his Basic. "*Fierfeks.* No better than the *murishani-*"

Luke hadn't spent the majority of his life in Hutt space half-blind to their native language. He glared as hard as he could in Father's direction. "Where's the *diplomacy* we promised, Father?"

"Precisely," Leia said. "Do forgive my father. He doesn't have the best... control."

"Ah, but *che copah* is what we deal in, what makes us who we are," Hondo said, lightly. "And we don't always have the luxury of protocol droids to haggle for us, hmm?"

*He spoke.* Luke winced. "I'm really sorry. Let's start over?"

"I am no stranger to his temper, young one." He still wore the same unpleasant smile. "Do we have a deal, Commander Tano?"

Ahsoka sighed. "Yes, we have a deal, provided your intel is sound."

"When have we ever failed you?"
"Whenever it was convenient," she replied, and Hondo laughed, long and loud. The scowl painting Ezra's face threatened to turn into a snicker. After a moment of silence, Ezra bowed to the threat, and Hondo's laughter grew choked.

"True, true. Come now, I will tell you all I know. Don't you worry, I can promise the information will hold up."

There were plans laid neatly against the table, stark against wine stains and scratches and wood splintering at the seams. If Luke didn't know better, he'd say they belonged to the original, but there were a few changes. Namely, glaringly, its shields. Virtually impenetrable.

"We're going to have to stop them before they build it," Leia said, horrified realisation dawning. "Force, nothing short of the entire fleet twice over will get through that shielding."

"I'll lower the favours to two, yes?" Hondo's smile wasn't so unpleasant now. "Even pirates like me intend to keep the galaxy, not lose it. This is... quite serious."

"Far more serious than we imagined," Ahsoka said, hands twitching restlessly at her sides. "We've made him far too desperate for his own good."

"The Emperor will not underestimate us a third time," Vader warned. "He will make sure all flaws in its design have been carefully and methodically eradicated. There will be no possible way to breach its shielding, should he succeed."

"So he can't succeed," Luke said. "Which means we have limited time. Do you think the, uh, prisoners, that we have, could tell us more?" He eyed them, shifty, so they'd understand who he meant.

"Likely," Ahsoka said. "But that's not the right question. Question is, will they, not could they."

Luke sighed. "This is about as far from an easy time as we can get."

"And here I was, hoping we might get a vacation out of it, huh, kid? We'll pull through." Han laid a hand on his shoulder. "We always do, somehow."

There was a haunted look in Kanan's eyes, then. "Maybe we've said that too much."

Hondo held out a hand. "Allow me to offer you shelter. You might want to keep a low profile. You don't intend to set sail during an Imperial patrol, eh?"

"This is low profile?" Ahsoka raised marked brows, the diamonds on her forehead rising along with them. A half-smile pierced the triangles on her cheeks. Sometimes Luke wondered if they meant anything, like the strange and mystical fortunetellers on Tatooine had, with the lines on his palms. Now, though, he worried about her temper.

"Ah, it may not look so, Commander Tano, but let me assure you, we here are virtually indetectable."

Vader looked to her in shock. "You are not seriously considering this?" He shook his head. "With this lack of foresight, we'll see ourselves die here."

Ahsoka stared at him, until Luke felt his frustration turn to curiosity. "You want to lecture me on foresight?" she asked, and the curiosity sparked out of life as quickly as it had sparked to.
"My point remains valid."

"People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones," she warned, and Vader twitched.

"I lacked foresight before, yes. But it has been a long twenty years since the Clone Wars. The Apprentice now matches the Master, in all ways."

"Your master and I have tighter control on our tempers."

"While interpersonal relationships never cease to entertain, if we could please take this beyond the stronghold and into your assigned quarters. It would be an immeasurable pleasure." Hondo bowed his head, slight.

Luke felt abruptly mortified. Leia, too, shared the sentiment, and added, like a true senator, "I apologise. I meant to keep a firmer watch on their distinct lack of professionalism, but the task at hand caught up with me."

"It is no trouble, Princess. I only hope to remind them of their privacy."

"If those two weren't at odds, this would go a lot easier," Han grumbled, and Luke gripped his shoulder.

"Sorry we offered you too much money at the cantina, Han. You could've escaped this."

He shrugged. "Where's the fun in that?" A smile. "And before you ask, kid, no, I don't regret it."

Luke tossed a spare credit into the air, and caught it once more. He was silent, but Han suffered from the same lack of sleep as he did nonetheless.

"I knew I was right to have a bad feeling about this," he said, and Luke hummed his agreement. "What a mess."

"Right?" Luke sighed. "I thought we'd helped put an end to it, but we've only made it worse."

"I wouldn't say that. He'd have made another one eventually, even if we weren't around to stop him the first time. People like that, they don't have limits. Offer them a chance to get the upper hand, and they'll not hesitate a damn second about it."

Luke watched the credit sparkle as it twirled and spun. "You read people pretty good, Han. And you always seem to know when something's gone sour. You ever think about that?"

"Just counted myself lucky to have it, really."

"Ben once said the Force flowed in all of us. I kind of wonder if he meant that literally."

"You're bringing this up now, kid?"

"If you even have the smallest connection to the Force, this could mean a lot, for you. Palpatine could attack you more than just physically."

"What? With his special mind powers? Aren't you taught to resist that kind of tripe?"

"Yeah, but were you?"

"I'm a scoundrel. I always know how to find my way outta things."
"Are we counting on that? Y'know, you should join us sometime."

"With Yoda? I can't do what you can. Lift whole damn ships outta the water, build a kriefing temple out of stone."

"I didn't build a temple," Luke protested. "It's not that complicated, if you really let yourself embrace it. You should try. In case the Emperor gets to you."

Han sighed. "You're getting real paranoid, kid. It worries me."

"And you're not?"

"I've had to be," Han said, like that was an excuse.

"So've I."

"Fair point," Han got out. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry it turned out like this."

"Could've turned out worse." Luke turned over, onto his stomach, and stared at the metal of his bunk. It was furnished in gold paint, chipping and cracking at the edges. It hadn't been properly taken care of in decades, if he remembered anything about metalwork. "Could be dead. My own father could've killed us, even."

"I don't know if that's the best way to look at it."

"I look for the bright in people. If I don't, well, who knows? On Tatooine, I couldn't afford not to."

"I know what that feels like."

"Then you should come train with us, sometime. Find the brightness in yourself."

Han snorted, eyelids half-closed, sleep trailing in. Perhaps he was comforted knowing they were both alive, breathing, here and now. "Is that what Yoda told you?"

"It's what I figured out."

"Sure, why not?" The sheets rustled, likely from Han's defeated gesture. "Hells, what do I have to lose?"

Hondo's base was nestled in a cave on a planet that held nothing. Luke sat on the cliff's edge, kicking stones into the dirt metres below, and wondered what the hell he'd gotten himself into. Just for a brief moment, before seeing his friends' smiling faces and thinking, *Yep, that's why.*

The Empire wanted to take that away from them. It wouldn't.

"You'll break your toes," Leia warned, coming to stand beside him, and resting a hand on his shoulder.

He snorted, held up a rock to eye level. "They're probably made out of dirt, like the rest of this planet."

"It's not particularly hospitable, no."

"What are we doing here?"
"We're here so he won't find us."

But the Emperor would find them anywhere. Luke knew that as well as Leia, and Leia knew he knew. Why bother to pretend?

Leia sighed. "We're here for a little respite," she amended.

Respite in this place was a pipedream. The suns beat down all life, boiled the air, created a wasteland in an entire planet. It was perfect for hiding away, burrowing into the ground like reptiles, but it was otherwise unbearable. Every second they had spent here was more and more frustrating. His family, snapping and growling, growing angrier as each day felt more like backing down. He and Ben were the only ones who had any measure of calm, save for the pirates themselves.

But their calmness was borne of familiarity. Nobody knew how long the Empire had forced them into this chaotic state, but they'd coped. For Luke, there was legitimate weight to the concern of Darth Vader going stir crazy.

"Father," he called, and Vader's mask tilted. "Why don't you come sit with us?"

Distraction was an option. The less time his father had to focus on their company, the less risk of bloodshed. There was nothing here that offered engagement, but Luke figured, if he asked enough questions, acted the innocent farmboy they all thought he was, he might soften the mood.

Vader watched sandstreams blow along the cliffside, and Luke felt his derision like a stake. "I've lived long enough in these environments," he said.

"What, the heat?"

"And the sand."

"You're worried about a little sand?" Leia raised an eyebrow. "That hardly seems a threat to the oh-so-great Darth Vader."

"I don't like sand," he said plainly, and, for some unknown reason, Ben snorted aloud.

"He never has," Ben clarified, face warming. "Some things don't change."

"Sand doesn't change," Vader protested. "It is as unpleasant as it ever was. Perhaps even more so."

"Too many bad memories?" Han asked. Vader's back tensed, and Han slapped it, friendly. It would be reassuring to anyone else, but Vader just stood there, creaking with the wind like an old tree, and Luke got the unfortunate sense they'd reminded him too much of the past.

Then, Vader swung back, loosened, and slapped Han in return. "Don't tell me you enjoy your trips to Tatooine, Solo."

"I enjoy its cash." Han mimed rubbing credits between his fingers. "Not so much its scenery, or its people, or its rule. 'Cept you guys, of course." He shot them a charming smile, but his eyes were kind.

"The Hutts," Vader said, dryly. "There are no creatures more disgusting in this galaxy. Whatever qualities could offer that planet redemption, the Hutts eradicated long ago."

"Agreed," Han replied, and Vader settled, just like that.

Luke stared at him incredulously. He shrugged, sat down next to him, and took a swig of water from
his canteen. "I've been talking dangerous people down for years, kid." He tapped his heart. "It's how I'm still alive."

"You have guts, Solo," Luke said, and couldn't keep the smile from his face. "I think we need them now more than ever."

Chapter End Notes

As a note, I do indeed like Hondo's character. Idk, he's refreshingly centred, single-minded, for the group of crazily self-sacrificing Jedi we're used to. He's in it for himself, mainly, but he's not evil. Still, the entire situation in this chapter is sketchy as shit, and Luke's suspicious of outlaws, after his upbringing on Tatooine. Just, uh, to defend myself from any accusations of Hondo-bashing. This isn't. This is me having too much fun with thieves and pirates ;a;, and Luke not having any of it. orz.

On another note, I, uh, accidentally a little Skysolo. And just slight hints of Force-Sensitive!Han. I don't intend to make this a EVERYONE-IS-A-JEDI-BECAUSE-WHO-CARES-ABOUT-CANON!AU, but I always wondered how Han always seemed to see things coming from a mile away. Also, his son. As powerful as the rest of the Skywalkers, even though he's only got one Force-sensitive parent? Like, what is this? I call genetics on this bitch. Han's gotta have a little Force sensitivity. Like, a tiny bit, just a wee spark. And even the smallest bit is worth training for when a crazy guy whose face looks like scrambled eggs is hunting you down nonstop!
After two days, Ohnaka handed them the blueprints, insisted he wouldn't call them for more than the tiniest favour, and ushered them off into the stars again. Han liked him. He knew what he was doing, for once in this damn place.

Han, though, had no idea what he was doing. He questioned everything, constantly, but this was an all new low. He'd lived his entire life fighting off the galaxy's scum, and then Luke, out of nowhere, mentioned all the work he could be doing, all the knowledge he could be acquiring, and suddenly everything was upside down. Him, Force-sensitive? In their collective dreams, maybe. But, he always knew who to trust, who to confront without dying, who to back down from.

What the hell kind of chain had that farmboy started?

Han sat, but found himself unable to keep still. The ship's pilot needed a steady hand, and Chewie chided him for being careless, but he couldn't focus. Was it true? The old wizard had said the Force ran through all of them, but Han had been on his own until Chewie. He'd never felt a shared connection, not like the Jedi, with their bonds and their spirituality and their meditation.

Luke stared over his shoulder, out through the viewport. "You might make us all sick, flying like that."

He gave a tight smile. "That's not how artificial gravity works, Luke."

"All the same." Luke sighed. "Did I upset you earlier? Suggesting you should train with us? You're a valued member of this team, y'know, and."

"It's alright, I'm alright. It takes a lot more than that to hurt my pride, kid. I know I'm not the strongest here, but I've got skills you don't. We've all got something different to put on the table."

"If you do have the Force, you've got better foresight than the rest of us, let me tell you. You do have something to offer, if you ever doubt that. We need you here. How else would we fly around so fast, anyway?"

It was oddly comforting to hear that. What had been squirming in his stomach settled, just slightly, and Han tried his best to project gratitude, not that he knew how in the nine hells to do that.

"Thanks," he added, just to be sure. For good measure.

"Nothing to thank me for," Luke said. "It's the truth."

Base was hectic, but Han was tired. Dazed. They didn't register. Nothing registered.

Anakin eyed him with cautious understanding, and came to his side. "You alright, there, Han?"

"D'you think there's a chance I'm not completely Force-blind after all?"

Anakin blinked. "Sure. Sure, why not?"

"Real substantial answer."
"Sorry." A shrug. "It just doesn't work like that, y'know? It's up to you to unlock your potential in the Force; as much as we say that, it's true."

"You're saying only I know?" Han rubbed a hand across his forehead. "How do I know if I don't know what I'm looking for?"

"Just keep trying," said Anakin. "If it doesn't work out," and here, he was Vader for a brief moment, but calmly amused, "you still have your uses, Solo."

"What a pleasure to know."

Tano looked as if she hadn't slept in seventy-two hours, and something told him she felt like it, too, from the exhausted look on her face. Luke and Leia were gathered round her, huddling to listen, but even they were losing focus.

"I'm almost positive Marek knows something about the Second Death Star," Tano said, massaging her temples. "Now, we just need to get him to talk. Or at least confirm he has something to talk about."

"He's not exactly willing," Leia said. "You don't mean to-"

"Hurt him? No, not even if it would be fair pay for Luke's hand. But I do need him to tell me what he knows. This could save millions of lives."

"So tell him."

"Palpatine bred the conscience out of him, Leia."

"Did he?" Leia raised an eyebrow. "He stopped on Bespin. We managed to apprehend him only because he was hesitant."

"We made him question his loyalties, maybe," Tano allowed. "But change his nature? The Emperor made him an assassin. He shouldn't care about casualties."

Anakin shook his head. "No, that in itself is too unreliable. You could've said the same about me, once."

"You still had good in you," Tano snapped. "Marek isn't the original. Which means nothing, of course." She waved a hand. "I know clones, we all do. But he isn't one of the Fetts. Palpatine made him for one purpose and one purpose only."

"The Clone Troopers were made for that purpose, too, y'know."

She frowned. "But they weren't made to be soulless. Not until Palpatine decided to break them, anyway. Marek's clone, he's bound to be missing a few pieces of the puzzle. Pieces the Emperor had specifically selected for removal."

"I think you'll find he missed a spot," Anakin said, slow. "He always does."

Leia took the first interrogation shift. Marek took one look at the door, heard her footsteps, and knew she was a Skywalker, backing away like a kicked dog, hands raised.

"I didn't sign up for this," he said.
Leia had a chance to come into view, then, and raised a disapproving eyebrow. "You didn't sign up for anything."

"Exactly!"

"Except killing my family." She hummed. "Excuse me, trying to kill my family."

"What do you want?"

"Information. On the Second Death Star. Don't ask how we know. You know how well the Empire keeps secrets."

Marek opened his mouth to retort, said nothing, and then closed it.

"As I was saying," Leia continued, as if nothing had happened, "the Second Death Star. What do you know about it?"

"That the Emperor was building it? He doesn't trust me like he trusted- him. And he didn't."

"Do you know why?"

"You can figure that out for yourself," Marek spat, and sneered. Leia looked at him as if he were dirt, and Han was frankly impressed with the stern aura she projected. Marek was the rebellious type, and they rarely took orders well. Except from those they respected. "Fine. He intends to destroy all planets with known Rebel bases."

"All of them?"

"If it takes him time, energy, resources, he doesn't care. He only cares about eliminating the threats from the equation."

"Those threats being us."

"And all who sympathise with you."

Leia had her father's snarl. "If he murders millions of innocents because of what we've started here-"

"He won't," said Tano. "Do you really think we're going to let him?"

"And if we can't stop him in time? It takes months to evacuate an entire planet, let alone hundreds."

"If we can't stop him, we're all going to end up dead regardless," Tano said plainly. "What's a quick death by lasercannon to slow, agonising torture?"

"Very refreshing prospects," Obi-Wan cut in, dry. "Let's try to look at this with a keener, less panicked eye, shall we? It's too late to stop the Emperor from constructing the new Death Star, but it isn't too late to sabotage his efforts."

Leia sighed. "We'll have to tear down their factories, their bases of operation, everything."

"We have numbers," Luke said. "And our fear is greater than the Empire's. We'll all be more determined, won't we?"

"They may not see it coming," Anakin allowed. "Going on the offensive so suddenly."

"The sooner, the better," Leia finished. "We mustn't allow this to happen, under any circumstance."
"You should train with us," Luke said, his hands folded neatly on the only hologame board in the entire floating Rebel base. It remained unused. "I think it's a good idea."

Han side-eyed him, unamused. "I can already defend myself."

"Yeah, but you can always defend yourself more."

"Luke," Han began, and then stopped. Well, the kid had a point, if he thought about it. You could never be too prepared, especially when you'd incurred the wrath of an entire galactic empire. The Galactic Empire, in fact. "Fine. What d'you intend to teach me, anyway, huh? How to, what, knock people over?"

Luke winced. "I mean, obviously you're only a little, so you can't just-" He made a vague gesture with his hands, waving them around in circles like they could actually tell him something. "Boom. Like that. But you should have some telekinetic response if we try hard enough. And you can already read people pretty well; I don't even need the Force to know that." Luke held up his fingers, like he was counting. "Oh, and you should really be honing your precognition, that could save us thousands of lives."

"Way to put it lightly, kid."

"Well, it's true. You may not have stupidly overbalanced powers in the Force like my father, but if the Order were still around, I'm sure they could've used you."

"I'm not Jedi material, believe me."

"It's a lot to take on. I know you're not really all for that kind of thing. But everyone deserves a chance to maximise what they've got." Luke hummed, in thought, and then lit up, grinning brightly. "I've got it. You can have this. You're one of us now, so it should pass to you, and work for you well enough." He held out his old lightsaber, his father's, and then raised his new one. "I've got this now, so you can have my old one. You just have to promise not to break it, since it's been in the family so long. If I ever have kids, I want them to have it." He paused a moment. "I know, that means it's kind of temporary, even if you won't have to lose it for another decade or so. Don't worry, if you like using one so much, you can make your own."

Han blinked, and looked at the half-singed hilt like it was precious. "You'd give me this?"

"Well, yeah. I'm not gonna criticise your skills with a blaster, because they're practically invaluable now we all use 'sabers, but having your own once in a while might get you out of a few... sticky situations. I mean," and Luke went a little proud, a little smug at this, "they literally cut through anything."

"But this, this is, what'd the old man say, part of you?"

Luke winked. "But you guys are all part of me, too. I'd say that counts, wouldn't you?"


"I know you will, Han. Don't worry."
"You have to feel it, Han. You can't just think about it."

"It won't move. I think we gotta accept that, kid."

Luke shook his head, and repositioned his flight helmet again. "No, I know you can do this. It just takes practice, is all."

Han looked at him, sighed, and looked back to the helmet. It was like aiming a blaster through the gaps between a blastdoor. Impossible.

"Don't give up like that," Luke snapped, and Han realised he could probably read every thought that flitted through his head. *Comforting.*

He glared at the helmet, even though he knew it would have no effect. He was just so *tired* of trying to pick things up with his mind, sweet gods, this was ridiculous to even consider. He didn't have what they had. Maybe he could read people, sure, but he couldn't- whatever this was. Be what they wanted him to be. He was no Jedi, though they shared a keen eye for liars and a keener eye for lie detectors.

"I'm giving up because it's impossible," Han said plainly, and Luke huffed. He wore a frown disturbingly like his father's, though he was always in control. Still, there was that small glint there, of the harsher side of the Skywalkers, the signs he was in fact Vader's son.

"It isn't." Luke crossed his arms. "If you resist the idea, then obviously you'll get nowhere. That's not how the Force works. It's about belief in yourself. That you don't have to be limited by your physical body, that the Force will allow you to do more. Just let it go."

Han had let too much go in his life, but he shrugged, and thought about the Jedi, how they centred themselves. How Luke centred himself. He'd grown so much calmer, more at peace. If Han could find any thread of serenity in this dump, maybe he'd have a chance.

"You're acting like you're under pressure."

"I am," he replied simply.

"Don't worry about it. Picture things that make you happy. Use your positive feeling to fuel your ability."

Han had positive feeling when he got a paycheck. He had positive feeling when he wasn't being hunted, when he completed a job successfully, when he and Chewie played Dejarik into the early morning. And, he supposed, when people believed in him. Like Luke, apparently.

He let go.

The helmet rose, he panicked, and then it shot into the ceiling and bounced to the ground with a loud smack.

"That was weirdly fitting for your first attempt," Luke said, teasing, but a hint of curiosity sparked in his eyes, maybe even a little pride. "What'd I tell you? Now pay up."

"*Pay up? We didn't bet on this, kid.*"

"Practically we did," Luke said, like that was an acceptable answer.

"Fine, fine. What d'you want for it?"
Luke smiled. "Your undying gratitude?"

"You have that a thousand times over, by now. How many times have you saved my ass?"

"How many times have you saved mine? It goes both ways, you know."

He doubted it. He could charm, but Jedi were more suited to wearing false masks. They all saw right through him, probably read his fears like a flimsi, first time they met him.

"It does," Luke insisted. "Don't do that."

"Let me wallow a little, kid. It's not easy when you owe debts to people who can read your mind."

"I don't. I wouldn't, without your permission. I just get a general idea of what you're feeling." Luke tapped his foot, thoughtful. "You can probably read me better than I can read you."

He felt a poke at his side, but there was nothing there. Then, he suddenly felt his chest float with light laughter, a strange kind of joy, even though it wasn't his own. He tilted his head.

"Told you," Luke said, and now he was absolutely, doubtlessly smug.

"Is that what you're feeling right now?"

"You tell me."

"I'm pretty sure."

Luke grinned. "You feeling happy? Then you're feeling what I'm feeling. I'm glad I could help you out, Han. Everyone deserves a chance at this, especially this."

Han tried projecting appreciation, this time. He hoped it might come across a little clearer, not so fuzzy, like a blurred holo transmission. "I owe you."


There was a quick, fleeting moment, where he felt a thought flashing past at lightspeed. Still, he caught it, and reeled back in confusion. *I can owe you a kiss. How about that?*

He didn't want to ask where that came from. The Jedi were perhaps too kind to be around for long. He didn't get attached. It was safer that way, and there was nothing in the world Han loved more than safety -- keeping his own life tethered firmly to the ground. Attachment rarely flew streamline to caution.

Instead, Han leant forward to give Luke a brief hug, a pat on the back. Luke looked at him like he'd grown two heads. "Did you just-? No, nevermind, it's none of my business. You don't owe me more than what you want to owe me. And if you don't want to owe me anything, then you don't."

"I'll repay the debt, kid."

Luke laughed a little sadly, then. "Don't go out of your way for me, Han. I'm just a farmboy from Tatooine who's gotten himself deep into something he barely understands half the time." And suddenly Han knew that he knew. He'd heard that thought, or felt it, or something. Whatever it was, it was enough. "That debt you owe me? It's better given to someone else, who deserves it. I just told you a few things, you did the rest yourself."

"Couldn't have done it without you, Luke, and you know it. Damn well you do. Or, at least, damn
well you *should."

"Really-"

The reckless side of himself kicked in, no matter how hard he tried to push it away. It had its uses, but now was not the time. "I could prove it to you," Han said, stupidly. "How much it means to me."

Luke blinked, and Han saw a similar kind of rash, blind feeling in his eyes as they reopened. A Skywalker kind of rashness. That beat even his own. But there was confusion, too, and alright, maybe he didn't know. Somehow, that didn't make him feel any better. "Okay, then. I'm kinda honoured you're set on this, y'know." His mouth turned down, just a little. "I'm not like my father, I don't go around trying to get an even bigger head. You really don't need to boost my ego, it's fine."

"How about I do it anyway?" he asked, and Luke gave a tentative nod.

So Han pressed a gentle kiss to his lips and pulled back in an instant. That same stupid part of him clenched his eyes shut, and he covered his face with his hands. "Sorry, kid, that was -- how'd one of you word it? Uncalled for. Completely unnecessary. Shit, I don't usually do this--"

"You're just as nervous as the rest of us, aren't you?" Luke was smiling, though, small but genuine. "You sure this isn't just out of a sense of gratitude? Or going really far to pay back your debts?"

"I owe about a million to Jabba, but you don't see me going around--"

"Okay, Force, I don't need to hear that. It's enough to have lived in Hutt space for two decades, let alone--" Luke stopped, and snorted. "Point taken." He tried not to laugh, and failed. "If you owe me a debt, then I owe you at least as many."

"Then, we're even, kid?"

"Even."

He went a little sly. "Then maybe it's a reward. For being such a good teacher. Following in their footsteps."

"It's more than just that--"

"I know." Han set a hand on his shoulder. "It's the same for me. And hey, added bonus. That whole Force-sharing thing seems to be working out great for your dad and the old wizard, huh?"

Luke's eyes were warm. He felt something reach out, offer a hand. Metaphysically, but still a hand. He took it. "Maybe we can work on that next," Luke said, with an equally matched slyness.

Chapter End Notes

So, uh, I accidentally Skysolo. I ship Skysolo to the moon and back and then all the way to the moon again. I hope you don't mind its being here? A lot of this just goes on the metaphysical, digital paper entirely unplanned.

It may be way too fluffy. That may be a welcome relief? Things are about to get very unfluffy, considering the state of the Empire.
Anakin preferred to run from his thoughts and let them chase him than to risk their catching up. He strolled the base frequently, watching the stars blur as they jumped in and out of hyperspace. It was beautiful, and sometimes he felt more at peace with the stars than in front of the Rebels.

He wore the suit when he wanted to be alone. They didn't talk to him when he looked like the murderer they knew he was.

Today, though, the Rebels had grown their courage overnight, and some even dared sit next to him at the library table and watch him stack and reorganise what little holocrons remained. He had no plans to do what half of them had imagined in visceral detail, but it was slightly amusing to watch them approach him like puppies, sniffing at the air.

He kept his focus on the holocrons. Alphabetising them, watching years of culture he'd torn down. Most of them couldn't manage to hold his interest. Training, tutorials, records. Nothing that mattered anymore.

Though, there was one. Of Obi-Wan, a recorded lecture he'd given to the younglings on using the Force to augment their physical abilities. He looked so much brighter, then. His eyes weren't lit by the holo, but by the audience, and perhaps most importantly, by the absence of his.

The holocron had looped five times now. The Rebels fear had turned into confusion and then, slowly, into a mix of sympathy and pity. He let its clasp snap back, and set it next to the others, nestled deep enough to be lost from sight entirely.

But his wistful feelings were soon overpowered by someone else's. A strange sort of elation, a deep and combined happiness. On the days Anakin was most proud of, he and Obi-Wan could often share this. But who, now, was so consumed by it?

His son. He could sense no-one better than his own family.

Anakin approached with care and a deliberately slow pace.

"You sense that?" Han's voice, nervous. "Force, it's your dad." And since when had he had any belief, any faith in the Force?

"He's probably just curious to see what's going on, Han. I really doubt he wants to kill you."

"I never said that!"

"You thought it."

There was a muttered, "Did not," which Luke disregarded entirely. He was too busy laughing.

"Vader's gonna murder me," Han said. "And I have absolutely no idea how to defend myself, because someone thought it would be a good idea to play hologames instead."

"What, defending yourself can't wait two hours?"
"Not now it can't! Vader's here, and now I'm gonna die. Thanks, kid, you've been a great help."

"He'll probably be happy to see we're skiving off basic training. He always tells Ben it's boring and useless."

"That'd be because it is."

"You don't even know how to shield your mind, Han." A snort. "It's not useless. Boring, yeah, of course, when is it not? But useless? Do you want people prying into your thoughts or don't you?"

"No, I don't, really, I swear. Not an appealing plan of action."

A sigh. Then, "Father's not going to kill you." And a crash. "No, don't try to hide the hologame board, what are we, twelve? Father is about the first person to try that kinda thing, when it comes to training. Hells, if he were here earlier, he'd probably have brought the blasted thing out and insisted we play it."

"I'm not hiding it! I'm strategically placing it to the side. What your dad can't see can't hurt him."

"Except for the fact that he can see, Han. Stop it, I've trained you for about a half a day. You can't go sneaking around Darth Vader with the knowledge the average four-year-old Jedi would know. What're you, crazy?"

"Yes. Now help me hide this board, or so help me, we're all gonna lose our oxygen supply."

"You're jumpy."

"For good reason!"

"Invite him to a game instead, if you don't want to make him mad. Or give him some of that Corellian whisky."

"Damn, that's a good idea- quick, where's the decanter?"

"Force save me, Han, sit down."

"You gonna make me?"

And then Anakin understood.

Despite what Han believed, he hadn't felt even a fleeting shred of anger. That they could find happiness in this war was a blessing, not a curse.

Still, he was curious to see Han's reaction to his presence. An old, tired Sith could have some fun, right?

"Working hard, are you?"

Luke skittered away from the doorframe and left the sensors to shut it automatically, so Anakin wedged his hand through the gap. The ship wasn't old enough to lack safety functions, and quickly reopened the door, revealing a desperate Han Solo trying to push the hologame board out of his frame of sight.

"We've just been training," Han said. "And I wanted a quick break, y'know, stuff gets to you after a while."

A mischievous smile, invisible within the suit. "These are all excuses I have heard before, Solo." A bead of sweat rolled down his neck, and Anakin resisted the urge to burst into laughter. Quickly, he added, "Y'know, even I was more creative back when I was a padawan. I once told Obi-Wan I'd been too busy 'intercepting important Separatist communications' to practice my Shii-Cho. He didn't believe any of it, 'course, but I tried anyway. I kept up the guise of the 'newest comm interception prodigy' for six months before Obi-Wan finally told me to just quit it."

"That's the, uh, first form, isn't it?" Han asked. "Luke said it was used a lot for training."

"So he has been teaching you!" Anakin clapped his hands together, sat down in the corner seat, and hummed thoughtfully. "Oh, this reminds me of my days training Snips. She hated it at first, just wanted to go out and fight. Then she saw Jar'Kai. You pick your favourite form yet?"

"I started just an hour ago," Han returned.

"I'd be interested to see your progress," he said, with a great deal more honesty and sincerity. "No pressure. Keep up your Dejarik game. Just use one of my excuses if anyone asks; it teaches strategy. Really good strategy. Which is integral to the Jedi way."

"You're more terrifying when you're talking like a normal human being," Han said.

"Good to know," Anakin replied, and waved. "I'll let you two go back to your 'training.' Congratulations, by the way. Half the time, I think you two deserve each other. In the best way, I mean."

Han stared, but Luke just snorted loudly. "Thanks for the input, Father. I'll let you know how Han's doing after two hours of practice."

"Have you heard the news?" Anakin asked, and Obi-Wan looked up from the flimsi he wasn't reading with a single eyebrow raised. "Obviously not. Luke's with someone. Guess who?"

He closed his eyes again, but his mouth curled up in a smile. "It's young Han, isn't it? They certainly fit together well."

"We could've had that," Anakin said.

"Not with the Council."

"We could've left the Council, saved them the trouble."

Obi-Wan set down the flimsi, eyes calm but prying. "Would that have led us to happiness?"

"It would've saved us so much time, Master. So many lives."

"This," Obi-Wan gestured to their room, the entire base, "is better than not trying at all."

Anakin pried through data outside of the Jedi archives when he got desperate. It kept him occupied, and stopped Ahsoka from sending him suspicious looks, and equally as suspicious Rebel babysitters. They could sit around and watch him sift through transmissions until the ship shifted to night cycle, but he would make no play at entertaining them. He'd had enough of being the loyal company dog.

Still, their curious eyes were discomfiting, distracting. And their chatter grating.

For all his faked childhood stints in enemy interception, he had learnt through the years to pick out
those who lacked the sense to keep their mouths shut. He knew what channels in the Empire would contain blabbering, mindless bucketheads, and they weren't Main Command. Comms between friends, coworkers, those were where they truly talked. Never in the eyes of an Administrator, but in the eyes of their equals.

Before his defection, he'd had them immediately silenced. Oftentimes, personally. An unwitting traitor was a traitor all the same. But here, now, they were useful. Not little bugs, but people with lives. Fools, but sentient. Feeling. And he could take advantage of all of it, where he'd been so limited under Imperial command. Palpatine blinded him in the Darkness, but now he could use it to see. He had both sides of the Force at his fingertips, and that lent him more power than the Jedi -- or the Sith -- had ever considered.

Vader was particularly pleased by this. The part of him that was still Anakin was fascinated. If he was meant to enact Balance, then it could only follow that he should become it, as well.

"You," he said, pointing a gloved finger at one of the more skittish of his guard. "Tell me, does the Alliance have anything on Imperial signal decryption? Or will I be forced to do all of it myself?"

The Alliance did, in fact, have something on Imperial signal decryption. They produced it almost instantly, as if to appease him, and yet still watched over his shoulder. Not that this bothered him any. He had no plans to do anything worth their disapproval. He could sense them, their courage in the face of fear, and he respected them. They chose this life. He would do anything in his power to make it easier for them, now. They'd become his people. As vigilant as they liked to be.

As promised, the channels were overflowing, cluttered to the brim with information. The babysitters let their keen eye dim just slightly.

He skimmed through the unimportant chatter, tuning his ear for key phrases, things that might give away carefully-hidden enemy secrets.

And there it was. Just sitting there. A holomessage, from some Imp, to one of their family members. A tired-looking Mirialan boy, his face scattered with small little diamonds, like freckles. From the sound of it, he was talking to his sister. But there was something empty in the way he looked that caught Anakin off guard.

"I mean, I knew I never should've taken the job, Ziira, but I thought it'd be good for me. The other Mirialan here, there's something up with her. I don't know, it's strange, and if I'm completely honest with you, it's scaring me a bit. She looks like someone dragged her here against her will, like- like she wants to claw her way out, or something. She's crazy, I'm telling you. They make you crazy here. They have labs for it, and everything. All sorts of experiments. It's- I'm so tired, Ziira. I just want to go home. But at this point, y'know, I have this terrible feeling- this terrible feeling they won't let me."

The holo flickered off, and flashed the words "END TRANSMISSION.", before going silently back to its usual passive scanning.

Ahsoka rushed her way to the table, and Anakin was so completely used to people appearing from nowhere, that, at this point, she couldn't raise a hair on his head. She did, other times, when she held a blade to his throat, perhaps. But sneaking around in the shadows was what he'd taught her, back in the day, in case she'd ever needed it.

She hadn't, truly. But it seemed that had changed during her time away from the Order. Free from it.

"Another Mirialan? With the Imps?" Her fingers gripped the edges of the library table. It was
"Are we going to focus on the irrelevant, or the interesting, Ahsoka?" A small smile, in his words. He lifted the helmet from his head, so she might stop looking at him like-like, well. What he was, and all he could have been. "I'd consider lab experiments a bit more important than every-day interactions between species."

"Did you not hear what he said?" Ahsoka had paled, slightly, just bringing her skin a whisper closer to the colour of her markings. It was over quickly, but her concern set him on edge.

"About the Mirialan? What's so important about-"

"You know what Mirialan chose the side of the Empire, Vader. I'm sure you were very pleased to see her again."

Offee. That one. Oh, yes, he'd known her. Known that she'd liked to keep to herself, and that wasn't something she planned on changing at any point in the near future. "Barely. She spoke probably once when I was around. Yeah, real chatterbox, right?"

"If she's still with them, if they've used her to fuel their research-"

"Well, we're going to check it out, right? We'll find out for sure, then."

"Of course we are. But do you know what this means? They've got more of them. Gods, they must have so many."

"Can't be worse than me, and look where I'm sitting right now! They'll come 'round."

"She won't."

"Gonna test that theory? Or are you just gonna sit around thinking about testing it?"

"I need a ship," she said, and hurried towards the docking bay.

There was a ship, of course. There was always a ship. Ahsoka called them all to the docking bay, and held out a holomap.

"It's in Wild Space," she said. "It may contain something that could win -- or lose -- us this war. But it also may kill us. Nobody in the Empire has ever let slip what they keep there."

"And we're going?" Luke asked. He spun the map around, curious, but not threatened. "With enough backup, we'll make it through, I'm sure of it."

"Yes, we're going. If you agree."

"We all do," Leia cut in. "As you can clearly see." She gestured to the eager, intrigued faces of the remaining Jedi, and Ahsoka nodded.

But there was a warning in her eyes. A concern, running deep. She seemed uneasy. "We'll need to be careful. If the Mirialan's there."

"We may still yet escape her," Obi-Wan said. "If we're able to time it right."

Ahsoka scoffed. "If. Then, a sigh. "This isn't going to be a breeze."
"Oh, we know."

They knew. Immediately.

Wild Space wasn't daunting, but interesting, worthy of his curiosity. But it was also dangerous -- incredibly dangerous. There were no patrols, Imperial or otherwise, to scour these fields of space. Even scavengers rarely went in without an entire fleet, and they never stayed long.

Unexplored space was a threat. Unworn paths through the forests of stars meant more hazards along the way, and the long-abandoned ships floating here and there promised they wouldn't be unchallenging. It surprised him, that the Empire would be so daring as to build a station here, though it was likely it wasn't their choice alone. The Mirialan. Offee. The other Inquisitors. They all had far too much influence over High Command.

For all the Empire denied the existence of the Force, they'd managed to clear enough room in their roster for an entire division dedicated to solely that.

"Well, I can't say I've done this before," Han said. Anakin stood over him at the helm, determined to check for any signs of engine failure, signs that they were pushing the hyperdrive beyond its limits. Getting stranded here was a death sentence.

"There's a first time for everything," he replied, and Han's eye twitched.

"Can't say no to new experiences."

Luke slipped in from behind them, and put a hand on Han's shoulder. "We can do it. We've just gotta work together to, uh, not die."

"That was very reassuring, Luke, thank you."

"Nobody works together better than we can," Luke said, like this was a dare. "Bet you they don't."

"The power of teamwork is what's gonna get us out of this, is that what you're saying?"

"The power of not being uncoordinated is gonna get us out of this," Luke corrected. Han opened his mouth, then closed it.

"Fair point. But don't get too cocky, kid. We've got a long way to go."

Luke raised an eyebrow, grinning. "Then let's enjoy the ride. You got anything besides Dejarik on this ship?"

The base was small, barely a whisper of a thing, hidden like a grain of sand in this vast wasteland. Scans showed the engines, the life support, anything necessary, working in perfect order. Everything unnecessary was peeling back at the edges. Not that there was much to peel back, looking at it. There were no identifying marks on the station's hull, and Anakin had a strong feeling there never had been. If the Empire truly cared about its image here, they'd have sent a team out to repaint their sigil in as bright a colour as possible. This was purposeful stealth.

"What a miracle. They're actually hard to find," Anakin said.

"Are they even alive?" Han sighed. "No, no, don't answer that. I know it doesn't take much to keep yourself breathing, even barely. This place is just..."
"A dump? Hardly a reflection of its importance? Yeah, that's the Empire's idea of subtlety." Anakin smiled. "Cute, isn't it?"

It was a monstrosity. Calling it cute would be like calling a Krayt dragon domesticated and soft-hearted. It was an ugly grey, it looked half-pieced together like one of his mother's quilts, and it dripped with the scent of danger. That it blended into the background without further study only proved its vitality.

"It's gonna be locked down tighter than Palpatine's a-"

"Yep," Anakin interrupted, loudly. Han smirked, but spared them the fate they'd have suffered from hearing the end of his sentence. "But, hey, what can't we break through, right? Obi-Wan once got himself locked up in high security prison because the Council felt like it. And convinced me he was dead. Thanks for that, by the way, Master."

"I'm sorry. Duty to the Order had to be my first priority in the Wars." He sighed. "I may have the abilities of a spy, but I certainly don't have the resources. We've no idea about the uniforms, mannerisms, or rules in place at this station. We can't infiltrate it by disguise."

"I might-"

"Anakin, I am sorry, but news in the Empire travels fast, even to outposts in Wild Space. They'll know Vader's no longer on their side."

"Yeah, okay. But they won't recognise me without it, right? Or maybe I could just intimidate them into opening-"

Obi-Wan scoffed at this.

"Fair point," Anakin said, with a sigh. "If there's anything worth keeping in here, the Stormies would lay down their lives to keep the Alliance from entering. Even if Darth Vader demanded they unlock their doors."

"So we're going to have to play the unrecognisable, unimportant lackey game," Ahsoka said. "Some of us have our faces painted on Imperial Wanted Posters." She eyed Obi-Wan, and then Anakin himself. "Some of us don't. Not yet, at least. Soon, definitely, but that's for later. Take advantage of what anonymity we have left now."

"So, no hints of Vader." Anakin hummed. "Better prepare with some meditation, huh, Obi-Wan?"

But Obi-Wan wasn't smiling. Instead, he looked curious.

"You insist the part of you that was once the Anakin we knew is gone, yes?"

Anakin tilted his head. "I'm not the same as I once was."

"How good are you at pretending?"

"After Vader? Very."

Obi-Wan narrowed his eyes. "It might work. Stealth is preferable, but we can utilise your skills as a last resort."

"Skills?"

"How much of Vader's Darker side can you hide, really? Does it truly take meditation?"
"Not so much anymore," Anakin offered. "I tip when I'm angry, or when I talk to people I'm, uh, 'not particularly fond of'. But I can usually hold it off. I have to be exceptionally caught off-guard to fail at that."

"Good," Obi-Wan said, steepling his fingers together. "Vader has no face, to them. Only a voice, a way of speaking. If you temporarily conceal the Dark in you, they'll have no way of figuring out who you are. Steal a uniform, look and feel the part, and you'll be free of their suspicion."

Anakin raised an eyebrow. "Temporarily?"

"We are not asking you to hide who you are, Anakin. Only that you attempt... a less direct method of approach."

"Can do, Master." He paused. "And, thank you."

Chapter End Notes

VADER IS SO PRETENTIOUS. WRITING IN HIS POV MAKES ME FEEL LIKE A FAUX-INTELLECTUAL, I-DON'T-NEED-GLASSES-BUT-I-WEAR-THEM-ANYWAY, STUCK-UP PRAT. Oh God, can you ever get too into the minds of the characters you write? Someone save me, please, holy shit, before I start insisting I'm too good for Starbucks and need quality green tea to properly focus my mind. Not that I have anything against quality green tea. That's the good shit, right there.

Tbh, though, I'm p much 200% sure I can write on doughnuts. As long as it's food, and there's caffeine. What is college, what is life? What is healthy eating? What are healthy habits? What is not writing at 2 in the bloody morning oh god look at the time fuck?

Enjoy. I hope. <3
Anakin hadn't had to be stealthy in a very, very long time. His breaths wouldn't slow without a fight, his feet wouldn't still when he knew danger was around the corner, he couldn't slip into the shadows where there were none. The base was lit blinding, sterile, clinical white, and there was no nook or cranny that could escape it.

There were ventilation shafts, thank the Force, nestled so deeply into the walls that Anakin could shout and go unheard. Instead, he hummed a tune from the past, and earned Ahsoka's furious glares.

"You better keep that down," she hissed. "Or do you intend to have us all killed?"

"Relax," he said, infuriatingly casually, from the increasing stiffness in Ahsoka's posture. "Nobody can hear us."

"Everyone can hear us," she said, visibly calming herself. "Vader, I know Obi-Wan told you to act like a reckless padawan."

And Obi-Wan cut in, then, "I didn't exactly word it like that-"

But Ahsoka talked over him. "But he meant for you to be in actual visual range of the threat, first. This isn't the time to realise your dreams of becoming a recognised thespian! You can't practice method acting when we're about two metres away from certain death. By vaporisation."

"It would be quick, at least," said Leia, and Han and Luke snorted loudly at this.

Ahsoka made a noise like she was dying. "We're all going to fail this mission completely, aren't we?"

"Not with any luck," Obi-Wan offered. Ahsoka only sighed in return.

Luck wasn't often on their side. Half of the time, he figured he drove it away just by opening his mouth.

"Hey," Anakin started, in the quiet. Away from the light of the grates, the airshaft was cold and shadowed and stung the hand he hadn't had the sense to fit a glove on. "Do you think I could become a recognised thespian? I mean, I am pretty good at acting."

Ahsoka made a choking noise, and Leia actually groaned aloud.

"Now might not be the time," Obi-Wan offered.

"Palpatine took me to see an opera once," Anakin blundered on. "I read way too much into it, probably. But that could say something about my future career! I could be a real methodist, impress the crowds-"

"Please stop," Ahsoka cried. "We get it, this is unpleasant, let's not talk about your hopes for the future in the middle of a serious-"

Anakin pouted, and then gave a wink. "But I really think I have a chance."
"Damn," Han said, and stopped crawling, leaving everyone to bump into him like a row of dominoes. "You're practicing, aren't you?"

"I'm getting into character," Anakin clarified.

"So," Ahsoka said slowly, a little prying, "which one is the act? Vader or Anakin?"

"Haven't I said?" He shrugged. "I'm both and neither."

Ahsoka stared blankly. The answer was unsatisfying, he knew, but it was the truth. And lying would elicit an even worse reaction from his former padawan. Finally, he settled on, "Whichever's appropriate for the occasion."

"Maybe you could get a career in theatre." Ahsoka sighed. "You're too good at acting as if nothing's happened."

Anakin frowned. "Do you really want to have a casual conversation with Darth Vader in the middle of a dark airvent in a secret research base that's likely guarded from head-to-toe? By lasers? Blasters? Trained interrogators? Probably Inquisitors?"

"I've told you before, casual conversations with Vader are better than lying to us."

"I'm both and neither," he repeated. "Vader is as much a lie as Anakin."

Ahsoka looked at him as if this were the easiest question in the universe. "Then don't pretend to be either. I don't see the point."

Frustration grew, seeped into his eyes. They flashed in the emptiness of the crawlspace, and Threepio, with all the expression his facial plate could muster, flinched back in horror. Anakin winced. "To garner trust?"

Ahsoka practically recoiled.

"That I intend to honour," he insisted. "How do you expect the Rebels to work with Vader? It's Anakin who has the more... comfortable personality."

"Comfortable personality," Leia said, then, humming with interest. "I say we use this to our advantage, honestly. We have a diplomat and a -- for lack of a better term, forgive me -- attack dog, all in one. The Alliance needs this. Tension runs high, here." At this, she glared pointedly in Ahsoka's direction. "We don't need infighting alongside the Empire's threats."

"I was out of line," Ahsoka grit out. "But my point still stands. Lying will not gain the trust of your crewmates."

"You weren't out of line, and you clearly know that," said Anakin, sadly. "I'm about as two-faced as they come. Getting Red Squadron to work with me without suspicion would be like asking for the stars to jump to hyperspace instead of the ships."

Ahsoka softened. "You've changed, I won't deny that. I trust you have no reason to kill us, at least. We offer you more power than the Empire could ever have managed, not without an Order of their own."

"I'm not here for the power." More unimpressed looks. "Vader is still part of me, I realise. The power is tempting by itself, but that's not what drew me here. That I was a Jedi, first, that I have family who somehow tolerate me, that Red Squadron will even fly beside me, I could go on. The Alliance is
composed of decent people. The Empire isn't. I have an obligation to right what I've wronged."

Luke blinked. "What made you see, in the beginning? Before you knew the Alliance?"

"People that hadn't given up on me, even when I'd given up on myself. Pure chance, blind luck, the Prophecy, the power, I have no idea. I wish I could say it was because I'm a good person, but even before Vader, I'd done things. Vader and Anakin are one. It's only that nobody, not even myself, wants to acknowledge that. Not then, not now."

"But you weren't there, before. It wasn't until you spent time with us on Yavin that you realised."

"People who didn't look at me like they wanted to use me, perhaps. The Empire is no better than Hutt law, when it comes to slavery. I was an object to them, and I acted like one."

"But you're Vader," Ahsoka said, in the most painfully confused tone possible. "There was none of my master left in you, when we fought, before. How are you there now?"

Obi-Wan cleared his throat. "If I may be so bold... it may likely have been the Bond. It restored feeling to the part of you that had purged it in the fires of Mustafar." Another cough. "As dramatic and far-fetched as that sounds, I believe it to be true, at least in part."

Anakin felt his heart beat into his throat. "Force, you're right. Kriffing hell, you're right."

Han rested his head against the sharp metal of the wall. "Do we have to come to life-changing conclusions right in the middle of an airvent? Really? You guys sure know how to pick your timing."

They'd been silent for ten minutes, Anakin's hand bruising against the bolts sewn into the flooring, until Ahsoka began laughing. It startled all of them so much, they hit their heads against the vent's ceiling. "Oh, wow," she said, after choking down her hysteric's, and waiting for the others to stop groaning in pain. "It figures the Bond would have attempted to redeem Darth Vader. Your faith in him was always beyond comprehension, Master Kenobi. I'm impressed."

"My faith was not as it should have been. Luke is the one we should truly be thanking, for having the heart, strength of mind, and determination to face down evil with a pleasant smile."

Luke seemed to flush a little, under this attention. "Well, how else are you gonna face down evil?" A wave of gratitude, then, and Luke managed to recover himself. "Besides, Father wasn't irredeemable. It just took a lot of intense focus to recognise that."

"Your mother believed the same," Obi-Wan said, graciously, and Ahsoka gave a solemn nod.

"He's right. I don't know why, but she saw good in you still, Vader. Even if this is an act, after all, the façade of kindness is still kindness, in some shallow kinda way. Even if you aren't good, you've done good. That's more than any of us had possibly imagined, in the beginning."

"I'm flattered," he said dryly, "beyond comprehension."

They had a patchwork heap of a map in their minds, but the vent eventually led them downwards, to grates looking into rooms with helpfully-labeled signs. They were, of course, looking for the main science lab, but any information was good information, even if it came from accounting.
"It's so cold in here," Han said, thoughtfully. "That doesn't seem right. I mean, the airvents need to circulate more than just oxygen, right? They're also in charge of temperature regulation, and if I remember my days in training camp right, military bases aren't prisons. It's supposed to be warmer."

"Unless they've decided to put someone in cryostasis," Obi-Wan offered.

"The clones? They wouldn't need cryo, or carbonite, or anything. They're disposable." Luke's eyes widened. "To the Empire," Han insisted. "Of course I don't think they're disposable, kid."

"No, no," Luke said, waving a hand. "It's just, that made me realise something. If they're disposable, why go to so much trouble to keep them quiet, y'know? There's got to be something else here. If it's research, it could have something to do with the Second Death Star, and that's-. Well, that's what we need, even after Hondo."

"Well, I can promise you it won't just be lying around," Han warned. "They'll have guards all over this place. And I mean, all over. Probably even in the 'resher."

"So, what you're saying is, there's no escape, no hiding, and no promises on what they're even keeping here." Anakin groaned. "This has all been a fantastic idea, and I'm so glad I thought to check it out."

"What if we find that other guy?" Luke asked. "The Mirialan, the brother. Not the, uh, Inquisitor? She is an Inquisitor, right?"

"I'd assume so," Obi-Wan replied. "You think he'll be of use?"

"Well, even if he hates it here, he's gotta know what's going on, right? We could ask him. He seems decent."

Han sighed. "So why's it cold?"

"It's not-" Leia closed her mouth, hummed, and attempted to find the words. "It's not physical, exactly. It certainly feels like the sensation of touching ice, but I can sense it's not truly atmospheric. We're picking up on something. A Force signature."

"That feels like getting up and personal with a cloud of liquid nitrogen?" Han snorted.

"Sith in great conflict with themselves often radiate a cold aura," Obi-Wan said, and pointed in Anakin's direction. "As we've seen."

"You're saying it's her?" Han blinked. "I can tell she'll be a real joy to meet."

"Hey, that you sensed that in the first place," Luke began, "is a real step forward. You've got an eye for the small details, huh?"

Han seemed to turn slightly pink at this, and Anakin raised an amused eyebrow. "Luke's got a point, y'know. I probably would've just assumed it was an issue with the ventilation."

Han smiled. "Thanks, Luke, Anakin. I'd say I try, but I have no idea how I did it."

Luke rolled his eyes. "Do any of us?"

Ahsoka laughed, a happy chime compared to her previous dark mood. She'd relaxed, now, and her suspicion eased off. It was a start, he hoped. "I can agree with that, for sure."
They dipped down through the grates like glue, sticking and dragging. His shirt rucked up, cold metal scratching the warmth of his soft -- too soft -- torso. Without the suit, he was quiet. But he was touchable.

They'd landed in the Mirialan's quarters, according to half-torn blueprints, and hoped the cracks in the flimsi wouldn't send them down too wrong a turn, into the cold arms of Offee. The room itself was small, stifling, unpleasantly put together. No more luxurious than the 'freshers in a non-warp transport vessel. In fact, the 'freshers in the maglev trains back on overpopulated Core words like Corellia and Coruscant were better than this prison cell.

Where the walls had chipped, the Mirialan had splashed cheap, postcard art prints. Where the bedframe shook with every rotation, a set of silky, feathery pillows. Everything -- the nothing -- they'd given him, he'd covered with every inch of himself. Personal effects, sketches, empty cups lined by the sink to be washed. Every chance to hide what the Empire wanted him to face, he took. On every wall, a reminder of home, of the job he'd not dare escape.

He was probably as mad as the rest of them, if not worse.

"Are you sure it's not his aura?" Luke asked. "We don't know them. We don't know how they feel."

Han looked at the place in pitied recognition, cataloging its ruined state, and said, "It's not his. Anger's cold. Hopelessness is consuming. It'd feel like the Force was trying to strangle us, if it was him, I'm sure of it."

"So where is he? Off-shift?"

"Probably," said Ahsoka. She surveyed the room with scepticism level to Han's. "He's been here for a while. He'll know enough to help us. Question is, will he help us?"

"We can promise him a way off this rock," Han offered.

"Not without Offee's resistance."

Obi-Wan smiled, gently. "I think that's a given. We need only to placate her enough to allow the Mirialan his exit."

Anakin laughed. "And that's gonna be so easy."

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Artoo, banged and bruised, was scanning the room for information when the kid returned. The exertion in his eyes made him careless, and he blundered into his room and onto his bed without sparing a glance at the intruders in the corner. Politely, Anakin cleared his throat, and watched as the kid practically jumped out of his skin. It would've been entertaining, if it weren't for the genuine terror radiating from every pore on his body. His hands shook, his breath came in sharp pants, his hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat.

"Who are you?" His hands were tight enough around his blaster to be steady, but they were paling, and the kid was too tired to keep it up for long. It was an empty threat, and he knew it, and yet he held it firmly in their direction regardless, like a child waving a stick at a rabid animal.

"Relax. I'm Ani, and this is my partner Ben. We're Rebels, on a sabotage mission. Figured, you seem like a good kid, you can help us."

Narrowed eyes, but the white-knuckled grip went slightly more lax. "Rebels? Competent ones?"
"Yeah. How d'you feel about a little betrayal, Nosey?"

The kid blinked. "Nosey?"

"Yeah, looks like you dipped your nose in ink. I would've called you Freckles, but that's a little too predictable for my tastes."

Nosey choked down incredulous laughter and threw up his hands. "If you can get me the hell out of this place, you can call me Dipshit for all I care. The name's Vaare, but I don't think you really care, do you?"

"Nosey it is," Anakin said, and gave him a swift slap on the shoulder. "Y'know where they keep the lab research around here?"

Obi-Wan stared at him, and when Nosey turned to point their way out of this dump of a room, he gave the team a swift wink. It was enough of a persona to keep the Imps off their backs, and that was good enough, surely? Even if it did carry a familiar brand of obnoxiousness.

"You can get me out, right? I wanna see my sister. She's back on Mirial, and I haven't seen her in a year. I'm beginning to forget what it feels like to get squished in one of her hugs, and I hadn't even thought that possible before I came here. This place is- there's something wrong with all of them. They're insane, they don't have limits, or reason, or morals, or anything. The base commander, Offee, she's legitimately lost her mind. They're doing research on things that shouldn't even see the light of day."

Ahsoka sighed. "So we've heard."

"She's making a name for herself, after all this time on this garbage heap? Good for her, but I don't wanna be around to see it. They're gonna kill me, I swear any day now, they're gonna get round to doing it-"

"Relax," Anakin assured. "We'll get you outta here, just you wait. And we'll make sure none of this ever does see the light of day, I promise you."

There was a pause, as Nosey considered this. He blew hair out of his eye, chewed his lip, swallowed sickly. Anakin could practically see all the terrible fates the kid was predicting, flashing through his head like little destructive comets. The kid fiddled with the hem of his uniform, scarred fingers picking at the rank insignia sewn into its chest, and scrunched his eyes shut.

"I'll take you to the labs," Nosey said, after a while. "But, just- watch out for Offee, okay? She's... jumpy. She kills people here so much we've got- we've got an airlock."

"Damn," Han said, a horrified twist to his mouth, eyes wide. "That's worse than the academy."

"You were one of them?" Nosey asked, then snorted. "No, nevermind, kriffing hell, all of us were- will be. Glad you got out alive."

"Offee," Leia interrupted. "When are her shifts?"

"We won't be able to avoid her for long. Probably won't manage a second. Don't expect miracles."

She grimaced. "I don't tend to."

Chapter End Notes
TFW WINTER. WRITING WITH FLU AGAIN. Though God knows what month it will be once this is published. Spring? Bless Spring, like, forever. I'm so sick of being sick. The cold can go stuff it, at this point.

Sorry if everything sucks. I can't feel my throat, and I think I'm about to cough and sneeze up an entire lung. Maybe two.

Also, the power of love returns. This story is basically one long, epic tribute to the Draco In Leather Pants trope. I am shameless. I know Vader was an empty husk before Luke (and for quite a while after) during the OT. I acknowledge redeeming him took Luke's weirdly fucking insane determination and lack of fucks, and that only worked after Vader literally watched his own son suffer horrific electrocution. But I'm a stupid fangirl at heart, and I want the Skywalkers to just hug it out, okay? In as realistic a way as I can possibly manage with such a ridiculous, unbelievable concept. Like, let's be real here, if Lucas (okay, maybe not Lucas) were to write Vader as suddenly young again, he'd probably just charm his way through half the galaxy, and then murder everyone. Like some kind of preying mantis, black widow, perfect honeytrap hybrid creature. "Now I have a more pleasing aesthetic, I can achieve the will of the Dark through any alternate methods I choose. Its power can fuel my deceit." Or something. Y'know that melodramatic fucker. He'd probably consider looking once more like an underwear model (haydenchristensentoimeanforreal) the will of the Force or some shit. Let's not lie to ourselves here, Sexy!Vader would be LEGIT terrifying as fuck. (Don't Google this. If you must, look at That One Scene Where Anakin Divests Himself of His Ever-Present Robes in ROTS. Please don't Google Sexy Darth Vader. I love y'all motherfuckers and we need Jesus enough already. Stay safe. Stay sane. If you've been unfortunate enough to try it, you'll know just the picture I'm talking about. You will lose your mind, and regret all the choices you've made in your life, so that they might lead you to its eternal inglory, and this hell. K. Love you. Bye.)

(Oh, and look! It is Spring. Hahaha, fuck you, Winter.)
The halls were quiet. Ahsoka seriously doubted this was the result of dedicated, respectful "Troopers, and instead the sheer lack of them. There was an airlock. That in itself said enough disgusting things about the state of this base; she had heard no more, but she had the gift of her imagination to fill in the rest.

What had become of her friend? Friends? Why had this happened to the people she knew better than herself? There were no answers, of course, and she would never find any, but the wounds still stung as if they were fresh. In a way, they were, torn and re-opened by Anakin's reappearance, if he indeed was Anakin. There was a part of her that clung to the doubts. Trust was dangerous now, as it never had been. Trust was a death sentence.

Barriss Offee was here, in these very halls, prowling alone, or with "Troopers better off dead. The part of her that saw the worst in people imagined Offee strolling through the base, dragging the bodies of her victims behind her, throwing them only into the airlock once patrol had been finished. If she were mad, as the Mirialan child had said, then this sort of behaviour would not surprise her.

Everything she had once touched was poison. A scared voice in her head lay the fault on her own shoulders. Everything she cared about, tainted. Was that coincidence or consequence?

The lights in the hallway flickered, and Vader looked at them in clear displeasure. "Imp bases always like this?" he asked, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "This place is more than a mess."

"Nobody even comes here," Vaare said. "It's just me, a few other crew, Commander Offee, and the labrats."

"Labrats?"

"Yeah, the clones. They don't wake up, considering, well, cryo. But they're alive, so I count them as members of this shithole. Dunno if Offee does, she treats them like they belong in the trash chute."

"So, there are clones here." Ahsoka crossed her arms. They had minds of their own, likely, if they hadn't been brought out at Bespin, and even there, Palpatine hadn't managed the control necessary to subdue someone with a Jedi's unchanging heart. They were worth freeing. "You have enough space on your ship, Solo?"

"Uh." Han bit his lip. "Probably. Barely? A few of us might have to share rooms. She's made to carry freight, not people."

Vader poked Obi-Wan. "I call top bunk."

"I take it you're sharing, then," Han said. "Leia?"

"I'll see to Nosey." A cough. "To Vaare, I mean. He's been here too long, and a little company might help."

Vaare grinned. "I don't care if I have to sleep on the floor if it means I'm leaving."

Ahsoka thought, and said, "I'll watch over the clones." It was better she keep an eye on them, in case
they were to plan on going rogue without careful oversight.

"I guess that leaves me and Luke." Han was a little red at this, and Ahsoka raised an eyebrow.

*To be young again.*

Han made a strangled noise. "I'm practically your own age, Tano! Unless," at this, he waved an arm towards Vader and Obi-Wan, "you've also lost twenty years, somehow."

"I haven't had the luxury. Seems the Force gets picky." She narrowed her eyes. "You know, Solo, I never said that aloud."

Han blinked. "What? Yeah, you-" He stopped. "It's always better when the Twins are around."

Leia laughed. "What are we, your Force glasses?"

"Focus lens sounds better," Luke cut in. "Han objects to anything that might tarnish his image."

"My image is already tarnished. Just don't wanna tarnish it further, if you know what I mean."

"We don't," Leia said, dry, forcing back a smile.

The doors to the labs were covered in clawed, half-formed nail marks and blood. Ahsoka wasn't surprised, but she was disturbed. Had the clones broken free? Just how much experimentation did Barriss oversee?

The lights were dimmed, their company only the sound of their footsteps, but she could sense the clones' presence, even now. Underlying, crawling under her skin, a visceral state of permanent terror. Barriss, too, she could sense, but her mind was racing, and her emotions too fast for Ahsoka to grasp. She caught words, phrases, mentions of Palpatine. This had become his pet project, and Barriss was killing herself and others in order to stay ahead.

She stepped ahead, scouting for shadows she knew weren't there. But it was better to be safe; overlooking the fine details had cost her more than just her pride as a Jedi. "This way."

"Is this it, Nosey?"

Vaare sniffed. "Yeah, this is the place. She should be coming around soon, so whatever you want to do, do it and get out."

"I'm starting to think a confrontation is inevitable," Obi-Wan said.

"It is," said Ahsoka. "Definitely, it is. My mistakes follow me around."

Obi-Wan looked at her with a great measure of scepticism. "You think Offee was your mistake, Ahsoka? Was she not all of our mistakes? Or perhaps, the error belongs solely with her."

"Not solely. The Order wasn't paying a shred of attention to the state of its learners."

"Then the blame does not fall solely on your shoulders, either."

"No. But she is my responsibility."

"You think your personal ties will sway her?"
"Doubtful. But worth trying."

There was a pause, as they considered this, and Ahsoka felt a sudden jolt of recognition shoot through her. She wouldn't turn around, she would let Barriss think she had the element of surprise. But, subtle, barely seen, she focused her gaze as close to the shadows as possible, and mouthed the shadow's name so the others might catch it.

"Worth trying?" the shadow spoke. "Worth risking your life for, Ahsoka? I hardly think so."

She stared aimlessly at the wall. "Take a look and see, Barriss. The Greatest Sith is standing right beside me."

"Then he is a fool."

"So quick to judge me, Offee? Do you forget who found you out, or have you chosen not to remember?"

Vaare shot a panicked look towards her, backed himself up against the nearest tank. The clone inside reached out to grab at nothing, fingers scraping against the glass. Vaare leaped, horrified, to the nearest place of refuge, and stumbled right into Vader himself. Then, to his knees. "He's the Traitor?" Vaare cried. "You didn't tell me- you should have told me when you started- and Offee's here, and you- you're being stupidly reckless. You're going to get us all killed!"

Vader sneered. "Another with no faith."

"You'll speak to us of faith, after what you've done? After you betrayed the Order's, and now the Lords' themselves?" Barriss snorted, her nose wrinkling, distorting the already scarred diamonds painting her cheeks.

Vader took one quick look in Ahsoka's direction, and then saw the last scraps of Anakin overcome by sick, sick fury. "You betrayed her! You let your partner and friend take the fall for your misguided actions, without a thought. You are no Sith, no servant of the Force, you are a coward, and Palpatine's newest dog."

"You've no idea what it's like, serving under him, now you've left us to rot! The Emperor's more a rabid dog than I, he's going to break all he worked for, work his subjects beyond their sanity, and it's all because of you."

"Do not dare to speak to me of servitude, you piteous, naïve little child!"

Barriss only laughed harder. "I'm the child? Me?" A snarl. "I must say, I think childish foolishness suits you more than me, Skywalker."

Vader let out something close to a roar, and wrenched-out, animal sound, and used the Force to slam Barriss against the nearest tank. The glass cracked, seeped its preservative fluid onto Barriss' uniform, and she hissed in disgust, for all of a second, before Vader had his fists clenched so tight, there was no air left for her to use.

"I must say," Vader began, spitting, "I sincerely regret not having finished what I started."

There he was. There was what he tried so desperately to hide behind the jokes, the obnoxious attitude, the over-inflated ego. Perhaps it had always been hiding, there, even from the day Anakin was assigned to train her, from the day he insisted her name become Snips, and that his was Skyguy, not Master. That they were equals, and friends above anything.
Did she equal him now? In strength? In mind? In not-so-perfect balance?

"This was not the plan," she growled, but Vader didn't seem to hear her. Barriss was slowly, with everything she had, wrenching herself desperately out of Vader's grip. Vader slammed her to the floor, but she only crawled farther forward, breath laboured.

She rasped, choking and coughing and spitting, until she could finally find words. Her nails had left imprints in the stark, pristine floors, now spattered with blood and cryofluid. "If the Emperor labels me a traitor, a second one, he won't be lenient. He won't even hesitate. I've no choice now, Vader, and nor have you."

Vader reared up, face contorted into something like indignance. "I have far surpassed the old man on his tiny throne. Were he to face me now, he would die, slowly. That is why he hasn't come to attend to his duties personally. Instead, he employs his little pets." Vader lifted Barriss to her feet, and watched, impassive, as she quickly reestablished her footing, and held her lightsabers around her like a shield. "No longer! If the Force wants Balance, then I will return what I stole. Presence in the Order. Soldiers who see past his charm and magic tricks."

Barriss stepped back, but made no move to attack. Instead, her eyes lit with something wild. "You're no more sane than I am. You've all lost your minds along with me!" Hysteria rose in her cheeks, pale and clammy. "You're just as lost as in the Beginning, aren't you?" A pause, then more broken laughter. "And so am I. We've learned nothing. This became pointless long ago -- too long ago."

"Join us," said Vader. "And repay the Alliance for what you've done, repay the person you were once so lucky to have called a friend."

"Join you?"

"This was pointless from its inception," Vader insisted. "I joined the New Order to restore meaning to this galaxy, true meaning. Jedi free to feel, bound to save, not serve. I liked the Council no more than you did, Offee. I succeeded in what you failed."

"Destroying it?" She lowered her hood, to look more clearly. "And now you want to undo all we worked for?"

"My success-" Vader cut himself off. "My success was incorrect. I interpreted the Prophecy incorrectly. Palpatine's path will never lead to balance, to order, justice, security. It has only led to suffering." He turned away. "Under my hand, and the hands of others. It is our task now, to cleanse this place."

Barriss raised an eyebrow. "So, you've turned your violence to the other side, instead, have you?"

"That you remain on this base, alive and breathing, is evidence to show otherwise. The Jedi are forgiving. The Empire cannot find the integrity to do so as well, and that is why they will lose."

"Lose?"

Vader held out an arm, to sweep the room, throwing back the robes draped on his shoulders. "He cannot defeat us. The blood of the Jedi burns brighter than all of what flows through the Empire's veins. Trust has made us the superior opponent."

"Now you choose the Code?" Barriss snapped, and took bold, heavy steps forward, into Vader's direct line of sight. "When it's too late! After all you've done!"

There was a flicker of horror in Vader's eyes, but Obi-Wan stepped beside him. Only now could
Ahsoka sense anger from him. "No," Vader said, sudden. "No. So long as the Jedi live, it is never too late."

"We mustn't allow the Dark to overtake the Light," Obi-Wan added. Barriss glared, and Obi-Wan continued, smirking, "Or the Light overtake the Dark."

"Balance," Barriss repeated, emptily.

She sagged to the floor, tapped bleeding hands against the cold glass of the cryopods. "Is this your start?"

"Beyond that," Vader dismissed. He grinned, too wide, too filled with teeth, a disturbing parody of her former master. "Checkmate in five, Offee. You still wanna be here when your King falls?"

She slumped farther. "Not particularly."

Vaare had considerable strength for someone of his age and stature... and general demeanour. He volunteered to carry more than his due of the Cryostasis Chambers into the Falcon's hull, even though he spent half the time looking ill and on the verge of passing out.

"You need a little help?" she asked.

"I need a little help wrapping my mind around Darth Vader. That guy's karking terrifying in one instant, and some cocky little shit in another? This doesn't- I don't-"

"Hey, Nosey." Vader slapped him a little too hard on the back. "Can't say I can explain it either. Still, better I call you Nosey than let you die outright, am I right?" A grin. "Or am I right?"

"What the fuck," Vaare said. It lacked question, simply a statement of fact. He looked at Vader as if he'd grown two heads. In a way, he had.

"Welcome to the Rebellion," Leia said, and pushed another cryopod up the boarding ramp.

Han rested his head against the hologame board, breathing steadily as Luke laid a single hand just below his shoulder, almost like an afterthought, but a subconscious level of caring and empathy worthy of a Jedi. She was proud of what they had become, despite their father's Fall.

"Vaare's right," Han said. "How're we gonna avoid the Empire between now and the time we reach Base?"

Vader blinked, half asleep on Obi-Wan's shoulder, and shook himself. "Stealth? Again? Anyone?"

"We haven't really shown ourselves to be good at it, pal," Han replied.

"Practice makes perfect," Vader said sagely, holding up a single finger, and then went back to resting.

"Your dad's got worse plans than I do, Luke."

Luke shrugged. "We don't have a choice now, though. It's that, or fly directly into Imperial space and just pretend like we belong there. Which we obviously don't."

"Half of this ship is ex-Imperial," Han moaned, dramatically, "and we can't even blend in for half a parsec of space-"
Ahsoka sighed. "Who says we can't? Just avoid their scrutiny long enough to pass by relatively undetected."

Leia stared, and then said, "She has a point. We'll have to exercise extreme caution, but I think it's doable, if we try hard enough."

"Hey!" came Han and Luke's chorus. "We always try!"

They didn't hold Barriss in a cell, but she stayed in her rooms as if they had, even though Ahsoka was posted metres above, and the Clones beside. They left food by the door, which she took, but they hadn't seen her face in daylight since the fight. Touching the door was like trying to battle through a snowstorm. Ahsoka left her to her own devices. And when she slept, they didn't speak a word.

Vader, on the other hand, paced across the ship, wrapped in his suit. The chill wasn't solely from the cryopods, she assumed. There was something frayed in the edges of her vision, and she was waiting for the inevitable moment the string snapped.

It didn't. Vader walked through the hallways as he always had, scaring Vaare back into his room, breathing heavy and stomping through the cargo hold hard enough to test their freight's fastening. Every moment Ahsoka was awake to see him, he rushed about like an impatient youngling. Sometimes, she heard his even breaths outside their door, but they always faded into the distance. After minutes, after half an hour, it varied. But he was always there.

Now, he was breaking his record. She'd counted two hours. Barriss had kept her eyes at the crack under the door, seeping in artificial light, for the entire time. In the safety of the *Falcon*, she looked less a walking skeleton and more a breathing creature, but there was a hint of animal paranoia in her, now more than ever.

"See to him," Barriss announced. "Please, see to him, and see to his leaving, soon. I can't sleep knowing he's there."

"How unlike old times, huh, Padawan Offee? I seem to remember sleeping better than I ever have with his and Master Kenobi's guard."

"That was the past," she spat, panic growing in her like mould. "Don't we have reason to fear for our lives?"

"If he'd planned on killing you, at any point, you'd be dead, a hole where your chest should've been. Do you see any hole, Offee?"

"Not yet," she said, and Ahsoka threw up her arms and got up.

She kicked the door open, finding Vader leaning against the doorframe, casual like a worker taking his lunch break. He turned his head toward her, but said nothing.

"What are you doing?"

"Thinking."

"Outside our door?"

"You are unguarded when you sleep. She will use the chance to slit your throat."
Ahsoka made a noise like a snort, like a furious scream, and raked hands along her face. "Now you care about the fate of your apprentice, Vader? Or do you not want someone like her doing your job for you?"

Vader ignored that. "She betrayed you," he said, as if that were explanation enough. As if it made a single shred of sense in any possible way.

"Are you here to welcome her to the club? Go right on ahead, Vader, please. Don't let me stop you."

Something in him perked up, at that. "So I can kill her?"

"Just a few days ago you were advocating for her asylum!"

"She's found it," Vader hissed. "Now is the time she face the Council's decision."

Ahsoka almost hit him. "There is no Council. You killed every last one of them."

"Nonsense," Vader replied. "I purged-" A pause. "I killed wrongly. But the Council still lives. We are the Council, now."

"And have you discussed your decision with the other Councilmembers?"

Petulance. "She deserves it!"

"Why?"

"For betraying you!"

"I prefer her company," Ahsoka said, calmly. "Of all my betayers, she hardly takes first place. In fact, I think I might forgive her. At least her reasons were her own, and not implanted from the twisted minds of others."

"He told me you were all fated to die, if I did not join him!"

"They were fated to die from the moment you gave him your allegiance, Vader. You have the ego to recognise it. Once divided, once broken, the Council couldn't raise a finger to you, the Chosen One. And they at least put up a fight. Tell me, what did the younglings say, as they were dying? Did they beg for mercy, or did they confirm your beliefs about martyrdom, about sacrificial appeasement to your precious god?" She bared her teeth. "If you think so low of him now, how did you ever get it into your pliable little head that he would save your family?"

"You defend Offee, above anyone?"

Ahsoka pouted, faux. "How could I possibly do this? After all you've done for me? All the debts I owe you for so kindly doing me the favour, sparing me the effort of having to purge the Order myself? They were fools, Vader, but they were not pigs for your slaughter! You killed children! You killed your own kin! You destroyed Padmé, and broke your master's unbreakable spirit." A frantic sort of rage built in her. "You. Ruined. Everything. We. Fought. For. The Clone Wars, our soldiers deaths, they were all for nothing!" She was panting, now. "It was my responsibility to protect them, to give meaning to their sacrifice, and you stole it and you stepped on it, and you- you-" Choking. "Barriss is millions of times more honourable than you, Vader. She is a Saint, a Paragon of the Order, in your image. My best friend, who left me, who squished my trust between her fingers? She is a beacon of Light in your shadow."

Vader, who had held a 'saber to her throat, who had attempted to tear the ligaments keeping her head
to her shoulders, who had left children in a pool of their own blood, began to shake. His breathing went rapid, gasping. He stumbled forward, but his feet wouldn't listen to him. He swayed, and through the vocoder, there was some kind of horrific, blood-curdling moan. Not quite a wail, but like the death cry of a thousand purrgil. She stepped back, but a single gloved hand grabbed at her sleeve. "Snips, Snips, what have I done? I just- want it to- be over. I want it to be gone." The ship quaked beneath them. "I hurt them, all of them. I hurt you, I hurt Padmé, I tortured Leia- It was my intent to kill Luke, on the Death Star, after I removed Obi-Wan from the equation. After I had finally taken care of the problem that had plagued me for my entire life." He stared at her, through an empty lens. "I cannot go back. I would do anything to go back. Why can't It take me back? I just- want to go-home."

Fearing that he might suffocate himself, Ahsoka yanked off the helmet, to find her old master's face, contorted and twisted like the blur of hyperspace. He wasn't crying, but all the light in his eyes, the laughter she once knew, the teasing, joking cocky attitude, the feeling, it was all gone. She fell back in horror. "Listen, Vader, I didn't- this doesn't mean-"

His hair stuck to his face, cold sweat trailing rivulets down his neck. His face was pale, his pupils small and unfocused. In the Force, she felt agony, worse than the searing, endless pain of a lightsaber wound, worse than the cold, empty peace of death. The others came rushing forward, then, Obi-Wan looking as if clawed hands had torn through him and ripped out his still-beating heart. Luke couldn't stand, Leia froze in place, and Han began to plead for her to get it to stop, please.

Please.

It had finally hit him. And her. And the remaining Jedi. It was crumpling them from the inside out. Barriss had unsheathed her 'saber. And Ahsoka stood in the eye of the storm, and her ears rang, and time was slow, and what had they made of this galaxy?

"Stop!" she screamed, loud enough to make Han grasp desperately at his ears. "Enough! Enough! Quit it, Skyguy, stop it- don't- look, you can still fix this. Stop, stop, enough, I'm sorry, Force, please-"

Anakin was quiet. The Force stilled. Tears leaked down his face, eyes red and puffy and messy. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't fix this. The Prophecy was wrong. I've done such terrible things- I can't-"

"You can, I was angry, I shouldn't have said-" She breathed through her nose. "You can still redeem yourself, Anakin-"

"I don't deserve that name. I'm sorry. I don't-"

Her vision was dimming. The ringing made her montrals feel as if they'd been sliced from her head. Everything went white, and distantly, she saw everyone else collapse like puppets with cut strings.

Her eyes opened to Threepio. They were all piled in the medbay, too small to fit them, the droids running around, motors whirring.

"I haven't enough medical training for this!" Threepio cried, and Artoo hit his knee with one claw. "You know droids aren't Force-sensitive, you- you- tin can!" A sob. "I take that back, of course you aren't a tin can, Artoo, of course you aren't."

Artoo screeched at him, and whirred in circles.

"I don't know how to fix them! You know more than I, Artoo, they trained you for more than protocol- this most certainly isn't protocol-"
Barriss stood. "I've had extensive training as a healer," she said, even as her stance wobbled. "Leave it to me. It's the least I owe them."

The world was fading, but Ahsoka made her mouth move, just for a moment. "Thank you."

Barriss looked at her with round eyes. "Please forgive me."

"Already have." She moved a hand, which gravity pulled down with such strength it made her joints crack. "All of you. 'Ready have."

"I'll take care of it," Barriss promised. "Don't worry- I'll- I'll do something right, for once. Give me a little time."

Ahsoka laughed, even as everything spun around her, even as bile rose in her throat. "I have all the time in the world."

Chapter End Notes

Generally, Mirialans are kind and respectful (Luminara tho?!?!?! How so polite?!?!?! Very wow. Pretend I didn't just use that meme.) Vaare is another kind of Rebel. You know, the teenage angst kind.

What, don't look at me. I get terrified when OCs appear. Thought I might give him a bit of character, y'know. Like, idk, another smartass to add to the crew.

Also. Um. Overgenerous use of emphasis. I write fics like comics, for some reason. I promise the words I emphasise actually have meaning. Last I checked, I definitely was not Frank Miller.

Oh, and uhm. Yeah. It's obvious Barriss isn't in her right mind. She was sharp af in TCW, and she is here, too, but idk I've been super clear, but Palpatine has literally Lost His Fucking Marbles. He's working them all to death, planning insane shit, trying to grasp at straws. He's getting desperate, because this isn't exactly the destiny he foresaw, huh? And so it's been rubbing off.

OKAY. Also. Most importantly. I wrote the. Uh. Dramatic resolution to Ahsoka and Anakin's conflict. And I mentioned purrgil. Because space whales are canon now, okay? And I had to? Sorrynotsorry? Oh God, I apologise. Sometimes my own stress manifests in my writing? It was coming. After all Vader's done, after all the Imperial-alligned Sith have done, this was bound to happen. We're talking about Anakin Skywalker, too, after all. Since when does he do anything but solve his problems with a breakdown? And he has a lot of problems. And the weight of a million dead Jedi on his shoulders. Had to break him, sometime. Now, to put him back together.

Disclaimer: this fic is not Humpty Dumpty. All the galaxy's horses, all the galaxy's men, they'll put Anakin together again.

(I think I may be fanfic's version of the Cheshire Cat. I need to stop breaking my characters like fine china.)
They all passed through consciousness like trains, light shifting through the windows, illuminating the inside once every three odd moments. She'd healed so many, but never with such emotional damage. The Inquisitors, they kept to themselves. They licked their own wounds.

Her old people, for all they preached of serenity, they always let their feelings bleed. And now, she was drowning in it.

The droid twitched. "Ma'am, might I recommend we leave them be, for now?"

"I know what I'm doing," Barriss said, like a promise. She knew droids could sense these things as well as the strongest of the Force. "I've done this far too many times to count."

"Ma'am, I don't mean any offence, but you've truly given me no reason at all to trust you, and I'd very much like to keep my- my friends alive, for as long as I can. I know, one day, I'll outlast them, but I was hoping I might share in their company a few years longer."

"I've no intention to kill them," she said. "They saved my life. I really rather owe them a debt of honour, at the very least, don't you think?"

"Is this how you'd like to repay it?"

"In any way I can."

"They won't use it against you."

She smiled at the droid's small, hopeful glimpse of innocence. How had it remained intact these years, she'd no idea. "Yes, yes they will."

"They are... kind people, for all their eccentricities. They've taken very good care of me, and they'll surely extend that hospitality to you, madame."

"Certainly any other. But not me," she said, and went back to work.

Ahsoka woke again, eyes blazing open, gasping for breath. Her cheeks were flushed with anger, and her skin warm to the touch. It was a vast improvement over the past hours, where they'd shook and moaned out horrible things, fingers clawing the sheets. Still, she was thrashing, and exertion was not the remedy, here. "Please," she said. "Do settle down."

"You're telling me to settle down? Where are the others?"

"They are all well, I assure you. Please, you will only hurt yourself further."

"You're a healer and yet you threw away your 'Troopers like rotten food?' Ahsoka spat, and the rage died. "No, sorry, I didn't mean that- I-"

"It's quite alright. You're correct. I had the skills to help them, and I didn't. They gave nothing and took everything. It was my duty to purge corruption."
Her lips curled in a snarl, baring sharp, hunters' teeth. "I've heard the word 'purge' too many times today."

"I've noticed," she said. "Please, rest. The others should wake soon."

She settled back in her bed, fingers tapping restlessly at its framing, teeth grinding painfully loud. The quiet wasn't comfortable, as it once had been, but harsh, dripping in worry and concern and sharp regret. The tang refused to leave her mouth.

"I drove him to this state."

"The consequences of his actions -- he'd not yet faced them. So suddenly, it would have overwhelmed everything he had. Generally, in our unit, we encourage our patients to process trauma at a slow pace, so things like... like these, don't happen. It has a great fallout, and a very negative impact on the Force-sensitives around."

"So I've seen."

"Even your pilot, with his early grasp on his abilities, was knocked out immediately. It can have severe effects. Please, don't aggravate them."

"I'm trying not to," she promised. "I just shouldn't have dumped it on him so fast."

"He knew it would come. Surely you don't think he was destined to live the rest of his life unaware?"

"Sometimes, y'know, Barriss, sometimes I did."

"You're aware that's very unrealistic, in this stage? It was likely to do greater damage ignored and untouched than treated and released."

"Oh, I'm aware. I'd almost hoped it, though."

"He can heal, now, in places he could not before. It was not ideal, but it went better than, by all rights, what we expected. Or, at least, what I had. Is this not... enough?"

"We don't give up on people here, no, but we don't push them over the edge, either."

"You certainly weren't pushing him over the edge, so to speak. There was no edge, he was doing all he could to delay the weight of the truth, for your sake, but that's simply not possible, in these circumstances."

"It was so bad, Barriss. So bad."

"I know. These things don't generally tend to go well, if that's any consolation."

"A very great consolation," Ahsoka said, and rested her head against her knees.

In the Force, she was tense and bruised, anticipating a blow that Barriss would not dish out for the life of her. She had embraced the Dark in the hope that it would offer greater peace than the Light, but every step down had creaked and collapsed and really, she'd rather fallen down the staircase altogether. She, too, felt bruised, and not just from the staircase's Fall. It had taken every single fibre of her being not to break under the weight of Anakin Skywalker's regret, and what she had managed was only thanks to her emotional detachment. She knew Ahsoka better than Skywalker, or Kenobi. Ahsoka was a friend to her, and they had understood, together, the pains of war.
The pains of war were still here, unrelenting. And now Ahsoka believed Barriss lacked the understanding she'd once given.

She didn't. She hadn't meant to hurt the ones close to her, but the Order had been failing, and a desperate part of her young mind had tugged at any strand of hope that might save them before the Republic spilled past any chance of fixing. She would do anything, to preserve the sanctuary of innocent lives, but Palpatine had requisitioned her to his own Order, and she was to follow his every command, or face execution.

There was still that small, sick, squirming little parasite inside her that begged for anything but death, and so she had bowed and nodded and pledged herself to the Dark, and to supporting the Empire's every last whim and terrible plan.

It was funny that the singlemost important pillar of Palpatine's Dark Order was the first to fall. Now his palace was set to crumble, and they would all be crushed beneath it. She only hoped now to go out with honour, as she had first hoped when trapped in the factory with Ahsoka all those years ago.

"Are you feeling alright?"

Ahsoka snorted. "Is it really surprising if I say no?"

"I wouldn't be shocked."

"I did a number on him," Ahsoka said, gaze trailing sadly over Vader's crumpled form, sweat dripping down him in rivulets, pale and shaking, with eyes clenched tightly shut against the clinical light.

"I already said you didn't do it," Barriss said. "He was going to face this eventually. He was not alone, and I find that most important of all."

"He felt alone,"

Barriss smiled, eyes low, lashes brushing her cheeks. Vader would still soon, and the droid, Threepio, for all his complaints, was perfectly adept at caring for the injured. "Then we have to convince him he isn't."

Kenobi woke next, and said nothing. Ahsoka wordlessly handed him a cup of tea, and he sat in bed with a look in his eyes that told her he was seeing them drowning in an endless ocean, rather than floating gently in the vacuum of space.

"I should have been there," Kenobi said, finally. His voice was raw, as if he'd been screaming outside his mind as well as in.

"I don't see how any of you could've predicted this," Barriss offered. "Has he not always been unpredictable? Instead of turning me in to the Order in chains, he first insisted he would duel me, with the aid of another's lightsabers. That was neither the first nor last time he surprised us."

"You've seen him more than I have, these past twenty years," Ahsoka spat. "Tell me, was he so unpredictable still, or has he settled down in his old age?"

"His rage was. His responses, they never made sense to me. He would lash out, or retreat so far inside himself, none of us could sense anything but emptiness from him. He was not the Skywalker we knew. There were hints, of course there were, but they were hidden, and Vader was, do forgive the analogy, what Skywalker became when crushed between the Emperor's two fingers."
"So now he's crawling out," Ahsoka said, words bitter in her mouth, lips curled, "he's getting growing pains."

They sat in silence far too long to be comfortable, until Vader's children woke, and the pilot of their ship. Vader was still down, though he'd calmed since the beginning. The children doted over him nervously, but Barriss assured them he would wake. It was only that he didn't want to.

Solo began, "I feel like someone's hit me over the head with-"


"Exactly," Solo confirmed. "What in the nine hells was that?"

"That was the fallout of an intensely powerful Force-user's emotional breakdown," Barriss said, lightly. "Surely you expected this?"

Solo looked at her as if she were slow. "No, no I did not damn well expect this- oh, shit, has the old man killed himself? Is he gonna wake up?"

"I already said-"

"That was before you mentioned the emotional breakdown!"

"My point stands!"

"He feels like he's got one hell of a hangover," Solo announced, crossing his arms. "Can he heal from that?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Can we heal from that?"

"Your senses were overwhelmed, not destroyed. This used to happen quite frequently in the Inqui-"

Solo threw up his hands, then winced as it pulled at bruised muscles. "Of course it did! Because they're all maniacs!"

"It's not emotionally sound-" Barriss started, but Solo just choked down laughter.

"We've messed him up real bad."

"He's my father, and I love him," said Luke, hesitantly, "but he messed himself up really bad first. This was kinda inevitable. I just care that he's gonna get better. And he is, right?"

"I've really said-"

"Well, good," Solo said. "I gotta look out for him now. He's the crazy in-law."

"Did you just-?"

Leia couldn't stop herself from laughing, and Luke spat his tea. Barriss looked at her ruined uniform in disgust. "If you could please maintain-"

Kenobi gave her a sympathetic smile. " Civility? I'm afraid, General Offee, that this does take some time to get used to."
Vader did wake, eventually, as if someone had dumped icy water on his head, eyes stretched wide, panting and sweating. He fell back against the sheets, fists bunched in his cape, cheeks tinged with a sick flush.

"You'll be experiencing some disorientation," Barriss said. "This is normal after such an episode, so there's no need to worry."

"Fuck," he said, passionately. "I took you all down with me."

Kenobi was at his side in an instant, running a hand along his sweat-damp forehead. Vader gave him an exhausted kind of smile and attempted to stand, rising to his feet like a newborn, swaying, before viciously righting himself, gripping a bulkhead, white-knuckled, like a lifeline. Barriss had worked with him briefly; she knew he hated to show weakness. And Skywalker. Well, he hadn't used that cocky veneer for his own amusement.

"Really, you needn't attempt to stand so early on in your recovery."

Vader snarled at her, and she smiled back, pleasantly. "You have no say in what I do. Or how I do it."

"She saved you from a world of pain," Ahsoka snapped.

"Are you defending her? Still?"

"Enough!" Luke and Leia chorused, in an instant, and looked at each other in surprise, and then dawning approval.

"Look, someone still has some sense around here," Leia said, dryly, and Luke gave her a thumbs up.

Luke chewed his lip in an attempt not to laugh. It came out more like a gust of air, whistling through his teeth. "Yeah, follow my example."

Vader looked at them fondly, and then shot a piercing glare in her direction, as if she were holding a knife against their throats. It was true, her choices were a consistent spiral of hope and disappointment, and she, too, had become the very thing she hated, but she never would lower herself to murder civilians. Not if someone had a knife to her own throat.

"I understand the... animosity between us, Lord Vader, but if I am to be your healer, you really ought to listen to my professional opinion about your health."

"There's nothing wrong with my health."

"Don't be a child," Ahsoka said, but it wasn't harsh. "That took a toll on you. Pretending like it didn't isn't going to get us anywhere."

"I am not, by any means. I've dealt with far greater pain than this, the Emperor would never let it stand that I bend and break under pressure. General Offee should know this better than most."

"He's not lying," Barriss confirmed, reluctantly. "You, Vader and his children, Kenobi -- they'll recover with the aid of their training." She pointed a single finger at their pilot. "You brought an untrained Force-sensitive on board. He is the one who suffers the most from this... outburst."

Luke and Leia looked in Solo's direction, leaking regret like saturated sponges, but he waved it off. "Sure," he said. "This is kinda new. But I've had worse. The Imperial Academy wasn't fun. Never
were easy on me, the bastards. Guess I took it extra rough when the Inquisition came around like they owned the damn place."

Vader failed to hide his wince. "Listen, Solo, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get you caught in the crossfire-"

"Skywalker, you need a whole karking freighter ship load's worth of therapy, but I'm not gonna blame you. Respectfully, you've got about as much control as an Imp military brat."

"I'm flattered."

"Can we consider the argument settled?" Kenobi huffed. "This has all been quite unnecessary."

Solo winked. "Communication, am I right? Who needs it? Not these walking examples of perfect stability, that's for sure."

Chapter End Notes

IS THIS THE FIRST TIME I'VE USED THE WORD "FUCK" WITHIN THE ACTUAL FIC? I know "fucking" is usually "kriffing" or "karking" but but IT'S JUST SUCH A SATISFYING WORD. How could I abandon it? How could the SW universe abandon normal-ass swearing?

Anyway! The story is wrapping up now. I think I'm going through an existential crisis just thinking about it. I have so many ideas for so many stories! But finishing up this one is hitting me hard, haha. It's been my life for the past year and a bit. It's quite the undertaking! There should be only a few chapters left, now. I may write a sequel, or an add-on of some sort! A drabble in this 'verse here and there, maybe. You know, to stave off the existential crisis :). I've very much enjoyed writing this, and I'm forever grateful to all of you for sticking with me. <3 Seriously. I love you guys, and I couldn't appreciate you more.

And happy Star Wars: Rebels Has Slain Us All Day! Kind of. I mean, it's a few days late, but hey, man. Better all our well wishes come late than never, right? We're all suffering. We just needed a moment of silence, and you know, some time spent processing the sheer magnitude of ALL OF THAT. HOLY FUCK.

Guess whose predictions were totally right? I think I just anticipate Dave Filoni trying to smash us all into little pieces, and then spending a significant amount of time stomping on those pieces, and then throwing them into the sea. To drown. IN PAIN.
"There's more information," Vaare said, and Ahsoka looked up, raising an eyebrow. "Listen, I get the feeling you guys are in this for the long run, that you seriously want to take the Empire down. Whatever, I'm fine with that, keeps them off my tail, y'know? But you don't have enough shit to properly destroy them yet."

"We 'don't have enough shit?" Ahsoka asked, amused. But she kept her gaze soft, so Vaare would continue, and not skitter off like a little kitten.

"You wanna get the Second Death Star, right?" At this, Ahsoka nodded. "'Kay, well, in the research lab, the guys went nuts over what you did to the last one. They insisted their shields be impenetrable. Y'know, that only means they'll be all the more difficult to get into, but nothing in this hellhole is impenetrable. That's a pipe dream if I ever heard one."

"So you know how to pass the shields?"

"Oh, good, I don't have to spell it out. Yeah, I know. You can't push through them with lasercannons. They prepared for that. They practically bombed every prototype they got their hands on, and believe me, it wasn't pretty. Until it was. To destroy that floating planet-eater, you'll need to get inside and trigger the reactor overload yourselves. That's easy enough, sure, but the shields protect everything. Everything. Even the internals. You're gonna have to get past them if you want to blow that shit up."

"And you know the way to do this... without physical force?"

"Yeah. They let engineers into the place all the time, just to take care of all the engines, every little spinning cog. Obviously, to get into the engines, engineers gotta shut down the shields so they don't get sliced in half. The Comm Station Central, back near Coruscant. That place delivers them all the keys."

"You want us to intercept a passcode?"

"You can fuckin' raid the place, who cares? Stealth clearly isn't your forte. Take the data forcefully, if you want. Not like the Empire doesn't already know you're coming."

"Steal the passcode, shut down the shields, overload the reactor, and then...?"

"I studied this thing for way too long to be healthy. I'm an engineer myself, not that the Imps thought I could hold my own next to their superiour intellect. Once the reactor's overloaded, the whole place will go wonky. The outer shields will fizzle out, the engines will stop dead. It won't blow the whole place up, because, obviously, safeguards, but it will leave it vulnerable to Rebel attack. Take in your whole damn fleet, and don't stop firing."

"And we'll get out, how? Or are we not set to leave at all?"

"What d'you think I am, a crazy martyr like you guys? I'm coming with. I know how to shut shit down, but I don't wanna shut myself down, for Maker's sake. There are escape pods. They don't require modulator keys, because the Imps are cowards and break under pressure, and like they'd remember a code to get themselves the hell outta their fucked up death station as it's failing them.
Hands would probably shake too hard, anyway. Hell, swipe a credit through the scanner and the door will unlock. We can just get in them and leave."

Ahsoka hummed. "And the Emperor?"

"What about him? Crazy fucker will go down with the rest of the crew, unless you're worried he'll squeal and run, too. You can go see to it yourself. Y'know, personal and all. Hell, throw him into the reactor core. That'd be a sight."

"And we'd have time?"

"What, to entertain yourselves by throwing that pig into his own ship? Yeah? It won't blow up until you give the order."

"We'll come under heavy fire," Ahsoka warned.

"How many Jedi d'you guys even have? You're worried about the Imps' shitty aim?"

"Alright. You're a smart kid, you know that?" Ahsoka leant down to ruffle his hair, bangs falling over the diamonds painting his forehead.

"Do I get a promotion for this? Y'know, for saving your asses? From Rebel Lackey to Rebel Fairly Competent?"

"If we manage to take down the Emperor? I'll make sure you're promoted to General, Force help me. You've been invaluable, you know that?"

Vaare flushed a little at this. "Just doing my job, Commander."

"You want us to infiltrate a what?" Vader spluttered. "A Comms base in Core Space, and then the Second Death Star itself?"

"Isn't this a little bold?" Obi-Wan offered, hesitant.

"I'm confident we can do it."

"If we don't rush in, headstrong and unprepared, it's manageable," Leia said. She aimed an unamused stare in her father's direction. "That means you, too, Anakin."

He saluted. "Yes, ma'am."

"Force knows we have enough backup," Leia continued. "How many strays have we taken in?"

Han snorted. "Far too many to count, at this point, Princess."

"You don't intend for me to be the last, do you?" Barriss asked.

Luke burst out laughing.

"I might still have this baby's old identification tags," Han said, swinging a chain linked with a passkey on one finger. "This unlocks the hull entrance. Gotta change the registry code to a classic Corellian freighter's."

"You think that's gonna work?" Luke asked. "They're shifty now. Really shifty. Not like before,
where they'd turn the other cheek."

Han shrugged, and Luke made a horrified sort of noise. "Han! We're trying to live through this."

"Give me a chance," Han said. "I've done this too many times to count."

"You'll jinx it."

"Well, now I will, with that kinda attitude."

Ahsoka looked ahead, into the stars, bright lines through the scream of hyperspace. As they got closer to the Core, ships had passed through their trail and ridden the current past lightspeed. They were civilian, all of them, save one military cruiser that Han had taken one look at, and then run from. He'd sent the *Falcon* into a nosedive, curse her luck, to avoid their line of sight. Ahsoka regretted eating breakfast.

Now the field was dotted more with Imperial class starships than civilian. They spun around Core Space like electrons in an atom, shooting past and colliding with anything that dared cross their path. These were the fighters they needed to avoid. The *Falcon* was fast, but a Star Destroyer could crush her like an ant.

"Change the code," she said. "Please don't forget to be thorough, Solo."

Han held a hand over his heart. "As if I ever could! I'm wounded, Tano." And then, he gave Luke's shoulder a firm squeeze, and got up to trace the path towards the airlock.

Luke held his head in his hands. "I'm concerned. Core Space isn't a joke."

"It's really not," Leia agreed, her eyes on Ahsoka, accusing, as if she expected them to come out of this in pieces.

"It's a risk we must take," Ahsoka said. "And not one with odds too overwhelming. Core space is patrolled, yes, but it's busy. Here, unlike the Outer Rim, we have crowds to blend into."

"Well, provided those crowds aren't patrolling, too," Luke said.

They sailed to the Comm Station in relative terror. Han compulsively checked the *Falcon's* faux registry code for a single number out of line, sweating and twitching and pale.

"You said you've done this countless times," Ahsoka said.

"Not with these kinda high stakes!"

But it was unfounded, it seemed, as ships sped in and out faster than flies. The Empire had barely a care in the world for their "registry code", and ushered them through without hesitation. Apparently, they were short of staff. Or careless in their panic. Either would work for them.

They docked, gently, and settled in amongst a sea of other ships, Imperials rushing around them with datapads and holos and minds entirely distracted.

Then, she felt *them*. Half the karking Inquisition, strolling around without a care in the world and, Force, oh Force, Vaare had said, "*Not like the Empire doesn't already know you're coming.*"

Vader crossed his arms, and stopped in the middle of the room, crushing them all into his back. Ahsoka rubbed a hand over her montrals and waited to move again, but Vader stayed firmly put. "I
don't care that they're here," he said, with all the fervency and reckless determination of a child. "We're gonna get those keys, and they're gonna deal with it."

Barriss tensed up, bristled like a cat, and glared up into the shadowy hood of Vader's robes. "Are you positively insane? Do you want us to die here?"

"We're not gonna die," Vader dismissed. "As if." He clenched a fist, went cold. He just switched now, whenever he felt like it. Barriss looked at him as if he'd turned ten different colours all at once, and then grown montrals of his own. "I trained all the pawns in this little game. And I can fight no-one better than myself."

"Don't you think they've branched off?" Luke asked.

"I think nothing of their originality."

Barriss huffed. "I don't fight like you do. Like a careless, hulking tank. I don't get myself ripped to shreds every other week."

"I was never 'ripped to shreds'," Vader spat. "I fought because I had the ability. Know yourself, know your limits."

"Know what you will become," Ahsoka echoed, blandly. "Don't run into this. If you die, the Emperor will win without us having to fight him, and we wouldn't want that, now would we?"

"You want to hurt him more than I do," Vader offered.

"I want to see him face justice," Ahsoka corrected, but Vader just sniffed, as if they were one and the same.

"Shall we stroll in?" Obi-Wan asked. Everyone in their path moved away, and the Inquisitors' presence in the Force was more patient than irate.

Vaare pointed at Barriss. "See her face? Y'know, really horrified? That's my face. What in the nine karking hells do you even think you're doing, this is not how I intended to get the keys, really, what the-"

Vader made a zipping motion over his mouth, or air grate, or whatever he insisted they call it. He looked stupid, wearing a cape with a hood, as if that would make him less recognisable. He did an admirable job with what he had, though, and he was relatively quiet and unassuming, compared to the usual flare for the dramatic. Now they no longer needed it, she suspected he planned to go in with blasters and 'sabers blazing. Careless, reckless Anakin.

Vaare shut up, then growled. "Hey! You don't get to tell me to shut up, when you lumber around, all, 'Yeah, let's kill all of them, this is a great plan, just follow my lead!' We're gonna die, you're gonna kill us-"

"I will kill you if you do not close your loud mouth and let me think." A huff. "Nosey."

Vaare shoved at his shoulder, and got nowhere. Vader stood firm like the durasteel beams in Coruscant's highest towers. He refused to move even half an inch, so Vaare shoved again, and then Vader was laughing. "How long do you intend to keep that up?"

"You deserve it!" Vaare protested, pale and shaking, and Vader put a hand on his shoulder. That actually shut him up, for which Ahsoka was grateful. Vaare was right, and she didn't need the
"Listen, kid," said Vader -- or, Anakin, Vaderkin, the "amalgamation" -- Force knew. "You've got half a dozen Jedi on your side. More than half a dozen, honestly, if we count the little younglings." He motioned in Han's direction, whose face soured immediately. "And Ofee, I suppose."

"You suppose?" Barriss protested.

"We've got you covered."

"This place is literally swarming with Inquisitors," Vaare said, snippy, like she had been. Still was. Probably forever would be.

"They cannot surpass me."

Ahsoka sighed, wanted to pull her robes over her face and just sink to the floor. Planless, as usual. "Don't get too cocky, Vader, and find yourself missing another limb."

"Hey, Snips, I'm hurt. This isn't being cocky, it's being truthful. And all good Jedi must be truthful."

"You are unbelievably smug for someone outnumbered, in enemy territory, and remarkably -- really, what a surprise -- walking right into a trap. Again."

"Ah, it's nothing. I've gotten through worse."

"With dumb luck."

"Yeah, but it's my dumb luck. And I'm still here, aren't I?"

"We'll see about that at the end of the day!" Ahsoka snapped, but Vader just laughed harder. Leia slapped him on the arm, but he still wouldn't quiet. "If the Imps don't get you, I swear I'll kill you myself."

"Looking forward to that," he said. "What's a little sparring for old time's sake, right?"

The first few rooms were empty, but the ominous feeling of being watched grew, had her searching for every little sound, every little scent.

Vaare held out his holo, the station map he'd somehow managed to get his hands on. Ahsoka didn't ask. It was likely not all that legal, and the poor kid was in enough trouble already. "The key hub is a few rooms ahead. You sense anything?"


"Han's right. The Inquisitors are up ahead, and they seem sure they're gonna wipe the floor with us."

"They will not," Vader said, decisively. "I won't let them."

"Uh, we won't let them, pal," Han interrupted. "We. Teamwork? Please don't tell me he's gonna try to pull a solo act."

"He isn't," Leia said. "I'll drag him along with us myself if I have to."

"I cannot allow your deaths."

"Thanks for the faith," Han grumbled.

Ahsoka crossed her arms. "The Inquisition isn't all that well-trained. Better than most, sure, definitely, but they're uncoordinated."

Vader seemed pleased by this, that they were lost without his training. But overestimating the enemy could never cost them as much as its opposite. Uncoordination was not synonymous with dysfunction.

"Don't let that get to your head," she warned. "They have lightsabers. They have the Force. That is enough."

"Artoo," Leia called, rushing towards the nearest console. "Artoo! See if you can establish a connection with their database. We have some passcodes to borrow."

"I'm afraid we cannot allow that to happen."

Ahsoka felt the Inquisitor before she saw her, terrible and dark and twisted in the Force. She wasn't alone, of course, but the companion by her side looked more an apprentice than a full-fledged member. He was small and Ahsoka could sense his fear. "Can't you?" she asked, and the Little One shrank back.

The Inquisitor kicked at the Little One's heels. "Never back away from a challenge you can win," she snapped. "Snoke! You coward. I send you to protect our technician and this is all you give me?"

"I can seriously assure you I don't need protecting." The Technician. Luke, Leia, and Han both grimaced at the sound of her voice, before she appeared, hydrospanners in one hand, blasters in the other. "Yeah, hey, you. Nice to see you again. And you, boss. Sorry, Your Royal Lordship."

"Doctor Aphra," said Vader. "I see you're well."

"No better than you! Heard you got your golden years back. I think some congratulations are in order, but these two don't seem in the spirit."

"You are here to ensure the safety of the passcodes and nothing else!" the Inquisitor snarled, but Aphra only laughed, and raised two hands in surrender. "Snoke, fight like I taught you."

"This is useless," he said, and blocked the hand the Inquisitor had thrown his way, in her seething anger. "We back away from challenges we cannot win, and we return when we have surpassed them. I am leading this opposition, not you, Inquisitor."

"These guys, am I right?" Aphra grinned. "The latest prodigies from the Programme, in all their glory. Well, the kid. He's the brains, she's the brawn. You get what I'm saying?"

Vader looked down at them. "You are strong in the Force, child. You know this. Are you truly putting your talents to their true use here?"

Fear unfolded into caution, and curiosity. "Hardly. Everyone must start somewhere. I seek power, and it rests with her for now, however unfortunate. And undeserving."

"Quiet! I outrank you, you snivelling little-"

Vader shut her up instead, and pushed her into the nearest bulkhead with a whoosh and a sick
"Do something better with your time, young one."

The child huffed. "Where else can I find power?"

"In many places," said Vader. "Physical strength, numbers, they mean nothing in the face of true enlightenment. The Force offers power in every emotion, every location." He regarded the crumpled heap in the corner, and radiated disgust. "Some more than others."

"You can stick with me, kid," Aphra said. "I'll show you the ropes. Trick is to work with the Empire, not for them. Speaking of, how are we doing on the passcodes? I want them."

Leia snorted. "Just like you to double-cross them. Artoo has the codes now, but why should I give them to you?"

"Because I'm about to give you a very valuable opportunity in which to escape." She pointed to the protocol droid at her side. "He can keep the Brawn occupied. Seems like the Brains has got enough sense himself."

"What do you intend to do with them?"

"Sell 'em. Or maybe steal some of that tech from the Death Star 2.0 before you blow it to kingdom come, y'know?"

"Artoo, see that you transfer the files to Bee Tee and Triple-Zero, would you? Exercise caution. Electrocute them if necessary."

"Oh, I do so like her," Triple-Zero said.

"Nice seeing you." Aphra waved. "And you, Your Lordship."

Vader looked at her fondly. "Good luck in your future endeavours, Doctor."

"You, too. Weird to see you switching sides, but that's the way to go these days, it seems." She turned to Snoke. "Now, lil' guy, how about I show you a thing or two about screwing over the Imps?"

Chapter End Notes

So, I did that. TFA is canon! I couldn't not? Acknowledge? This? In my second-to-last chapter? But I'm Fixing All the Things in this 'verse, so alas. Snoke's off to go rogue. Aphra's off to be Aphra. God, I love her. Keep doing you, my queen.
"Let's get out of here," Han said, mocking a shiver. "Place gives me the creeps."

The Falcon, of course, wasn't having any of it, groaning under the weight of her own shields, fighting off the blasterfire. Leia felt abruptly very, very tired and very, very done. "Tell that to the Empire," she said.

"Eh, they'll let off eventually," said Han, rolling his shoulders and throwing a thumbs up Luke's way, where he was clambering up to the portside cannon.

Leia eyed the other. "That one has my name written on it," she said.

Han gave a pleased grin. "Well, I mean, if you wanted to speed things a long a little, that'd be the way to do it."

Her feet knew the path. Now it was only a matter of her good aim, their hyperdrive's efficiency, and a heap of luck. But from the looks of things, mostly just her good aim.

Trailing through space with the dust of a thousand disintegrated TIEs beside you was, unsurprisingly, not good for their field of vision. But Han insisted that "letting her float" was the safest way to avoid the Empire's watchful eye, and allow them safe passage from the freeways of Core Space.

Which meant waiting, when they were about to undergo the most difficult trial of any of their careers. Facing Palpatine, facing the entirety of the Empire.

She felt her stomach roll, and her thoughts turned to Alderaan, to all she had lost. The Fleet was racing behind them, and she knew Evaan would insist she be at the forefront. To see them enact justice with her own two eyes, to see them pay for what they'd done. There was a time for forgiveness. She'd been stretching it far too long. Palpatine deserved an eternity of pain at the bottom of a Hutt prison cell. If every drop of his blood spilled, it would still not account for the losses Alderaan had suffered.

They had forgiven Anakin, and now Barriss, and so many more. But Palpatine was unforgivable. She would see to that herself.

"We could die here, today," Ahsoka said.

Han shrugged. "It's looking more like tomorrow, from the dust cover. We'll have to wait."

"We could die tomorrow, then," she amended. "You're all- I hope you understand. You're aware of
the consequences, and what this means."

"I'd be outta here if I didn't know exactly what I was getting into," Han assured.

"I don't want to be the weapon to enact Palpatine's violence any longer." Barriss clenched a fist. "I want to return to him his own twisted justice, and see if he likes the taste of his own medicine."

She settled against the cold floor, to meditate, to clear her mind. She had made it. They had all made it.

But at what cost?

"We're out of the Empire's personal space. Oh, and the Fleet's arrived." Luke smiled. "Thought you might want to know?"

She blinked the sleep from her eyes and rose, joints cracking and aching. Through the viewport, the Fleet was a spattering of bright battleships and scattered X-Wings. Han was rushing back and forth between comm ports, and amongst the chaos, she'd heard the Ghost was docking and sharing supplies.

She stretched, and Luke met her with, "There's a holo for you."

"Who from?"

"Evaan. She has ideas about rebuilding Alderaan, and she says she's worried about you. That you're going into the Death Star without the troops."

Leia rubbed a hand through her hair. "Pass me the holo," she said. "I have a few ideas."

As Luke left to retrieve it, she let her shoulders slump, the exhaustion momentarily overtake her. Then, she pulled herself together. Like all the Jedi seemed to be doing, somehow, some way.

They had a long path ahead of them. The fight was nothing compared to what would come after. The Emperor was only the beginning, and yet the ending. There was more to be done. There was always more to be done. Until her bones could no longer support her frame, she would work to fix this, but there were some problems only a unified galaxy could solve. Alderaan was the beginning.

Luke returned with the holo, set it in her palm, resting his fingers calmly over hers and breathing deeply, before leaving her and the flickering image of Evaan Verlaine in the dark of the night cycle.

Evaan was clearly exhausted. Her eyes were tired, her face stained with dirt, sweat, blood. "I've been fighting, ma'am," she said, to clarify, as Leia widened her eyes in horror. "On the other fronts. To get here. The Empire is on high alert. It's not safe."

"Has it ever been?"

"Never less sustainable than now, my princess. Are we making the right choice?"

"We're making the right choice. It may doom us all, but know it's the right path, at least, Evaan. If we don't fight for this, do we fight for anything at all? Do we lie down and accept all the casualties the Empire leaves trailing behind their shadow?"

"You're right. But if we fail at this, then those casualties will remain. We cannot fail. Our posterity is relying on us. To give the Alderaanians back their Alderaan, even in little pieces. If we die, who is left to remember?"
"The Force." Leia held out a hand for Evaan to link with. Little crackles of electricity sparking down her palms. "We won't fail, Evaan. Have faith that we will give everything for this. Maybe, with a little luck, our everything is enough."

"The Rebels want us to dock with Base one last time," Luke said. "To check over the ship."

"They're paranoid," Leia said. "It's smart, but it doesn't make the process any faster."

"Let them. Better safe than sorry."

Leia shrugged, instead, and Luke trailed off to the cockpit, leaving her alone. She had never wanted more to fight in her life, but they were at such odds. Insurmountable, in the eyes of many. She couldn't meditate with thoughts of their doom buzzing around her head like flies. All the possibilities, all the ways they could fail the galaxy they'd worked so hard to protect.

"Are you alright?" came a voice, like a whisper, from the hallways.

She looked up at nothing, until she saw the unmistakable glint of life in someone's eyes. "It's a little dark in here, isn't it?" said Obi-Wan.

"I thought it might help me think."

"It will. But don't forget you have others to confer with. We are here, all of us, and I don't think any person on this ship isn't overflowing with ideas, strategies, plans. I could go on. Don't consider yourself alone in the crowd, like your father did."

"What do we have, besides old Jedi who knew nothing of Palpatine's true nature?"

"Anakin. Yoda. They saw him, they can track him. They can continue to see him, even through this."

Leia exhaled. "Strategy, anyone? I don't know how this will play out. So many things could go wrong."

"Then we'll have to try harder to fix them."

"As they appear?"

"As they appear before us, yes, Leia. The Jedi have never given up."

"I know."

"And we are Jedi."

"I know."

"And so we will not give up. This could cost us everything. But-"

"It could cost them even more."

Base was hidden behind the shadows of a million flitting comets. They bounced off the outer shielding and into the Falcon's, splintering off into sparks of light. The docking bay lay open but unused, and the staff there, reeling them in from the tides of space, looked too tired to think. Or to properly execute their jobs. Stumbling and fumbling between the husks of long-empty transport
vessels.

They dragged out their things to be carted off by loading vehicles, and were escorted by the living dead to their quarters. Door-by-door, lined neatly against each other. To keep a watchful eye on.

"They look like they haven't slept in days," Han said. "Sure it's okay for these people to be working with, y'know, *dangerous* machinery?"

"What choice do we have?" Leia shrugged. "We can't ask for more staff now, or here. It's too much of a risk."

Han slumped down onto the bunk, hanging his head not only to avoid the metal of his bunk's sister, but out of exertion. "We have to find the Death Star. The new one. That Palpatine thought was a good enough idea to try twice."

"Yoda knows where it is," Leia said, massaging the sore joints on her hands, reddened and bruised from hours of training. And the unending stillness of meditation. "This pitstop isn't just for mechanical repairs. They're going over us, making sure we're not rushing in blind and headfirst like this family usually does."

"Yoda has a plan?"

"He probably has thousands," Luke said, and Obi-Wan snorted his agreement.

"Yoda has, no doubt, meditated on every possible scenario, no matter how improbable," he said. "But one thing remains constant; beneath the intense caution, he knows within himself where Palpatine is."

"Anakin doesn't?"

"He does, but he's far too much of a presence to go unnoticed, snooping through the Force, searching out Palpatine's location. The connection runs both ways, and Anakin risks revealing our location before theirs. Yoda has had ninety decades of training to prevent this."

"I concede your point," Han said.

"We should rest," Obi-Wan offered. "We need clear minds to discuss our plan of action with Master Yoda in the morning."

Luke gave an incredulous huff. "How can we sleep when we're going after the Emperor? The real Emperor!"

"Rest and sleep are two different things, Young Luke. It is better to be at peace to win this battle, rather than at the brink of paranoia-induced insanity."

"Point."

Morning cycle was empty. Only the insomniacs, or ship transfers, were awake so early. But so was Leia, and what did that make her? The culmination of their unrest? She smiled. Force, they were about to face down the most lethal man in the galaxy.

"What're you smiling so much about?"

"Only how insane this is, Han. Go back to bed."
"I've been strolling around," Han said. "Can't sleep. Walked past the little green guy's room. He wants to talk to us, when we're ready."

"Ready?" Leia mouthed.

"Yeah, who wants a bet we're all awake right now?"

She shook her head, hair falling into her eyes, coming unpinned from its messy bun. She'd been awake for too long to count. But every time she closed her eyes, she saw him. "I wouldn't bet against those odds."

"Nor would I." Han shrugged, gave a sigh of resignation. "I can feel you worrying, all of you. I figure, probably you can, too. It's a feedback loop."

"You know why, don't you?"

"Why we're worrying? Yeah. The odds aren't low because it's too noisy here, or too cold. It's 'cause we have about the craziest bastard to ever grace the galaxy chasing our tail, and now we're about to bite back. Or try to, anyway."

The longer she stared at the walls, the more the patterns seemed to be moving. "Apparently," she said, "there is no try."

Yoda's room had an air of peace about it, despite the fact that peace was far from their reach, now. They'd dug themselves too deep. They were drowning in Han's despised low odds, smothered in bad luck like ship grease.

Everyone looked ill. Shaky and sweaty. She could feel the entire ship's fear trying to crawl down her throat. But Yoda was quiet, centred, unaffected. Maybe it was emptiness, that he'd felt all the fear he could in his lifetime, and now he was burnt out like an old hyperdrive. Or maybe he simply didn't care any longer, or had unreasonably high hopes, given the situation. He was wise, of course he was wise, but when it came to the enemy, hadn't they all tripped up? Hadn't they all had moments where they'd forgotten to err on the side of caution?

"Know of Palpatine's location, I do," Yoda said, opening one eye, and then closing it. It was either satisfaction or disappointment in his gaze, as rarely as they saw it, and Leia couldn't tell the difference. She couldn't read Yoda, and she knew he liked it that way. Ninety decades exposed to the corrosive nature of this place would do that to anyone, even the most idealistic, the most hopeful of their generation. And Yoda had once hoped, hadn't he? Or else he wouldn't know the grave mistakes it sometimes brought.

"Where is he?" Obi-Wan asked. "I suppose he wouldn't have the good sense to hide at this point, would he?"

"Indeed not. Orbiting Coruscant, he is. Like a beacon for the whole galaxy, do you see? Blinds him, his arrogance does. Here, his weakness lies, and here, his only."

"He can be hurt, just like anyone else," Leia protested.

"Physical pain? Irrelevant, that is, to someone of his stature. The Sith care not about pain, only about victory."

Leia hadn't thought physical pain would affect him mentally, but it could still be used to cripple him. She didn't know. Were they here to apprehend him? To kill him? To apprehend him and then kill
"Your destiny, it is," Yoda told her, and she frowned. That didn't help. It was always going to be her
destiny, if destiny was made of time. Time passed. The consequences didn't.

"Are we going to have to kill him?" Leia asked.

"Possible, it is, and understand you must acknowledge this, I do. Killing is not the way of the Jedi,
but unstoppable, is he not? Seen that already, have we not?"

"That's precisely my point."

"I- I think he might make it that way," Luke said, slow. "He wants to win, always. A loss like this,
he couldn't take it- no, no- he's gonna set this up to be life or death."

"And that means he has to die," Anakin continued.

Yoda sighed at this, but she felt, she watched as he accepted it as truth. Palpatine would never give
up, and the only way to bind him was by fighting until they won. If he won, if he won... there would
be no peace. There would be no second chance. So they owed the galaxy a victory, and one life in
trade for many. That was awful, disgusting. But Anakin would be more than happy to take up the
job for them. She could sense it in the way his muscles clenched, his teeth ground, whenever
Palpatine was mentioned. He looked like a dog ready to snap.

After all Palpatine had done to them, Leia couldn't pass judgement. She couldn't even blame him.
Palpatine built the weapon that destroyed her people, and then he'd used his mindless lackeys to pull
the trigger. And then the most mindless of all had grown himself a fresh conscience, and now the
Empire was crumbling. If Palpatine died, she would not miss him.

"None of us would," Han said, derisively. "But it's still a life, huh, after all this? Even his."

"Even his."

"Can we call ourselves Jedi and slaughter mercilessly?" Luke asked, crumpled, clinging within
himself.

"If he gives a chance to spare him, we will. But he can never see freedom again, and that's a fate
worse than death." Leia scrubbed at her eyes. "We've given ourselves two terrible options, and
choosing not to choose will only light the way for Palpatine's regime."

"So, it's only a matter of time," Luke said.

Han slumped. "Well, that's a relief."

They flew the ship in through empty space until they found the husks of half-burnt vessels, and there,
they knew. Han had been the one to suggest it, that they get in the same way they did the first time,
only with more successful hiding, and nobody else had any better to give. Flying themselves into
enemy territory was, by far, their best option, and that made her want to scream.

TIEs patrolled the area in droves, shooting down ships that matched the registry's most wanted. The
Falcon wasn't fully credified, and they knew it, but it wasn't worth the cannonshots. No, they'd be
taken in for questioning, through the tractor beam. Or so Luke and Han had hoped. Leia had been on
the inside most of that time, when they'd blundered into the Death Star with some half-formed plan
that could've got them killed.
And now they were doing no better.

The comms channel flickered with curt, brusque transmissions. Short, to the point. No chatter. Lifeless. They were informative, nonetheless. Passing mentions of a "suspicious approaching ship", requests for interrogation upon arrival.

They were trailed by TIEs as they got closer and closer to the Station's main docking bay, flanking and hovering so close Leia could practically reach out and touch them. It was clearly not an attempt at subtlety, but intimidation. It had the opposite effect, of course; she was immensely comforted by the Imps' predictable flashes of smugness and superiority, their insistence on swiftly "taking care of business", yet somehow showing the whole galaxy at the same moment.

Unpredictability was their worst enemy, here, where every pillar of their plan lay grounded on the firmly-established patterns of their past. If the Empire had new protocols, they would quite possibly have to face stealth, and its inevitable crushing failure.

The escort allowed them to drift in range of the tractor beam, and then followed farther, even as the Falcon lay helpless in the Death Star's grasp. She hoped they were enjoying the rush of power rather than entertaining any paranoia. They'd never second-guessed their tech before, but now. Now they were forced to.

Little specks of debris floated off the Station's sides, gathering like a shroud around them, unable to escape the force of the beam. For all they struggled, they remained intact and firmly in place, and that was at least a mildly reassuring statement of the Empire's confidence. They were not so run into the ground that they had only time for triple-checking and compulsive safeguarding the defence; they'd dedicated themselves to the offence as well. Their construction teams would be spread out, easier to infiltrate.

Once the Falcon was only metres away from the docking bay, Han signaled them to ready themselves for hiding, behind cramped storage bays under the flooring, and even deeper into the ship's internals.

The floor was dirty, and she was cold, and the metal channelling pressed marks into her hands. Luke piled himself in and huddled. He and Obi-Wan had the same empty look in their eyes, but Anakin. Her father looked set to kill, jaws around the neck of his prey, teeth so close to piercing flesh. Like there was a beast to be unleashed.

There was, of course. But there was a time for that. Now was not that time.

It was dusty, cramped between containers that looked like they'd been locked since before Han's birth, and oil dripped from the hinges of the doors that separated the bays into manageable, neat little arrangements. There was only hard durasteel beneath them, and Artoo scrabbled to get a grip, and Ahsoka's montrals knocked painfully into the low-hanging ceiling. She felt stacked like a deck of cards, on the edge of blowing over as the beam pulled roughly at the Falcon's sides.

Anakin gnawed at his lip until the ship landed, where force smacked his teeth together and blood welled at two small points on his bruised mouth. He said nothing, and held his mechno-arm over his chin, to stop the sounds of dripping. Luke twisted and set one boot over the fraying doorhinge, settling it.

The boots of Stormtroopers overhead rocked the walls, and screeching noises bounced around with heavy reverb as the Empire methodically set to opening each of the outer cargo bay's floor holds. The armour was too weighty, too wide to fit through any farther, but Anakin looked almost rabid when a single, white-plated hand reached down and brushed against a crate he'd been leaning on
only moments before.

This was the worst idea they'd ever had. And they'd had plenty of awful ideas.

Time was endless as the Imps ransacked every room, stomping carelessly through the halls and clearing section after section. Half of them sounded bored, the other tired. But they kicked through, almost lazily, and came up with nothing. There were loud protests at this, at having wasted so much time, and one slammed the base of their blaster into a control panel, yelling about useless heaps of junk the Emperor was too paranoid over to be sane.

Then they were gone, and the remains of the Order sat in silence, blood still dripping from Anakin's mouth, Luke's boot still at the doorhinge, and Ahsoka's montrals still slammed against the head of the crawlspace.

"That was fun," Anakin said.

Luke lowered the boot. "Did it work?"

"Not for long," Ahsoka said. "We need to-"

"-get the hell out of here," Leia finished. "As soon as we possibly can. And stay out of sight."

Vaare was shaking in his Imperial engineer's uniform, but he kept his voice steady. "The entrance to the Engine Room's a couple floors down and to our right. They got all sorts of checkpoints you gotta pass through before you get there, but I have the passkeys, and you can blast the guys who try to raise any alarms, right? As long as you're more competent than they are, we're good."

"You're saying that like you're not sure we're competent," Anakin said, and huffed. "I'm offended. I'm always competent, at everything. All the time."

"Yeah, right, sure." Vaare sneered. "Because this is gonna be such a breeze."

"Well, we can always pretend." Anakin slapped him on the back. "Ready to get your hands dirty?"

"You mean dirti-er."

Vaare turned on one heel and left them in the dust, slipping into the passageway at their side. Narrow, dim, dingy. If she hadn't known it was built recently, Leia would've called it ancient. Purposefully unnoticeable, she figured.

They followed behind him, footsteps echoing, too loud, squeezing their way inside one of a million alleyways on this station. Vaare had the confidence of someone who knew where they were headed, but the paranoia seeping off him spoke volumes about his true feelings. His shoulders were hunched, his hands shaking, sweat dripping down and staining his uniform. Every time he tried to tread lightly, his boots seemed to squeak louder.

"Are you okay?" Luke asked, eventually. "You look like you're about to collapse."

"I'm not used to this," Vaare said, easily. "I mean, engines, yeah, sure. Engines, I like. Engines, I know. But this kinda security? That was on the outside of my base, not the inside, y'know? And none of the 'Troopers thought they needed it. Nobody came, not other than you guys, and Maker knows who'd expect the complete lack of sanity you guys possess."

"It was that quiet?"
"Are you kidding me? The Emperor protects this thing like an egg. Don't you know he's here? He knows you're trying to crack it, scramble it, and eat it all in one go."

"Of course we know he's here." Anakin snorted. "As if any of us could forget the stench he leaves in his wake."

"Yeah, well. It smells fishy here, alright. The Emperor wants to keep it that way. If these keys work, if our luck holds up there, once he finds us, or we find him, or whatever- we're not- it won't last any further than the passkeys, okay? I don't have any insight into the workings of that fucker's head, and I don't want to, and I don't expect any of you really karking want to either, do you?"

"You're implying we're going in blind," Leia clarified.

"You're damn right that's what I'm implying."

Anakin shrugged. "We're always blind, with him. Nothing he does is predictable, he'd be dead already if that were true. No amount of preparation can fix this."

"No amount of luck, either, dumbass."

"But a considerable amount of skill." At this, Anakin held out a hand, one thumb up.

"That kinda confidence is gonna have you crying for your mommy on the floor," Vaare snapped. "Don't be a fucking idiot."

"We don't plan on it," Obi-Wan said, kindly. "What Anakin means to say is, with all of us here, we're quite evenly matched, if not overbalanced."

"This is the Emperor we're talking about here." Vaare crossed his arms. "Don't start underestimating him."

Anakin huffed. "Never have, never will."

The walls were dull grey, and the blue of the forcefields, lined row after row, stood even sharper in comparison. Vaare grabbed a slip of something almost like flimsi, covered in Imp code, and waved it over a scanner in the corner. There was a pause, and then the first forcefield shut down.

"Good," Vaare said. "It's accepting us, which is an absolute miracle considering-" he waved his hands "-considering everything, actually. This whole damn thing. Whatever, we only have thirty seconds or so before the forcefield starts up again. Yeah, those don't have safeguards. Imps don't care if their engineers get cut in half; they can just get new ones. Move it."

If they rushed a little too quickly into the next section of the corridor, nobody said anything.

The forcefield, as promised, resurfaced a few moments later. They were cut off, now. Officially. If it hadn't been real before, now it was visceral. If Leia died, she wanted to die with honour, not on the blade of an Imperial forcefield she had the power to subvert. If they failed, they would render everything pointless. Everything she'd worked so hard to keep from Imperial reach, freefalling straight into their greedy arms.

Vaare fiddled with his passkey. "Just making sure it works still," he clarified, and Anakin gave him a horrified stare. "Oh, yeah, I mean, it could stop working at any time, technically, but I imagine you'd just cut a hole through the kriffling floor to get out, so what does it matter, really?"
"What the hell d'you mean, 'it could stop working at any time'?" Anakin threw up his hands. "I don't wanna get impaled on that thing."

Vaare snorted. "You literally carried your armour along with you in a 'cargo crate'. You wouldn't get impaled, you'd get mildly singed."

"It's made up of electronic components," Anakin said sagely. "I'd fry like an egg."

"Ew," Vaare said. "Then don't walk into the forcefield if I don't say so. No eggs."

"How can you know?"

"I can't know." Vaare shrugged. "You're one of those Force's-ass-kissers. Maybe it will tell you."

Ahsoka choked. "That's definitely not how it worked, last I checked."

"Yeah," Vaare said. "But when was the last time you checked?"

He returned to tinkering with the scanner, chewing his lip, bruising it deep purple. They pretended not to notice the sweat dripping from his temples, or the way his fingers shook slightly, just a faint tremour.

"'Kay," he said, at last. "Got it."

Five seconds, she counted, before it went down. They moved immediately into the next section, and Leia felt the hairs on the back of her neck burn upon its resurgence. She was in such close proximity. One push, one misstep, and they could all be frying like eggs.

"One more," Vaare promised. "Three's the charm, right?"

The field flickered, and Vaare held up a hand, blocking them.

"Is it supposed to do that?" Anakin asked. "I know mechanics, and I'm about positive it isn't supposed to be-"

"Chill out," Vaare said. "Okay, don't. We could all die. But I at least think I got this, which is more than any of the other engineers can say. They don't have the same knack for highly illegal activities, y'know?"

"You're so comforting," Anakin snapped. "I'm so comforted."

"I'm so glad I could be of service, oh Great Lord of Darkness." The field dropped, and Vaare smirked. "See? Pretending to know your shit works. Tried and tested."

"Pretending?" Anakin's eyes flashed. "Y'know, I am the Great Lord of Darkness, what's this about pretending?"

"Nothing, sir, your majesty, sir. I'm qualified."

Anakin sighed. "Sure as hell you are."

They left the corridor's final section, and Vaare locked the field tight behind them. He hovered a hand near it, close enough that even she was wincing, and then hummed, satisfied. Satisfied it'd keep the monsters out, but they were right here next to him.

"Yep, that's a job well done," he informed them. "Suck it, engineers, I'm less replaceable than you-"
"Moving on," Obi-Wan said, gently. "The engine room?"

"Gotta fuck up the shield generators first," Vaare said. "Thirty second rule applies to the fields guarding the engines, too. Official, actually legal Imp engineers get a skeleton key to all that shit, get to turn off the shielding in here for good and for as long as they want, as long as they put it up again when they leave. But we're not official in any way whatsoever, so we gotta break the shields first. Unless you want your other hand chopped off, Lord Vader?"

"Yeah, no," Anakin said. "Not in the mood, to be honest."

"Neither am I!" Vaare pointed to their left. "That way. Onwards, fellow saboteurs."

"How hard is it gonna be to ruin the shield generators?" Anakin asked, eyes suspicious. Vaare shrugged. "That's not an answer. Why're you shrugging, don't tell me you don't actually know after all this, Nosey."

Silence, then, in return. "What, no? No, c'mon, you can't be doing this to me right now. Obi-Wan, tell me he isn't doing this to me right now."

"My dear, I'm afraid he's doing this to you right now."

"Okay, look, I've got a vague idea."


"I've studied it enough, your lordship! We just have to overheat them, and if I jam the passkey into the outer servos, I'm pretty sure I can shut down the cooling mechanism. Boom. Destroyed, just like that. No, it shouldn't take long, or that much. Just don't break the key and we're good."

"Unless you want to volunteer the hand that did get chopped off?"

"No, no, really, I don't, thanks. I'm good."

"I'm good, too. We're keeping the passkey safe, that's a thing now. Don't startle me, I can't drop it. Then we'd all die."

"That's a little dramatic," Obi-Wan began. "Surely-"

Vaare glared. "Nope. We'd all die. No startling."

"No startling, then," Obi-Wan promised. "Will jamming the servos alert the other Imperial guards?"

"Almost guaranteed. But their comms aren't permanently recording, only when they're actually talking. If you get to them fast enough, nobody will suspect a thing."

Anakin groaned. "Have you ever thought about what that deviousness, that kinda future planning means in you, as a person?"

"It means I've got less brains than a bantha."

"Damn straight." Anakin held out a hand for a high-five, which Vaare returned. "We might all be on the verge of certain death, but a man can understand another man here. We're all insane. We've lost it."

"Together. We've lost it together."

"I'll drink to that," said Obi-Wan.
"These servos were made to destroy me," Vaare said. He was panting now, with the sheer force of using material as durable as flimsi to ruin intricate mechanisms. "Really, they were made by competent people, and I'd appreciate it if I could, but I can't. Don't be so karking good at your job next time."

"Please let there not be a next time," Leia begged. "Please let them know when to give up."

"We don't," Luke offered, and Han nodded.

"We really don't."

Vaare gave one last heave, before the servos made an agonising crunch, sparking and smoking. He collapsed onto the floor, then, in a pool of sweat, but not before laughing like a maniac. "Holy hell," he said. "What has my life become?"

"You're doing good work," Anakin promised, setting a hand on his shoulder.

Vaare snorted. "Oh, I know I'm doing good work. I'm just-" A sigh. He threw his head back against the generator, even though it was slowly raising in temperature, degree by degree. He breathed a moment, eyes falling closed. "I'm just tired."

He pulled himself to his feet, and sent a look of pride towards his handywork. He passed a hand over it, watching as the generator struggled and choked and coughed and died a slow, painful death. It sparked until it could spark no more, and on its dying breath, the lights flickered, and the engine made a slow groaning sound like an injured old man.

"Alright." He brushed off his hands. "Time to stab the engines with laser swords. Then, when you're done being mildly reckless and facing down the Emperor, we can take it up a notch and overload the core." He grinned. "Don't worry, with the main engines fucked, the Imps won't have the time, effort, or resources available to protect the core."

"Are we sure about this?" Ahsoka asked.

Vaare pointed to the melting pile of now nothing but scrap metal in the corner. "They don't have any shields. They're up shit creek."

"That was too easy," Anakin said. "Way too easy."

"Or, y'know, the Empire is a haphazard mess," Han offered. "I mean, not likely, sure. Possibility, though."

"We almost got burnt by lasers!" Vaare protested, and waved a finger at the doors locked tight behind them. No fields had held, but the blast shielding itself was menacing.

Anakin shrugged. "We didn't, though."

"The Emperor is a bit arrogant, my dear," Obi-Wan said. "He may believe he can solve this problem himself. Namely, by killing us. Possibly torturing us, tearing through our minds for information, imprisoning us indefinitely, I could really go on."

"Yeah, thanks, darling," Anakin said. "None of us want him in our minds ever again."

"So, we'll fight until we can't anymore. Death or victory. It's a little dramatic, but you wouldn't have it any other way, would you?" Even at the prospect of death, Obi-Wan's eyes were kind. Anakin grabbed his hand.
"We're not gonna die. I'll use everything I have, and more. All the power I've gained, that you've gained, that we've all gained, we'll turn it against him. We'll see him ruined."

"I trust we will."

"Yeah, but just to be safe, if we don't make it?" Vaare trailed off at their wince, but Luke steeled himself.

"If we don't make it, the Rebels will finish this. The station's weak, now. They can overload the core with a cup of kriffing blue milk if they want to."

"So that's it," Vaare said. "We're just gonna walk in there and die."

"Stay here," Ahsoka said, suddenly. "As much as I trust the Rebels, we don't need the added risk. Vaare, overload the core yourself. We'll give the order, or... we won't. You'll know."

"Because of unnaturally long comm silence? I've... had it happen before, I'll know."

"Just be vigilant. Hell, monitor the Imps'. If we're not around to report, they will be."

"Will do, Commander."

"Then let's get this show on the road," Anakin said, with false cheer. His face was empty, but his eyes were brimming yellow. She could sense rage, there. Twenty years of it.


"You, too, guys. You need it more than me."

Anakin had slipped, conspicuously, into the suit, and now, by consequence, the whole base had aimed keen eyes their way. No 'Troopers had acted, yet, but awe would wear off soon, to be replaced with the lackey's ingrained death wishes, out of stupidity rather than loyalty. Leia had no idea why her father couldn't practice subtlety for the life of him, but there was no choice now. Fighting out of the armour would be an unnecessary risk.

Vader strode forward, boots heavy enough to make the floor rattle, breathing a forcefully calm constant. They were anything but. Of course, Father still had his pride. His cape dragged behind him, and Leia watched in amusement as Luke tried to sidestep it and still stay at his side, like a lost puppy. Obi-Wan flanked his left, completely unaffected by the cloth that fluttered and brushed against his shoulders, and occasionally, caught against his beard.

It was not a scene she had ever expected to see in her life, and that they had defied expectation to such extent was a comfort here, in a world where the Emperor and his Sith would insist this confrontation was predestined, that they had no control over their own fate. It was that threat, that fear, that dagger hanging over their heads, that had driven Anakin to Palpatine's side in the first place. As if the Emperor had any more control over the flow of time than they ever could; he was no flawless saint.

How could Anakin have ever believed it?

"I imagine this must be quite the sight," Obi-Wan said, casual. He sniffed as Vader's cape brushed against his nose.

Vader gripped it heavily in one clenched fist. Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "It obscures your face,"
Vader said, "They *must* see. They must know to whose side I truly belong." A huff. "Your power will not be diminished with a place far behind me, trailing like some useless waste of air."

"Well," said Obi-Wan, "I do work hard to make this beard presentable."

"You are, as always, right." Vader paused. "To recognise this as a presentation, and in everything else."

"That's a little-"

"There is no-one in this galaxy wiser than you, old man," Vader declared, and continued forward only when Obi-Wan had regained enough composure to match his pace.

"If you hope to make me fight harder with flattery, you may be succeeding."

"Good. I am pleased with our party regardless, but to be at our peak when fighting Palpatine, that would be the ultimate symbol of rebellion."

"So you just really wanna rub it in his face, huh?" Han asked.

"Oh," Vader said, entirely deadpan, "absolutely."

"I can't disagree." Obi-Wan shrugged. "I will admit to some feelings about him that go against the Jedi way."

"Vengeance," Vader offered.

"And I do tend to bathe a while in my own smugness once he is defeated. After all these years of the galaxy's suffering, I would like a moment to..."

"Bask in the glory of our victory."

"I know that face," Obi-Wan said, accusing.

"My face is concealed behind a mask," Vader protested.

"And yet I can still physically feel your 'I'm right, you're wrong, and I intend to lord this over you for the rest of your existence' grin, Anakin."

"I will not deny it. This aura comes naturally."

"Try-hard," said Han.

For a moment, the arrogance faded. "It's fact, not conceit. We are as one, thanks to your efforts. Our blood has united us, our loyalty has become strength. Palpatine is weak because he trusts no-one more than himself. He has no competent army; he believes none can surpass him. If, by some miracle, he saw potential in another, he still has neither the time nor the resources required to train them. He has abandoned all chance of support." Vader turned to face them all, wrought with determination. "We've already won."

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The hallway stretched to infinity, or close enough for the Stormtroopers to find their footing once more. Now, they milled around, whispering into their comms, relaying their location as they passed.

One leant against the nearest comm panel. "Emperor, sir, they've made it to Turbolift C. They'll be headed straight for you."
Vader rushed forward, a blur, and materialised next to the poor soul inside that bucket. He shook, for a while, as Vader stared him down, before he jumped nearly out of his skin as Vader plunged his saber into the console. "You will not be making reports to the Emperor again," Vader said, and the 'Trooper nodded so hard Leia worried for the state of his neck, if wacking your head around in the tin can suit gave you whiplash.

The console sparks bounced off Vader's suit, and he swept at his shoulders. But even without his hands, the 'Trooper remained in place, the Force keeping him unnaturally still, strange wheezing noises coming from his throat. "Father, that's enough," she said, and it was calmer than she felt.

The 'Trooper crumpled to the floor, and Vader picked him up. "I came here to make a point. I am making one."

"You're damn right you're making a point," Han said. "Relax. We're only walking into a deathtrap. We've had worse."

Chewie growled out his firm approval, and Vader pouted. Leia couldn't see it, but he did. Luke wore the same expression when someone told him he'd had a terrible idea. Which was, of course, a regular occurrence. "How else do you intend to retrieve the intel?"

"From Palpatine himself," said Luke. "I mean, he's the monologuing type, right? He might just give everything away. His plans, his bases, I don't know. Things we can turn to the Alliance after this."

"And if he doesn't?" Vader asked.

"I know you're just going to make him," Luke said. "That's not the way of the Light, but you just switch... whenever you want."

"I can get him to talk." Vader's fists shook. "He will have his punishment. After he talks. I can wait. I have waited."

"You're still planning to hurt him."

"He deserves to be hurt."

"It's not about what he deserves, Father."

"You are the good one, here. You and your sister. Let me shoulder the burden of the Dark, my son."


"I am only helping him die, as he helped me. It is his favour to return."

Obi-Wan stared with unfocused eyes. "Force knows I have let enough people live that I shouldn't. I cannot hope to lecture on the merits of the Light."

"If you find you can't fight with the Light anymore, at least-" Luke choked. "At least give us his body. As proof."

Something in Vader purred like a nexu.

"Not to carry around like some sort of war prize! To bury him, to give the galaxy the closure it needs. To give you the closure you need, Father."

"Very well. But I will not tread lightly around him. My vengeance is inevitable."
"We can't. Despite how much I wish we could, we can't. The risks are too great. The losses we just can't afford."

"It is likely, then, that his life ends tonight."

And Vader walked forward into the elevator, and Leia couldn't find it in herself to feel a hint of regret.

He had destroyed her home. She would destroy his.

The turbolift rose slowly enough to make her stomach churn and sweat bead at her temples. She leant back, positioned her legs to battle stance, and held her 'saber as if it were made of precious stone, and not parts of the Falcon.

Vader tapped his boots impatiently against the lift floor, arms crossed, breathing heavy. Obi-Wan lay a hand on his shoulder. "We will succeed, of this I have no doubt. You can overcome this."

"I wish to see him suffer," Vader declared. "But battle is swift and..."

"Not unhurried. So I've seen," Obi-Wan smiled. "I cannot lie to you, my dear, and say that I haven't felt the same way about some few, special individuals in my time. But you must work through your anger, and if need be, with it. Never swimming upstream, like the rest of the Sith." A small silence. "Strange to think I know more about harnessing passion than they do."

"Palpatine has let them become weak," Vader spat. "I will not spare him my wrath for the sake of the Light."

"At this point, leaving him untouched would perhaps be worse."

The doors opened to the Emperor's throne room, where he sat, with his back to their eyes, and watched the stars. Leia wondered if he might be counting which ones he intended to conquer, chew up, and spit out next. Shriveled hands rested pristinely against the throne's arms, and the fabric of the Emperor's hood shifted slightly as he turned one glowing eye to scrutinise them. Leia bared her teeth.

"You have your mother's spirit, young one," said the Emperor. "Both of you. How... charming. I did so like her. A pity, what Vader did, don't you think?"

What an entrance dripping in sick, sticky arrogance, she thought. What an abomination, a shell of a human being. Worse than Vader himself had been; Vader was a hollowed out husk, and Palpatine had always been empty.

She ignited her lightsaber in time with her father, and held it forward, pointing straight at the Emperor's tender neck. "You have no right to speak to us this way. Really, you have no rights to anything, but I thought I might find a starting point." She smiled, politely, all practiced democracy, convincing politician.

She was so angry. He'd ended so many lives, snuffed out like firelight. As it followed, the galaxy was a darker place, and if she could remove the shadowy stain he'd left, she would do anything.

"It's a good one," said Luke. "You don't think you're gonna fight us with insults, do you?"

"I'd likely win," Obi-Wan chimed in, and only then did Palpatine bristle.
"None of you will leave victorious today. In fact, none of you will leave at all."

Obi-Wan grinned. "We'll see about that."

Vader stepped forward. "He will not live long enough to see."

In a flash, Palpatine was out of his seat, and holding a sparking hand towards them, little flecks of lightning dancing in his palms. Luke blocked the first blow with a 'saber, but his surprise caught him like a web, and he missed the next. That, Obi-Wan and Vader blocked with each blade, blue against red, life mingling with death, Dark with Light.

And so this was balance, she thought, and tossed her 'saber in a spinning arc, searing the edge of the Emperor's long robes. It returned to her, settled gently in one outstretched hand, and she held it out before her, its light aligning with her nose.

Even Han, with an unpracticed and tenuous grip, blocked the Emperor's path with his blade. Still, he held firm, and she imagined he'd grasp the hilt harder and harder with each passing second. It was Luke's, and before that, their father's. It called to its family. It stayed at their side like a loyal pet.

Leia took the next swing, meeting his blade again, pushing against it hard enough it felt like her teeth were cracking together. "This is for my mother and father."

"Your father is standing right beside you," Palpatine replied.

She slashed again. "I had the privilege of knowing two. You nearly took both from me."

For a twisted, endless moment, Leia saw pride light in his eyes. "You have so much anger in you," Palpatine said, considering. She exhaled sharply, flooding with indignance, and Palpatine shook his shadowed head, sparks still crawling along him like tiny threads. "No, this is good, this is very good. Use it, Leia, as I taught your father to."

"Never for you," she spat, and with a roar, brought her blade down hard enough to cause him a moment of faltering, unbalanced swaying. She swung again, and again, and once more, until he was back against his throne.

There, pinned against the very thing he relished so much, the Emperor blocked all seven 'sabers, in quick and even movements. He was old, but he was not fragile. His greatest flaw was underestimating them still, even after all this time, after all their hard-won victories, the Empire's crushing defeats.

Vader stomped forward, one boot crunching against Palpatine's foot, and Obi-Wan held back a wrist. Ahsoka's second blade snuck between his exposed ribs then, and landed a clean swipe. Still, the Emperor was talented, and the lightsaber's tip had only grazed the outer layers of his flesh. Leia knew her father wanted to see bone.

Luke dived at him then, Han at his side, knocking him, robes and all, straight back into his ridiculous chair. But Palpatine only smiled, and gripped Luke's shoulder, and Leia watched in horror as the threads of lightning wrapped around Luke like a snake, coiling tighter and tighter. Luke screamed in agony, and then, surprisingly, in rage, and his 'saber was a green whirl of light, as he tried to shield himself from further harm.

Vader roared, and Palpatine's hands were at his neck. "You dare touch my son?"

Wheezing, spitting, Palpatine said, "It evokes such a powerful reaction from both of you. You could harness that, become even greater Sith, and complete the cycle, as apprentice slays master, time and
Vader’s hand gripped at the tear in Palpatine's robes, fingers bruising the cut. Palpatine didn't even wince. "Do you want to die, you wretched fool?"

"Fulfill your destiny."

At the mention of the Prophecy, the talk of masters and apprentices -- Obi-Wan, Vader, Ahsoka -- they were all snarling. Even Obi-Wan landed a heavy blow, slicing a line into Palpatine's knuckles, almost white with effort. A shredded strip of fabric from his sleeve floated gently down onto the floor, and only with the Emperor's considerable skill did he manage to save his hand from going down along with it.

At this, Luke paused. "Is this also what it meant by balance? To kill the greatest of the Sith? Are there even many left? Proper Sith, not the Inquisitors. The genuine thing."

Palpatine twitched. "Of course there are many, boy."

"Is this actually right?" Luke asked. "You're all acting like it's right."

He was met with silence.

Finally, Obi-Wan said, "And I thought I was getting too old for this. Clearly, I was wrong."

Vader paused, and his lightsaber lowered just a milimetre. "It has never been in my nature to spare the undeserving." Then, he turned, and there was a flare of such warmth from him. "But for you, my children, anything within my power." And Leia watched balance unfold. "You guys just name it, okay?"

Palpatine froze. "You cannot have returned-"

"You have no say in my destiny. You don't know what I'm capable of; you only see what you deem correct." Vader tore the helmet off. Anakin's grin was exaggeratedly smug. "Well, guess what, Palpatine, they undid in a year what you worked on for decades. How's it feel to get beaten so thoroughly?"

"You think because your face has changed, you have lost all those years, my apprentice? You think you can escape what you have done? Your ghosts will always haunt you."

Obi-Wan practically growled at this, and stepped furiously forward, but Anakin grabbed his arm, just light enough to give him a moment's hesitation. "Wait, wait. He has a point, we've gotta give him that. No, I can't escape. But I won't go any further."

"Then I suppose I will have to take the task on myself. You have failed me, Vader. This will be your final time." He smiled, slow, creeping across his face and stretching it like a crescent moon. "Watch the Dark in you; it has never left. A Sith Lord remains so for all of time."

Instead of attacking Anakin, who stood guarded, Palpatine let the strings in his hands weave and chain between them, piercing through Luke, through Han, through Ahsoka, and Chewie, and to her. She had known pain. And suffering. But never this level of outrage, burning hotter than the lightning coursing through her blood. They were boiling alive, but she had always been a furnace -- the freedom she fought for, the coals. This was nothing except fuel.

She charged, and then Luke and Obi-Wan, and the rest of the Jedi, and gripped tightly at the Emperor's neck, his arms, his legs, his robes. He threw himself out of the way, scrabbled at Anakin,
tore nails through his exposed cheek, and Anakin recoiled, hands cupping the blood seeping down his face, and there, Palpatine lost all balance. He stumbled, wavered, and fell to the reactor below.

Everyone was still and quiet, save for the slow drip of blood, trailing over Anakin's cheekbone, over his hands and slithering through his fingers, and falling softly to the floor. It was the loudest noise she'd ever heard.

"He's gone," Anakin said.

"Good riddance," said Obi-Wan.

"But was he right? About the Dark in me?"

"It is what you make it. There is, in fact, at this point in time, absolutely nothing at all stopping you from using both as you see fit." Obi-Wan laid a hand on his plated shoulder. "You said yourself he has no place in dictating your destiny, Anakin. And now, he never will."

Anakin let his hand drop in the turbolift, and through the hallway, letting blood trail like drops of rain over the edges of his suit. For perhaps the first time, it was his own, and not the spattered remains of others. When they made it to the main engines, the flow was lessening, but left the exhaustion clear to see.

"Are you guys- kriffing hell, shit, are you okay?" Vaare waved his hands. "No, that's a dumb question, you're not okay. Are any of you crazy, crazy bastards on the verge of death?" He held up a piece of cloth, a scrap of the Emperor's robes. "If you guys are bleeding out on me, this is all I've got in the way of bandages. Got caught on the railing. Doesn't really fit the Stormtrooper vibe, though."

"It's the Emperor's," Anakin said.

"The Emperor... was on the railing? I thought it was just debris- what in all of this karking galaxy did you do, exactly?"

"Debris can't wear robes."

"Holy fuck," said Vaare. "I guess that means I have the okay on blowing the reactor to kingdom come."

Anakin gave him a thumbs up. "You have the A-Okay."

"Let's blow this place before it goes and blows itself," Han said, and Vaare shrugged, and slammed a hand against the console, opening a keyport. Artoo hurried to it, and with ease, clicked it into place.

At first, there was nothing, and then the Red Alert claxons sounded, and the reactor began to spark and hiss, and the room felt a few degrees hotter. Then, the floor began to quake like a frightened youngling, as the 'Troopers rushed in terror to the eye of the storm.

"Escape pods," said Vaare. "Now. Thank me later. By the way, you're welcome."

They called in the airstrike, scrambled to the nearest evacuation centre, and Vaare, with shaking hands, swept the passkey through the door, and slowly pried it open, where they piled inside, crashing into each other, bruised and battered and laughing. Force, was she laughing. The other part was crying.
And, as they were jettisoned into space, she felt, for the first time, as if they'd finally managed half the battle. Her people were gone, but the Empire was falling into tatters at her feet, and she trusted they had not died in vain. And for the rest of her life, she was going to fight to keep it that way.

"We did it," Han said, fingers hovering against the transparisteel, looking out into the stars below, and the fleet gathered around them, smoking holes burnt into their hull plating, but still flying. Still managing.

"Yeah," Luke said, "we did."

Vaare tilted his head. "Does this mean I get a promotion?"

"Get ten," Han said. "Do I have permission to do that? Nah, nevermind. Don't care. Congratulations on being promoted ten times."

"I promised," Ahsoka offered, smiling down at Vaare, and ruffling his hair. "If Han doesn't have permission, I'll do it, you have my word."

"So." Anakin's eyes were red and watery, but he was smiling stupidly. "So," he said again. "Where to now?"

Leia looked at the stars, at the ships, docking bays opening to recall their fighters, and at the Death Star, melting away, collapsing in on itself, and lay back.


"Really, we ought to head back to Base, gather ourselves, rally the troops. There's the rest of the Imperial forces to fight, now. We need to be prepared."

"Deal," Anakin replied, and threw out his hands. "But I'm not settling for anything less than an actual night's sleep, and a good glass of Corellian spiced ale. I know you have some, Han, don't lie."

"Not lying. Least we deserve is a drink, and maybe some candied meiloorun."

"Blowing up a space station sure does work up an appetite," Luke said, dryly. "We're free, guys. You can go raid the kitchens back at Base. Hell, we could go back to Hoth. Who votes for that?"

Leia snorted. "I'll pass."

Han yawned, and for once, seemed to relax enough to mould into the luxury, Imperial-made seats surrounding him, even against the rough touchdown on Base's main cargo port. "So, where are we headed from there? After raiding Base, obviously."

"Dunno," Anakin said. "We have a second chance. You up for leading the hero life again, Master? I could go back to saving people; it'd make for a nice change."

"No consideration for the scoundrel life?"

"We can go for both. After all, the proof is standing right beside us."

"I know," said Han, and winked.

"A second chance?" Leia asked, smiled to herself, and closed her eyes. For once, the comms in her room would be silent. Maybe she could get in some rest before returning to the Rebel life that stretched long ahead of them. "I can't wait to get started."
Hey, all of you. Thanks for seeing this through with me. I might be tearing up a little, at finally finishing this. I love you all endlessly, and I hope this is open-ended enough to feel like another beginning, but unambiguous enough to leave you *not* screaming, "IT'S INCEPTION ALL OVER AGAIN." Or any other movie, really. Nobody goes without cliffhangers or end credits scenes, man. Guys, we're in it for life now. We're all gonna go bankrupt on movie tickets.

Much love, and literal undying gratitude (seriously, you are the BEST). Time to break myself writing another one of these jumbo-sized fic candy bars. Feel free to join me! And watch me chug more caffeine! And rack up a higher word count in fic than I ever do in essays. <3 c:!

Like, this is (eternal hell) -- I mean, fandom. It's never the end, yo. It's just a new beginning, and a *second chance*. Eyyy? Eyyy? You guys see what I did there?

Like I wasn't going to leave this on a terrible pun.

<3 Cheers, and DON'T FORGET YOU HAVE MY UNDYING GRATITUDE, GODDAMNIT.

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