The Youxia Bond

by Narsil

Summary

Having refused to rejoin the Jedi Order and seeking refuge in the backwaters of the Outer Rim from the bounty hunters on her trail, Ahsoka Tano encounters a Force-user with a very distant past and an equally uncertain future. At least that's something that the newcomer shares with the rest of the galaxy.
In honor of a new Star Wars movie, my first Star Wars story. For those that follow my other stories, I know, I said I wasn't going to start any more stories until I finish off most of the ones I already have. In my defense, I've been inspired by some fine fanfic and the thought of the new movie (which I'll actually see in a few days). And also in my defense, except for today this chapter hasn't taken any of my usual writing time from my other stories, I've only worked on it after finishing my usual daily quota and if that quota wasn't met, then this story didn't get worked on at all — and that's how I plan to continue. Still, while I haven't read all that much Star Wars fanfic, I like to think that I've come up with a rather different way of handling the problem of Dark Side temptation, we'll have to see.

Also, at the moment the rating is a warning of what's to come more than anything, and will probably go up along with additional archive warnings, fandoms, categories, relationships and characters as they become appropriate. But be warned that this story will eventually include F/F and possibly M/F/F. If that isn't your cup of tea, you'll want to avoid this.

As a not-so-side note, while I've seen the prequel movies, the Clone Wars movie, and own and am watching the five seasons of the Clone Wars cartoon, I am fine from finished with that last. There's Wookieepedia, of course, but if anyone notes continuity/setting errors let me know and I'll do some more research and perhaps update the story.

Jenni stepped through the permanently irised open door, shook the snow off her sleeping bag-jacket, and brushed off her jeans, stamped the snow and mud off her hiking boots, then started forward again, twisting her head to play the beam from her flashlight-headband about what had been the foyer of the Youxia central headquarters, nostalgia from her and the two women and two men following her — the other four Dancers of her Bond — mixing until she couldn’t tell where hers began and theirs ended. She was a little surprised — true, there was dust everywhere, but she’d expected at least a few bodies. It may have been over four years since the neutron bombs had wiped it clean of life inside and out and ended a thousand years of peace at the same time, but there should have been clothed skeletons at least. Maybe the Slaves didn’t want decomposing corpses stinking up the place while they ransacked it.

A thousand years, while the League had ended the suffering of the poor if not poverty itself, while mankind had terraformed Mars and then Venus, had even reached out to the nearest stars with the newly-invented warp drive. All gone, replaced by death, chaos and terror as the Void Slaves and their secretly armed allies seized control of an Earth that had forgotten how to use the arms it didn’t have.

At least the running will be over, if not the way we’d hoped, Jenni thought, her nostalgia morphing into grief at the memory of the long months on the run stretching into years as propaganda broadcasts had displayed the final battles of bond after bond that hadn’t been gathered in the Mountain for the
holiday celebrating Ming Song’s discovery of the connection to the Tao, and how to both directly
guide and be guided by it. Those bonds that hadn’t become as skilled as her own bond at muting
their presence in the Tao before being caught and turned into one more blow to the morale of a
conquered Earth.

Feeling the concern coming from her bondmates, she shook off the grief. Remember, whatever
happens, The Party never ends. Taking a deep breath and shifting her backpack to a (temporarily,
after over a week of hiking) more comfortable position, she sent, “Come on, people, no time for
sightseeing. I can’t imagine the Void Slaves don’t have Central under observation, so however
isolated the Mountain might be we’re on the clock. Let’s give them a proper welcome.”

Grim amusement came back, and the five Dancers broke into a trot toward the elevator banks; with
no power the elevators wouldn’t run, of course, but it would be faster to cut through the floors and
make their own way down the shafts. And they could leave a few surprises along the way.

The others were just laying down the last circles of crushed crystal-permeated paint as Jenni sorted
out crystals they’d gathered from the hidden storerooms (and hadn’t they been relieved that the Void
Slaves hadn’t found them) when a soft alarm went off by their stacked backpacks — the first of their
booby traps had gone off. Everyone paused for a moment and looked up, then returned to their tasks
at perhaps a slightly faster pace than before, just shy of hurrying.

A few minutes later Jason sent, “I’m done!” A chorus of agreement from the other three followed.

Jenni leaned back on her heels. “I think the large crystals I have will do the job. Everyone switch
circles and double-check the work, and I’ll get them laid out.” As the other four carefully double-
checked their work she inserted a large crystal in the depression at the center of each spiral and at the
cardinal points of the circle inlaid into the floor in the center of the room, a huge crystal at the center,
and then started double-checking her own circle for any breaks from four years of neglect —
nothing.

The room shook as the second booby-trap went off.

“Oh, we’re out of time. Drop what you’re doing and get into position.”

The four knelt at the open ends of the spirals they’d painted, and as Jenni sat half-lotus style and
swept her headband’s light around the room one last time ... but this time focused on the people she
loved rather than the room itself: tall, red-headed Henrik who’d been ‘gifted’ the nickname of ‘the
Hammer’ by the girls of the Bond, and not because of his blacksmithing hobby; bronze Kaulana, he
of the gentle hands and easy Island smile; almond-eyed Yua, the eager, playful one, with a tendency
to leave nip marks; and raven-haired Sacagawea, who got as much pleasure from a night of cuddling
as wild heights of passion. Yes, their bond had had a good run — centuries long as Dancers had
cycled through, even if only Jenni and Henrik had been been members when the Void Slaves struck,
and Jenni only just barely — but it was over now. If David and Usagi’s calculations were correct, in
a few moments it would be over for every Flame that burned bright in the current of the Tao. Well,
extcept for those Buddhists that moved to the Asteroid Belt so they could stare at their navels,
anyway. But hopefully with the Void Slaves gone the people of Earth will be able to deal with their
non-Awakened followers.

Breaking the silence for the first time, Jenni said, “See you on the other side.” Then she took a deep
breath, and stopped muting her presence in the Tao as for the first time in four years she opened
herself fully to the heartbeat of the Universe. For a moment she feared being swept away by the
sheer force of the life the pattern of crushed crystal paint focused on her, but she had always had an
intuitive feel for the currents and now she rode them, gathered them, poured them into the large crystal at her feet. It in turn accepted her gift, amplified it, and divided it between the four cardinal point circles around her. The others reeled under the onslaught but managed to rally and feed the spirals. Those spirals amplified the power they received even more, and the four floods hammered into the crystals at their heart and transformed into the dark Yin of the Void before exploding outward.

To Jenni’s shock, the world went white instead of black.

/oOo/

A hundred thousand years later, give or take a few centuries:

As the undulating, spinning, multi-white tunnel of hyperspace collapsed to streaks of pure light then settled to a starscape, Ahsoka Tano breathed a sigh of relief. Wherever she was, she’d made it! From the sounds the hyperdrive had been making, she hadn’t been certain that would happen and hadn’t dared drop out of hyperspace into the empty void between stars to make repairs the tramp freighter might not have parts for, or the fuel to get her back into hyperspace and to the nearest inhabited planet. She hadn’t exactly had the time to do a survey of available resources before making her unannounced departure from whatever mid-Rim world she’d stowed away to after the first bounty hunters attacked her, and the fuel gauge was distressingly low. She didn’t think that whatever was bedeviling the engines was the result of shoddy maintenance, not from the neat, eat-off-the-floor clean state in which the freighter’s previous owner had kept the cockpit and common room, but the open panels and hanging wiring told the ship’s age and keeping it running properly had probably been a near-full-time job for its captain.

Her mood darkened at the thought of that captain, the male human that had stepped into her fight with the second band of bounty hunters to find her — the ones that hadn’t underestimated her because she no longer had her lightsaber thanks to her refusal to rejoin the Jedi Order, and were trying to kill her rather than going for a capture. His interference had cost him his life even if it saved hers, though he’d lived long enough to tell her which bay his ship occupied and the access codes to give her access. She just wished she knew his name, he hadn’t been carrying any identification. Maybe there’ll be something identifying him in his room, I’ll have to check first thing once I land this hunk of junk. What if he has a family? The young Togruta had seen deaths in the two years she had been Skywalker’s padawan, Jedi and clone troopers she had liked and respected among them, but the free trader had been one of the civilians she was supposed to protect, not be protected by!

Shaking off the dark thoughts, she turned her attention to the planet she was rapidly approaching, named Trey according to the nav-charts. It was the best choice when she had compared the nav-charts she downloaded from Traffic Control to those stored in the ship’s nav-comp, barely registering on the download beyond a name and location on the official list but very well mapped on the ship’s personal list — which meant she could arrive in less than a day, but anyone making a straight jump on her trail might take a week or more. And why would they? It was a barely settled Outer Rim backwater, one the dead free trader had probably been able to make a living off partly because his detailed nav-charts significantly cut his travel time and so operating costs, but mostly because no one else saw the point in challenging him for the market. Hopefully, his desire to keep his monopoly extended to not letting anyone back in civilization know where his goods were coming from.

Realizing that her thoughts had again drifted back into the same bleak rut they had worn in the long hours she had occupied the pilot’s seat, she refocused out the cockpit window to look over the planet growing ever larger: plenty of clouds, a large majority of the surface covered by oceans; most of the land one massive continent that mostly lay in the northern hemisphere, though it was narrow in spots that would probably be underwater if the ice sheet that covered much of the northern hemisphere
wasn’t so extensive. From the green not a desert world where it wasn’t ice, thankfully, that meant she’d have more time to stay away from locals while she figured out what she was going to do next.

And speaking of locals, I’d better find out where they’re located so I can stay away from them. She brought up the ship’s database and was just beginning to look for a map of the settlements when she paused. Something ... was different ... cleaner? Fresher? All her life, she had heard the Jedi Knights and Masters that had trained her cohort speak of the ... the haze of the Dark Side that had clouded the Force, that had them striking at shadows even before the Battle of Geonosis and the beginning of the war. There had been times that she had thought they were making excuses for their failures. No longer, as she swept toward Trey and the clean, clear, beating heart of the Life of an entire planet wrapped itself around her. Not even her visits to the Crystal Caves on Ilum had felt like this. And look at those ice caps! And — she hastily glanced at the scattered dots of small settlements on the database’s map — it’s practically empty, what would a clean Coruscant be like!?

She shook off the thought, she’d have time to investigate once she was on the ground. Let’s see, no hails from any kind of traffic control, no surprise there, and ... no landing beacons. I guess they expect you to know where you’re going. (That wasn’t really a surprise, either — a place this small and out of the way in the Outer Rim would be vulnerable to pirate and slaver raids, and the first place any raiders would land would be any settlement large enough to need, and be able to afford, a landing beacon.) So, somewhere rugged enough that there shouldn’t be anyone around, and close enough to a major settlement that I can walk there in a few days if I have to. But hopefully there’ll be some kind of speeder bike onboard.

She started looking over the various settlements, pulling up what data there was on them in the computer (not much), but her eyes kept wandering back to a spot inland on the northeastern part of the world continent. It was some of the most rugged terrain on the planet, and high enough about sea level that its center had acquired its own covering of ice separate from the northern and southern ice packs. It was also very far from any settlements, there was no way she was walking out of there. But while she hadn’t felt the Force pulling on her like this very often she could recognize it for what it was — something down there was important, to her if no one else.

With a sigh, she finally brought the freighter to a halt in relation to the planet. She was going to have to investigate the ship’s hold, see if there was a speeder bike, and enough power cells that she could get to what passed for civilization if she couldn’t lift the ship once she landed.

The speeder bike slowly coasted to a halt, and Ahsoka simply sat on it as she huddled in the blanket she’d pressed into service in lieu of a coat and stared up at the mountain, her breath cloudy in the cold mid-day air. The mountain was a steep, rugged, naked rocky spire, with glaciers on each flank like a scarf draped over a pair of shoulders, apparently empty of life except for a few flyers high in the sky. Whatever was pulling at her lay at the foot of the left-hand glacier, and like the larger (relatively) flat spot where she had left the freighter, this looked like the closest flat spot where she could park the speeder bike. She had no idea what could be there, hidden in this most desolate area of a backwater planet, but whatever was up there was still calling to her. It reminded of some lines of a poem she’d read once, before the war when she’d dreamed of exploring the Unknown Regions: ‘Something hidden. Go and find it. Go and look behind the Ranges — Something lost behind the Ranges. Lost and waiting for you. Go!’

“Well, I guess I’m walking from here.” Swinging a leg over the back of the bike, she dropped to the ground and pulled off the blanket, then untied the backpack of supplies she’d put together and slung it on her back before rewrapping the blanket around her. She made sure the blanket didn’t cover the blaster she’d found onboard and was now strapped to her hip, then she pressed the off switch for the
repulsorlift so the bike settled to the ground. Besides not knowing how long she would be gone and so needing to conserve power, the bike was like the freighter — lovingly maintained but way too old — and she didn’t trust the repulsorlift to hold the bike’s position in any kind of wind. As ready as she could be, she started up the mountain slope.

Hours later, a stunned Ahsoka turned off the hand light that she’d used to make her way deep into the mountain. The crevasse she’d found at the base of the glacier and the cracks in its wall had looked natural, but the room she’d found deep in one of those cracks with one wall sheered away leaving it open to the outside air, was clearly sentient-formed — a complex carved out of the heart of the mountain. And from the dirty streaks of ice running down the polished stone of the walls she’d passed as she carefully made her way deep into the mountain, squirming around collapses and backtracking from the occasional crevasse, up until recently the complex had probably been buried by the glacier.

And now she stood in an ice-free room buried deep in the heart of the mountain, a room where her hand light was unnecessary ... because it was brightly lit by a huge, slowly spinning oval mass of what she suspected was the Force so concentrated that it was made visible, coruscating with every color imaginable, reaching from floor to ceiling.

And even as that pure concentration of the Force overwhelmed her Force-sense, leaving her limited to her physical senses, still she could feel the pull toward it. She hesitated for long moments, before finally stepping forward and slowly reaching out a hand upraised and flattened.

As she approached, the colors bleached away from a spot on the oval mass and a face swam into view — a Human female face, young, bracketed by pure white hair shot through with streaks of blue in a pattern eerily similar to Ahsoka’s montrals and lekku waving about her head as if she was submerged in liquid.

Ahsoka hesitated again, her hand a few centimeters from the surface of the coruscating pillar. Still feeling the pull — the need — she took a deep breath and thrust her hand forward into the swirling mass.

For a split-second the entire pillar of energy flashed clear to reveal a slim Human female slightly taller than Ahsoka dressed in a form-fitting shirt and pants and an open heavy coat, and Ahsoka instinctively spread her arms to catch the floating woman now falling forward just before the room plunged into darkness and the woman’s weight slammed into her.

Chapter End Notes

The bit of poetry Ahsoka remembers is from Rudyard Kipling’s poem, "The Explorer."
Palpatine finished rereading the news article from Milagro that had been flagged by his news filter, then rose from his seat at the desk in his working office and strode to the office’s clear wall to stare out from his point in the highest tower on the planet at the scattered lights of a Coruscant night. The capital city planet of a galaxy-spanning Republic never slept, of course, but, biological imperatives being what they are, the tempo did slow down with the fall of night. Not that he was really in the mood for ‘Coruscant stargazing’. (The light pollution meant the sky never really got completely dark, just a very deep blue, but there was still the artificial beauty of the semi-random light show put on by those parts of the towers below him still occupied and awake, and the multi-layered traffic lanes that passed between them.)

A world along the Corellian Run just shy of the Outer Rim border, there was nothing particularly significant about Milagro — certainly nothing to draw the attention of the Chancellor of the Republic. However, it was the world where the mercenary gang hired by Darth Sidious to pursue a certain former Padawan had met their deaths. The second such band, actually, and what had been a simple case of cutting off a loose end and perhaps furthering the estrangement between Anakin Skywalker and the Jedi Council with news of his Padawan’s death was becoming more serious. And Palpatine didn’t know why.

Everything seemed to be going well — Jedi after Jedi had fallen in the war; the Jedi that survived were mostly scattered throughout the Republic fighting alongside their future executioners; the military he would need to hold on to power when he was declared Emperor was growing as the war continued, and the news released to the Republic’s sheep subtly played up that military’s accomplishments while undercutting the Jedi’s reputation; the Hunters that he had tossed a few fragmentary Dark Side techniques moved about in the shadows eliminating possible future threats as they gained the experience they would need to form the core of his future Inquisitors; and the Jedi Council was flailing about in the mists of the Dark Side that Darth Sidious had immersed them in, trying to find the elusive Sith Master and unknowingly sowing the seeds of their own destruction as their continuing alienation of Skywalker and his ‘friendship’ with Palpatine allowed the Sith Master they couldn’t find to further sink his hooks into his future apprentice. Yes, all was going as he had foreseen.

But then the mercenary gang he’d tasked with capturing Ahsoka had failed, she’d temporarily vanished, and Darth Sidious’s visions of the approaching glorious future had become ... fuzzy — slightly indistinct, as glorious as ever but not quite there. Then a short time ago those visions had cleared once again, but he still felt as if something was off, somehow, a piece missing along with the Padawan.

And now the news that his second attempt on Ahsoka had failed.

More mercenaries would both be pointless and risk exposure. I cannot order Darth Tyranus to take up the hunt — his persona as ‘Count Dooku’ is too important to my plan’s culmination, even if he were in position to quickly resume the pursuit he would be missed. It will have to be one of my Hunters.

Decision made, Palpatine turned back to his desk to bring up his database, to review his Hunters’ locations and missions and determine which was in position and could be most easily spared.
The trip back to the freighter was a nightmare. Ahsoka was actually both skilled and powerful for her age, even as a newly-minted (if somewhat older) padawan she had been able to reach out with the Force and pull down an entire wall (with an empty window to supply a hole for Skywalker, and hadn’t that been fun?). But the burst of effort that had required was a far cry from using the Force to carry an unconscious body behind her as she made her way back to the surface, for hours. Then there had been getting both of them on a speeder bike she wasn’t certain could handle the weight, and the long cold trip down the mountain. (The Human’s coat was thankfully much better protection than Ahsoka’s blanket, she hadn’t had to worry about the patient the Force had led her to dying of hypothermia without her realizing it — not that that didn’t stop her from reaching out to sense the limp life tied to her back every few minutes.)

She was very happy when the freighter came into view.

She was also happy that her unnamed benefactor had taken especial care with medical equipment and supplies — as lovingly maintained as the rest of the ship and much newer. No bacta tank, of course, not even an emergency one, and when she undressed her (frowning slightly at the primitive fastenings on the clothes), her patient didn’t have any outward injuries needing bacta bandages. Still, to be safe, as soon as she had the Human wrapped in a blanket and laid out on the couch in the common room she gave her a bacta injection for any internal injuries she might have.

Everything done that she could do for the moment, she sat at the game table and laid her head down for a moment’s rest.

/Jenni’s eyes snapped open, staring up at the metal-paneled wall that curved up above her. It certainly wasn’t the Heaven she’d been expecting, or even any heaven that she’d ever heard of. And if the Buddhists were right (or many of the Buddhists, anyway) and those not reborn merged into Nirvana, she wouldn’t be aware of anything, at all.

Instinctively, she reached out, sending, “Hey gang, what’s going on?”

Nothing. Not just no reply, the joy/grief/whimsy/determination/anger/love of her Bond was gone, — she was alone in the Dark of her mind.

She bolted upright, looking around wildly only to find herself alone in a room the like of which she’d never seen before: small, rounded corners, round doorways in three walls, a built-in couch she had been lying on along the wall without a doorway, a seat in the corner on the other side of the doorway at a console with a dark screen and a scattering of lights above it, and in the other corner across from another round doorway another table and several seats — and one seat taken by a red-skinned girl, a white-and-blue headpiece on the head she was lifting from the table. Jenni instinctively reached out, to get a read of who she was dealing with, and froze in shock.

The girl she was sharing a room with wasn’t human.

Jenni scrambled backward along the couch toward the corner away from the alien. “Who are you!? What are you!? Where am I!? What happened to my Bond!?”

But she knew what had happened to them: they were dead like she should be, and as that reality crashed down on her she curled up against the corner on the couch and began to cry.

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Ahsoka stared at the crying Human female, trying to work through what had just happened. There had been a wave of shock powerful enough to disturb her sleep and she’d lifted her head to find her patient looking around wildly. That was understandable, she’d never been on this freighter before, but why had she panicked when she saw Ahsoka? It wasn’t like they’d ever met before. And what language had she been speaking? She was a Human on a colony world, she should be speaking Basic!

... just how long was she asleep in that Force vortex?

What do I do? She needs comforting, but if we don’t share a language ... Then she remembered the head of a protocol droid she’d seen in a case of miscellaneous spare parts she’d seen during her search of the ship. If she could rig up a battery pack —

A few minutes and a quick search in the hold, and she’d found a battery pack with a bit of a charge left. She thought she’d worked out which of the wires in the droid’s neck stump she needed so attaching the pack’s lead should activate it instead of frying every circuit it had left...

She carefully clipped the lead into place, pressed the ‘on’ button, and sighed with relief when the head’s eyes lit up and it spoke with in a pleasant female voice.

“Hello, I am D-FN8, sentient-cyborg relations. How may I ... Oh my, what happened to my body!?”

Jenni jerked when a gentle hand gripped her shoulder, then lifted and shifted her so she was half-on a lap — the alien’s, from the red skin tone she could see through cracked eyelids. And another hand was gently stroking her hair as the alien murmured something in (naturally) no language Jenni had ever heard the like of. She focused on the alien, and gasped — she had rarely met a Dancer whose Flame burned so brightly, more than enough that she could sense and manipulate the currents of the Tao without the aid of living crystals. For a moment fear flashed through her, but then she sensed the alien’s sympathy and concern washing over her. She twisted to throw an arm around the waist by her head and buried her face in a bare orange stomach, and sobbed.

She finally ran out of tears, and sat up to wipe at her cheeks. “Thanks, I needed that. You don’t speak Anglic by any chance, do you?”

“Oh my, that is a fery obscoor language.” Jenni twisted in shock — there was nothing living there!— then relaxed at the artificial head like a robot from a scifi movie, sitting on top of a small black box on the table where the alien had been sleeping. She hadn’t sensed anything because there was nothing living to sense. The robot head continued, “Yam D-FN8, sentient-cyborg relations. Mistress Ahsoka has tasked me to translate.”

“Oh ... hello ... Defenate.” She paused, surprised to hear Defenate speak in another language using her voice. Oh, right, ‘translate’! It had been centuries since the League had needed to use translators, Anglic had long since become the unofficial common language of Earth’s people and its colonies, but she remembered reading about their use by the United Nations that had preceded the League. And they’d been people, of course, not robots.

Turning to face the alien sitting on the couch beside her, she repeated, “Hello. My name is Jennifer Allston, but you can call me Jenni. Where am I?”

The alien replied, and Jenni did her best to pretend the robot speaking with the same voice was actually the alien. “Hello, my name is Ahsoka Tano. Yoor on ... my freighter, but I found you inside the mount weer parked below.”
“Mount? Mountain? The Mountain! Maybe ... do you have a map?”

“Of course.” Ahsoka rose to walk over to the table where Defenate was placed. Moving the robot head to another chair, she sat down and fiddle with controls Jenni couldn’t see for a few minutes until a hologram of a planet sprang into existence that instantly had Jenni’s complete attention.

“Weer here ...” Ahsoka was saying, but Jenni ignored the dot of light as she rose to her feet and walked over. Her finger traced the white that covered the top of the globe. “Is that all ice?”

“Yes, is an ice age. At least I think so.”

Jenni’s finger ran along the ice that had swept over the Bering Strait joining Asia to North America, then circled the patch of ice that covered what had been Tibet before resting on the dot of light on the easternmost edge. “Good thing you found me when you did or the ice would have rolled over me, and who knows how long it would have been before it retreated.”

Ahsoka stiffened, and Jenni turned to focus on the stunned silent alien staring at her wide-eyed. “What is it?” Jenni asked, worry suddenly twisting her gut.

“Jenni ... the ice is retreating. You were covered.”

“It —” Jenni whirled back to the globe, staring at the vast expanse of white. If that wasn’t the maximum advance ... She whispered, “How large is the population?”

“I don’t know, I don’t think anyone does,” Ahsoka replied. She fiddled with the table’s controls, and the globe began to turn as a thin scattering of lights appeared across its surface, mostly along major rivers toward the equator. “These are all the settlements in the database, maybe ... a few hundred thousand settlers?”

A few hundred thousand!

Jenni toppled forward into the hologram, Ahsoka just fast enough to keep her from cracking her chin on the far edge of the table.

Ahsoka stared down at the Human girl for a long moment before levitating her up and back toward the couch. “Defenate, that language she was speaking, how old is it?” she asked as she made Jenni as comfortable as she could.

“No one knows, mistress,” the robot head replied. “It is related to Anguc, an ancestral Human language of several Core worlds that argue over which world spoke it first. It is now spoken only by scholars that argue as much as the worlds do.”

‘Related’?

“Yes, mistress. I was forced to ... approximate the translation of a number of the words she used.”

‘Approximate’ — does that mean ‘guess at’?”

“As you say, mistress.”

Ahsoka grinned for a moment at the protocol droid’s prissy, almost offended tone, before sobering again as she refocused on Jenni. She speaks a dead language. She was trapped in a Force vortex for so long that an ice age covered up and then uncovered her location. She is so shocked by the number of inhabitants that she faints. The picture that was being painted was bizarre, so bizarre she could hardly believe it, but ...
Jenni slowly came awake to find herself staring at the same metal-paneled wall curving above her as before, and again instinctively reached out for her Bond to find nothing but the Dark. She pressed her eyes closed to fight back the tears, then sat up and wiped away the few that had escaped. Am I going to go through that every time I wake up from now on?

She sat up and looked around for a distraction, and found the orange-skinned alien — Ahsoka, her name is Ahsoka — sitting at the table with the rotating hologram of Earth again, watching her. The young ... girl? Is she really female, or is that just human preconceptions talking? Whichever, Jenni took comfort from Ahsoka’s sympathy rippling through the Tao.

But however strong her sympathy, the question she asked through Defenate took Jenni’s breath away for a second. “Jenni, when you were trapped in the Force vortex, how many people lived on this planet?”

“Trapped in a what?” Jenni waved off the question. “Never mind, later. When I should have died, there were as many souls as the planet could sustain, approximately ten billion.”

“Ten billion ... yes, that’s ... a lot of people.” Ahsoka waved a hand through the rotating hologram. “Yoor sure this is your home planet?”


Ahsoka slumped back in her seat and stared at the globe, her sympathy washed away by pure wonder. “Scholars back in the Core are going to go crazy when they find out about this,” she muttered, then grinned up at Jenni. “This planet rotates once in just over twenty-four hours. And it slowing slightly, thanks to the moon — ‘suming the rate of slowing is constant, it would have been exactly twenty-four hours around ninety thousand years ago. This might be the Human homeworld!”

“Wait, you mean there are humans —” She waved at the ceiling. “— out there?”

“Oh, yeah, trillions of ‘em, planet after planet full. Can’t go anywhere without running into ‘em. This planet is pretty far from the Core Worlds, it was colonized — maybe recolonized? — just a few centuries ago, I think.”

Jenni collapsed into the other chair by the table to stare at the rotating globe, so stunned she lost her focus on Ahsoka’s eddy in the Tao and was again alone in her own head. “Wow.” Maybe ... maybe we weren’t such failures, after all.

After awhile she shook herself free of her own wonderment at what she’d just learned and looked over at Ahsoka. “So, now what?”

Chapter End Notes

I came across ‘Coruscant stargazing’ in And None of It Seems to Matter, by Kablob.

So, for levels of power when it comes to the Force. Whatever the RPGs might say, it’s clear from the movies that strength of connection to the Force and training in how to use
it are two entirely separate things. However, while there is no way the Jedi Order finds all the strong force-sensitives in the Republic so there can be many more than seems to be the case on the surface, there aren’t so many that you can have enough in a single planetary population to populate a large Order (not unless that planet’s name is Coruscant, anyway). Hence the crystals Jenni is used to — among other things they amplify the Force, allowing someone that would otherwise be way too weak to perform at Jedi level. So Jenni thinks that Ahsoka, who I’m considering to be above average but not spectacularly so (and about Jenni’s level), to be incredibly powerful. What Jenni is going to think when she meets Anakin....

I don't know when another chapter will be up, I basically spent a large chunk of the day working on this after finishing my weekend allotment of my primary stories and don't know when I'll be able to find the time again.
Beautiful Day

Chapter Notes

I know, almost 2 1/2 months, I did say this one would be intermittent. But I've been good, focusing on my main stories all this time, and just couldn't resist this weekend. But fair warning, it'll probably be at least this long before I get back to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Quill Bolera was bored, frustrated, and angry ... especially angry. He had been stalking a senator that had become a minor thorn in his Master’s side and had just been ready to strike, everything lined up to make it seem like a Separatist terrorist cell — a perfect excuse for the local contingent of the Grand Army of the Republic to impose more stringent controls. (And didn’t that title make him want to snicker?) And then he’d gotten the order from his Master — directly from his Master, not through the usual cut outs and blind drops — to drop everything and search for a former Padawan that had run away from the Jedi Order. However important the task had to be for the Sith Lord to risk contacting him that way, he was feeling distinctly ill-used.

It hadn’t actually been all that hard to work out where she had run to once he arrived at Milagro and sliced into the official records of the investigation, what there were of them. (The police had assumed that the bounty hunters had been after the free trader and bitten off more than they could chew ... but only barely. That allowed the police to call it good and not take a closer look — perhaps at his master’s ‘suggestion’.) The identity of the free trader whose body had been found alongside those of the dead mercenaries had led him to the bay he had been docked in — empty, but Bolera managed to find a witness that had seen Tano enter the bay just before Fate’s Gift took off. Traffic control hadn’t bothered to keep the record of the exact track of the freighter’s jump into hyperspace, but Wynt Chinelo had been a regular at the port and the traffic controllers had been able to tell Bolera the general vector. Between that and the nature of the cargoes that Chinelo both sold and bought, Bolera had known just which backwater Outer Rim world he’d been scratching out a living off of.

Unfortunately traffic control hadn’t had anything like adequate nav-charts for the hyperspace route to Trey and so Bolera had spent three weeks — three weeks — prowling his ship’s limited living quarters bored out of his mind while he was in hyperspace.

But his boredom was finally at an end as the swirling white of hyperspace turned into streaks before collapsing into stars, and he found himself throwing up his hands to block a light that was all in his mind, the concentrated power of the light side of the Force washing over him — the whole planet was a vergence! He almost pushed forward the levers that would throw his ship back into hyperspace without bothering to compute a course, but with an act of will that left him shaking managed to stop his hand halfway — and a good thing, because he was flying directly toward Trey and doing that would have turned his ship into a smoking crater and him with it.

Having gotten himself under control, he scanned for landing beacons, any form of traffic control — nothing. He was able to locate the handful of settlements on the map he’d downloaded back at Milagro, but it hadn’t been updated in a century (in violation of the Republic’s requirement that an updated planetary map and census be sent to Coruscant every twenty-five years, but throughout most of the Outer Rim that the Republic actually claimed no one really cared) and his scanners were picking up local com traffic for at least twice that many. Population growth hadn’t been explosive,
but it had been substantial. And that meant he had more settlements to search through for the elusive Tano than he’d hoped, if not as many as he’d feared.

For a moment he wished that he was more of a sensor, but he put the thought aside as pointless — even if he was good enough to sense Tano from orbit, the sheer power of the vergence would have undoubtedly washed out her presence.

He tried to send a report back to his Master, but as he’d feared it turned out to be impossible: a hyperwave transceiver connected to the HoloNet was too expensive for this backwater, and ... no, as was often the case in such systems the local subspace transceiver was locked to outsiders — he could send the message, but not without asking permission and leaving a record. For a brief moment he considered turning right around and heading back to Milagro, but ... three weeks. And once he’d made his report, his Master would undoubtedly order him to turn around and return to hunt for Tano — another three weeks (minus the maybe-a-day he would be able to shave off thanks to the data from his two trips along the route). And then another three weeks returning after he’d completed his mission. No, that was too long to keep his Master’s best Hunter cooling his heels, and she’d probably be gone by the time he got back anyway. He would simply have to find and kill the former Padawan and make his report when he returned to civilization.

Decision made, he started by circling the planet, comparing settlement size on the map with what he could glean from the com traffic — with no way to pick one settlement over another, he would simply start with the largest and work his way down. He grimaced at the thought. Yes, he knew the Sith were supposed to be masters of their fate rather than slaves to the whim of a higher Power, but sometimes he thought a little guidance outside of battle and Force visions of possible futures would not be amiss — though since he was headed into a light side vergence, it was possible that guidance would have been denied him, anyway.

The comp pinged its success at locating the largest settlement, and he sighed as he piloted a course toward it — unless he got lucky, this was going to be almost as tedious as his weeks in hyperspace.

At least it’s not Coruscant.

/AOoA/

Ahsoka sat cross legged on the metal floor of Fate’s Gift’s hold, sighing as she examined once again the parts spread out in front of her. Much to her surprise, she almost had everything she needed to build a new lightsaber, three of them even. They would be too large, clunky, and ugly, but they would work — if she could find new kyber crystals to replace the ones in the lightsabers she’d left behind when she walked out on the Order, which wasn’t likely. It wasn’t like she could hop across to Ilum and seek out new ones, and there weren’t a lot of loose ones kicking around the galaxy. She figured the chances of finding a kyber crystal anywhere on Trey was about the same as the temperature of deep space. Still, while she hadn’t actually expected to find one on the ship, she had hoped —

She glanced up as she felt the now-familiar caress of Jenni’s Force-powered attention. As expected, the human was standing in the hold’s inner doorway — dressed in the same shirt and pants she’d been wearing under her coat when Ahsoka first found her — but it felt early. Ahsoka focused through the Force on her time sense for a moment, then frowned. It was early, normally Jenni would still be in the common room practicing Galactic Standard with Defenate. Waving Jenni over, Ahsoka asked, “Shouldn’t you still be translating?”

She did have to agree that the way Jenni and Defenate had overcome their lack of training vids for Galactic Standard was unique. Jenni would recite something she’d read with the Force enhancing her memory to get it word for word — in Anglic, of course — then Defenate would translate it into
Galactic and Jenni would read it out loud with Defenate correcting her pronunciation and providing the meaning (Jenni occasionally correcting the translation). It had certainly worked, over the past several months Jenni’s Galactic, though still accented, had become excellent if somewhat formal. But Ahsoka was getting a little worried about Jenni’s growing obsession with regurgitating an endless stream of history, philosophy, plays, novels —

“I thought I’d take a break, see what you were doing.” Jenni waved at the parts scattered across the floor. “What’s all this?”

In spite of her apparent focus away from Ahsoka the caress of her awareness never wavered, and the former Jedi fought to hide another growing ember of concern at the desperation that underlay that awareness. Once Jenni had explained the intimate nature of the Bonds, often physically but always mentally, it hadn’t been hard to understand (if only dimly) why Jenni reached out to Ahsoka through the Force whenever they shared a room — having one’s constant emotional ... awareness? mindscape? ... reduced from five to one had to be devastatingly lonely. But this was the first time Jenni had actually sought her out for a ‘fix’, however limited Jenni’s perception of Ahsoka’s presence in the Force must be compared to the shared emotional life of four other people.

I wonder if she knows I know the first thing she does every morning is cry?

But nothing in Ahsoka’s sixteen years had prepared her for dealing with the situation, so she set her growing fears aside once again. “I’m trying to build a lightsaber.”

“A lightsaber?” Jenni’s eyes lit up at the word — much of what Ahsoka had told her about the Jedi Order had her muttering about navel gazers, but she had been impressed by the description of the Order’s signature weapon.

“Yeah, but I’m afraid I’m missing the kyber crystal, and it’s the most important component.”

“Kyber crystal?” Jenni frowned thoughtfully. “What does it do?”

“It’s imbued with the Force, with it the lightsaber becomes a manifestation of a Jedi’s — or a Force user’s, I guess, for me now at least — connection to the Force.”

“I’m imbued with the Force?” Jenni suddenly grinned. “Like a focus? I might have an answer ...” Her voice trailed away as she suddenly looked sick. “Uh ... why do you want a lightsaber?”

“Because we’re almost out of rations, maybe a week’s worth left. When we head for what passes for civilization on this planet, I’d like to have at least one weapon I’m practiced with.”

Jenni struggled with herself for a moment, then, reluctance clear in every line, said, “I might have an alternative.”

\[...

Jenni stared into the room where Ahsoka had found her, eyes haunted.

The trip this time had been quicker than the first time Ahsoka had made it — there were two of them, and Jenni had known the layout — but the Human had become more withdrawn with every step until they’d reached the room. There she’d simply stopped and stared as minute after minute ticked by.

Finally, Ahsoka stepped up behind Jenni and shifted a hand out from under the blanket she was again using as a coat to place on the Human’s shoulder. “Jenni?”
“It’s here they died, you know — all of them. Henrik, Kaulana, Yua, Sacagawea ... and every other Flame burning bright on the planet.”

“I know.”

Jenni turned to look Ahsoka in the eyes. “I should have died here — I wanted to die here. I didn’t want to live past that day, not after what we did.”

Ahsoka desperately scrambled for words, blurted out, “Maybe the Force has a purpose for you still?”

Jenni laughed, and Ahsoka felt her skin crawl at the bitter, hysterical edge to the sound. “Ninety thousand years in stasis? More likely it just didn’t want to throw away a useful tool.” She turned away and strode back up the corridor. “Come on, what we need is this way.”

Ahsoka gaped, staring wide-eyed into the room whose secret entrance she and Jenni had managed to blow open with her blaster.

Once again their hand lights weren’t necessary, because the entire room was lit up by the boxes and boxes of softly glowing gems stashed in the shelves cut into the rock. And not just glowing, Ahsoka felt like she was bathing in the Force, sweeping over and around her through her covering blanket, washing away her worries. Forcing her eyes away from the sight to her companion, she whispered, “What are they?”

Jenni too could apparently feel their influence, as tension, so much a part of the Human that Ahsoka hadn’t even realized it wasn’t a natural part of her, seemed to just flow away. “We don’t ... didn’t have a distinguishing name for them, we just called them crystals. Any Dancer would know what we were talking about, and they were too ... private ... to speak of to anyone that wasn’t a Dancer.”

“But what are they?”

“As best we could tell, they are ... not the Tao made manifest but in tune with the Tao, so that we can focus on them, through them, to accomplish more than we ever could alone. And just maybe, they are replacements for the ‘kyber crystals’ you spoke of.”

“I think you may be right.” Ahsoka turned back to the room and opened herself to the Force. It was hard not to allow it to ‘wash’ her away, to focus even as she stayed relaxed and open to the Force all about her. And unlike her pilgrimage to Ilum where she had spent long hours seeking out a single kyber crystal calling to her, here all the crystals — thousands of them — called for her attention. But amidst the ‘cacophony’ a single crystal ‘shone’ brighter than the rest, and she confidently stepped forward to a single corroded box. It came apart in her hands when she tried to pick it up off its shelf, glowing crystals cascading down across the floor, but she stooped and scooped one crystal out of the air, on the bounce. “This one.”

Now it was Jenni’s turn to stare wide-eyed, though at Ahsoka rather than the room. “What did you just do?”

“I opened myself to the crystals, picked out the one that was most ... ‘in tune’ with me. Didn’t your people do that?”

“No. we knew that individual crystals worked better for some Dancers than others, but we found out which best suited us by trial and error. To pick out a single one from all those? Still, you just did it....” Face firming in determination, she turned back to the room, closed her eyes ... and staggered back several steps. “Wow, that’s a rush.” She stepped forward again, closed her eyes. Again, minute
after minute ticked by as sweat beaded on her forehead. Then she stretched out a hand and made her way into the room, eyes still closed, sliding her feet on the floor to avoid slipping on the crystals scattered there, until she touched another box. This time her touch alone was enough for it to fall apart, and she snatched a handful of crystals out of those streaming to the floor and picked one out before dropping the rest.

Then she bent over, hands on her knees as she gasped for breath. “That is tough.” Finally straightening, she slid her way to the doorway then turned around to stare back into the room. “I think we should leave the rest here. This room is shielded, but to any whose flames burn bright any crystals we take with us that aren’t not personally attuned will shine like spotlights, at least any not kept in specially prepared containers that we don’t have. And we can have only one crystal personally attuned to us at a time.”

Ahsoka grimaced. “That’s too bad, my usual fighting style uses two shota — small lightsabers.” Shrugging, she added, “Perhaps it’s just as well, I was probably too dependent on it. Let’s get back to the ship and find out if we have any lightsabers at all.”

Ahsoka took a deep breath, squeezed the safety built into her new hopefully-a-lightsaber’s hilt, pressed the ‘on’ button, and promptly dropped it as the hilt heated up.

“Okay, that was more than just ‘not working’,’” Jenni waited until the hilt finished clattering across the ship hold’s floor, then knelt and held her hand an inch or so above it. “Hot. What happened?”

“I don’t know.” Ahsoka grabbed a pair of pliers and a screwdriver and set about opening up the casing. In the end she had to pry it open, to find the components inside fused into a solid mass. “Definitely more than ‘not working’.”

Jenni peered over her shoulder, and Ahsoka suddenly realized that for once Jenni wasn’t even partially focused on her through the Force as her curiosity got the better of her. “Yeah, definitely more. What happened?”

“I don’t know, I just hope it didn’t damage the crystal.” Ahsoka started chipping away at the fused components. The worry twisting at her gut was very un-Jedi-like, but when Jenni had demonstrated how to attune herself with her chosen crystal and then walked her through the process herself, the Togruta had been stunned at the result. The kyber crystal she had been guided to on Ilum had seemed to resonate with her when she reached out to it with the Force, but her new crystal had seemed to merge with her. Even now as she struggled to free it, she could sense it like a piece of herself buried in the melted metal and rubber.

“Your crystal should be fine, they can be dipped in lava and be still cool when they’re plucked out.” Jenni shifted around where she could watch Ahsoka work the crystal free. “So how do lightsabers work?”

“Power from a power cell is focused through a series of lenses and energizers that convert it to plasma. The plasma is projected through the krayt crystal to give it the properties that allows the plasma to be held by the containment field, then sent through another series of field energizers and modulation circuitry to create the coherent beam of energy that forms the blade. The blade is arced back to a negatively charged fissure ringing the emitter by the containment field, which channels the power back to the power cell.”

The crystal finally popped out of its molten prison, and Ahsoka snatched it out of the air then looked up and giggled at the confused look on Jenni’s face. “Here, let me show you.” Reaching over to pull
a box away from the wall, she dumped out its contents and sorted out the various components for another lightsaber, explaining each one’s purpose as she went.

When she finished, Jenni frowned thoughtfully. “I see why it didn’t work. *These* crystals can transform energy just fine, but the only source of power they will accept flows from the Tao. Which means that when you flipped the ‘on’ switch the plasma hit your crystal and had nowhere to go.”

“So instant meltdown.”

“So instant meltdown.”

Ahsoka sighed in disappointment and started placing the components back in the box. “Then I guess that’s that, we’ll just have to go with the blaster and hope we don’t run into anything too dangerous.”

“Don’t give up yet.” Ahsoka’s head snapped up, and Jenni smiled at her renewed hope. “Like I said, our crystals can transform the flow of the Tao into energy, we just need to figure out the ... frequency? ... of the plasma we need and get rid of the extraneous components, and try again.”

“But ... but how do we feed the Force through the crystal? Where does it *come* from?”

“It comes from us.” Jenni fished her crystal out of her pocket and held it out in the palm of her hand, and after a moment its faint glow began to brighten until Ahsoka had to hold up her hand to shield her eyes. Jenni clenched her hand into a fist, the light leaking through her fingers for an instant before going out. “Ahsoka, so far as the Tao is concerned these crystals are a part of us. As it flows through us it flows through them, and we can direct that flow as the crystal transforms it at our direction.” With a grin, she added, “It’s too bad we can only attune to a single crystal at a time, or we’d never need batteries again!”

Ahsoka finished putting away the components and dug her own crystal out of her pocket. “So how do we do this?”

Jenni’s grin broadened. “Practice.”

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*Ten days later:*

Again crouched on the floor of the hold, Ahsoka finished assembling their second attempt at a working lightsaber as unwanted tension again coiled in her gut. It had taken them *way* too long to figure out exactly what ‘frequency’ they needed for the crystals to produce plasma (not a bad descriptive Jenni had come up with, Ahsoka thought, considering the process they’d gone through getting the right output).

Then they’d had to work out what to do with the energy being fed back — they couldn’t get rid of the fissure ringing the emitter, that feedback was needed to maintain the blade’s stability, but they no longer had a battery powering the blade for the fissure to feed that energy back into. They’d eventually settled on a series of empty batteries for the power to feed into and a heat vent and light if a fight went on too long, but it was a slapdash, temporary fix at best.

Now if only that slapdash, temporary fix would *work*. It would have to, they had enough rations left for one more meal.

“Ready?”

Ahsoka smiled at an equally tense Jenni and not even trying to hide it. (Though one thing Ahsoka
was pleased with was the way the last week’s effort had seemed to ease that bitterness in the other woman.) “Ready!” She rose to her feet walked out into the center of the hold. Holding the lightsaber out at arm’s length, she clenched her hand to squeeze the safety, put her thumb over the ‘on’ button, focused on her crystal inside the hilt ... and froze as the Force screamed at her of lethal danger.

“Ahsoka, what is wrong!?”

The Togruta carefully lowered the lightsaber and called back, “I don’t know, but whatever it is, it’s really dangerous.”

After a moment’s quiet, Jenni called back, “Leave the lightsaber there, we’ll activate it from a distance.”

“Good idea.” She carefully placed the lightsaber on the floor and walked back toward Jenni. The Human was looking around, and Ahsoka felt her reach out through the Force to pull several large crates over in front of them. “Another good idea.”

Joining Jenni behind the crates, Ahsoka reached out through the Force and lifted the lightsaber to shoulder height, squeezed the safety, focused on the crystal, simultaneously fed the Force into the crystal and pressed the button — and both she and Jenni ducked down as the lightsaber exploded, bits and pieces pinging off the wall above their heads and the crates in front of them. They both peeked over the top of the crates at the circular soot mark on the floor with a softly glowing crystal bouncing to a stop in the middle.

“Did I mention that our crystals amplify the current of the Tao that we feed into them?”

“No. No, you didn’t.”

Several hours later, Ahsoka finished assembling the last lightsaber they had components for. She had spent those hours practicing moderating how much of the Force she fed into her crystal, and figuring out just how much she needed for the required output.

Now she again strode out into the middle of the hold, lifted the lightsaber out to arm’s length at shoulder-height, clenched her hand to squeeze the safety, put her thumb over the ‘on’ button, focused on her crystal inside the hilt ... and when no warning came from the Force pressed the button while simultaneously (and extremely cautiously) ‘pushed’ the Force into the crystal — and a pure white blade spring from the hilt, humming.

“Yes, we did it!” At her shout her concentration on the crystal stuttered and the blade vanished, but it didn’t matter — she had a working lightsaber, the rest was just practice.

“Yes, we do.” Jenni walked out to join her, admiring the blade that Ahsoka had once again activated. “That’s quite some weapon, too bad we don’t have the components for another one.”

Relaxing her grip on the safety and dropping her focus on her crystal (did she even need a safety, if the lightsaber could only activate if she focused on the crystal?), Ahsoka shook her head. “No, it’s just as well. Lightsabers are tricky to use, and incredibly dangerous to anyone that hasn’t practiced with one. If we can get the components to control the intensity of the blade so we could reduce it to practice saber-level then I could train you, but as it is you’re better sticking to the blaster and leave the lightsaber to me.”

“That makes sense.” Jenni gazed longingly at the humming blade for another long moment, then shrugged. “So, on to the nearest settlement to find out if we can earn enough credits to refuel?”
“Maybe.” Deactivating the lightsaber, Ahsoka clipped it to her belt and strode toward the hold’s doorway.

In the common room, Ahsoka brought up the world map dotted with the settlements. Setting the map to slowly spin, she concentrated on the points of light, opened herself to the Force ... she reached out to touch a light dot at a junction of the two major rivers that Jenni had named ‘North America’. “That one.”

She looked up to find Jenni staring at her in confusion. The Human asked, “Did you just use the Tao to pick our destination?”

“Yes, I did. Do you mean your people didn’t?”

“No, we didn’t.” Jenni shifted her gaze back to the still-spinning map, eyes alight with wonder.

“How about Force visions?”

“We’d get them in dreams occasionally, it’s not hard to tell them from ordinary dreams or nightmares, but we don’t seek them out — just go with the flow of the Tao. Do you seek them out?”

“Sometimes, but you can’t really depend on them — ‘Always is in motion is the future’, as Master Yoda has said.”

“Cool.” Jenni gazed in wonder at the map for another long moment, then turned to Ahsoka. “So let’s go and see what kind of future the Tao is sweeping us toward.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know, mostly a process chapter this time. I wanted to get into some of the differences between the Jedi Order and the Youxia bonds. Sure, IMHO the bonds are superior to the Order, but not in everything — including the passivity they’ve picked up from the Taoism of their founder, insofar as looking to the future is concerned. It’s made them miss some possibilities, the same way that Order’s insistence on no emotion or connections has led it to miss some.

I took Timothy Zahn’s idea of the cave on Dagobah being a vergence that hid Yoda from the Emperor and extended it to the entire planet, like Tython but not as dangerous to non-Force sensitives (nor lost in the Deep Core, just a backwater planet no one important has ever heard of).

Note on time measurement: For this story I’m going with a Standard Year equaling 8766 hours (maybe make a Galactic Standard hour 3.6% shorter than ours for an even 9000?). But rather than the five days per standard week Wookieepedia gives I think ten days makes more sense: seven days for a usual work week and a three day weekend. Of course, non-Republic worlds will do whatever they please, and on the less “civilized” Republican worlds that seven-day work week is mostly a pipe dream.

The chapter title comes from the song by U2 — it’s a Beautiful Day, but things don’t quite feel right....
Ghent Tardun sighed as he stepped out of his office/jail, rubbing his face.

At the sound Cal glanced up from where he was leaning his chair against the wall. “That much fun, huh?”

“Yeah, Cort’s rants are getting longer. And even more obscene, if you can believe it.”

“Can you blame him?”

Ghent sighed again as he dropped onto the chair next to his lifelong friend, hand automatically checking to make sure the blaster on his hip was secure. “No, I don’t — it’s been weeks since Riptide pinged him on arrival and promptly disappeared, he’s getting scared ... more scared. But that doesn’t make it any more fun being on the wrong side of the com while he vents. And then there’s his demands that we drop everything and search the planet.”

“Yeah, like that’s gonna happen. Maybe we could manage to pull people away from what little time they can get in on their digs if there was any real chance of success, but it’s a big planet. If we had any ships we could scan for wreckage from orbit, but ...” Cal shrugged.

“True.” Ghent tilted his chair back to lean against the jail’s wall and swept his gaze along the synthecrete main street (only street, really, except for some short dirt roads) to the single landing pad at the end. It wasn’t much, but as the marshal of Newtown and the largely empty lands for hundreds of kilometers in all directions and even more since his marriage, it was in some sense his. “So, anything new from the dig at First Light? Or are they still digging out all the frozen mud?”

“Still digging out the mud. They’re asking for more help from Alysha Ranch, but they’re going to have to wait until after the roundup. However much everyone would like to dive in, keeping us all fed comes first.”

Ghent chuckled. He knew a few that would starve before they’d walk away from a dig, even if only temporarily, so it was a good thing cooler heads (or at least less fanatical) were in charge. As fascinating as the possibilities the First Light dig represented, he would miss the neo-nerf steaks next year if the roundup was interrupted. The neo-nerfs only had two horns and their hides lacked the nerf’s thick coat over their shoulders and heads, but their spit wasn’t acidic, their stench wasn’t near as bad, the meat was just as delicious, and the herds were finally getting large enough that it was dropping out of the luxury item category. If it wasn’t for the Treyans’ consensus policy of staying largely unnoticed until their digs had given up incontrovertible proof, that meat would be a luxury item, Trey’s biggest export.

He frowned when his daydream of a thick, juicy, neo-nerf steak was interrupted by the sight of a speeder bike coming out of one of those dirt roads. He didn’t recognize either of the two girls, even if he did the species — a Togrutan piloting and Human behind her. And he should recognize them, he knew everyone around close enough to use a speeder bike to come to town. For that matter, he knew everyone close enough to use a hopper to come to town — Newtown had only been settled a couple generations, and with only a few unique finds so far there hadn’t been a lot of immigration from the rest of the planet. And the Togrutans especially, not many non-Humans had joined the wild bantha chase that was Trey’s founding and fewer had migrated to Trey since. Though he’d never seen
anything like the Human’s white hair shot through with blue in imitation of her Togrutan friend’s 
montrals and lekku, either

The speeder stopped in the middle of the street as the two women looked both ways at the businesses 
that made up most of the buildings (on the first floors, at least, with the owners living on the floors 
above them). Then the Togrutan pointed at the general store before gunning the speeder bike into 
motion again. The pair dismounted from the bike and walked inside.

Ghent, what’s wrong?”

“Strangers on a speeder bike.”

“So?”

“Where’d they come from, on a bike?”

Cal shrugged. “Maybe they’re staying on one of the farms, borrowed the bike.”

“But then I’d know the bike —” Ghent stiffened as he realized he did know the bike, the dent and 
long scratch in the paint ... he could remember the time Ian had tried to ride his bike up the side of a 
cliff-in-all-but-name on a drunken dare and ended up leaving for his run to Milagro a few days late 
and smelling thanks to his bacta bath. He glanced at the buildings around the store, on both sides of 
the street, ran down his mental list of the people he knew were in town. “Put out the call for a posse, 
a circle around Navin’s store.”

/

“— but there simply isn’t any work around here. The harvest is in so the farms won’t have enough 
work for the hands they have until spring, and the bar has enough maids. The digs are always happy 
for more hands, but I assume you’re looking for more than room and board.”

“Yes, we are. But if that’s all we can get for a few months, then that’s all we can get. Are there better 
prospects anywhere else?” Ahsoka kept half an eye on the storekeeper as he frowned thoughtfully, 
and the rest of her attention on Jenni as she wandered the store, examining its not-so-varied products. 
Ahsoka wondered just how the store’s offerings looked to her time-lost friend — the former Jedi 
figured that food packets probably looked the same after ninety thousand years, and cooking aids 
would probably be a case of form following function. But the power packs and engine parts, both 
mechanical and electronic ...

“Lorne, the Marshal’s on the com!”

The female voice came from a back room, and the storekeeper straightened and turned away.
“Excuse me for a moment.” He disappeared into the back room, and Ahsoka focused all her attention 
on her friend with a smile.

The smile quickly faded, though, as a sense of unease grew ... a warning from the Force. But it 
wasn’t as abrupt as the warnings she knew so well from when she came under attack during the war, 
nor as intense as the constant “buzz” of being in a hostile war zone.

And Jenni didn’t seem to sense anything at all.

Then Lorne came out of the back room. “My apologies for making you wait. I’m afraid I can’t help 
you, any work at this season that actually pays would be south of the equator but I don’t know what 
communities.”
Ahsoka forced a smile. “Thank you for your time. Can you give me the contact info for the digs?”

“Certainly.” He quickly scribbled some numbers and letters on a small sheet of paper. “Here’s the web address.”

“Thank you.” Ahsoka took the offered sheet. “Jenni, come on, we’re going!”

Jenni turned away from an assortment of battery packs and hurried over to rejoin Ahsoka. The two stepped through the doorway and walked toward the speeder bike, Ahsoka’s tensing and looking around as the warning through the Force grew stronger and stronger....

A heavy metal blast door slammed up across the door and windows behind them with a massive clang that had Ahsoka jerking around, scrabbling at the clunky, makeshift lightsaber at her belt as the whine of a blaster bolt sounded, a ricochet —

She whipped back around, focusing on her crystal set inside her lightsaber’s hilt as she squeezed the safety, its pure white blade sprang to life....

The speeder bike had lifted from hip-high to chest-high with a tendril of smoke made of vaporized metal rising from it, hovering in front of Jenni’s widespread hands as if they were plastered against an invisible window. And someone was shouting.

“— nine rings take you, hold your fire! Someone take that damned idiot’s long-gun away from him.”

A male Human, average height, dark hair balding, slightly overweight ... the man that had been shouting, Ahsoka thought, stepped away from where he’d been standing behind a building’s corner. He had a blaster in hand and a badge on the chest of his vest — too far away to see the details, but she would have bet the credits she didn’t have that it had the two back-to-back triangles that were used to represent the law on many of the Outer Rim’s frontier planets. He paused to stare at Ahsoka and Jenni for a moment, before sliding his blaster back in its holster and walking toward them with his hands spread wide. A younger Human male — maybe even a teenager — stepped out of the door of the same building. (A building whose windows were also covered by metal shutters with firing slits, Ahsoka noticed — along with most every other window and door along the street.) He holstered his own blaster before joining the older man, ignoring the irritated glance the marshal sent him.

Through the Force she could sense hostile attention, but the feeling of imminent danger had faded. And none of the hostility was coming from the two walking toward her and Jenni.

“Morning, I’m Ghent Tardun and this is my sometime deputy, Brodie Vandorack,” the marshal said when the pair were close enough for normal conversation. “So, what are two Jedi doing on Trey? And where’s Ian?”

For a brief moment Ahsoka was tempted, but ... “I’m afraid neither of us are Jedi. Who is — ?”

“You’re Ahsoka Tano!”

Ahsoka froze for a moment at the deputy’s exclamation, but relaxed when no new warning flared in the Force. “Yes, I am. How did you know?”

“We may be such a backwater we don’t have a hyperwave transceiver —” the Marshal began.

“Yeah, how the Order treated you really suck!”

Ghent shot a repressive glance at his deputy. “— but we do get the news bursts through the subspace
transceiver — your trial got a lot of coverage, I don’t know how I didn’t make the connection myself. And Ian Keel is the owner of the speeder bike your ‘non-Jedi’ friend is using as a shield.”

“Oh, I never did learn his name.” Ahsoka hesitated, but didn’t know how to sugarcoat it — with two years of war she’d had more than a few friends die, but both as a Jedi and a commander of clone troopers she’d never had to write so much as a condolence letter. “He died saving my life.”

Ghent sighed, suddenly looking older. “I was afraid of that. After Riptide disappeared after pinging her arrival months ago and then you showing up on his speeder ...” He lifted the comp on his wrist and pressed a button. “All clear, everyone, thanks for coming out.” As people started rising on roofs and other shuttered windows rose, he waved toward his office. “You want to join me? I got someone that’s gonna need to know just how his friend died.”

“— and then Ian opened fire from behind his turned over table. He took down a few of the bounty hunters, and half the rest turned their fire on him. He probably thought the table would shield him, but didn’t take into account how heavy some of the bounty hunters’ blasters were — they blew through the table and took him down. But the distraction he provided gave me the chance to get over the bar and charge the bounty hunters. I didn’t have my shotos, but I did have a knife, and they weren’t wearing full body armor. Once I was in the middle of them, they didn’t stand a chance. I killed a few, more died from their own partners’ fire trying to shoot me and missing, and the survivors ran. Ian was still alive when I got to him, but even if there’d been a bacta tank right there I don’t think it would have helped. He was hurt too badly.” Ahsoka paused for a moment, eyes haunted as she remembered others she’d known with similar injuries, their hands in hers going limp as they died. Her voice gone soft, she finished with, “He survived long enough to give me the access codes to his ship and tell me where to find her. He never did tell me his name. I wonder if he recognized me like Deputy Vandorack?”

“Probably,” the Human male whose head-and-chest holographic image floating over the desk replied. (A rather handsome Human as they counted such things, as best she could tell from the hologram, at least compared to Skyguy. At least he had a full head of hair and no beard.) “He loved Riptide, he wouldn’t give it to some random Togrutan that isn’t even fully grown yet, even if he was dying.”

“Riptide?”

“You would know it as Fate’s Gift, that’s what was on the paperwork he was using.”

“So you believe her?”

Ahsoka and Jenni stiffened at Marshal Tardun’s question, but Cort nodded as he surreptitiously wiped at wet cheeks. “Yes, now that Ahsoka’s given me the details I’ve found the law enforcement records of his death in my downloads from Milagro. What’s there checks out. Dumb bastard always did have a soft spot for a pretty face. Once while we were on the run here —” He broke off, waving a hand dismissively.

Ahsoka flinched, then stiffened for a moment when Jenni took one of her hands, down toward their laps where neither man could see it.

What do I do? She struggled with the thought for a moment, then settled for gently squeezing Jenni’s hand before letting go.

“Besides,” Cort continued, “You’re being hunted. That adds some veracity to your claim.”

Ghent straightened in his chair. “You really think so? Hold that thought.” He lifted his wrist-comp to
his mouth again. “Clear sailing, Cort’s given the green light.” He lowered his hand as acknowledges sounded and grinned at the two girls gaping at him. “You didn’t think we’d just take your word for who you are? Well ... Tano, at least. I’m afraid the name ‘Jenni Allston’ doesn’t mean anything to us.” Ahsoka froze, focused on Jenni, and relaxed when she sensed her friend’s mental giggles through the Force ... and suddenly realized that Jenni’s attention hadn’t been focused on her once since they’d hit town! At least, not through the Force like on the ship. Maybe she’s getting better?

— third town in a month. The story he’s used every time has him just arriving, too. You’d think he didn’t think we’re talking to each other.”

Ahsoka refocused on the conversation in time to see a slight smirk cross the face of Cort’s holographic image. “He doesn’t. The first thing he did once he landed is slice the planetary network and go looking for the government databases ... I think. If that’s what he was looking for, he didn’t go anywhere near the trade databases. Guess he didn’t think that reports of what you found in the digs matter.”

To the former Jedi he might as well have been speaking an alien language, but Jenni was grinning. “Trade databases? Digs? You hid access to your government databases in archaeology websites? That’s brilliant!”

“Ahhh ... well ...” Ghent mumbled.

Cort laughed, though it sounded slightly forced. “Their government databases aren’t hidden in the archaeology websites, they are the archaeology websites.”

Now it was Jenni’s turn to stare at him as if he was speaking an alien language (which for Jenni at least he was, now that Ahsoka thought about it). “What?”

“Well, yes ...” Ghent shrugged, embarrassed. “Trey was actually colonized by a Core World archaeologist named Vinjera Kurn several centuries ago. Kurn found some ancient records that said that Coruscant isn’t the Human homeworld, but as far as the survivors of some great calamity got before their ships wore out. The records didn’t say what the nature of the calamity was or how many refugees landed on Coruscant, or even in what direction they had come, but it did include a description of the star system. She spent decades searching every star map she could find, and eventually found this world. All her fellow scholars thought she was crazy to take those records so seriously, that it had to be a hoax even if they couldn’t figure out how it was done, but she was a true believer and so she and her followers — and their families — moved here looking for proof, gave the planet the name in the records.” He shrugged again. “They found evidence of an ancient civilization quickly enough, probably humanoid and the right size from the layouts of the few below-ground installations we’ve found, but no records or images have survived the millennia. We’ll keep looking, though — it’s a big planet, the proof has to be around here somewhere.”

Ahsoka stared at him for a long moment, then turned to meet Jenni’s eyes. She hesitantly reached out to her Human friend through the Force, and gasped at the wave of grief, exultation and loneliness that crashed over her.

But none of she was feeling showed when Jenni forced a smile. “Trey ... Terra. I guess we have trade goods we can sell, after all.” Ahsoka thought of the hours and hours of translated books stored away in Fate’s Gift’s data banks and nodded. (Or was it Riptide’s? She’d have to decide which name she wanted to keep for the ship she’d been given — the one that seemed so appropriate, or the one given by the man that had loved it.)

As Ahsoka was momentarily lost in thought, Jenni asked, “Can you bring up a map of the world?”
Ghent gazed at her curiously for a moment, then shrugged and typed some instructions into the panel he’d used to bring up Cord’s hologram. That hologram vanished, replaced by a rotating image of the globe.

Jenni rose and walked around by Ghent. She gazed at the globe for a moment, then reached out and touched a spot on the southeast section of the same continent as the town they were currently in. “Somewhere around here. It’ll take some looking, but you should be able to find a huge carving into the side of a mountain of three Human males on riding animals. The carving is under an overhang and the rock is very hard, so it should still be there.”

Ghent stared at the spot on her finger rested on, then up at Jenni. “How do you know? Is this some Jedi trick?”

“No.” Jenni shook her head, and shifted her hand to point at a spot on the continent across the ocean to the east, on the west coast just below the retreating ice. “Because I was born here when it was an island, ninety thousand years ago.”

Chapter End Notes

The carving actually exists — the Confederate Memorial Carving. This carving of President Jefferson Davis and Generals Robert E. Lee and “Stonewall” Jackson is the largest high relief sculpture in the world, its top over 400 feet above the ground, measuring 90 feet by 190 feet, and recessed 42 feet into the mountain. The rock is hard enough that if we all disappeared tomorrow, 100,000 years from now it might be the only evidence left that we were ever here. (I’m assuming that over the next thousand years leading to Jenni’s time, building materials are developed that are tough enough to survive ninety millennia if buried even if records and all other soft materials wouldn’t.)

And yes, Jenni was born somewhere in the British Isles, though that would have only been of historical interest under a centuries-old world government.
Ahsoka slowly circled about Jenni, her lightsaber held high by one hand, slanting diagonally down across her torso in the opening position of Soresu, the blade humming at the low pitch that told anyone with any experience with the weapons that it was set in training mode. Her *new* lightsaber. Her use of Soresu — that most defensive of forms — was good practice even if she wasn’t as skilled as she could be, but unnecessary ... Jenni *never* initiated an attack. Instead she turned in place to keep facing Ahsoka, *her* new lightsaber in a two-handed grip at waist level, blade slanting down and humming at the same low pitch.

First the archaeologists had found the relief sculpture that Jenni had told them of. Then they’d found more evidence of ancient occupation at site after site that Jenni pointed out, some previously discovered, most not. *Then* they found evidence of ancient terraforming of their next neighbor out from the sun, the planet Jenni had said was named Mars — a place none of them had bothered to visit, since even the most primitive hyperspace drive opened up local space with its habitable planets to easy colonization ... the possibility that humanity’s first form of space travel was something else much slower hadn’t occurred to them. And with her credentials firmly established, Jenni had turned over all her people’s literature she’d recited and translated over the past few weeks.

Now the debate raging across the planet was when to release their findings to the larger universe. (They’d avoided pirate raids by not having anything that made the trip worth it, and with the war on ...) And Ahsoka and Jenni found that what few credits they had were no good anywhere on the planet, whatever they asked for — or even expressed an interest in — was theirs. They’d kept their requests limited to an overhaul of *Life’s Gift* (the name for their ship Ahsoka had eventually decided on in honor of the man that had saved her life at the cost of his own), topping off the fuel tanks and restocking the ship’s supplies, a few changes of clothing, a new body for Defenate ... and all the necessary components for *real* lightsabers (with the addition of the crystals they’d brought out from the Mountain). They had spent the week since then in almost constant practice.

Ostensibly, it was to prepare Jenni for their confrontation with the stranger still wandering from town to town searching for Ahsoka, in case he was another Dark Side user. Certainly, Jenni had needed the training — she had some skill with some sort of sword that helped with lightsabers, but even with Ahsoka handicapped by her inability to use her favorite fighting style (Jar’Kai used two swords, and there were no Kyber crystals on Trey for a third lightsaber) Jenni had still been clumsy and easily handled by her trainer. At first. But now ...

In an eye-blink Ahsoka shifted from Soresu to her next-favorite form — Ataru — throwing herself up and forward, spinning and twisting head-over-heels over Jenni, pure white blade slashing down toward the Human’s white, blue-striped hair.
And just as Ahsoka had come to expect, Jenni’s equally pure white blade snapped up to block the downward swing as she spun in place, blade sweeping across her body to knock aside Ahsoka’s follow-up slash. Ahsoka stepped back, easily parrying Jenni’s counter-thrust, and dropped to swing at her ankles, then when Jenni hopped up over the attack shifted the path of the swing up between her legs toward her crotch — only to blink when Jenni practically stood on her head, one foot pointed at the ceiling, her blade easily knocking Ahsoka’s blade away from her body through the space now empty.

At that Ahsoka leaped back and relaxed the flow of the Force through her into her lightsaber. As her blade vanished she held up her hands to signal the end of the bout. “Oh, come on! What was that? How do you do that?”

“Do what?” Jenni inquired as she shut down her own lightsaber.

“Always be somewhere else. I mean, I know Jedi Masters — which Force knows I’m not — have levels of skill and emersion in the Force that make them untouchable by anyone but another Master or overwhelming numbers. I’ve seen Master Yoda bounce around a training room like a kiffu ball on enhancers. But you don’t have that kind of skill, you can’t come close to touching me. So how can you pull off stunts like that last one?”

“Ah, another difference. I should have realized when you told me of your six Forms, we didn’t have anything them.” Jenni walked over and picked up a water bottle by the wall, sucked down half of it, and dumped the rest over her head before continuing.

“The Youxia didn’t go in for martial arts, not most of us. We didn’t have lightsabers, or blasters, and did have a more peaceful union ... a utopia, even, while it lasted.” She faltered for a moment, face going cold, and Ahsoka’s heart clenched. She wished now she hadn’t asked, and was really happy that for the moment her friend had dropped her usual near-constant focus on her through the Force, it gave her the privacy to push down her growing fear of Jenni’s mental state.

With clearly-forced cheer, Jenni continued, “Anyway, it’s another aspect of how deeply I immerse myself in the currents of the Tao. Every act of aggression is an act of self, an imposition of your own will to shift that current. And because it is, there is a disturbance in that current that I sense before the blow arrives. The only way to avoid that disturbance is to train that act of aggression so strongly into mind and body that you act without thought.”

“Which I often don’t,” Ahsoka mused, realization dawning. “My preferred Form is based around two shota, I almost never fall back on a single, longer-bladed lightsaber. But why does that mean you have no Forms? There are any number of Masters that can sense the ... ‘disturbance in the currents of the Tao’ as well as you can.”

“But not many below their level, I think, your training must focus on other aspects that never occurred to us. So you use the Forms to at least partially make up for that lack. But it’s more than that. Yes, the only way to act aggressively against a Youxia without forewarning or overwhelming numbers is training, but that training is itself predictable if your opponent is trained in the same Form. So the ‘Form’ of a Youxia that is swept into a warrior’s destiny is both unique and constantly changing, so that when he faces another Youxia warrior in a spar — or a slave of the Void in deadly combat — his Art is not already known.”

“And we’ve been sparring for most of a week, you’ve been learning my moves, even beyond your ‘immersion in the current of the Tao’. But I’d think that would really slow down your training — beyond enough of the basics to avoid killing yourself, every Youxia is self-taught.”

“Yes.”
The one word response was flat, cold, and through the Force Ahsoka sensed that her friend was once again falling into that raging despair that she lived with (or more like dwelt in) more and more with every passing day ... when she wasn’t focused like a laser on Ahsoka during their sparring. And they couldn’t spar all the time. **So I’ll have to think of something else ... somehow. But for now ...**

Ahsoka raised her lightsaber, focused on her crystal with a part of her attention as the rest centered itself on her friend, and her blade sprang to life. “So I’ll have to get sneakier. Let’s see how I do.”

/oOo/

When the alert from her secretary (and former handmaid and still her bodyguard), softly chimed, Senator Padme Amidala of Naboo breathed a sigh of relief and hastily pressed the acceptance key. “Yes, Aja?”

“**Knight Skywalker is here, my lady, and wishes to know if you can tear yourself away from your oh-so-important work.**”

Padme grinned at the snark. Aja didn’t approve of her superior’s secret intimacy with ‘the Hero with No Fear’, but nonetheless did her part to keep it quiet. Her less than respectful announcement was her way of letting Padme know that her husband had arrived alone.

She glanced around to make sure the office windows’ shutters were closed (as they almost always were now, officially to make it harder for assassins but really for these moments with her husband), then said, “Send him in. Then why don’t you call it a day? Knight Skywalker and I may have a great deal to ... discuss, and he can escort me home when we’re done.” Left unspoken, ‘the Hero with No Fear’ would provide all the protection she needed.

“**Of course, my lady.**”

In the seconds before the door slid open, Padme blanked her screen of the vitally important but mind-numbing trade agreement she’d been reading, pushed the button that would withdraw the screen into her desk, and rose to her feet as her husband strode into her office, dressed in the blue and brown battle dress he preferred to the usual Jedi white. As soon as the door slid close behind him, she was around her desk and in his arms. “Annie!”

His arms went around her without a word, without concern for how he crushed her own gray and tan robes, her face pressed into the crook of his shoulder, his face rubbing against her brunette braids. Under her hands, even through his tunic his every muscle felt like it was poured steel. Sometimes she wished she was Force-sensitive, to be able to read the moods of the man she’d chosen, but at times like this there’d be no point.

She sighed into his neck. “No word, then.”

“No — no rumors in the under-levels, no hint that she caught a ship off Coruscant ... it’s as if Ahsoka’s vanished like she never existed.” He released her, pushed away and whirled around, fists by his side trembling. “And the Council refuses to devote more resources searching for her, they say that since she left the Order she’s no longer their concern. **No longer their concern. As if they were concerned about her before!**”

Padme stepped over, laying a hand on his shoulder. “You care. You know Obi-Wan cares. Yoda cares. And I care. And you at least know she’s still alive, right? You said your master-padawan bond is still there.”

“Yes, I know she’s alive, but that’s all. And I can’t keep searching for her, Obi-Wan and I have been
assigned a new mission. Tomorrow I’ll be taking the 501st to Auwei, we won’t be back for a month at least. And without me and Obi-Wan here to keeping searching ourselves —”

Padme broke their embrace to push back, hold Anakin at arm’s length so she could look him in the eye. “That leaves me. I will not stop searching.”

Anakin gazed back at his wife for a long moment, then pulled her to him, crushing his lips against hers hard enough to bruise.

_Oh no, not again!_ Normally, Anakin was as loving and considerate a lover as a woman could hope for. But lately ... 

His hands were already busy at the fastenings for her robes. Those robes had the appearance of the full, cumbersome robes that were the current popular style for a human Senator to conduct official business. (She had considered breaking with that style for something more comfortable, but as young and powerless as she was she would have seemed only petulant rather than a trend-setter.) But since their marriage over two years ago ... His seeking fingers found the artfully hidden clasps and her robes fell open. He brushed them back off her shoulders and she dropped her arms to her sides so the robes could slide down her back to pool about her feet, leaving her standing in only her white panties and low pink slipper-boots. One hand found an exposed breast as the other pushed aside his own blue battle robes to scrabble at the fastening of his tight, light brown pants.

Truthfully, in other circumstances she wouldn’t have minded his newfound aggressiveness so much. If it wasn’t for her concern that it was driven by his fears rather than because he had finally realized that normal people weren’t more ... fragile ... than trained Jedi, she could enjoy a more dominant Anakin — one that didn’t treat her like a precious, delicate flower that would crumble at a careless touch. The problem was —

He spun her to face the front of her desk. One hand between her shoulder blades pushed her down to lie across its top, her nipples tightening at the cool touch of its surface, while his other hand pulled her panties to one side. A moment later she could feel his engorged cock pushing past her nether lips to sink into her sheath, and she wasn’t _ready!_

His hands gripped her hips as he hammered into her, and she gritted her teeth as she endured the friction of his steel-hard cock against the stretched, barely dampening walls of her sheath. The only good thing about this whole botched up mess was that when her lover was like this he didn’t last long. Indeed, she could already feel him swelling, the pain growing worse from the imagined further stretching of her sheath’s walls, and then he _exploded_ into her as he always did on their first round whenever they could sneak in some private time together.

His last few pumps were much less painful thanks to the lubrication of his seed filling her, oozing out around his softening rod. Then he pulled out and stumbled backward, falling onto the aluthiac-leather couch she had against one wall, his pants fallen around his dark brown knee-high boots.

As he lay there gasping, she straightened and walked around to the back of her desk, pressing a hidden stud for tissue. She ignored him as she silently wiped her nether lips and inner thighs clean of the smeared white ooze. As she dropped the soiled tissue into a special disposal box to vanish with a flash into its constituent atoms, he finally spoke.

“I did it again. I’m sorry.”

Padme whirled and strode furiously toward him. “Yes, I’m sure you are! Like the last time, and the time before that. ‘Sorry’ isn’t good enough, Annie, not anymore!” She paused to stare down at him. Her resolve weakened for a moment at the clear guilty regret on his face, but she steeled herself ...
they could not go on like this.

As she continued to stare down at him, a thought occurred to her. She smiled, and Anakin paled. “What you need, love, is a lesson. You are going to lie there and not move unless I tell you.”

He paled even more, swallowed, but nodded convulsively.

“Good.”

She began by kicking off her slipper-boots, then hooking a thumb under each side of the waistband of her stained panties and slowly pulling them down along her thighs until they came loose and slid down her legs to the floor. She stepped out of them and kicked them to one side, then straightened and spread her stance slightly, putting herself fully on display.

Eyes wide, Anakin swallowed ... though this time for a very different reason.

*Good.* Padme’s lips twitched at the sight ... but her lips weren’t what she wanted twitching. She reached up one hand to pinch and twist a nipple before kneading the breast it tipped, fingers of her other hand between her legs rubbing along her cleft then slipping up into her sheath. She twisted those rubbing fingers, seeking ... *there!* She moaned at the sensations rippling through her from her hands and suppressed another smile as Anakin’s cock twitched and swelled from her show, growing to attention thanks to her show. *Almost there,* she thought, beginning to gasp slightly, her hips twitching.... *Now!*

She pulled her fingers clear of her cleft and lifted them up to suck and lick them clean, her gaze fixed on her husbands’ still-wide eyes, then strode forward and straddled his hips with her hands on his shoulders. Giving him what she hoped was a sultry a smile (and hoping that his obvious lust had overwhelmed whatever sense he might have been receiving through the Force of her own state of mind), she undulated her hips, rubbing her nether lips along his by now steel-hard rod and coating it with her juices. Satisfied, she reached down to guide his cock to her sheath’s entrance and sank down with a satisfied sigh. She held still as she adjusted again to that vein-laced rod, more quickly this time thanks to her earlier reaming and fresh lubrication, then finally began to slowly rise and fall.

By now her mind was fogging from the rising pleasure washing through her. He pace began to pick up slightly, sucking in air as she struggled to hold on to her purpose ... until Anakin’s own control *finally* slipped and he began to frantically thrust up into her.

Instantly, she slammed down. “I said don’t move!”

He groaned with frustration but followed her order. She sat on his lap for a long minute, let her breathing settle, waited until his hands resting on the smooth aluthiac leather curled into fists before resuming her rise and fall. *This* time she was better able to maintain control, her rhythm staying slow but steady ... though her hands gripping Anakin’s shoulder were tightening, fingernails digging into flesh.

Nor was she the only one maintaining control — when her husband wasn’t half-insane from worry and frustration he really was a considerate lover, and had quickly learned to somehow hold off his own release until she’d reached her own peak. Though from his increasingly strangled groans she suspected she was pushing his limits.

Finally, when she was beginning to tremble from the effort of maintaining her even pace and his head was tilted back against the back of the couch, neck taut and eyes screwed shut with his own fight to keep still, Padme decided she’d tortured them both enough. “All right, you can move.”
Even before she finished her permission Anakin’s hands flew up from the couch to pull her down against his chest even as he rolled them over, pinning her down, the smooth leather cool against her sweat-slicked skin. Hands braced on the back of the couch on each side of her head, he began the furiously pound into her, bouncing her back against the couch with each thrust. But even now he somehow managed to hold himself back until she felt her sheath clench tight around his steel-hard cock and her shrill keen of release filled the office. Within seconds Padme again felt the familiar swelling pulse and Anakin slammed into her once more and froze, buried deep, as fresh seed gushed into her womb.

Finally, when the last pulse into her overflowing sheath was over and his cock began to soften, he carefully rolled to the side and settled onto the couch beside her. “Lesson learned,” he gasped out between gulps for air, “I won’t do that again.”

Padme sighed as her own breathing slowed. “I hope not, I wouldn’t want to put you through a repeat performance.” I think that was as hard on me as it was on you, love.

When she decided she’d recovered enough, she pushed herself to her feet and staggered toward her office ‘fresher. “Let’s finish this up in my suite,” she called over her shoulder as the door disguised as just another wall panel slid aside. She stepped in without waiting for a reply. Anakin knew the routine, and by the time she’d finished wiping herself down and cleaned off with the sonic shower she’d had installed after the first time her husband had surprised her in her office he’d have hung up their clothes in the cleaning closet Aja had helped her install (the cleaning closet wasn’t what she would call really effective, but it was good enough to kill the smell and remove obvious stains) and activated the cleaning droid he’d reprogrammed to forget dealing with the messes left behind by their little interludes. By the time she was done he’d be ready to take her place in the ‘fresher.

But this time she would be just a wee bit slower getting clean. As the door slid closed behind her, she pushed a stud on the wall by the mirror and when a small storage space’s cover slid aside removed the fluid collector that space contained. The small device had been designed for collecting and preserving forensic evidence at crime scenes, but she had another use in mind. Hastily sitting on the toilet seat and spreading her legs, she inserted the probe up into her sheath. She grimaced at the cold of the probe and the sensation of its soft suction, but the clear crystaplast tube connecting the probe to the reservoir quickly turned white before the light signaling that the reservoir was full flashed. Sighing in relief, she removed the probe and returned the collector to its storage space and again pushed the stud to hide it from sight. The stud would only open to her fingerprint, the collected sample could wait to be smuggled out another day.

I don’t care what those fools on the Jedi Council think, love, she thought fondly as she again wiped her inner thighs clean of his smeared seed and her own juices, you need more attachments. Ahsoka and Obi-Wan were actually making things worse for her husband, not better — he needed another attachment that wasn’t going to vanish or constantly be at risk on the battlefield, someone not a part of the too-often horror of their current lives. And I’ll see to it you have them. If tonight doesn’t do it, this sample will be a start.
Yes, another chapter! Now that *The Unexpected Hobbit* and *The Raven* are done this is one of the stories I’ll be focused on (along with *Ranma, the Naive Succubus*, once I finish rereading what I’ve already written).

And yes, this is a little short. For those that don’t read my other stories, I’ve decided to go with shorter chapters again, to try and motivate myself to write more. So far, it seems to be mostly working.

Jenni frowned as she stared at the large hologram in Navin-town’s small library. Very small, only a hologram projector and keyboard in a room that could be mistaken for a large closet if it wasn’t for the window, but she was a little surprised to find a library at all — as connected through some form of wireless as the current colonists of Earth-that-was were, everyone would have their own tablet. But she supposed people would want a larger projector from time to time, she’d been using the library screen for stellar maps.

It had been almost a day since she’d taken her fatigue-driven misstep during her last spar with Ahsoka, and the town’s (village’s, really, ‘town’ was too grandiose a label) single part-time medic had ordered her to take a two-day break from all exercise to give her body a chance to recover from the strain of the past week (ten days, she was still getting used to that) of near-constant sparring. During that day she had felt the silence-fueled darkness of her mind growing, filling in the corners, shadowing her every thought. Even the shining flame of Ahsoka in the current of the Tao was helping less and less — as comforting as the former padawan’s presence was, it was outside her, not shining at the center of her being as her Bond had been. And now Ahsoka was gone, answering a call from Marshal Tardun, and Jenni was desperate for any distraction she could manage.

Finding a possible if permanent solution to her growing instability had been quick, though it had revealed a very unpleasant side of galactic society — or societies, better said. That done except for convincing Ahsoka to go along with it (something that was *not* going to be easy), Jenni set that solution aside and turned to a more general perusal of the library’s database. She had hoped that satisfying her intellectual curiosity about recent history and current affairs would provide a distraction. It was proving distracting, all right, but only because now she was haunted by the overwhelming feeling that she was *missing* something ... something *important*.

Whatever it was, it had to do with the beginning of the current war, whenever she let the Tao’s currents sweep her attention where it would she kept coming back to that opening battle, the First Battle of Geonosis. She reviewed the historical record of the beginning of the war yet again, and yet again couldn’t see anything significant — it seemed a straightforward battle: several Jedi found out about the Separatists’ building military strength, the Separatists tried to buy more time by killing the Jedi that found them (and Senator Amidala, and how *she* ended up in that mess wasn’t clear), the Jedi swept in with an army of their own, clones force-grown for war —

Her thoughts stumbled. From what Ahsoka had told her the Order was supposed to be dedicated to *peace* — diplomats preferably, ‘one riot, one ranger’ (and maybe a padawan) when diplomacy failed. What were the Jedi doing with *an army of their own!*?
Some quick research had Jenni leaning back in her seat, more confused than before. The thought of the Jedi Order making use of ultra-tech Mamelukes was disturbing, but she could understand it ... there was a war on, they needed an army, they had one handed to them, they made use of it. She couldn’t think but that there had been at least some opposition to using what was essentially a slave army, but the only alternative was a quick victory by the Separatists ... and considering what the Trade Federation had done to Naboo a decade earlier, that victory would have been catastrophic for hundreds if not thousands of major worlds and uncountable minor ones. So yes, she could understand how the pragmatists carried the day.

But where had that army come from? Or rather, following Kaulana’s advice when investigating human behavior — whether crime or politics — to follow the money, where had the funding for the army come from? (She fought to ignore the spurt of grief at the thought of that gentle cynic’s missing mental presence.) According to the public records, the creation of that army had been commissioned by Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas without the knowledge of the rest of the Order out of concern over the growing breakdown of public order, but surely a lifelong member of the Order couldn’t have secretly accumulated enough private wealth to fund the creation of an entire army! So who had backed him, and why wasn’t that person or organization a matter of public record?

A little digging and it turned out his backer was a matter of public record, just that the public record in question was buried deep in minor news articles: Hego Damask of the Galactic Banking Clan. And that didn’t make sense, either — Damask was wealthy but he wasn’t that wealthy, no individual was. Or rather he hadn’t been that wealthy, seeing how he had died in his sleep at almost the moment the war started. So if Damask hadn’t funded it out of his own wealth he was either acting as a conduit for some shadowy conspiracy or he had convinced the Banking Clan to pony up the funds itself. Of the two options, the former seemed more likely than the latter — bankers weren’t big on unprofitable ventures, and there was little less profitable than an army that wasn’t being used for conquest; not much money to be had in building massive quantities of expensive materiel, shipping it great distances, and blowing it up. In either case any records wouldn’t be public, so following the money was a dead end.

But I’m on the right track, I think, the timing of Damask’s death isn’t suspicious at all. So if I can’t follow the money, what about the power? Who has gained the most power out of all this? It’s not the Trade Federation, the last thing they wanted was a fair fight. But it could be someone connected to the Trade Federation, playing them off against the Republic.

So let’s google news articles for ‘increase political power war’ and see what we get. (She fought to ignore the spurt of grief at that bit of nonsensical slang for web searches that was now known by only a single living being.)

Unsurprisingly, the number of hits was in the thousands, and she sighed, eliminated everything predating the Battle of Geonosis, sorted them from earliest to latest, and dove in.

Several hours later she leaned back and rubbed tired eyes, almost shaking with repressed anger — there had been many names that had come up in those articles, but one that had surfaced over and over: Sheev Palpatine, former Senator of Naboo and current Chancellor of the Republic. A Chancellor whose authority had been steadily growing as the years of war passed. Don’t go off half-cocked, she warned herself even as the need to obliterate something — anything — burned in her veins. By all reports he’s done a lot of good with that power; he’s been a decent war leader, and has had some real success reducing corruption. What if it’s someone that intends to assassinate him and step into his shoes?

She sat and stared and the holo-projection for a time, now just waiting for Ahsoka to return. The Togrutan was young, but still knew a hell of a lot more about galactic politics than she did, perhaps
she’d be able to see something Jenni had missed. Though Jenni doubted a Padawan would be privy to the sort of information that would answer her questions, that data would be deeply buried.

Wait, Ahsoka might not be privy to what I need, but Cort’s a hacker! (‘Slicer’, by current Galactic slang.) I’ll bet he can find it for us!

It was a few moment’s work to bring up the library’s com app, and a few more moments for a hologram of the upper half of a Cort rubbing at his eyes to appear. He looked at her and grimaced. “Jenni, what was so important that you called me in the middle of the night?”

Jenni’s eyes widened, and she glanced at the angle of the shadow cast by the light from the window. “Ummm ... oops?”

Cort chuckled. “Forgot the time difference, did you? Well, I’m up now. What can I do for you?”

A now blushing Jenni quickly explained what she’d learned and her concerns, ending with, “I’ve taken it as far as I can, and I doubt Ahsoka can add anything, but you’re a hacker ... uh, slicer. I know your connection here isn’t the best but could you—”

She broke off at Cort’s raised hand. “And what will you do if you find out who’s behind this?”

She shrugged, trying to keep the snarling fury she could feel slowly building again off her face. “I don’t know, it’ll depend on who it is. Maybe nothing, but it’s better to know who your enemies are.”

“Yeah, I thought so too, that’s why I’m here.” Jenni’s eyes widened again, but this time he wasn’t laughing. “You’re not the first one to wonder about that, you know, I did too. I’m sure we’re far from the only ones ... only unlike those other ones, I was skilled enough to find out. But I wasn’t skilled enough not to get caught.” He sighed and rubbed at his face. “The first assassin missed us out of sheer dumb luck. Ian was paying attention after that and caught the next one. After that ... I got the heads up of the massive bounty posted with the Bounty Hunter’s Guild from someone that owed me a favor barely early enough for us to run. I created new identities for us, but we didn’t have anyone we trusted to give us new faces and not sell us out so we had to disappear into the Outer Rim. And here we’ve been ever since, until Ian got himself killed saving Ahsoka.”

Jenni was beginning to shake again. She whispered, “Who?”

“Are you sure you want to know? You won’t be able to un-know it after and I doubt you can do anything about it.”

“Who?”

Cort hesitated, but finally shrugged. “The Chancellor.”

The building anger Jenni had been fighting for so long howled.
Ahsoka sighed as she walked alongside Marshal Tardun on their way back to the Navin-town library. She knew Jenni needed her around to help keep her sane, but she’d badly needed some alone time so the afternoon away from the time-lost Human was something of a relief. Speaking of which ... “Thanks for letting my borrow one of your blasters and your firing range.”

Ghent shrugged. “Whatever you want, you get. Within reason, anyway. Must say me and the boys were a bit surprised by your request, though ... and how good you were. Thought you Jedi stuck to your lightsabers.”

“We mostly do,” Ahsoka agreed, “but however ‘elegant’ a lightsaber might be compared to a blaster, there are times you need the extra range. Especially with the war. I imagine you didn’t find the rest surprising, though.”

“No, everyone knows about the Jedi ability to parry blaster bolts, and having the boys take potshots at you while you bounced around like a kiffa ball made for good practice for everyone. Good thing those blasters were set on stun, though, we didn’t know you could reflect the bolts back at the shooters.”

“Not all Jedi can, mostly the more experienced ones that get sent out expecting a fight. Which pretty much described my life since becoming a padawan, now that I think about it.”

Ghent chuckled but didn’t respond, the two falling silent for half a block.

When they turned to corner onto the block with the city offices containing the library cubicle, Ahsoka stopped. “So, Marshal, before we rejoin Jenni, what did you want to talk to me about?”

Ghent sighed, shaking his head. “I suppose I should have expected a Jedi to know.”

“Actually, it’s that you didn’t say anything before Jenni headed for the library, and that your offices are on the other side of town.”

Ghent laughed. “How often are Jedi powers used to explain common sense?”

“More than you’d think, having a reputation for being all-knowing has two edges,” Ahsoka replied with a grin. “Now talk!”

“Right.” Ghent hesitated for a moment, before shrugging. “Is something wrong with Jenni?”

Ahsoka’s eyes widened, that had not been what she had been expecting. “Why do you think something might be wrong with Jenni?”

“A few of my people whose instincts I trust tell me that they feel ... uneasy, around Jenni. There’s nothing they can point to, but they feel like something’s wrong.”

“Do they?” Ahsoka turned to lean against the wall of the store they were standing next to, crossing her arms to seem as unthreatening as possible. “I wonder if they’re Force-sensitive? That could explain it.”
“Force-sensitive?” Ghent repeated, eyebrows rising.

“No one that can sense the Force is strong enough to become a Jedi. Most aren’t, actually.” After a moment’s hesitation, Ahsoka sighed. “Yes, something is wrong with Jenni. Remember, she may be a Force-user but she isn’t a Jedi, her people did things differently. She joined her bond when she was sixteen, and for the four years after before she ended up in stasis she lived with at least two people in her head, usually four — those constant presences in the Force, every emotion, able to communicate with them on the other side of the planet as easily as if they were in the same room, her mind and memories an open file, and the same for them. Now, her mind has gone silent and it’s driving her insane. Maybe she’d be all right if she was back in her own time, but . . .” She waved one arm, encompassing the town around them.

“But everything and everyone she knew and loved is ninety millennia gone,” Ghent said for her. “And an insane Jedi — Force-user — is a dangerous one.”

Ahsoka reluctantly nodded. “It doesn’t happen often, but when it does the results can be terrible. Falling to the Dark Side — ‘into the Void’, as Jenni would put it — is inevitable.”

“If she might be so dangerous, why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because that would just make it worse. She’s empathic, in a way that Jedi aren’t — we can sense emotions, but we usually need to focus on it. I think she does it as automatically as breathing.”

“And sensing distrust in everyone around her would just push her over the edge even faster.”

Ahsoka nodded, and Ghent rubbed his forehead. “Force, what a mess! Isn’t there anything you could have done to prepare us just in case?”

“I did.” At Ghent’s cocked eyebrow she forced a smile. “You didn’t notice that today I trained you and your deputies in how to take down a single Jedi?”

His other eyebrow joined the first, then he suddenly looked thoughtful. “Pin the Jedi in one place as best we can, with multiple blasters firing from multiple directions. Explosive attacks from a distance would work, too.”

“Maybe. It would work better in a city than on a planet of small settlements, but that’s the best way for non-Jedi to take down a Jedi short of orbital bombardment.” Her gaze dropped, staring at the wind-blown pattern in the dust covering the synthecrete at her feet. “It might be better for me for that matter, with all the sparing we’ve been doing she’s learned a lot about my fighting style and I’m lucky if I can get a touch on her at all. But I needed something to take her mind off the silence, that we could do together so she could sense me in the Force.” She looked up again, a single tear running down her cheek. “Marshal, I don’t know what to do.”

And in an instant the young Togrutan changed from the admired Jedi Knight (even if she insisted that she’d never been more than a Padawan) and hardened war veteran to a child not much older than Ghent’s oldest boy, lost in a world she didn’t fully understand. Ghent found himself fighting to resist the urge to hug her and tell her that everything would be all right . . . both because she might take the embrace wrong, and because he didn’t like to make promises he wasn’t sure he could keep. Instead, he cleared his throat as best he could of the sudden lump and asked, “Have you talked to her about —”

Ahsoka gasped and whirled, lightsaber instinctively leaping into her hand, as the oppressive sensation of the Dark Side of the Force washed over her. She looked around frantically, senses reaching out, searching for the sudden danger . . . and the glasssteel window to the library cubicle exploded out of its frame to hurtle across the street.
Even as she heard the high-pitched, enraged shriek coming from the now empty window she was running forward, lightsaber angled to block anything coming out of it, Marshal Tardun pounding along right behind her.

Then she slammed to a stop as the Force screamed a warning, just barely getting her lightsaber up in time to block a crackling ribbon of lightning whipping through the window. She held it, twisted to angle her lightsaber to catch a second strand, glanced through the window and stiffened at the sight of Jenni standing upright, legs and arms spread wide, blue-streaked white hair seeming to coruscate around her thrown back head as writhing strands of lightning radiated from her hands to score trails in the walls, hammer into the sparking remnants of the library console, flash through the window and past her.

Then Jenni’s gaze dropped, and at the sight of her yellow-iris eyes Ahsoka cried out ... and then screamed as the break in her concentration allowed the force lightning she’d been blocking to hammer into her. She spasmed as every nerve in her body seemed to light up, falling backward into the street.

“‘Soka!” The shout came at the same instant that the pain stopped, and a moment later a gentle hand rolled her onto her back, the fingers of the other hand pressing into one side of her neck. She forced open her eyelids to see Jenni, a concerned expression on her face ... and not a hint of yellow in her eyes.

“Jenni, raise your hands and back away slowly.”

Drawing on the Force to keep the pain from driving her under as she so badly wanted, Ahsoka twisted to see the Marshal standing several meters away, blaster in a two-handed grip leveled at her friend. She managed to rasp out, “Marshal, it’s all right. She didn’t intend to hit me ... she wasn’t aiming at anything.”

Ghent hesitated, then lowered his blaster. “What happened?”

Jenni blushed. “I ... well ... I learned something and ... I lost it.” She rose and stepped over to look through the window she’d just come out of, and grimaced. “Someone needs to call Cort and tell him everything’s all right here, I was talking to him and ... well, the library’s gone. Good thing Defenate is overseeing the upgrade for Life’s Gift’s hold.”

Ahsoka ignored the burning pain that seemed to fill her from the soles of her feet to the tiny montrals on top of her head and climbed to her feet, swaying until Jenni caught her around her waist and pulled an arm around her friend’s shoulders. The Togrutan rasped, “What did he tell you that upset you so badly?”

She felt Jenni’s shoulders stiffen under her arm, but she just said, “Let’s get you to the medtech first, I’ll tell you after.”

Half an hour later Ahsoka sighed in relief as the pain-deadening effect of the multiple bacta injections kicked in, though she suspected the anesthetic effect wouldn’t last long enough. Thel Serat was surprised she’d been able to walk to his office even with help, and from the way she’d felt like a badly seared piece of meat she believed him.

Now she sat on a stool, Jenni standing behind her holding up her shaking arms, her hanging lekku still twitching spasmodically against upper breasts and neck, as Thel finished wrapping bacta bandages around her bare chest to cover the large weeping, almost skinless patch right below her
breasts where the Force lightning had hit her. He’d wanted to stick her in a bacta tank, but she’d refused ... maybe later (probably later, she didn’t think she’d ever been more grateful for that ancient universal healant), but she had things to do first.

Wrapping done, Jenni lowered Ahsoka’s arms and the Togrutan spun on the stool to look up at her friend. She reached out to the Human’s presence in the Force, both make herself more open to Jenni and to heighten her awareness of Jenni’s emotional state. “So Jenni, what did you learn from Cort that was so upsetting?”

She felt Jenni’s anger explode, and Jenni reached back through the Force to Ahsoka as she fought back against the conflagration. But this time there wasn’t a hint of her inner turmoil on her face, no hint of yellow in her eyes. Then the moment was past, and Jenni was shaking her head as she turned and sat on the office’s bed facing Ahsoka. “Later, when Cort is back in the loop. There’s something more important. Serat, can I borrow your tablet?”

“Sure.” The medtech scooped his tablet off the nearby counter and handed it over. Jenni typed on the screen for a few moments, then handed it to Ahsoka. “How hard do you think it would be for someone here to make one of these?”

Ahsoka glanced down at the tablet at the picture of a slave collar, the type used by bounty hunters and slavers before they chipped their acquisitions. Her shock brightened the blue stripes against the white of her lekku. “No, we are not blowing your head off!”

Jenni sighed, shoulders slumping. She rubbed at her face as the office door slid open, the Marshal stepping through with his blaster gripped in one hand hanging at his side, ignoring the sight of Ahsoka’s bare breasts to focus on Jenni. “What’s the shouting?”

Ahsoka handed him the tablet. “She wants us to put one of these ... these monstrosities on her!”

Ghent accepted the tablet with his free hand while holstering his blaster, his eyebrows rising at the picture on the display. He looked up at Jenni. “Really?”

Jenni nodded. “Yes.” Looking over at Ahsoka, she continued, “I don’t know how much experience you’ve had with Void Slaves, but we found that even those that voluntarily dive in inevitably become sociopaths. For those that are pulled under by the undertow, well ...” She shrugged. “Our technical term is ... was —” She grimaced as Ahsoka felt her pain and anger surge for a moment. “— ‘bug-nuts crazy’. And I’m being pulled under. Waking up in the Now, I could probably survive if I wasn’t a Dancer. But I am a Dancer, the last survivor of the Dahlia Bond — of all the Youxia Bonds — and the Silence ...”

She shrugged again, but her gaze stayed fixed on Ahsoka and the former Padawan could feel her grim determination. “From what Serat” — She nodded at the medtech — “said about your recovery time in the bacta tank I think I can hold it together long enough, and we can take on your Hunter together. I don’t expect to hold it together through that, but at least I can go down fighting. If I don’t kill him myself I’m sure I can at least distract him enough to give you the opening you need. After that ... talk to Cort about what he told me, you’ll need to decide for yourself what to do about it. You’d know better than me, anyway.”

Ghent had lifted his gaze from the tablet to stare at Jenni. “Are you sure about this?” When Jenni nodded he sighed regretfully. “Yeah, we can make one of these easy enough. But what’s to stop you from just making it pop off? You are a Jedi ... or whatever ... after all.”

Jenni grinned, and to Ahsoka’s surprise it was actually genuine. “We ... ‘Force-users’ —” She glanced at Ahsoka, her grin turning sly. What a prosaic term for those like us, you people have no
poetry in your souls.” She looked back at the Marshal as he chuckled. “Anyway, we Force-users aren’t gods. I have no idea how the lock works, so ...” She shrugged yet again. “My sense of the current of the Tao would warn me when I’m about to set it off, but is unlikely to do more to guide me. I doubt the universe wants to inflict a dangerous lunatic on you.”

“All right, I’ll —”

“NO.”

Everyone in the room turned to look at Ahsoka. Jenni slid off the bed to lay a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “‘Soka —”

“NO!” She knocked Jenni’s hand away. “I said we are not blowing your head off! There has to be another —”

She froze at a sudden thought that in retrospect was blindingly obvious, and Jenni blanched at the abrupt wave of fear. “Ahsoka? What’s wrong?”

Ahsoka took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and released her fear into the Force as she’d been trained. She’d never been the best student of that foundational technique of the Jedi Order (not helped by the fact that her Master wasn’t much better), but this time it helped ... mostly, at least. Opening her eyes, she forced a smile for her friend. “What if you’re not alone in your head?”

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter up, and only slightly delayed due to Christmas preparations! The next chapter is likely to be delayed rather more due the actual holiday, though....
Chapter Notes

Yes, one more chapter before Christmas! And the last chapter of the year, so to all my readers celebrating Christmas and New Year's, a joyful and safe holiday to you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What if you’re not alone in your head?

The words seemed to hang in the air, and Ahsoka gasped as all sense of Jenni through the Force vanished. Her friend was still there, to sight ... and sound, when she turned to the Marshal and medtech. “Could me and Ahsoka have some privacy, please?” But when the two men nodded and left the room, and the door whooshed shut, so far as Ahsoka could sense through the Force she was alone.

Jenni had watched the men leave, and now she turned to hop back up onto the bed and looked at Ahsoka, her expression calm. “When you made that suggestion, you were afraid. Why?”

“I ... well ...” She was sure the blue stripes of her lekku were brightening again with her embarrassment. “I got the impression that everyone in your Bond were ... intimate. You did say it was common for Bonds even if you didn’t say it was for your Bond.”

Jenni nodded. “You’re right, we were. At least, us girls were with the guys and each other. Henrik — one of the guys — would have been bisexual but Kaulana — the other guy — wasn’t so Henrik was heterosexual instead. So is it the actual sex that scares you, or are you worried about how your friends would take it when they learned you’re in an intimate relationship?”

“The sex, really. Since I walked out on the Order, my yearmates, what few acquaintances in the Order I’ve made during the war will probably think I’m capable of anything. Jedi who choose to leave aren’t well thought of.” She giggled suddenly, and if Jenni heard the nervous edge to her humor the Human ignored it. “They probably think I’ve been in bed with a different man every night, you wouldn’t believe the rumors that you hear in the crèche! When actually ...” She shrugged. “I think it was the sex that kept me from thinking of this until a few minutes ago. It’s an obvious solution, after all.”

“Yes, it is,” Jenni agreed, “but even though I told you already, you don’t really understand. Yes, sex can be intimate whether you’re getting hammered into the mattress or in a long, slow cuddle, and joining a Bond generally means sleeping with whoever in the Bond shares your preferences. But the truth is that the mental intimacy is what many Dancers couldn’t risk — or adjust to sometimes, there were Dancers that would break their ties. When the bond is formed, both individuals see everything about each other ... every hidden fear, desire, regret, all of it, along with those memories they cling to the hardest. For that one moment they see each other as God must see us. It won’t happen again, not for that pair, but they won’t forget it, either. And then after, always knowing what each other is feeling, always having your mind and memories open to your Bonded — even able to share each other’s physical senses, sometimes without meaning to.” She giggled, though to Ahsoka she still remained an empty hole in the Force. “Half the reason orgies are common within Bonds is because having all the emotions and sensations of someone else’s sex in your head while you’re trying to negotiate, study, spar, sleep, whatever, is so distracting! So if it’s going to happen, why not have it all
happen at the same time?”

Ahsoka surprised herself by laughing, though she was sure the blues of her lekku must be positively glowing by now from what she was certain had to be an almost death-dealing level of embarrassment, Jenni joining her. As their mirth settled, Jenni said, “I know this is practically the opposite of the lack of attachments — the celibacy — the Order demands, what you were raised to. Do you really think you can handle it? If it turns out you can’t, not only will I be pulled under by the undertow into the Void, you’ll probably be pulled in with me.”

The last of Ahsoka’s humor fled, and she straightened on her stool and took a deep breath. “Yes, I can do this.” A moment later, Jenni was off the bed, kneeling in front of her with her arms around her waist and sobbing into her stomach, her presence filled with relief and gratitude flooding back into the Force. After a frozen moment, Ahsoka hesitantly wrapped her arms around Jenni’s shoulders.

Now dressed in a loose tunic that hung to her midsection along with her panties, just as she was about to be lowered into the bacta tank, Ahsoka finally thought to ask. “Jenni, while we were talking, I couldn’t sense you through the Force at all. How did you do that?”

“Oh, that.” Jenni grinned up at her from where she was leaning against the wall ... she hadn’t stopped smiling since she’d calmed down; Ahsoka had already quietly told the Marshal that Jenni would have no trouble staying rational until Ahsoka was out of the bath, not with hope to give her strength. But Jenni was still speaking: “Advanced technique, where you literally become one with the current of the Tao. On the plus side, since you are such an integral part of the current there’s no separate entity to sense. The downside, though, is that you become an automaton, an observer as your body speaks and acts on its own.”

“A ‘downside’?” Ahsoka repeated. “But isn’t that the goal ... to be guided by the Force? That sounds like what the Order strives for, and even more for your ... ‘go with the flow’.”

“When you’re like that the Tao isn’t guiding, it’s driving,” Jenni rebutted. “What the Tao wants to do isn’t necessarily what you want to do — and yes, your own wishes are important. If our own desires don’t matter, why did sentience evolve in the first place?”

“I’ll have to think about that.” Ahsoka frowned thoughtfully for a moment, then grinned … grinned wider when Jenni stiffened, undoubtedly picking up the feeling inspired by her sudden impish thought. “Oh, and intimacy isn’t totally unknown to Jedi. When I get out, remind me to tell you about the Altisian Jedi.” With that, she signaled Thel to lower her into the tank.

The last sight through the clear tube of the bacta tank a giggling Ahsoka took with her as she sank into the lassitude that came with being immersed in the healing fluid around her was the sharp look Ghent was sending her friend and future lover.

Quill Bolera didn’t even bother to curse his lack of training as a sensor as he fell out of his meditative state — the weeks he’d spent searching one scattered settlement after another of this misbegotten hole of a planet for an errant Padawan had taken him past boredom and frustration deep into the simmering anger that was the closest any Dark Sider came to calm. That faux-calm had been necessary to interact with the inhabitants of this self-important backwater, and had helped him resist the urge to grab one of the women and play — the population was simply too small for that, the woman would have been missed and suspicion naturally focused on him. Before he had sensed
something through the Force he had been considering giving up on the hunt and leaving a virus in the local subspace transceiver to send an alert if it detected Riptide leaving the planet ... and taking a few women with him, for entertainment on the three-week journey back to civilization. And he’d have left some presents for the biggest settlements behind, launched from orbit.

But he had sensed something through the Force, and unfortunately, as useful as his ‘calm’ had been for his attempt at meditation, that attempt had failed to shed any more light on that hint. The hint had only lasted a few seconds, maybe as much as half a minute, before it vanished and all he had was a direction. And that was all his attempt at meditation had given him, though he supposed the verification was useful.

But it is a direction, and that’s more than I had before. Rising to his feet, he grabbed his tablet to pull up a hologram of the settlements around him. He would have to turn at ... not quite a right angle to the search pattern he’d been following, but close. And there were at least half-a-dozen settlements along the direction he’d be taking now, next to one of this continent’s major rivers, and a few more before hitting an ancient mountain range close to the east coast.

It was going to take time, but at least now he had a goal.

/oOo/

Chancellor Palpatine — or rather Darth Sidious in his guise of Chancellor Palpatine — was standing at his office window looking down on his kingdom, Coruscant stargazing. Things were still going well — the near-disaster of the discovery of the chips in the clone troopers prevented; the Outer Rim sieges beginning, spreading out and isolating the Jedi even more, making them easy prey when the time came to sweep them from the board; Anakin growing estrangement from his former master thanks to Obi-Wan’s siding with the Jedi Council during Ahsoka’s expulsion and trial (if only in his heart), and his trust in the Chancellor he fondly believed to be the few true friends he had left absolute — yes, victory was so close the Sith Master could taste it ... and it was sweet.

The only flaw in his enjoyment was that the Hunter he’d sent after Ahsoka hadn’t reported back! His last report had contained his findings on Milagro before his departure for Trey, and even with the combined estimated travel time to and from that backwater ... Quill Bolera, was it? yes ... Quill must have been on Trey for weeks now. And Darth Sidious could not escape the feeling that there was an Ahsoka-shaped piece missing from the picture of his gathering victory, even if that picture was clear and becoming clearer.

Let’s see if that loose end is still on Trey. If she isn’t, I can start the manhunt again in the systems around Trey until my tool finally reports back. If she escaped before he could arrive, they’ll pick up her trail that much faster. And if it turns out he’s already disposed of her and is on his way back ... He shrugged. That was how insurance worked, resources expended that you hoped were wasted.

Decision made, he turned from the window and strode over to his desk. Bringing up the control panel in his desk, he verified that the doors to his office were locked, closed the paneling over his office windows, and brought up the hologram of the galactic territory the Veil covered. The same miasma that blinded the Sight of the Jed, allowed him to mentally reach out to anywhere within his realm, but the number of inhabited systems within that vast territory was literally incalculable. Once Ahsoka had escaped off Coruscant he hadn’t considered trying to track her down himself for even a moment, but now with a likely system ...

Locating the Milagro system along the Corellian Run and then Trey off to one side in the Outer Rim, he reached out through the Veil for the familiar feel of the young Padawan he’d met with her master on multiple occasions ... nothing. Sighing in disappointment, he shut down the map and was just closing the panel in his desk when he suddenly realized that he hadn’t sensed his Hunter, either. In
fact, he hadn’t sensed anything ... and as lightly inhabited as Trey was he should still have sensed something. Even a planet inhabited by nothing but lower lifeforms should have been detectable!

He quickly reopened the panel and brought up the map. Locating Trey, he again reached ... and found nothing. Either a pirate fleet had decided to not only raid that poverty-stricken backwater but expend the firepower necessary to wipe it clean of life (extremely unlikely), or some unknown factor was blocking the reach of his senses into that part of the Outer Rim.

Some quick checking of the systems around Trey (such as they were) revealed that whatever it was, was apparently restricted to the Trey system alone, and the secret Emperor (as he considered himself already) leaned back and stared thoughtfully at the galactic map. He had no other Hunters free to investigate, and with a Hunter perhaps already on Trey there was no point in sending mercenaries. But ...

A vicious grin spread across his face and he opened the panel for his com. A few moments later the familiar voice of Naboo’s Senator responded, with no hologram as he’d expected at this hour.

“Chancellor, what’s happened?”

“There’s no emergency, my dear. My apologies for calling so late, but I thought you would wish to know immediately. I believe I may have stumbled across the location of our wandering Padawan.”

A few minutes of conversation later and he leaned back with a self-satisfied smirk. Yes, this would do nicely. His warning of the bounty hunters pursuing Ahsoka and reassurances that with the Republic on the offensive in the Outer Rim she would not be missed in the Senate would send Amidala scurrying to find her friend and offer the protection of her diplomatic status. At worst she would return with better navigation data of the route to Trey and some word of Ahsoka’s intentions, at best with Ahsoka herself ... and once back on Coruscant he could consider how best to use them to further isolate Anakin.

And while Amidala was on her mission of mercy, his lackeys could use her absence to undermine her influence by portraying her as an impulsive, headstrong girl perhaps too young for the responsibilities of her position. The more intelligent Senators would never buy it, of course, but that august body was full of fools and his bought-and-paid-for lackeys (often the same people).

Yes, all was once again going as he had foreseen it.

Chapter End Notes

I doubt the Empire-spanning reach of the Emperor is official canon, but it is at least hinted at in what Wookieepedia calls Legends — when Mara Jade was an Emperor’s Hand she was able to hear his voice wherever she was, and who knows how far away she was when the Emperor stuck his Last Command in her head just before he died on the Death Star? But there will still be limitations, and here’s mine: even with his ability to ‘observe’ any planet in his future Empire there are a lot of planets, and so one can hide by simply not being anywhere he would look (Obi-Wan hiding on Tatooine) or even next to a Vergence of the Force that would hide your presence in the Force (Yoda on Dagobah, with the added benefit of it being a Dark Side Vergence and so an even more unlikely place to hide).

The line “... was heterosexual instead” is a variation of a line from Lois McMaster Bujold’s Barrayar. When the villain of the story tried to blow up the heroine’s marriage
by telling her that her new husband was bisexual, her response was “He *was* bisexual, now he’s monogamous.” The poor man didn’t quite know how to handle that....
On the Edge

At the sound of the door chime Jenni looked up from her tablet, surprised. She had been grateful for Ahsoka’s trust and support, but had been less confident herself of her ability to maintain control. So after the young Togrutan had been placed in the bacta tank, she had asked Marshal Tardun for his advice on the most innocent feel-good fluff-piece of entertainment he knew of, completely devoid of a hint of politics. Ghent had come through, suggesting *Dew on the Sands*, a vid-series about a Core World socialite whose bad investments cost her everything except for a single Outer Rim moisture farm, and her adventures learning how to make that farm work ... with the help of a very handsome unmarried (and often exasperated) neighbor. With that show and enough food to last until Ahsoka was healed, Jenni had settled down in her room to enjoy a story she could understand in its broad outlines while pausing it occasionally to jot down yet another addition to an ever-growing list of cultural references Ahsoka could explain once she was healed. Jenni suspected that the Marshal had realized that she had essentially put herself under house arrest, because she hadn’t been disturbed since. Until now.

Pausing the latest episode just as Mott and Llyl were frantically working to repair a vaporator damaged by a sandstorm (and she guessed were going to end up in the same bed when they were done, but too exhausted to do anything about it), she called out, “Come in!”

The door slid aside to reveal the Marshal. “Jenni, we have a problem.”

/AOo/

Ahsoka blinked as the world slowly came into focus, her bacta tank-imposed lassitude fading away. From the height of the ceiling and the padded but extremely firm surface beneath her, she was lying on a mat on the infirmary floor. She could feel the expected weakness from the drugs mixed with the bacta, as if the world was sitting on her chest, and ... at the sensation of cloth on her stomach, she struggled up to brace herself on her elbows to find Jenni using a towel to wipe away the bacta residue coating her. At her movement Jenni looked up and smiled at her, but that smile was tight, the Human’s eyes worried.

Raising herself up had awakened a deep ache, and Ahsoka carefully lay back down and closed her eyes to turn her Force sense inward ... as she suspected, she’d been taken out of the bacta tank too early; she wasn’t in any danger, or even really disadvantaged, but she wasn’t going to be enjoying life for awhile. Without opening her eyes, she said, “I’m out of the tank early. Something’s wrong.”

“We’ll talk about it as soon as you’re clean and Serat has checked you over.”

“I don’t need to be checked, I just did. I’m fine, nothing a healing trance won’t fix.”

“A healing trance? Jedi can heal themselves?”

“Of course we can ... you can’t?”

Jenni shook her head. “Get your shirt off, I have a change of clothing that covers more and isn’t bacta-saturated, and you’ll want as much of this muck off as possible before you hop in the shower. No, we don’t heal ourselves, though we do heal faster, don’t get sick, live longer, whatever is required for where the Tao’s currents sweep us.”

Ahsoka sat up and stared at her friend for a long moment. “... don’t get sick. Live longer.” After a moment she shrugged, then tucked her lekku inside her shirt’s neckline, grabbed the lower hem of
her shirt just below her breasts. She hesitated for a moment, then groaned at the effort it took to pull it over her head. It wasn’t like Jenni wasn’t going to get thoroughly acquainted with her breasts — along with the rest of her body — once they bonded. “Jedi heal at the same rate as everyone else, but can go into a trance that speeds it up. Same thing for disease. And we ... they ... those that don’t die violently ... don’t live any longer than anyone else.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised, it sounds like the Jedi can mostly do what the Youxia can, maybe better, but only if you force the issue.” Jenni towed off the bacta fluids coating Ahsoka’s breasts, her manner as impersonal as any medtech (something for which Ahsoka was grateful, and more than a little ashamed at the depth of her gratitude), then shifted around to her back as she slumped forward. “Let’s get you in the shower and then that change of clothes. By then the drugs should have worn off, and the good Marshal is waiting.”

“All right.” Ahsoka waited as Jenni finished wiping her back, arms, head and lekku then helped her to her feet. She braced herself on the bed as Jenni pulled down her panties so she could step out of them, then with one arm around Jenni’s shoulder and Jenni’s arm around her waist staggered toward the shower. As Jenni started the water and set the temperature, Ahsoka asked, “Jenni, what’s wrong? Why the rush?”

Jenni hesitated, then shrugged as she helped Ahsoka into the shower stall and grabbed the soap and washcloth. “Your hunter must have sensed my tantrum, he’s headed this way. You had as much time in the tank as you did because he’s still stopping at each settlement between us and him, but he’ll be here in a few days.”

Ahsoka carefully eased herself into her chair by the desk in the Marshal’s office, Jenni taking the chair beside her. By the time her shower was over she’d been steady enough to towel dry and dress herself, but she wasn’t quite ready to go leaping into combat yet.

Ghent had already asked how she was feeling (and Ahsoka had had no choice but to answer truthfully, thanks to the imminent combat), so now he waited until the pair were settled before getting down to business. “Jenni told you?” Ahsoka nodded, and he leaned back in his chair and continued, “I like to think I’m a good marshal, but even with the training you’ve given my men a Dark Sider with a lightsaber is above my level. So how do we handle this?”

“You’ve confirmed he has a lightsaber?”

Ghent nodded. “He’s not exactly flaunting it, but a waitress at one of the diners he’s eaten at saw it on his belt. She didn’t recognize it for what it is, but remembered it because she didn’t recognize it and was wondering what kind of tool it might be.”

Ahsoka frowned thoughtfully. “Okay — first thing, make sure that when he gets here you and your men are nowhere close to him ... out of town with landspeeders so you can get back in a hurry. Anything else, and he’ll pick up your hostile intent, go on alert.”

“That means we can’t tell anyone else.”

“That’s right. Jenni or I can trigger the alert to get everyone off the street when we confront him, that can be your signal to get back into town. When you arrive ...” Ahsoka paused as she considered what she remembered of the town’s layout. “ ... the same thing you did when you braced me and Jenni, only get everyone up on the roofs. There you can take shots at him when you can — I don’t expect you to hit him, but it’ll be one more distraction. Just remember that he can reflect your shots back at you, so duck after each shot.”
“Makes sense.” Ghent straightened and touched a stud on his desk. A holograph of the town sprang up, and as he worked the controls a scattering of points of light appeared on rooftops along the main street. “We can use the pirate raid warning to get everyone off the streets and out of your way ... you’ll need to set it off at the same time you alert me when you’re ready to spring the trap. I’ll have my people stash blaster rifles here at the spots I’ve highlighted ahead of time so anyone can play, not just my deputies, and personal messages ready to send to the ones I think are up to this....”

Ahsoka could feel herself tensing more and more as she followed Jenni toward the tiny house they’d been staying at, like a spring coiled too tight. Bonding was her idea and a price she was willing to pay to keep Jenni alive and sane, but now that they finally doing it she found she was edging beyond nervous into terrified, and mortified that Jenni’s own constant empathic sense meant there was no hiding it.

Then they were in their tiny shared main room, the front door hissed shut, and Jenni turned around to face her. “No sex.”

Ahsoka’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“No sex.” Jenni giggled, apparently amused at the total confusion Ahsoka was sure she was picking up. The Youxia stepped back to lean against the counter for food preparation and crossed her arms. “Ahsoka, I’m afraid I’ve accidentally misled you. Yes, adding a new Dancer to a Bond is usually followed by an orgy ... at least in my bond ... but it doesn’t have to be. There’ll only be the two of us, so sex until you’re ready. It is the sex that has you tighter than a drum, right? Not the bonding itself?”

“I ... well, yes ... but you ... needs?” Ahsoka sputtered out.

Now Jenni’s giggles turned into laughter as Ahsoka felt the blue stripes on her lekku brighten with embarrassment. When Jenni got herself under control, leaving only a broad grin, she said, “Sure, I wouldn’t mind having some fun in bed, you’re cute as a button and I’m wondering how much of my research is accurate — yes, I did some checking on erotic differences between Humans and Togrutans and I want to hear what you sound like.” (By now, Ahsoka was once again wondering if it was possible to die from embarrassment.) “But you’re supposed to enjoy it as much as I do, and even if you weren’t still sore from my tantrum you’d be too tense to enjoy it. I’m no longer a randy teenager, if only by a few years, I can wait.”

“I ...” Ahsoka’s tongue stumbled to a halt, the relief and gratitude filling her mixed with shame (and perhaps just a dash of disappointment, something she was going to studiously ignore until later).

Jenni’s grin softened into a gentle smile, and she straightened up. “But we still need to to form our Bond, and don’t think putting off the sex means you get to dress up ... ‘skyclad’, the Western Wiccans called it, even if we’re doing this indoors instead of the sun in the middle of open wilderness — as open to each other physically as we will be mentally. So come on.” She walked toward the room they’d been using for sparring, shedding her clothing as she went.
Quill Bolera grinned, his excitement stirring as he piloted his ship down towards the latest settlement along the line toward whatever he’d sensed almost a week earlier after dumping the supplies he’d purchased at the last settlement in orbit. (He had to have some reason for visiting each town, after all, and he could pile up only so much in his hold.) He might not have had the sensor training that this kind of mission called for, but for the first time since his arrival on this Light-infest rock the Force was warning him that something in the rapidly approaching buildings was dangerous — and to him personally, not just something that was a danger to the common herd but that any half-trained Sith (and Jedi, he would admit to himself if no one else) could handle. And he could only think of one thing ... or rather one person ... on this backwater hole that could be that threat. Finally!

Then the ship was settled on a flat piece of ground on the settlement’s outskirts. It only took a few moments to shut down the engines, get his speeder bike out of the hold, and head into town. Really, the town was so small going on foot would have made more sense, if his exit might not need to be ...

expedited.

As he rode along the main street his grin returned. The power of the Light Side that seemed to permeate the planet might be swamping his senses, but the Force user he could sense in a nearby eatery was practically glowing with joy-permeated power of the Force. Whatever Ahsoka had found here, it had made her a very happy Togrutan indeed.

Quill smirked as he parked the speeder bike in front of the eatery. It was such a shame that he’d have to spoil everything for her....

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Ahsoka was not in proper form for combat. She knew her pursuer was coming, that in minutes she would be in yet another life or death struggle with innocent lives on the line (she had no illusions how her pursuer would act once he was revealed for what he was, she had seen too many examples of the ruin those that fell to the Dark Side — slaves of the Void, to use Jenni’s poetic turn of phrase — left in their wake); she should have been preparing herself mentally, focusing on the battle to come, releasing her fears and worries into the Force so she could enter combat calm and in control ... she’d never been particularly good at it, any more than her master, but she should at least try.

Instead, in spite of the fact that it had been a day since their bonding, that she still ached to her core from Jenni’s Force lightning she’d gotten in the way of, that she was about to fight for her life and the lives of others ... in spite of all of that, she could not keep the joy bubbling up from her heart and spreading a broad smile across her face. And it wasn’t just because of Jenni’s welcoming joy still blazing in her heart.

She had recognized how lonely ... how incomplete ... Jenni had been thanks to the loss of her Bond — in the life Ahsoka had seen when they bonded, family and close friends had been a constant and even when the Void Slaves’ coup had driven the survivors of Jenni’s new Bond (all two of them) underground shortly after her sixteenth birthday she had still had that Bond. But Ahsoka hadn’t recognized how lonely she herself had been. She may not have been bonded mind-to-mind with anyone but Anakin — and that Padawan-Master bond like a candle to the noonday sun compared to this one — but she had still been a Jedi ... one among a united whole, with drive and purpose. She had lost all that when she had walked away from the Order, alone in a cold and hostile galaxy, more
cold and hostile than she’d imagined. Now ...

Now I’ll never be alone again, she thought as she once again focused for a moment on Jenni’s presence in the back of her mind.


“Like you’re one to talk!” And it was true, Ahsoka’s own joy was dim in comparison to Jenni’s blazing happiness and gratitude.

“Maybe, but I have a bit more experience. When this is over, we’ll need to talk about Barriss Offee.”

The statement came like cold water to the face, Ahsoka’s joy guttering from the shock of that statement, and the wave of bitter anger she still felt whenever she thought of how her former friend betrayed her swept through her yet again. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and released that anger into the Force ... and much of the joy that had been making her giddy.

“Better. And just in time, he’s here. Showtime. Remember the plan, we need to make this fast before he has time to involve innocents in spite of the evacuation.”

“Right.” Ahsoka took another deep breath, and stepped out of the eatery to face her hunter with Jenni right behind her.

Quill was surprised when two women stepped out of the eatery to meet him: his target, dressed in her usual skimpy, tight battle dress; and a Human dressed in a skirt with a loose top draped over her torso. The human’s hair was dyed white and blue in a pattern that reversed the colors of Ahsoka’s lekku and montrals.

He was even more surprised when an ear-splitting siren went off for several seconds, and blast shutters slammed down over doors and windows all along the street.

“That was a warning siren, to alert everyone that they need to evacuate the town,” the unknown woman said. “Congratulations, you’re considered as dangerous as a pirate raid.”

Quill focused on her — he already had the measure of the former Padawan — and frowned. She was confident, supremely so, but she was weak. He could barely detect her presence in the Force at all. Certainly she was too weak to be a Jedi, even if the metal tube in her hand was a lightsaber. (Lightsabers weren’t exactly standardized, one could never be sure until they were used.) He smirked, this was going to be fun. Ignoring the fact that they’d obviously known he was coming, and the way the Togrutan that was the only one that was remotely a threat was shifting to one side, he asked, “And you think you’re up to dealing with a threat as dangerous as a pirate raid?”

“We shall see, won’t we? I’m Jenni, by the way.” The Human hefted the metal tube in her hand, and a bright white blade sprang humming from its end. As Ahsoka copied her — her blade also a pure white, unlike the shorter green blades of the pair she had typically wielded before — Jenni chanted,

For ten years I have been polishing this sword;
Its frosty edge has never been put to the test.
Now I am holding it and showing it to you, sir:
Is there anyone suffering from injustice?

A complete lunatic. Where did the runt find her, and why is one of the oh-so-noble Jedi letting her
die pointlessly? Are they lovers? She wouldn’t be the first Jedi that ran wild after leaving the Order. Not that it mattered — the additional Human meant he was facing two instead of the one he’d been expecting, but he’d long since learned that if you knew what you were doing, multiple opponents that weren’t trained to work together made it easier, not harder. Two Jedi working together could be dangerous, the Force helped them coordinate, but Jenni was hardly a Jedi. Still, he supposed she could possibly be a distraction, best not to take unnecessary chances.

Without a hint of warning he sprang toward her, his own lightsaber leaping into his hand and its fiery red blade springing to life as it swung straight for Jenni’s torso — and she took a step back as she parried his actual strike for her neck instead of the feint ... and the follow-up strike that would have taken off an arm, and the strike that would have sliced her in half at the waist, and the one that would have done the same from neck to groin ... and at the Force’s warning he whirled and stepped to one side as he parried Ahsoka’s attempt to drive her blade through his back, so that the combatants formed three points of a triangle. This might be harder than I thought.

Quill knew other Hunters liked to taunt their prey as they brought them down, but he considered it rather pointless to waste the effort on the dead. So without a word he stepped toward his target, red humming blade shrieking as it impacted the Padawan’s glowing white blade again and again, before spinning away to block Jenni’s attacks as she came to her friend’s defense ... to easily block Jenni’s attacks, and he frowned.

He wasn’t surprised that the Human’s skill with a lightsaber wasn’t up to a Jedi Knight’s level, or even a Padawan’s — a new Padawan’s. What he did find surprising was she didn’t even rise to the level of her defense against his first assault. But why? Who was stupid enough to focus purely on defense? It had to be some kind of trap, but he couldn’t see how.

*It doesn’t matter what kind of trap it is if they don’t get a chance to* —

He leaped back away from Jenni as suddenly blaster bolts started to rain down from the roofs of the buildings around them. Most of them slammed down into the synthecrete street around the pair, but both he and Jenni whirled their lightsabers above their heads to deflect multiple bolts ... and several hammered into his speeder bike, dropping the sparking, smoking ruin to the roadway as flames began leaping from its engine. Bastards! He had liked that bike....

Even as he cursed his ambushers he saw his opportunity, shifted position to place his back to a wall and Jenni between him and Ahsoka running toward them through the hail of blaster fire (knocking aside a few bolts of her own as she came), and used the Force to activate the wrist shield he’d taken off a Mandalorian he’d killed as he used his lightsaber to deflect bolts toward Jenni at point-blank range.

She whirled to face him and deflected the bolts, several back at him, and he used the wrist shield to reflect them straight back. They hammered into her chest even as another shot from a roof hammered into her back, and the Human dropped limply to the road as her presence in the Force vanished like a snuffed-out candle.

“Jenni!” his target screamed as she leaped over the corpse and slashed blindly at Quill. He grinned as he parried her strikes — apparently they had been lovers, and nothing made a target as furious ... and as vulnerable ... as the death of a loved one. And someone on a rooftop was shouting for them to cease fire. Once Ahsoka was dead he could take to the rooftops to make his way back to his ship, and kill a few of his ambushers on the way.

He’d won. His only regret was that he wouldn’t be able to grab some women to take with him, and since they’d apparently been tracking him since his arrival he couldn’t drop in on another settlement instead to pick some up there. But he’d definitely be giving this settlement a gift from orbit before he
Time to end this. He parried Ahsoka’s last wild slash and riposted, fast enough that the Padawan was only barely able to parry it ... and his next strike, and the next, and the next. She backed up, trying to break contact, but he pressed her. She stepped back again and her heel caught on her lover’s corpse, tumbling her backwards onto the synthecrete of the road. Quill stepped over the corpse, batting away a few blaster bolts as some of the men on the roofs opened fire again — and staggered as the worst pain he’d ever felt in his life pierced through him, up through his torso and into his chest. He looked down, gaping at the sight of the corpse he was straddling glaring up at him, leaning up on one elbow. Her other hand held her lightsaber, its blade stabbing up through his groin. She yanked sideways, the lightsaber’s blade burning through heart, lung, and rib cage as it ripped out of his torso, and as the world went dark his last emotion was stunned amazement that according to the Force the Human that had killed him didn’t exist.

Ahsoka was gasping as she rolled to her feet. She’d been right on both counts — the damage she had suffered from Jenni’s Force lightning that the bacta tank hadn’t had the time to heal hadn’t hindered her at all, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t hurt. But the flash of pain she had felt from Jenni just before her bondmate had vanished from her Force sense had given the former Padawan a nasty shock — it had felt just like all too many clone troopers that had died around her during her two years at war, and only the fact she could still sense Jenni’s presence in her mind had kept her from panicking. Though that presence had had an odd feel to it, even after the less than a day since their bonding ... muted, distant somehow. It must have been the effect of Jenni fully ‘immersing herself in the current of the Tao’, as she would put it.

But that muting effect was gone now and Jenni’s pain was back, burning across back and chest. But Jenni didn’t seem to notice it — she simply stood over the man that she’d killed, staring down at his corpse with the oddest mix of emotions ... a sort of singing emptiness mixed with worry. She looked up as Ahsoka approached and silently asked, “Shouldn’t I feel something?”

“Feel something? Oh!” Ahsoka remembered the piece of poetry Jenni had recited just before the fight started, and realized that not once throughout her vision of Jenni’s life — not a single time — had she seen any combat. This was Jenni’s first kill. Or at least the first face-to-face, she thought as she remembered the ritual that had ended with Jenni trapped in a Force vortex of some sort, and with the deaths of every single person on Trey with a significant connection to the Force. (Terra, the colonists were debating changing the planet’s name to the original, and the yeas were winning.)

Ahsoka laid a hand on Jenni’s shoulder. “You will. You’ll have nights you spend in meditation because you can’t face your dreams. Believe it. I'll be there with you.”

Jenni nodded, but flinched at the new weight on her shoulder as her burning pain jumped. Ahsoka’s eyes narrowed and she hastily tore open Jenni’s charred top, checking the improvised armor she’d worn underneath it. “What’s wrong? Didn’t the armor hold? Weren’t the blasters set to half strength? Thel, Ghent, get over here, Jenni’s hurt!”

By now the blast shields over windows and doors had risen, and as Thel and Ghent ran over Ahsoka scrabbled at the armor’s clasps. The armor fell away, and the medtech hissed. “Crap, we forgot about the heat transfer! You’re going into the bacta tank right now.” He shouted for the bystanders gathering around to fetch a stretcher.

“Yeah,” Ghent agreed, staring at the strips of skin that had pealed away with the armor. “Jenni, why aren’t you screaming?”
“I definitely know the pain is there,” Jenni said, “but we Dancers can immerse ourselves in the Tao’s currents enough that the pain doesn’t interfere with whatever needs doing. Ahsoka?”

Ahsoka nodded. “Jedi can as well, through a kind of walking meditation. It does require us to split our attention, though.” She looked over as one of the deputies she’d met the day she’d gone into the bacta tank herself hurried up, pushing a stretcher hovering on its own repulsor ahead of him. “Let’s get you in the tank before your Tao decides you feeling your pain won’t get in the way of anything.”

A Jenni beginning to tremble from shock nodded. “You’re beginning to figure out how it works for the Dancers. Yes, let’s.” She lay down on the stretcher, and the clean pad Thel had yanked from the foot of the stretcher to its head, and Thel and the deputy guided it toward Thel’s office.

Ahsoka and Ghent began to follow, when another deputy ran up to them. “Marshal, Cort’s on the com, he says another ship is coming into orbit!”

Chapter End Notes

The poetry is a translation of "The Swordsman" by Jia Dao, a poet from the Tang dynasty (roughly the early 7th century A.D. to the early 10th), and nicely sums up the Youxia spirit of knight errantry.
Best Friends Forever

Padme rushed into the infirmary, and sagged with relief at the sight of Ahsoka standing by the bacta tank, one hand on its clear surface as she turned her gaze from the young Human woman in the tank to the newcomer.

A puffing Marshal entered behind her. “You didn’t ... let me finish,” he gasped out. “Jenni’s the injured one ... not Ahsoka.”

Ahsoka stepped away from the tank. “Yeah, I’m fine, and Jenni will be.”

“Ahsoka ...” Padme hesitated, knowing Jedi’s dislike of personal shows of affection, then threw aside restraint and stepped forward to throw her arms around her young friend. “I’m so happy you’re all right, we were worried about you.”

Ahsoka hesitantly returned the embrace for a moment before gently pushing Padme away. “‘We’?”

“Yes, Obi-Wan is worried about you and Anakin is desperate, he’ll be so happy to hear you’re all right. Even the Chancellor has been searching for you, he’s the one who warned me of the bounty hunters after you and where I could find you.” Padme hesitated at the odd expression that crossed Ahsoka’s face. “You ... did know about the bounty hunters?”

Ahsoka opened her mouth, paused, then glanced at the bacta tank before turning her attention back to Padme, her expression hard. “Yes, I knew about them. A gang of bounty hunters jumped me on Coruscant, again on Milagro. And I’m sure when you landed you noticed the ship parked on the outskirts of town? That belonged to a hunter we took down just before you arrived.” She glanced at the tank again, her face softening. “Once Jenni gets out of the tank we’ll have to see about breaking Ahsoka’s face. “You ... did know about the bounty hunters?”

Padme’s eyes widened in surprised speculation. During one of Annie’s rants after his Padawan’s departure he’d mentioned the bizarre rumors circulating in the Temple about what Ahsoka was getting up to now that she’d left the Order, and Padme had been as outraged as he was — just because Ahsoka hadn’t been able to trust the Order after the way it had treated her didn’t mean she’d turn into a slut! But maybe there’s a kernel of truth, after all — romance at least, not the promiscuity. She hoped so, her Togrutan friend deserved to be happy as much as Annie. And at least she won’t have to hide it.

Padme fought to keep the momentary bitterness that stabbed through her off her face, but she must have let something slip because Ahsoka’s gaze sharpened. For a moment Padme thought she was going to ask about whatever she’d seen, but instead she grinned. “And when did you intend to tell me that you’re pregnant?”

Padme felt the world go hazy, lightheaded from the shock. “I’m pregnant?”

Ahsoka’s face went blank. “You didn’t know?”

“No. I hoped but ...” Then it finally sank in, and Padme reached out to embrace her friend and spun them around, laughing joyfully. “I’m pregnant!”

“Let me go!” Though it was hard to take Ahsoka’s protest seriously, the way she was laughing ... laughter with a definite edge of pain to it.

Padme hastily let her back down. “I thought you said you were fine!”
“I am, just the remnants of a nasty shock I took just before the hunter arrived, I haven’t had time for a healing trance yet to clear up the last of the damage. So obviously that was good news, who’s the father? I must have met him at some point, considering me and Sky Guy seemed to spend as much time with you as we did in the Temple.”

Again Padme fought to keep her expression clear, and again she must have failed — Ahsoka froze, her eyes going wide. “Anakin? It’s Anakin? When did that happen?!”

Padme frantically looked around. Then sighed with relief. The Marshal had discreetly let himself out once it was obvious she and Ahsoka were friends, and the Human woman — Jenni’, had Ahsoka said? — was asleep, thanks to the drugs mixed with the tank’s bacta to keep patients from dying of boredom. “Shhhhh! Not so loud! No one can know.”

“... oops?” The blue stripes across Ahsoka’s lekku brightened with embarrassment. “I get it, I won’t tell anyone. But you sure moved fast after I left, was I in the way or something?”

“It was before you were assigned to Anakin. We were secretly married just after the war started.”

“Married even? Wow! But if I missed that I’ll bet Obi-Wan doesn’t know, either, does he? Are you going to tell him once it becomes obvious you slipped up and got pregnant?”

Padme frowned repressively at her grinning friend. “I didn’t ‘slip up’, I got pregnant deliberately — after you left I thought Anakin needs more ‘attachments’, whatever the Jedi Code might say. And no, Obi-Wan doesn’t know. Do you think I should tell him?”

Ahsoka’s grin softened into a gentle smile, her gaze flicking over yet again to the bacta tank for a moment. “‘Attachments’. Yeah, I’ve pretty much decided that part of the Code is nonsense, so good for you. Obi-Wan?” She frowned thoughtfully for a moment. “I... can’t really say. He’s formed his own attachment to Anakin, but he’s also rather... inflexible, I guess... about the Order’s rules. But you can’t hide it forever — unless you don’t intend to let the children know who their father is? No, that won’t work, either. Whether Anakin’s known as their father or a really close friend of the family, the Council will still consider it too strong an attachment.” She shrugged. “I guess it’s just a matter of timing, whether you want the big reveal to be during or after the war.”

Padme considered Ahsoka’s advice and thought her friend was probably right, she and Annie were going to have to talk it over the next time their schedules overlapped. She had no idea how he was going to take it, though, in spite of his issues with the Order’s restrictions he was still devoted to it.

But that was an issue for another day, and she focused on Ahsoka’s... friend... floating in the bacta tank. The Human was beautiful, and older than Ahsoka, and the coloration of the waves of hair floating about her head... “So how long have you and... Jenni, was it?... Jenni been an item yourselves? That must have been the whirlwind romance you thought I and Annie had, you haven’t been on Trey all that many weeks.”

The blush on Ahsoka’s lekku was back, and she stammered an attempted denial for a moment before giving up with a sigh. “How did you know?”

Padme giggled. “The way you can’t keep your eyes off the bacta tank is a big hint, but really, her hair style matching you lekku’s pattern?”

“Oh.” It was Ahsoka’s turn to giggle. “Actually, that’s a coincidence, that was her style when I met her.”

“It was?” Padme’s giggles turned into laughter. “In that case, she might want to change that if you
intend to hide your relationship.” Then as Ahsoka shook her head ruefully, Padme sobered. “You won’t be coming back with me, will you?”

“No. No, we won’t. We can’t stay here, but Coruscant ... unless I rejoin the Order I can’t think of a more dangerous place for me in the entire Republic, too many bounty hunters. And now I can’t rejoin the Order, not ever again.”

Padme sighed, but nodded. “I thought as much. Annie will be disappointed, but he’ll understand.” Now it was her turn to glance toward the bacta tank. “How long until she comes out?”

“Days, maybe even a week. She lost a lot of skin, and her internal organs were almost cooked.”

Padme’s eyes widened. “That bad? I’m surprised she’s alive. But I’m afraid that means I won’t be able to wait to meet her when she gets out. Just the trip out and back is really more time away from Coruscant than I should be taking, even with the new advances in the war. By the way, you do have an up-to-date nav-chart for the run back to Milagro? It would be nice to shave a week off the return trip.”

“Yes, we do. Defenate’s on board our ship, I’ll have her send it to you.” But her eyes tracked back toward the bacta tank, and Padme took her by the arm and gently pulled her toward the door.

“Come on. I know you’re worried about her, however pointless it might be — she’s in a bacta tank and it isn’t a disease, if she hasn’t died yet she isn’t going to — I’m the same way with Anakin. But you can’t just sit around waiting, so why don’t you come back to my skiff? I can give you a meal like you haven’t had since the last time we ate together, and we can catch up.

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Ahsoka protested, but let herself be pulled toward the door. “Jenni, are you sure?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine. I think ...” Jenni broke off for a wave of exhaustion, that Ahsoka guessed signaled a yawn. “... I think the current is sweeping me toward sleep anyway, the drugs must finally be taking effect. The Tao must have decided I’ve been awake long enough. So catch up with your friend, then go into your own healing trance. Just don’t forget that anything you tell her the Chancellor is likely to hear as well.”

“All right, I will.” Ahsoka wasn’t surprised to find Aja, Padme’s secretary/bodyguard, waiting outside the infirmary with the Marshal, and after Ahsoka let Ghent know that everything was all right the three started walking back in companionable silence toward the edge of town where Padme’s skiff was parked.

Then Ahsoka twitched as Jenni spoke up again. “Ahsoka, you need to have Padme take a message with her, for Barriss Offee.”

“And why would I want to send that murderous traitor a message?”

Jenni paused while Ahsoka fought to again release into the Force the rage that thoughts of the Mirialan woman that had framed her for murder could still fan to life many weeks later. When Ahsoka’s inner turmoil eased, she continued: “‘Soka, would you say Barriss was your friend?’”

“Yes.”

“A good friend?”

“... yes.”
“A loyal and valiant Jedi?”

“You saw my life when we bonded, yes!”

“You know I didn’t really see your whole life, just the highlights you consider important. But yes, I’m asking questions that I already know the answers to, she’s important enough to you that she featured prominently in what I saw.”

“Then you saw what she did to us! To me!”

“Yes. But Ahsoka, just what kind of pressure must she have been under for the loyal and valiant Jedi you knew to be twisted into ... that? And no one saw the warning signs that must have been there — not the masters, not the Jedi and troopers she fought alongside ... not the friends that knew her best. Not you.

“Think about it.”

Ahsoka barely noticed as her bondmate finally let herself slip into slumber, so stunned was she by Jenni’s last statement. She only came to herself when a concerned Padme gently shook her shoulder, to find she’d come to a stop in the middle of the street. She quickly excused her sudden inattention to a passing thought, and they resumed their walk to the ship.

But she did think about it, as she called up Defenate onboard Life’s Gift for the nav-chart for the jump to Milagro. She thought about it during the meal Padme and Aja prepared from the luxurious stores with which a grateful Queen Apailana had stocked the skiff. Her mind kept cycling back to it as she and Padma told the stories of their lives since they’d last seen each other. While she recorded a message for her former master.

And in the end, after she’d reluctantly said goodbye and was walking down the ship’s ramp to return to the infirmary and her own healing trance to get rid of the last of the bone-deep ache from Jenni’s accidental assault, she turned back to face her friend. “Padme, could you take another message back for me? For Barriss Offee? I’d like you to deliver it to her personally.”
Jenni walked into the infirmary, toweling her still damp hair after her shower to clean away the bacta residue. (Ahsoka had insisted on wiping off most of the excess first, just as Jenni had done for her, and if her touch hadn’t been as ... experienced ... as Jenni’s it had still had her purring as she got in the shower.)

Ghent straightened from where he’d been leaning against the wall. Jenni’s eye widened when Cort stood up from the medtech’s normal seat, but before she had the chance to say anything Ahsoka spoke up from where she sat on the patient’s bed.

“What took so long?”

Jenni grimaced. “You would not believe how many times I had to wash my hair to get the bacta-stink out of it.”

Ahsoka laughed, one hand rising to stroke a short, white, blue-striped lek lying across her shoulder and down along her chest. “Another reason to be happy to be a member of a species that doesn’t have hair.”

“Oh, it has its uses. It makes a nice handhold during sex.” Jenni flashed Ahsoka a memory of Henrik’s head pinned between her thighs with her hands buried in his fiery locks, holding his mouth against her burning cleft as her hips bucked, and laughed when the blue of Ahsoka’s lekku brightened at her unspoken response. Taking mercy on her Bonded, she turned to the slicer to find him watching the exchange with one eyebrow cocked. “Cort, I have to say I’m surprised to find you here. Didn’t Ahsoka get in touch to get the details about what you told me while I was in the bacta tank?”

“Yes, she did. But while I don’t think there’s any danger of another one of the ... Sith Lord’s minions showing up any time soon, I want to go with you when you leave. Oh, and don’t worry about anyone showing up too quickly. Even if the Senator hands over the nav-data at Milagro like she’s supposed to I have a worm in their systems that’ll wipe the data, it’ll be as if it was never there.”

It was all Jenni could do to keep her own eyebrows from rising. Sith Lord? Ahsoka has been talking with him. And from the Marshal’s start of surprise, she hadn’t told him. She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile, and refocused on Cort. “He won’t need to send any minions, once he finds out what happened to the one he sent all he’ll need to do is let the Bounty Hunter’s Guild know where Ahsoka is and they’ll come swarming in.”

Having managed to fight down her blush as the discussion turned serious, Ahsoka spoke up. “If he learns that much, he’ll also learn that I told Padme that we wouldn’t be staying.”

“Nice phrasing, not letting Ghent know how certain it is our Sith Lord will learn everything Padme knows.”

“It’s as you told me when you kept me from telling Padme about the Chancellor, if he can’t do anything about it all telling him will do is paint an even bigger target on our backs if he’s forced to give up what he knows.” Ahsoka was not happy about that, and Jenni knew why — if any other Void Slaves showed up, Ghent’s questioning would be extremely painful and almost certainly lethal. And they couldn’t stay to protect him, along with the rest of Trey’s inhabitants.

But Cort was shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter if I’m still safe, I’ve been hiding here long enough.
With Ian dead, it’s time to move on.”

*But not necessarily with us.* Though now that Jenni thought about it, who else did he have to go with? It wasn’t like there was an abundance to free traders dropping by — in fact, with Ian dead there wasn’t likely to be any. *We’re going to have to go through Milagro, have Cort shut down his worm, and pass on the good charts along with word that Trey’s market is open. If we don’t, who knows when the next free trader will show up. Unless — “Ahsoka, have you gotten onto the Hunter’s ship?”*

Ahsoka shook her head. “I tried, but the Force warned me off and I don’t know enough to even recognize the traps, much less disarm them. We’re going to have to blow up the ship in place before we leave.”

“So much for that idea.” Jenni sighed, realized she’d been standing in place since noticing Cort’s presence, and stepped over to sit down beside Ahsoka, Cort sitting down as well and Ghent leaning back against the wall. “All right, Cort, we can at least get you off the planet. But after that you’re safer making your own way, with all the bounty hunters we’re too much of a target.”

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In the end, Ahsoka and Jenni placed the mining charges all over the Hunter’s ship, while sharpshooters with blaster rifles around the ship kept a watch for the automated anti-personnel blasters common to smugglers and bounty hunters’ ships. Nothing popped up (or down, as the case may be), though the Force warned Ahsoka off from several places that she suspected were hidden access ports. (When it occurred to Ahsoka to ask, Jenni explained that she wasn’t so much warned off as guided by the feel of the currents of the Tao.)

Once Ahsoka and Jenni were safely away and the mining charges set off, the resulting explosion collapsed a few of the closest houses and left a good-sized crater. Some form of self-destruct mechanism must have been triggered, because the miners that had brought the explosives swore they hadn’t brought enough for *that.*

But it was done, and as Ahsoka watched the lights of the starscape stretch into lines and vanish into the roiling gray of hyperspace she felt an eagerness that she had been missing since she’d walked away from the Order. As horrible as the war had often been, her actions in defense of the Republic has *mattered.* The fight for survival since had not been enough to lift what she now recognized as a deep depression ... if anything, that lonely struggle had strengthened it. Only first her concern for Jenni and then their glorious Bonding had relieved it, she felt the last vestiges of that depression fade away as she once again set off on a mission in the Republic’s defense. Even the way the Force had returned to the murky mistiness that she’d known all her life as soon as they’d left Trey-space (or rather, Terra-space, since Ghent told them just before they left that an overwhelming majority of its inhabitants had voted to adopt the original name) couldn’t dampen her spirits.

The shock she’d felt from Jenni, though ...

She set the alarm and was unbuckling the seat belts she had automatically latched even though there was zero chance of combat, when she heard Jenni say, “So, Cort, you aren’t going to want to be dropped off, are you?” Turning her seat, she found that as she had been lifting off and setting course for Milagro the slicer had entered Life’s *Gift’s* cockpit and was seated behind her. And she hadn’t noticed. *I’m going to have to ask Jenni to teach me her constant awareness of everyone’s emotions around her. Battlefield awareness and the Force’s warnings of danger are fine, but I’ll take the problems she says she has with large crowds over being caught unaware when I’m not in danger — not all dangers are immediate.*
Ahsoka ignored Cort’s reply to focus on her Bonded, the white around Jenni’s lips and eyes matching the shakiness Ahsoka was picking up through their bond. She was just about to ‘say’ something through their link, when —

“— the Chancellor, aren’t you?”

She instantly switched her attention back to Cort, focusing on him through the Force. Jenni wasn’t in any immediate danger, and this … “Cort, are you certain Chancellor Palpatine is the hidden Sith Lord the Order has been worried about since finding Anakin … Skywalker? I mean, he’s been so friendly, supportive. He’s practically Anakin’s patron, has been since Anakin joined the Order.”

Cort shrugged. “I don’t know anything about a Sith Lord, I thought they were centuries extinct. But yes, it’s the Chancellor that’s behind the war … both sides of the war. And you are going after him, aren’t you?”

There was a predatory hunger behind his quiet question, and Ahsoka silently asked, “What do we tell him? You are sensing what I am, right?”

Rather than answer her Bonded, Jenni asked, “And why do you care? With Ahsoka being hunted, I’d think you’d want to stay as far away from us … and him … as possible.”

Cort’s lips tightened, his hunger turning angry. “Because he owes me — for a year on the run, years hiding on that backwater hole —” For a moment his hunger turned into amusement, his lips quirking. “— however historically significant that backwater has turned out to be.” The moment of levity was fleeting, however. “He owes me for the loss of all the savings me and Ian had managed to accumulate, for Ian’s death. No offence, but if we hadn’t been hunted he wouldn’t have been killed in that bar.”

There wasn’t any way to respond to the implicit statement that Cort would rather Ahsoka had died than his friend that wouldn’t sound selfish, so Ahsoka just glanced over at Jenni.

Jenni gazed back for a moment, then looked back at Cort. “And how can you help us deal with him?”

“When I sliced the Chancellor’s files, the first thing I did, before I was discovered, was create a back door. I never bothered to go back in, with the signal lag over galactic distances …” He shrugged. “But if I’m actually on Coruscant the lack of lag time should allow me to seize control of the files, at least long enough to copy everything. I won’t be able to do that without setting off all kinds of alarms, through, so after that we could take refuge in the Jedi Temple. We give everything to them, and let them deal with him.”

“Hmmm.” Jenni glanced over at her Bonded. “‘Soka?”

Ahsoka felt a warmth blossom in her heart at what was apparently becoming her nickname — unlike her former master’s ‘Snips’ there was no gentle mockery involved — but forced herself to focus. Though she’d had Life’s Gift’s quarters altered so she and Jenni could share a room … and a bed … Focus! She ‘sent’ back, “That’s better than what I could come up with. All I had was to go to the Order with what we’d learned, and hope even without proof they’d take us seriously enough to investigate themselves — they do owe me, after all, and some of them might even recognize that. The only alternative I could see was to attack him, force him to defend himself with the Force, as a Sith Lord he would be tainted by his connection to the Void and easily detectible from the Temple. But …”

“But that could go wrong any number of ways.” Jenni sighed and leaned back in her seat. “All right,
Cort, you’re in, with one change — instead of taking what you get to the Order, you dump it straight into the hyperwave. You can do that, right?” At a stunned Cort’s jerky nod, she continued, “Good, after the way the Jedi Council treated Ahsoka I don’t trust them, so we take the decision out of their hands. Then we go to the Order, after that we’ll probably need their protection — Palpatine will have more important things to worry about than us, but Void Slaves are vindictive bastards.

“But you’re going to be with us for awhile, because we’re going to have to wait.” At the other two’s questioning looks, she shrugged. “From the news, it looks like the Republic’s on its way to winning. If we go in right now, destabilize the Republic’s leadership, who knows how long we’ll be extending the killing? Besides, we’ll need to figure out some way to get onto Coruscant without being detected. There is some way to track individual ships?”

Ahsoka and Cort both nodded. “Yes, by the emissions of the sublight drives,” Ahsoka said. “But I can take care of that once we leave Milagro, alter the drive’s performance enough to register as a different ship.”

“And I have a false ship’s ID,” Cort added. “Get me within range of a hyperwave transceiver, and Republican port authorities will even recognize us by the false ID. Still, once we get that all set up, are you sure you want to wait? If Palpatine’s started his end game, he must have some plan already in place for taking down the Order once the Republic has won. Striking after victory is certain but before he makes his move ... that’ll be a tricky piece of timing.”

Suddenly, in spite of everything — her months on the run and near death; Jenni’s near death; the years of pain and suffering that had preceded that, all of them dancing to a Sith Lord’s tune; the feel of the shroud of the Dark Side that was twisting her gut and still had Jenni white — Ahsoka found herself laughing a wave of optimism swept over her. “We’re the Youxia Bond. If there’s anything we excel at, it’s timing!”
As she stepped out of her ship into the Jedi Temple’s landing bay, Padme smiled at the sight of the figure waiting for her — a tiny, wrinkled, green figure in Jedi robes, braced on his walking stick. She was actually somewhat surprised to see him, considering how busy the Council was and that when she had requested permission to land she had also stated that she had no official business. She had decided to come straight to the Temple, rather than return first to her duties (and formal dresses, she was much happier in the simple but stylish bodysuit she currently wore) and find an excuse to visit officially.

Yoda spoke as she approached. “Happy, you are. A success your search was, then, for our missing Padawan?”

“Yes, it was, though she didn’t come back with me.” She dropped to one knee, to place herself closer to his height. “And she’s no longer your Padawan, and isn’t going to be again — there wasn’t much of chance of that when she left, and from what I saw there is zero chance now.” Padme remembered the young Human woman in the bacta tank, and had to fight to keep from smiling. If not for the reason you’re thinking.

And Master Yoda was thinking it, his ears drooping as his eyes fell. “Poorly handled, that was,” he murmured. “Very poorly.”

“Yes, it was.” Padme reached into the pocket on her bodysuit’s chest, pulled out a chip. “She did give me a message to deliver, though.”

“Did she? Happy young Skywalker will be to see it.”

“It isn’t for Knight Skywalker.” His message was verbal, and private. “It’s for Barriss Offee.”

“For young Offee?” Yoda’s eyes widened, his ears lifting. “Know you the content?”

“Yes, I watched as Ahsoka recorded it.”

Yoda examined her for a long moment, then slowly nodded. “Very well. Give it to me, and deliver it I will.”

“No. I promised Ahsoka I would deliver it personally. She has little trust in the Order right now.”

Yoda sighed, but nodded. “Escort you I will.”

Barriss Offee was having a bad day, gray and dull ... another in a neverending series of bad days. She went about her shift in the Temple’s medcenter in a haze, outwardly ignoring the sharp looks and widened eyes of the patients that recognized her. Acknowledging the distrust would interfere with her duties, and it was no more than she deserved. She almost wished she had been able to hold on to her delusions about the Order’s responsibility for the war in the face of her former Master’s relentless logic ... almost.

Looking back she couldn’t pinpoint when she had become a murderer.
The point when she had set her feet upon that path was easy enough — the Clone Trooper on Santive III whose nickname she’d never learned. (She’d avoided using the Clone Troopers’ alphanumeric designations as much as possible.) He’d been dying under her hands in spite of all she could do, and in spite of all she could do she’d burned with anger and hatred of the war and those driving it — those responsible for one more drop in the sea of death she swam in — and in that anger and hatred she’d found the strength she needed to save his life. She’d recognized afterward where that strength had come from, of course, but it had worked! The Clone Trooper had lived! And so she had reached for that anger and hatred again ... and again ... until she’d lost count of the number times ... the number of lives she had saved.

Oh yes, she had no trouble recognizing when she had first turned to the Dark Side, she just couldn’t remember when she had started blaming the Order for all the pain and death surrounding her. When she had ceased to be a healer.

And now, everyone treated her as carefully (she couldn’t really say gently) as a spun-glass Ashanki goblet, or avoided her like a plague-carrier. She wasn’t allowed access to sharp tools even when she ate, and her lightsaber was locked away.

And they wouldn’t allow to interact with the younglings.

After the way I betrayed everything my master believes in, framed Ahsoka, and murdered Tutso and the others, why should they?

“Barriss, you have a visitor.”

Barriss looked up at her master’s announcement over the meditation chamber’s mic — one of the younglings’ meditation chambers, that along with the mic had a camera so that teachers could observe and offer advice while maintaining the illusion of privacy. It had been assigned to her for a rather different reason, of course.

But ... a visitor? Who could possibly want to visit her? Why?

Does it matter? It isn’t like I’m accomplishing anything here. She uncurled from her lotus position and rose to her feet. “I’m ready.”

The door slid open, and Barriss was surprised to see Senator Amidala standing there with a tiny projector in her hand. The Senator stepped into the room, and the door slid shut behind her. “Barriss Offee, I just got back from a trip to the Outer Rim, looking for Ahsoka.” She offered Barriss the projector. “Ahsoka sent you a message.”

A message? From Ahsoka? Barriss reached out for the tablet with a hand beginning to tremble. Ahsoka hates me ... she must hate me. What could she possibly have to say to me? Whatever it was it couldn’t be pleasant. But Barriss deserved whatever invective her former friend heaped on her, and she steeled herself as she touched the button on the screen.

A small holographic image of the young Togrutan sprang up from the tablet. For several long second that image stared silently at her, then began to speak. “This is my fourth attempt at this. Each one has gotten shorter, and this will be the shortest yet. So, here goes.” She paused, her chest lifting with a deep breath. “Since I learned what you did, I’ve had to release so much anger ... so much hate ... into the Force — anger and hate, not just for the dead, but for the way you betrayed me personally. But a new ... friend ... pointed something out to me that I hadn’t thought of — that the Jedi I knew ... the friend I knew ... would never have done such a thing. And that there had to have been signs, signs of your descent into the Dark Side, and signs of the desperation that had to have driven the Jedi and friend I knew to do it. Signs that we ... that I ... missed completely. I failed you, and I am very, very
The hologram vanished, and Barriss stared at the projector in her palm, her mind awash in a chaotic swirl. She’s sorry? She’s sorry? After what I did, She’s sorry? She dropped to her knees, projector falling from her hand as she was wracked by sobs.

A moment later she felt the Senator’s arms circle around her.

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\text{\textbackslash n}\text{Jedi Master Luminara Unduli sighed as she switched off the screen showing Barriss clutching at the Senator holding her as she broke down, then chuckled ruefully. (The audio was still on but at least Luminara could give Barriss some privacy, since she clearly wasn’t a threat to her visitor.) “Trust Ahsoka to make us look bad again. And once again, we have no one to blame but ourselves.”}
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Standing on the seat next to her, Yoda hummed. “Responsible for her own actions, your former Padawan is.”

“I didn’t say she isn’t. For that matter, Ahsoka didn’t say she isn’t. But she’s right, the signs had to be there ... thinking back, they were there, and we didn’t see them for what they were. We were too busy. And now, here we are.”

“Here we are,” Yoda agreed. “And another question, it raises because right in one way, young Barriss was: soldiers, we are not; generals we should not be. Feel as Knight Ofee what other knights do? What other warning signs missed have we?”

Luminara sighed again, leaning back in her own seat. She was grateful to the ancient Grand Master for his subtle acknowledgement that, whatever she had done, Barriss was still one of theirs, but also accepted the change of subject. “Not a pleasant thought. The years after the end of the war will not be easy ones, as all of us — Masters, Knights, and Padawans — grapple with what we had to do to restore peace to the Republic. But at least now the end is in sight.”

“The end, yes. The beginning of the hunt for the Sith behind the war, behind the shadow that lies over the Force, also yes.”

Luminara kept her surprise off her face. Not at the mention of the Sith, Count Dooku and his apprentice Asajj Ventress were proof enough of that. But ... “Considering how long the influence of the Shroud has been growing, that would mean that Dooku wasn’t corrupted by a trove of Sith writings — perhaps a holocron of an ancient Sith Dark Lord. That he had a living master.”

“Yes, means that it does.”

For a moment Luminara was tempted to ask if the rest of the Jedi Council agreed with the Grand Master, but chose to let it go. That was an issue for later, after all, they had more than enough problems to deal with now ... as Yoda had said, it was a matter they could focus on in a few months when the war was won. She glanced at the blank screen as she listened to her former Padawan’s wails of pain. “Perhaps now Barriss will finally be able to stop punishing herself with her grief and self-loathing and release them into the Force.”

Chapter End Notes
So, for Barriss's redemption — however it happened, in canon she was sufficiently trusted to once more be serving in the field by the time of Order 66, though her final mission was to prevent a plot to poison Felucia's water supply and so perhaps she wasn't actually assigned a combat role. So here's my version of part of the process, stay tuned for what else comes.

**Tutso:** Tutso Mara trained with Barriss, showing her how to properly hold a lightsaber. He was one of those killed by the bomb Barriss helped engineer.
Ahsoka stepped into Life’s Gift’s cockpit, unsurprised to find her Bonded still there practicing setting up hyperspace jumps with the nav-comp. The ‘feeling’ of Jenni in the back of her mind had taken a ... studious? ... edge before Ahsoka had left on her check-up of their ship, and it hadn’t changed during the hours she’d been gone. (She really should have made that tour before they left Terra rather than trust the technicians that had worked on the ship while she’d been occupied with first Jenni, then the Hunter, then Jenni again, but with Padme taking word of her location back to Coruscant they’d been pushed for time.)

Jenni looked up from the co-pilot’s controls (carefully locked, along with the rest) and smiled at Ahsoka. “So what had you so confused?”

Ahsoka dropped into the pilot’s seat. “When was I confused?”

“And ...” Jenni glanced at the digital chronometer set into the wall. “... two hours ago. There were a few points when you were definitely less than happy, though not worried, but confusion concerns me more. Kind of like hearing ‘what’s that?’ from a surgeon.”

Ahsoka giggled as she thought back over the path of her tour, then remembered. “Right, the hold. Defenate said you told her to install that new lining and move those crates herself, rather than have the technicians do it. She was rather put out with you, even if her new body is more capable than the usual protocol droid they aren’t usually cargo handlers or drivers.” When it had come time to provide a body for Defenate’s head to be attached to, Jenni had suggested that any droid hanging around them needed some upgrades just to survive and Ahsoka couldn’t disagree.

It was Jenni’s turn to giggle. “And I’m sure she was all prim and proper while complaining. Protocol droids aren’t much good at ranting, are they? But the hold ... the boxes are full of crystals from the Mountain, and the lining prevents them from being noticed by any other Dancers that might be around if we take any out of their boxes.”

Ahsoka shook her head, smiling at the feeling of anticipation coming through their bond. “Don’t you mean ‘when’? What are you up to?”

“I suppose that is what I mean, and you’re getting better at reading me,” Jenni said with a grin. “Give it a few months, and I won’t be able to keep any secrets from you at all. As for what I’m up to ...” Though her grin didn’t change, her mood darkened. “Let me introduce you to the biggest matter of internal debate among the Youxia Bonds.”

“Even bigger than whether the Tao is a tool of God, or is God?” Ahsoka asked breathlessly, eyes going wide, and was rewarded by a surprised laugh from her Bonded ... a real laugh, accompanied by a lightening of the metaphorical weight on her shoulders.
“Oh, yes, much bigger! The God question was just something to fill up time, with no way to answer it. This actually affected how the Bonded acted. You remember how I told you that completely merging with the current of the Tao can be chancy, because where the current wants to sweep you isn’t always where you want to go. But some of the Bonds suggested that the chance of that happening would be reduced if you set up the proper conditions first. Other Bonds considered that to be heretical, a rejection of the fundamental principle of going with the Flow.”

Ahsoka’s mind flashed back to their fight with the Hunter, Jenni taking blaster bolts to her back and chest, dropping as her presence in the Force vanished, only her muted presence in Ahsoka’s mind letting her know her Bonded was still alive but had merged with ‘the current of the Tao’ ... and how she’d been able to kill that hunter with ease, because he had thought she was dead. “That was what you did during the fight. So you’re in the first camp?”

“Actually, I’m mostly in the second camp. Getting too wedded to altering the future to suit yourself is ... problematic. But I’m not fanatical about it, so I’m going to be setting up a trap in the hold for any other Hunters we encounter, just in case. But that’s for later, and —” Her gaze shifted to the chronometer again and back. “— we’re just about to come out of hyperspace, so it’s time for me to get out of your way.”

“Yes, it is, time for you to get into the ventral gun turret.” Ahsoka slipped into the pilot’s seat, buckled in, and put on her headset. She waited until Jenni had shut down the nav-comp and the cockpit’s door closed behind her, on her way to the gun turret that Ahsoka shown her and explained (muttering something about getting some use out of a misspent youth), then unlocked the controls and flipped the switch for the com to the second crew quarters that Cort had used during his and Ian’s escape from their own pursuers. “Cort, we’re about to exit. Whatever you’re doing with the computers, it’s time to shut it down and get to the dorsal gun.”

“Acknowledged,” the slicer answered back, and Ahsoka flipped off the com and settled back in her chair as the ready lights for the ventral gun lit up. A few minutes later the ready lights for the dorsal gun came on, along with its com: “All green here.”

“Good, we’re just about clear.” Ahsoka had one hand on the ship’s controls and a finger on the switch to free the controls to the guns, ready in case they were ambushed. She really hoped they weren’t, they wanted to leave everyone in Milagro thinking Ahsoka was alone. Six ... five ... four ... three ... two ... one ...

The roiling gray-white murkiness of hyperspace flashed into streaks of stars settling into their proper places, and Ahsoka gazed shifted to the scope ... nothing, or at least no other ships close enough to be a threat. Not that she’d been expecting any, not on the heading coming in from the planet formerly known as Trey, but if another pack of bounty hunters had come after her they might have split up, leaving someone behind just in case she and they crossed in hyperspace.

But it looked like they were in the clear, and she flipped another com switch before starting the calculations for a jump to Bacrana. “Milagro flight control, this is Free Trader Riptide. Please respond, over.” She winced at the formality, she doubted the flotsam and jetsam of the galaxy used military precision. Not that it mattered in this case, but she’d have to watch that going forward.

“Free Trader Riptide, this is Milagro Flight Control. Please state your destination.”

“I’m just passing through, but I have some mail for you. The free trader servicing Trey has died, so what passes for a government there asked me to drop off his nav-charts for the run to Trey and to ask you to pass along the word to other free traders that the route’s open. They included a list of goods they regularly buy.” And the neo-nerf steak is unbelievable, she almost added. But in spite of the new findings that Jenni had been able to guide those crazy archeologists to, they’d still decided to keep
their heads down at least until things in the rest of the galaxy had settled down.

“Very well, Riptide, we are ready to receive your transmission.”

“Sending.” She hit the button to send the data packet on its way.

“Data received, and ... it looks good.”

“Then I’m out of here. You have a nice life.”

“Likewise, Riptide. You are cleared for departure.”

Ahsoka flipped off the com, then when the nav-comp’s screen lit up with its results steered Fate’s Gift onto the indicated heading. She doubted that any bounty hunters or Darksiders (Void Slaves, she could hear Jenni’s voice saying that, she rather liked that label) would be fooled by her course coreward along the Corellian Run, especially since Bacrana was also on another minor trade route running spinward and trailing, but it wasn’t like she knew where they would be going, anyway.

Five minutes later, she dropped them out of hyperspace and flipped on the coms. “Jenni, we’re clear, it’s —” The door behind her slipped open and her Bonded stepped in. “— your turn.”

Ahsoka glanced back as the cockpit door slid open, and Cort stepped in, his nose wrinkling at the stench of vomit and disinfectant. He glanced at Jenni, sitting in the co-pilot seat with her hand on the nav-comp’s controls and her eyes closed, then sat in the seat behind Ahsoka in the pilot’s seat. He murmured, “What’s going on?”

“Jenni’s trying to program a destination,” Ahsoka quietly replied.

“Really? Is it a Force thing?”

“Not for Jedi, at least not this completely. She’s adapting a technique her own people came up with.”

“So what’s the hold-up? It’s been almost an hour.”

“It’s —” Ahsoka broke off as Jenni twisted to the side and tried to vomit into the bucket between them. She didn’t have much success, her stomach already empty from previous attempts.

Ahsoka laid a gentle hand on Jenni’s arm. (She was finding that in spite of their mental connection — or perhaps because of it — she had gotten more ‘touchy-feely’ since they’d Bonded.) “Jenni, this isn’t working. In fact ... should we go back to Terra?”

Cort looked between the two women. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s some sort of shroud fueled by the Dark Side over the Force,” Ahsoka explained, now rubbing a hunched over Jenni’s back. “I’ve never known a time it wasn’t there, gotten ... desensitized, I guess. Didn’t even realize how bad it’s gotten over the last few years, until I visited Terra — for some reason the Shroud doesn’t reach there, I was amazed how clean I felt. But Jenni was never exposed to it until we left.”

“It’s not that,” Jenni disagreed, straightening with a grateful smile for her Bonded that Ahsoka felt through their link. “Sure, I felt like I’d been dipped in slime after we left Earth ... Terra. But I can live with that, the problem is that I’m trying to merge with the current of the Tao — the Force — and this ‘shroud’ is in the way. It’s like a ... a riptide trying to sweep me into the Void. I’m all right as long as
I don’t use the tide, try to swim with it, but that tide is the only one I can use while I’m in it.”

Ahsoka frowned. “That can’t be right. I mean ... yeah, from what I’ve heard looking into the future, receiving guidance from the Force has become more difficult over the years, but there’s still a few visions.”

“Are there? Or are all of you seeing whatever Palpatine wants you to see?”

Ahsoka felt herself go lightheaded with shock as that question hammered into her. “Jenni, Jedi depend on those visions! I mean, we ... they don’t seek guidance for every step, but if you’re right ...”

Jenni nodded grimly. “Then you’ve been dancing at the end of Palpatine’s strings for years.”

“We have to warn them!”

“Maybe, I just wish ...” Jenni sighed. “Even if we didn’t seek out visions the Youxia were even more dependent on the currents of the Tao to sweep us where they would than you Jedi, and it isn’t like I was exactly high up in our ranks however powerful I was! Why are we the ones in the hot seat?”

“Maybe because we were on Terra, where the shroud, veil, whatever, doesn’t reach?” Ahsoka suggested.

“Then why did we need to leave, if it’s only on Earth ... Terra ... that we can trust the currents?” Jenni asked. “And leaving was the right move — it felt right!”

“Hold on, let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves,” Cort cautioned. “Focus on our problem right now, leave the rest for later. So, aren’t you two linked? Jenni, can’t you draw on your tie to Ahsoka to, I don’t know, ‘push’ yourself through? Does that even make sense?”

The two Bonded exchanged glances. “Maybe?” Jenni replied. “It isn’t something that I know of any Youxia trying, we ride the currents rather than create our own. Ahsoka?”

The Togrutan shrugged. “I haven’t heard of anyone ... feeding, I guess ... the Force to someone else through a bond, either. But it’s worth a try.”

The two settled back in their seats and Ahsoka closed her eyes, focusing on the comforting ‘feel’ of Jenni’s presence in the back of her mind. There was a discordant mix of uncertainty and determination ... and then Ahsoka knew that Jenni had again ‘dive’ into the ‘riptide’ she’d described, the foulness Ahsoka felt through the link making her want to retch. But she struggled through it as she tried to ‘reach’ into herself for the strength her floundering Bonded needed, to somehow ‘push’ it into her presence — and as if something flipped a switch ... no, pulled a lever ... it was like a flood gate had opened up, strength from deep within herself pouring through the link to Jenni. Jenni’s awe came back ‘up’ the link like a triumphant shout — and just as suddenly it seemed as if a plate of grayish, translucent glass cut through the link. Ahsoka could still sense Jenni’s presence through that ‘glass’, but it was muted and distant as it had been during their fight with the Hunter, and the strength that she had been feeding into her Bonded ‘splashed’ against the new barrier. Her eyes flew open to find herself twisted in her seat and Jenni’s hands flashing across the nav-comp’s keys.

“It worked?” She twisted to look at Cort behind her. He continued, “From the way you spasmed I hope it worked.”

“It worked,” Ahsoka agreed, sucking in a shuddering breath. “She wasn’t kidding about being dipped in slime, that was foul. But she got through.”
“So where are we going?”

Ahsoka turned back and leaned over so she could see the nav-comp’s screen, and her eyes widened. “Dantooine.”

“Dantooine? Where have I heard that name before?”

“Jedi Master Mace Windu won a battle there.”

“That Dantooine? But that’s all the way across the Republic! It’ll take months to get that far without following the trade routes, and there’s no way to do it in a single jump without getting yanked out of hyperspace by some star’s gravity shadow if we don’t fly right into it!”

But Ahsoka had been watching the text scrolling up the screen as Jenni’s fingers continued to fly across the keyboard. “Maybe not. She isn’t just entering the destination, she’s programming the route.”

The two Republic natives exchange a glance with eyes filled with awe, then turned to stare at the time-lost newcomer.

Jenni’s mental ‘giggles’ echoed in the back of Ahsoka’s mind.
There Goes My Life

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Padme looked up as the door signaled a new customer entering Dex’s Diner, and smiled when she saw Anakin. She hadn’t realized he was back, but this was one of their locations for ‘accidental’ meetings in public. He couldn’t exactly invite himself to her apartments, but if a couple of old friends met and one invited the other home so they could catch up in private, who would care? And it wasn’t like he could invite her to the Jedi Temple, that would raise eyebrows — fortunately for them one friend inviting another into her home was one thing, a Jedi inviting a Senator into the Temple quite another. So, the diner, and she suspected a no longer needed message sitting in an anonymous mail account. (Of course they had to regularly drop in when the other wasn’t there, or their meetings wouldn’t look so accidental. But the food was good, if simple, so that was all right and the simplicity was even a good excuse as a nice change of pace from elaborate banquets and dances.)

She called out, “Knight Skywalker, I didn’t realize you were back, when did you get in?”

He looked around, found her, and bowed extravagantly. “At your service, my Lady.” He straightened to chuckles from some of the other customers, and continued, “I got in a few hours ago. I’ve just finished reporting to the Council, and thought I would get some real food.”

“What, the Temple doesn’t feed you properly?”

“Oh, it feeds us all properly, all healthy and properly balanced. It just doesn’t feed us well. And the less said about army rations the better.” He walked across the room to join her, accompanied by additional laughter, and dropped into the seat across from her. He quickly placed his order in the table’s built-in pad (not that the cook probably hadn’t already started, he always ordered the same stew), looked up at Padme, and his gaze sharpened. When she smiled back and mouthed ‘later’ he subtly nodded. “So, while I was out crawling through mud and trying to figure out how to use the Force for something as petty as convincing the local insect-equivalent not to eat me alive, what galaxy-shaking legislation have you been working on in the Senate?”

In her own seat several tables away, Aja shook her head before turning her attention to her own plate — now that Anakin was here, she could relax from the alertness her unofficial duty as Padme’s bodyguard demanded ... a bit, at least.

After a couple mouthfuls of nerf steak, she unobtrusively glanced around the room and had to keep from shaking her head again. She didn’t know why Jedi and Senators were so blind, but the pair weren’t fooling anyone in this restaurant. But then, the regulars here saw more of the pair together than most Jedi and hangers-on around the Senate chambers. Still, all the expressions she could see were approving or even amused, so she doubted word would be leaking out any time soon. The public did like its heroes, and for once that regard was warranted and even useful.

She turned her attention back to her own meal.

As soon as her apartment door closed behind them, Padme was in Anakin’s arms, her lips pressed to his. For a long moment the two simply luxuriated in each other’s presence and the relief of being able
to drop their public façade. They were both quite used to C-3PO by now, and simply ignored his exclamation on seeing his creator.

Finally, they broke apart and Anakin grinned, glancing toward the door to Padme’s bedroom. But first... “So, what news do you have that you didn’t want to share at Dex’s?”

But Padme glanced over at C-3PO. “Threepio, don’t you need to shut down and recharge?”

“No, Mistress, I just... oh.” Padme had glanced toward her bedroom door, and while ‘dense’ was his standard mode he wasn’t completely hopeless. “Oh, yes, of course. I will be at the recharging station if you need me.”

Anakin was softly chuckling at the prim tone to C-3PO’s last statement, but waited until the protocol droid sat down at the recharge station and the glow in his visual receptors went out. “So what didn’t you want to tell me at the restaurant?”

I’m pregnant. The words trembled on her lips, but she forced them back — right now, she wanted to get laid, after the long weeks apart so would her husband (much of their best sex was after they’d been apart for awhile), and once she told him she doubted he’d be in the mood until he processed it.

So instead, she went with, “I saw Ahsoka.”

“You did? Where? How is she? Is she safe? Did she —?”

Padme shut him up with a finger to his lips. “I found her on a backwater planet called Trey — actually, the Chancellor found her and passed the word — and she’s fine. More than fine, actually. Anakin, she knows about us.”

“She does?” Anakin asked, eyes widening. “Since when? How? Has she told anyone?”

By now Padme was holding back giggles, both at her husband’s reaction and at Ahsoka’s newfound expansion of her worldview. “Relax, she figured it out while we were talking. No, she hasn’t told anyone, and assured me she won’t. As for how...” Now the giggles escaped for a moment. “I think she’s... open to possibilities that you Jedi ignore. I think she’s taken a lover of her own.”

“A... a lover?” Anakin groped for a chair beside a nearby table, and fell into it. “Ahsoka? Are you sure? He must be quite a man... she never showed any... any desire to...”

Padme plopped herself onto his lap and snuggled against his chest. “Maybe because her lover must be quite a woman, and a strikingly beautiful Human. And yes, I’m sure. I haven’t talked to Jenni myself, she was injured in a fight with a bounty hunter that caught up with Ahsoka, and in a bacta tank. But the way Ahsoka was looking at her, had her hand on the tank... I called her on it and yes, they’re lovers.”

Anakin stared at the simple pattern on the wall, its supposedly soothing pattern lost on him, almost oblivious of his wife in his lap as he grappled with the revelation. “Wow... wait, bounty hunter? This Jenni was in a bacta tank... they didn’t come back with you?”

“No, they didn’t. Anni, someone’s put a price on Ahsoka’s head, she’s already been attacked by bounty hunters three times. Since she can’t... or won’t... seek the Order’s protection, for her Coruscant is one of the most dangerous places in the galaxy.”

“What!”? Anakin’s shock jerked him to his feet, only his quick grab saving Padme from hitting the floor. “Who!”?
“Sheev didn’t know.” Anakin turned toward the door, and Padme grabbed his arm. “Anakin, you can’t — not search for whoever offered the bounty, not try to find Ahsoka. Sheev’s already investigating the first, do you think you have more resources than the Chancellor’s office? And right now, Ahsoka’s best protection is her relationship with Jenni; crechelings might believe the rumors about the rampant promiscuity of Jedi that leave the Order, bounty hunters will know better — they’ll see a young Togrutan in a relationship with a Human woman … to the point that they’ll think Jenni dyed her hair to match Ahsoka’s lekku. But if you show up …”

For a long moment Anakin stood staring at the door, then turned away. Shrugging off her hand, he began to pace the length of the room, running his hands through his hair.

“She sent you a message — she said you need to watch your back as much as she does, not all our enemies are in front of us.” Padme had wondered if the message would mean more to Anakin than it had to her ... and if he would share ... but he simply nodded as he continued to pace. She suppressed a disappointed sigh.

I guess I’m not getting laid, after all. And since that’s the case ...

She stepped up to her pacing husband and wrapped her arms around him from behind, bringing him to a halt. Leaned her head against his shoulder, the murmured, “You know, it’s funny, how Ahsoka figured out about us. The Marshal that met me when I landed said she was in the infirmary — scared the life out of me! — and when I burst in she’s standing by Jenni’s bacta tank with one hand on the transparisteel. She looks at me, and the first thing she says is ‘You’re pregnant. As much time as me and Sky Guy spent with you, when did you have time to have a secret romance?’ The next thing she says is ‘Anakin’s the father?’ How did she know that?”

But she had felt Anakin stiffen halfway through her almost panicky rambling. “You’re pregnant?”

Her arms tightened their hold in him. “Yes, I’m pregnant.” Please, let him take this the right way!

He took her hands in his and pulled them away from him, turned so he could stare at her, eyes wide. “I’m going to be a father?”

“Yes, you’re going to be a father.” She waited for some additional response — any additional response — from him, but he just stood there staring at her. Finally unable to bear the silence, with a voice that shook she said, “Anni, please, you’re scaring me.”

That jerked him free from his shock, and he fell back into a chair, running a hand through his hair as he grinned. “Wow, I’m going to be a father! How did that happen?

“Oh, the usual way,” Padme said dryly as she plopped into his lap, trying to ignore the relief that almost had her shaking. And it had been ‘the usual way’, she hadn’t needed the seed she’d siphoned out and stored, after all ... something she was eternally grateful for, and never intended to tell her husband. (Not that she’d disposed of her ‘deposit’ — one thing the past over two years had made clear was that things happened in war, that sample be her only opportunity to have more children.) “So, do we wait until after the war to let everyone know about the twins? Or do the Big Reveal right now?” She had remembered Ahsoka’s words, and had thought about how best to handle it at every waking moment. (She’d also remembered Ahsoka’s use of the word ‘children’, and had confirmed it as soon as she could do so discreetly.)

“Twins?” Anakin’s grin actually widened.

“Yes, so start thinking about names for both sexes when you aren’t busy hunting Sith or winning battles. So how do we handle this?” She quickly ran through Ahsoka’s reasoning, regretfully killing his grin in the process ... now he just looked sick.
“Padme, the Order’s all I have, what will I do when they throw me out?”

At the word ‘when’, Padme felt a tense knot in her heart she hadn’t even realized existed — hadn’t dared realize existed — come apart and vanish, leaving her lightheaded. Anakin had chosen her over the Order. He’d not only chosen her, he hadn’t even thought about it ... it hadn’t even been a choice. She wriggled on his lap, smiling inside at the inevitable result ... he might be in shock, but his body wasn’t. *I don’t care how upset he is, he’s getting laid tonight*. She leaned down and softly kissed him. His arms instinctively circled her waist, pulling her closer, the kiss deepening until when they finally broke apart she already felt like she was about to burst into flame, her nipples almost painfully tight. She whispered, “Let’s worry about that later. It’ll have to wait until after the war regardless, and they might not be so eager to throw our their 'hero with no fear'. And whatever happens you’ll always have me and our children. *Tonight*, let’s celebrate.”

“Celebrate?” She wriggled again and his eyes widened, then he grinned and pulled her down into another kiss that left her gasping. As she caught her breath he easily rose to his feet with her in his arms. (From the extra support she felt and the light touch of his arms he was cheating, and she giggled at the thought of what the Council would think of such a ‘frivolous’ use of the Force.) “Yes,” he murmured in her ear as the door to her bedroom slid aside, “a celebration is definitely in order.”

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea if writers have come up with a different word for a see-through material harder than glass, or even steel, so if anyone knows of one other than "crystoplast" please let me know. EDIT: Thank you, DarthLocutus, for "transparisteel."

The chapter title comes from the song by Kenny Chesney. Not a perfect fit, but close.
I know, it's been awhile, but I have excuses! First, much of this chapter was Not Safe For Work, which meant I couldn't work on it during breaks. (That didn't mean I didn't write, I ended up posting two chapters of my current Ranma story in a row, and have another chapter for this story going up in a day or so.) Second, this chapter is almost three times the length of my current minimum chapter word count so you aren't actually getting a lower word count, just getting it all at once. Third, I got ambushed by a great fanfic -- Thrower of the Dart, an movie Avengers/Artemis Fowl crossover by Vathara on FF.net. Even if you don't care about Artemis Fowl (I only read the first two books), this one is a treat. And fourth, this chapter just did not want to be written, sometimes it was like trying to squeeze blood from a turnip. But it's done!

And for those that skipped the above note, this chapter is NOT SAFE FOR WORK!

Jenni sighed in relief as she eased down onto one of the seats by the console in the common room, rotating her shoulder ... she and Ahsoka had been sparring in Life’s Gift’s hold — the slimy sensation of the Veil that enveloped them was eased there, she assumed because of the presence of the crates of crystals — and she had tried a move that she hadn’t quite been ready for. Ahsoka had promptly demonstrated that fact, of course, and she’d landed wrong. Thankfully she hadn’t broken anything, and the Tao’s gentle currents were already sweeping away her aches; in a few hours she should be fine.

But until then, she would have to settle for catching up on the current news of the galaxy. Or at least, as current as they had available; they’d downloaded the latest news burst Terra had received through its subspace transceiver, but Cort hadn’t felt confident enough yet in the security of Life’s Gift’s database even if they’d been willing to stick around at Milagro long enough to download the latest burst (something he was happily correcting during the weeks it would take to get to Dantooine). And where they were headed there wouldn’t be a subspace transceiver, much less a hyperwave transceiver, so until they got back to civilization what they had was all they had.

She wished Ahsoka had accepted her invitation to join her, even though the young Togrutan had proven shockingly ignorant of a great deal of the larger culture the Jedi Order was imbedded in she still knew more about the undercurrents of what they watched than Jenni did. But her Bonded had had some sort of revelation in the middle of their last match (one that threw her off her game enough for Jenni to try that move, but not enough for it to work), had begged off joining her. Jenni had no idea what thought could have caused the interesting mix of trepidation, delight, and ‘I’ve got a secret …’ coming through their link; but it had been topped off with the particular flavor of anticipation that had always preceded one of her previous Bonded springing a happy surprise so she could sit in her curiosity and let Ahsoka have her fun until she was ready to share. Until then ...

Jenni grinned and brought up the console’s keyboard. Until then, let’s see what the newsies have to say about her Sky Guy.
Over four hours later, Jenni shut down the console’s holographic projector and frowned thoughtfully — she had not expected what she’d found.

Sure, she’d expected the news reports of Skywalker to be laudatory (the Hero With No Fear, really?), wars need heroes and from Ahsoka’s (just possibly a little biased) accounts her former master was the genuine article. What Jenni hadn’t expected was the way that Skywalker seemed to be the only hero. Or at least, the only hero that was a Jedi, the others were barely mentioned. And the drama she’d stumbled across — she’d only seen one episode, but she suspected the rest would be the same: thanks to his years as a slave young Anakin Skywalker was caring, brave, and wise beyond his years; while the rest of the Jedi were ... not evil, exactly, but naïve and distant at best, cold and uncaring at worst without concern for how their plans would impact the individual common people they interacted with. The only other real heroes besides Skywalker had been some of the troopers in the 501st that he led, with whom he’d forged an unbreakable bond. It was that drama that had her going back and watching the news again with fresh eyes.

This has to be Palpatine undermining the Order. What is wrong with them, doesn’t they have any publicists of their own? Wait, right, ‘religious’ order, I should have known. But the way he’s boosting Skywalker is actually a little scary, it’s going to be tough keeping Ahsoka from charging to his rescue ... and from what, exactly? Maybe Cort will have a way to anonymously pass this on to the Order and Padme.

Just then she felt Ahsoka’s approaching presence, and looked up as her Bonded walked into the common room from the short corridor to the personal quarters. From the eagerness she was all but ‘shouting’, the Togrutan really should have been bouncing like a puppy. Though there was still the trepidation from earlier, if anything even stronger.

Before she had a chance to say anything, Ahsoka forced a smile. “How’s the shoulder?”

“Washed clean by the Tao. What has you so ... bubbly?”

Ahsoka laughed (genuinely, unlike her smile) and grabbed Jenni’s hands, pulling her to her feet. “Come on, you can tell me about whatever is bothering you later, I’ll show you.”

She led Jenni toward their personal quarters, and Jenni’s eyes widened when she realized she was sensing some of the crystals. Stepping into their room after her Bonded, she looked around to find crystals spaced along the angles where walls met ceiling, floor, and each other. And the slimy feeling of scum on skin was gone.

Ahsoka was babbling: “It occurred to me that the reason why we don’t feel whatever the shroud over the Force is in the hold so much is because the crystals you stored there push it away somehow, so if we lined our quarters with them it couldn’t get through and since it’s pushing that shroud away that means Palpatine won’t be able to use the shroud to detect them, though we’ll need to take them down and store them in the hold again whenever we get back to civilization so any Dark — any Void Slaves that might be around won’t notice them the usual way, but until then —”

“Ahsoka, you’re brilliant, this is a wonderful surprise! Now we’ll —” Jenni had turned to embrace her Bonded, and she froze, gaping at the sight of the open-backed, thigh-length, rust-red tunic Ahsoka favored dropping down her thighs and legs to join her belt on the floor about her feet. Now wearing only red boots and fingerless gloves (since they’d left Terra she’d taken to leaving off her blue-gray leggings), she took a deep breath, pushing forward her breasts for Jenni’s admiring gaze. The pert orbs weren’t an unfamiliar sight, the couple had been sleeping together in the nude since Jenni had come out of the bacta tank. (Ahsoka had insisted on both the single bed and lack of clothes, though she hadn’t indicated any desire to take their physical relationship further and Jenni
hadn’t pushed; since leaving Terra the pair had found that skin on skin contact had lessened the impact of the shroud all around them.) Now, though, those breasts’ white tips had crinkled tight, and Jenni suddenly realized just what Ahsoka’s trepidation had been all about. “Ahsoka, we don’t need to do this now, I can wait —”

“No.” Ahsoka shook her head, her determination clear through their link along with the rest of her response. “We didn’t ... consummate the bond when we first bonded, I wasn’t completely recovered from your Force lightning and still really nervous about the whole thing. Then when you came out of the bacta tank yourself we were in a hurry to get off-planet. Then once we were off-planet and immersed in the filth of the Shroud ...” She shuddered. “Eww, just no! But now that the Shroud has been pushed away, it’s time. And it isn’t like I have no idea what to do, the memory of your consummation of your first bonding you shared when we bonded was very educational.”

Jenni laughed at that last, because Ahsoka was right — first bondings ... and all that surrounded them ... were central moments in a Bonded’s life. She’d learned a great deal about lovemaking herself from the memories she observed during her own first bonding, before her new Bond had taken her to bed and done their (highly successful) best to have her screaming her joy.

And a few months later most of them were dead. She pushed the thought away (she was not going to let history repeat itself), and focused on Ahsoka. Her Bonded was determined but nervous, even a little scared ... but there was a good deal of eager curiosity included in the mix. She wasn’t just trying to do what she considered her duty.

Jenni stepped forward to embrace her Bonded, dipping her head, her pink lips meeting Ahsoka’s greyish ones. As Jenni had expected Ahsoka was hesitant, but rapidly growing more confident as their deepening kiss matched her inherited memory. With one hand kept around Ahsoka’s waist, Jenni lifted the other to run it across the white, blue-striped ‘helmet’ of skin-coated horn (careful not to touch the montrals rising up to points above, that gave Ahsoka her 360-degree echo-sense), then brushed her thumb along the white pattern on a cheek before she ran a finger underneath the horn’s lower edge where it merged with a lek.

Ahsoka stiffened, her lips parting as she moaned, and Jenni’s tongue darted in to sweep along the sharp teeth of a carnivore it found there then out as Jenni broke the kiss. “Remember, be careful with the teeth,” she murmured, “yours are a lot sharper than mine.”

Not bothering to try to force words through her gasping breath, Ahsoka nodded before lifting her own hand to tangle it in Jenni’s blue, white-striped hair. She pulled her back down to resume the kiss for a long moment before breaking off herself and shakily whispering, “You’re overdressed.” She reached behind Jenni’s neck for the fastenings of the Human’s own backless, chest-windowed tunic ... dusty blue to match Ahsoka’s leggings.

(After Padme’s comment on the way the blue-white of Jenni’s hair reversed the pattern of Ahsoka’s own ‘helmet’ of horn, they’d decided to continue the reversal with their clothes to hide the Togrutan’s Jedi origins — what bounty hunter would think half of an obvious couple was the Order’s wayward former Padawan? They’d assume that the similarity in dress to that Padawan was a desire to shine thanks to reflected glory. Now if the pair could only figure out how to hide their lightsabers in the almost skin-tight outfits ...)

It took only moments for Jenni’s belt, blaster, lightsaber, and tunic to join Ahsoka’s on the floor, then she was falling backward onto the bed, her legs hanging half off, Ahsoka on top of her trailing burning kisses along her jawline and down her neck. Jenni braced herself — if that article she’d found about different races’ sexual idiosyncrasies was right ...

It was, and the pain of Ahsoka’s teeth sinking into the skin over her collarbone where neck met
shoulder pierced through her, followed by the liquid sensation of blood oozing down her shoulder onto the bed. We’re going to have to clean the sheets before we go to sleep tonight.

But as hard as she’d tried, she’d failed to keep the pain from bleeding over into their bond, and Ahsoka jerked back, sitting up on the bed. “Jenni, what hap— You’re bleeding! I ... I did that? But ... I don’t remember ...”

Jenni quieted her with a finger to her lips, her other hand going up to trace her forefinger over the still-oozing bite mark on neck and shoulder. “Yes, you did that, I thought that might happen. As for why you don’t remember it, according to an article I read that bite is instinctual for Togrutans marking their mates. Traditionally, I’d need to make sure it forms a scar and adjust my tunic to show it off, then any other Togrutans we meet would know we’re mated — all Togrutans know of that instinct even if they suppress it.”

“Why would they suppress it?”

Jenni shrugged. “Some Togrutan cultures consider that instinct a relic of a barbaric past, or putting individual relationships above the group — you belong to a very social species and some Togrutan cultures have made group identity into a fetish, though few of those leave your homeworld. Most Togrutans embrace it, though.”

Ahsoka sighed, suddenly pensive. “You know more about my species than I do. I wish I could carry your mark, but your teeth just aren’t sharp enough.”

“I just know the sex parts, I doubt that was covered much in the Order’s training. As for the mark ...” Jenni pulled her not-quite-yet-lover into a kiss (interrupting Ahsoka’s giggling at the thought of the Order teaching anything about sex other than DON’T), free hand roving over red-hued skin. She whispered, “Help me get my boots and leggings off, and I’ll show you my mark.”

Ahsoka had closed her eyes, breath coming faster at the sensation of gentle hands cupping her breasts, thumbs gently circling crinkled-hard tips, but reluctantly pulled away and crouched to pull off one boot, then the other, then pull leggings down and off.

Jenni rose off the bed and stepped over to the wall with her closet. She placed her thumb on the lock, then when the door slid aside reached up to grab a box on the shelf above her hanging tunics. “If we became close enough for you to consider me your mate I thought that might be an issue, so I got with Thel and Khaylia Long, the deputy that also handles metallurgy when things are calm — or is she a metallurgist that becomes a deputy when things get exciting? Anyway, Thel took a cast of my bite and Khaylia created a mold and ...” She opened the box and reached in to take out a black choker of woven steel, the enameled medallion centered on it steel gray with a broken black circle that Ahsoka realized was the pattern of Jenni’s bite. “It’s made out of battle steel so it should be able to survive anything you can. They’ll be happy to make another for me whenever we next drop by.”

Ahsoka accepted the choker and fastened it around her neck with trembling fingers, then wiped at wet cheeks and embraced her Bonded, the emotion she suddenly realized was much too strong to be simple affection sweeping through their bond from both directions, meeting and intermingling until it was impossible to sort out which strand belonged to whom.

Jenni returned the embrace and the pair stood silently, lost in the moment as seconds stretched into minutes. Finally, the Human woman reluctantly broke the hug. She cleared her throat and said, “That’s not all I brought with me from Terra.” She giggled, both audibly and through their link. “I think the good Marshal just about had a stroke when I asked him about this, but we’ll need it thanks to Togrutan physiology.” She reached into the box again and pulled out ...
Ahsoka felt the blues of her montral/lek stripes flushing bright at the sight of something she’d only seen before in Jenni’s memories when they’d bonded. She suddenly had a very good idea how Ghent had felt. “What is that?”

Jenni grinned. “It’s a double-headed dildo shaped like a Human male erection. In two years as a soldier, you never saw naked men?”

“Well ... yes, but never like that!”

“Really?” Jenni raised an eyebrow, astonished. “Those soldiers’ self-control is impressive, you’re a cute young thing. Anyway, the same article that warned me of Togrutans’ tendency to bite said that Togrutans’ lower lips don’t have the same sensitivity as Humans’ but that you’re even more sensitive inside. So ...”

Ahsoka watched wide-eyed as Jenni widened her stance, rubbed the upper dildo head between her damp nether lips, then slowly began to push it up into her sheath. “Share my senses, f-feel what i-i-it’s like.” Ahsoka shivered at her Bonded’s suggestion but opened herself up to the feelings flooding their bond, and her breath caught at the sensation of rubber pushing against in inner sheath rapidly getting soaked with anticipation, spreading under the pressure of the deepening intrusion. Jenni’s memories would be useful, but they lacked the ... immediacy ... of the direct experience. Not trusting her ability to speak, Ahsoka thought through their bond, “Will-l-l-l that even fit in me?”

Jenni shuddered as the dildo reached full penetration, then pressed spots on the top and bottom of the rubber cock and both women shuddered again when the inserted end expanded. “There, it should stay in place now; the state of the art has improved in the last 90,000 years, my old ones needed straps to hold it in place. Yes, it should fit, and it beats the alternative.”

“Al-ter-r-r-native?” Ahsoka managed to gasp out, shuddering in turn at the full sensation coming over their bond, and the wet warmth blossoming in her own cleft in response, then gasped again as a memory flashed into her mind: a close-up view of a Human woman’s cleft, both skin darker than Jenni’s and raven-hued pubic hair wet with arousal, clit engorged ... and another woman’s hand buried in her sheath up to the wrist.

“Fisting. But Yua was taller than you — almost certainly larger — so let’s not test that your first time.”

“No, let’s not.” Ahsoka felt herself tightening up again, even worse than before, her breathing faster again but for not for the same reason.

Jenni stiffened at the sudden emotional onslaught. “Ahsoka, we can still wait —”

“No!” Ahsoka stepped, pushed, and when a laughing Jenni allowed herself to fall back on the bed pounced, landing with her knees straddling her Bonded. “Now, where were we before my instincts so rudely interrupted us?” the Togrutan murmured, dipping down and cutting off the giggles with her lips. For a moment their tongues entwined, their breasts pressed together, Ahsoka’s hips undulating at the sensation of the rubber cock rubbing against her own cleft.

Finally, Ahsoka broke the kiss and repeated her march down along Jenni’s body, pausing for a moment to lick and suck at the still-oozing bite. Jenni shivered from a mix of pleasure and pain, then pure pleasure as Ahsoka moved on down along swell of breast with a hand preceding her to caress a heaving breast. She paused when her lips reached a mound’s red tip and spent long minutes alternating between the two nipples with tongue and teeth, delighting in her partner’s rising pleasure until an orgasm flashed through Jenni’s now-sweaty body and exploded in their minds.
Ahsoka collapsed on top of her lover and lay there gasping, until she felt Jenni’s giggles through her fleshy pillow.

“That was a small one, love.”

“A small one? What’s a big one like?”

“Keep going and you’ll find out.”

“What have I gotten myself into?” Without waiting for a reply, Ahsoka pushed herself up to again straddle Jenni’s hips.

“Ahsoke, wait a moment. Look through my eyes.”

The teenager paused and closed her eyes, reaching for their bond, and ‘reached’ for lover as they’d practiced to see herself with one knee on each side of Jenni’s hips, pert breasts still heaving from Jenni’s orgasm she’d shared, and ... below the white patch of skin vaguely shaped like a bird’s spread wings, what was normally the single white line of the lips of her cleft had pulled apart and her juices oozing out smeared her inner thighs.

“That’s an aroused Togrutan, and ... you’re beautiful.”

Jenni meant every word, and Ahsoka could again feel her blush brightening her montral/lekku stripes. Ignoring that heat, she reached down toward a dildo already wet along its underside from rubbing against her own wet cleft, positioned between her spread nether lips, and began to sink down.

Between the memories she’d shared when she and Jenni had bonded and what she’d just felt when Jenni had inserted the dildo in herself, Ahsoka had thought she was ready for the sensation of the dildo penetrating her. She’d been wrong, the sensation of her own sheath’s walls stretching around the slowly intruding shaft so much more intense, and she shrieked, spasming as her first orgasm exploded through her just as her ass touched Jenni’s thighs.

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Cort looked up from monitor he’d had installed in his quarters before they’d left. (He personally preferred a monitor to a holograph display.) He’d been so intent on his improvements to Life’s Gift’s electronic security protocols (wholesale rewriting, more like, but it wasn’t like he didn’t have plenty of time to get it done before they arrived at Dantooine), that he hadn’t noticed the sounds coming through the wall he shared with the ship’s other two crewmembers. But the final shriek yanked him out of his almost-fugue state. Twisting in his seat, he stared at the wall for a long moment before realizing just what he had heard.

It’s about time! And the way that pair have been dancing around each other, it’ll be far from the last. He momentarily considered staying where he was and enjoying the concert, but rejected the thought — it would be more frustrating than titillating, not in any ring was there a chance they’d invite him into their bed later, and what with the stamina Jedi were rumored to possess that first shriek would be far from the last. Still, that didn’t he couldn’t get some entertainment value out of it later.

As he shut down his monitor and rose to his feet to head to the hold and its computer station (from the strength of that first scream, the holographic console in the common room probably wouldn’t be far enough away), he murmured to himself, “Ahsoka is going to be so embarrassed when I tell them that we need to install better soundproofing.” He chuckled as he imagined the brightening blue
stripes of her ‘helmet’. He doubted that Jenni would be embarrassed at all (proud, more likely), but the Togrutan teenager would more than make up for it.

Ahsoka’s world came back into focus to find herself again sprawled across Jenni’s body, the bloody bite on Jenni’s shoulder at the edge of her vision, her own body still shivering with aftershocks. “Wow,” she breathed, and began to straighten only to stop when the arms embracing her tightened.

“Stay right there,” she heard her lover murmur, and then she sucked in a breath as Jenni’s hips began to undulate, pumping the dildo up into her still-tingling sheath. She clutched at their bed sheets as her own hips instinctively began to rise and fall on their own, increasing the length and vigor of the thrusts, her breath coming in increasingly desperate pants as she again felt her pleasure growing under the assault. In the midst of her own pleasure haze, she could sense Jenni’s own growing, and when her second orgasm ripped through her Jenni’s own shout joined hers as the Human grabbed her ass and yanked her down to meet another upward thrust and something pulsed and splashed into her womb.

When she could finally think again, she gasped out, “Did that ... thing actually ... ejaculate ... into me?”

Jenni laughed as she fought to catch her own breath. “Yup. I did say the modern state of the art was much improved, it’s good for a few times before it needs to refill its reservoir ... though I’m not sure how much of an improvement that is. Sure, it’s more realistic, but it might get in the way of enjoying time with a woman instead of a fake man.”

“Well, let’s find out.” Ahsoka rolled away, the dildo sucking free of cleft with a wet pop, her cleft instantly leaking a flow of a clear, viscous liquid. “Get it off and show me how to put it on, and you can see what it feels like.”

“Okay, though wearing it probably won’t be as pleasurable for you as it is for me.” Jenni had again pressed on top and bottom of the shaft and gently pulled it free. Now she touched a small shield-like protuberance where the two halves met. “This is designed to stimulate a Human woman’s nub, and you don’t have one. With the insert expanded to hold it in place, I doubt it’ll shift enough to properly stimulate you.”

“Good, after that I could use a break.” She shivered at the sensation of the non-cock-shaped half sliding deep in — it wasn’t as intense as the blowout she’d just experienced, but just as intense as her first penetration. “How do you — right.”

Jenni had pressed again on top and bottom of the shaft to expand the insert, then licked clean fingers wet with Ahsoka’s juices mixed with the ejaculate. “Tasty.” She lay back down and spread her legs. “Come on, love, show me what you remember from our bonding.”
The constantly shifting gray-white of hyperspace turned into streaks of lights then stars, and Jenni found herself staring through the cockpit’s transparisteel at the first planet other than Earth she had ever seen with her own eyes, rather than video recordings or others’ memories. It looked to be a pleasant world: the blue of oceans and large lakes; greens and yellows of forests and grasslands; some mountains and deserts but not, she thought as much of either as Earth had. No, she wouldn’t mind staying on Dantooine for awhile.

She glanced over at her Bonded, sitting in the pilot’s seat beside her. (The co-pilot’s controls were locked; while Ahsoka and Cort had been willing to trust her sense of the flow of the Tao’s currents enough to allow her to navigate, neither trusted that sense enough to let her fly.) “So,” she asked, “just where are we going?”

“I don’t know,” Ahsoka admitted. “Dantooine doesn’t have any industry or cities, just some market towns. Not even automated beacons for anyone that drops in.”

“Head for the abandoned Republic base,” Cort suggested over the headsets both women wore. He was in the ventral gun turret, in case any surprises came up at them from the ground. (Not that they expected any, or Jenni would have been in the dorsal turret herself.) “The locals might not have visited, and Dantooine’s enough of a backwater that looters from outside might not have dropped in for the same reason anything useful we might find will still be here — not worth the effort to ship it out.”

Ahsoka glanced at Jenni, and Jenni shrugged. “Sounds as good a destination as any.” (She hoped Ahsoka’s somewhat subservient attitude would fade as she finished growing up. The Togrutan was young, and for her entire life until she left the Order she had been under the authority of someone, but members of a Bond were supposed to be equals.)

Ahsoka nodded her agreement. “So let’s see, where was ... oh.”

The holographic projector Cort had installed in the control panel had sprung to life, showing the planet with a blinking dot in the middle of a northern continent, and another dot for the approaching Life’s Gift on the opposite side of the planet.

“Wow,” Jenni murmured, watching the growing installation they were soaring towards. It was huge! “I didn’t think the battle you fought here was so large.”

“It wasn’t,” Ahsoka replied. “Important, yes, you don’t send the Grand Master of the Jedi Order on a mission to a backwater if it isn’t important. But the transit time kept down the actual number of troops involved, on both sides. If Master Windu had lost that would have changed.”

Jenni glanced over at her Bonded. Ahsoka’s gaze was fixed on the base as she guided them in, but the mix of anger, regret, and self-disgust tensing her every muscle came clearly through their link. “Ahsoka, what’s wrong?”

“The fight here was worse than expected ... Barriss and I flew in additional medical supplies.”

“Oh.” Jenni knew better than to hug someone in the middle of landing a vehicle of whatever size, and there wasn’t really anything to say about Barriss that Ahsoka didn’t already know, so she simply sent a wave of love through their bond. Ahsoka shivered and gave her a tremulous smile before
turning back to her piloting, her tension easing as her emotional storm settled.

Her Bond’s distress eased, Jenni returned her attention to the rapidly approaching base — building after building, most identifiable as warehouses around empty fields for landing freighters, others as barracks, a few most likely administrative centers, and around them all a wall perhaps two man-heights tall. The wall had towers interspersed along its length, and ... she leaned forward (a useless gesture, a few inches weren’t going to make the view better). “Are those gun barrels poking out of the towers?”

“Yes, they are,” Ahsoka agreed. “They didn’t even bother to pack up their emplaced heavy weapons, much less ship them out.”

“Good, there should be plenty of other leavings, then,” Cort enthused —

And Ahsoka wrenched the controls, sending Life’s Gift spinning to one side as the guns on their side swiveled to point at them and opened fire.

Jenni cursed and reached for the buckle to her seat belt, ready to head for the dorsal gun, then grabbed at the console as Ahsoka threw the ship into another twisting spin and the abrupt changes of direction tried to slam Jenni into the wall. (Life’s Gift’s gravity plates, like the rest of the ship, were old and slowly failing.)

More cursing came over their headsets along with the hammering of the ventral gun, and one of the towers firing on them was abruptly hidden by exploding dust and debris from the blinding-blue bolts hammering into it, just before a ball of fire tore the top of the tower apart. Jenni’s cheers joined Cort’s, and Ahsoka shouted, “Good shooting! Do it a few more times and we’ll have a clear path in.” She banked the freighter to come around for another pass, weaving to avoid fire from the remaining tower as they flew.

“At least we can be sure no looters have preceded us,” Cort commented dryly as he resumed firing. “Too bad they didn’t leave a warning beacon as well.”

“I’ll be sure to complain the next time I’m drop in to the Temple,” Ahsoka muttered, slide-slipping the ship to avoid the fire from one of the three remaining towers on that side of the wall.

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“Leavings!” Ahsoka murmured, staring at the interior of the warehouse ... the fully packed interior of the warehouse. “Didn’t they take anything when they left?”

“Personal items and sidearms, I’d guess,” Jenni replied, gaze wandering over the crates of rations, grenades, blasters (both pistols and rifles), armor (though all of a single size, being for a clone army), tents and bedding, she was sure enough spare parts to build entire new vehicles.... “I don’t think we’re going to have any trouble getting by until the currents sweep us back into the center of things.”

“No, not a problem at all,” Ahsoka agreed. “But it would be nice to be able to keep an eye on what’s going on out there while we’re waiting, not go charging in blind.”

“That isn’t going to be a problem.”

Ahsoka twitched at Cort’s voice in her ear, he had been out of the ventral turret as soon as it pulled back into the ship, and down the ramp and disappeared into the warehouses as soon as they landed. Ahsoka had actually forgotten he was listening in, and frantically thought back over what she and Jenni had said to each other for anything embarrassing before relaxing when she couldn’t come up with anything.
Beside her, Jenni giggled at her rush of panic. “Cort, what did you find? Besides the additional insulation you said you wanted.”

Ahsoka’s lekku stripes brightened with embarrassment as she remembered Cort’s laughing comment on the quality of their lovemaking as measured by the loudness of her screams. And from the ‘giggles’ coming through their bond, that was precisely what Jenni had intended. When they got back to the little love nest they’d put together in the hold in the middle of the crates of crystals to avoid further voyeurism on Cort’s part it would be her turn to strap on the dildo, and this time she would last long enough to make her lover pay for her teasing! Yeah, right, like you came anywhere close last time, you’re just too sensitive. Not that that was something to complain about....

Fortunately, Cort had no idea how Ahsoka’s mind was wandering, even if Jenni did, so he simply answered Jenni’s question. “A hyperwave transceiver, miniaturized enough to fit on a small ship, still in its factory crate.”

The two women sucked in their breaths ... when Jenni had asked why Terra didn’t have one, she’d been told that they were expensive, well out of reach of most colonies in the dirt-poor Outer Rim (as much for ongoing maintenance as the initial installation), and that the price of those small enough to build into ships went from expensive to astronomical — which was why they were usually reserved for flagships of fleets, scouts, and the most luxurious of starliners; other ships made do with the repeater units that connected to planetary grids. For one small enough to fit into a personal ship ...

Ahsoka had followed Jenni’s thoughts. “That is almost certainly from the Order, they have a near-monopoly on transceivers that small; the only exceptions I can think of are ambassadorial vessels of the richest planets. Someone was really careless.”

“Or guided by her own currents,” Jenni suggested, “the Tao might have been setting up its own ... opportunities, the same way we do.” At the doubt from Ahsoka over their bond, she added, “Hey, intelligence implies purpose, and even Jedi scholars recognize their ‘Force’ has some form of intelligence.

“Or it could be someone too exhausted to think straight, that just wanted to get on the ship and go home.”

“Well, yeah, that too,” Ahsoka agreed. “Defenate, Cort’s find might be small enough to go into Life’s Gift, but it’s still heavy, he’s going to need the cargo platform. Please take it to him.”

“Very well, Mistress Ahsoka,” came the droid’s reply from their ship, where it had stayed waiting for just that word. That didn’t keep it from making its tone of voice color its proper phrasing, and Jenni had to grin — the accent wasn’t the same, but a disapproving DFN8 sounded just like her favorite primly disapproving matron from a historical drama set in the British Empire. Her grin dimmed a bit at the thought that she’d never see that series again, but she banished the wave of loss with the thought of the new drama she’d discovered ... and that would be available again when they got the hyperwave transceiver installed.

“Right, let’s get that installed first.” She wanted to see if Mott and Llyl had done more than sleep while sharing a bed, and there ought to be a half-dozen new episodes of Dew on the Sands by now.
Entering Endgames

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jenni slowly sank into the calm stillness of meditation — “stillness” because she was sitting in the lotus position on the floor of the crew quarters she and Ahsoka used only for changing and showering (apparently the one thing the “Grand Army of the Republic” hadn’t shipped to Dantooine was the materials for extra soundproofing), instead of using the meditative ‘dance’ of katas practiced to the instinctive level she preferred. But that form of meditation was more appropriate to sinking into the Living Force, as Ahsoka said the Order called it, instead of the Unifying Force.

(The Yuxia Bonds had never separated the Tao into two separate currents, but when her bonded had explained the Order’s view it had explained so much — like how the Void Slaves had managed to pull off their coup decapitating Earth’s unitary government, the Bonds had been almost entirely submerged in the Living currents with barely any recognition that the Unifying current encompassing all the individual strands and binding them together existed at all. And the Void Slaves must have immersed themselves in that all-encompassing Unifying current, mapping out its direction and moving accordingly. Just as the Chancellor was probably doing now.)

But her present purpose required she also submerge herself in that Unifying current. They had been parked in Dantooine’s abandoned base for long months, months that she and Ahsoka had spent training and evolving a lightsaber style for the two together, comparing each other’s conception of the Force/Tao and even coming up with a few new techniques, studying the current state of galactic affairs and as much as they had time for of the history behind them; learning everything they could of the Republic’s major races (the Togrutans first, of course, then some like the Mirialans when Jenni noticed an oddity in the Republic’s definition of ‘species’); teaching Jenni how to pilot and even do routine maintenance on Life’s Gift, and the few vehicles they found parked and covered; emptying the crates of crystals to create circles and swirls over floor, walls, and ceiling of the hold. And while they had been busy doing all that, Cort had spent those long months using the hyperwave transceiver they’d installed on Life’s Gift and his slicing skills to surreptitiously, meticulously set up the Republic-wide web at the center of the plan they’d come up with for dealing with Palpatine without getting them all killed. A task he had reported complete the previous night.

So now Jenni was in as private a location available on the ship, surrounded by crystals holding back the polluted current of the Void that had swept over everything, and as she sank deep into the current that bound all life together she asked a single question: “Is it time?”

She didn’t get a reply, of course, or even a vision; but a feeling of peace ... of rightness ... swept through her and she couldn’t help but smile softly to herself. Thank you. She didn’t know if there was a person to thank, but it seemed polite. Besides, an attitude of gratitude was good for you. She allowed herself to slowly drift ‘up’ to full wakefulness, uncoiled from her position on the floor, and flipped on the intercom. “Ahsoka, Cort, it’s time to go.”

/’oOo/

Weeks later:

Barriss Offee stood on one of the landing platforms of the Jedi Temple, her yellow-tinted, tattooed face turned up at the sky, watching the flashes of light that were the only evidence of the space battle taking place right on the edge of Coruscant’s atmosphere. Since her breakdown over Ahsoka’s message she had done well ... very well, well enough that if the Temple’s mindhealers weren’t
suspicious of the cause of her breakthrough she’d undoubtedly be back out in the field right now. But apparently, Jedi were supposed to recover from mental trauma through a calm center and quiet meditation, not an emotional storm brought on by the forgiveness of a former (and she hoped future) friend. Not even the support of Master Unduli and Grand Master Yoda had helped, the first suspected of undue attachment due to their former Master-Padawan relationship, and the latter suspected of a soft spot for those he’d helped train as younglings (which for centuries had been pretty much every Jedi alive, except for the Green Jedi of Corellia of course).

But that didn’t mean she hadn’t shared her own altered relationship with the Force — and especially the shroud of the Dark Side that smothered them — and now she didn’t look down at the tapping sound of Yoda’s walking stick approaching, simply taking comfort as his blazing presence in the Force thinned that shroud just a little.

For long moments Yoda joined her in looking up at the flashes, listened to the faint rumbles. Finally, he asked, “Sense something, you do?”

“Yes, Master. This raid, kidnapping the Chancellor, it has to be an act of despair, a desperate gamble by the Trade Federation to snatch victory from their nearly completed defeat. The fact that General Grievous leads this forlorn hope just makes that more clear. But ...”

“But ... ?”

She finally looked down at the tiny, wrinkled, deadly figure beside her. “But that’s not how the shroud feels. Instead, it feels eager, the Dark filled with malevolent laughter. Somehow, this is exactly what our true enemy wants. And I don’t know why.”

“Know I too do not,” Yoda replied. “Concerning, this is. Unfortunate it is that tell the Council of your insight we cannot.”

There was nothing to really say to that without sounding bitter so Barriss simply returned her gaze to the heavens, the pair silently watching the battle.

Darth Sidious tested the bonds with their glowing lights around his forearms, holding him into his seat ... carefully, lest those bonds respond with their restraining shocks. The initial shock would be unpleasant but not serious — no more than a warning — but quickly escalate. And while the bonds had to be fully active for the deception he was weaving, there was no reason to make himself unnecessarily uncomfortable in the process.

And then the curtain went up with the door to the chamber’s upper platform irising open, and Master Kenobi and Knight Skywalker strode through. Not good, Kenobi was supposed to have been killed by the buzz droids specifically programmed to target his starfighter before he reached General Grievous’s command ship.

They didn’t bother to take the curving stairs down both sides of the platform, leaping to the floor below to approach the man they’d come to rescue. “Chancellor.” “Are you all right?”

The door irised open again, and Darth Sidious’s aging apprentice strode through, bracketed by a pair of hulking, faceless, humanoid security droids, heavy blasters in the place of hands — the Chancellor’s third mark had arrived, blazing with confidence, not even hesitating at the sight of two Jedi. That confidence wasn’t misplaced, Darth Tyranus — Count Dooku in his former life — really was as good with a lightsaber as he thought he was, better than his master, really.
This time that skill would not be enough, and General Grievous thought Tyranus wanted to handle this himself and so wouldn’t be arriving with backup.

Palpatine motioned with his chin to point behind his ‘rescuers’. “Count Dooku.”

Like the Jedi before him the Sith Lord didn’t bother with the stairs, leaving the security droids to guard the entrance and leaping down to the floor below ... though he did add an extra spin to his leap just to show off. “Your swords, please. We don’t want to make a mess of things in front of the Chancellor.”

The Jedi scoffed, ‘saber hilts leaping to hands and blue blades springing to life. Dooku grinned eagerly, his own red blade springing to life. “I’ve been looking forward to this.” (He had long since destroyed the blade he’d used as a Jedi, along with its kyber crystal — a relic of his former life of naivety, Darth Sidious had said. His current blade was formed using the artificial crystal favored by the Sith.)

“I’ve grown more powerful since the last time we met, Count,” Anakin replied as he and his former Master separated and circled to come at Dooku from both sides.

“Good. The greater the pride, the more painful the fall.” The usual response to a two-pronged attack would be to attack first to hopefully take down one prong while it was isolated, at a minimum to get out of the trap. Dooku, supremely confident, waited for them to attack. His confidence wasn’t misplaced, his blade flashing to knock aside two attacks not quite synchronized even as he stepped out of the position between his opponents, shifting to maneuver Obi-Wan between him and Anakin — of the two, Obi-Wan ... “The Negotiator” ... was actually the more dangerous battlefield commander (as much for his ability to draw men to him as his tactics, an army with him in charge just would not break), but Anakin ... “The Hero with No Fear” ... had surpassed him as a duelist and brawler; only by a sliver, but in a fight a sliver could be all it took.

And so the fight continued all about the main floor of the chamber, Darth Tyranus apparently dealing with two of the most dangerous Jedi alive with ease, keeping both in play as he danced around them, the air filled with the constant screech of a single red blade against two blue. But Darth Sidious could sense his apprentice’s waning confidence, slowly fading into growing desperation. He wasn’t as young as he once was — not as young as even the Master he faced — and while he could use the Force to enhance his stamina, so could his enemies and two fighting against one didn’t need to focus as much on the fight itself and so could do so more easily. Only the power of the Dark Side fueled by Tyranus’s desperation-fed hatred was keeping him alive.

And General Grievous and his men hadn’t arrived to close the supposed trap.

That desperation was revealed when Tyranus’s booted foot slammed into Kenobi’s stomach even as red blade knocked aside blue yet again, forcing him back several steps. When it came to the lightsaber Tyranus usually disdained such moves as ‘brawling’, sticking to the ‘pure’ forms of the Art.

But ‘brawling’ or not, the move gave Tyranus the chance to shift to one of the stairways, backing up it as Skywalker pressed the fight. The stairs weren’t wide enough for more than one-on-one, so Kenobi raced for the stairway on the other side of the platform. He was met by the security droids, but easily reflected their blaster fire back at them and then his flashing blade dismembered them in passing. But they did slow him down for a few seconds, long enough that when he reached the top Tyranus was ready. Before either Jedi bracketing him had a chance to react he stepped to the middle of the platform, dropped his lightsaber, and thrust his hands out. His willed blows of the Force picked up both Jedi and hurled them back. Skywalker slammed into the wall, but Kenobi hit the railing and was sent spinning to hammer onto the floor before underneath a secondary platform.
Tyranus clenched his fist and yanked down, and the platform above Kenobi shivered, creaked, and collapsed down on top of the stunned Master. Tyranus turned back to the Knight to find Skywalker rising to his feet. The Sith Lord’s lightsaber leaped back to his hand and he jumped back down to the main floor, where Skywalker would have room to tire himself out maneuvering around Tyranus’ center.

Yes! Sidious fought not to grin triumphantly, keeping a worried look on his face. His plan was back on track.

Normally, when Darth Sidious put on his mask of Chancellor Palpatine he would suppress his link to the Force to a trickle — enough to allow him to sense danger and feel enough of the emotions of those around him when he focused to be useful, but no more. He hated it, but that technique had enabled him ... and all the Sith before him since the institution of the Rule of Two ... to not just keep to the shadows but to walk in the light, undetected. With that technique, he had confidently walked into a meeting of the full Council of the Jedi Order, unafraid of being recognized for what he was. But it did make any proactive use of the Force difficult. So, with Skywalker focused so intently on his duel with Tyranus, Sidious felt it safe to reach out to the Force, just a little. And reach through the apprentice bond between him and Tyranus.

Tyranus was ... not desperate, now that he faced only one enemy, but eager — and not eager in the way he’d been before. Then he had been eager to once again prove himself against almost worthy foes, now he was eager to get this over with.

So was Sidious, and so he cautiously fanned the flames of that eagerness, along with the ever-present anger and hate that was a mark of a Sith. Tyranus began to press the fight ever harder, pushing Skywalker around the floor, uncaring of how fatigued it would leave him when he came down from his combat high and let go of the torrent of the Force pouring into him to enhance his stamina. And Sidious began to subtly play with his apprentice’s perceptions ... not enough for a true master of the lightsaber to notice, but just enough to give Skywalker an edge if he could seize it.

Then the two combatants were suddenly still, almost chest to chest. Through the scream of lightsabers locked together between them, Tyranus snarled, “I sense fear in you, Skywalker. You have hate, you have anger, but you don’t use them.”

Tyranus was right, the Knight was practically vibrating with anger, probably had been since Kenobi had been taken down. Yes, he would make a fine apprentice once he was convinced to take that last step.

But he didn’t take that last step yet, only stepping back to separate them, disengaged the lightsabers, spun his blade ... and before Tyranus’s slightly Force-befuddled senses could react his lightsaber went flying away, along with both of his hands. As a stunned Tyranus dropped to his knees Skywalker reached out through the Force to yank that lightsaber back, snatching it out of the air and crossing both blades below Tyranus’ chin.

Chancellor Palpatine couldn’t cackle, but Tyranus wearing his mask could permit himself a relieved sigh even as he again suppressed his connection to the Force to a trickle ... now that the fight was over the odds were too great that Skywalker would notice the dark nature of his connection, and he wasn’t quite ready for that. But one more step in that direction ... “Good, Anakin, good. Now kill him. Kill him now.”

Tyranus’s jaw began to drop, before he caught himself just short of burning himself on the lightsabers crossed beneath his chin. He slowly turned his head to fix his unbelieving gaze in his secret master, and Sidious glared in the shocked betrayal coming through their link. He replied to that shock: “Did you truly believe me unaware of your plans to engineer my death once the war was
over?” (Not that the plans had been unexpected, the only way for a Sith apprentice to rise above that status was over the dead body of his Master.) But outwardly Sidious kept his attention on the young man he had befriended as a boy.

Chest heaving from the exertions of the duel he’d just won, Skywalker gritted his teeth. “I shouldn’t.”

“Do it!” When Skywalker still hesitated, Sidious added, “Anakin, he knows of your marriage to Padme, he boasted of what he’d do to her.”

Skywalker’s anger flared and red and blue blades swept across each other, sending a gray-haired head bouncing across the steel deck. He stepped aside as the headless torso fell forward with a soft thud, then hurried to the Chancellor.

It was the work of a few moments for Skywalker to shut down and open his bindings and Sidious rose from the chair, rubbing his wrists. He glanced sideways at his ‘rescuer’, to find him staring at Tyranus’ headless corpse. “You did well, Anakin. He was too dangerous to be kept alive.”

“Yes,” Skywalker murmured, “but he was an unarmed prisoner. I shouldn’t have done that, it’s not how Jedi do things.”

“It is only natural — he cut off your arm, and you wanted revenge. It wasn’t the first time, Anakin. Remember what you told me about your mother, and the Sand People? Now we must leave, before more security droids arrive.” Sidious began to stride toward the stairs up to the exit, only to pause when Skywalker hurried toward Kenobi’s prone body. “Anakin, there’s no time, we must get off the ship before it’s too late.”

Skywalker ignored the Chancellor, dropping to one knee beside Kenobi and sighing in relief. “He seems to be all right.”

“Leave him, or we’ll never make it!”

To the sound of grinding metal, Skywalker reached out through the Force and lifted the platform from off of Kenobi body and shifted it to one side to drop with a clang. He lifted Kenobi and slung him over his shoulder. “Whatever happens to us, happens to him.”

Throughout the rest of the holo-dramatic escape attempt, re-capture, confrontation with General Grievous, and final dangerous escape from the battle (incredibly ... and frustratingly ... dangerous, with Sidious unable to even attempt to protect himself for fear of revealing what he was), the Sith Lord was distracted by his concerns. Skywalker was not ready. Yes, he had killed a literally disarmed Tyranus. But regardless of what Sidious had said in an attempt to shape how his young target thought of what had happened when he looked back on it, that murder had not been out of a thirst for revenge but from a hatred powered by his love, his concern for another, and as such it was flawed, weak. It might not be enough, and even if it was Skywalker’s commitment would be ... less than total.

And Master Kenobi lived, the bond of friendship between the two still in place, the sense of bitter isolation begun with his separation from his mother, then fanned by her death and the loss of his Padawan not built up even further into a blazing bonfire with his love for his wife a final strand to be snapped. (Never mind the mixed metaphors.)

Even as the disintegrating command ship fell across the line from night to day, until Knight Skywalker actually succeeded in crash-landing the flaming forward half of the ship on a civilian landing platform, the only Sith Lord left in the galaxy considered how he should alter his plans ... just
in case.

He didn’t even wince at Master Kenobi’s ironic comment as the burning hulk shuddered to a stop while the fire emergency vehicles soaked it down: “Another happy landing.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the second half is pretty much straight from the opening battle of Episode III, from Palpatine’s POV (though I did change some of the dialogue to something a little less awkward). Fortunately, this pretty much sets the foundation for the grand finale, so I won't have to rewrite the rest of the first half or so of the movie. And at that point, things are going to be different.
Several days later:

Jenni slid into the copilot seat next to Ahsoka as the timer on the instrument panel counted down to the drop from hyperspace into Coruscant orbit. As she buckled herself in, she glanced over at her Bonded, and reached up to touch the choker she now wore with Ahsoka’s bite pattern on its medallion. Jenni still didn’t know why the Tao had swept them back to Terra before bringing them to Coruscant, but they’d taken the opportunity to make Ahsoka’s choker half of a matching pair — along with dropping off the last of the books Jenni had been able to summon up from memory and transcribed, then translated with DF-N8’s help during the months on Dantooine. (At least the books that mattered, she didn’t think children’s books without the pictures would work well; though Thornton W. Burgess’s animal stories might be worth the time, they weren’t dependent on the illustrations.) But that had been all they’d done on Terra before leaving for Coruscant, perhaps there was something in one of those books that needed to be preserved for posterity, whatever happened with Palpatine? She just wished that even with the four years she’d spent in hiding she’d had the time and interest to read more — after all, she was only twenty.

Ahsoka laid a hand on her arm, and when Jenni shook off her momentary melancholy smiled at her Bonded. “All done?”

“Yes,” Jenni said, “the last of the crystals from our quarters are sealed away with what we didn’t use in the hold.”

The two ... they were the last of the Youxia Bond, but they couldn’t really use Bonded as a distinguishing label; in a galaxy of planets there had to be other Dancers that bonded with each other. Youxia? Youxia would work. Sure, whatever meaning it might have had was as long forgotten as the language that had produced it ... but how many these days knew (or cared) that ‘Jedi’ had come from ‘Je’daii’? And she didn’t think that anyone knew what ‘Je’daii’ had originally meant.

Jenni shook off the introspection that had again crept up on her (that had been happening a lot lately) and toggled the switch for the intercom. “Cort, we’re in the final countdown, you ready?”

“Ready and primed,” the slicer confirmed.

“Good.” She closed the circuit and looked over at Ahsoka. “Ready?”

Ahsoka’s answering grin showed none of the tight nerves thrumming at the Togrutan’s core (not that Jenni wasn’t just as bad). “Ready.”

“Let’s do it.”

As the final seconds counted down Jenni watched Ahsoka close her eyes, take a deep breath and release her nervousness to be swept away in the Tao’s currents as she blew it out. (Jenni wasn’t sure constantly letting go of emotions like that was a good idea, but it was definitely handy at times like this.) Then through their bond she felt Ahsoka ‘reach’ out for her crystal in the lightsaber hanging on her belt. Jenni was still kicking herself for not thinking of it earlier — if they could ‘push’ a rivulet of the Tao’s flowing currents through their crystals to power their lightsabers, they could ‘pull’ a rivulet through the crystal to give themselves the strength to ‘push’ through the filth of the Void that seemed
to cover everything and merge with the Tao’s sweeping current. If she had realized that when they’d first left Terra, she could have saved herself an uncomfortable time when she was trying to let the Tao send them where it would, and puking her guts out thanks to the way that required her to ‘immerse’ herself in the Void’s filth. Of course if she had figured it out then, then Cort wouldn’t have made his suggestion that led them to discover she and Ahsoka could reach out to the currents through each other ... and a few other tricks they’d picked up along with that ... so she’d call it a win.

Now Jenni felt her sense of Ahsoka’s flame vanish as it merged with the currents of the Tao, only her eyes and the Togrutan’s faded presence sensed through their bond telling Jenni she was still there ready to take over piloting when Life’s Gift dropped out of hyperspace. So now it was her turn, and she turned to face forward, relax in her seat, and watch the churning gray of hyperspace as she ‘reached’ for her own lightsaber’s crystal to ‘push’ herself through the filth that seemed to fill the universe to achieve her own merging with the current sweeping them on to Coruscant as she had so many times before.

And she easily succeeded as she had so many times before, finding herself once again a passenger in her own body, concentrating on not again resuming control of her own actions ... for a split second, before the dreamlike quality the world had taken on vanished into the sharp edges that reality always had for a few moments after taking back control of her own destiny.

What ... ?

She bolted upright, looking around wildly ... and Ahsoka turned her head to wink at her before turning forward again just as hyperspace’s churning gray collapsed into streaks of light to the pinpricks of stars and a planet’s nightside lit up by an unbroken mass of city lights — and Jenni realized that she was cloaked in the feel of her Bonded’s presence, flooding through their bond to coat every inch of skin. They’d thought that that would create a false signature, leading anyone that sensed her dancing flame to mistake her for her Bonded, but had had no way to test it. Now she shivered as she luxuriated in the sense of a warm, full-body embrace. I guess it works, why else would the Tao be doing — ? Was that a giggle? Great, the Tao has a sense of humor. That explains so much.

If it was a giggle, there wasn’t a hint of it in Ahsoka's voice when she activated the com. “Coruscant control, this is Free Trader Ghost of Tom Joad requesting berthing assignment.”

(Jenni had to suppress a giggle of her own at the reminder of their latest false name for Life’s Gift. If anyone did become suspicious, trying to track down the source of the name — a song that had been lost to obscurity ninety thousand years ago — ought to be suitably frustrating. And it fit in nicely with the Youxia view of the world, which was why they’d remembered it — John Steinbeck might have been horribly wrong on economics, but his heart had definitely been in the right place.)

There was a moment of silence, then an obviously bored traffic controller replied, “Free Trader Ghost of Tom Joad, I am not showing a filed flight plan, please supply a cargo manifest.”

“No cargo, that’s what I’m here for.”

“You’ll be met by an inspector to verify your lack of cargo. Your berthing is X12-F24-Z13, the beacon is active.”

“Verify beacon X12-F24-Z13, wait on an inspector. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Ghost of Tom Joad, have a pleasant stay and good luck on the cargo.”

The light showing an active com went dark, and Jenni flipped on the intercom. “Cort, change of
plans. Apparently the Tao will be sweeping Ahsoka off somewhere else with me as the stalking horse ... the distraction, that is ... and it’s probably a good idea if you hold off on your own breaking and entering until we know why.”

There was a moment’s silence, then Cort replied, “Understood, how long do you think that’ll take?”

“You’ll know when I know, just ... I don’t know, keep an eye out.”

The silence was longer this time. “Will do. But if it looks like we might be overwhelmed, I’m going in.”

“Sounds good.” Jenni broke the connection and muttered, “So much for all our planning.” She refocused on the planet they were flying toward and gasped, actually shoving herself back in her seat as for a moment the presence of uncounted billions of sentient beings swept over her, leaving her feeling as if she’d been tossed and turned in strong river rapids before clawing for the surface and life giving air. As she fought to separate herself from that flood of Life, she thought she knew at least part of why the Tao hadn’t kept her in its embrace — there was no way she’d have managed to stay merged under that onslaught.

Yes, that was definitely a giggle.

/oOo/

Darth Sidious stood at the full-length window of his office, Coruscant star-gazing again as he waited, using the nighttime city lights and constant traffic as a calming device just short of meditation. The plans were laid, the trap was sprung, and young Skywalker would either fall for it or he wouldn’t. He ought to ... his love for his wife was obsessive and thanks to the dreams he’d had of his mother’s death, the dreams of Padme dying in childbirth with which Sidious had haunted his sleep increasingly more often over the past several weeks should have him absolutely frantic.

Yet after Sidious had revealed himself as a master of the Dark Side — as the Sith Lord that the Jedi had sought for years, Skywalker must have realized — the young Knight had left to think, and now Sidious was following his presence in the Force to the Jedi Temple and, from the other Force signatures, the Jedi Council. He hadn’t taken the bait, at least not yet.

Still, Sidious had plans for that, as well.

Even as he considered the possible branches from the involvement of the Council before Skywalker accepted his apprenticeship, Sidious stiffened at a new, familiar Force presence. While through his Shroud he could track individual Force users in hyperspace, he seldom bothered — the effort was consuming in both energy and attention. So instead, he kept track of the Jedi’s movements through his spies and Council reports to his mask as the Chancellor and when he wasn’t focused exclusively on an important project he kept a sliver of his attention on the Shroud around Coruscant, ‘watching’ for the arrival of those familiar or strong in the Force ... and Skywalker’s prodigal Padawan had just returned, at the worst possible time. It could not be a coincidence.

How did she do it? The Jedi have lost all foresight, seeing only what I want them to see, for years!

But ‘how’ didn’t matter at the moment, only that she had, so he pushed aside the useless thought as he hurried to his desk and its computer terminal and brought up the registry of arriving ships. He held a finger to the scrolling list, focusing on any whispers from the Force, until ... there, the Free Trader Ghost of Tom Joad. He didn’t know who Tom Joad had been, or even what planet the name came from, but following up that clue of where Ahsoka might have been spending the last few months could wait. He simply made a note of where the ship’s berth was located — much closer to the
Senate apartments than he liked — and considered the locations of his minions on Coruscant ... and unfortunately, the only one able to respond quickly enough already had an important task.

*I’ll just have to leave it to the mercenaries. There should be more than enough of them, anyway.*

Activating the watchman program that would not only make his next call untraceable but eliminate any record that it had happened, he brought up the com with his face replaced by the image of Darth Sidious rather than Chancellor Palpatine.

The image of his charcoal-dark Koorivar minion down on one knee appeared above the desk, bowed to show the massive scarring on the top of her head where her spiraling horn had once been. (Her bitter resentment over the loss of status losing her horn had inflicted had provided just the hook he needed to seduce her to the Dark Side, and Koorivarn support of the Separatists both financially and militarily would have made her the perfect scapegoat; it was unfortunate that he had to reassign her.) Solemnly, she intoned, “Master, how may I serve you?”

“Leave the Senator to the mercenaries, I have another mission for you. Go to berth X12-F24-Z13. There you will find the Free Trader *Ghost of Tom Joad*. Skywalker’s former Padawan Ahsoka will either be there or have just left. Track her down and kill her. Dispose of the body, do *not* collect the bounty.”

“Yes, my master.” Peisofi lowered her head even further, almost prostrating herself, and Sidious cut the connection. He rather doubted that the Koorivar would be able to take down Ahsoka, her skills lay in ambushes and assassinations while the Padawan had been schooled by the battlefield and was almost certain to see her coming. But even if Ahsoka triumphed in the end she was unlikely to come through unscathed — and even if she did, it would take time. And time was all he needed, he could deal with her afterward, personally if necessary. And that would take care of *that* longtime flaw in his plan.

He activated the sleeper program hidden in the traffic control systems and arranged for a ‘glitch’ to cancel the inspection of Ahsoka’s ship, then turned back to the window-wall, again reaching out for Skywalker’s presence ... his mark had reached the Council, it wouldn’t be long now.

**Chapter End Notes**

I know, it’s been awhile, but now my summer vacation is out of the way. (And wasn’t that just what I needed!) The ship's name *Ghost of Tom Joad* comes from a song inspired by Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. It was originally performed by Bruce Springsteen, but I like the cover by Solas.
Jenni didn’t embrace Ahsoka ... the Togrutan standing at the head of Life’s Gift’s ramp wasn’t actually Ahsoka, and if she did embrace her bondmate that would change if Ahsoka lost her fight to stay out of the way of the Tao’s control of her body. But resisting the temptation was hard, and the force (or Force, in the Jedi’s terminology) animating that now-familiar flesh gave her a sympathetic smile even though her voice was emotionless: “Five minutes.”

Jenni nodded. “Five minutes.”

‘Ahsoka’ nodded back, then ran down the ramp and across the landing bay toward the entrance, along the ribbon of light from the open ramp that other than the stars shining down through the open roof was the only outside light, to quickly vanish from sight. The only sense Jenni had of her bondmate was her presence in the bond, and that muted by the Tao’s control. Jenni shivered as she closed the ramp and headed for the hold.

Those five minutes seemed to take five hours.

But finally she sensed the countdown’s completion and lowered the hold’s ramp, walked down it into the dark bay toward the entrance Ahsoka had left through, then whirled in place, her lightsaber leaping from belt to hand and its blade springing to life. The blaster bolt she’d parried blew a divot into the steel walls around them.

A shadow dropped the thirty feet from the bay’s open roof, landing easily and rolling to its feet. Jenni pressed the stud of the remote she had in one hand, and the roof began closing even as the bay’s lighting came on. She tossed the remote away, gripping her lightsaber’s hilt with both hands as a crimson blade sprang to life in the newcomer’s hand. The fresh lighting revealed a member of one of the races Jenni had studied during their enforced wait, one of the races supporting the Separatists — a charcoal-dark female Koorivar, but one missing the intricate spiraling horn that was her race’s pride. A figure whose very center seemed to be nothing but churning hatred, even if overlaid with surprise. Distracted by the effort to force down her own burning hatred rising to meet it, Jenni couldn’t stop herself from asking, “How are you not raving at the moon?”

Amusement rippled through the newcomer for a moment, but she ignored the question. “You feel like Skywalker’s coward of a Padawan, but you aren’t her. Where is she?”

Jenni smirked, broadening the expression to make her easy to read, just in case the Koorivar wasn’t familiar with Human expressions. “Do you really expect me to tell you?”

“I suppose not easily. Thank you. I am Peisofi, and you will answer every question I ask before you die screaming.”

“I am Jenni. I’d have a pithy piece of poetry for you, but I already used it on the last Void Slave that I killed.”

Peisofi just laughed softly as she flowed forward, lightsaber flashing toward Jenni. Jenni fell back under the assault, toward the still-open ramp as she parried each slash and thrust, not even trying to riposte. The Void Slave’s style seemed an even more aggressive variation of one of the forms Ahsoka had demonstrated, as best she could — djem so. But where djem so was all about the riposte, responding to attack with all possible force to end the fight as quickly as possible, Peisofi was almost purely on the attack, using brute force to try to overpower her enemy without waiting for Jenni to make the first move in an assault that quickly had the Human struggling. Remember, keep
your apparent skill down until you’re in the hold, you don’t want to have her wondering....

“You know hate well, like nothing I felt in Jedi even as I slowly killed them,” Peisofi stated conversationally, her breathing regular in spite of the constant assault she was keeping up. “But you keep that hate locked away, refuse to accept the strength it can give you.”

Jenni grunted as she blocked a slice that would have cut her in half at the waist, leaped over a leg sweep and spun in the air as she deflected another sweep that would have taken a leg off at the hip. She landed, sidestepped an overhead swing that scoured a line in the landing bay’s steel deck. “After all that the Void has taken from me, I will not give it the satisfaction of taking over yet another puppet.”

“Lost someone, did you?”

Jenni waited out another rapid-fire exchange of blows, making her first half-hearted attempts at ripostes, before replying, “I lost everyone, some that I helped kill myself.”

Then the hold’s lowered ramp was at her heels and for a moment she surged onto the attack, Peisofi’s own precognition pulling her back a couple steps before Jenni stepped back to disengage, then did a backward flip up into the hold, sighing with relief as the radiating presence of the crystal patterns all around walls and ceiling and across the floor washed away the filth of the Shroud.

Peisofi ran up the ramp, ‘saber ready, then froze when she entered the hold. She looked around at the swirls and circles of shining crystals sealed to walls, floor and ceiling, eyes wide with shock. “What is this?” she whispered. (Though even as stunned as she was, she kept half an eye on Jenni, much to the Human’s disappointment.)

“My own little contribution to cleaning up the galaxy,” Jenni replied with a smirk. “So long as we are surrounded by the crystals, the filth of the Void cannot reach us.”

The Koorivar stared at her for a moment, then gave her a smile like something from the Deeps. “You have just lengthened the list of questions I have to ask. My Master will reward me well.” She again flowed into the attack, Jenni backpedaling swiftly.

In the freighter’s common room Cort watched through the discreet video link they’d installed, and when the dueling pair were almost to the opposite wall of the hold he touched a glowing button on the screen and the hold’s ramp rose to close them in.

Darth Sidious kept his face calmly impassive as he turned his chair, the one in the circle beside the window, to face the four Jedi striding into the living room of his personal quarters — a dark brown, black-haired, horned Zabrak; a light brown, bald Iktotchi with his downward-slanted pair of horns; a yellow, green-patterned amphibious Nautilan with sensitive tentacles hanging down from the back of his head; and a dark brown, bald Human. They knew he was a Sith Lord and he knew they knew, but he didn’t know if they knew he knew and wanted to see how the situation would play out. Besides, Skywalker was on his way (and Ahsoka still at the landing bay her ship had been assigned) so playing for a little time wouldn’t hurt. *Masters Kit Fisto, Agen Kolar, Saesee Tiin, and Mace Windu ... child’s play. They will be the first to die this day.*

But the iron control that had brought him to the pinnacle of the Siths’ centuries-old dream kept his savage satisfaction out of his expression and voice, as he politely inquired, “Master Windu, I take it General Grevous has been destroyed. I must say that you are here sooner than expected.”
Windu ignored Sidious’s question, his lightsaber’s hilt dropping into his palm, his companions following suit. “In the name of the Galactic Senate of the Republic, you are under arrest, Chancellor.”

Sidious raised an eyebrow. “Are you threatening me, Master Jedi?”

“The Senate will decide your fate.”

“I am the Senate.”

“Not yet!” the purple blade of Windu’s lightsaber hummed to life, followed by a blue and two green blades.

Sidious rose to his feet, his own lightsaber dropping out of his sleeve into his hand. “It’s treason, then,” he snarled. His lightsaber blade shone red and he relaxed his suppression of his connection with the Force, shivering as the glorious Dark flooded into him, then poured that Force out into the Veil around them. As the four Jedi staggered as their own ability to sense the world around them vanished in the Dark haze, Sidious threw himself over the circle of chairs at them.

Kolar was the first of the Jedi to die, the Zabrak still struggling to recover his bearings when Sidious’s crimson blade thrust through his chest and out his back. Sidious yanked his blade free and spun in place, and the Iktotchi fell away in two directions as that blade swept across his midsection. By then Windu and Fisto had recovered from the shock of the loss of their Force sense, but without that sense they were helpless against the greatest Sith Lord in history. A moment later Sidious’s blade swept across Fisto’s stomach — not a clean kill, the Nautolan remained in one piece as he fell, but helpless and dying. And now only Master Windu remained.

And with that Sidious stepped back, breathing hard and easing off on the pressure of the Veil around them and so allowing Windu to recover some of his Force sense ... enough to make him a challenge, and convince him that Sidious was tiring. The Chancellor was an older man, after all, deskbound by his duties, it was reasonable.

And Skywalker had just arrived at the top level landing and was on his way to the suite.

Sidious allowed himself to be driven back out of the main room back into his sleeping quarters and across the room, and there was less pretense than he would have liked — Master Windu was accounted one of the finest duelists in the Order, after all, and had developed his own variation of Form VII that the Sith so delighted, Vaapad ... a form that partook of the fury of the darkness in each person without grasping the power of the Dark Side, and so almost worthy of respect. Drawing on the Force to give him endurance, Windu was like a buzzsaw battering and probing at Sidious’s defense without pause. And though Sidious was as adept at drawing on the Force for the endurance he needed to match that buzzsaw, thanks to his age and condition he needed to draw on more, lean on his burning hatred of all things Jedi, and keeping that hatred under control even as he drew on it to power his connection to the Force was growing more and more difficult.

The window that filled his sleeping quarters’ entire wall shattered out into the outside air when he deflected Windu’s blade into it, just as it was designed (just in case he’d been prematurely exposed, and the Jedi thought they could trap him in his suite), and he gave Windu the infinitesimal opening the Jedi Master needed to twist his lightsaber out of his hand. It hurled across the room where it lay charring a stripe in the fire-resistant (and very expensive) carpet imported from Wyliia.

Sidious fell back against the now-empty window frame as Skywalker burst into the room just in time to see Windu level his lightsaber and state, “You are under arrest, My Lord.”
“No!” Sidious snarled back as he sampled Skywalker’s roiling emotions. *He isn’t quite there yet. Just a little more to push him over the edge* ... Gathering his hatred and growing frustration, he launched it all at the man looming over him, coruscating lightning the same shade as the blade threatening him flashing out only to be pulled to that same blade and reflected back. Sidious jerked and twisted as his own power hammered into him. He fought to ignore the pain as the Dark Side sunk deep, twisting and molding and burning, skin loosening and sagging away from the muscles underneath.

Finally, when anyone else would have been dead he cut off the barrage and slumped back against the frame as strands of smoke curled up from flesh and charred robes. He turned to look at his victim, gasping out desperately, “Anakin, I have the power to save the one you love! You must choose! Don’t let the Jedi overthrow the Senate!”

And *still* the boy just stood there, his lightsaber unactivated in a hand hanging loosely at his side, trapped by his clashing emotions, desires and loyalties.

“Of course you want to preserve the Senate,” Windu ground out, “it dances to your tune, a cover for your own evil tyranny. You are too dangerous to be left alive.” He raised his lightsaber for a final strike, and too late Skywalker began to throw himself forward, his lightsaber blade finally springing to life.

Sidious again poured his hatred into the Veil as he rolled into the room, twisting to face Windu framed by the empty window, and fresh lightning flashed out against a target reeling from his renewed loss of foresight. Windu screamed as the Force lightning played along his body, then his own Force-powered resistance collapsed and his spasming body was hurled out of the window to fall to his death.

Slowly pushing himself to his feet, gasping for breath, Sidious turned to face Skywalker to find the young Jedi with his shoulders slumped, head lowered, the chaos that had been roiling his emotions settled to resigned guilt. Yes, he had his apprentice! “Anakin?” he asked as softly ... or tried, wincing at the croak that emerged from his ruined throat, already busy amending his plans going forward. He’d intended to use his new apprentice and the 501st to seize the Jedi Temple and massacre all within, and so cement his hold on Skywalker — but that hold was so tenuous he couldn’t risk it. He’d have to send him after the leaders of the Separatists and have the Fleet obliterate the Temple from orbit....

Skywalker raised his head to reveal tear-streaked cheeks. “I’ll do —”

A new Force signature suddenly blazed into life — a signature very familiar to them both — only a hundred meters away, and the pair whirled to stare out the empty window.

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Ahsoka was finding it more and more difficult to resist the temptation to resume control. Running away from the ship while her Bonded waited to face her own fight alone hadn’t been easy, and it hadn’t gotten easier when she hotwired the airspeeder. (The technique one of the troopers of the 501st had taught her was for commandeering enemy vehicles on the battlefield, not stealing from civilians! Not even one as fast and agile as this one, she had the sinking feeling that there was a very unhappy owner in her future.)

But her fight to stay in the background was strengthened when she realized just where the current was sweeping her ... or rather, toward *whom*. The bond she shared with her former master was had been a guttering spark compared to the one she had formed with Jenni, but it had never been ended ... and she was headed straight for him, her sense of the bond strengthening by the second as the
distance between them closed.

And from what she was picking up through that bond it was no guttering spark now, and he was a mess — what she’d picked up from him before had been on the battlefield, when emotions ran high, had been determination, actually making the title the media had hung on him of ‘the Hero With No Fear’ had been at least plausible; now his emotions were a churning mass of anger, resentment, grief, determination, love, and guilt swimming in a sea of overwhelming fear like nothing she’d ever felt from him before.

Then the airspeeder swept around yet another spire spotted with lit windows and she found herself staring at a very familiar tower, one full of government offices ... at the very top that of the Chancellor. And arcing away from what had to be that office’s wall of windows, a flailing body.

Even as that sight registered the airspeeder was diving and picking up speed, scooping that falling body out of the air to hammer into the passenger seat beside her, and even as the vehicle resumed its course it jittered as Ahsoka recognized the man in the seat beside her and her efforts to remain detached shattered and the world took on the familiar sensation of sharp-edged hyper-reality.

A smoking, charred-black-striped Master Windu stared at her, wide-eyed with shock. He whispered, “Ahsoka?”

She forced herself to focus on the rapidly approaching office, slowing their speed. “Can you pilot this?”

“I ...” Master Mace Windu visibly gathered himself and jerked a nod. “Yes.”

“Good. Get yourself back to the Temple and medical care, I’ll deal with Anakin.” Then she was alongside the Chancellor’s office — yes, the windows were completely empty of transparisteel, she wondered how that had happened — and she pulled herself up into a crouch on her seat, drew on the Force ... shifted the current of the Tao flowing around her ... and leaped from the airspeeder through the empty window to land several yards away from two figures.

One was someone that had to be the Chancellor, from his robes and the power of the Void surrounding him so thickly that it felt like there should be a humanoid-shaped Black Hole where he stood, worse than anything she had ever felt from Asajj Ventress or even Count Dooku — even if that figure had only wisps of hair on his head and features that looked like melted wax.

But the other was Anakin Skywalker, frozen in place in stunned disbelief, staring with wide eyes above tear-streaked cheeks, and she grinned cheekily. “Hey, Sky Guy, miss me?”
Jenni missed a step when she felt her bond with Ahsoka blaze up into its full glory, and barely managed to twist to one side enough that Peisofi’s thrust only scored another burn along her side instead of skewering her through the gut. It wasn’t the first strip cauterized along Jenni’s sides and arms, but it was the first that Jenni had actually acquired by mistake ... the rest were flesh wounds that Jenni had allowed, to enhance the illusion of half-trained incompetency. And it was the last she would have to take.

Recovering from her stumble, she straightened and grinned, her lightsaber’s spinning blade suddenly becoming an impenetrable defense as she called out, “Cort, ‘Soka’s running clear, start your run!”

“Finally!” came Cort exulting shout in her ear, and Jenni grinned viciously at Peisofi’s stunned expression rapidly morphing into fury.

“You were playing?!” The Void Slave shouted, stepping back to glare at Jenni.

“Yup! Ahsoka needed to be elsewhere that your owner didn’t know about, and what better way to keep him ignorant than to have her signature here mixed up with yours, obviously fighting a duel? But she’s in the open now, so the subterfuge is over.”

Peisofi snarled and hurled herself at Jenni, and for the first time since the fight had started Jenni stopped holding back. The hold echoed again and again with the shriek of lightsaber against lightsaber as her own pure white blade spun to intercept crimson.

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Cort hadn’t been entirely passive as he had waited for the word to go. He had sought out the node through which he could enter the ‘backdoor’ he had set up in the Chancellor’s very private network the first time he had snuck in, before he’d been detected ... if it hadn’t been found and closed off. It hadn’t and now, his triumphant shout still ringing in his ears, Cort tapped a key to open that ‘door’ and unleash his ICE breaker, and leaned back in his seat.

Unlike his normal style there would be nothing stealthy about this break-in — he had spent much of the months-long wait on Dantooine designing the ICE breaker with everything he’d been able to learn from his analysis of his first break-in, everything his years of experience had taught him, and everything his fertile imagination could come up with. The final result would analyze the opposing Intrusion Countermeasure Electronics programs, obliterate them, seize control of the databases, and protect them from any counterstrike attempting to delete them, all without any concern for what alarms they might be setting off in the process — a battering ram rather than his usual lockpicks, ‘breaking-and-entering’ rather than ‘burglary’. Speed was what was important, not stealth.

And ... as he watched the lines of text scrolling up the monitor he preferred he saw the first data begin to come through the link, to automatically shunt through the hyperwave transceiver they’d installed on the ship on its way out to the entire galaxy. Along with a report of the defenses frozen or obliterated.

Cort’s eyebrows rose. “And here I thought I was over-prepared! Good thing I got bored, Sith Lords are paranoid. So was I paranoid and bored enough? Let’s see what manually activated defenses you
He froze for a split second as an alert popped up that he’d tripped a hidden alarm, then his fingers flew across the keyboard activating fresh ICE breakers along with watchman programs of his own as his eyes tracked across fresh lines of data. Those databases were his now and nothing and no one was going to take them away from him until he was done, he didn’t care that he was sending up a massive flare signaling to all of Coruscant, “Here I am, come get me!”

But that was a lot of data....

A frozen Anakin stared at Ahsoka, her head tilted up at him with an impish smile. He didn’t know what to do! Padme’s life was on the line, and he’d been prepared to pay any price, do whatever it took to save her, but that had been with his former Padawan safely lost on the fringes of the Republic. Now ... she was only the third person in his life to care about Anakin — not the Chosen One, not the Padawan, not her Master, not the Knight, General, apparently even future Apprentice, but Anakin. And if he sided with the Chancellor he’d have to kill her because she would never side with them, and while he might be able to convince Padme that the Jedi Order was as corrupt as the Senate and needed to go he’d never convince her that Ahsoka was a part of that corruption because she had so obviously been a victim of that corruption and Padme would never forgive him because he would never forgive himself and what would his children think when they grew up and —

He dropped his lightsaber and covered his ears as a piercing wail hammered the trio. “What is that!?" he shouted even as the Chancellor shouted a denial and dashed to his desk.

As Palpatine brought up a holographic screen and keyboard and the alarm cut off, an Ahsoka ‘smirking’ through the link Anakin had forgotten still existed said, “That would be Cort.” Turning to face the Chancellor, she continued, “You’ve probably forgotten about him, he’s a slicer who got curious about just who was behind the clone army you maneuvered Master Sifo-Dyas into commissioning ... with your financial backing. The bounty you put on Cort’s head after you caught him breaking into your personal network just after the war started drove him to maybe the only planet in the Republic where the shroud of the Void — the Dark Side — you’ve spread over the galaxy doesn’t extend. And wouldn’t you know it, the bounty hunters trying to collect the bounty you put on my head drove me to the same planet.”

The reminder of just who had to be behind the attempt to kill his Padawan hit Anakin like a punch to the gut, but the man she was taunting had other concerns. His hands danced across the holographic keyboard, then balled fists hammered through the keyboard’s image and onto the desktop. He lifted his head to stare at Ahsoka as hate filled the room, pressing down on Anakin until it seemed as if he should be drowning in smothering darkness instead of standing in the Chancellor’s lighted sleeping quarters.

Then everything happened at once, as the Chancellor leaped over the desk, his lightsaber flying into his hand from where it had been burning a stripe into the carpet. He swung down toward Ahsoka in an overhead slash as a lightsaber hilt leaped into Ahsoka’s hand, and it was as if a tiny sun powered by the Force erupted in that hilt, pushing back the overpowering hatred all around them even as a pure white blade sprang from it ... and twin lightsaber blades shrieked as the Chancellor’s blade clashed with Anakin’s own blue one interposed between the Chancellor and his target. “You will not touch her!”

Jenni was growing increasingly frustrated. She found herself in the same position she had been in...
when she’d first started sparring with Ahsoka, more than able to defend herself thanks to her deep immersion in the Tao’s currents, but up against an opponent whose own greater defensive skills more than made up for her more shallow immersion. (These days, Jenni had an easier time getting touches on her Bonded thanks to her knowledge of Ahsoka’s style but a harder time defending herself thanks to Ahsoka’s own deepening immersion.) Jenni’s frustration wasn’t helped by the fact that Peisofi was growing increasingly frustrated herself.

Then Jenni jerked at an abrupt intensification in Ahsoka’s emotions coming through the Bond: fear, determination, caution, anger, exhilaration — a mix Jenni had felt before, before her millennia-long sleep.

The emotional mix of a warrior charging into battle, that she had felt when Hyledd and Gianni had bought her and Henrik time to escape with their lives, during the first week of the Void slave-backed coup. I’ve got to get to her!

Unfortunately there was only one way to end her fight with the Void Slave quickly enough to get to Ahsoka in time to have any chance of being able to help — if she could win it at all, something she had been growing more and more doubtful of the longer she and Peisofi clashed. At first Jenni had been looking forward to springing the trap she had so painstakingly set up in the hold, but as the fight had gone on and her own anger and hatred had risen to meet that which had hollowed out her enemy she had had growing doubts about the wisdom of that as well.

Ah, well, needs must when the Devil drives. I wonder what kind of Devil or Hell people swear by now? Pushing the thought aside, Jenni went low, then when Peisofi leaped over her swing she sprang back across the hold. Even as Peisofi landed and started to close the distance, Jenni dropped her lightsaber, spread her arms wide, and released all restraint on the four long years of grief, anger, and hatred that had been churning in her gut since her enemy had arrived. Instantly the same Void-powered lightning with which she’d accidentally almost killed Ahsoka flashed out — but to the walls, not her enemy, where that lightning flashed through the amplifying arrays on every surface and erupted outward again.

Peisofi surprised her — she’d expected the Void slave to throw herself back when she sensed the danger, but instead she hurled herself forward. She was even good enough that she was able to twist while in the air and catch a few of the crackling strands of Void-powered lightning on her lightsaber... but only a few of the multitude reaching for her, and only for a moment; her lightsaber bounced across the floor as she slammed down to writhe screaming where Jenni had been standing a moment before.

Jenni began to laugh as she moderated the strength of the lightning she was pumping into the arrays.

Ahsoka gasped, faltering for a moment at the sudden onslaught of overpowering emotions pouring through her bond. Fortunately Anakin managed to knock away the Chancellor’s thrust that would have skewered his former Padawan and she forced her attention back onto the fight, but it wasn’t hard to realize just what was happening back at Life’s Gift... and it was going on, and on, and on....

She parried another slash aimed for her neck and sprang back. Palpatine tried to keep in contact, but Anakin held him back with a quick flurry of thrusts and slashes. (Either from pure hatred or because he thought she was the weakest of his two enemies, the Chancellor had been concentrating on Ahsoka, staying on the defensive against the Knight he’d tried to corrupt... not that he was finding it difficult, for some reason Ahsoka couldn’t understand Anakin was nowhere near his best.) Free from the immediate fight, she leaped to the other side of the room to land on the bed, shouting, “Sky Guy, cover me!” A feeling of acceptance came through their bond, and she dropped her lightsaber and fell
into what Jenni had called the lotus position, closed her eyes, and reached for her Bonded.

It was like diving into a firestorm of pain, made up of equal parts grief, longing, anger, hatred, shame, and more that Ahsoka lacked the time (and probably experience) to identify in a moment. She had no problem identifying the ruthless, vindictive satisfaction pouring fuel on the emotional maelstrom, though. She managed to push through enough latch onto Jenni’s physical senses, to see a strange Koorivar writhing on the floor, shrieking as Force lightning hammered into her from all sides. Jenni was standing with arms held wide, letting loose peals of laughter that was practically cackling as she fed Force lightning into the ritual crystal arrays she’d painstakingly set up.


The laughter and lightning cutting off, the satisfaction stuttered and faded with it ... and the shame swelled to fill the ‘space’. “Ahsoka? I’m ... I ...”

“I know, Jenni, I know, but you’re better than this. Finish it and get over here, me and Anakin could use the help.”

“I will.” Ahsoka’s last sight before she let her awareness of her Bonded’s senses fade away was Jenni’s lightsaber leaping to her hand and springing to life, before slashing down at the smoking body at her feet. She opened her eyes and rolled off the bed, her own lightsaber leaping back to her hand, only to drop to her knees as a current filled with nothing but death — no, deaths — rolled over her, tumbling her along in its wash, worse than any battlefield she’d ever been on.

Darth Sidious’ hold on the volcanic anger that seemed to be slowly burning him to ash from the inside out was fraying, one strand at a time. He had been so close! He’d had all the power he needed to declare his empire, he’d had his apprentice, he’d had the Jedi Order completely engulfed in his trap ... and then a single former Padawan the bounty hunters and his own Hunters had missed and a slicer he hadn’t even bothered to send Hunters after, just bounty hunters, had dropped out of hyperspace and the entire plan that the Sith had literally spent centuries building had collapsed like a house of cards.

And now he couldn’t even get his revenge. Somehow the Togrutan was shielding herself from the influence of the Veil, her defense was better than it should be, and after the damage he had suffered from his own assault reflected back at him by Master Windu he was far below his best ... barely enough to hold back Skywalker — a Jedi whose own connection to the Force was too strong for even the Veil to completely strip away.

Then suddenly Ahsoka leaped back, calling for Skywalker to cover her, and the source of the Light Side radiating from her lightsaber hilt vanished. Skywalker instantly stepped from his corner of the triangle that had been moving back and forth across the room, to stand between Sidious and the bed, and Sidious snarled as he focused all he had on the Knight before him. Skywalker had shifted to a purely defensive stance, and Sidious took advantage of that to press the attack without worrying (much) about his own defense even as he tried to distract his enemy by reaching out through the Force and grabbing odds-and-ends about the room to throw at him. But Skywalker didn’t bother to parry the nuisance attacks, simply letting them bounce off except for one tablet aimed for his head, which he ducked. Sidious needed a better distraction, something like ...

Order 67! That slicer locked me out of the databases and all of the purge and self-destruct routines, even the codes to physically blow up or fry their servers, but did he lock me out of the routines that don’t involve the stored data? There was only one way to find out. He’d intended Order 66 for his moment of triumph and Order 67 as the backup just in case, but ‘just in case’ was now. He’d simply
have to vanish into the shadows again as the Jedi Order gathered its shattered remnants, and begin
again.

He eased up on his assault for a moment, then called out to the nonsentient A.I. he had named after
the master he had killed: “Plagueis, initiate Order 67!”

There was no response, and for a long moment he was afraid that he had failed there as well. But
then the darkness of the Veil around them roiled as the deaths rolled in. And that was when the
greatest Sith Lord in millennia made his final two mistakes.

Actually, one of those mistakes had been made years earlier, when he and his master Darth Plagueis
first thought of the idea of a clone army with chips in their brains preprogrammed to force them to
murder the Jedi at the proper moment. It was a natural mistake, given that the Sith mindset was
ultimately solipsistic — for each Sith, he or she was the sole sentient of inherent importance; all other
sentients were threats, hindrances, or tools. And the clones were tools. As a result, it never occurred
to either Sith Lord that any clones would resist the implanted commands to murder their Jedi
commanders, and most of the clones didn’t. But some did, because a number of Jedi had ignored
their programming.

The Jedi, from younglings to the Grand Master himself, were taught to avoid emotional attachments,
and until the war that had been comparatively easy. Before the war, most missions Jedi were
assigned were of limited duration, with the sentients met during the course of those missions never
seen again. Those sentients with which most Jedi came into regular contact were other Jedi, also
trained to avoid emotional attachments. But with the war, Jedi were assigned to various commands
for extended periods, and even when detached for other missions eventually rotated back ... even
Jedi fought better with people they knew and trusted guarding their backs, after all. Many Jedi had
struggled to resist the natural bonds formed by those that fought side by side (and occasionally back
to back) but eventually failed, and some Jedi, through either ignorance or previously hidden heretical
beliefs, didn’t bother to try. Those Jedi knew more than their subordinates’ numbers, they knew their
names.

So when Order 66 reached those Jedi’s troops, the results were not what the Sith had intended:
General Aayla Secura with the 327th Star Corps, shot in the back multiple times ... all the shots
nonfatal, then her unconscious body loaded into her personal fighter before the clones’ ability to
resist could fail and piloted by her astromech to a non-Republic planet; General Stass Allie, assigned
to the 91st Mobile Reconnaissance Corps, saved when one of the two troopers accompanying her on
patrol crashed his speeder bike into the other trooper, killing them both; General Plo Koon, the Jedi
Knight that had found a three-year-old Ahsoka Tano and brought her to the Temple for training,
fighting a patrol when Order 66 was sent, protected when a clone interposed his ARC-170 starfighter
between the General and the rest of the squadron, giving the other clones a reason to hold their fire
until their General could escape ... and the squadron then going on to destroy as many military
holdings on Cato Neimoidia as they could, both Separatist and Republic, before they were shot
down one by one; General Shaak Ti, at the cloning facility on Kamino overseeing the training of the
young clones and educating them in the ways of the Jedi that they would follow, saved when one of
her cadets deliberately wounded himself with her lightsaber, shoved her into an empty training room,
then misdirected her pursuers so she could escape ... and accidentally called her ‘Mom’, and received
a hug and a seat in her starfighter in return. And many more, each story both unique and the same.
They weren’t a majority of the Order, or even that large a minority, but they were enough that the
wave of deaths that crashed onto the rest of the Jedi Order ... and Anakin, Ahsoka, and Jenni ...
wasn’t quite as overwhelming as it might have been.

The second mistake was all Darth Sidious’s, though. Like his contempt for those not of his race, his
contempt for the Jedi Order was deep and all-encompassing ... and when Skywalker rejected
Sidious’s offer to become his apprentice and instead protected his former Padawan, he placed himself firmly in the camp of that despised Order. So when Order 67’s death crashed down on them like a cresting wave and Ahsoka dropped to her knees, Sidious thought that surely Skywalker — with his connection to the Force stronger than any Sidious had ever seen — would be impacted even more severely ... giving Sidious time to deal first with the alien that had destroyed all his plans, and then the man that had rejected him. Unlike the two shaken fools he drew strength from the deaths reverberating through the Force, and he gathered that strength to enfold the staggering Jedi and threw him across the room, and stalked toward the Togrutan on her knees, clutching her head and keening. As much as he’d like to use Force lightning for a long, painful execution, Skywalker would recover before —

And suddenly Sidious wasn’t the only one in the room drawing strength from those deaths, as he felt Skywalker follow his example and finally give himself over to the Dark Side. Even in his shock he managed to knock aside the Jedi’s assault twice before that shining blue blade thrust through his stomach and backbone. Skywalker held it there for a long moment, charring all the flesh and organs around it, before yanking it free. The would-be Emperor of the Galaxy fell to his knees, clutching his stomach, than onto his face.

Skywalker kicked him over onto his back. “I’d leave you to die slowly like Qui-Gon and my mother, but who knows what other tricks you might have,” he snarled, raising his blade. Sidious’s last sight before the descending blade blocked his view were two yellow-rimmed eyes glaring down at him.

Chapter End Notes

The idea for the occasional failure of Order 66 (and saving a few favorites in the process) came from angelrider13’s Resist Order 66 (a little repetitive in the few chapters written, since the story never got past the reactions of the clones to the order to murder their beloved Generals, but an interesting concept).

A fun story that had fewer but longer chapters and is actually complete is MarbleGlove’s Remedial Jedi Theology.
Because it's over doesn't mean it's over.

Finally the avalanche of deaths crashing into Ahsoka eased, and she grabbed her lightsaber from where it lay on the carpet a few feet from her face, sat up and grabbed the bed for support as she levered herself onto her feet and looked around. She wasn’t surprised to find Anakin already up, he always had been more resilient than she, but he’d been in the middle of a fight with ... She didn’t even try to fight the surge of grim satisfaction when she saw the Chancellor’s corpse — she even found herself wishing she could see the Sith Lord’s final expression. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately, for the good of her soul), Anakin’s killing strike had been a bit high and sheared off half of Palpatine’s head instead of cutting it off at the neck.

“Ahsoka, what’s going on!? Jenni’s curled up on the floor of the hold and isn’t responding.”

Ahsoka stiffened at the sound of Cort’s voice through her ear bud, and paled. What she’d just gone through had been horrible enough for her, with Jenni’s history it must have been all twenty rings of hell. “Cort, I’d just finished talking Jenni down when we were hit by a wave of deaths, Jedi are dying all over the galaxy.”

Anakin turned away from the corpse of the man he’d considered a mentor and a friend, and Ahsoka shivered at the faint yellow in his eyes. “You’re talking to the slicer that hacked Palpatine’s database? Ask him what Order 67 is.”

“Hold on a moment.” Ahsoka went over to the Chancellor’s desk, and as expected found a spot for plugging ear buds into a speaker. “Cort? You’re public so I won’t have to repeat everything, what do you have on Order 67?”

“Yeah, I heard, give me a moment ... Bantha-shit!”

“That bad?”

“Apparently all the clones have chips implanted to force them to attack and kill the Jedi when they receive Order 66 from the Chancellor. He sent the order out a few minutes ago. Is that what hit Jenni so hard?”

Ahsoka ignored Anakin’s mouthed ‘Jenni?’ as she furiously thought. “Yes, all those deaths hit her worse.” But she was frowning, something was niggling at her. This was Coruscant, there weren’t any armies, but there were some units, Anakin was standing beside her — she paled even worse than before. “Sky Guy, the Temple! Every clone trooper on Coruscant is going to be gunning for it! The 501st is here, isn’t it!” All her friends in Torrent Company ...

Anakin froze, blanching himself. “Yes, they are. But ... Cort? ... Palpatine said to initiate Order 67, not Order 66.”

“Yeah, Order 66 is the core programming, Order 67 was tacked on just a little bit ago ... guys? There’s a hit squad headed for Senator Amidala right now.”

Ahsoka whirled to Anakin. “Go! I’ll ... do something about the 501st,” she trailed off, her former master already vanished through the door on his way to the landing platform, he must have left his own speeder there.

Right. Anakin would be more than enough to handle any single squad of assassins by himself just fine, especially with the lives of his wife and children on the line — and those weren’t the only lives at stake. And she was going to need help. “Jenni!” she called through their bond ... nothing, except
for an overwhelming wave of guilt. Hesitating for a moment, she reluctantly did something she hadn’t done, so far — pushed herself into the maelstrom of guilt filling her Bonded’s mind without being invited. “Jenni.”

“It felt just like when my Bond killed all the Dancers on Earth. I should have died with them.”

“But you didn’t, and I need your help. Younglings need your help.”

Jenni didn’t respond immediately, but the guilt slowly faded to manageable levels. “What do you need me to do?”

“Join Cort, we’re talking through the earbud.” Ahsoka felt Jenni’s assent, and sighed with relief. “Cort, Jenni’s on her way up.”

As she waited for Jenni Ahsoka thought furiously, so when her Bonded announced her arrival she was ready and already on the move. “Jenni, I’m putting some distance between me and the Chancellor’s quarters, with all the noise I’m surprised Security hasn’t already put in an appearance and I don’t have the time to deal with them. Home in on me in Life’s Gift, and we’ll drop in on the Torrent Company’s barracks and talk them down.”

“Talk them down?” was Jenni’s doubtful reply. “With the chips in their heads?”

“They may be chipped, but they’re friends, and neither of us are Jedi — me very publicly, what with my expulsion and trial, and they’ll be happy to take me vouching for your own status as an excuse. For the rest of the 501st ... we’ll think of something. Cort, do you want to leave, or stay with the ship?”

“With the Chancellor dead his bounty will be lifted, but it’ll take awhile. Until then, I’m safer with you.”

“Sounds ... well, not good, but as good as we’re going to get for now. See you in a few minutes.”

During the discussion she’d reached the landing platform for the tower’s top level, and as expected there were among the other vehicles some open-top speeders she could hot-wire ... again. As she selected the most maneuverable speeder available from the excellent selection available (not the fastest, when she might have friends trying to kill her), she wondered how Windu would explain stolen property (the last speeder she’d hot-wired) being parked at the Temple. She really hoped he’d have the chance to make that explanation.

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Ahsoka circled the barracks Torrent Company of the 501st was usually assigned when it was on Coruscant as Life’s Gift approached (not having quite caught up with Ahsoka in spite of its head start). Her heart ached at the sight of familiar figures on the parade grounds milling around as they formed up, preparing themselves for action. Their movements lacked the crispness she had known in the past, as the chips in their heads drove them on.

And quite a few had stopped what they were doing and were looking up at her.

Then Life’s Gift arrived, and the two settled down on the parade ground side-by-side in front of the growing formation, right where the troop transport they had to be waiting for would need to land. Ahsoka climbed out of her speeder and walked over to Life’s Gift’s as its ramp lowered, waited for Jenni to walk down it and join her, then the two walked toward the head of the formation side by side. She noticed some blaster rifles lifting as the pair got close enough to be clearly recognizable — and in Ahsoka’s case recognized — and it was all she could do to keep from going for the lightsaber
on her hip; the Tao’s currents should provide enough warning and she and Jenni had practiced ‘fast-drawing’ their lightsabers until they could probably do it swiftly and cleanly while drugged to the gills ... but there were a lot of blaster rifles out there.

Then the figure standing at the head of the formation stepped forward to meet the pair, joined by another from the ranks. She glanced over the identifying strips on their armor, and felt herself relax ... Captain Rex and Sergeant Coric. She’d expected Rex if he had survived another year of war, and Coric’s wasn’t that much of a surprise — the Sergeant had become a close friend of both her and the Captain over the years, and medics got cut a lot of slack.

“Commander Tano, you shouldn’t be here. It ... isn’t safe.” Captain Rex’s voice was distorted slightly by his helmet, but she could still hear the strain he was under.

“Rex, I know about the chips in your heads and the orders they’re forcing on you, I was there when the Sith Lord that maneuvered himself into being elected Chancellor activated them.” Raising her voice so at least the front ranks behind the Captain could hear her if the Captain didn’t have his com set to the unit-wide frequency, she continued, “But there’s something you all need to remember — I am not a Jedi! They threw me out before my trial, and I told them what they could do with their offer to reinstate me and walked away after it was over!”

She felt the men in front of her, at least, relax at her words, blaster rifles lowering. But ...

“And your friend?”

... yeah, that. “She’s not a Jedi, either, had never heard of ... them before I met her a few months ago.”

Sergeant Coric laughed. “Yeah, I can believe she’s not a Jedi, not with those broaches you both have around your necks. Togrutan love bites, boys, our little Ahsoka’s all grown up!”

Yeah, they were on the unit channel, or at least Coric was, and a wave of laughter from over a hundred men swept seemed to fill the parade ground. The laughter redoubled when Jenni replied, “Yup, we’re Bonded and everything!” and leaned down to plant a kiss on Ahsoka’s cheek — they must not only be on the unit channel, but the Captain’s helmet camera as well, and Ahsoka was certain that the grin she could feel on her Bonded’s face had to be ... contented.

Then the laughter redoubled again when Ahsoka gently slapped her on the arm and whined, “Jenni!” The practically glowing blue of her lekku stripes from embarrassment didn’t help, though Jenni’s amused approval of the effect of their little comedy skit on the men that came through their Bond helped settle her down.

As the laughter quieted, Captain Rex said (with a bit of amusement in his own voice), “So, Commander, what do we do?”

An odd question for someone that for all their shared experience was still a teenager, and ... and Ahsoka suddenly realized the significance of the rank he’d used twice now, the one given to all Padawans serving with the Army. “I was never taken off the list of J — the list of officers, was I? Even though I’d been expelled from the Order.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“Great!” Ahsoka straightened, the whine gone from her tone. “I was going to ask you to return to your barracks, but instead I’m going to order you help protect more innocents that are not Jedi ... the younglings in the Temple. Have you received any orders? Is the rest of the 501st mobilizing to move
on the Temple?"

“Well, yes, our transport’s supposed to be here any moment, but ... the children aren’t Jedi?”

“No, we — they may come to the Temple when they’re practically babies, but they don’t actually join the Order until they’re ready for serious training.” And there was no need to mention just how young the younglings were when that serious training began. Her friends wouldn’t ask, and she could get entire clans under their protection. “Okay, I know a way into the Temple that doesn’t involve any of the ... normal entrances, I’ll sneak in and send the children out. If you check I think you’ll find that Palpatine” — she snarled the name, and was happy to hear growls from the closest men — “gave you access to the classified 3-D map of the area around the Temple, we’ll find the best place to fort up in case we’re discovered ...”
Aja could not stay still. Something was wrong, she knew it, but she couldn’t figure out what. All she knew was that when Skywalker had dropped by to visit Padme he had been worried about something — deeply worried — and it had to involve Padme. Jay suspected that her employer and friend had picked up on it as well, if the worry hidden from anyone that didn’t know Padme well was any indication, but if Padme had gotten anything from her husband she hadn’t told her bodyguard. So all Aja could do was make sure the security for the Naboo Senator’s suite was at full strength (something she’d warned Security about when she’d verified that the landline to their office was working), and worry, and pace.

It was her pacing that saved her life. When the transparisteel window that was the outer wall exploded inward, she was behind one of the short narrow walls that broke up the large space of the main room to make it feel more cozy — and when she’d become Padme’s unofficial bodyguard, she’d had all the original flimsy excuses of interior dividers replaced by the real thing, capable of stopping anything short of a blaster large enough to require a mounting. With the wall’s blast shadow, she wasn’t even knocked off her feet.

This was good, because it meant that when the first two figures appeared in the now empty window, fire from the heavy blaster she’d strapped on after Padme had gone to bed knocked them right back out again. Not fatally, worse luck, she’d recognized the armor they were wearing in the light of those light fixtures spared by the blast wave and flying shards — that particular brand was as good as anything worn by the clone troopers and came with a personal grav plate, enough to slow their fall and a little maneuvering capability just for situations like this ... and was used almost exclusively by the most expensive mercenaries and the elite (and so small) military units of various planets. As heavy as her pistol was, it would take a direct hit to penetrate, or a lucky hit on joints or the neck.

And not only were they likely to be back, but if they were mercenaries they were unlikely to be alone.

And speaking of blaster rifles ... she darted out from behind her cover to grab the one that had been dropped by one of the men she’d shot, then rolled to one side before taking a peek out the window just in time to shoot one of another two men leaping from a small van hovering six feet away. That man fell with the same slowness of a personal grav plate, but the limpness of a corpse. The second of the two landed in the room and both he and Aja twisted around to bring their rifles to bear and fired only for the mercenary’s shot to go wide, singeing her hair and cheek, when he was twisted by a pistol shot glancing off his shoulder. Aja’s shot didn’t go wide though it was high, and his head exploded as the bolt drilled through his helmet.

“Padme, get back in your room!” Aja shouted as two more mercenaries landed in the room. This time Aja’s shot was off, hitting one of them in the shoulder and making him drop his rifle. He instantly grabbed at the pistol holstered on a hip, but Aja had to ignore him because the other mercenary was ignoring the lighter bolts from Padme’s blaster and firing toward the doorway to the sleeping chamber. Aja’s shot took him in the side and knocked him down, his rifle flying wide, and she turned back to the one she’d wounded just in time for the bolt from his pistol to hammer into the rifle she held instead of her chest. The explosion hurled her back against the wall, almost onto the shards of transparisteel still in the window frame.

She was almost blinded by pain but still saw another van pulling up as the first van dropped away,
and she looked around frantically even as she felt herself beginning to float and the world going hazy, the pain fading along with the sound of Padme screaming her name — the mercenary she’d wounded was ignoring her to focus on her Queen/Senator/friend still firing from the sleeping chamber door, two more mercenaries from the new van had just leaped into the room, she couldn’t see any dropped weapons close enough to grab ... the smashing, grinding sound of metal on metal yanked her attention back to the van, just in time to see it dropping, a speeder buried in its side, Knight Skywalker catapulting from the collision toward the suite with his lightsaber’s blade already activated.

She was smiling as her eyes dropped closed. Skywalker would be more than enough, Padme was safe.

She had not failed in her duty.

Padme had been jolted from an uneasy sleep when her suite shook. It had taken only a moment to grab her personal com from on top of the stand beside her bed, and the blaster she kept in a hidden compartment in that stand as she looked at her sleeping chamber’s outer wall. The wall-sized screen that had replaced her window after the assassination attempt at the beginning of the war was blank; the explosion must have destroyed the outside cameras.

She awkwardly rolled off the bed and waddled toward the door. (She loved the thought of her children, but wasn’t exactly sold on pregnancy.) Once there, she palmed the controls while standing to the side. She wasn’t surprised by the sound of blaster fire coming through the open door. She was surprised to see her friend/bodyguard in a shootout with fully armored mercenaries.

Not that the armor seems to be helping much, she thought with a smirk as she murmured the code into her com to set off the alert for Ani she was happy he’d insisted she set up after learning she was pregnant. That done, she began to add her own blaster bolts to the firefight while using the doorframe for cover. When Aja complains I’ll get to tell her that at least this time she’s along for the ride. Aja was not happy with the way that all the dangerous stuff seemed to happen to Padme when she wasn’t there.

Her first shot missed but the second glanced off the shoulder of what had to be a mercenary, what with the armor he was wearing. As Aja’s shot was better aimed, and as Padme watched the rifle bolt blow through the mercenary’s head she distantly wondered who hated her personally enough to pull a stunt like this — sure, she had enemies both among the Separatists and the Hutts, but there weren’t enough mercenaries in the galaxy to go after everyone the Hutts hated and the Separatists had more important problems to worry about than revenge on a single Senator.

Padme ignored the collapsing corpse for the inevitable additional targets. (And ignored Aja’s yell for her to go hide in her room — honestly, unlike bounty hunters mercenaries travel in packs, how did Aja expect to hold them all off herself?) Two more mercenaries leaped through the empty window-wall, and Padme concentrated her fire on the one on the far side from Aja, leaving the other for her bodyguard. She got several hits, but only glancing shots, and then dropped into a crouch as her target fired back, the bolts not passing through the door blowing deep divots in the wall and spraying drops of abruptly-molten metal ... much more and that wall would start coming apart, however sturdy its construction it wasn’t blast door steel.

Then a rifle bolt from Aja slammed into his side and he spun as he fell, his rifle flying away. Padme peeked further around the doorframe to get a better view, just in time to see her friend’s ‘borrowed’ rifle explode, hurling her against the wall. Screaming Aja’s name, Padme fired at her friend’s attacker as fast as she could pull the trigger, her bolts flying almost randomly. One of the bolts actually
glanced off one of the next two mercenaries to leap into the room, spinning him in the air and sending him rolling across the floor.

Padme felt herself going cold — Aja down, three mercenaries with who knows how many more behind them, armor and rifles against her single pistol, her encumbered by her pregnancy ... she wasn’t going to be able to hold long enough for her husband to come to the rescue. Not that her despair kept her from trying, and the newcomer still on his feet dropped as a bolt took him in the throat. As she shifted her attention to the two left she whispered, “I’m sorry An —”

The screech of rending metal yanked her attention back to the window just in time to see Anakin catapult into the suite, shining blue lightsaber blade humming through the air as he cut down the last unwounded mercenary. Instantly, Padme pushed herself to her feet and scurried across the room to Aja, her husband could easily handle the last mercenary....

Her breath hissed out at the sight of her friend, she could see her lungs between her ribs! It didn’t matter how good the emergency kit was that Aja had insisted be installed in the suite, no amount of bacta tape or injections would be enough. And from the blood pooling around them and that Aja was coughing up as she tried to breath, she wouldn’t last long enough to reach the tower’s med center. Grasping one hand, she whispered, “Aja?”

Aja’s eyes opened, but weren’t tracking. “Padme?”

“I’m here.”

“You’re safe? All ... bad guys ... gone?”

“Yes, Anakin's here, you held them off long enough.”

Aja smiled for a moment before a fresh gout of blood gushed out with her last breath and her eyes emptied.

Padme sat there for a moment before the screaming from behind her registered. Gently setting Aja’s limp hand down beside her, she turned to find two of the three mercenaries in the suite when her husband arrived lying in pieces, with the last screaming mercenary floating in the air in front of Anakin. Her husband had thrust his lightsaber into the man’s groin and was slowly dragging it up through his abdomen, armor and all. His victim was already dead, he just hadn’t stopped breathing yet.

What would haunt her nightmares in the years ahead wasn’t the sight, but the grim satisfaction she felt that at least one of their attackers was suffering as they deserved for what they had done.

No! She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, exhaled. “Ani. Ani!”

Anakin’s head turned toward her, and she had to fight not to recoil at the sight of black and yellow eyes blazing with hatred — this wasn’t her Anakin, it was the one that had slaughtered the entire tribe of Tusken Raiders that had tortured his mother to death, down to the tiniest infant.

It took all her strength of will to keep her voice steady as she said, “It’s over. Finish him.”

For a moment as his eyes seemed to blaze brighter she thought he would refuse, maybe even attack her, and a jolt of fear raced through her and she stepped back. At that he shuddered, shook his head, then with a scream as loud as his victim’s yanked the lightsaber up. He let the two halves of the corpse fall away as he dropped to his knees.

She rushed over and crouched beside him, an arm around his shoulder, her other hand gently pulling
his lightsaber out of his hand and deactivating it before setting it aside. “It’s all right, I’m fine, it’s over,” she murmured over and over as he sucked in shuddering breath after shuddering breath.

Finally, he looked up, the yellow in his eyes fading. “The twins?”

“They’re fine.”

He twisted and laid a hand on her swollen abdomen as he had so often before, and breathed a sigh of relief. “They’re fine. A little agitated, but fine. Aja ... ?” He glanced over to where her bodyguard’s corpse lay, and seemed to deflate. “If I had been just a little faster —”

“No, don’t do that to yourself, it’s not your fault. I don’t know how you got here as fast as you did, I’d barely sent the alert.”

“I was already on my way.”

“So you couldn’t have gotten here a second faster than you did. Mourn her, but don’t dishonor her sacrifice by blaming yourself. But we’re saving ‘Leia’ for our next daughter — it’s a wonderful name, but Aja just gave us a better one.”

“Yes, it’s only right.” Taking a deep breath, Anakin pushed himself to his feet. His lightsaber leaped to one hand, and he offered her the other. “But right now we need to go, those might not have been all of them.”

“The Temple?”

Guilt flashed across Anakin’s face, and he shook his head. “No, the Temple isn’t safe right now.”

“The Temple isn’t safe? Anakin, what’s going ... no, later, first we get me somewhere safe —” She froze at the sensation of liquid running down her legs. “No, first we get me to the med center. I think my water might have just broke.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I’m actually early this week! This chapter was one of the ones that seem to write themselves, which means it’s up before Labor Day weekend instead of next week.

And yes, I know that having the water breaking always signaling the babies are on their way is a cliche, that it only happens to 10% of expectant mothers. And yes, it’s earlier than in canon. But Padme just went through a rather stressful and active few minutes at the wrong time for any woman.
Youthful Escapades

Chapter Notes

I almost didn't post this today, I've been busy this weekend and didn't get as much writing as I'd planned, but after some thought I finally decided that I have enough going on to make up one more chapter before getting into the after effects. So, on with the show!

Barriss Offee jerked when the alarms went off, almost cutting the leg of the patient she’d been carefully scraping burned cloth off of (bacta tanks were wonderful, but they didn’t clean wounds of foreign contaminants). She looked around wildly for whatever was making that awful wailing, then sighed with relief when the sound cut off. Her relief was short-lived.

“The Temple is under attack. All trainees and their immediate supervisors return to their rooms. All Jedi not already assigned a task report to the central fountains. I repeat ...”

Barriss turned back to her patient. “It seems the bacta tank will have to wait.” She thought for a moment, then opened a cabinet and took out an injector, picked a vial from the rack and inserted it, turned back to her patient. “This will take care of the pain, but don’t try to walk on that leg ... unless the fighting gets this far, then do what you must.”

Without waiting for his answer, she ran for the store room to grab as many first aid kits as she could carry, then was out the med center on her way to the rallying point.

She just wished she had her lightsaber....

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Ahsoka sneezed again, disturbing some of the dust that coated the conduit she was crawling through. It had been years since she had come through this way (snuck through this way, more accurately), years even before she had been assigned as Anakin’s Padawan — children could be cruel, teachers could be demanding, and she had needed a place where she could be alone from time to time. When her explorations of the Temple had uncovered a route that actually ended in an ancient landing bay outside to Temple, she kept it to herself since it gave her a place where she could go and at least have the illusion of getting away from the Order and its sometimes smothering limitations.

As they’d grown up the children’s cruelty had been worn away by their teachers’ gentle (and sometimes not-so-gentle) remonstrances, and she had grown strong under the pressure of teachers’ high expectations, so her need for her hiding place had faded. Now it didn’t look like anyone or anything else had been through since her last visit.

With good reason. She sighed as she again ‘reached’ down to have the Tao sweep her lightsaber up to her hand, and fed that current coming through her into its crystal to bring the white blade to life, then quickly carved out a chunk of the metal around a hole she’d had no trouble squeezing through when she was a child but would never get through now, much less Jenni. Once done she ‘caught’ the section she’d cut out and floated it to the floor of the new tube in the direction they didn’t need to go, then deactivated her lightsaber and returned it to her belt. “Light stick?”
At the request through their bond, Jenni floated forward a light stick from the back she was pulling behind her until Ahsoka could grab it, and the Togrutan quickly glued it to the top of the tube they were exiting. By the time the pair reached the Temple’s interior, there’d be a path of lights all the way back to the 501st waiting in the landing bay.

Path clear and light set, Ahsoka led the way up the new conduit, sneezing again when she stirred up fresh dust. She ignoring the flash of pain and muttered curses when Jenni brushed against the still-hot edges her lightsaber had carved. Those would have cooled down by the time the younglings came through.

Barriss was trying not to fume as she strode down the corridor away from the fighting ... she had just been sent away like a misbehaving child told to go to her room and meditate! That's not fair, they're afraid I might lose control again in the heat of battle, and they can’t allow me to stay close to the fighting when they aren’t willing to trust me with a weapon, for my own safety.

All true, and Master Kase had been apologetic when he had made his decision, but it had still taken Barriss long seconds to release her fury at the brush-off into the Force. And besides, even with the burned and wounded Master Windu’s return the clone trooper assault had come as a complete surprise, they’d killed the Jedi standing guard at the main entrance and blown their way into the Temple long before enough Jedi could have gathered to stop them, and now were spreading throughout the complex, outflanking every attempt to block them. Their years fighting alongside Jedi were serving them well now that they were killing them. The last thing the Jedi struggling to stem the tide needed was her dragging them down.

She was so caught up in her thoughts that she didn’t sense the presence of the two individuals approaching the next intersection by another corridor — one of them very familiar — and only Jedi-trained reflexes on both their part kept her from running right over the small Togrutan that obviously had expected to be sensed.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I just — Ahsoka!?” Barriss stared at the friend she’d betrayed ... the dirt-smeared, oil-stained friend she’d betrayed. “Why are you here? How are you here? The clone troopers turned on us, the Temple’s under attack, you have to get out!”

“Barriss ... hi.” Outwardly Ahsoka seemed calm, but her lekku were twitching in a way that Barriss had learned was a Togrutan nervous tick. “Yeah, Jenni and me know about the attack, we’re here to get the younglings out. Oh, Barriss, this is my Bonded, Jenni.” She motioned to the equally dirt-smeared and oil-stained (and charred in patches to boot) Human standing slightly behind her.

‘Bonded’? What’s — She pushed away the thought, though from the way Jenni was dressed the same way as Ahsoka but the colors reversed — the pattern dyed into her hair reversed the pattern of Ahsoka’s lekku, as well — was a really strong hint. Later, right now there’s the younglings. “Get them out the way you got in?” She raised an eyebrow and looked the pair up and down. “Is it safe?”

“So it had gotten dusty and had a few oil leaks since the last time I passed through, and I had to widen some of the openings with my lightsaber, it’s still safer than staying in a Temple under assault. Torrent Company is outside waiting to guard them.”

“Torrent Company? Isn’t that the part of the 501st that you and Skywalker usually worked with? Why aren’t they part of the attack?”

“The clones are attacking because of a chip in their brains ordering them to kill the Jedi. I’m not a Jedi, neither is Jenni, and when I told them that the children aren’t either, yet, they were happy to
believe me.”

Barriss stared at her for a long moment, then jerked a nod. “Right, let’s go.” As she fell in alongside her friend and the silent Jenni, she murmured, “Ahsoka, after this is all over ... can we talk?”

Ahsoka glanced sideways at her, sideways at Jenni on the opposite side, then forced a smile and jerked a nod.

Barriss almost fainted from relief before releasing it into the Force. She was rather less successful with the instant butterflies in her gut. But that didn’t stop her from teasing, “So, the way you and Jenni are color-coded under all the grime, is there something going on between you two?”

Ahsoka surprised her by laughing. “Barriss, you have no idea! But it’s too much to explain right now.”

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Knight Sala Grissom was not happy to see them, she was one of those that had advocated for keeping Barriss away from the younglings and considered Ahsoka a traitor for walking away from the Order, and since she was one of those that had made raising and training the youngest of the Order her opinion had carried a great deal of weight, more even than most Masters. But she had also been following the progress of the battles raging throughout the Temple, and the white around the Human’s mouth wasn’t because Barriss and Ahsoka had shown up with a complete stranger. The news that they had a way out for the younglings had been all it took to get her over her clear reservations. Now she stood at the head of the line of children staring at the wall panel Ahsoka had reopened. “How did a child find this?” She shook her head. “A story for later.” She stepped toward the opening, only to halt when Jenni grabbed her elbow.

“You can’t go. We may have convinced Torrent Company that the children aren’t Jedi, but there’s no way they’ll be able to convince themselves that you aren’t.”

“But ... but we can’t send the children through without at least one adult with them!”

Jenni stared at her for a moment, turned to stare at the opening, then muttered a curse. “You’re right.” She turned to gaze at Ahsoka for a long moment, the Togrutan turning to meet her eyes, and after a long moment of silence the two sighed and Jenni nodded. “Right, let’s do this.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, and Barriss’s eyes widened as the pair’s presence in the Force ... shifted. They still looked the same, but her friend’s Force signature had changed to that of the Human while Jenni now ‘felt’ like Ahsoka. Barriss breathed, “What did you do?”

‘Ahsoka’ shrugged. “Ahsoka is the best to take the head of the line out but having a stranger obviously not a Jedi wandering around in the middle of a firefight is not a good idea. So we switched places; once Ahsoka’s reached Torrent Company we’ll switch back.”

Barriss stared, eyes wide with horror, stories of the evils of Sith Lords seeking immortality springing to mind. From her own horrified expression, Knight Grissom was remembering the same tales.

‘Ahsoka’ glanced between the two and shook her head, smiling wryly. “Ahsoka reacted the same way, when I first suggested this. Relax, this only feeds the Void — embraces the Dark Side — when it’s forced; voluntary is just fine and anyway it requires a bond.” Turning away from the two now bemused Jedi, she hugged ‘Jenni’. ‘Jenni’ returned the embrace for a long moment, before letting go and turning to the open panel and the growing crowd of younglings stacked up in the corridor. “Remember, younglings, we’re playing Follow the Leader’, so keep close and you’ll be fine.”
Jenni found herself pacing again as she watched more and more children crawl out of the open panel into the long-abandoned landing bay. Through her bond with Ahsoka she had been ‘listening in’ on the reports Knight Grissom received of the ongoing battles raging through the Temple, and she was growing increasingly worried. The rest of the Temple’s defenders had been told of the escape of the younglings — and more importantly the path that escape was taking — and were doing their best to keep the assaulting troops away from that part of the Temple, both through stiffening resistance and luring them into other areas. And in truth, they hadn’t done all that bad a job.

But one company of the 501st refused to be distracted and refused to stop. They already killed half a dozen Jedi, were holding off other Jedi probing their flanks and rear, and would soon reach the first of the older younglings, those that had searched out the kyber crystals needed for their own lightsabers but hadn’t yet been taken on as Padawans by any Knights or Masters. (The older children had pealed off from the rest as they moved toward Ahsoka’s secret exit, into corridors joining the main route. Knight Grissom had not been happy with giving them that task, but had reluctantly agreed that someone had to be the last line of defense and really, their age might be too much for the troopers of Torrent Company to resist their programming, even if the children abandoned their lightsabers. For that matter, none of the adults with the children were happy about it — Barriss’s protests had been particularly vociferous.)

Yes, Jenni was worried about the troopers breaking through and cutting off the children’s retreat, but what really scared her was the thought that those troopers would realize the children were escaping from the Temple itself, and report back to whoever was calling the shots. The landing bay the children were taking refuge in was abandoned, not hidden — if the rest of the clones did a perimeter sweep, they’d almost certainly find it. The children would have no choice to go back into that maze of corridors and conduits, they’d have to spread out away from the path Ahsoka had laid out so everyone could fit, there would be accidents and children getting lost, and considering the dangers of that poorly maintained, likely unmapped maze some of them might never be found. And that would be the ones that could get back into the maze — Torrent Company would do its best to hold off any attackers but there was simply nowhere in the bay to take cover, most of the children would be massacred before they could escape.

She paused her pacing to stare through the wide open entrance to the landing bay at the cliff-like wall across the empty flyway. She murmured, “We can’t stay here.”

Captain Rex looked up from where he was discussing something appropriately military with one of his sergeants. “What was that?”

Jenni straightened and took a deep breath. “We can’t stay here.” She quickly repeated her reasoning (leaving out the part about the oldest children maybe abandoning their lightsabers to sneak out), finishing with, “ ... unless the bay door can be closed?” She looked around at the rust-streaked walls.

Captain Rex had been nodding in agreement, but now shook his head. “No, even if we could somehow get it closed there’s no guarantee we’d be able to open it again and that could be just as bad if the soldiers in the Temple follow your escape route.”

“Right. Cort, have you been listening in?”
The response over her earbud was instantaneous. “Yeah, you want Life’s Gift there?”

“As fas as you can.”

“On my way.”

“Great.” Jenni refocused on Captain Rex. “Our freighter is on its way.”

The Captain grinned. “You had someone else onboard? Sneaky, I approve. Between our shuttle and your freighter, we should have enough lift capacity so long as we don’t take the younglings very far. But where do we take them?”

“I don’t know, but I bet Ahsoka does. Give us a moment. ‘Soka?’

“Ahsoka missed a stride, almost stumbling, at Jenni’s call. Running beside her, Barriss glanced over and Ahsoka shrugged. “Jenni.” Keeping only half her attention on the corridor that would hopefully put them in front of the company aimed at the escape route before they encountered the older younglings standing guard, Ahsoka sent back, “Kinda busy here.”

Jenni’s reply had the faint ‘echo’ that meant she was speaking aloud at the same time she was ‘sending’. “I know. But I think, and Captain Rex agrees, that we need to move the kids out of the landing bay in case the rest of the 501st finds us and we need to know where to send them.” She sent a ‘burst’ of the memory of her discussion with the Captain, and Ahsoka nodded and stopped running.

“Good thinking. I don’t know where to send them, but I think I know someone that does. We need to switch so I can use the shuttle’s coms.” She closed her eyes, ‘reached’ for her Bonded, and swayed as she felt the familiar moment of vertigo as the entire universe seemed to shift around her. She opened her eyes to find Captain Rex staring at her, and he shook his head.

“The way way you two can switch places is ... well, a little freaky. Did you know the way you stand changes when you do that? Useful though, what do you need?”

“Your shuttle’s com, I need to make a call.” She headed for the shuttle’s ramp at a run, past its original pilot now bound up and set next to an unusually large patch of rust on the wall. A few moments later she was in the co-pilot’s seat looking at a screen showing the brown-crested, wide-mouthed face of one of her first non-Order friends.

“Ahsoka, I didn’t know you were back in town! Where’ve you been, and why aren’t you here?” His gaze sharpened. “That’s an ... interesting broach you’re wearing.”

Ahsoka giggled even as the blues of her lekku blushed. “Does everyone know what that means? Dex, it’s good to see you again, but I’m afraid I don’t have time to gossip, I’ll introduce you to Jenni later. The clone troopers were all chipped on the Chancellor’s orders, he ordered them to kill all the Jedi, most of the 501st is attacking the Temple right now, we’re getting the younglings out, we need to get them out of the shooting gallery where we’re currently stashings them. Do you know anywhere we can hide a few hundred younglings until the shooting’s over?”

The Besalisk former prospector, smuggler, gun runner, professional fighter and now cook and diner owner stared at her for a long moment, eyes wide as he took in the rapid-fire infodump, before shaking himself out of his shock. “Yeah, you’re busy, all right. Do the tykes all need to be stashed in the same location?”
"No. Actually, breaking them up into individual clans would be even better, so long as we can find them all afterward."

"Then no problem, fly them down to the diner and I’ll get them spread around."

"Ahsoka, we need to switch back now! Barriss needs you!"

Ahsoka gasped at the mental ‘shout’ echoing in her mind. “Dex, I gotta go, first flight will be on its way in a few minutes.” She broke the connection and whirled to face the Captain. “Rex, I’m needed back in the Temple, check the directory for Dex’s Diner in CoCo Town, take the younglings there, keep the clans together.” Before he had a chance to respond, she ‘reached’ for Jenni and abruptly found herself in the middle of bloody chaos.

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Barriss shook her head in bemusement as the Force signature of her companion shifted again from her friend to her friend’s (apparent) lover. (And didn’t she want to hear how that happened ... once she got her old friend somewhere private and begged her forgiveness, which just thinking about tied her stomach in knots even if it seemed that somehow Ahsoka already had.)

Then ‘Jenni’ opened her eyes, and asked, “Where to?”

“Follow me.” Barriss took off at a run again, ‘Jenni’ right on her heels, their Force-enhanced legs pushing them as fast as the need to turn corners allowed. Then the pair turned one last corridor, and Barriss breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the two older younglings standing guard with their lightsabers in hand but not activated ... and a moment later the Force screamed a warning that had her throwing herself backwards into ‘Jenni’ as a massive explosion turned the wall beside the guards into a hail of shrapnel.

Hacking on smoke, she pushed herself to her hands and knees and looked down the corridor, and froze at the sight of troopers pouring through the hole in the wall ... and walking unconcerned through the remains of the two younglings splashed across the floor and opposite wall. Some of those troopers were turning toward her and ‘Jenni’, but most of them ignored the pair to continue their advance toward the crèche.

Barriss reached her hand out, and one youngling’s lightsaber leaped past the troopers and into her palm as pure hatred like a blanket of ice seemed to surround and penetrate her. Without saying a word she activated the lightsaber as she rose to her feet and charged, the green blade reflecting back the first oncoming fire.

She never did remember that fight clearly, only snatches in her nightmares of figures screaming and falling, blasters pointing at her that failed to fire or whose aim was off slightly, the empathy inherent in her battle focus telling her that these soldiers did not want to be there and even sensing gratitude as she cut them down ... and her own uncaring icy exultation in the slaughter, a memory that would wake her sweat-soaked and shaking, and soon wrapped up in the comforting arms of one of the others alerted through the Bond if she didn’t wake up that way.

And through all the chaos she could sense Ahsoka returned to her rightful body, silently covering her flanks and watching her back as she dealt with those already in the corridor and then drove into a company that had placed itself in the worst possible location to fight a Jedi — crowded into a long maintenance conduit with no way to keep their distance, no way to spread out, and no way to retreat, only attempt ambushes from other branches as she passed, that Ahsoka dealt with.

Then the pair were out of the conduit into one of the open park-like areas scattered through the
Temple, and they barely threw themselves apart in time to avoid the hammering fire of a tripod-mounted heavy blaster. As they ducked, dodged, and ran (jumping in a room full of soldiers experienced in how Jedi fought was a Bad Idea), the blaster’s fire blew dirt into the air, scattered wood like shrapnel from shattered trees, sent up sparks and small clouds of vaporized metal as it blasted divots into the surrounding walls ... and the firing stopped at two Jedi Barriss didn’t recognize dropped down from an upper-level balcony and hammered into the blaster’s guards as well.

Barriss instantly stopped dodging and charged to the newcomers’ support, Ahsoka coming in from the opposite side, and in a few minutes the Jedi — and Ahsoka — were the only ones standing.

And Barriss’s blade shrieked as Ahsoka’s blade intercepted it just short of the neck of a groaning soldier lying on the ground with one of his arms lying detached beside him. She whirled toward Ahsoka, snarling, only for Ahsoka to step back, deactivate and drop her lightsaber, and spread her hands.

“Barriss, it’s over, and it’s not their fault. It’s time to let it go.”

Those words resonated, at war with the need to slaughter all that had threatened the innocents she guarded churning inside her and she dropped her lightsaber and fell to her knees, clutching at a head feeling like it would split open. She instinctively ‘reached’ out to her friend, and was stunned by what she found — no disgust, no accusation, not even any pity ... only a calm acceptance and determination.

Closing her eyes, Barriss threw herself against the hatred and bloodlust, forcing herself to release her grip on them one metaphorical finger at a time. Horror and self-hatred flooded in to fill the void and she twisted away from the other Jedi, only for Ahsoka to drop beside her and pull her into a hard embrace.

Barriss clutched at her friend — undeniably her friend, perhaps her only friend left in the galaxy — and cried like she hadn’t since receiving Ahsoka’s message.

Chapter End Notes

A little late this week, I know, I had a major personal project over the weekend that ate up all my time. So two more chapters, I think, to put this story away.
Several months later:

As C-3PO left her office on his way to the *The Ghost of Tom Joad* with the hovercart carrying the last of the boxes of her personal belongings, Padme Skywalker-Naberrie looked around to make certain nothing had been missed and tried not to cry ... again. Sixteen years of public service, and it had all come to this—an empty office, a ruined reputation, and everything she had struggled to achieve in her long years as Senator destroyed as the Republic tore itself apart.

Literally tore itself apart, great empty swathes across the Grand Convocation Chamber growing wider daily as more systems seceded from the Republic and called their delegations home. Some were systems whose leaders were trying to escape the consequences of the revelations of their personal corruption in the massive infodump of Palpatine’s files; just as many if not more were systems whose citizens were appalled at the breadth, depth, and depravity of the corruption contained in those documents, and no longer wanted any part in the government that had allowed that corruption to not just fester but to spread its tentacles throughout the Republic and beyond. And that didn’t include the new trend, those systems that had gone off like thermal detonators, their governments shaken when they weren’t annihilated by bloody revolutions. (Something a few farsighted and quick-thinking government leaders had tried to prevent by ordering the destruction of their own systems’ hyperwave transceivers when they’d realized the nature of the information suddenly pouring in. Padme suspected all they’d done was buy themselves some time, and in many cases probably made the final bloodbath even worse.)

The only saving grace in the catastrophe was that the Separatists were even worse off; the revelation that their entire upper leadership had known Darth Sidious for what he was and had allied with him anyway combined with their own even broader, deeper, and more depraved corruption had shattered that coalition like dropped crystal.

No, there was one more saving grace—Palpatine’s records on the personalities and activities of Black Sun, the Hutts, and other organized crime syndicates were almost as extensive as those on the Republic’s government. Between those revelations and the sheer chaos those records had unleashed, organized crime was in the process of being annihilated both by law enforcement and its own fratricidal war; what fragments survived would have to rebuild their networks from the ground up.

“"It’s not fair.”

Padme turned, surprised to find Areta Rhade—a longtime friend and her replacement—standing in the office doorway, she thought they’d already said their goodbyes at the farewell party with her staff the previous evening, and hadn’t expected cleaning out her office to take this long—and it wouldn’t have, if she hadn’t broken down a few times. She knew Areta could see the aftermath of those tear-soaked episodes, but she just shrugged. “I was one of Palpatine’s closest allies for most of his time as Chancellor, and the fact that that support was weakening toward the end and that his records show that I was a dupe rather than a collaborator or blackmail victim doesn’t change that. Salvaging something from this catastrophe will be hard enough without having a politician heavily involved that no one trusts anymore.” (Though they’d been lucky in one way ... that massive infodump hadn’t included a word about Anni, apparently Palpatine hadn’t needed to keep notes on whatever he’d had planned for her husband.)
“And so instead you’re ... what, joining a group marriage with those responsible for destroying your reputation? Heading off into the backwaters of the galaxy? Raising your children on a freighter? Are you insane!? At least return to Naboo, your family misses you!”

Padme giggled. “You’ve been saving that up for awhile, haven’t you? We’ll be swinging by Naboo before we head for the ‘backwaters of the galaxy’, let Mother and Father meet their grandchildren. But can you imagine Anakin settling down on a planet as peaceful as Naboo? I’d give it one year, tops, before he started blowing things up, intentional or otherwise. And The Ghost of Tom Joad might officially be a freighter, but she has to be the toughest, fastest, most lethal ‘freighter’ in the galaxy—Jamillia saw to that; Luke and Aja will love growing up onboard.”

“Well, yes, our Queen did you proud. I think her exact words were, ‘If Padme is going to completely lose her mind, the least we can do is try to keep her alive long enough to recover’. And I will admit to spending much of my childhood daydreaming of growing up on a free freighter, landing on a new planet every month with the space between the stars as my home, going wherever the cargoes took me. But I doubt the reality will live up to my fantasies.”

Padme’s giggles turned into laughter, and she pulled her friend into a hug. “We’ll be fine, you’ll see,” she murmured in her friend’s ear. “And with the ship’s hyperwave transceiver, if you ever need advice I’ll always be a call away. But now I have to go.”

“I know.” Areta returned the embrace for a long moment, then reluctantly let go and stepped back. “And don’t think I didn’t notice that you didn’t say anything about your group marriage, with that hyperwave transceiver you just mentioned I will expect to hear how that works out.”

Padme felt her cheeks heat with a furious blush and opened her mouth to protest that it wasn’t really a group marriage, that it was some kind of Force thing (not a Jedi thing, more like the exact opposite), but couldn’t find the words to say—she didn’t really understand it all that well herself. And besides, while Jenni had described the Bond as best she could to someone that hadn’t experienced the Force for herself, she had mentioned that on her homeworld a Bond was considered the legal equivalent of a marriage.

Padme really wasn’t sure what she was getting herself into; all she knew was that not once in the Youxia Bonds’ thousand years of history had one of their members fallen to the Dark Side ... and twice her husband had surrendered to the Dark Side’s seductive call, once when he’d annihilated an entire tribe of Sand People and again when he’d killed the mercenaries hired to assassinate her ... but not before torturing one of them first. With her approval, for a moment at least. Anakin needed the support Jenni and Ahsoka could provide, that perhaps she couldn’t, and where he went she would follow. (Or more like, where she went he would follow, maybe, sometimes they seemed to bleed into each other.)

So in the end Padme just shrugged again and said, “I’ll tell you all about it.” Another quick hug and exchanged farewells, and as her waiting bodyguards fell into place around her (former members of Torrent Company that had decided they’d had enough of military life, and claimed that the Outer Rim sounded like a nice place to visit this time of year) she followed C-3PO toward her new shipboard home, and new life.

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Jenni just could not keep a grin off her face. That should have been easy, she actually shouldn’t have felt like smiling at all—the first food riot had broken out the previous evening, and the morning’s initial reports had been horrendous. And it was only going to get worse.

But the sheer joy radiating from Barriss as she finished packing what little she owned before heading
for *The Ghost of Tom Joad* made it impossible for any empath around her to do anything but share in her happiness, even if it felt a little odd to feel that joy ‘secondhand’ instead of through a bond like she shared with Ahsoka. Right now, though, Ahsoka was the only one Barriss trusted enough to bond with, so the rest would have to wait until later—a thought that made Jenni giggle, and Ahsoka to look at her suspiciously when she felt her Bonded’s amusement.

Jenni waved that off, and asked, “Are you two good? It’s about time for my farewell meeting with the Council.”

Ahsoka’s suspicion faded, and she grinned. “I think we’ll wait until you’re done and go back to *Tom Joad* with you. I don’t want to miss this.”

Jenni’s giggle turned into a laugh, in spite of a slight pang at the mention of the ship—the Bond and allies (not subordinates, much less minions) were grown too large for *Life’s Gift*, so she couldn’t object when Cort had asked to assume ownership when the Bounty Hunter’s Guild cancelled all of Darth Sidious’s bounties and he was free to leave. But she was going to miss her first ship-home even more than she did Cort (even if he left contact information).

But it was today that they were living, and she pushed what-might-have-beens aside. “Yeah, it should be quite a show. All right, then, I’ll meet you at the main entrance after it’s over.” She paused as a thought struck her. “Barriss, why don’t you see if you can use your bond with Ahsoka to join in? It probably won’t work, but it’s worth a try.” The other two exchanged surprised glances as she turned to leave, and she grinned again as Barriss snuggled up against Ahsoka. The Mirialan probably didn’t even realize what she was doing—the newly Bonded tended to do that, and even if the new Bond hadn’t been consummated yet that still held true. (The thought of sex made Barriss a little queasy so Ahsoka wasn’t pushing it, a reversal that Jenni also found amusing. So did Ahsoka, for that matter.)

It was a good fifteen minute brisk walk to the Council Chamber at the Temple’s peak, and Jenni was saddened by all the signs of battle still visible as she passed by. The Order was understandably leery of letting in outsiders at such a perilous time, and was much too busy to see to any but the most necessary of repairs itself—it had been decimated by the Chancellor’s Order 67 and most of the survivors were scattered throughout what was left of the Republic and beyond, overseeing the removal of the chips from all the clone troopers they could reach (from a safe distance and out of sight), trying to cement the fragile peace, destroying the abominations created by a mix of technology and Sith alchemy that built up and maintained the Shroud (she’d seen more than one grown Jedi cry when the installation on Coruscant was blown up and they’d felt an immediate lessening of the Void’s influence), and looking for Jedi survivors that might still be in hiding or recovering without the benefit of modern medicine.

And helping the Green Jedi, what few were left—the Order as a whole might have been decimated but the *Corellian* branch had been all but annihilated, only *most* of the younglings and a few adults escaping into the catacombs beneath that system’s Temple while the rest of the adults on site held off their attackers. The Chancellor had been especially nervous of that standoffish semi-splinter branch and had planned accordingly, and his plans had worked almost to perfection. Though he probably hadn’t anticipated some of those adult Jedi, with no preparation, no crystals of their own like she and Ahsoka had, reaching almost into near orbit to pull down a Navy cruiser on top of them to cover the younglings’ escape.

Jenni pushed aside her momentary bleak thoughts—and scary thoughts as well, the Dancers of this era could operate on a scale no Bond had ever dreamed of—when she arrived at the entrance to the Council Chamber and was promptly waved through by the Jedi standing watch (to prevent disturbances more than protection, considering the lethality of some of those in the room beyond).
She’d give the Council that much, they didn’t play petty power games by making supplicants wait just to prove they could.

When she walked in she instantly reassessed the odds on the lethality of those in the room, because it was almost empty—the tiny green man that looked something like a humanoid toad with big pointy ears; a blond, bearded Human male; a dark, bald Human male; the rest were holograms. “Masters Yoda, Obi-Wan, and Windu are the ones actually here,” Ahsoka reminded her through the Bond. Not that Jenni had needed more than the name of Windu, having seen and heard the other two when Ahsoka had been hurriedly debriefed by the Council as soon after Order 67 as they’d been able to make contact with Coruscant. Master Windu had still been in a bacta tank at the time.

“Was Barriss able to piggyback—ah, to join us?”

“Yes, it worked.” Jenni kept her surprise off her face at the sound of Barriss’s cheerful ‘voice’, though she was sure the Jedi in the room had picked up on it—they had to be as intently focused on her as if they were in combat. Fair enough, she was just as intently focused on them.

But that moment of surprise vanished as quickly as it came, and she squared her shoulders and stepped into the middle of the half-circle of chairs mostly seating holographic images. She glanced around, realized that there was no chair for her, and hid a smirk as she took a seat anyway, on empty air, tucking herself into the closest approximation of the lotus position her booted feet allowed. That smirk became harder to hide when she sensed Windu’s disapproval ... and Kenobi’s carefully hidden amusement. Perhaps he wasn’t as much a stickler for procedure as she had been led to believe.

Yoda also was amused, and if the soft chuff he let out was his species’ equivalent of a chuckle he didn’t bother to hide it. But as a Grand Master of the Order its current trials must have fallen on him more than anyone, and the moment of levity was brief as well.

Windu leaned forward in his seat, forearms braced on his knees, hands clasped. “Jenni,”—she had rejected all attempts to refer to her as ‘Master’, she might be the only survivor of the Youxia Bonds but that didn’t change her age and lack of experience—“thank you for coming to see us before you left. We owe you a debt that can never be repaid, and we have no wish to try to dictate to you. But we ... have concerns about Skywalker’s decision to leave with you.” He paused, but Jenni didn’t respond and he finally continued. “Ahsoka told us of how he gave in to the Dark Side during his fight with Darth Sidious. When we asked her, Senator ... ah, his wife admitted that he had done the same when he killed her attackers. We understand that your ultimate destination is the Outer Rim, and do not believe that it is ... wise ... for him to be so isolated from ... those that know him when he is in such a fragile state.”

“And you have concerns about how the Youxia Bond view the ‘Dark Side’, as a tool rather than an abomination. Yes, I know Ahsoka told you. I was listening in during her debriefing, after the way you treated her there was no way in hell I was going to let her face you alone.”

The sudden silence was ringing, and she unfolded from her kinda-lotus position and lowered her feet. Turning away from the Council, she walked over and stared out the huge windows that circled the chamber at the city below ... or rather at that city’s surface. The surface that looked so peaceful. Even if she’d been looking in the right direction, even if it was far enough away to be over the horizon, by now the smoke from the fires started during the planet’s first food riot would have dissipated. After a long moment she turned to again face the Council. “Have any of you studied primitive medical practices? If you have, you’ll have encountered the first halfway practical treatment for cancer, over and over, race after race. My people called it chemotherapy—a treatment where the patient is periodically injected with poison, and prayers offered that the poison will kill the cancer faster than it kills the patient. The Youxia Bonds saw the Void like that, a sometimes useful but
extremely dangerous and highly addictive tool, one that always corrupts those that wield it, and destroys those that turn to it too frequently even if they don’t lose themselves within the Void’s embrace.

“The Bonds had an advantage that others don’t though, the Bonds themselves. Privacy is nonexistent in a Bond—even every member of a Bond knows where the others are, what every other member is feeling; members can look out through the others’ eyes, hear what they hear, feel what they feel. We can look into other members’ memories whenever we choose and not only can we not be stopped, if we’re careful we won’t even be noticed. The ... mindset, the corruption from reaching out into the Void, is distinct and unmistakeable once you know what you’re seeing. And every new member of a Bond is shown what the signs look like, when we need to intervene.”

Walking back to the center of the room, she resumed her ‘seat’ on empty air. “No, Skywalker is better off a member of my Bond in the Outer Rim than here on Coruscant with just his family. Ahsoka and Padme won’t let him fall.”

One of the holographic Masters straightened, another Togrutan ... Shaak Ti. “Padme won’t let him fall? She’s going with you?”

Jenni grinned. “Of course she is, the Bond travels together.”

“But she isn’t Force sensitive! How can she join your Bond?”

Jenni’s grin widened. “She isn’t a Dancer yet, but she will be; spend enough time with a Dancer, and you learn to dance yourself ... and thanks to the Bond she will be spending all her time with three Dancers, four once Barriss decides to fully join.”

Now it was Yoda’s turn to straighten. “Barriss, you speak of? Leave with you she will as well?”

“Yes,” Jenni agreed with a nod. “She’s already bonded with Ahsoka, I expect she’ll bond with the rest of us once we’ve earned her trust.” Or the sex drives her crazy. She was very careful to keep that thought buried deep, where her two ‘listeners’ couldn’t ‘hear’ it without real effort ... though she felt their curiosity at her spike of amusement.

Another Master burst out in protest, one Jenni didn’t recognize, or even his species. She sent an questioning burst through the Bond and got back a ‘shrug’ from Ahsoka, he must have been newly-promoted to the Council to fill empty seats after the massacre.

“But that will be two trained Force users that have lost themselves to the Dark Side!”

“It’ll be three. While Ahsoka went to deal with Skywalker and the Chancellor”—some of the Masters twitched, and Jenni wasn’t surprised; she hadn’t heard anyone in the Temple or what was left of the Senate call him Sheev, Palpatine, and definitely not the Chancellor ... as if refusing to use the names and title of the man they’d thought was their friend, ally, and mentor could separate them from the monster he actually was—“I dueled the pawn he sent to stop her, and lured her into a trap I’d set up powered by what you call Force lightning. But I lost myself to the Void, until Ahsoka pulled me out.”

She sighed and again unfolded herself to stand straight before the Council, unbending. “You needn’t worry, I won’t be training anyone in how reach out to the Void. Remember how I said that with chemotherapy the treatment was to inject the patient with the poison and pray? That was because of individual variability, each patient with a different level of resistance. It is the same with the Void, and what the Void Slaves did first to my world and now to yours has made hate a companion that is always with me; when I stare into the Void I see my own face, and it is the face of a monster. So I
will not be reaching out to it again ... ever. Nor will I teach or even encourage anyone else to do so.”

“That’s not true! You’re angry, sure, but—”

“Hush, ‘Soka, it’s true enough. And what they need to hear.”

And it was—tension eased out of the three Masters present, the ones that could sense her sincerity, Windu leaning back in his chair, Yoda seeming shrink with his ears lowering slightly, Kenobi’s shoulders slumping. Jenni couldn’t read the body language of the rest of the Council, but she watched them all glance at the three present and their own postures shifted as well.

But that didn’t mean that they were now happy about the Bond’s plans, and after a moment Kenobi straightened. “But why the Outer Rim? I understand that a freighter as heavily crewed as your own—even one of the quality of the one the Queen of Naboo has given you—will have difficulties finding cargo in the Core well-paying enough to earn a living. But I can’t imagine you’ll do any better in the Outer Rim, and Anakin ... Knight Skywalker ... has enemies. If the pickings are still too slim in even the Colonies, why not the Expansion Rim or even the Mid Rim?”

“Because the new colonies in the Outer Rim will need all the help they can get ... the ones you’ll be creating by dumping Coruscant natives with a pile of equipment and supplies and a few advisors, I mean. Three former Jedi veterans of the war and one of the Republic’s finest diplomats will go a long way.”

Silence again slammed down, as the entire Council straightened, jaws dropping (those that had jaws). After a moment a wrinkled orange alien with some kind of breather mask over eyes and mouth—“Plo Koon,” Ahsoka ‘murmured’—demanded, “How did you know learn about that!? We’re still in confidential negotiations—”

He broke off when Jenni began to giggle. After a few moments she brought herself under control. “Sorry, but your faces ... !” But the situation didn’t allow for much levity, and she quickly sobered. “I didn’t learn about it, I figured it out. Coruscant comes nowhere close to feeding itself, not by several orders of magnitude, and with the disruption of interstellar trade and the wave of secessions cutting into the Republic’s revenues food shipments have plummeted and won’t be rebounding any time soon. I’m sure what’s left of the Senate is trying to move Heaven and Earth to bring in as much food as it can, and grow enough here to make up the slack, vat-grown products, whatever.” She waved dismissively. “But it isn’t going to be enough, not even close—Coruscant’s a death trap. Yesterday was the first food riot; I give it less than a year before widespread cannibalism sets in ... beyond that typical of the Deeps, anyway.” A number of the Council joined her in grimacing—the lowest levels of the city-planet had a strong resemblance to deep ocean trenches with its life, sentient and otherwise, away from a few equivalents of hydrothermal vents living off the upper level’s garbage and each other. “What choice do you have but to get as many as you can off-planet? And that many refugees ... the seceding systems aren’t going to want them, those that stay can only take so many without destabilizing, so ... new colonies. And any empty worlds gardenlike enough for colonizing by urban refugees will be in the Outer Rim. I know you will do the best you can to look out for those forced to colonize, but you’re stretched thin as it is and have problems bigger, more important, and closer to home than widely scattered, dirt poor start-up colonies. So we will do what little we can to help.”

She fell silent, and that silence stretched until Yoda finally broke it with a deep sigh. “Told anyone have you of your insight?”

“Only my Bond, now and future—there are no secrets in the Bond, and those joining needed to know what they would be getting themselves into. But if I can figure it out, others will if they haven’t already ... our first job is to transport Dex Jettster, all of his employees and their families, and
as much of his equipment as he can tear out of his diner to Naboo. And it was Dex’s idea, when Anakin told him about our new ship, I was there and heard the whole thing.”

Kenobi hadn’t so much as twitched at Dex’s name, but Jenni sensed his approval—and lack of surprise—at the news, and so did the two bonded ‘listening’ in. “So that’s how he learned about it,” Ahsoka ‘murmured’, and Jenni ’sent’ back her agreement.

But it seemed Windu and Yoda were too focused on her to pick up on Kenobi’s lack of surprise, so they simply exchanged glances with each other, then Kenobi. Windu and Kenobi nodded, and Yoda sighed again. “Very well. Stop you we cannot, so help you we will, as much as we can.”

“Though as you said, we are stretched thin,” Kenobi cautioned. “Most of the time you will be on your own.” He grinned, suddenly amused. “And now it’ll be your jobs to keep Anakin from charging off in all directions. I’m almost relieved.”

Jenni laughed and bowed then turned to go, only to pause, shoulders tightening, when she heard one of the other Council members mutter, “Some ‘Chosen One’.” She paused for a moment, considering just letting that go, then turned back around.

“Yes, the ‘Chosen One’, the one supposed to ‘bring balance to the Force’. And just what aspect of the ‘Force’ did you think he was supposed to bring into balance? Your ‘Light Side’ and ‘Dark Side’ of the Force? Sure, Darth Sidious and all the Darths before him stretching back a millennium played you all like a fiddle, but there was only two of them at a time, at most! If that was what was out of balance the Jedi Order would be gone, not just decimated. No, the imbalance lay between Order and Chaos. The Republic had gone from maintaining peace to maintaining stasis, and so had you—how much new technology has come out that actually threatened any of the Republic’s interstellar corporations? For centuries! Of course, you got all the corruption and injustice that stasis requires to be maintained, and a Sith Empire would have been no better. Well, that stasis is well and truly gone now, and the Youxia Bond—including your ‘Chosen one’—will do all we can to minimize the fallout of the coming Time of Chaos that your failure made inevitable until a new equilibrium is reached.”

Turning back around, she stalked toward the door, only to be brought up short by Ahsoka murmuring in her mind, “Uh, Jenni ... Terra?”

Sighing, she turned back around. “Ahsoka just interrupted my Grand Exit to remind me that I was going to tell you about what she called a ‘vergence in the Force’. The planet where she found me—formerly Trey, now Terra—is settled by as oddball a group of archaeologists as you’ll find anywhere, but they’ve agreed to allow you to set up a Temple there if you wish. I’d advise training your younglings there ... after all, the plans for those perversions of Sith alchemy that the Sith used to feed the Void and interfere with with currents of the Tao—plans that are now scattered throughout the galaxy—won’t function around a ‘Light Side’ vergence.”

She turned away, but paused at Windu’s soft cough. He asked, “You will let us know where on Terra the vergence can be found?”

Suddenly she found herself grinning again. "I'll give you the coordinates for the mountain complex where Ahsoka found me, you can build your new settlement there though it'll take some cleaning up ... it was buried by an ice age for most of the past ninety thousand years, but it would be nice to know there are children there again. But the vergence isn't on the planet, it is the planet. And the bounty hunters hunting Ahsoka chased her straight to it." And she strolled out of the Council Chamber, leaving behind a Council stunned silent once again.
I know, that was a really long talk-fest. And I know I’ve skipped a lot of relationship development and drama, but if I included all that the epilogue would be as long as that of *The Return of the King*, with less justification. The next (and last) chapter will have more action, but mostly of the lemony kind. So for those that might want to skip the lemony goodness (hopefully) here’s a few notes on my inspirations for how things turned out. I got the massive infodump of Darth Sidious’ files and the resultant collapse of the Republic from *Frangit Et Finit* by Darthkvzn (not complete and apparently dead, unfortunately), though the following prediction of mass starvation on Coruscant I came up with myself (though for me that seems like simple common sense). The method of colonization they’re adopting out of desperation (dumping a bunch of urban dwellers with a pile of supplies and a few people that know what they’re doing) I got from the standard practice in one of the stories in Robert A. Heinlein’s *Time Enough for Love* (though there the new colonies’ tech level was essentially what a small group could maintain itself, or wouldn’t break down before the colony grew enough to replace it—call it pre-steam US). And the fate of the Green Jedi, including the escape of most of their younglings, I got from Vathara’s excellent SAO/Star Wars cross, *Change of Fate*. (Vathara’s other stories are also excellent, though the latest few have seemed more like outlines and snippets—I’ve read the Valdemar and Star Wars crosses with Rurouni Kenshin and the Avengers/Artemis Fowl cross multiple times. And I’ve only read the first two Artemis Fowl books, and haven’t read Rurouni Kenshin at all, so that’s saying something.)

Like the ship, of course, the title of the chapter comes from the song by Bruce Springsteen and covered by Solas (and others, I’m sure), and is particularly appropriate for where the Republic and Separatists find themselves:

**Men walkin' 'long the railroad tracks**
**Goin' someplace there's no goin' back**
**Highway patrol choppers comin' up over the bridge**
**Hot soup on a campfire under the bridge**
**Shelter line stretchin' 'round the corner**
**Welcome to the new world order**
**Families sleepin' in their cars in the Southwest**
**No home no job no peace no rest**

**The highway is alive tonight**
**But nobody's kiddin' nobody about where it goes**
**I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light**
**Searchin' for the ghost of Tom Joad**

**He pulls a prayer book out of his sleeping bag**
**Preacher lights up a butt and takes a drag**
**Waitin' for when the last shall be first and the first shall be last**
**In a cardboard box 'neath the underpass**
**Got a one-way ticket to the promised land**
**You got a hole in your belly and gun in your hand**
**Sleepin' on a pillow of solid rock**
**Bathin' in the city aqueduct**
The highway is alive tonight
Where it's headed everybody knows
I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light
Waitin' on the ghost of Tom Joad

Now Tom said "Mom, wherever there's a cop beatin' a guy
Wherever a hungry newborn baby cries
Where there's a fight against the blood and hatred in the air
Look for me mom I'll be there
Wherever there's somebody fightin' for a place to stand
Or a decent job or a helpin' hand
Wherever somebody's strugglin' to be free
Look in their eyes Mom you'll see me."

Well the highway is alive tonight
But nobody's kiddin' nobody about where it goes
I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light
With the ghost of old Tom Joad
I'm With the Bond

Chapter Notes

I know, I'm really late, over October I didn't manage to write on a single weekend and what seemed like half of the weekdays. But it's finally done!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Mistress Padme, you wished to be alerted when Mister Jettster had left the ship.”

At C-3PO’s soft announcement Padme looked up from the changing table and the baby she had been exchanging baby talk with. “That quickly?” She glanced at the digital clock on the wall of the passenger’s quarters they’d converted to a nursery, and was shocked at how late it was—even with the help of three Force users (“Dancers” she told herself, though her mental voice sounded distinctly like Jenni—she rather liked the Terran’s poetic labels) Dex was actually a little late heading home for one last night, and in spite of her nervousness at what was coming next she had lost herself in the delight of playing with her children. “So, not that quickly. Let the others know I will be out in a few minutes.”

“Yes, Mistress Padme.” C-3PO turned and left, and Padme gently lifted an Aja yawning now that her mother’s attention had been briefly diverted, and placed her next to her brother in the crib they shared. Aja began to fuss, but quickly settled down when Padme softly sang a lullaby from her own earliest memories of her mother. She had a little more time, the other three would be showering first.

(They were all enjoying water showers while they could; the ship’s water reservoir would be topped off when they left and it was a short hop, relatively speaking, to Naboo, but after that they had no idea where they’d be headed or how available fresh water would be when they got there. It would be wipe-downs and sonic showers with a lather job and a little rinsing for hair for all of them when off planet from here on out—not a part of her new life she was looking forward to.)

Within minutes Aja was curled up next to Luke, fast asleep, and Padme smiled as she turned away back to the changing table. She slid open one of the lower compartments and pulled out a breast pump. Ani had gotten a taste, but she did not want to be leaking tonight.

That chore quickly done and her robe retied, she put the pump back into its slot for automatic cleaning and turned to D-FN8 waiting patiently in one corner. They didn’t really need another protocol droid, but they did have other needs, and D-FN8’s sarcastic edge had dulled once she’d gotten her new body—she was definitely happier with her new role, even if she complained about how human her new body looked (right down to a full head of red hair).

“Defenate, when was your list of shipboard residents last updated?”

“This afternoon, mistress.”

“Good, that should cover everyone. Enable nanny and bodyguard subroutines.”

A knife blade sprang out along the back of one human-appearing hand and a blaster barrel from the palm of the other, then both retracted and a thin covering over one human-like breast slid aside to reveal a thin trickle of milk. D-FN8 picked up a hand towel from on the changing table and wiped
herself clean, and the covering slid back over the breast. “Nanny and bodyguard subroutines enabled. Don’t worry, Padme, I’ll look after them.” Even the tone of her voice had changed, losing the electronic edge usually preferred for robots to sound more fully human.

“I know you will, thank you.”

Padme glanced around at the bare steel walls of the nursery—they would do for now, but would need painting and decorations as the babies grew.

Ahsoka had beaten Padme to the ship’s mess. (Ahsoka had an unfair advantage when it came to showering—not having hair—and was sharing a refresher with Jenni besides; Padme had no idea how the sleeping arrangements were going to work once they were all bonded, she’d been afraid to ask.) The young Togrutan looked up as Padme walked in and grinned. “Nervous?”

Padme snorted as she walked over to the dispenser for a cup of Corellian no-ale. (Thanks to Senator Bel Iblis she had gotten accustomed to Corellian ale, but she was not drinking anything alcoholic, not tonight.) “As if you didn’t already know. Of course I’m nervous! This is a big step, and one not many are going to understand.”

“You can still back out, you know. We could just drop you off on Naboo, or you could just stay aboard and not be part of the Bond.”

Her cup full, Padme sat down across from Ahsoka. “No ... no, Ani needs this, needs others watching out for him, to back him up and keep him ... pointed in the right direction. I just ...” Her voice trailed off, and Ahsoka continued. “In spite of what we told you, you’re worried about the loss of privacy, about not being you any more. And maybe about sharing Sky Guy?” At Padme’s jerky nod, she smiled sympathetically. “Actually, you’re doing pretty good—I wasn’t just nervous, I was terrified! While privacy isn’t exactly a great concern to the Jedi, at least not their own, there’s all the horror stories I heard growing up of what happened to Jedi that became too attached. And Jenni wasn’t exactly stable—Sky Guy might be tempted to reach for the Void when those he’s attached to are threatened, Barriss when under stress, but Jenni was getting swept into the Void by her own temper when she lost control ... and her control was getting worse with every passing day, and a fight coming. I was afraid that I’d get swept into the Void with her, and neither of us would ever fight our way out again.”

Ahsoka’s smile softened as her gaze seemed to turn inward. “Instead, I went into battle the next day almost giddy with joy. There’s something about realizing that you’ll never be alone again, always have someone to offer a shoulder to lean on or watch your back, someone that you can rant at without worrying about offending her or being ignored because she knows exactly how you feel....”

Her voice trailed off for a moment, then she shook herself out of her introspection. “As for sharing Sky Guy, that’ll be weird for me too, I’d never ever thought of him like that before you suggested he join, and he was my master. But from what I’ve seen in Jenni’s memories, it’ll seem natural, especially at first while we’re all ... well, a bit high on the new Bonds—and the new Bonded. You’ll see. And a lot better than having just him join like you first suggested, that would be horrible.”

That last statement did more to steady Padme’s nerves than anything else. Yes, she had been shocked to her core when Jenni had responded to her original hesitant (and private) suggestion that Anakin join the Bond by saying she would only consider it if both joined, but the more Jenni had explained about what the Bond actually was the more she’d realized that her new friend was right when she insisted that no member of a Bond could sustain a deep marriage relationship with someone not also
in the Bond—Padme had just never thought that she would be involved that deeply in something involving the Force (the Tao, her mind whispered to her, after months’ worth of evenings spent with Jenni and Ahsoka) ... always thought that would be an aspect of her husband’s life that she could no more than observe.

*And now I’ll become Force-sensitive myself ... a ‘Dancer’, Jenni says, even if not all that ‘bright’ of one. That it’s inevitable. The thought helped Padme relax even more—awareness of the personal power imbalance between her and Anakin had never actually put a strain on their marriage (and they had fought well together several times) ... but it had always been there.*

Then Jenni strode through the doorway still combing her hair. Unlike her Bonded, she had exchanged the pair’s usual color-coordinated outfits for a robe. “You’re here, good. The bairns asleep?”

“Yes, Aja and Luke are cuddled up with each other, as cute as can be, and Defenate watching over them.” Padme wasn’t surprised by the word she didn’t recognize, Jenni had been dropping them into their conversations lately—without realizing it, Padme suspected, perhaps in an unconscious effort to preserve little pieces of her long-gone home. (And hadn’t *that* been a shock, finding out that Terra was the actual home world of scattered Humanity, and that Jenni had been born there when it was almost the only Human world ... ninety thousand years ago!)

“Good, as soon as Anakin gets—” She broke off as he walked in. “All right ... let’s grab a meal first, we’re in for a long night.”

The meal was both too quick and too long, quick because they simply heated up some already prepared meals (‘TV dinners’, Jenni called them ... Padme didn’t think that one would stick) and no one really felt like talking as they ate, and too long because of the nerves that were twisting her gut and she suspected her husband’s—he had the expressionless expression that meant he was trying to keep how he felt off his face.

Then the quick dinner was done, and Padme felt her tension ratcheting even higher when Jenni rose from her seat and dumped her containers in the trash slot before announcing, “Let’s go.” The others quickly rose to follow her example, but to Padme’s surprise, when they left the mess Jenni led them toward the holds instead of the living quarters. She thought the mystery was solved when they entered a hold and she saw an extra-large collapsible foam mattress against one wall, already covered with sheets, but Jenni ignored it. Instead, she led them to the opposite wall and pressed her palms against the middle of one panel while several of the studs holding it in place sank slightly on their own. (Padme had never considered how useful the Force could be for secure locks, and was kicking herself now ... though having a lock that only her husband could open would probably not have been the smartest decision.)

Padme wasn’t surprised at all when the panel, along with all those surrounding it, sank into the wall slightly then slid to one side, revealing a hidden compartment half-full of stacked and strapped boxes. Beside her with one arm around her shoulders, Anakin snorted. “Really, a smuggling compartment?”

“Hey just because we aren’t planning on taking up smuggling doesn’t mean we aren’t going to have things to hide,” Jenni replied. “Like this.” She stepped back and extended one hand toward the compartment, and straps on one of the stacks fell away before the top box floated up and toward them. As it settled to the deck the lid popped open.

Padme sucked in a breath at the sight of scores, no, hundreds of crystals softly glowing white that seemed to radiate a warmth that soothed the aches in her soul. “What *are* those?”

“We just called them ‘crystals’,” Jenni said. “I suppose we’ll have to come up with a name now,
since they’re in the same galaxy as kyber crystals. As for what they do ... they act as a focus and amplifier of the currents of the Tao that we focus and shift for our own purposes.”

Anakin’s arm across Padme’s shoulders stiffened. “Amplify?”

“Yes, amplify. With mine I’m about as powerful as Ahsoka, but I ... was considered unusually strong.” She forced a grin. “And yeah, I’m looking forward to seeing what you can do with yours once we get to some back-of-beyond planet where you can tear up the landscape in private.” She motioned and more boxes unshackled themselves, floating out into the hold and opening until they seemed to be swimming in warm serenity. “Go on and pick out one that seems to sing to you. Ahsoka can explain better than I can, she’s the one that figured it out.”

Ahsoka began her own explanation but Padme wasn’t listening, turning in place as she stared at all the open boxes around them ... and one box in particular. She stepped over to it, knelt, ran her finger through the crystals it contained....

“This one.”

She forced her gaze away from the crystal in the palm of her hand, looking up to find the other three staring at her. Anakin’s eyes were wide with surprise, but Jenni was grinning. She nudged her shoulder against Ahsoka, and the Togrutan rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, you were right, Padme’s growing strong enough to become a Dancer.”

“Maybe not a particularly strong one,” Jenni added, “but when it comes to sensing details and subtleties you’ll probably be our go-to girl.”

At least that Terranism is self-explanatory. But the thought was distant, as her attention returned to the crystal glowing in her palm. She never would remember her husband selecting his own crystal, or the boxes of crystals floating back into to their hidden storage. Only Anakin gently shaking her shoulder jerked her out of her reverie, and she looked up to find the others smiling at her.

“It definitely isn’t going to take you long to get stronger,” Jenni said, “but it’s time for the Bonding.”

Padme nodded. She felt herself tensing up again, and refocused on the piece of herself still resting in her palm as she followed Jenni to the mattress. She could do this, it was already ... more than she had expected.

Once they reached the foam mattress Jenni turned to face the others, reached for her robe’s tie, and as it fell open shrugged it off her shoulders to puddle about her feet. The robe had been her only article of clothing.

Ahsoka sighed as she started to strip out of her own outfit. “You could have said something.”

Jenni laughed. “I was in the refresher when you left. Besides, it should have been obvious. Padme figured it out, after all, and it’s her first time.”

Ahsoka rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah.”

Padme’s giggle mixed with Anakin’s chuckle, and she felt herself relax a bit from the sheer ordinariness of the exchange. Taking a deep breath, she untied her own robe’s sash and let it slip off her shoulders as the last of Ahsoka’s clothing hit the floor and she stepped over to her Bonded. Padme tried to distract herself from her own nudity by looking the pair over with a critical eye.

Only now, seeing the pair next to each other without a stitch on, did she realize how much effort Jenni had put into mirroring Ahsoka. She’d noticed that their usual outfits were similar in style with
the colors reversed, of course, as were the shades of Jenni’s hair with the pigmented patterns on Ahsoka’s lekku. But only now, as Jenni flipped two of her three braids to hang down each side of her chest, did Padme realize that Jenni’s hairstyle had actually mirrored Ahsoka’s lekku as much as humanly possible. And her full head of hair was the only hair she had, all her body hair gone—including about her cleft—Padme suspected permanently. In the months since their arrival on Coruscant, Jenni really had done her best to make herself Ahsoka’s mirror.

And then I had to find out that Bonds normally had more than just two members and had spoil it with my request for Anakin to join.

Jenni must have caught her flash of guilt, because she stepped over and pulled Padme into a hug, whispering, “It’ll be fine, you’ll see.” Ignoring the way Padme shivered at the soft feel of skin on skin and warm breath across her ear, Jenni held her for a long minute until the shivering eased, then stepped back and looked over at Anakin just as the last of his clothes hit the floor... his reluctance to reveal his massive erection had probably slowed him down. One eyebrow lifted, then she glanced sideways at a wide-eyed Ahsoka and smiled slyly. “Well, you might actually match Henrik.”

“What will that even fit?” Ahsoka gasped out, and Jenni laughed.

“We push babies out of that hole, it’ll fit. Now come on.”

She led the way onto the foam mattress and knelt, the others following suit so they were at the four corners of a square with Anakin directly across from Padme, reaching out to grasp each others’ hands as previously instructed. Once they were all settled, Jenni said, “Normally at this point there would be a mini-discourse on the practicalities and deeper meanings of the Bond, but that was almost always for teenagers that hadn’t been children of a Bond—usually Dancers found late—being given one last chance to back out. Performing the ceremony sky-clad has much the same function, if you can’t handle being physically naked in the presence of near strangers you aren’t likely to be able to handle the much more intimate ‘nakedness’ of mind and soul the Bond imposes. So I think we can skip that this time. Anakin, Padme, close your eyes and meditate, ‘reaching’ out as you’ve practiced.”

That practice on top of everything else had been one of the reasons Padme had gotten so little sleep over the past month, though she had found it restful enough to compensate somewhat. So now she closed her eyes and focused on her breathing for a moment as she cleared her mind and focused on herself... herself as a child running through the grass on a family picnic; her time with friends in school, before her decision to become queen with all the study that entailed caused those friends to drop away one after another; her overwhelming joy at winning the election, and the way the joy fell away to just leave ‘overwhelming’ as she adjusted to her position; the stress and horror of leading her planet through the clash with the Trade Federation; becoming Naboo’s Senator and all she’d fought for for over a decade, only to see it all come crashing down in a matter of days and have to fight to salvage what she could from the wreckage; her secret marriage to Anakin, and all the happy times they managed to sneak in together under the noses of the Jedi Order, the Senate, and her own bodyguards; her pregnancy, and the two new lives that had joined her Ani as the most important people in her universe, and her terror at almost losing them before they were even born along with her own life; her grief for lost friends, both in the Jedi Order, among the clone troopers, and her secretary/bodyguard thanks to the Chancellor’s Order 67, and guilt that she hadn’t recognized him for the monster he was when it might have been prevented.

Then when she felt she was ready, she squeezed Jenni and Ahsoka’s hands and tried to... ‘offer herself’ to her two friends—she wasn’t a ‘Dancer’ yet so she couldn’t really ‘reach out’, but she could do that much.
But if she couldn’t ‘reach out’, they could, and she suddenly found herself inundated with memories and feelings that weren’t her own—Ahsoka being found by Master Plo Koon and being brought to the Temple; Jenni’s childhood with her parents’ Bond (all her parents ... she didn’t know which of the men was her biological father because her biological mother had never bothered to find out, but it didn’t matter because she’d had two mothers and three fathers); Ahsoka’s difficulty dealing with the atomism of the Order when her species instinctively ran in packs; Jenni’s eagerness and joy at joining a Bond so that she could share in the togetherness that had made her parents so happy, only to have it all come crashing down when only a few months later all but one other of that Bond died in the Void Slaves’ coup and the survivors had to rebuild out of the shattered remnants of other Bonds that managed to survive; the anxiety Ahsoka had felt at being assigned to Anakin rather than chosen by him and how she had hidden it behind her snark that earned her the nickname ‘Snips’, an anxiety quickly alleviated only to be replaced by the pain and fear of two long years of war and her overwhelming sense of betrayal when the Jedi Council abandoned her when she was framed by a friend; Jenni’s near destruction by her overwhelming guilt at what her Bond had done to save her world and the crushing loneliness and grief that came with the loss of everything and everyone she’d ever known; the equally overwhelming joy felt by both of them when Ahsoka had saved Jenni’s sanity by joining her in a new Bond; the ever-deepening relationship the two enjoyed as they trained, experimented, and studied through the months in hiding before the Force finally told them it was time to return. Padme was awed by the strength and compassion the panorama of those two entwined lives revealed. (And never mind the moments of weakness, self-doubt, and selfishness, and the multitude of intimate moments that would have had her alternately blushing and blanching if this wasn’t all blasting into her in a timeless split-second.)

And what are they learning about me? What right do Ani and I have to intrude on this? She quailed at the thought, tried to shrink away from them, only to be enfolded in the presences of the member of a pack species and the Human that before her exile in time had known nothing but the Bond, that she knew had seen all that she was as completely as she had seen them, all her moments of pride and selfishness, and didn’t care ... they would love her and her husband for all their days, and would love Luke and Aja as if the children were their own—because they were. In an instant all resistance vanished and she merged into the core of the Bond ... and found one presence more waiting there for her. Her husband.

Only this was an Anakin Skywalker that she had only seen hints of. This was a young boy born into slavery, who quickly learned to hide his opinion of the Masters and his dreams of freedom; who had clung to his mother as the foundation of his world that could be taken from him at any moment on a Master’s whim; who when the Jedi (and a certain Queen of Naboo pretending to be one of her handmaidens) had entered his life had found the courage to let go of that foundation to pursue his dream of freedom and a new childish dream of freeing all slaves, everywhere; who found that in a way he had exchanged one Master for another, even if his new Master had a gentleness, tolerance, and sense of justice that any of his previous Masters would have considered risible, enough that as he grew in strength and skill and then faced years of brutal war, he and Obi-Wan had come to share a sense of brotherhood that was as strong as it was forbidden by the Code; who, when he had again met the former Queen and now a Senator whose kindness and concern a decade earlier had led to a childish crush, had had the strength and courage to shatter the new chains the Order had bound him in and accept the love growing between them; who was crushed by the grief and guilt of his failure to save his mother’s life, guilt at his failure to regret his descent into Darkness as he had slaughtered the entire tribe of Sand People that had tortured his mother to death; how he had silently sworn that never again would anyone he loved suffer and die as his mother had, and his core-deep fear that he didn’t have the strength to keep that oath even as his circle of loved ones grew with the addition of an unasked for and initially unwanted Padawan, and then two bundles of life that he was still awed to think he had had a part in creating.
All thoughts of the two new presences in her mind fled as she let go of Ahsoka and Jenni’s hands and threw herself across the mattress at her husband. His arms instinctively caught her and pulled her close even as he fell backward under her weight, and two cheeks wet with tears pressed together.

“I’m sorry, I never knew.”

On realizing that those words had come from two throats, Padme pushed herself up enough that she could look down at her husband’s face. “Never knew about what?”

“How lonely you had become, how tired you were of hiding our relationship.”

“I was?” Startled at the statement, she considered it for a moment. “I never really thought about it, but I guess I was.” She grinned down at him. “Well, we aren’t hiding anything now.”

“No, we—” His response was cut off as her lips met his in a kiss that started gentle but quickly became lip-bruisingly intense before those lips parted for tongues to duel for supremacy. She had known he loved her, but with his love sweeping through her (along with probably shock and lust, considering the way his hands were beginning to stroke along her back and sides), now she knew, and she had never imagined being loved that intensely. Part of her was actually concerned, wondering if love that intense could be healthy and resolving to have a quiet chat about it with Jenni later. (Maybe it was normal, or at least not unusual, and it was just their new empathic link?) Another part of her was giggling to herself over Ahsoka’s memories of her introduction to sex, and how long it had taken her to work herself up to it. But those parts were distant, buried under her own growing lust, the intensity of Anakin’s love and naked flesh pressed together as powerful an aphrodisiac as long separation had ever been, and her desperate desire to be joined with him in every way possible burned even hotter than on their wedding night. And from the rod pressing against her swiftly dampening cleft as much as his own burning lust flooding her mind, she wasn’t the only one—he’d already been erect before, thanks to the three women’s naked beauty, but now he had to be like steel!

A simple shift of her hips, lifting, wiggling (and hissing as the tip of that steel rod slipped between folds beginning to drip), lowering herself back down and it was done. She took a moment to luxuriate in the familiar sensation of her sheath stretched almost to the point of discomfort as his hands gripped at her buttocks, then her hips began to lift and drop almost on their own as she luxuriated in the way their love and lust mixed and mingled until she couldn’t tell where hers ended and his began.

It couldn’t last long, of course, not as intense as their new unity was, and in what felt like a split-second of eternity she felt the sword plundering her sheath swell before erupting, and the seed splashing into her depths pushed her over the edge. The explosion of pleasure flashing through her and ripping a scream from her lips was the most intense orgasm she had ever experienced—and him as well, he would later tell her, as their mutual reactions fed into each other and drove each to higher and higher peaks ... or higher and higher up the same, shared peak.

When it was finally over she lay on Anakin’s chest heaving in time with her own, floating in a haze of bliss strong enough that she barely noticed when fresh loving warmth surrounded her, slowly lifted her and eased her to one side—the Force, she realized ... or rather, the Tao’s current, gently sweeping her aside. She definitely approved of the more poetic terms Jenni had inherited from her own people.

But as the minutes passed and her sweat cooled, the haze of bliss fading, she realized that Anakin’s own lust was growing again. At the sound of a familiar, deep groan she twisted her head, her eyes widening at the sight of Anakin’s rod again rising to the occasion, encouraged by Jenni and Ahsoka’s eager tongues and lips ... Padme giggled as she remembered Ahsoka’s reassurances in the ship’s galley, the young Togrutan had been right in every particular. Padme distantly hoped she went
right on being right after the Bonding ‘high’ faded.

Jenni raised her head to gaze at Padme for a moment, then whispered something in Ahsoka’s ear and abandoned the tongue bath to float up and over Anakin’s prone body and settle down next to Padme. If Padme hadn’t still been so limp, she would have stiffened when she heard Jenni’s voice in her head.

“I’m impressed, even with your first time with the Bonding high, you can still worry. My first Bonding, I was all ‘rainbows and unicorns’ for a week.”

“I know, I saw. And I know Ahsoka’s right, I just can’t help it.”

Jenni grinned, then grabbed some pillows and bulked them against the wall so she could scrunch up against them. A moment later Padme found herself floating up and turning in air before lowering until she could feel Jenni’s breasts pressed against her back. In the time that she had been in motion, Anakin had decided he’d had enough and pulled Ahsoka up along his length and rolled them over so he was on top. Padme shivered when Jenni leaned forward and breathed in her ear, “Would you like to share in ‘Soka’s first man?”

“Yessss!”

“Close your eyes and focus on ‘Soka.”

Padme followed Jenni’s instructions, closing her eyes and ‘reaching’ for the sense of Ahsoka’s presence in her mind. She caught something passing between Jenni and Ahsoka, ‘heard’ the ‘giggles’ of the youngest of their Bond, and abruptly found herself staring up at her husband’s face as his head dipped to seek out her lips ... no, Ahsoka’s lips, just as she was filled with Ahsoka’s love for her former Master and eagerness to join with him completely. (There was a hint of sadness that she could never have his children, but that faint darkness was the only taint in the purity of the moment, and Padme made a mental note to look into that later—there had been some incredible breakthroughs in the Chancellor’s files on Sith alchemy, and not all of it had been about producing tortured, twisted, perverted monstrosities. Just the vast majority of it.) Then the tip of Anakin’s rod brushed against a different set of lips, and all thoughts of the future vanished at the new sensations.

It turned out Togrutan folds weren’t like hers, the sensation of the mushroom tip pushing between them had a ... stiff? rubbery? ... quality that wasn’t unpleasant, but definitely unusual. Then that mushroom tip slowly pushed deeper, and the off quality vanished, subsumed in a mix of pleasure and pain as the sheath’s walls were stretched and stretched and stretched. Padme had never been this tight even on her wedding night, it was like she could feel every vein in that rod scraping along those walls. How is Ani even getting that huge cock in there!? But the pain was rapidly fading under a mounting wave of pleasure, growing to levels that she had never felt, leaving her gasping and writhing.

Then two new points of pleasure mixed with that tide. ... my breasts ... Like a drowning victim pulling for the surface, she ‘grasped’ at those familiar sensations and came to herself to find herself coated with fresh sweat and the fingers of the younger woman she was lying against playing with her tits.

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“Intense, isn’t it?” Jenni breathed in her ear. “Togrutans might not have a clit to play with, but penetration really gets their engines revving.”

“No kidding!” Padme gasped out. She didn’t know why Jenni was whispering, from the way Ahsoka had her legs clamped around Anakin’s waist trying to pull him in deeper, her shouts egging him on as she clutched at the sheets, the pair wouldn’t notice Jenni if she yelled.
“So let’s try again, only this time remember that you’re Padme, not ‘Soka.’”

Padme nodded uncertainly, not sure whether the thought of diving back in was more scary than exhilarating.

“Come on, when you get thrown off the horse you have to get back in the saddle.”

“So says someone that has probably never seen a horse, whatever that is.” Padme may have passed over much of Jenni’s life too quickly to get more than an impression, but the only riding she’d seen in those memories had involved vehicles.

“Hey, I’ll have you know I’ve seen a real horse outside of vids ... my parents took me to a zoo, once. Now, back in the saddle.”

Padme giggled, then gasped when Jenni tweaked her tits again before gently cupping her breasts. Taking a deep breath (and shivering as that breath shifted her breasts against Jenni’s hands), she again closed her eyes, and reached for Ahsoka’s ‘presence’ in her mind.

She was amazed to find that while she had been distracted Anakin had actually managed to bottom out—she had no idea how—and as he began to pick up speed Ahsoka’s pleasure was actually mounting! As she was again swamped by that rising wave the only thing keeping her ‘above water’ was the sensation of Jenni’s hands on her breasts, the pleasure coming in ripples as Ahsoka’s writhing shifted angle and depth of Anakin’s thrusts.

Then that rising tide exploded as Ahsoka’s first orgasm struck. Its speed caught Padme completely by surprise and as the wave crashed down on her, her world went dark.

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Barriss gasped as she finally went limp. After a long moment she let go of one breast as she pulled the fingers of her other hand from out of her sopping cleft and looked around for something to wipe them on before giving up and using the night shirt she was wearing—it was sweat-soaked, so it wasn’t like she wasn’t going to have to wash it, anyway.

Ahsoka ‘giggling’ in her mind wasn’t helping her mood. “I warned you,” her friend sent through their Bond. “Even if you block off the physical sensations you’re in for a long night.”

“Didn’t your crèche managers—” (never ‘mothers’, at least not out loud—that smacked of attachments) “—ever tell you that no one likes a know-it-all?”

Ahsoka’s ‘giggles’ turned into outright ‘laughter’. “No, I was never a know-it-all. Just be glad that lack of time won’t let us take the ‘honeymoon’ that was the custom for the Bonds of Jenni’s time. If we did, you’d be getting this every night and at random moments during the day for a week! Gotta go, Jenni’s getting grabby.”

Barriss sighed as Jenni’s presence in her mind faded to the extra emotional pattern that she was growing accustomed to, even if just what emotions made up that mix were new ... and extremely uncomfortable. Don’t whine, you knew what you were getting into when you signed on for this. At least, you thought you did, and you can’t say Ahsoka and Jenni didn’t warn you.

But she suspected Ahsoka was right again, that she wouldn’t be able to resist joining the Bond for long, not when she was catching the emotional effects without what Ahsoka insisted were the benefits. Barriss still wasn’t convinced, though her friend certainly seemed to be enjoying herself.

“...and so will you, soon enough, and Ahsoka is going to be insufferable.”
Jenni sighed and shifted the currents around them to lift a limp Padme off of her and float her friend over the pair now lying side-by-side in the middle of the mattress, lowering her down to rest beside a sweat-coated Anakin gasping for air. That taken care of, she scooted over to cuddle up against an equally sweaty—and faintly giggling—Ahsoka. “Careful, love, if you keep that up Anakin’s going to think you’re mocking his performance. What’s so funny?”

“Barriss. That poor woman is catching hell with none of the benefits … not yet, anyway. What about you? You haven’t been getting any of the benefits yet, either.”

Jenni twisted and reached out, and a box that been sitting at the foot of the mattress against the wall floated up toward them. She felt Ahsoka’s amusement on seeing the container for the dildo she’d brought with them from Terra, and a reviving Padme’s curiosity. Broadening the ‘bandwidth’ to include the mother of her two new children, she replied, “I think it’s time to give Anakin and Barriss a rest while I introduce Padme to the invention that made lesbianism more than an exercise in frustration for Togrutans.”

“Wait, what?”

Laughing softly at Padme’s confusion, Jenni popped open the lid and floated out the dildo. “With three women in the Bond to one man—soon to be four—you’re going to become very familiar with this. Don’t worry, I’ll enjoy it as much as you do … exactly as much as you do.” Her laughter grew louder at Padme’s instant fiery blush from her hairline all the way down to the tops of her breasts.

In the morning Dexter would be back with his employees and their families, and with the hold turned into temporary living quarters for most of that mass of people there’d be no more fun times like this before they reached Naboo to meet those lifeforms dreaded by all those joining a new relationship, ‘The Parents’. (Though that would be mitigated to an extent by the coterminous presence of the much-loved lifeforms known as ‘The Grandparents’.) And from there, who knew where the Tao’s currents would sweep them?

But tonight was all about the Bond.

Chapter End Notes

So, thus endeth the story. What do I think would happen going forward, broadly speaking? A mess, but perhaps not as bad as it could have been. With the chaos caused by the near-total collapse of both the Republic and the Secessionists, piracy explodes with pickings ample and resistance almost disjointed. When that added to the chaos results in the near cessation of interstellar commerce, they start banding together for multi-ship Viking-like raids on planets wealthy enough to make a quick smash-and-grab worth it but not so wealthy that they’ll have their own defense force. This in turn quickly leads to planets rejoining the Republic while others coalesce into new polities of their own. As a result civilization on Coruscant doesn’t completely break down, though there is a period of mass starvation and cannibalism before (mostly) the die-off and (somewhat) the forced colonization efforts has the population reach a new equilibrium. Even with all this, though, the memory of past unity and dreams of future unity don’t just vanish—the galaxy has essentially entered its own Three Kingdoms/Warring States period that will eventually end in a reunified galaxy, though not for generations. Oh, and
the pirate fleets will eventually meet in battle with thrown-together/odds-and-ends fleets of the newly forming polities, before breaking up and returning to business as usual, whatever the newly-minted pirate admirals might wish. Pirates are in it for the loot, after all, and what’s the point in victory if your ship isn't one of those that survive to celebrate it?

For the Jedi Order, initially they’ll stick with the Republic. They’ve been devastated—most of their Knights and Masters dead, their reputation in tatters—and Coruscant is at least a well-defended planet. As well, if they abandon the Republic it would probably collapse completely. Once the Republic has at least stabilized, Yoda and the rest of the Council will pull away from the Senate and move the Order to Terra a little at a time—partly because since the entire planet is a Light Side Vergence no one can use one of the Sith alchemy abominations that had powered and spread the shroud of the Dark Side throughout the galaxy (the plans for which have now been spread to everyone) against them there, and partly because they need to divorce themselves from the Republic to be allowed to operate in the territories of the other star nations. And the Order itself will change. For one, it will almost certainly return to the original mantra:

Emotion, yet peace.
Ignorance, yet knowledge.
Passion, yet serenity.
Chaos, yet harmony.
Death, yet the Force.

Most of the adult Jedi survivors are alive because they paid lip service to the later version and so the clone troopers fought their programming when they were ordered to kill them. Also, before the Republic’s collapse both they and the Senate had maintained the Order’s monopoly on powerful Force users (they thought) with the requirement that any children found to be strong in the Force be turned over to them to be raised. But now that is over, and new orders of Force users will be rising and not just the Bonds. Some of them will be as idealistic as the Jedi Order at its best, some ... not so much.

As for what happens to our ménage a quad (soon to be quinta, and I have no idea if those are the proper words for “four” and “five” in this context), who knows? If anyone else wants to play in my sandbox to find out, feel free! Just please let me know so I can see where you take them.

Oh, and the chapter title comes from the song by Little Big Town, “I’m With the Band”:

Last night in Memphis
Tonight in New Orleans
Tomorrow I’ll be miles from here
Ain’t nothin’ to me, nothin’ to me

Sweet gypsy highway
Won’t you let me chase my dream
‘Cause I got a song to take me there
And it’s somethin’ to see, somethin’ to see

Lord, I was born with a suitcase in my hand
Livin’ in a life that few could understand
Sometimes it gets so confusin’
That I don’t know where I am
But I always know who I’m with
I’m with the band

Cheap whiskey midnight
Another round with my friends
Watchin’ the world through the windshield
And we’re rollin’ again, rollin’ again

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